Editorial
This is always a nice time of year; with lengthening days, birds singing more and more and other wildlife on the move. The frogs were pairing up in our pond, and palmate newts and a pond skater have been spotted.

This year was the first I can remember that we had a resident flock of waxwings (up to 65) in Burn Brae, Westhill. They were there for most of Feb & through to mid March feeding on the various cotoneaster trees that still had berries; especially a large one at the edge of the park beside the road - a good sight in the sunshine of the settled weather. Even several honey bees were out in the garden on several days feeding on the Viburnum flowers; but mid March sees it very cold again.

And many thanks again for all the contributions to this last newsletter of the season, and to the NSRO for their assistance in the printing of the Newsletters.

Ed

Official Notification

AGM
RSPB Highland Local Group
Thursday 25 April 2013 - 19.30
Fraser park Bowling Club
MacEwen Drive, Inverness

AGM: If there is anything you want raising at the AGM then please let me know.
Also, please pass on to committee members any suggestions you have for indoor speakers and locations for field trips; this will help us to make up a varied and interesting programme.

Doreen Manson

Indoor Meeting Reminders

Thursday 28 March:
Red Squirrels & Woodland Birds in the Highlands. Ian Collier, FC Woodland Officer

Thursday 25 April:
AGM of the RSPB Highland Local Group, followed by The History of Bird Conservation in Scotland. Paul Walton - head of Habitats & Species, RSPB Scottish Headquarters

Field Trips
For April – May 2013

The black grouse safari at RSPB Corrimony with warden Simon McLaughlin on Thursday 11 April is now fully booked. Those of you who didn’t wish to get out of bed at a ridiculously early hour can still join us for the visit to Glen Strathfarrar. Please meet the rest of the group at the Bog Cotton Café in Cannich, no later than 9.30am. If you arrive early you may have time for a coffee and bacon butty. Contact: Keith or Rosie on 01997 421193.

On Saturday 27 April Doreen and John Manson will be leading a trip to Bonar Bridge and the Falls of Shin. This is an area the group has not visited for several years and may be new to many members. Early spring migrants such as common sandpiper, wheatear and willow warbler should be back in good numbers. Meet at the Highland Council car park at 9.00am or Dingwall car park at 9.20am. Contact: Doreen or John on 01997 433283.

Virtually all our summer visitors should have returned by Thursday 09 May in time for the Migrant Hunt with Lynda Graham. The places to be visited will be decided only a couple of days before the trip. Meet at Inverness Retail Park at 9.00am or Dingwall car park at 9.30am. Contact: Lynda on 01463 791292

The final field trip of the session will be a coach trip to Caithness on Saturday 25 May at Dunnet Head we will be looking at the colony of seabirds which include puffin, guillemot and razorbill. On the cliff top is a diverse coastal heathland with special plants such as spring squill, thrift and roseroot. Castletown Bay should have a selection of migrant waders along with up to four species of tern. The coach will leave the Highland Council car park at 08.00, with a second pick up in Dingwall at 08.20. The booking form for the trip is
at the back of this newsletter and the cost will be £20. It would be nice to fill the coach for what should be a most enjoyable trip.

**Contact:** Keith or Rosie on 01997 421193
or John or Doreen on 01997 433283.

Keith Barnes

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**Reminders**

- **Seating at Meetings.** The front row of seats are available for those of you with difficulties with walking, seeing or hearing, please avail yourselves of this facility or ask any committee member if you need extra help. Any front row seats still vacant shortly before the start of the meeting may then be used by anyone else.

- **Stamps.** Rosie Barnes is collecting the used postage stamps on behalf of the RSPB Albatross appeal.

- **Bad weather contacts.** If you are in doubt that a meeting will take place due to bad weather conditions please contact any committee member for up to date information. In the case of field trips contact the leader for the day.

- **Coach Trips.** Remember to book early to avoid disappointment.

- **RSPB Sales.** John will still take orders throughout the year for goods from the RSPB catalogue. Remember that the group funds benefit from your purchases and you do not pay post and package.

- **Shared Transport for field trips.** If you have no transport or would like to share a car please come along to our first meeting place or alternatively phone the leader of the trip.

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**Cromarty Firth North Saturday 24 November 2012**

Back last March, enjoying a leisurely lunch stop with the group and the white-tailed eagle at Shieldaig, a certain Committee member optimistically asked whether we might consider leading a field trip some time this season. Unable on the spot to think of a reason for saying no, we quietly forgot about this until an early summer email dropped into our inbox to say that a date and provisional venue had been assigned to us. Several recce visits and a few more emails later, sixteen members joined us in Dingwall on a bright icy morning hoping that we could find them some birds!

