



Chairman's Thoughts

SWT Aberdeen Newsletter Spring/Summer 2019

<http://www.swtaberdeen.org.uk/>



Doing Our Part to Stop the Extinction Event

I'm guessing that, like me, you have listened with mounting concern to the dire warnings from David Attenborough and from the landmark report by the United Nations scientific panel on biodiversity, the IPBES, on the horrific consequences for human civilisation if we continue to destroy our natural resources and wildlife at the rate we are doing right now. The extinction of species is now on a par with other massive extinction events in the geological record and we can expect more that a million other species to disappear within a human generation. Our way of living is impacting the natural world like an asteroid would, albeit in a generation or two, and the huge problem is that many, many people in the world don't really understand this. The IPBES report makes clear that the root cause of this extinction event is the sheer scale of human consumption which is changing the face of the planet through clearing natural ecosystems for food, heating up the world and leaving vast, truly immense, amounts of waste. The future for human societies is very bleak if we are not able to summon up the strength of will to stop this catastrophe, reduce our need for use once-only resources and work out how to live on the planet with only those things we can renew and replace without more destruction of natural resources.

In general, at least in a functioning democracy, Governments do what the people want them to do. If the vast majority of us insisted that we wanted the country run so that we are not over-exploiting resources and that natural ecosystems were being protected and restored then that would happen. The problem is that many people don't really care about the natural world, or do care but would still rather have all the things that comes with vast over-consumption of resources, or they try to limit their impact on the global natural world but are not being supported to do so by what's available to them.

I realise that I'm preaching largely to the converted through this newsletter audience. But what can we all do right now? First, do all we can as individuals to reduce consumption of non-renewable resources, for example, sign up to green energy suppliers; do absolutely everything to reduce fossil fuel use in vehicles, the more of it kept in the ground the better for all our futures. I know most of us fly to go on holidays and many do it for work, but try and limit it as much as you can. Second, remember the maxim to reduce consumption, reuse as much as you can (as in the new deposit return scheme) and then recycle like mad and demand recycling where that is lacking. Really think about how to reduce any kind of waste, especially plastic! Support this way of living and be proud to do so. Third, educate others in whatever way suits you best. Pick up someone else's litter and bin it, fight for wildlife through supporting campaigns, ask your school to promote environmental activities. It's good to see that the voices of the young are growing louder, with Greta Thunberg a great example, and the organised protests of young people may well irritate some of us but this really is a protest at that bleak future we are leaving them. Finally, we need to continue to press Governments to change the way they view national success. If we measure this largely by material wealth, the ability to buy and sell goods and the resources we can extract out of the planet then we are failing. We need to measure resource over-use, health and quality of life, our access to nature and the state of our natural resources. The Scottish Government is beginning to lean further this way but we need to tell our elected representatives time and again that this is what we want. I hear it often said that we in the UK or Scotland can do very little to change this impending global train-wreck so why should we forego our material acquisitiveness when other nations are reluctant to do it? Well, because those of us with enough foresight need to show what can be done to reduce resource consumption and to pressure politicians to protect and restore our natural ecosystems. If most of us want these things then we will be able to build a spectacular national demonstration of how to live successfully on this planet and then we can indeed begin to change the world.

Roger Owen

Local Nature Conservation Sites in Aberdeenshire

In 2014 I wrote an article for the Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire SWT newsletter on the identification of Local Nature Conservation Sites within Aberdeenshire. Just as a bit of a recap, these are sites of regional and local importance that form part of suite of sites within Aberdeenshire that are protected for their biodiversity and geodiversity value. These sites sit alongside sites of international and national importance such as Special Protection Area's and Sites of Special Scientific Interest.



