

# Orkney Field Club

Founded in 1959

*Aim: To encourage the study and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the County*



**Orkney Field Club is a registered Scottish charity, No. SC 012459**

## **Pre-AGM Reports**

The 2010 OFC Annual General Meeting will be held on Thursday 11th March at 7.30pm in the St Magnus Centre. It would be nice to see as many folk there as possible so that we have more membership involvement in the running of the Club and perhaps some new ideas as to the events we put on and the activities we engage in.

Below are the annual reports less the statement of accounts which will be published at the AGM.

### **Chairman's Report**

The most important thing to say to the membership of the Field Club is what a great privilege it is to work with this Committee. Members bring massive expertise and commitment; meetings are thoughtful and interesting; and much help is given outside meetings too. Needless to say, though, what follows are my views – and thus my responsibility! – Alone.

To set the scene, it may be of interest to show members the agenda for the year as the Committee themselves defined it when we first met after the AGM. It is in the nature of a “wish list”, and by no means has everything been achieved, but it is to be hoped that Club members will recognise something of the direction we have taken!

*Various suggestions were made by committee members including;*

- *More publicity about the Bulletin and Recording. Continue to improve the quality of the Bulletin and include a write up in the Orcadian. Sell copies to non members via shops etc.*
- *Include more outings with more explicit aims and subject matter ..... this is being addressed this year with the Lichens course and Wildflower event.*
- *Plan additional winter outdoor outings and/or indoor workshops*
- *Encourage the use of recording cards to encourage more members to submit records to the relevant recorders*
- *Increase publicity..... improve the website with more recent news and photos*
- *Need for a public speaker to go on Radio Orkney*
- *Plan some events aimed at families possibly a treasure/scavenger Hunt*
- *Study course planned on Lichens at end of May*

*It was agreed that we needed to keep these aims in mind as we thought during the year about what the Club is doing.*

The Club was founded “to encourage the study and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the County”; realistically others have long since assumed the mantle of cultural heritage, but I believe that we have continued to make a worthwhile contribution as far as the

natural heritage is concerned – but do come to the AGM and tell us what you think and how we can do better!

First, as to study:

The six indoor Club Nights have been a conspicuous success. On a couple of occasions we have attracted an audience of 50; there has been a satisfyingly broad range of topics; and the talks have been delivered with erudition and clarity. I have certainly learned a good deal from them, and equally been stimulated to learn more. We are immensely grateful to the speakers who have given their time and expertise so generously, and I'd also like to acknowledge the considerable work put in by Dick Matson in particular in pulling the programme together.

For the record, the talks were as follows:

20th February: Ask the Experts (panel including John Crossley, Keith Fairclough, Brian Ribbands, Jonathan Side, Alison Skene and Jenny Taylor)

20th March: Orkney's Lepidoptera (Sydney Gauld)

17th April: the How and Why of Bird Song (Prof. Peter Slater)

25th September: Orkney's Bumblebees (John Crossley)

30th October: 1859 - A Voyage of Discovery (Prof. Jon Side)

20th November: Orkney's Birds of Prey (Eric Meek)

I have not repeated summaries of these excellent talks as extensive reports have appeared in the local papers, and the press releases are available on our website. However, I hope members will not mind if I identify themes which have repeatedly emerged – naturally a very personal observation. The first is how fortunate we are to live in the kind of place which brings together so many knowledgeable and stimulating speakers; and the second, how much more of the extraordinary variety and interest of nature there is for us to see and learn about, quite often “under our noses” so to speak.

Dick himself will write about the summer programme, and in every part of that the participants will have been broadening their understanding of Orkney's nature and ecology. Perhaps this year there has been a little extra focus on relatively focused meetings, sometimes with a significant taught element. Examples include John Crossley's workshop in June on wild flowers, and the May visit to the County of “the grand old man of lichens”, County Recorder Kery Dalby, who worked with fifteen of us for a day. Subsequently there has been another study meeting on lichens, and the intention is to sustain this side of our work.