We started with a short drive to Ferry Point where **goldfinch** and **tree sparrow** greeted us in the car park, and a short stroll yielded **wigeon** and **little grebe** at the mouth of the canal. As the sun rose higher and the tide began to fall, skeins of **greylag** and **pink-footed geese** lifted noisily from the roost at the head of the firth. Back across the canal, **wrens** scolded in the woods while **redshanks** got to work on the emerging mud.

Onward to the clay pigeon shoot at Deephaven for elevenses, more geese, and a greater variety of waders including **curlew**, **lapwing**, **bar-tailed godwit** and **dunlin**, though the stoat we had seen the day before didn't show up. By Dalmore Distillery the tide had dropped to attract **turnstone** onto the beach, while **teal** loitered along the waterline and the party wandered along to the woods where the sharp-eyed found **goldcrest** and **great spotted woodpecker**.

Lunch was by now beckoning, with Nigg hide providing a comfortable venue, albeit not a quiet one for two innocent visitors who arrived at the same time as our party! Somewhere among the sandwiches were reports of **pintail** and **golden plover**, with plenty of **shelduck** and other usual suspects.

With the sea and the day's limited warmth receding rapidly, it was time to head inland. Next stop was Kildary Loch, which was fairly quiet with the notable exception of the resident ravenous **mallards** by the boathouse. And so finally to Stoneyfield Lochs and more particularly its views into adjacent sites: the disused landfill pit, with **moorhen**, **coot** and **tufted duck**; and some scrubby trees hosting a flock of mixed **yellowhammer** and **reed bunting**. Heading back to the cars, a group of **long-tailed tit** flew through the woods, and Committee members present ruled that domesticated **peacock** don't count! By now it was getting too cold before it became too dark, so the outing ended by mutual consent.

Thank you to those who came along, and especially to Keith for keeping the species count (59), and Lynda for coping with our excessive "short list" of venues and rookie efforts at risk assessment!

Peter Batten & Denise Lloyd
indoor meeting – RSPB North Scotland Office Update
06 December 2012

This is always a popular meeting with group members and the latest talk has met our expectations.

George Campbell started off the proceedings by introducing us to the new strategy for the RSPB as a whole. The RSPB message now in place of ‘for birds, for people, forever’ simply states ‘saving nature’. This does not mean that we are as a society abandoning birds, they will still be at the forefront of what we do.

George introduced Peter Mayhew who went into more detail about the regional strategy. It faced up to the problems on three fronts:

1. Species: In Scotland there are 40 species at risk of which 20 are at serious risk. Time would be spent to find out why these species are declining.

2. People: Time spent to help people who work on the land understand the need for change to accommodate flora and fauna for future generations. Engagement of the general public at sights of special interest where enjoyment of the countryside and what it has to offer can be appreciated by all.

3. Futurescapes: The RSPB cannot buy enough land to ensure conservation issues be observed to the letter, so a new approach must be devised.

The RSPB, together with other conservation bodies and backed by government could set up ‘nature improvement areas’.

All this will take time and it is important to communicate to the general public how important it is to provide habitat to all wildlife for the enjoyment of all the people.

The next speaker Dr. Mark Hancock spoke of the research he has conducted into the life of the common scoter. Almost the entire British population (90%) are in the Highlands. Mark has conducted an in depth research programme over the past three years. In brief, his findings were: the past three years. In brief, his findings were: the females preferred lochs with shallow edges, young ducklings thrived best in shallow lochs with sandy straights and large insects, and for older ducklings the absence of predators was important.

Solutions, he suggested, to help make more suitable habitat included: better water management of the hydro schemes, control of mink, and trout management (a reduction of numbers would leave increased insect life). Mark closed on an optimistic note; he posed the question ‘can we save the scoter?’ The answer, an emphatic YES! it can be done. He held up the example of the bittern and the black-throated diver, both with rising numbers due to better management.

The final speaker for the night was Stuart Benn, who had taken a busman’s holiday visiting conservation success sites in Europe. First he visited north west Denmark where he was amazed by the sight of golden eagle hunting over a stubble field at sea level, not an uncommon sight in the area. The birds were nesting in trees! He found the same to be true in southern Sweden.

