

Notes on the Birds of the Island of Bute, 1990-2000

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Introduction

This is the third of our ten-yearly updates on the status of birds on the Island of Bute, reporting the significant changes which have taken place since the Rev. J.M. McWilliam published his book on *The Birds of the Island of Bute* in 1927. Previous reports appeared in volumes 21 and 23 of the Society's *Transactions* (Gibson, Hopkins and Stephen, 1980; Gibson and Hopkins, 1990).

The Rev. Mr. McWilliam was not in favour of regular annual bird reports, since he felt that these were likely to get so filled with padding that the really important issues could be lost amidst a mass of routine observations. As Honorary President of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club he often expressed this view very strongly. In deference to his well-known and firmly held views, therefore, we do not usually include routine occurrences where no obvious status changes are involved, and as in our previous reports, some considerable selection has been made. To the best of our knowledge, however, we have included all those records which are more important or more likely to be of interest to other observers, so we trust that the following list, restricted to seventy-five selected species, will be a useful addition to our knowledge of Bute birds. For security reasons, information about the breeding of one rare species has been suppressed.

As in our two previous papers (1980, 1990), in the following check-list an asterisk* indicates an additional species not previously recorded for Bute, either in McWilliam's *Birds of the Island of Bute* (1927) or in our own 1980 and 1990 supplementary lists.

For ready assistance and much useful information we are very grateful, as always, to many members of the Buteshire Natural History Society and to many other colleagues who have visited the island and passed on their observations. Needless to say, we shall always be glad to receive any additional information.

Systematic List

In the following Systematic List the arrangement and nomenclature follow the *List of Recent Holarctic Bird Species* by Professor Karel H. Voous, published by the British Ornithologists' Union (1977).

RED-THROATED DIVER *Gavia stellata*

One pair nests successfully fairly regularly at one site.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE *Podiceps cristatus*

Now fairly well established, since breeding first proved in 1985, with birds usually present on Lochs Fad, Quen, Ascog and now Greenan, although evidence of successful breeding, as with all reed-nesting birds, is not always easy to obtain.

RED-NECKED GREBE *Podiceps grisegena*

One in Kames Bay on 26th December 1997.

CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Well known all round the shore and on some of the lochs, but still no breeding records known for either Bute or Inchmarnock, despite considerable extension of breeding range elsewhere in Clyde area.

SHAG *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Certainly present on Inchmarnock during the breeding season, with several pairs breeding in 1992, but no proved breeding records since then, although a few pairs probably do breed. Common all round the Bute shores at all seasons of the year, but no recorded breeding on Bute itself.

GREY HERON *Ardea cinerea*

Now nesting again on Bute after a lapse of many years; one nest near the Kirk Dam in 1999 and five nests in 2000.

*SPOONBILL *Platalea leucorodia*

One seen at Ettrick Bay on 20th October 1998, again on 28th October, and last seen at Scalpsie Bay on 1st November.

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE *Anser brachyrhynchus*

Still not common, but usually a few birds mixed with Greylag flocks during the winter; a flock of at least 160 birds at Ballycaul on 6th October 1998 was most unusual. There have been occasional summer records: one at Loch Ascog on 26th July 1998 and four there on 21st September.

WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE *Anser albifrons*

Still a regular winter flock of some 150-200 birds (Greenland race).

GREYLAG GOOSE *Anser anser*

In the course of a visit to one of the Burnt Islands on 15th May 2000 an obvious nest of a goose with recently hatched egg-shells was found. Some half-dozen Greylags were seen standing on the shore-line of the same island on 24th June 2000. On a later visit to the island, on 30th July, nine geese, apparently two adults and seven juveniles, were seen swimming offshore. Since this island in the Kyles of Bute is a long way from the nearest known breeding site, it is always possible that this breeding record in the Kyles of Bute originated from escaped or semi-domesticated birds. Further investigation is therefore required and any additional information will be very welcome.

For several years up to five Greylag Geese, presumably injured birds, have been resident on Loch Ascog.

CANADA GOOSE *Branta canadensis*

A fairly unusual summer record: eight flying low over the north of the island on 13th June 1998.

