



GLASGOW NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

September 2005

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(Newsletter Editor)

Next Newsletter Deadline
1 Nov 2005

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Thomas Kinsey, who had been a GNHS member since 1994, died recently and left a substantial bequest of nearly £8,000 to the Society. If any member who knew his interests could let us know then we could acknowledge his gift in some suitable way.

Our sympathy goes to Jean Miller on the death of her husband, the **Rev David Miller**. He had been ill for some time and a note was sent to Jean from all her friends in the Society wishing her well

New Librarian required. You will all be sorry to hear that Joan Chapman suffered a stroke a few weeks ago and feels she can no longer carry on as Librarian. She is getting better all the time, and we wish her a speedy and full recovery and look forward to seeing her at meetings soon.

Conserving the Great Yellow Bumblebee

Richard Weddle

The Great Yellow Bumblebee (*Bombus distinguendus*) is a distinctive bee which has declined in recent years through loss of its preferred habitat due to factors such as agricultural improvement and scrub encroachment. It is now mainly found in the Western and Northern Isles and the extreme NW of mainland Scotland, principally in the remaining areas of machair.

GNHS has joined RSPB in a major project to conserve the bee in these areas and we are very grateful for funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The work will include seeding areas with the plant species preferred by the bee, and managing the grazing and mowing regimes so as to interfere as little as possible with the bee's requirements. There is also a scientific programme led by Tom Charman from the University of Cambridge, with contributions from Geoff Hancock (and his daughter Louisa) and students from the University of Glasgow. This will include studies of land use as well as the biology and behaviour of the bee itself.

The project began on 1st July and will continue for three years. At the beginning of September Edna Stewart, Morag Mackinnon and myself have arranged to go to North Uist – principally the area around the Balranald RSPB reserve – to get to know the territory, and, if possible, to collect seeds either for sowing in suitable areas next year, or for propagating to produce even more for sowing the year

after. We hope to make contact with local people to assist in this, and perhaps it will be possible in future years to have a larger GNHS excursion to that area.

This is an exciting project that this brief account does no more than outline. There will be much more detail and news over the coming months. In the meantime, if anyone is interested in knowing more about particular aspects of the project, please get in touch.

A Blackbird Saga

June McKay

This year I was delighted when blackbirds nested in my blue *Clematis alpina* which is situated on the south-facing wall outside my sitting room, immediately beside the 3 ft. high window sill and supported on netlon. There is a down roan about two feet to the other side of both netlon and clematis, the latter growing around it, and the blackbirds' nest was about 10 ft. off the ground on the windowsill side of the clematis - high enough to deter my cat, who, although a hitherto inveterate hunter is now sixteen with encroaching arthritic joints. "Why all this detail?" you ask; the following saga will explain all.

Alerted by the blackie's alarm call one afternoon I sallied forth, to discover a large ginger cat stuck between netlon and wall in his attempt to get at the nest. He clung on tenaciously as I fought to extract him, and seemed quite undeterred by my determined efforts to scare him with stones, a hoe and, finally, a borrowed water pistol.

After much head-scratching I built up a Heath-Robinson defence of one hay rake across the windowsill, lashed securely to the window frame, together with a folding ridged plastic cloche, which was lashed with rope to the down roan on one side, and in through the sealed windows on the other. These, and the window sill, were all liberally smeared with teatree body cream, generously laced with curry powder which I thought would be an added deterrent to the ginger cat, who would be forced to put his face into the concoction if he attempted again to climb to the nest. The birds clearly realised I was trying to help, so that in rigging up the defence from the kitchen steps I came literally face to face with the hen, but she just sat tight.

The ginger cat returned several times unsuccessfully. So imagine my surprise when at 11pm there was a noise and on the sill and immediately outside my sitting room window was a fox. He made four attempts during which we stared at each other as I banged on the glass and he only ran off when I dashed outside and squirted the water pistol at him. It was some time before the penny dropped and I realised that our Paisley urban fox with an extremely sensitive nose was looking for his carryout curry supper.

Days passed during which the window cleaner was forbidden to clean the sitting room windows, and I wielded the water pistol against a variety of cats hoping to deter them from visiting the premises at all, in preparation for the perils of first flights.