He next journeyed on northern Germany where there has been a successful reintroduction programme to return the lynx to the Hartz mountains, 24 were released between 2000 and 2006, numbers have since increased and a whole tourist industry has evolved round this. The lynx, whose main prey is roe deer, are notoriously difficult to see but people still enjoy visiting the area.

Stuart then went on to speak about the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, he marvelled at the foresight of one man, Michael Succow. Michael had noticed that in the no man’s land between east and west wild life of every kind thrived and when the wall fell he immediately set about petitioning the government to set up nature reserves managing to get 4.5% of the states land set aside as state parks and biosphere reserves. Today, there are large stretches of land between the Arctic Ocean and the Black Sea similarly set aside as conservation areas.

Altogether an interesting and varied group of speakers and once again a successful evening.

To round off the evening a cheque for £1000 was handed over to George as the group’s contribution to RSPB projects. George thanked the group for the cheque and also the support given to the RSPB over the years. The money will be used in the programme to buy extra food and set up new feeding stations for corn buntings in North Uist and the site near Inverness Airport.

Doreen Manson

New Year Bird Count
08 January 2012

Almost 20 members took part in the annual New Year Bird Count on 05 January. The weather was overcast but relatively mild for mid winter.

The roll call was held in the spacious new hide at Udale Bay. The total number of species seen was 98, including 3 new species to add to the overall running list; which now stands at an impressive 138. These were red grouse, ring-necked parakeet and the elusive crested tit. Well done
In Search of Sea Ducks Again
Saturday 26 January 2013

Despite heavy snow elsewhere in the country and a rather poor weather forecast, we were extremely fortunate on a dry, bright January 26th, as only a cold westerly caused watery eyes and runny noses - or was that just me?

We headed east along the Moray coast on our now-annual foray for winter duck, with the request from Keith for something a bit rarer, like king eider or surf scoter. I have to confess to failing on that score, and also failing to persuade any member of the group to do the write-up – a resounding silence was all that followed a request for a volunteer author. We did have a good day though, with a total of 67 species, including 14 species of duck.

Some highlights of the day? The beautiful, velvety pale-bellied Brent geese at Nairn west beach; the drake long-tails (long-tailed ducks) in their stunning black, white and grey plumage, with pink bills and seemingly endless tails; knot swirling round as the tide moved in Findhorn Bay; the sound and sight of the large flock of eiders calling and displaying in Burghhead harbour; the male velvet scoter which came out of the sea onto the rocks beside us giving a fantastic opportunity to study the face and wing markings, and for close photos; the pale grey and white sanderling running frantically around like wound-up clockwork toys; the 60 or so waxwings lining up on the telegraph wires or feeding on berries in the bushes below, and again great photos; the female smew, with her lovely red head, white cheeks and wing markings, preening or swimming in open water alongside the sheet of ice on Loch Spynie; the water rail which ventured out of the reeds onto the ice and gave good views but for all too brief a time; and so on.

I think the easiest way to sum up the outing is to plagiarise an old RSPB strapline – Aren’t Birds Brilliant?

Lynda Graham

Indoor Meeting – Sea to Summit
31 January 2013

Our speaker, Derek McGinn, took us on a photographic wildlife tour of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland from its shore to the summit of its highest plateau. The evening started with a series of landscapes from the sands of St Cyrus Bay on the east coast to a view of An Teallach in the west.

The first habitat covered was Rocky Coasts starting with shots of grey and common seals showing the obvious difference in head profile. A shot of two young dolphins and several of a female otter feeding on the seaweed with two cubs were followed by flying, diving and head-pointing gannets photographed at the Bass Rock and Troop Head, accompanied by Derek’s own recording of their calls. On the Isle of May we saw all four resident auk species and a series of shots showing the interaction between fulmars on their breeding cliffs.

In the Estuaries and Sands section we were shown many waders including spotted redshank, black-tailed godwit, knot, greenshank and the greater yellowlegs which spent part of last winter near Loch Fleet. Sanderlings were shown in several different plumages and we were told about a bird in one photograph which was colour-ringed. This individual had been recorded in Ghana, France and Namibia before being photographed by Derek on the coast of Scotland. Some sea ducks followed with a picture of a male long-tailed duck taken only recently in a local harbour being particularly stunning.

The first half finished with some familiar garden birds and some excellent shots of jay, pine marten, badger and red squirrel taken from a friends heated and double-glazed hide in Strathglass (a world away from the discomforts we were told about by Laurie Campbell at the 25th anniversary meeting last September).