Pronie Lochs

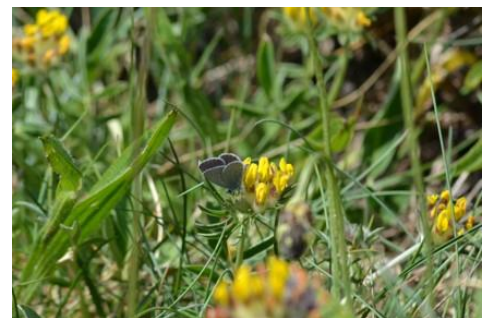
One hundred Local Nature Conservation Sites were identified and mapped in the Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2017, with policies for their protection. These sites cover a wide variety of habitats that are either considered to be good examples of their type or are particularly important for the populations of species they support. They vary in size from small areas of wet grassland and heathland which support a population of small pearl bordered fritillary to extensive stretches of coastline which support dunes, grassland and heath.

Geological and geomorphological sites similarly vary from small disused quarry at Harestone to extensive areas such as the Howe of Cromar on Deeside which has an extensive assemblage of glaciofluvial landforms including esker systems, meltwater channels with outwash gravels.

In fact, most of the sites noted for their geology or geomorphological features are also of botanical interest which in turn often means that they support a good variety of invertebrates, and quarries are often important nesting sites for peregrines or sand martins.

The presence of a Local Nature Conservation Site is reported in any searches for development, infrastructure projects or forestry proposals undertaken by the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre. This means that consideration of the important features of the site can be incorporated into any discussions and designs at an early stage. Not all development will necessarily be damaging to the interest of the LNCS, for example a single wind turbine is unlikely to impact on a large site of geomorphological interest if well sited but there may be an advantage in geomorphologists being able to have access to any excavations to build up their knowledge of the extent and nature of any deposits present on the site.

The identification of LNCS is an ongoing process, and the review of the Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan has provided an opportunity to review the existing sites and their boundaries, and to identify additional sites. A review of the existing sites has resulted in some boundary changes to exclude small areas that are no longer considered to meet the criteria, or to include additional areas of habitat or features of interest. New sites have come to light in various ways, some as a result of ongoing habitat survey and some in discussions with local specialists. The proposed LNCS have been assessed in the same manner as the original ones, with an initial discussion by a small scientific panel followed by consideration by a wider panel of local interest groups, including SWT. These sites have now be submitted to the Local Development Plan team who will be seeking permission from Aberdeenshire Council to confirm the existing sites and the additional 14 sites that will then form part of the Proposed Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2021.



Small Blue on Kidney Vetch

Judith Cox
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Wildlife Watch Group

Every year the Wildlife Watch group hold monthly sessions for children interested in learning more about nature and wildlife. A favourite session of ours (both adults and children) is held in the Cruickshank garden with Grampian Ringing group. This year the session with the ringing group was on a sunny Saturday in March. The sun brought the insects out who had a field day biting my ankles!

Kirsten Dickson

We started the session listening to the ringing group tell us about the importance of bird ringing in monitoring bird populations. We learned about how the individually numbered, lightweight band, attached to the leg of the bird can help track movements and life history. We watched the ringing group weigh the birds and explain how to tell the age and sex of different species.

Using the mist nets we were lucky enough to get close to some of our favourite garden birds including blue tit, greenfinch, great tit, goldfinch, chaffinch, bullfinch, blackbird and even a feral pigeon. But the highlight of the day by far is each of the children getting a chance to release a ringed bird – quite a magical experience!

We think it's one of the best ways for children to learn about bird conservation!

If you would like to find out more about Aberdeen Wildlife Watch please send an email to:

aberdeenww@swtaberdeen.org.uk



Photo: Anna Louise Kjaer

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

Dr Gwen Maggs



Red squirrels are the only native squirrel to the UK and are an iconic and charismatic species. However, in the last century red squirrel populations have seen a dramatic decline in distribution and numbers, resulting in red squirrels disappearing from most of the landscape.

Loss of habitat has impacted red squirrel distribution but today, the greatest threat to the continued survival of red squirrels is the spread of the invasive non-native grey squirrel. Grey squirrels were introduced to the UK in the 19th century from North America and out-compete red squirrels for food and living space. They can also carry squirrelpox, a virus that doesn't harm them but is deadly to red squirrels.

