

Eco Club 30th May 2009

We held our first meeting this morning, it was a beautiful sunny and warm day, sun cream and sunhats were needed.

Sophie welcomed everyone, 11 children and 8 adults, and then we set off for a walk. Our walk took us down to Risedale Beck and along the Beck, up the steps and back through the heathland. There were lots of flowers spotted – May blossom, Bluebells, Herb Robert, Yellow Pimpernel, Wild Garlic, Northern Marsh Orchids, Daisies and Buttercups full of tiny insects.

We stood very still and quiet and listened to the birds and heard Chiff Chaff and Chaffinch.

After our refreshments we headed down to the dipping platforms. Each platform yielded a different catch – those near the reed bed found a diving beetle larva that decided to lunch on a tadpole, 3 3 spined sticklebacks, toadpoles, a water boatman, a bloodworm and a pond skater. A red damselfly dropped in. People at the other station found two huge pond snails, a caddis larva, a huge diving beetle larva who lunched on another diving beetle larva!

The children received their diaries, a country code sheet and a wordsearch on the pond creatures as they left.

Eco Club 27th June 2009

10.30 2 children arrived. We dissected a buttercup and stuck the parts onto a sheet. Although cloudy and damp it was warm as we walked down through the Scrapes. Several flowers were identified including Foxglove, Ragged Robin and Cotton Grass. We investigated cuckoo spit! Then we hunted for the insect eating Teasel, walking through the very wet grass and under the tunnel of trees to the right of the lower pond dipping platform. We found some Teasels with their insect rich liquid.

On the way back to the Centre the children had to tick off flowers that they had seen and been told about. Lost the Red Campion on the way down and back! Found it second time.

After drinks and biscuits we set out on a Common Spotted Orchid count. Our hunt went from the Centre to the wetland gate. We got side tracked as we had talked about the lizard so we walked onto the boardwalk to see if he was there, but he wasn't. We talked about why the lizard liked to sunbathe. We counted over 20 Common Spotted Orchid from the boardwalk. We then went back the way we came and continued the count following the path behind the garden. In total we counted over 40 along these paths.

We were tidying up when some other children arrived. Slight typing error in/on the diary? So we quickly resorted our things and started again. Again we dissected our Buttercups. It was still cloudy with a little more breeze by this time. Through the Scrapes we looked at the Ragged Robin which was living up to its name after being soaked in the rain. We looked at how Honeysuckle climbed through the plants and how a Vetch did the same thing but in a different way. We could see the seeds in the Cotton Grass. Found some mint and squashed its leaves. The Teasel was examined again.

After refreshments we went on another orchid hunt, this time looking for both Northern Marsh and Common Spotted Orchids – quite difficult as some of the Northern Marsh had finished flowering, however the children were very good at spotting them all. Our path took us through the heathland. We recorded over 60 Northern Marsh and over 40 Common Spotted. We looked at the cuckoo spit.

Back at the Centre the children were given their packs.

Many thanks to all the parents and to Beryl and Sue who helped with organisation, especially second time round! We were so busy with our flowers I did not take any photos!

Elizabeth Dickinson

The Kakapo

It's been quite some time since I was last seen at Foxglove, but I've still kept busy in the conservation business, mostly in New Zealand. This year has been an exceptional year for an exceptional bird, the Kakapo. The Kakapo is a large, flightless parrot, may live up to a century and is a lek-breeder. Once abundant in New Zealand, the population was driven almost to extinction by the introduction of stoats, ferrets and cats, until by 1995 only around 50 remained. An intensive and creative conservation effort has rallied the population in the last 14 years by removing the birds to a couple of offshore islands and studying their breeding behavior, which as well as involving lekking, is erratic and does not occur every year, but is linked to major fruiting events of particular tree species.