During the interval Derek sold copies of his book, generously donating £1 per copy to group funds.

After the interval we moved on to Moors and Mountains, starting with very unusual views of snipe in deep snow. Mountain hares were shown in summer and winter coats and a variety in between. Derek then demonstrated that his photographic life is not all cushy when he played a recording made at 3.00 am at a black grouse lek, accompanying photographs of blackcocks and greyhens. We then moved into the pine woods for shots of capercaillie.

Dave Galloway

Water rail
crested tit, treecreeper and crossbills. A selection of beautiful moorland flowers followed, including sea pinks, purple and yellow oxytropis, alpine gentian and yellow saxifrage. We were shown photographs of several warbler species while listening to their respective songs, the sedge warbler having been recorded by Derek in his pyjamas at midnight outside a caravan on North Uist after he had been awoken by his wife to listen to this bird.

The evening finished with a wonderful five minute audio-visual presentation of snow buntings, dotterel and ptarmigan on the Cairngorm plateau with a background of their calls overlaid onto the beautiful music of Duncan Chisholm.

Thank you Derek for an enthralling evening with some excellent photographs given extra interest by the accompaniment of the bird songs and calls.  

Keith Barnes

Indoor Meeting – Birds & Wildlife of the Indian Ocean: Madagascar & the Seychelles
28 February 2013

The talk started with Bozena Kaletja-Summers providing background as to how she started off ScotNature tours. She is Polish and first visited the UK in 1981, and undertook some of her studies in the UK before undertaking a PhD in South Africa. She moved to the Highlands and was commissioned to undertake contract and research work with the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage. Ten years ago the RSPB approached her to take a group to Poland on a bird watching trip, then later to South Africa. As trip numbers increased she decided to start her own business. The first part of the talk covers a trip to Madagascar in November 2012 with 10 people. The second part of the talk relates to the Seychelles.

Madagascar’s wildlife is 90% endemic and it is the fourth largest island in the world, with diverse landscapes including a large mountain range about 2500m above sea level down the middle of the island creating rainforest in the Eastern part of the island, and desert and dry deciduous forest on the western coast.

The island has been deforested over the last 2000 years after the arrival of people, with only 5% of the natural woodland remaining. In the last 15-20 years 47 conservation areas have been set up to protect the remaining forested areas. These conservation areas come under three categories which range from areas open to tourism, those for ecotourism, and others that are strictly no tourism. Madagascar provides compulsory but well qualified guides for every tourism group, with 2-4 guides being provided for the tour group of 10 people.

Bozena then started showing the group the diversity of species in Madagascar of both wildlife and plant species including trees, orchids, birds such as the Madagascar magpie robin, Lowland streaked tenrec, resembling a miniature hedgehog that seemed to have a crown of thorns, chameleons, snakes, geckos, and insects including the giraffe-necked weevil which had evolved its long neck to allow a leaf to be rolled to protect the single egg laid by the female. Along with photos she had taken, there were short video clips to provide us with the eerie sounds of the Indri, a type of lemur.

Bozena finished the talk about Madagascar on discussing the people and the impacts they were having on the wildlife. The population has doubled in the last 25 years to 22 million people, and 80% of these rely on the land for survival by way of traditional farming methods. She summed up that though the future does look bleak for the wildlife of Madagascar, tourism has the potential to change this.

After the break Bozena talked about a visit to the Bird Island in the Seychelles with her family to tag sooty terns with dual locators in 2010. Dual locators measured different light readings for longitude and latitude enabling the locations of the birds to be mapped, once the locator had been removed from the bird at a later date.

Bird Island is privately owned and approximately 300,000 sooty terns nest there. The birds lay one egg directly on the ground. Fortunately for the sooty terns there are no predators on the island.

A tracking program is currently underway to monitor the activities of the tern population, in which locators are attached to individuals on the nest. There was a knack in capturing the nesting birds, however only one person in the group had mastered the technique. Once captured the rest of the team went about attaching the dual locator - weighing one gram- to a leg with glue. They also weighed and measured each bird. Ear plugs and gloves were necessary equipment. In addition, they marked the location the bird had been captured in the hope that it would return to the same location to nest the following year. This process was repeated for 60 birds, and data was actually recovered from 7 of the birds in 2012. These data showed that some stayed within the Indian Ocean, while others travelled further afield. A further 60 birds were tagged the same year, but sadly Bozena and her family have been so far unable to make it back to assist in any tagging or recovery program.

