

Bute Mammals: Additional Notes

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These brief additional notes on the mammals of the Island of Bute, mainly covering the past ten years, supplement the information contained in the four previous accounts of Bute mammals (Gibson, 1970-76-80-90). As before, I am glad to acknowledge the help of many colleagues in the Buteshire Natural History Society, and shall always be grateful for any additional information to keep our knowledge of Bute mammals up-to-date.

In the following Systematic List the arrangement and nomenclature follow *A World List of Mammalian Species* by G.B. Corbet and J.E. Hill, second edition (1986), published by the British Museum (Natural History), London.

Order INSECTIVORA

WATER SHREW *Neomys fodiens*

During the past few years Longworth traps have regularly caught Water Shrews in many different parts of Bute, so it can now be confirmed that the Water Shrew is widely distributed throughout the island, wherever there is suitable habitat.

Order CHIROPTERA

DAUBENTON'S BAT *Myotis daubentoni*

As previously recorded, it has long been almost certain that the large bats flying around the edges of Loch Fad and some other Bute freshwater lochs in the early evening were Daubenton's Bats, but the virtual impossibility of catching any prevented accurate identification. I am now glad to record that, with the aid of a bat-detector, positive identification has been established and that Daubenton's Bat can now be finally added to the list of Bute mammals.

Order CARNIVORA

STOAT *Mustela erminea*

The Stoat is well-known on Bute, but compared to the adjacent Argyll mainland relatively few Stoats on Bute turn pure white in winter (Gibson, 1970); most Bute Stoats show varying degrees of brown during the winter months. One of the earliest records of a pure-white Stoat from Bute was one "in the pure winter fur" exhibited to the Natural History Society of Glasgow in 1872, and this was regarded as very unusual (Kirksop, 1876), although many other pure-white specimens have certainly been recorded over the years since then (*Transactions*, 21: 94). Nevertheless, it is still worth reporting additional specimens, and a pure-white example was seen on 25th January 1997 just north of Rhubodach.

FERRET *Mustela putorius furo*

Polecat-Ferrets continue to escape all the time and may live in the wild state for several years, but I have no recent evidence of genuine feral breeding. Any Polecat-Ferrets on Inchmarnock now seem to have died out.

Order CETACEA

COMMON DOLPHIN *Delphinus delphis*

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*

As previously reported (Gibson, 1990), during the 1980s there was a significant change in the Clyde status of these two dolphins. The White-beaked, formerly far and away the commonest dolphin in Clyde waters, significantly decreased, whereas the Common Dolphin, formerly one of the rarest, significantly increased. During the 1990s this trend partly continued, so that sightings of the White-beaked Dolphin are now distinctly uncommon; there are still some Clyde sightings of the Common Dolphin, with records in Bute waters off Garroch Head and in the Sound of Bute, but these also seem to have decreased in numbers.

PORPOISE *Phocoena phocoena*

I am glad to say that the population of Porpoises in the Clyde sea area continues to improve, and small numbers are now regularly seen off the Bute shores. There have been occasional strandings.

LESSER RORQUAL *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*

A steady increase over the years and now considered to be nearly the commonest large cetacean in Clyde waters (Gibson, 1986 and 1995a), almost rivalling the Killer *Orcinus orca* in sheer numbers, with many sightings in the Sound of Bute and occasionally elsewhere from south Bute shores. One was stranded at Scalpsie Bay on 19th October 1996 (Gibson, 1996a), to the best of my knowledge the first stranding ever recorded for the Island of Bute.

HUMPBAC WHALE *Megaptera novaeangliae*

From around mid-December 1994 to the end of March 1995 a single Humpback Whale regularly frequented the Clyde estuary. Earlier, what was almost certainly the same animal had been seen off Loch Ryan and the south-east of Arran before it made its way further north up the Clyde between Bute and the Cumbraes. To begin with it seemed to be keeping company with at least one, and possibly two, Lesser Rorquals, but by early February it appeared to be solitary. This was only the second or third occurrence of the Humpback Whale for the Clyde, and the first record for Bute waters (Gibson, 1995b). For some three months it certainly gave excellent views to many watchers on the Renfrewshire shore, from where it was most easily seen. Although this was a most interesting record, most unfortunately the occurrence was hopelessly mis-reported by the media, with wildly exaggerated claims about the 'rarity' of whales in the Clyde area. One can only hope that any future occurrences of Clyde cetaceans which excite the public imagination will be reported more responsibly.

Order ARTIODACTYLA

ROE DEER *Capreolus capreolus*

In my experience albino Roe Deer are rather uncommon, so it is worth recording that an almost pure-albino specimen was seen twice at the end of May 1997 on the outskirts of woodland near Loch Quien.