2009 may go down in history as a watershed in the survival of the species. On Codfish Island (near Stewart Island) the birds geared up to breed in an unprecedented number when 27 females produced 33 surviving chicks bumping the world population over 100 for the first time to a whopping 125. The human effort involved in the recovery of the Kakapo is enormous and I was lucky to be one of a large team of Department of Conservation staff and volunteers monitoring the birds right through from laying to fledging. When the fruiting on which the Kakapo rely began to fail around March it could have been disaster, and most of the chicks had to be shifted to a hand rearing centre on the mainland, but the team has long experience in raising Kakapo and all reached fledging. Now in July I get to come full circle and help with the release of some of the young Kakapo into their new home, Anchor Island in Dusky Sound, Fiordland. The first chicks are settling in well despite the almost continuous rain and for this species at least there is a lot to be hopeful of.

Chris Bell

Undergrowth is published four times a year. Please send articles for inclusion in future issues by e-mail to the editor, Sam Hackett, at sam.hackett@btinternet.com tel: 01748 850966 or Tony Crease at tonycrease@aol.com tel: 01748 875504.

Any opinions included are those of the individual writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foxglove Covert Management Group or the policy of the Ministry of Defence.



Undergrowth

The Newsletter of Foxglove Covert Local Nature Reserve

Welcome to the Summer edition of Undergrowth. I have a large number of lengthy pieces this time so I must be very brief. As you will see they span the globe, from St. Kilda to New Zealand, via the Congo. Many thanks to all the contributors.

100 Club. We had a draw recently and it was won by Marie Conroy.

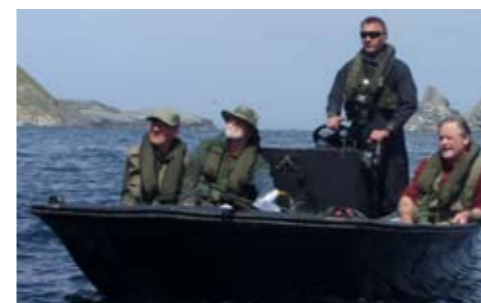
Trip to Saltholme RSPB. This will take place on Saturday 17th October. The coach will leave at 08:45. If you wish to go,

Ray Harper

Cape Wrath, July 2009.

The balance of probabilities tells me that the main Cape Wrath trip this year would be virtually impossible to replicate and there were three main contributors to the circumstances that made this, the 17th annual expedition, the best one ever. In no specific order they were the weather, the team, and the bird populations.

If we take them in this order the weather was magnificent and quite unlike anything we had ever experienced before. In many ways it was like sailing in the Mediterranean and the usual routine of being gated because of impossible seas, soaked through and freezing cold became a figment of our imaginations. For the first time ever we were sailing without wobble suits and enjoying every minute of the trip in sports kit with only a life jacket. For several days the sea was like a mirror and the experience was unforgettable. No waves, no wind, searing sunshine and the wonderful scenery to sit back and relish. The Royal Marines who ferried us around did us proud.



Thesecondfactor,one that might not be so obvious to everyone, was the team and the individual personalities who took part. It can be difficult for new people to be introduced to a long established core and working and living in

such close proximity, having the necessary expertise, and being prepared to accept the less than salubrious living conditions all have a bearing on the outcome. There are very few years when people new to the team did not gel but it has happened; this year was quite exceptional and the 'newer' members coupled with increasing confidence of some 'newish' members really did establish a very close bond that kept the group buoyant throughout. Even Chris Meller's timekeeping showed a marked improvement!



thriving due to the large number of sand eels and it was difficult to step around the boulders due to the great number of eggs and chicks. Several times chicks were witnessed actually hatching out!

Apart from ringing hundreds of birds, a significant number were re-traps. One Guillemot that was re-trapped had been ringed on the island of Canna 20 years ago and apparently they can live to be around 40 years old. This kind of information makes sitting amongst guano for hours in deafening noise so worthwhile!

