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SWT Aberdeen Newsletter Spring Summer 2020



Chairman's Message – Roger Owen

The last 3 months have probably been life-changing for all of us and I don't think the impact of this pandemic will be forgotten for a very long time. I'm guessing, like me, that you've all gone through a whole range of emotions from an initial disbelief that it could get so bad, to a fear that the virus would sweep all before it as we waited for our turn of the roulette wheel, and, now hope that the worst is over and we may soon be able to return to our lives as they were. Or should we? Alex Stuart of North East Biodiversity Partnership (NESBiP) calls for us not to return to life as normal, she says: "as we draw closer to an end of lockdown, we have an opportunity to bring forward lessons learned and rethink our priorities on what we want to redefine as the new 'normal' both globally and locally". See the rest of her article in this newsletter.

There have been some positives in all of this. It's amazing how many people have turned to nature to heal themselves emotionally. There have been many stories of delighted householders observing previously unseen, or previously un-noticed, wildlife in urban areas (see an example [here](#)). In North East Scotland there are already some great ways to find out what wildlife people are seeing, for example, on FaceBook you can find NE Scotland Wildlife; North East Scotland Biodiversity – wildlife gardening group; and Scottish Birds and Wildlife. And don't forget our own SWT local Facebook page! I have been entertained by adding a huge Sycamore tree in my garden to a website cataloguing notable examples of trees throughout the UK (see: [Treezilla](#)) I am also very interested to see initiatives like Rewild My Street in London, which could be applied in a lot of places by individual or groups of residents (see [rewildmystreet](#)). I'd love to see something like this happening in our own urban areas. On these lines, NESBiP have been persuading our local councils to mow grass verges less and establish more wildflower areas instead. The current lockdown has seen this opportunity increase, except, a little unfortunately where council landscape managers exhorted householders to mow verges themselves!

Unfortunately, the pandemic has driven a coach and horses through the last couple of our winter lectures and at least the first two summer events, all of which have had to be cancelled. Please continue to check our local SWT Website (www.swtaberdeen.org.uk) or our Facebook page to see updates. We have the remaining summer events, from July to September, and all of the next winter talks planned and will resume normal service to our members as soon as we possibly can. Meanwhile we have thought of ways to entertain you so have begun posting wildlife quizzes on Facebook and hope soon to provide some short videos from local experts about wildlife near us.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and I hope to see you soon!

Roger Owen

A Call to Action

In a very short period of time, we have seen nations across the world, including our own, come together for a collective goal of reducing the impact of a virus. Our way of life has been radically changed within mere weeks, and we have seen many preconceived notions of the status quo challenged. In the words of band Keane – "Everybody's changing, and I don't feel the same."

For many working in the environmental field, including myself, this comes with mixed feelings. For some who have spent a lifetime rallying for change in the ways we manage our environment, it comes as vindication that profound change is possible. That many of the excuses once held up by those 'in charge' and by the public as reasons for inaction, can be worked around, if not gotten rid of completely.

Indeed, it would be easy to become disillusioned about our lack of progress in meeting current biodiversity targets both nationally and globally, when we have now just shown how quickly and vastly our lifestyles can be altered when there is the will. Personally, I am choosing to land on the side of hope instead of despair or disillusionment.

As we reach the end of our current decade of biodiversity targets and prepare to set down new targets and strategies for the coming decade, we have an opportunity to enact change. Similarly, as we draw closer to an end of lockdown, we have an opportunity to bring forward lessons learned and rethink our priorities on what we want to redefine as the new 'normal' both globally and locally.

As part of the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership I have the privilege of working with a fantastic group of engaged individuals from a huge range of sectors – from NGO's to local authority staff, from rangers and community volunteers to scientists. We already have a wealth of knowledge and expertise at our fingertips about how we can improve our local environment. The thing we have been lacking is political and financial support as well as public backing.

During lockdown, many people have redefined their connection with their local environment. With our access to the outdoors and Nature vastly limited, our daily local doses of 'Vitamin N' have taken on new importance as an indispensable lifeline for both our physical and mental health. Many people are discovering or engaging their local wildlife for the first time or in a new depth, whether on walks around local greenspaces or in their gardens. From noticing and recording which new plants, birds and insects are appearing daily, to a huge upsurge in growing food plants and flowers at home. The public is now more aware of the importance of greenspaces in our everyday life and how they act as a home for our wildlife.

Globally we have seen the impact of reduced pollution from traffic and businesses – skies clearing of smog, and animals reappearing in the heart of cities. New ways of working from home are emerging for many people who never had this option previously – reducing traffic on our roads, pollution and time spent travelling. Major cities across Europe are now figuring out how to leave lockdown with less car use and more cycle routes or attractive pedestrian zones incorporating things like trees.

