

Twitterings

Newsletter of the Manx Ornithological Society

Issue 1 November 2012

What a washout!

Editorial

We had high hopes for the summer field trips this year, including some new events, but of five boat trips planned only one went ahead due to the weather. The Ayres pits trip was also cancelled, though we hope to set up a visit next March. However, a mid-week walk on Langness was well supported, so perhaps we will have more mid-week events in future for those available at such times, whilst continuing the weekend events for the rest of us.

This is the first of an intended new annual newsletter, produced in response to membership questionnaire responses that asked for communication for those who may not be able to come to events or talks on a regular basis. It brings news and reviews from the first half of the year, including our outdoor events. Future issues will depend on feedback received and we need your contributions. Please send any articles to the committee.

Richard Selman

Grant assistance

Funds are available to support projects that fall within the society's aims: to promote the knowledge, study, conservation and welfare of wild birds in and around the Isle of Man. Currently, funds are available from a legacy generously donated to the society by Armorer Collister. Guidance and forms will be posted on the website. Funds are aimed at voluntary groups and private individuals and match-funded projects will be prioritised. The chairman is happy to discuss potential projects on an informal basis before submissions are made via the secretary.



Kittiwake change in fortune

The RSPB has reported that a kittiwake colony on Orkney has completely failed this year and three others are likely to disappear within three years. Kittiwake numbers have more than halved across the UK since the mid 1980s. Figures are reported through the Seabird Monitoring Programme, which involves the Isle of Man through the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture, Manx National Heritage and Manx BirdLife.

Mull Head on Orkney had no kittiwakes breeding this year and across the Orkneys there has been an 82 per cent decline in just over a decade. Three colonies had under 90 nests and are expected to go extinct soon. Despite breeding extensions in the mid 1900s into Denmark and Sweden, and south into Portugal and Spain, kittiwakes have had a tough time more recently with poor breeding performance and significant declines in populations.

On the IoM, the last count found 1045 nests during the Seabird 2000 survey of the British Isles, down 17 per cent on the 1986 count, though previous to that there were only an estimated 230 pairs in 1959. Numbers on the Calf have collapsed since the 1970s, when there were hundreds of nests, to only 8 in 2010, and productivity has been low, with only 0.27 chicks produced per pair per year on average, which may explain the decline. Breeding failed completely on the Calf this year where there were no nests found at the usual sites, apart from one bird present briefly at Kione Roauyr, but kittiwakes move about and numbers on the Sugarloaf have been increasing, with reasonable productivity. Peel Hill peaked in the 1980s and has declined since. We will only know the overall changes on the IoM once we have a full count, which is expected in 2014–15.

Across the UK the data show an increase in the 1970s, a decrease in the 1990s and a continuing and greater decline in the 2000s. This species is more ocean-going than other gulls and takes small shoaling fish from near the surface. It is therefore subject to changes in fish populations and it is restricted to shallow foraging, though it will also take discards. Climate change appears to be the driving issue in the declines, with sea temperatures rising, causing changes in fish distributions. Failures in the northern isles seem to be due to extreme food shortages. The loss of traditional breeding sites is worrying. Their fortunes have certainly changed greatly over the last 100 years despite being a relatively long-lived species.



Update from a sister organisation

Manx BirdLife started life in 1997 as the Manx Bird Atlas, directed by Chris Sharpe, with the primary purpose of undertaking a breeding and wintering census of birds on the Isle of Man, which was produced in 2007. The Atlas increased the profile of the charity and led to it being seen as an important source of information on the birdlife of the Island. As a result, the directors decided that the charity should continue after the Atlas and expand its

remit. In 2008 the Manx Bird Atlas was renamed Manx BirdLife (MBL) with the aim of conserving wild birds and their habitats on the Isle of Man.

Following several staff changes MBL sought to recruit a Chief Operating Officer in early 2012. When recruitment was unsuccessful MBL approached the RSPB, who have provided support and guidance to MBL for several years, and the position was advertised as a secondment. In June this year Anne-Marie McDevitt from RSPB Northern Ireland took up the secondment, which will run for a year.