Other species ringed included Puffins, Razorbills (aptly named), Black Guillemots, Sandwich Terns, Arctic Terns, Herons, Swallows, Shags, Cormarants and even Red Throated Divers. The list goes on. A real thrill was a sighting of a White-tailed Sea Eagle. This was so close that it was possible to see the patagial tag on its wing and it was one of the birds released on the West coast of Scotland. A Minkie Whale was also spotted out in the bay.

There isn't enough space here to do justice to the scenery and wildlife however; it would be a pleasure to put together a slide show if anyone is interested.



The final component, and one that had been sadly lacking for several years was the raison d'être for the expedition in the first instance – the availability of the birds - and this year after five poor breeding seasons the situation had improved tremendously, so much so that for the first time ever we had to visit the Clo Mhor boulder field twice, something we had never previously achieved! Every Guillemot ring we had was used (ca 850) and in all we ringed almost 2000 birds taking us back to times ten years ago. Auks were in very good numbers and in one particular cave we entered Guillemots were standing huddled together in flocks almost like penguins. We enjoyed a decent overnight session with the Storm Petrels and there even seemed to be some improvement in the status of the gulls. Kittiwake numbers were the best for many years and we were also lucky to find several young Sandwich, Common and Arctic Terns. For a second year the 'pièce de résistance' was the Red Throated Divers and although four of the six known young were too small to ring we did manage to band two of them.

For 24hrs we were joined by the Admiral from Clyde Submarine Base. Sophie fulfilled the role of Aide de Camp for the day and escorted him and his naval colleagues on a sea tour of the cliffs, bays and ringing sites. The rest of us, meanwhile, took the less exotic overland route in argocats.

Looking back we all had an enjoyable time but the biggest thrill was to see the seabird colonies vibrant again, a deafening cacophony of sound and activity; adults coming ashore with bills full of sand eels and the boulders and crevices littered with eggs and young. It was a memorable few days and certainly one that will be remembered for years to come for the sheer fun and personal satisfaction it provided.

Tony Crease.

The Congo - Part 2



At last I have been able to go and see some of the Gorillas for which Congo is famous. It was easier to organize than I was expecting, because although there are rebel soldiers they are not in exactly the same area as the Gorillas we were going to see.

There were three of us – one of whom had travelled out from France - and we left Goma early with an armed escort provided by the Park Rangers. After about two hours we arrived at the start point for the trek. An hour and a half later, through rough scrub and then very close woodland (rather than “jungle”) we reached the point where the group we were to visit had spent the previous night. Unlike in Rwanda the gorillas are not guarded 24 hours a day, we had to rely upon a tracker to find them! They can move around 5 kilometres a day, so catching them early is important to avoid a wild goose chase!! They do leave a very clear track and, as with deer, you can smell them when you are getting closer, and because of their size and bulk they create temporary tracks through the undergrowth as they move around.

Each group is only visited for an hour a day, and groups of visitors must never be more than 6 people and three guides. So whilst they are used to visitors, they are not too familiar with humans. As we sighted the first one, we had to don surgical masks to stop them catching any diseases from us and vice versa, and the clock started ticking.

The gorillas were excellent. And in every way it was a memorable hour which seemed to last for ages. The group we saw was the Humbe group

(They name each group after park rangers who have been killed by rebels). There were 11 in this group, one huge silver back (the chap in the photo) another big male, some females and a handful of babies. All very cute - but massive. We are not allowed nearer than 7 metres, but as they wander away the rangers follow them and cut back the undergrowth to give a good view. On one occasion we were surrounded by them (not that we could see them all, all of the time, because the undergrowth is so thick).

We saw everything. Mothers with babies (literally 2 metres away despite the rules), adolescents playing in the undergrowth, lazy silver backs munching away on vegetation, a juvenile showing off by beating its chest, etc. At one point one of the smaller ones rushed towards us and we had to back off very quickly. At the time we thought this was aggression so we were genuinely quite frightened as the guides ushered us back quickly, but in fact that particular gorilla is known for its inquisitiveness and we were ushered back to maintain distance!!!. But they are very menacing and you would not want to get on the wrong side of even a small gorilla. Even though I had seen them before (a mere 22 years ago) if I stretch my memory, it was a much better visit than last time.