For many parents, a sharper focus has been placed on what and how children are learning as they have taken up the role of educators. Outdoor education, with its proven benefits to well-being and academic outcomes, looks like it could be key in helping our schooling systems start to work safely again with the virus still in our midst.

As we move from Spring into Summer, new focus is coming onto our food supply chains – both what we grow and how we grow, harvest and supply these products. There has been a new push to buy local and support our local growers.

It has been the ability of every individual to change and adapt that has seen us through these trying weeks and months, and it is my hope that these experiences will now shape a better new 'normal'. We will of course need the expertise of all those across the environmental sector to help enact changes we want to see, but more importantly we need public support. Now more than ever, I am aware of how my choices impact others – how globally they add up, but also how they have immediate effects on those around me and my local area. Our personal choices count. Our ability to put pressure on decision makers is invaluable and needs to be exerted. So yes, everybody is changing, and I don't feel the same – I'm hopeful.

Alex Stuart

Wildlife trip to Zimbabwe and Botswana, February 2020



Victoria Falls Safari Lodge

On 7th February I left Aberdeen with Saga to fly to Heathrow and then to Addis Adaba in Ethiopia, and on again to Victoria Falls airport in Zimbabwe. It was a long tedious series of flights and when we got there it was drizzling and grey, it was after all the Rainy Season. Stumbling into our coach for the short journey to Victoria Falls Lodge, a beautiful building of teak and thatch in the manner of an African village "hall". Very nice place, lots of stars, a la carte and a waterhole overlooked by the bar. Secondary forest all around.

Our first trip was a cruise on the Zambesi above the falls. The river was full, very brown and quite fast. The catamaran boat looked as if it had been knocked up in the shed, but it had a bar, a toilet and petite fours so who cared. We chugged around the river viewing Crocs, Darter, Open Bill Stork, Cormorant, Cattle Egret, large Monitor Lizard, Thickknee, and lots of Hippos, one of which was standing on the bank snacking on the new grass and we all declared we had never seen in the wild a hippo out of water. If we only realised in Botswana we would see hundreds out of water! Of course, all these birds and beasts should have African in front of their names, but please spare the author.



Antelope Great Kudu



Yellow Billed Heron

The next day was scheduled for the Falls. I was advised not to go as the path was wet, rough, and slippery. I was quite happy looking at the animals and birds at the water hole. They had not long left when there was the father and mother of a thunder storm. I have never seen the like, it was right over-head, no gap between the flash and the bang. Of course they saw little of the Falls but were soaked to the skin, the evening was spent trying to dry out phones and cameras.

Later we visited a local village with Chief Laughing Hyena. It was a very appropriate name as he had a mouthful of large teeth and could play the part very well. Zimbabwe people stick to the old ways. They have land and work it together sharing what the crops provide and make all sorts of things many from recycling rubber and plastics and they also carve wooden figures all of which they try to sell to the tourists. The bold heroes went forth to the Falls again the next morning and the same thing happened. I was very pleased I was not with them. The mostly drooked people staggered back into the hotel and then spent time drying out. Time to move onto the bus for the border with Botswana, I guess it's fairly typical for Africa; sheets of forms, and delay. My first Coronavirus temperature was taken there to see if I could enter Botswana.

Botswana bus for the couple of hours to the Chobe Safari Lodge, a huge complex on the bank of the Chobe River, a tributary of the Zambesi. No a la carte here! Just the usual huge buffet. Food was good throughout with the game meat, warthog, antelope etc being universally tough. Gave it a miss, there was plenty of everything else.



In beautiful weather we started our first game drive at 0545. Unlike Kruger we were not on tracks but in sandy ruts near the shore of the river. The going was rough and tough, but it was worth it! Hundreds of elephants and hippos, vast herds of Impala, and many other types of antelope but in smaller numbers, Eland, Great Kudu,



Waterbuck, Nyala, Bushbuck, Puku, and Buffalo. No Zebra or Wildebeest though, they were all away for their migration. Herds of Giraffes, we saw 17 together on one occasion. Down by the water there were Hippos, lots of Hippos, and not forgetting the crocodiles. Other species seen were Jackals, Chacma Baboons, Vervet Monkeys, Slender Mongoose, Lizards and Terrapin. And the birds! There were so many, over 100 species, I'm going to try and lump some of the specialities together, or I will just have a list. See them later.

The trip at Chobe consisted of three game drives at different times of the day, a river cruise, a birdwatching cruise and thanks to the Lodge, a free birding trip on the last evening covering twilight. This

took place on the noble vessel “Tin Can”, think boating references earlier, the name says it all, but there were the ever- present free bar and toilet!