BARNACLE GOOSE *Branta leucopsis*

An undoubted increase, with small groups now seen most winters, but in winter 1994 a flock of 234 birds arrived, which had dropped to 110 birds by 12th March 1995. Two colour-ringed birds

seen on 21st February 1998 had been ringed at Svalbard in 1993 and 1995. For several years up to three Barnacles, presumably injured birds, have been resident on Loch Ascog.

BRENT GOOSE *Branta bernicla*

Has apparently again decreased, but one bird, of the dark-bellied race, was seen at Mecknoch Farm on 10th and 17th December 1995, and another was seen at Rhubodach on 18th April 1996.

WIGEON *Anas penelope*

Additional summer records from several Bute lochs, but still no positive evidence of breeding.

SHOVELER *Anas clypeata*

Still seen occasionally in summer, but no recent confirmed breeding records known to us.

POCHARD *Aythya ferina*

Well known in winter, with occasional summer records, but still no proof of breeding.

LONG-TAILED DUCK *Clangula hyemalis*

Some additional records include single males at Glencallum on 8th May 1997, at Loch Ascog on 24th June 1997, and at Scalpsie Bay on 8th April and 3rd November 1998. Small parties seen off Garroch Head in six out of the last ten winters.

GOLDENEYE *Bucephala clangula*

Usually small numbers at most freshwater lochs in winter.

SMEW *Mergus albellus*

An adult male on Quien Loch on the morning of 15th February 1992; had gone by mid-day.

GOOSANDER *Mergus merganser*

Decreased as a winter visitor in early 1980s but now returning, with small numbers reported from most lochs. To the best of our knowledge, however, no proved breeding records.

*RUDDY DUCK *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Two on Quien Loch on 29th April 1994 and one on Loch Ascog on 23rd September 1996 appear to be the first records for Bute. Since this species is steadily increasing in many parts of the country, however, a watch should be kept for future occurrences.

*RED KITE *Milvus milvus*

One reported being mobbed by Ravens at Acholter Farm on 14th November 1996. This is probably the first record for the island, at least in recent times, and may have originated from the recent reintroductions further north in Scotland.

HEN HARRIER *Circus cyaneus*

Steady loss of suitable habitat because of afforestation, but probably up to four pairs breeding fairly regularly, with reasonable success.

GOLDEN EAGLE *Aquila chrysaetos*

Several pairs nest on the adjacent Argyll mainland of Cowal and Kintyre, and on the Island of Arran, and single birds are occasionally seen flying over Bute.

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*

Several additional sightings of single birds, from Loch Fad and Quien Loch. This is not surprising, since there are now over 100 pairs breeding in Scotland, with several pairs in the Clyde area, and additional sightings may be expected. In 1997 one bird remained around Loch Fad and Quien Loch from 8th May to 25th July.

MERLIN *Falco columbarius*

A steady decrease, as previously reported, and now very scarce as a breeding species. One pair certainly bred in 1994, with occasional sightings since then, but no confirmed breeding known to us during the past five years.

PEREGRINE *Falco peregrinus*

One pair, and occasionally two pairs, still breeding at traditional sites, but success very erratic. Seen occasionally on Inchmarnock but no recent evidence of breeding.

RED GROUSE *Lagopus lagopus*

Now distinctly scarce compared to former years, but a few still nest in the north of the island and on Scoulag Moor in the south.

BLACK GROUSE *Tetrao tetrix*

Although steadily decreasing and now distinctly scarce in many parts of the country, on Bute there are still a few birds in the far north of the island.

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE *Alectoris rufa*

Introduction of several hundred birds to Scoulag Moor in 1999. Reports would be welcome.

GREY PARTRIDGE *Perdix perdix*

Apparently virtually extinct as a nesting species, in common with the great decrease in many parts of the country, but two small coveys seen at the south-west of the island in May 1997.

QUAIL *Coturnix coturnix*

One heard calling near Dunagoil on 11th May 1997, but no bird seen.

WATER RAIL *Rallus aquaticus*

Isolated records from the Kirk Dam and the Plan Loch over the years probably indicate that a small breeding population still exists, but no positive evidence.

CORNCRAKE *Crex crex*

One heard calling for nearly an hour at Kilchattan Bay on the morning of 18th May 1996; no further evidence.