That day finally came with bright sunshine and rather too much wind and I sat in the garden, my rifle across my knee so to speak, as no fewer than five babies

eventually flew. I felt quite privileged to have been allowed to watch the events by parents who now totally accepted my presence. It was most entertaining to watch their methods of coaxing the youngsters from the nest (and how they could have all fitted into it I really can't imagine). The rifle (aka water pistol) was needed but, somehow, between alarm calls, all the babies were eventually transferred to distant shrubberies, apparently without loss.

It is surely quite remarkable that all the fledglings survived the first few days, for I was never aware of the usual shemozzle when a bird has been caught. Additionally, by some stroke of fortune the magpies and squirrels were also occupied elsewhere. Friends and neighbours said I should have let nature take its course and not have interfered. But I would have found that difficult- especially as the huge ginger cat would quite clearly have bought down not only the nest but also the netlon and the entire clematis.

A week later my son visited and helped me to remove the barricades, so imagine my horror three days later to find the birds busily repairing the nest. Alas, I decided I couldn't go through the entire time-consuming and agonizing process again and so asked my kind neighbour to climb up and remove the nest – besides, the windows need cleaning!

Wildlife in Glasgow Necropolis

Richard Weddle

Earlier in the year I was asked to go along to meetings of a steering group aiming to set up an organisation called Friends of Glasgow Necropolis. I went along because I was aware that the Necropolis is a unique landscape area – it's listed on the Scottish Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes - but also because on a GNHS excursion there last year I had been dismayed by the state of disrepair of some of the monuments – an element of 'change and decay' seems perfectly appropriate in the context, but vandalism and soil erosion undermining the monuments doesn't.

We have a reasonably full list of the higher plants that occur there; including such comparative rarities as Stag's-horn Clubmoss (*Lycopodium clavatum*) and Heath Pearlwort (*Sagina subulata*), though the former hasn't been seen for some years, and a probable sighting of the latter a few months ago has not been confirmed because it was subsequently 'tidied up'. There are of course many suitable substrates for lower plants, in particular mosses and lichens, as you might expect in a cemetery, and I've asked Keith Watson and Iain Wilkie to identify these.

In the animal world, the occasional presence of roe-deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) has been well publicised. It is likely that there are bats and other small mammals too, but I don't have any definite information about these as yet. (You might like to know that there is group called the Glasgow Vampyres meet there from time to time; I should hastily add that their name is a 'fashion statement' rather than indicative of a dietary preference!). The bird life doesn't seem to be particularly diverse – the 'usual' magpies, blackbirds, starlings and song-thrushes. However the Countryside Rangers and BTCV have recently installed a number of nesting boxes for both bats and birds, so this may encourage them – if not vandalised.

The birdlife often indicates the general health of the environment, and perhaps the relative scarcity of birds indicates a lack of invertebrates for one reason or another. As ever, we lack records of what invertebrates are in fact there. That is, except for a handful of records of slugs and snails adventitiously noted by Adrian Sumner last year. No doubt there are moths, spiders and beetles – dare one hope for a Sexton beetle? – and perhaps butterflies such as Red Admiral visit the prolific ivy when it is in flower in the early autumn.

The area is quite interesting geologically too; not so much because of its inherent crag-and-tail character, nor for the old whinstone quarry at the eastern end, but for the sheer variety of stones used for the memorials: including limestone and various marbles, sandstones, and granites. The British Geological Survey has offered to identify the exact sources of at least some of these.

There is much more that could be said, and I hope I, or others, will be able to give further news in future Newsletters. There is a recent book *Death by Design* which was written by Ronnie Scott, the Chairman of the Friends which outlines the history and highlights some of the interesting monuments. It doesn't say very much about natural history, but it's available in most bookshops.

Gretel dies but Stunpy lives

Norman Grist

Gretel was our name for the elegant, mainly white, hybrid Feral Pigeon, one of the flock that pestered us for hand-outs. We admired her beauty and proud, high carriage - not one of the common herd, she occasionally pecked to reprove one that tried to muscle in, yet was genteelly intimidated by increasing numbers of the commoners. Her partner, high in the pecking order, I called Hansel, protective but occasionally a bit of a bully.