'I had been working as Conservation Manager for RSPB Northern Ireland for three years when I saw the secondment opportunity. Having provided support to Manx BirdLife in this role I understood a fair bit about the Island and what MBL was trying to achieve, and felt I had the skills needed to help it develop and deliver its remit. My aim over the year is to ensure the great work that the charity is doing at present continues and to produce a strategy for 2013 to 2018. We are working in conjunction with a range of partners on the eradication of long-tails from the Calf of Man, due to take place this autumn; continuing to deliver important contracts for Government including the monitoring of the Island's bird population, vital as birds are a great indicator of the health of our environment; and inputting into the Island's Biodiversity Strategy through attendance at stakeholder meetings and the production of a Manx Birds of Conservation Concern. We are also in negotiations with CEMEX over the creation of a Nature Reserve at the Point of Ayre gravel pits and are seeking funding to carry our research into the reasons for the decline in the hen harrier population on the Isle of Man. It will be a busy year!

Anne-Marie has worked in bird conservation for almost twenty years. Starting with her first contract as little tern warden for the National Trust in Northumberland, she worked for BirdWatch Ireland on corncrakes in the Shannon Callows, Countryside Council for Wales on agri-environment schemes, and jointly with the RSPB and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland on the development and delivery of the Countryside Management Scheme. She has also worked on bird conservation projects abroad including pink pigeons for the Mauritius Wildlife Trust and on the Seychelles magpie robin for the Island Conservation Society.

The nation's favourite bird

What is the nation's favourite bird? That was the question posed at the MOS voting box on Tynwald Day. Votes were cast for local species and top of the results was the robin, with the chough and then the goldfinch following behind. These three together received over a third of the votes cast, but a very broad range of species received votes, including song thrush, raven, woodcock, gannet, house martin, seagull and storm petrel.

The robin has come out top in the UK previously and is clearly a well-loved garden and woodland species, possibly due to its beauty and tameness, although rarely seen in gardens on the Continent. The chough is a characterful bird of special interest in the Isle of Man due to its great rarity elsewhere in the British Isles, and the goldfinch has increased substantially in numbers in recent years and is commonly seen on the now popular niger seed feeders in gardens or feasting on dandelion seeds.

Votes went into a draw and the winner was Toby Macdonald, who received the British Trust for Ornithology Nestbox Guide, a book that is now out in a new edition with guidance and plans for building a range of boxes for different birds. The MOS stand this year looked at the varied boxes and baskets that can be provided for different kinds of birds to encourage people to think more broadly about their box provision.



A melodious start to the day

In May, 25 people crawled out of bed at an early hour in order to experience the peak of dawn chorus activity, joining our President, Pat Cullen, at Silverdale at 4.30am. They heard the sequence of woodland birds tuning up at dawn, and were lucky to experience a wonderful morning, with about seven song thrushes, one of the supreme choristers. This year there was a spotted flycatcher and a pair of treecreepers. Pat said that it was the best dawn chorus event so far, which goes somewhat towards balancing out the poor weather later on the year.

A beautiful afternoon on the Ayres

The 18th August turned out to be a lovely hot and sunny day on the NNR. Erica Spencer, the warden, guided a group of nine other members around Smeale Point. Three seals were spotted 'bottling' in the sea close to the beach, watching us as much as we watched them.

There was a busy area just offshore, where we watched sandwich terns and gannets diving on fish. Some of the terns came in close, looking down on flocks of ringed plover (50 and 60 in two flocks heading west), some sanderling and the occasional redshank, curlew and turnstone.

A small group of five common gulls floated just off the beach providing good views and the basis for a discussion of the identification differences from herring gulls. There were also black-headed gulls, more petite again. A couple of cormorants flew past, and on the beach pool there were a few dunlin and a turnstone. Further along the beach was a large group of oystercatchers, so we headed onto the heath.

In a poor year for butterflies there were still good numbers on the NNR, with small tortoiseshell, peacock, meadow brown, small heath and lots of common blues, also the occasional white flying past. Six spotted burnet moths were seen on the flowers and yellow wax caps in the dunes. Thyme, harebells and the bell heather were in full flower, with a lot of heather providing a purple carpet across much of the Recreation Area this year. Autumn gentians, an Ayres speciality, were already coming into flower and there were some puffballs forming.

Common green, field and mottled grasshoppers were all calling in the dunes. A stonechat and wheatear were spotted as we came back to the road in order to head off before the roads closed for Manx Grand Prix.

Thanks to Erica for guiding us around once more. Erica has now reached the end of her wardening contract so we wish her well in the future and hope to continue seeing her at meetings.



Tynwald Fair

The MOS took a stall at Tynwald Fair this year, the first time for some years, producing a display of different nest boxes to set people thinking about alternative bird accommodation to the usual tit boxes, to think broader and offer a range of nesting opportunities to other species, with open-fronted boxes, baskets, built-in wall boxes, wren domes, swift soffit boxes and a range of other designs. Richard Selman and Derek Marsden ran the stall.