Order RODENTIA

GREY SQUIRREL *Sciurus carolinensis*

Since the first report of the occurrence of a Grey Squirrel on Bute, near Torr Wood in the south of the island on 17th September 1994 (Gibson, 1996b), there have been over a dozen sightings up to 1999, all more or less from the same area. All reports have been of single animals, but in view of the time-scale involved it is most unlikely that there is only one squirrel. So far, however, there has been no reported evidence of breeding, and any additional information will be very welcome.

BEAVER *Castor fiber*

Subsequent research has now confirmed that the Beavers originally introduced to the island by the Third Marquess of Bute in the 1870s were Eurasian (Conroy, Kitchener and Gibson, 1998). In view of a fairly recent account (Lever, 1985) which repeated the suggestion that Canadian Beavers formed part of the original Bute Beaver colony, it is important to state that correspondence in the Bute Archives, searched by the Sixth Marquess and J.A.G., revealed that the Beavers came from 'Scandinavia', so were clearly Eurasian, and were purchased from Charles Jamrach, a London animal dealer. As previously reported (Gibson, 1980), in 1874 four Beavers were introduced into the specially-prepared enclosure of some three to four acres of woodland near Kilchattan Bay, followed by another seven in 1875. The small colony achieved good breeding success and had reached sixteen animals by 1878, with a further increase in 1879 (Black, 1880). Unfortunately, all the indications are that the Beaver colony had died out by 1887, or thereby, for reasons which are as yet unexplained.

The year 1887 would appear to be the likely date of extinction, for in that year Lord Bute's factor was again negotiating with Jamrach for the purchase of Beavers, presumably in an attempt to restart, or restock, the colony. This time, however, only Canadian Beavers could be obtained. One animal was purchased in 1887, but soon died. This appears to have been the mounted specimen which was later exhibited to the Zoological Society of Glasgow in 1890 (Watt, 1905) after which it was transferred to the Zoology Department's museum at Glasgow University (Register No. GLA HMZM 169), where it was recently examined by Dr. Kitchener and confirmed as Canadian. Later that same year (1887) Jamrach offered three more Canadian Beavers, one male and two females, but the asking price of £36 was considered to be too high, Lord Bute only being prepared to offer £30, so the animals were not purchased and there the Beaver introduction experiment apparently ended.

It should be emphasised that some early accounts of the Bute Beaver colony, written near the time and so giving the impression (quite false) of being first-hand contemporary accounts, are seriously flawed since they include assumptions based on second-hand or even anecdotal information; e.g. Harting (1880) unfortunately quoting Charles Hockin, and Morton (1890). These probably gave rise to the erroneous idea that Canadian Beavers were among the animals originally introduced.

Copies of all the relevant correspondence between Lord Bute's factor and Jamrach have been placed in the Scottish Natural History Library.

Although the late Marquess and J.A.G. very thoroughly searched the Bute Archives at Mount Stuart many times for all possible information on the history of the Beaver colony, no evidence was found to indicate that there had ever been any escapes from the well-constructed enclosure. It was therefore of considerable interest to discover that an escape from the colony had been reported in the *Buteman* of 3rd April 1875 (Anon., 1875), as undernoted:

Two very interesting specimens of the work of the Beaver which escaped from the enclosure at Drumrioch, and which has taken up its abode at Ascog Farm, were sent to the Museum of the Archaeological and Physical Society of Bute on Saturday last, by the Marquis of Bute's orders. They consist of the gnawed ends of two very large Poplar trees, which the Beaver has felled. One tree measures 5 feet in circumference, while the other is three inches more. The dam which this Beaver has erected for itself previous to making its burrow, is a very interesting spectacle. The Beavers at Drumrioch, we understand, are taking well to their new quarters, and all in good health.

I am very grateful to Mr. Edward Monaghan, Argyll and Bute Librarian, for kindly lending me the Library's *Buteman* microfilm of the relevant period.

WATER VOLE *Arvicola terrestris*

As previously indicated (*Transactions*, 23: 74-75) the Water Vole suffered a drastic reduction in population on Bute, and it is now distressing to record that, despite repeated searches, I have had no records at all for over twenty years. Baited live-traps set in all the most likely places during the past ten years have produced no result. I very much regret, therefore, that I have to assume the Water

Vole is now extinct on Bute, and I shall be very grateful to anyone who can supply me with positive evidence to the contrary.

Order LAGOMORPHA

BROWN HARE *Lepus europaeus*

Following the 1994 outbreak of myxomatosis, in which a great many Rabbits died, there was some increase in the Hare population the following year, but in 1996 this increase was very marked. In early summer 1996 specimen grid counts showed an average density of ten visible Hares per acre in some arable fields, which was quite remarkable. By the following year, however, numbers were more or less back to normal.

RABBIT *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

As indicated in the 1990 report, the numbers of Rabbits on Bute had considerably increased but it was anticipated that another outbreak of myxomatosis would soon take place and quickly reduce the population. This outbreak occurred in spring 1994, mainly in the south-west of the island, and a great many Rabbits died; over the following two years there was the usual increase in the population of Hares.

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