The talk finished with a 10 minute audio visual of wildlife on Bird Island, which was a treat for all. Bozena then answered a number of questions and was thanked by all for such an informative and interesting talk.

Heidi de Haas
**Around the Black Isle**  
**Saturday 02 March 2013**

We all met up at North Kessock just as a gentle band of rain reached Inverness. Not much in sight so we moved to the car park just beyond Charleston and, thanks to Hilary and myself putting on our over-trousers, the rain went off for the rest of the day.

What a treat – we were hardly out of the cars when an otter was spotted not far from the shore. We delighted in watching it leaping and diving as it fished for some considerable time. Being there for the birds, of course, we also had good sightings of **wigeon, teal, red-breasted mergansers, goldeneye, curlew and ringed plover**. Our two new young members from Nairn (Amy and Dee) got a good impression of things to come.

On to Munlochy lay-by overlooking the Bay where our arrival was greeted by a **yellowhammer**. The usual **red kite** was also present, plus some **shelduck** on the mud flats. Then a change of habitat at Rosehaugh Estate where, after some coffee, we stretched our legs a bit and were rewarded with **great spotted woodpecker, treecreeper and dunnock**. And the snowdrops were out in drifts in the woodland and by the stream, adding to our enjoyment of the walk.

Back to the sea and shore at Rosemarkie where we saw **eider, long-tailed duck, redshank, oystercatcher, cormorant and pied wagtail**. Some ‘eagle eyes’ also saw a **wren and bullfinch**. Then, crossing to the north of the Black Isle at Newhall Point, we spotted **Slavonian grebe**, more eider and a **greenfinch**. The incoming tide hastened us on briefly to Kirkmichael Churchyard for a close sighting of flocks of **pink-footed geese**, and then to Udale Bay hide for lunch break.

The timing was just right as flocks arrived with the in-coming tide and we were delighted by aerial displays of **knot**. There were also flocks of **curlew, dunlin, redshank** and **bar-tailed godwit** as well as the usual **ducks**. But, best-till-last, on the grassy bank just opposite the hide, we all saw the vagrant **American wigeon** with his white crest.

On our way to Cromarty we saw **scaup out to sea, rock pipit** at the harbour (‘I’m sure he was there the last time we visited’), and **fulmar** on the cliffs opposite Cromarty. Gillian spotted winter heliotrope on a bank at the ferry slipway (a relative of the more common butterbur). She had some of us on our knees to smell the vanilla-like fragrance but the cool temperature masked the scent.

The day was finished off with a wander up the Fairy Glen at Rosemarkie, but without any sighting of dippers (not surprising, given the number of dog walkers and families out enjoying a weekend walk and romp in the woods). A rough total of 56 species were noted over the day.

A huge thanks to Gillian and Ian for an excellent day out and herding us patiently round as many localities for bird watching – and special thanks from me for arranging the otter – it really made my day.

Sheila MacIver

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**Down in the Glen**

The winter influx of thrushes did not materialise – only two **redwings**, a very small flock of **waxwings** and no **fieldfares** was the somewhat sad tale. However there were compensations, one being the six **goldfinches** that frequented the Niger seed during almost the whole of January – I knew there was a resident pair but was delighted to see so many. The garden was also inundated with flocks of up to 90 **chaffinches** during that month with an odd ** Brambling** appearing at times with them. Another surprise was the continual presence of large numbers of **siskin** – one morning I counted a flock of thirty two. Their natural tree-based seeds must have been scarce. I did notice that the Niger seed that had been cast on the ground by the feeding birds was well used by these same **siskins**. Formerly I had swept it up each day and binned it. So a lesson learned!

Birds that hardly moved this winter were the **rooks** from the local rookery. We are fortunate in having a farm based in and around the village and the rooks seemed to find enough from the fields to keep them nearer home. In fact in the middle of that month I counted 112 **common gulls** feeding in one of the fields. However the prize for the winter must be the **albino chaffinch** that has been frequenting a number of different gardens in the village – it is quite remarkable the number of gardens and feeders that exist locally. There is hardly a week goes by without conversations about birds with locals.

One surprise in January was the appearance of two **starlings** on the bird table. They are not a bird that is seen much at all but other people have reported a
small flock of about a dozen birds. Some time ago they bred here but it is some time since I saw any sign of that.