Our interest is mainly in "wild" birds, but by tossing a few peanuts to Gretel, we unintentionally attracted an increasing mob of local feral pigeons. Gretel was gently persuaded to accept nuts from our hand, eventually perching on it while the mob jealously pestered below. Collared doves and wood pigeons could hardly penetrate the crowd. Gretel also visited our gardens below, other gardens and buildings nearby. Conspicuously white, she was tempting to the more-than six feline hunters that visit our gardens. We did not see her for several days and feared the worst - but there she was again for a while - and then no more. A few days later hidden under dense shrubs, I found her sad, mutilated corpse - and we guess which cat probably ambushed her. We were all saddened - but life goes on; and our expensive peanut consumption fell!

Stunpy was our name for the vixen fox, first seen here in 1997, whose probable demise I reported in last year's November Newsletter. It is curious that the foxes have been less noticeable in recent years compared with frequent sightings and close encounters in the early years since they colonised nearby. To our surprise and delight, there she was again - on the evening of May 18th this year. Mary my wife was leaving the composter area to walk back behind the garages - and there was a fox, relaxed though cautious. Reassured by a few words. it took a few steps towards Mary, then thought better and relaxedly jumped the low back wall into the next door garden. The fox looked old, with greyed muzzle, but had the tell-tale half tail. So Stumpy, this wise old vixen, must be about eight years old -

perhaps a tribute to the sophisticated mixed diet provided by others as well as ourselves in this tree-lined urban area of Glasgow.

Where are the Squirrels?

Richard Weddle

We recently had a request from the Scottish Squirrel Survey coordinator for records of squirrels in the area. I was surprised by the realisation that we didn't have any records since 2002! Now I know this doesn't mean that grey squirrels have suddenly disappeared from our parks and gardens, the reason is much more mundane, I think: we have grown so used to them we either hardly notice them, or don't think them worthy of note when we do.

However, I do have the impression that there has been a noticeable decline in the grey squirrel population in the last year or so. I can walk through the Botanic Gardens and see only one, where a few years ago I would have seen half a dozen or more. It is known that there are fluctuations in squirrel populations due to factors like the weather and availability of food, for example, perhaps some members would be interested enough to keep year to year records of numbers in their area? In any case please let us know about squirrels – as well as everything else, of course!

Finally, I've just heard on the radio a discussion about how grey squirrels can be a nuisance – stripping bark from trees, competing with red squirrels (in some habitats, at least), and stealing birds' eggs (as well as feed). So much so that in some areas, particularly in forests, it has been felt necessary to control them by culling. I wonder if you tend to think of them as 'tree-rats' or whether you prefer the 'Timmy Tiptoes' image?

The Natural History of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs

Roger Downie

Members will recall last November's Conference on Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, based on the Society's excursion programme in 2004 plus recent research on the natural history of the area, comprising Scotland's first National Park. A lavishly illustrated version of the conference talks is now available on the Society's website with each talk individually accessible and printable. A less lavishly illustrated version will appear in the next edition of *The Glasgow Naturalist*, due out in the autumn.

Thanks to Richard Weddle for creating the website, to the individual authors for preparing their talks in a publishable form, and to Scottish Natural Heritage for funding these published versions of the conference.

Perthshire Weekend, 21-22nd May 2005

Bob Gray

Tigh-na-Cleirigh The area of ground associated with this old manse slopes gently down to the southwest end of Loch Tummel. The most hospitable couple who own the ground, Beryl and Russell Coope, showed us around. There is something here to satisfy every aspect of natural history interest.

Around the house many house martins were nesting this year but this is not a regular annual occurrence unlike that of swallows, which are most regular. This

area is located between the northerly population of hooded and southerly carrion crows. Hybrids occur in this area but it is thought that, because these hybrids are less viable than the parents, the separation between the two populations is maintained.

Cuckoos here parasitise meadow pipits, which were nesting on a piece of ground we avoided. Four osprey nests occur on the top of power line pylons here in the Foss area. The first eggs were laid on 18th April and we were able to observe two of these nests from the road at the end of our visit.