Looking back over the Club's years since foundation in 1959 I have the impression of a well-established tradition of research and field study in those early days, and it seems fair to say that we do not match this on a regular and wide-ranging basis. In meetings during the year the Committee has identified the importance of raising the profile of Recording, but we do need to do more to raise public awareness of this and to spread the “recording habit”!

A final theme from this year has been the steps being taken to strengthen youth involvement. Wildlife Explorers and Nature Detectives are obvious examples, but also there are plans to encourage schools' contributions to the Bulletin, and to run a Schools' Natural History Competition.

As to conservation, perhaps there are two elements:

First, the Club has its own practical programme, notably at Durkadale and through the House Martin project. Success with both of these verges on the spectacular. The plantation is flourishing, and a joy to visit; aside from the health of the native trees there, it is evidently providing valuable shelter to an interesting range of birds. The growth in house martin nests has been remarkable, from 9 broods in 2001 to 59 in 2008. We are working, too, on the land in Orphir generously bequeathed to us by the late Thomas Wilson.

Second, although we have not been the active campaigners of yesteryear, the Club is regularly consulted on environmental and planning issues. During the year we have contributed to “scoping reports” (which provide the context for the specialists undertaking Environmental Impact Assessments) in relation to sand extraction on Burray and a wave energy array on the west coast. We have also responded on proposals for salmon farms and been in correspondence with Scottish National Heritage about the grazing of maritime heath.

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How well does the Club communicate with its membership? Again we need you to tell us! Two particular things come to mind.

I would like to thank everyone involved with the production of the Bulletin: all the contributors and then Ray Hallam, Dennis Paice and Dick Matson. We have had nothing but positive comments about the presentation and content of this year’s issue, and I am delighted to say that it cost considerably less than we had feared. Its publication is perhaps the central event of our calendar: we are determined to get it to you earlier in 2010, and already have an exciting range of articles beyond the all-important reports from Recorders. If anything, next year’s *Orkney Naturalist* may be even bigger, and it appears that we can continue to afford full-colour production.

We are also trying to improve electronic communications. The Club website, maintained through Orkney Communities, is now updated very frequently; we use it for urgent news but it is also ideal for making much more information available about us and our activities – for example, including substantial reports of all our Club Nights this year. Do let us know what you would like on the website (current plans are to strengthen the element to do with Recorders, recording and species lists) and please let me know if you would like your name added to the list of those happy to receive urgent information by e-mail. We will of course persist with traditional “hard copy” such as this Newsletter; but if arrangements are made between Newsletters – a Durkadale working party, a winter ramble or a lichen field day, perhaps – electronic means are perhaps the only affordable and manageable means of contact.

In closing this part of the pre-AGM Reports I would like to send good wishes to all Field Club members. We would be delighted to see you at the AGM, and always welcome your suggestions for the future.

Roger Davies, Chairman  
26<sup>th</sup> November 2009

## **The 2009 OFC Walks Programme**

The day of the OFC New Year Ramble was one of those rare winter days of crisp, clear, frosty weather with hardly a breath of wind and unbroken sunshine. The sparkling light showed off the countryside of the Roseness peninsula in East Holm superbly and conditions underfoot were ideal for walking. While nothing unexpected turned up we enjoyed watching the usual waders, such as Turnstone, Curlew, Golden Plover and Dunlin as well as Red-throated and Great Northern Divers, Kittiwakes and Snow Buntings.

The weather turned against us for the programmed date of the Winter Bird Race (a joint event with the RSPB Local Group) and postponement to the 1<sup>st</sup> March meant that a dozen folk had to withdraw leaving five teams of four. The weather for the new date was some compensation – clear and bright with a light breeze. In the spring-like conditions, from the 9am start for much of the morning, garden birds, such as Dunnock, Robin, Song Thrush, Blackbird and Wren, were in full voice.

A good range of the more common birds were seen with no surprises. Two of the most popular birds were Goldfinch in Finstown and Grey Wagtail in Willow Road, Kirkwall. A total of 92 species were noted (not counting a freshly dead Woodcock) and two teams tied for first place with 84 species. After a 5.30pm finish we repaired to the West End Hotel to compare notes and enjoy a most welcome bar-meal.