In many ways this was the highlight of the birding trips. I saw many species I had not seen before but the sheer number of birds coming into roost was astonishing. Highlights were a huge flock of Rock Pratincoles and as we passed a reed bed, thousands of Barn Swallows wheeled above us perhaps resting on their way north to Scotland.

The birds: How to do this? Think stork, heron, egret, wader, and I am sure they were all there in great abundance. Some I had not seen before were the waders Blacksmith, Crowned Lapwing, and Long-toed Plover. Many waders common to us were present especially Ruff and Common Sandpiper.

African Ground Hornbill

Picking out a few of the dry land birds were four species of Hornbill, Tropical Boubou, Pririt Batis, Terrestrial Brownbul, Grey Headed Sparrow, White-fronted Bee Eater, and so many more. Remember that most of these should be prefixed with African. Full list on request.

A great trip all too short as usual. Long flight back, another Coronavirus test at Addis Adaba, never had one since! All this and I have not even mentioned the flight in an Airvan over the borders between Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia (I got to be co-pilot), the Snake Park and the semi-formal dinner fighting the insects on the big catamaran as we cruised along. I wonder what else has been lost in the joy.

Rodney Payne

Appeal to Kincardineshire residents to help protect Aberdeenshire’s red squirrel

Scottish Wildlife Trust’s Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels project has issued a press release urging Kincardineshire residents to help protect red squirrel populations by reporting all sightings of red squirrels and their non-native cousin, the grey squirrel. The press release is repeated here.

Grey squirrels are known to occur sporadically in low numbers between the Rivers South Esk and North Esk, the latter forming a natural boundary between Angus and Aberdeenshire. Growing numbers of grey squirrels have been reported, north of the River North Esk at Benholm and Inglismaldie Woods, to Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels in recent weeks, raising concerns for the red squirrel populations of Aberdeenshire. Aberdeen is the only location in northern Scotland which has an established grey squirrel population. They were first recorded in the city’s leafy parks and gardens in the 1970s, and soon replaced red squirrels across the city and in many neighbouring areas of Aberdeenshire as far away as Banchory and Alford.



Grey Squirrel
(Woodland Trust)

Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels, a National Lottery-funded partnership project led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, has been working since 2009 to restore the red squirrel population by removing the grey squirrel competitor, allowing reds to recover. As a result, in recent years grey squirrels have been increasingly confined to urban Aberdeen, with red squirrels being seen in more areas of the city each year.

An ongoing monitoring campaign across the region, which relies heavily on the help of local volunteers, has enabled the project to detect remaining populations of grey squirrels and remove them in order to protect Scotland’s core red squirrel populations in Aberdeenshire, Moray, the Highlands and Argyll, the only regions where the red squirrel is still the only squirrel species.

North East Conservation Officer, Emma Sheehy, warned: “These new sightings show that grey squirrels are appearing further north into Kincardineshire than they have in recent years. We need the public to help us by continuing to report sightings. Without targeted action, these squirrels could continue to spread north, and become established in Kincardineshire and beyond. That could begin to undo the hard-won successes we’ve achieved in the in the last ten years.” Reporting sightings of both native and non-native grey squirrels at scottishsquirrels.org.uk is one of the simplest ways for people to help support one of Scotland’s most loved, and most threatened, species. Each sighting



Red Squirrel
(Sarah Woodfin)

enables Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels to target efforts to protect local red squirrel squirrels as well as those still thriving across Scotland's northern regions.

Emma Sheehy added: "With your help, we can make sure Scotland's core red squirrel populations are protected for generations to come."

Sarah Woodfin

What now for the living mountain?

This article originally appeared in the North East Mountain Trust newsletter "Mountain Views" in May, 2020 and is reproduced here with the kind permission of NEMT and the author.

Back in November last year I presented the first 'Adam Watson Memorial Lecture' at the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen. It was a great honour and a pleasure to see the room packed full with people; something alien to us all at the moment. With Coronavirus now at the forefront of our minds it is easy to forget that we are still in the midst of a climate emergency. The talk centred on that fact, entwined with many topics that Adam Watson cared so deeply about.



Cairngorms National Park Volunteer rangers

It's not easy and it's never dull. I can't think of a single issue we deal with in land management that doesn't have very strong opposing views, but the climate emergency has focused minds on what *must* happen now. For the last ten years much of our work has been aimed at contributing to the global challenge of climate change mitigation and adaptation; this will continue to dominate every element of our next National Park Partnership Plan.

The Conservation and Land Management elements of the current Park Plan concentrate on three things: *Landscape-scale collaboration*, *deer management* and *moorland management* and there is very significant progress being made. Guided by our *Cairngorms Nature Action Plan* and our new *Cairngorms Forest Strategy*, we are seeing woodland expand in ways that complement other land use and improve habitat networks... not the blocks of Sitka that Adam Watson railed against, but a gradual increase in native woodland that enhances both landscape and habitats. The *Cairngorms Connect* partnership (Wildland Estates, RSPB, SNH and Forest & Land Scotland) are collaborating on 60,000 hectares of woodland and wetland habitat restoration in Strathspey, whilst in Aberdeenshire the National Trust for Scotland has catalysed dramatic habitat changes on Mar Lodge Estate.