A short distance from the house is a pond constructed some 15 years ago and to which about 450 frogs arrive together on 15th March, breed and then disappear: not, however, before many of their number have been eaten by local otters that follow a clearly defined route marked by three spraints which RC pointed out to us. Investigation of one spraint with a hand lens indicated the presence of not only amphibian bones but also the jaws of a common or pigmy shrew, as evidenced by the blood red colour on the edge of the molars.

Badger latrines are in evidence locally and their main food supply is earthworms. The honey of local bees attracts pine martens that use the bridge to cross the burn in order to avoid getting their feet wet. Foxes in this area are apparently driven off by ewes if they get too close, although they are able to scavenge weak lambs. Rabbits, hares and voles occur. Red and roe deer are kept off young trees by means of hanging rags soaked in a proprietary liquid repellent, Renardine.

The Coopes keep a herd of Hebridean sheep as well as Highland cattle with calves, all of which allowed us to approach fairly closely. The untended, unfertilised field is home to a substantial population of moles that construct not only mole hills but also mole castles of which a few were pointed out, each one about two metres in diameter. Apparently these structures are occupied by families of moles. Another intriguing fact pointed out to us was that the sheep walk along the local sheep tracks in one direction only! Of great interest were wild cats kept in an enclosure, two adults and four offspring. These are rescued as often as possible by RC and returned to the wild by him where practicable.

According to RC, elephant hawk moths occur in this area. This is far north for them. They are night fliers whose food plants are rosebay willow herb and marsh bedstraw.

We were too early in the season to see many meadow plants in flower but were shown how young ash trees, earlier to flush than their parents, had their leaves burnt by the recent frost. Yellow rattle is encouraged on the ground as it parasitises grasses and so keeps them in check. We found round leaved sundew as well as the flowering semi-parasite marsh lousewort and petty whin.

The Coopes kindly invited all twelve of us into their kitchen where they provided us with coffee and cake. In the corner RC kept a fish tank containing a solitary *Polypterus*, a living fossil, one of the fringe-finned fish from the rivers of Africa. This is found in 400 million year old rocks of the Devonian era, the Age of Fish. RC's display of his array of arthropological artefacts rounded off a most memorable visit.

Cluny House Garden This woodland garden is located east of Aberfeldy on the north bank of the River Tay. We were privileged to be shown around by John Mattingley, husband of Wendy whose father established the garden in the 1950's. The low-lying, south facing garden benefits from the downhill flow of nutrients as well as the favourable light and temperature effects of its aspect. Conditions are clearly superb for the growth of a wide variety of plants from woodland locations in the Himalayas and North America. JM demonstrated to us an exceptional number of primulas (especially candelabras) and trilliums in flower as well as rapidly developing arisaemas (cobra lilies) and giant lilies (*Lilium superbum* and *Cardiocrinum*) about to flower. The candelabras in particular were regenerating and flowering in profusion, especially where an old path had been cut off and left to itself. Of interest was the discovery of naturalised *Chrysosplenium davidii*, an opposite-leaved golden saxifrage from the Himalayas, distinguished most obviously from the native *C. oppositifolium* by its larger flowers.

The canopy is made up of a variety of rhododendrons, azaleas and *Enkianthus* at shrub level as well as a tree layer comprising Japanese maples, rowans, birches, particularly sizeable Tibetan cherries (*Prunus serrula*) and a fine selection of conifers. Pride of place goes arguably to a giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) whose girth is currently the biggest on record in the British Isles. We checked this and found the present girth of 11.06 metres to be exactly the same as that recorded in 1998 – perhaps owing to the large number of people taping the tree at the same position. It is a truly remarkable specimen.

Of great interest is the way the garden is managed. No chemicals are used; nor are damaging animals such as slugs killed but simply removed to another part of the garden. Pest control is carried out by toads, frogs and birds that are encouraged by nest boxes, bird feeders and, of course seed producing plants. They produce leaf mulch on a 3-year cycle obtained by sweeping the paths of leaves in the autumn. In addition they have a weed compost, which is used to fill in areas where gaps have occurred in the canopy, for example, by felling.