A fair number of folk came to Marwick Bay on 19<sup>th</sup> April to help with Bag the Bruck beach clean-up organised by ECO. As usual dozens of bags were filled with netting, rope and plastic from the fishing industry, waste from passing ships and farm plastic, all of which can be harmful to our wildlife. We left satisfied with a job well done.

The ever-popular “Harrier Sky-dancing” event was held jointly with the RSPB LG on 26<sup>th</sup> April. Splitting into two parties, those who went first to the Lyde Road saw an amazing number of Harriers; although far fewer, the Harriers at the Cottasgarth site gave particularly good displays of sky-dancing. Not exactly a raptor or a sky-dancer but a Cuckoo put in an appearance at Cottasgarth!

Late May can be a good time for early summer bird migrants, so on 24<sup>th</sup> members set out for hot-spots in East Mainland and the joined-up isles. While some of the commoner warblers had been seen a week earlier it became apparent that these and most other migrants must have continued their journey beyond Orkney. Nevertheless it was a bright, sunny day – perfect to be out in the Orkney countryside and we were lucky enough to see Little Terns at the 4<sup>th</sup> Barrier. We went on to enjoy Andy Mitchell’s hospitality at his very special “reserve” at Hestily and finished the day taking a quick walk along the cliffs on the Scapa Flow side of Burwick.. Here Spring Squill, Sea Pink and Sea Campion were in full flower and specimens of Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell drifted by.

During the last week-end in May Dr Kery Dalby the County Lichen Recorder and one of the country’s leading authorities on Lichens, made the journey from his home in Perthshire to Orkney to conduct a short course in lichen identification and habitat. Although the “Walk” element of the course had to be cancelled due to his infirmity Kery gave a masterly dissertation

on his subject. The course took place at ICIT, Stromness, and as well as being deeply grateful to Kery we are indebted to Professor Jon Side who allowed us to use the facilities at ICIT.

There was a good turn-out at Linnadale for the Families Wildflower Day on 21<sup>st</sup> June. This glen provides a good range of plant habitat and many species were in full flower. Higher up at the foot of the moorland both Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl put in an appearance while 2 young Kestrels gave a brilliant flying display. Back down in the valley a Cuckoo called.

Equally popular was the next event a week later “Getting to Know Orkney’s Wildflowers” led by John Crossley, the County Botanical Recorder. John had found some excellent species-rich habitat at Windwick in S Ronaldsay and it was very much a question of getting down on hands-and-knees for a very close examination of the flora. As well as showing everyone a wide variety of wildflower species John carefully explained the principles of plant identification and gave instruction in the use of botanical keys.

Early morning mist gave way to brilliant sunshine on 5<sup>th</sup> July for our visit to the Hill of White Hammars on South Walls where conservationist Roy Harris has created a reserve of wet pasture, wet and dry heath-land and coastal heath. The visit was memorable for many things, - large numbers of Common Blue and Meadow Brown butterflies, a profusion of wetland, moorland and coastal heath flowers and Blue-tailed Damselflies around the pond near the car-park. As well as *primula scotica* we saw Frog Orchid and Field Gentian. We continued by car to Heldale Water and walked as far a time allowed towards Hoglins Water. As expected we found Bonxies and Arctic Skuas and Round-leaved and Long-leaved Sundews. Specimens of Common Hawker Dragonflies and Large Red Damselflies were on the wing in the warm sunshine.

We were not so lucky with the weather forecast for the Dragonfly and Butterfly event on North Hoy planned for 12<sup>th</sup> July and it was cancelled.

On Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> August we met at Quoyberstane, the home of the Lepidoptera Recorder, Sydney Gauld, for the Families Moth Day. Moth traps had been set at various locations the night before and were brought to Quoyberstane. We gathered round while Sydney told us about each species as they were released. Considering the less than ideal weather conditions on the Saturday night reasonable catches had been made, so this was an interesting and instructive event .