On 6th February I took a walk down through the wooded area that leads down towards Loch Ness. I had just left the house when I saw a waxwing feeding on cotoneaster berries. It flew up into the nearby beech tree and was gone when I returned. I wonder if such solitary birds ever complete the migratory journey! As I continued down the side of the river Ennick a male dipper was singing as he perched on a rock by the side. There were three of them in total which came as a pleasant surprise on a lovely sunny day.

Another morning walk along the main road to the post office led to the discovery of the body of a pink-footed goose. It was lying just behind the stone wall by the pavement and looked as if it had been thrown there. No signs of injury were apparent so it remains a bit of a mystery as the geese seen in local fields are solely of the greylag variety.

As the month progressed the frosty nights really set in and one morning when the temperature was -7°C two song thrushes were heard singing as I stood briefly in the garden. Several frosty mornings produced the same two songsters; a sure sign of the spring and summer ahead and a tribute to their stamina. They were not the only February songsters as robin; great tit; blue tit and chaffinch were also providing early morning song. At the end of February the two carrion crows are displaying and there is much stick carrying. It looks as if they are just upgrading last year’s nest but I will wait and see as it did suffer some damage in the gales of December.

I continued with the visits to Ullapool and had some great weather for the February trip. I have met one of the local worthies who takes great interest in what I am doing. He has a considerable amount of knowledge and I have learned a great deal from him about the local birdlife and the changes that have occurred over the years. He walks most days around the river mouth and along to the harbour area. One meeting culminated in him asking me what I had seen that day. I went through the list and he nodded sagely as I spoke. His final comment to me was ‘That’s good. You’ve not missed anything’. I felt reassured!!!

The February trip revealed red-throated divers, Slavonian grebes and black guillemots while the ringed plovers were displaying on the shore. On 21st February I went walking with friends along Loch Achall near Ullapool to find a pair of black-throated divers on the loch. Summer is on the way so I hope there is less rain and more sunshine than the two previous years.

Richard Prentice

R.I.P ‘Martha’

At 1pm on 1st September 1914, ‘Martha’ fell off her perch in Cincinnati Zoo – she was known to be 29 years of age. The passenger pigeon had reached the end of the road. A bird once numbered in billions (not millions) was finally extinct – it had joined the dodo and great auk. James Fisher (and others) have written that in nature a massive build-up of population is often a precursor to a species collapsing in numbers, or even as with the passenger pigeon becoming totally extinct. The reason is usually the species inability to adapt its behaviour or lifestyle to face a significant new challenge. The native American Indians had ‘harvested’ the passenger pigeon for generations in a sustainable way without affecting its overall numbers. However, with the European colonisation of the eastern United States and Canada, the bird faced a two pronged onslaught. First, it was taken in huge numbers as an easily collected source of food. Then the vast forest areas vital for the birds breeding success were either destroyed or fragmented in the need for agricultural land. The colonists would have had no conception of the passenger pigeon’s vulnerability – so numerous were the birds that they would have been viewed as an infinite and inexhaustible ‘commodity’.

The passenger pigeon nested in the NE United States from around the Great Lakes to the eastern seaboard, and northwards to Hudson Bay in Canada. Colonies occupied enormous areas of forest – one, in Wisconsin was calculated as being 850 square miles in extent, and to contain 135 million birds. In winter the passenger pigeon moved south to the Gulf States, Florida and Mexico, again congregating in huge communal roosts. Just a single egg was laid, and when the chick (a squab) was well grown it left the nest to forage for itself on the ground. Here, it would have entered the food chain by becoming a potential snack for wolves, foxes and other predators - such losses would not have greatly affected the overall passenger pigeon population. For the settlers the sheer concentration of birds made them easy to collect. Netting, shooting, stupefying the birds either with alcohol-laced grain, or by ‘smoking’ them out with fires lit below the trees, and simply knocking the nests from the trees using long poles – all these methods were employed to collect passenger pigeons in substantial numbers. Afterwards, pigs were often fed by being driven into the forest to ‘clear up’ any uncollected birds from beneath the trees. An expanding railroad network later ensured the pigeon harvest was speedily transported to markets in New York and elsewhere. From just one such railhead, Petoskey, Ohio, 50,000 birds were dispatched daily in 1878 for a continuous period of five months – and this
was just one of many collection points. Workers on the southern plantations and servants in Boston were fed on pigeon meat. The prices in New York once fell as low as 2 cents a brace of birds. Fortunes were made by both the collectors and traders alike.