Amazingly, only one Brit had been there since the park re-opened in May although hardy eco warriors are beginning to realize that the Congo is not all bad. So far, less than 40 or so have been there in the last 2 months, instead they go to Rwanda where they pay more and are in bigger groups booked months in advance.

After the trek we then went back to the rangers' HQ previously occupied by rebels. I know the park director well - we do business together - and saw a project he is running to stop the illegal clearing of forests for charcoal. They are making presses to sell which make charcoal replacement briquettes. A remarkably ambitious but credible project, but as the illegal charcoal is run by the rebels (and the army is in cahoots with them) it is a brave business. But if they are to protect the park - the second oldest in the world, then they have to do something. To cap it all, the journey back to Goma, by now after dusk, was past Nyiragongo volcano and we could clearly see the sky lit in red from the lava lake in its summit.

In every way the ICCN (Congoese wildlife service) are a truly heroic bunch who have suffered all sorts of trouble during the fighting last year and at the beginning of this year. In fact I judge them to be the only lot who are actually any good here. Through their efforts they have survived rebel occupation of their headquarters and the park itself (Mortar bombs were falling in the areas occupied by the gorillas (not guerillas!!) and now they are back in business even if the tourists are not quite brave enough to visit yet. Incredibly however, despite the fighting the gorilla population not only were not affected, but actually increased. There are now 84 in the Park (still not many really)

Look at their web site gorilla.cd - it is quite enlightening, and having had lengthy discussions with the park director, if we think we have complications in running Foxglove Covert, we ain't seen nothing!

Guy Deacon.

Update on moth trapping This is the second year that moth trapping has been done weekly here. As such we can now compare the data with that which was collected last year. July is the peak time at Foxglove and we are getting around 100 moths to identify each week. It's amazing that even though I trapped every week last year there are still moths that I haven't seen before, such as the Peach Blossom, Small Rivulet and the Muslin Footman. Conversely, some that we were inundated with last year are hardly making a showing – such as Silver Y. It's been good to see that the Ruddy Highflyer, which was a new record for the reserve last year, has made a re-appearance. We have recorded 2 this year. We are still adding new species to our list as well. The most spectacular this year was the Oak Beauty which was caught at the beginning of April. They still give a thrill of excitement to a Wednesday morning as I come to work, wondering how many and which moths will be there in the trap. Their intricate patterns and subtle colours are a delight. As well as in the trap you can see moths flying about during the day. We have seen a lot of Chimney Sweeper moths on the wet meadows, flying through the bracken. They are velvety jet black with a white tip to the forewing. They are like handsome waiters in their tuxedos! Also we've seen quite a few 5-spot Burnet moths flying around the heath land, feeding on the Birdsfoot-trefoil. It was a shame that this year's moth night at Foxglove had to be cancelled because of the appalling weather on that day. It had been re-arranged to the weekend of the 12th and 13th September. Although we will be expecting less moths to be trapped it will be interesting to have the traps in the different areas that late in the year. Who knows just what might turn up! I urge anybody who is interested to come along on a Wednesday morning to see the weekly catch (and maybe give a hand in identifying them as it can be a mammoth task!) and also to come along to any of the future moth events at Foxglove Covert or Marne Barracks.

Until then - Happy Moth-ing! **Marion Hannaford.**

Foxglove Wild Flower Walk Saturday 13th June

Saturday 13th June dawned warm and sunny with clear blue skies, providing ideal conditions in which to take a leisurely stroll through Foxglove Covert for the wild flower walk.

In contrast to the previous year when a much smaller group attended, this time we had a large group of 20 people. The advertisement in the 'Flowers of the Dales festival' booklet was the most likely contributing factor to this excellent turn out.