MOORHEN *Gallinula chloropus*

Common on Bute, but it is probably worth recording that in 1996 several pairs were still breeding on the Burnt Islands in the Kyles of Bute. One was seen at the small lochan on Inchmarnock on 24th June 1995.

GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis apricaria*

Although still fairly well-known in winter, to the best of our knowledge there have been no signs of breeding for many years; any additional information would be very welcome.

GREY PLOVER *Pluvialis squatarola*

As previously reported, now probably a fairly regular winter visitor in small numbers to the Straad area on the west of the island; scarce elsewhere.

KNOT *Calidris canutus*

An unusual summer record: a single bird at Kilchattan Bay on 31st July 1991.

SANDERLING *Calidris alba*

Party of six at Kilchattan Bay on 31st August 1997.

PURPLE SANDPIPER *Calidris maritima*

An unusual summer record: party of three at Kilchattan Bay on 15th May 1994.

DUNLIN *Calidris alpina*

Although well-known as a winter visitor, to the best of our knowledge the Dunlin has ceased to breed on Bute; we have no positive evidence of breeding since our last report ten years ago.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa limosa*

The first record for Bute was apparently one seen at Kilchattan Bay on 4th September 1959. Since then there have been a good many records of one or two birds, and the Black-tailed Godwit can probably now be regarded as a fairly regular visitor in small numbers on autumn, and occasionally spring, passage; usually along the shore, but one was seen at Greenan Loch on 1st October 1995. More unusual was a summer record of two birds at Scalpsie Bay on 25th May 1997.

SPOTTED REDSHANK *Tringa erythropus*

Formerly only one positive record for Bute, in 1927, but as previously reported, during the 1980s this species was recorded from Kilchattan Bay during July in six out of ten years, and from Ettrick Bay on 20th March 1988. Since then it has apparently become less regular, but two were seen at Kilchattan Bay on 23rd July 1994 and three on 30th August 1997.

GREENSHANK *Tringa nebularia*

The following summer records are probably worth noting: one at Kilchattan Bay on 23rd June 1995, one at Kirk Dam on 28th August 1997 and one at Scalpsie Bay on 14th June 1998.

***GREEN SANDPIPER** *Tringa ochropus*

One was seen at Quien Loch on 30th June 1986 (not included in our previous report), and another was seen at Dunagoil Bay on the morning of 22nd April 1995. Although not really uncommon as a passage migrant in some parts of the Clyde area, these appear to be the first actual records for the Island of Bute.

BLACK-HEADED GULL *Larus ridibundus*

Has apparently abandoned the old-established site at the Plan Loch, where no breeding has been recorded since the early 1990s. Elsewhere on Bute, breeding also very erratic at present. At least three pairs were nesting beside the Common Gulls at Scoulag in 1996 but not apparently later, and there were about twenty nests near Quien Loch in 1998 and 1999. No recent breeding evidence from Inchmarnock.

ICELAND GULL *Larus glaucoides*

One at Rothesay on 26th December 1997.

GLAUCOUS GULL *Larus hyperboreus*

At least seven records, all of single birds, from Kilchattan Bay in autumn and winter during the 1990s.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL *Larus marinus*

No further breeding records from Bute itself, but several pairs still nesting on Inchmarnock.

SANDWICH TERN *Sterna sandvicensis*

Still regular on spring and autumn passage in small numbers. During the first week of May 1996 adults were seen feeding young, barely able to fly, at a certain site in the south of the island. This was almost certain evidence of breeding on Bute, since the nearest known breeding site in the Clyde area is some considerable distance away, but although a careful watch was kept, no sign of birds feeding young was seen in subsequent years, although Sandwich Terns were certainly present in early summer.

LITTLE TERN *Sterna albifrons*

As previously recorded, one or two Little Terns have regularly been seen in summer at Kilchattan Bay, in several years during the 1990s, but as yet no positive evidence of breeding.

BLACK GUILLEMOT *Cepphus grylle*

There is now little doubt that the Black Guillemot nests at several sites around Bute, as well as on Inchmarnock. Certain breeding sites have been known, and young birds have been seen on the sea with adults, although positive proof of breeding is often difficult to obtain. On 20th September 1998, 71 Black Guillemots were counted in the course of a boat trip around Bute.