As early as the 1850-60’s, however, concerns at the size of the passenger pigeon slaughter were raised in the State Legislatures in both Kentucky and Ohio, and it was suggested that some controls should be imposed. However, Congress (probably for commercial reasons) overruled them. It stated that ‘the bird is wonderfully prolific…. and, no ordinary destruction could lessen their numbers….myriads of young are yearly produced’. And yet, around 40 years later, the passenger pigeon was to become extinct!

In 1810 Alexander Wilson (the Scottish born ‘Father of American Ornithology’), was visiting a friend in New England when he had a frightening experience. A distant rumble of thunder increased to a roar that drowned conversation. Thinking this to be an approaching tornado, Wilson became alarmed. ‘Its only the birds’ said his host. Going outside Wilson found the sky darkened by enormous flocks of low flying Passenger Pigeons. He likened it to the day-darkness associated with a solar eclipse! Later Wilson watched a passage of birds that lasted for three hours, and often stretched from horizon to horizon. He estimated the number of Passenger Pigeons to be around two thousand million. James Audubon recorded a movement of passenger pigeon’s that lasted for three days and nights. Later in 1866 in Ontario, there was a migration one mile wide and some three hundred miles long, and estimated to involve around 3 billion birds. Ornithologists have suggested that at its peak the passenger pigeon population may have been as high as 5 billion birds (say perhaps twice the total present day population of all the birds in Europe, at their post-breeding high).

However, it was noticed that as early as the 1850’s the passenger pigeon began to disappear from many of its previously known occupied areas – especially over the eastern part of its range. By 1890 the bird had become scarce everywhere, and was no longer commercially worth exploiting. Then in 1896 a potential breeding colony of around 250,000 were discovered in woodland near Lake Ontario. The local press widely publicised this as the ‘last great pigeon gathering in America’. Hundreds of hunters and ‘sportsmen’ arrived and the slaughter began. These people would have been well aware that this was probably almost the entire remaining passenger pigeon population. But, what a tale to tell the grandchildren later – the last great pigeon kill ever – and you were part of it! Then on 24 March 1900, at Sargents, Ohio, a 14 year old boy saw a bird among the cattle that he did not recognise. He asked his mother for permission to shoot it. This was the very last authentic sighting of a passenger pigeon to be seen in the wild. The stuffed bird (called Buttons, as these were used for the eyes) is now in a museum.

The inquest on the fate of the passenger pigeon produced various explanations. One from a $millionaire pigeon meat trader was, that God had put all creatures on Earth for the benefit of man, and that the Good Lord would be pleased that the passenger pigeon had been used as intended. It was even suggested the Almighty might one day see fit to bring the birds back again! Another theory was that the entire population had perished in a great storm over the Gulf of Mexico, but since - vagrants apart - the birds did not leave mainland America that had to be nonsense. Then there were those who clung to the belief of vast undiscovered forests where the passenger pigeon still prospered – sadly, wishful thinking. One suggestion was that the birds had en-masse flown to Australia! Any excuse rather blame man whose greed, ignorance and callous stupidity had been responsible.

If there is a positive side to this sad tale, it is that the passenger pigeon awakened the awareness of the American people to the vulnerability and fragility of their native wildlife. It may even have helped to save the buffalo in its eleventh hour. Then in 1909 the American Ornithologists Union offered a substantial reward to anyone able to produce evidence that the passenger pigeon still existed – there were no successful claimants.

R.I.P ‘Martha’, 1 September 1914. From billions to zero in under 100 years.

Mike Strickland

P.S. In many American States where the passenger pigeon occurred, there are plans to mark the centenary of its passing on 1 September 2014.

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**Book Review**

**BIRDSONG** by Jonathan Elphick, Jan Pedersen and Lars Svesson. Published by Quadrille Publishing – ISBN 978-1-84949-134-1  
Priced £30

I made up my mind last year when clearing out back copies of publications from RSPB, BTO, SOC and WWF etc. that the last bird related book I would buy would be The Atlas 2007-2011 when it becomes available. However the usual domestic request to identify a Christmas present lead to the advert for this book. I am pleased to say it is now in my possession and is absolutely superb. It contains excellent full page photographs of 150 British and Irish birds as well as a full page opposite about the bird.

The book begins with an explanation of the purpose behind bird song and then gives details of
names and plumage before it starts on the individual species with a description opposite the photograph page. It begins with the **Mute swan** and at the top of the descriptive page are the words and letters ‘Wing sound, Call 001, 002’. This is where the book further excels because there is a sound module attached. It is simple to operate as you can bring up the numbers by simply pressing the appropriate buttons.