Thanks to Eden Park Garden Centre and the Manx Wildlife Trust there were some locally available boxes on the stall but it was not economical to ship the more unusual designs over for a day, though there is potential if storage space were available to show them off and sell them on. It is hoped that people will think about the species that can be helped into new areas rather than just preferentially boosting a few species, though the delight that they provide and the connection with nature is undoubtedly worthwhile.



The MOS needs you

If you wish to see future newsletters then we will need articles of bird-related interest. It may be MOS business or trip reports, news articles or press releases, requests, adverts or reports on your own birding activities and trips, or you may have personal views on issues that you are dying to air and happy to debate across the pages. If you are not a budding writer, but keen on design layout, how about putting together future issues of this newsletter? Or perhaps you wish to become involved in dealing with records and the annual bird report, or coordinating a trip or event once a year. We also occasionally get asked to give talks to adults or children. An outreach to youngsters was one of the recommendations made to the committee following the recent members' questionnaire. We will also welcome new members to join our committee to help run the society. If you can help please contact a member of the committee.

Preservation expertise

In April we had an event at the Manx Museum, where Kate Hawkins showed us behind the scenes to look at the bird specimens in the store. There were frozen specimens, mounted stuffed birds and skins, also eggs and nests, plus some archaeological specimens.

Kate described the problems of preservation and the need to replace shrunken old mounts that look bug-eyed and unnatural, and which can become very faded, by sourcing new specimens for display purposes.

Some of the specimens have more scientific value. We saw a restored bittern from the curraghs, the first mourning dove found in Britain, from the Calf in 1989, a white-tailed eagle shot at Greeba in 1907 and some old Manx eiders (Cuddy's ducks for Northumbrians!). Most of the specimens are Manx and donations are welcome if you find a fresh dead bird and can provide the details of its provenance.



MNH saves the day: TK memorial

This year for the Ted Kerruish Memorial Lecture we had booked James Robinson from RSPB Northern Ireland to talk about his experiences of birds on the Falkland Islands, but unfortunately he had to pull out only shortly before the date. We were therefore very grateful that Kate Hawkins, a former MOS committee member and natural history keeper at the museum, offered to speak at little notice with a talk about the work that MNH is currently undertaking to eradicate rats from the Calf of Man.

These have plagued the island for over 200 years and the National Trust for England, followed by MNH, have been battling them for the last 50 or 60 years with baiting in local problem areas. Now that Manx shearwaters are breeding on the Calf, but appear to have levelled off in numbers, it is hoped



that a proper eradication campaign will allow a fuller expansion of their numbers and also increase the survival of other species: shags have failed to breed successfully, puffins used to breed on the Calf but no longer do so, but storm petrels are suspected of breeding, though no nest site has been positively identified yet. The night turned out to be an opportunity for members to hear about this very promising and worthwhile work.

Welcome to new MOS members Alan Williamson, Karen Griffiths and Sally Bolton. And sadly we note the passing of member Professor Juan Watterson, who will be missed.

Upcoming Events

December 4th – Christmas social and quiz. Sign up now by contacting the secretary.

January 8th – Buzzard study, a talk by James Leonard.

February 5th – Talk, TBA.

March 5th – AGM and Chairman's/President's evening.

March date TBA – Guided walk at the gravel pits.

News

Watch your berry bushes. Waxwings, fieldfares and redwings have arrived. Check out the BTO Berries and Birds survey and other volunteering opportunities on www.bto.org.

Choughs are to be reintroduced to Jersey in a programme of coastal habitat restoration. See www.birdsontheedge.org.

MOS website

You can view the events list and a searchable catalogue of *Peregrine* articles on our website.

Peregrine

Back issues of the journal *Peregrine*, published by the MOS, are available from the secretary priced £3/issue (volumes 4 to 7) and £7.50/issue (volumes 8 and 9). Volume 10 issue 1 (latest) is sold out. Postage and packing is included for IoM and UK addresses. A new issue will be available soon.

Subs

Subs are due on 1st December. Please send to the treasurer or pay at one of our meetings. If you DO NOT wish to renew please let the treasurer know: richardnorrision@gmail.com
Lhie ny Greiney, Surby Road, Surby, Port Erin, IM9 6TD

Contacts

Chairman: Richard Selman 877919

Secretary: Anne Kaye 834015

Treasurer: Richard Norris 834104

Website: <http://manxbirdlife.im/manx-ornithological-society/>