This is a fascinating garden and well worth a visit.

Taymouth Castle Arboretum This arboretum is located on the shore in the northeast corner of Loch Tay, near the village of Kenmore. Access is open. The southerly aspect combined with the flow of nutrients into the glacial till from the hill above make this a most admirable site for prolific tree growth.

The owner of the castle and land in the mid-19th Century was the 5th Earl of Breadalbane, one of the founder members of the Oregon Association (1849), a group of Scottish landowners who combined to send forth many plant hunters to all parts of the world in order to obtain the seeds of trees that would grow well in Scotland. This arboretum is at least partly a result of that enterprise. We did not have enough time to verify the various measurements carried out by the famous dendrologist, the late Alan Mitchell, or those of the Tree Measuring Society of the British Isles (TROBI) or the Arbor Society. It was sufficient to identify and measure the girth of some of the outstanding conifers that grow here. The following is a list of some of these trees:

Cryptomeria japonica (Japanese red cedar). Two, outside arboretum.

Abies grandis (Grand fir). Westernmost tree in the arboretum. Was 170', shed 30', now 160'/18' girth (48 m/540 cm)

A. homolepis (Nikko fir). Biggest trunk in the British Isles. 108'/12.5' (34 m/389 cm –TROBI, 2003). 392 cm girth – GNHS, 2005.

A. magnifica (Red fir). Two of. Easterly 140'/12.5' (43m/385 cm), (rough crown, dying back). Westerly 144'/11' (44.3 m/330 cm), (reasonable crown, live top). Tallest in British Isles.

A. nordmanniana (Caucasian fir). Two of the most outstanding specimens in British Isles. Broad crowns, broadly apart. a) 124'/14.5' (38.2 m/438 cm). b) 130'/15.5' (40 m/477 cm).

A. procera (Noble fir). 12 of. Blue crowns. Planted 1872 (ring count). Two outstanding. a) between magnificent 167' (51.4m) giant *sequoia* and the road is 153'/18.5' (47 m/569 cm). b) western end of path is 132'/19' (40.6 m/585 cm). Biggest girth in British Isles.

A. spectabilis var. *brevifolia* (short needled Himalayan fir). Only four big trees known in B.Is. - all here. Near extreme west end is 115'/10' (35.4 m/308 cm). Biggest girth in British Isles.

Picea smithiana (Morinda spruce). Two of. 115'/15' (35.4 m/462 cm). Biggest girth in British Isles.

Sequoia sempervirens (Coastal redwood). Two of. 124'/25' (38.2 m/769 cm). One of the largest in British Isles.

Sequoiadendron giganteum (Giant sequoia). 167'/26' (51.4 m/800 cm). Planted 1856.

It is perhaps worth noting that one of the last acts of the Oregon Association before its disbandment in 1859 was the purchase of £50 of seed of the Caucasian fir, which was then sent out to interested nurseries and subsequently to arboreta throughout the land. Today this tree is one of the most popular Christmas trees on the market. Finally in this arboretum of superlatives we found, forming part of the limited shrub layer, a few specimens of a Himalayan honeysuckle, *Lonicera quinquelocularis*, in flower.

Keltneyburn Nature Reserve This SWT reserve is located north of Kenmore, west of the B846. Its principal areas of interest are a species-rich unimproved grassland and a mixed deciduous woodland on the steep side of a gorge.

The lower ground is old pasture that has not been treated with chemical fertiliser. The soil here is deeper, moister and richer in minerals. We arrived too early in the season to see the many species of orchids hereabouts. The main plant in flower in the marshy hollows was the cuckoo flower, *Cardamine pratensis*. In more than one drier area we found flowers of bulbous buttercup, *Ranunculus bulbosus*, distinguished by its reflexed sepals. In the more open areas plants in flower that indicated previous woodland cover included bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), and chickweed wintergreen (*Trientalis europaea*). On the glacial mounds the well-drained soil is mineral poor

and conditions are acidic. Here we found in flower heath milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*) and bitter vetchling (*Lathyrus montanus*).