The fact we had a larger group meant that the walk took about an hour longer than advertised. With foresight a larger group might be better split into two in the future. On this occasion it did not distract, however, from learning about the profusion of flowers in bloom through the expertise of our guide.

Marion led us through a variety of habitats including pond areas, woodland, heathland, river banks and wet meadows, enthraling us with her knowledge of 'all things botanical'. We observed and found out about a wide variety of wild flowers, 68 in all, from the humble Daisy, the numerous orchids to be found on site, the most beautiful hybrid between a Wood Avens and Water Avens to the much rarer Adderstongue found in the recently created wet meadows area.

It was fascinating to hear the common names of the plants and their derivations. We found Tormentil, Oxeye Daisy, Foxglove, Lady's Bedstraw, Crosswort, Ramsons, Pignut (or Old Man's Baccy), gigantic Burdock, and many more, in the woods and on the river banks. We learnt that the name for Dog Daisy came about because it was thought that it used to cure rabies. One very common plant Goose Grass or Cleavers is surely an 'all round' plant as it can be used to make coffee or can even be used as a deodorant!

On the area known as 'The scrapes' we saw plants such as Bogbean, which was just finishing, Figwort with an unusual square stem, Cuckoo Flower, Water Mint with distinctive smell, and Greater Spearwort which is the most poisonous of all the buttercups.

The visit to the wet meadows area proved to be a 'Red Letter' day for wild flower enthusiasts as it was here we encountered the Adderstongue. We found not just one, or two, but quite a handful, possibly made visible when the area was cleared.

The walk was extremely informative, enjoyed by all, and personally speaking, I am looking forward to the next wild flower event. A big 'Thank you' to Marion.

Sue Harper



Nest Boxes with a difference



After another season of ringing Blue Tits and Great Tits at Foxglove, it was good to do something different. My wife Anne and I were invited to join a party of Ornithologists who were travelling to the archipelago of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides to monitor the breeding population of Leach's Storm Petrel (Leach's Petrel), as the 4 main islands that make up St Kilda are the Petrel's main stronghold in the UK.

The journey from County Durham to St Kilda took us two and a half days. The first day were travelled to Fort William and the second on to Skye where we caught the ferry to Harris. We stayed on Harris in a bunk house before getting the boat for the 40+ miles trip to St Kilda. Luckily the sea was calm on our journey out and we arrived in Village Bay in good heart. We were housed in cottages that had been re-built in the shells of the old cottages dating from the 1850's and whilst basic were very pleasant.

By contrast the Leach's Petrel, together with their smaller cousin, the Storm Petrel, nest in crevices and holes in the boulder scree which occur across the islands and to make counting even more difficult only venture out at night when they can escape the attentions of the Great Skuas which prey on them. Clearly, if we were to get to grips with these birds, we had to find ways of seeing them at night or 'detecting' them their nest holes.

Our monitoring techniques involved 'standardised' mist netting in the colonies of Leach's Petrels at night where we trapped birds on two consecutive nights and from this we will be able to calculate the size of the population. Our other way of monitoring Storm Petrels is to 'stake out' an area of likely nesting territories and then play tapes of their calls and listen for their responses.

The weather that started off so good only got better and as a result what started off as a plan to ring 3 nights out of our 9 was so good that we had 8 'all night' mist netting sessions before calling a halt on the last night as we needed to celebrate our success! In all we handled over 1300 birds including 300+ Leach's and 600+ Storm Petrels, got loads of data for the professional ornithologists to spend the winter analysing.... and to bring us full circle checked some most unusual nest boxes. These boxes, which we installed specially for Petrels, are checked not by opening the lid, but by smell as anyone who has handled these birds will tell you that they have a very special oily smell!

Tom Dewdney. (Tom gratefully acknowledges the assistance of JNCC and the Seabird Group in facilitating this trip).