Grey squirrels have completely replaced reds in many parts of the UK, but there are still places where healthy red squirrel populations continue to exist. Scotland is now home to 75% of the red squirrels, it is therefore vital that we work to protect these surviving strongholds.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels project is a long-term collaboration led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project aims to halt the decline in, and improve conditions for, populations of red squirrels across Scotland working in the south of Scotland, the central lowlands and the north east.

At this time, halting the spread of grey squirrels through control is the only viable option to fully protect the strong red squirrel populations we still have across Scotland. The project only control grey squirrels in target areas where we know this activity will have a positive impact on the local red squirrel population.



Photo credit: No Bad Photo

Annual surveying of squirrel populations across all the regions, conducted by volunteers, monitors the long-term changes in red and grey squirrel distribution. This monitoring, using squirrel feeder boxes to collect hair samples, has proven that the work conducted by Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels and its dedicated volunteers has halted the decline of red squirrels across Scotland, even where squirrelpox is present.

In Aberdeenshire we have been very successful in restoring red squirrels to the region, and even welcoming reds back into Aberdeen City after many decades. Our annual survey results show that our work to control grey squirrels in the North East is making a difference with the proportion of survey sites returning 'red-only' more than doubling from 15% to 34% since 2015, meanwhile 'grey-only' have halved from 22% to 11%. Red squirrel sightings are now common around Aberdeen City, popular locations include Countesswells woodlands, Hazelhead Park and Seaton Park.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels is now entering a new phase of Developing Community Action, where we are working to encourage local communities and land owners to take on the vital roles of the project and build community engagement. Through training, support and our interactive online Hub we hope to empower local people and communities to take ownership of their red squirrels to ensure the future of Scotland's most beloved animal.

If you're interested in helping the project please become a "squirrel spotter" by reporting all your red and grey squirrel sightings (dead or alive) on our website scottishsquirrels.org.uk. This helps us track the distribution of squirrels across the region to adapt our management and track the recovery of reds across the region.

A World in One Country

I left on the 23rd February on this Saga trip titled as above. I flew from Heathrow to Johannesburg and joined the coach party and off we went, the final destination being Cape Town, a long way away! I could easily fill in a newsletter article just on the itinerary, places and people, or should I concentrate on the wildlife? Wildlife wins, of course.

Rodney Payne



Long Tailed Widowbird

The first night at Zebra Lodge NW of Jo'burg brought the first wildlife. Kudu, zebra, warthogs and giraffe. On then over the northern end of the Drakensburg Mountains and a steep drop of 2000 m down to the Kruger National Park. From the bus windows I saw bless buck, eland, white stork, white winged crow, and Long Tailed Widowbird. Lunch yielded a masked weaver.

Kruger! A lifetime ambition of mine. The first surprise was having to get going at 0515 clutching a picnic breakfast. Is this a holiday? But it was worth it. The wildlife was much closer than I had thought, a pride of lions lying on the road beside us for example. None of the wildlife took any notice of the safari vehicle and its ten inhabitants. The guide was excellent, humorous and very competent. I explained I was interested in birds. "We must get the big five first, and then we will find some birds".



The animals as we saw them:-

Buffalo, giraffe, kudu, dwarf mongoose, spotted hyena, impala, gnu, elephant, leopard, warthog, klipspringer, Butchell's zebra, baboon, lion, rhino, vervet monkey.

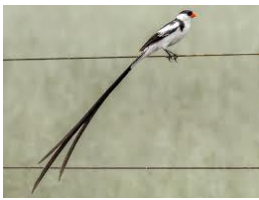
The birds:-

Yellow billed hornbill, yellow billed kite, quealah, harlequin quail, go-away bird, European roller, ring-necked dove, white tailed swallow, fork tailed drongo, brown snake eagle, common spurfowl, lilac breasted roller, African hoopoe, woodland kingfisher, white faced whistling duck, hammerkop, pied crow, southern pied babbler, cape turtle dove, speckled mousebird, and cape glossy starling.