There is a page giving full guidance on how to work the module and warns: ‘NB Please do not use the player to attract birds. This can cause stress to nesting species’.

The photographs and text alone make this a worthwhile purchase but, by adding the recordings, makes it almost a necessity. I highly recommend it and just wish it had been available when I was struggling to learn bird song from CD’s.

Just think, you can sit in the house, press a button and a **nightingale** will sing to you all night long!!

Richard Prentice

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**From your Group Leader**

The birds are letting us know that spring is on the way, both by their enhanced plumage and the abundance of early morning singing. At first I worried that the sound of the song thrush was absent, but now they have joined in loud and clear and the great-spotted woodpeckers have started their drilling. This, of course means that we must continue feeding our garden birds.

We have been fortunate this winter to have frequent sightings of up to three otters at a time sometimes from our windows but also when walking by the river Conon with the dog. The otters cannot resist taking a second look at the dog – I wonder what they think of him?

This year we met after our New Year bird count at the hide at Udale bay and for once had excellent weather. Well done to Sam, Ali and Elizabeth for adding three new species to the all-time list and congratulations to Rosie and Keith for winning the trophy. Thanks also to Dave Galloway who keeps the list and keeps us all in order!

We are still hoping for some new committee members. Please give this some thought; we would welcome you with open arms!

Doreen Manson

**Stevie’s Snippets**

16 Dec: A small group of **redpolls** were feeding on the weeds along the roadside down from Kirkmichael graveyard, Udale. One had a very rich plumage with a splendid red forehead.

02 Feb: East beach, Nairn: watched a nice flypast of over 50 **Brent geese**, and later saw a lovely flock of **snow buntings** in very fine plumage feeding on the shore; also had several ‘clockwork’ **sanderlings** feeding very close to us.

12 Feb. There was a small flock of about 15 **waxwings** at Tomatin (but not many berries about)! Near the road end at Coignafearn a flock of **snow buntings** were feeding along the roadside, but they were very flighty. And here the **ravens** were putting on their usual displays of aerial synchronisation.

19 Feb: A very nice dawn chorus in Applecross with mainly **blackbirds**, **song thrushes** and **robins**, with **chaffinches** and **wrens**.
And Finally ...

Spring is on its way!

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Feral goat kid in March, Strathdearn © Steve Austin

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Field Trip Notes

Please note the following for your safety and guidance when on field trips:

- Our trips are usually low risk and take account of the ages of the group but occasionally they may involve rocky paths, slippery duckboards or boggy ground. You can help to keep our trips enjoyable and trouble free by observing the following advice:
- Check the weather forecast and bring appropriate footwear, normally sturdy boots and warm waterproof clothing. It can be wet, windy, muddy, slippery or (even sometimes) searingly hot! There may be insect bites and ticks to contend with. You should consider taking a whistle, stick, walking pole, map, a small first aid kit and even sun protection cream for the head and neck. A mobile phone can be useful in an emergency and of course do not forget your binoculars and scope.
- Comply with route and safety instructions at sites and with the request of the trip leader
- Do not get separated from the group, especially in the hills or unfamiliar terrain. Make sure that you know where the meeting place is and at what time you should be there
- If you have any particular health problems that may slow you down, or prevent you from safely completing the walk, or birding in time, please speak to the group leader. If you are in any doubt, stay with your vehicle or the bus
- If you are carrying other members of the group in your own car, please ensure that your insurance covers this. Most policies are invalidated if passengers are charged or contribute to the cost of petrol.

Coach Booking form

I wish to book .......... place(s) for the Caithness coach trip on Saturday 25 May 2013 - at £20 per person

Name(s)................................................................................................................... Address..................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................. Post Code ..................................................................................................... Tel no. ...........................................................................................................
I enclose cheque (made payable to: RSPB Highland Group) for: £..............................

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The RSPB Highland Local Group would like to keep your details to send you further information about group activities and the work of the RSPB. If you want to amend or update your details or you do not want us to use them in the way stated, please contact me at the address below.
John Manson, Muirton Lodge, Urray, Muir of Ord IV6 7UR or email: john@jmanson2.wanadoo.co.uk
If you wish to receive this information electronically, please confirm your e-mail address here: ...

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Please send cheque and completed form to: John Manson, Muirton Lodge, Urray, Muir of Ord IV6 7UR