Native trees seen in the gorge included ash, birch, bird cherry, goat willow, hazel, oak and rowan. A sizeable, rough grown Spanish chestnut was found coming into leaf near the path at the side of the meadow. Many naturally regenerated tree seedlings were in evidence, including ash, much beech, birch, hazel, oak and rowan. A noticeable feature of many of the trees and shrubs was how many of the fresh leaves had been damaged by recent late spring frosts.

Finally, on the wing above the grassy meadows, were encountered many male St Mark's flies looking for females in the grass below, a phenomenon we had also encountered the day before at Tigh-na-Cleirigh.

The BLB executive met in March and awarded the following grants:

Jeff Liston	Paleo-botanical colour plate reproduction	£182.50
T Norman Tait	Aisa Craig book of photos of 1896-1920	£750
Agnes Walker	Purchase of books for ref. "Scottish Plant use"	£200
Victoria Tough	GU expedition Equador	£400
Patrick Walsh	Overwintering of tadpoles in Scotland	£400
Sarah Maclean	GU expedition Birds Ethiopia	£500
Geoff Hancock	Beetles on St Kilda	£400
Roger Downie	Monitoring relocation Gt crested newts	£500
Graham A Stirling	GU expedition Rio Negro 2005	£400
Andrea Mason	GU expedition Caribbean Turtles	£400
Martin Muir	GU expedition Gambia 2005	£400

The BLB executive met in June and awarded the following grants:

Dominic McCafferty was awarded £800 to study Genetic variation of otters in Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

Suzanne Livingstone has been awarded £400 to do further work on the nest ecology of the Leatherback Turtle which has implications for conservation and hatching.

The next meeting will be on the 13th September and applications, six copies, should be with Morag Mackinnon at least 14 days prior to that.

Winter Programme. Robin Jones is unable to continue as Programme organiser and thanks go to everyone who has helped to get this exciting winter programme put together. You will find it with this mailing, so get all these dates in your diary and come along to the first, **Exhibition Meeting on the 20th September.** Please let Roger Downie know if you need a table or backboard for your display. Wine and Cheese will be enjoyed as usual.

Sunday 2nd October join us for a Fungal Foray to the Clyde Valley National Nature Reserve on Sunday 2nd October will be led by Graham Walker of SNH. He suggests we meet at Lanark Rail Station at midday. The reserve is a short drive north of Lanark and we will follow him to the site which meanders along a valley bottom. Please let Morag Mackinnon, know if you are coming and if you need a lift can give a lift. Train times to Lanark on a Sunday might not be too reliable.

The next meeting is on **October 11th** and starts at 6.30pm with a tutorial by John Simpson about the Bean Geese which nest in Russia but over-winter in Europe. Only two flocks come to Britain, and one of those can be found in Slamannan – and John will bring maps of where to find them. At 7.15pm Jacqui Kaye of the BTO will continue the bird theme with a talk on Birds in the Garden. **November 8th** is of interest to everyone. Richard Weddle is going to talk at 6.30pm about the conservation plans for the Great Yellow Bumble Bee which feeds on Machair flowers. At 7.15pm we welcome Richard Sutcliffe, who is going to tell us about the new Natural History Displays planned for the opening of our Kelvingrove Museum in June 2006.

The **BLB Lecture** which will be given by **Prof Nick Davies** entitled “Cuckoos versus hosts – an evolutionary arms race” will be held at 5.00pm in the Western Infirmary Lecture Theatre is on **Wednesday 30th November**.

June McKay is going to talk about “Botanising in Sichuan” after Dinner at 7.15 in the University College Club – the date for your Diary is **December 13th**. **Booking form enclosed.**

December Tues. 14th 7.15pm

Annual Dinner

Glasgow University College Club

Speaker: June McKay Botanising in Sichuan

We are looking forward to seeing as many members as possible for another enjoyable Annual Dinner. The cost is £20 pp and again the BLB fund will provide something to drink to the health of the Society! Send your cheque and application on the form below to Hazel Rodway.

NAME.....

Address.....

Phone No.

I enclose cheque for £..... forplaces at the dinner.

Dietary requirements.....