White Faced Whistling Duck

What a great place for birdwatching, BUT, you cannot get out of the vehicle or you will turn from observer into prey!



Pin tailed Whydah

The next day was a bus tour up the Blyde Canyon rivalling the Grand Canyon for size and depth. Amazing scenery, quite fantastic. A few new birds cropped up, white necked raven, red winged starling, pin tailed whydah, and hadeda ibis.

We left Kruger then and passed into Swaziland where we stayed overnight. Out of Swaziland and into Zulu country and the Ghost Mountain Hotel. I could have stayed there forever! While we were there we had a guided boat trip on a Lake Jozini with great views of elephant, hippo, wildebeest, black rhino, crocodile and various antelope. Passing birds were marico sunbird, egyptian goose, grey heron, reed heron, black winged lapwing, great egret, African fish eagle, African spur wing goose, black winged stilt, glossy ibis, yellow billed stork, and african darter.

I took an optional game drive to Mkusi Wildlife Park. We left at 0900 after breakfast, a great deal better than the earlier trip in Kruger. The only new animal was a leopard tortoise, but there were lots of birds. Very hot there - 36 degrees.



Long-crested Eagle

The Mkusi new bird list:-

Long crested eagle, turaco, steppe buzzard, rattling cisticola, broad billed roller, maribu stork, three banded plover, red billed oxpecker, marsh sandpiper, red backed shrike, cape cormorant, african pied wagtail, jacana, cattle egret, and black crowned night heron.



Leopard Tortoise

A group of young Zulus visited us in the hotel, dancing and singing. The sound of their drums under the low roof was almost unbearable! We visited Shaka Land, the film set from "Zulu". It is set up as a window on the old Zulu life. A ferocious warrior demonstrated all too obviously what an awful apparition they must have made with their spears and shields. I was interested that the "asegai" is not the Zulu word for the short stabbing blade, they call it a "shiiiish" which is the noise it makes entering and leaving an opponent's body! The young Zulus turned up again and outdoors their drums were much more bearable.

We moved on to Durban and flew down to Elizebethville. Then via Cape Agulas the most easterly part of southern Africa, the Garden Route, which is all trees, the rest have been cut down, and eventually arrived in Cape Town. No birds of note and only baboons about. I bucked up again when we went to Cape Point the most southern point of South Africa, and its close neighbour the Cape of Good Hope. Wild, windy weather! Thousands of African cormorants clustered at both points together with fur seals. The next highlight for me was the African penguin colony at the aptly named Boulders. Plenty there all going about their business, quite used to spectators. Thousands of cormorants here as well.



African Penguin

New birds:-

Grey headed gull, kelp gull, African oystercatcher, cape gannet, white breasted cormorant, Cape crow, cape sparrow, African dusky flycatcher, cape bunting, cape robin chat, southern double collared sunbird, tern (sp) Table Mountain was not speaking, the cable car could not operate in the gale and it was covered in dense cloud.

Whether desert or jungle the country is beautiful everywhere. The food was excellent both in the hotels and at the chippie (huge hake and chips, £5). For me the highlights were Kruger and Mkusi. It was a highly enjoyable trip.

Rodney Payne

Outings:

- June 22nd – Botanical Outing at Crathes
David Welch**
- July 20th – Montrose Basic
Ranger Guided Walk**
- August 10th - Longhaven Reserve
SWT Seasonal Ranger**
- September 14th - Fungi at Houghton Country Park
(jointly with Grampian Fungi
Group)**

**Booking for the above outings is necessary:
Please reserve a place on any of these events at
bookings@swtaberdeen.org.uk**

Local SWT website: www.swtaberdeen.org.uk
National SWT website:
<http://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/>

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