Planting Riparian Woodlands

Landowners in many locations all across The Park are regenerating woodlands and restoring peatlands; this must continue. We aim to ensure that deer densities are at a level that can allow habitats (including peatlands) to recover and be sustained. Deer managers are now, more than ever before, carrying out Habitat Impact Assessments and setting deer culls to suit. Given the recent Scottish government *Deer Working Group* review there is even more pressure to ensure that deer are managed with the long-term sustainability of both habitats and local communities in mind.



Young people inspired by nature in Glen Muick

Moorland management has also been scrutinised in the recent Scottish Government '*Werrity Review*'. Our view has always been that every form of land management whether forestry, farming or moorland management must be carried out in the public interest. This is why the CNPA and six estates in the East of the National Park set up the *East Cairngorms Moorland Partnership*. Our aim has been to demonstrate that public and private interests can go hand in hand and that moorland must be managed in ways that support both.

I finished the talk last November, with a tribute to Adam Watson and those who, like him, stand up for our mountains and our environment. I closed with a picture of Greta Thunberg because Adam once said to me "Dinnae be a Jessie" you have to fight. If Greta Thunberg is anything to go by, maybe he was right about the fight bit, but wrong about the Jessie bit and the age of grumpy-old-bearded-men (including me) needs to move into the age of angry-young-women.

Will Boyd-Wallis, Head of Land Management for the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)

Aberdeen Wildlife Watch volunteers please!

Aberdeen Wildlife Watch group provides fantastic opportunities for children to connect with wildlife and nature – activities which are educational and inspirational, and may lead to developing our wildlife champions of the future! We are looking for enthusiastic and friendly volunteers to help lead the group. Although currently on hold due to Covid-19, the group is a nature club run by Scottish Wildlife Trust Volunteers for children aged 8-12 and ordinarily runs once a month. Due to the nature of the work, all new volunteers are required to complete a short registration process with the Trust, which includes a PVG application. For more information and details on how to apply, please contact the Trusts People and Wildlife Officer Catherine Leatherland by email:

cleatherland@scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk

Lorraine Shakespear

Aberdeen Wildlife Watch Leader



Caterpillar Correction from Previous Newsletter

We have to make an admission: in the last newsletter we incorrectly labelled an image of a caterpillar as that of the Speckled Wood butterfly (*Pararge aegeria*) and it was pointed out to us by Mark Young that this was in fact the caterpillar of a Snout Moth (*Hypena proboscidalis*). Here is a correct image of the Speckled Wood caterpillar:



(image thanks to Barry Henwood)

Walks & Talks for 2020

Outdoor meetings venues as noted. Indoor meetings take place at Main Lecture Theatre, School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Aberdeen, Tillydrone Ave, AB24 2TZ at 7.30 pm. To book on the walks please contact bookings@swtaberdeen.org. To check details of the Talks please contact Rodyne Payne 01569 763 742. **Please check SWTAberdeen.org.uk or our Facebook page for latest information and if the Walks and Talks are going ahead.**

Walks

Tuesday 7th July 20:30 – 21:30

Swift Walk & Talk – Garioch Heritage Centre, Inverurie (AB51 4FY). Family Friendly, no dogs. Free.

Saturday 15th August 10:00 – 16:00

Wood Ants of Birse Forest with Jeni Stockan. Forest of Birse carpark (AB34 5EN). (2 or 4 hour options for the walk). Family Friendly, no dogs. Free.

Saturday 26th September 10:30 – 13:00

Den Wood near Old Meldrum. Woodland Trust North Scotland Site Manager Ross Watson. Den Wood car park (AB51 0AW). Family Friendly, no dogs. Free.

Talks

Tuesday 15th October 19:30 – 21:00

AGM followed by Creating and Managing Aberdeen's Woodlands for People and Wildlife. Ian Talboys (Aberdeen City Council Countryside Ranger).

Thursday 19th November 19:30 – 21:00

The Woodland Trust History and Aims and the re-introduction of red squirrels to their Ledmore & Migdale site on the Dornoch Firth. Barbara Crane.

Local SWT website: www.swtaberdeen.org.uk

National SWT website:

<http://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/>

The Scottish Wildlife Trust is a company limited by guarantee, registered in Scotland (registered number SC040247), having its registered office at Harbourside House, 110 Commercial Street, Edinburgh EH6 6NF. It is also a Scottish registered charity (charity number SC005792).

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