Alistair and Christine Skene were our mentors for the Rock-pooling event at Yesnaby on 23<sup>rd</sup> August. Although the wind was blowing at 35-40mph and it started to rain after a couple of hours, a surprising number of people, including children, braved the elements. Alistair started with a quick, but fascinating, overview of the geology of the Yesnaby area, making use of nearby features and specimens to explain the geological processes. We then moved down to the shore for a look at marine life and here the children came into there own exploring the rock-pools and shallows for a variety of fish, crustacea, molluscs, worms and seaweed which Alistair and Christine were on hand to identify and tell us about.

We had been hoping for a mild day for our look at farmland flowers, insects and birds on 6<sup>th</sup> September but the day started wet and windy. Nevertheless conditions improved sufficiently for a few of us to venture forth to East Mainland. Here we found a field where some of the Brassica plants were running to flower; these and some extensive clumps of Sow Thistle were attracting Painted Ladies and a single Great Yellow Bumblebee. The real surprise was to find 4 if not 5 recently emerged Peacock butterflies on Sow Thistle, indicating that the species had almost certainly bred nearby. A quick look at St Peter’s Pool and Newark Bay revealed the

usual waders including Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot and Sanderling. In Deerness were large numbers of Golden Plover and feeding in a field with one flock were 5 Ruff. In the nearby quarry-garden were 2 Willow Warblers; at North Keigar was a Peregrine with a Pheasant kill and in a stubble field at Mill Sand we found a single Black-tailed Godwit.

The Club's annual pilgrimage to the native woodland at Berriedale on N Hoy had to be postponed twice because of the weather, eventually happening on 17<sup>th</sup> October. First stop was Burra House garden for late migrants and we were rewarded with Barred and Yellow-browed Warblers and a Chiffchaff. On to Berriedale and we were pleased to find that fine autumn colours were still holding on. We worked hard for passerine migrants but could only find 3 or 4 Chiffchaffs. The presence of a Sparrowhawk was probably significant. Three or four Woodcock put in an appearance, one of which came down the glen and settled on the opposite side of the burn to us some 15yds away at eye level. With the burn in full flood the waterfall at the head of the glen was spectacular. Just below, we managed to find patches of Wilson's Filmy Fern. Some of our group who continued on to Rackwick were invited in for tea and cakes by Mr and Mrs Rendall - many thanks to Jack and Dorothy! The final treat of the day was a circling Buzzard high above Sandy Loch.

There was no week-end weather window in November for the Club's Autumn Ramble and it was cancelled.

The final outdoor event of the year was "A Look at Lichens of a Rocky Shore" on 21<sup>st</sup> November. We are fortunate that Roger Davies has taken up a keen interest in Lichens and through his initiative the Kery Dalby course was arranged early in the summer and, having enthused many members, Roger followed that up with this event. Nine folk met at Yesnaby on a fine day although the wind was chilly. Roger had prepared aids to identification and lists of species likely to be encountered so participants knew very much what they should be looking out for. In a collaborative effort and with assistance from Roger a good number of species were identified.

### **The Durkadale Native Tree Plantations**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> April the Durkadale Working Party made a good start on reinforcing the fencing around the OFC native tree plantation, while on the RSPB site more willow cuttings were put in to reinforce the shelter belt. Routine clearance of coarse grass and weeds from around the young trees was carried out; and of course a good picnic in the open air was enjoyed by all.

Future plans for the OFC site include continuing with the fencing repair work, trimming back the Lodge-pole Pines where they interfere with the native trees and transplanting Aspen suckers. At the RSPB site we need to keep planting Willow cuttings on the north and west sides to create an effective shelter belt. The trees at both sites are progressing well and a good quantity of Downy Birch seed was collected in early October for other tree-planting projects..

### **The OCEAN Group**

Dick Matson, and fellow OFC committee member Jess Butler, who also represents the WEX group, are members of the committee of OCEAN (the Orkney Environmental Awareness Network). In recent months work has focused on producing a directory of sites of significant wildlife value for use in schools, on producing the OCEAN calendar of natural and cultural heritage events and on promoting the Nature Detective challenge. The last mentioned encourages children to go into the countryside to spot, record and perhaps draw wildlife or subjects of cultural heritage significance. This project is very much along the lines of the OFC Juniors Wildlife Challenge which the Club ran a couple of decades ago.