BARN OWL *Tyto alba*

A good many sightings from various parts of the island, and a few pairs still apparently breeding. One bird was seen near the traditional nesting site on Inchmarnock on 24th June 1995.

SHORT-EARED OWL *Asio flammeus*

Two or three pairs still nesting on Bute; young birds ringed in 1995 and 1998. One bird seen at north end of Inchmarnock on 24th June 1995.

NIGHTJAR *Caprimulgus europaeus*

One bird heard churring, and later seen, near Ardsclapsie on 5th May 1996 is our only recent record, so may still possibly breed but no positive evidence.

KINGFISHER *Alcedo atthis*

Several additional records, including one at Rhubodach on 1st September 1995, one found stunned at Rothesay on 5th November 1996, one near Stuck Farm on 25th August 1998 and one at the Lade, Rothesay on 26th September 1998, but no real proof of breeding since the 1976 record.

HOOPOE *Upupa epops*

One seen at Eskechraggan Farm on 6th June 1999.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER *Dendrocopos major*

A steady increase over the past twenty years and now reasonably well known as a breeding species in suitable areas.

SKYLARK *Alauda arvensis*

Although a remarkable decrease in many parts of the country, still fairly common on Bute.

DIPPER *Cinclus cinclus*

An uncommon nesting species, but occasional records of individual birds may indicate that a small breeding population exists.

REDSTART *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Locally common in some areas, eg. Balnakeilly Wood, and some indication of increased breeding status in the south of the island, with birds seen carrying food at Drumreoch in breeding seasons of 1995, 1996 and 1998.

RING OUZEL *Turdus torquatus*

No positive breeding records known to us for past fifteen years, but not entirely absent; single birds seen near Ardscaipsie on 24th July 1994 and in Glen More on 16th June 1996.

GARDEN WARBLER *Sylvia borin*

Some evidence of return as a breeding species, with birds heard singing at Skeoch Wood in May-June 1995, at Ettrick Bay on 6th June 1996, at Ambrismore on 19th May 1998, at Woodend on 14th June 1998, and one seen at Mount Stuart on 18th June 1996.

BLACKCAP *Sylvia atricapilla*

Formerly a scarce summer visitor, but a genuine increase noted over the past ten years. At least two additional winter records, one at Mount Stuart on 31st December 1996 and two males at Ardbeg during November-December 1998.

PIED FLYCATCHER *Ficedula hypoleuca*

Bred in Forestry Commission nestboxes at a certain area in the north of the island, where one pair was breeding in 1994, apparently the first breeding record for Bute. Three pairs reared twelve young in 1995, five pairs bred (four successfully) rearing sixteen young in 1996, but apparently no breeding records since then, although one female was seen inspecting a nestbox on 27th May 1997.

GREAT GREY SHRIKE *Lanius excubitor*

Several isolated winter records of single birds over the past ten years.

MAGPIE *Pica pica*

Occasional occurrences, usually of single birds, over the years from various parts of the island, but no genuine evidence of breeding known to us for the past ten years.

RAVEN *Corvus corax*

A notable increase in breeding status since our last report, with up to twelve occupied sites during the past five years and reasonable breeding success. One pair still usually nesting on Inchmarnock.

BRAMBLING *Fringilla montifringilla*

Still a rare winter visitor, but one seen at Kilchattan Bay on 26th November 1994.

SISKIN *Carduelis spinus*

Well-known in winter, and still reasonably regular in summer, but as far as we are aware, no recent proof of breeding, although still probably does breed in small numbers.

TWITE *Carduelis flavirostris*

Regular winter visitor, but now a much reduced and scarce breeding species.

CROSSBILL *Loxia curvirostra*

Another possible breeding record - a party of eight, including two juveniles, near Mount Stuart on 19th May 1998. Small parties are still occasionally seen in winter.

SNOW BUNTING *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Erratic winter visitor, and some years no sightings, so it is worth recording small parties seen at Ettrick Bay on 16th February 1992, Glen More on 25th November 1995, Glencallum on 25th January 1998, and Ettrick Bay on 18th November 1998.

YELLOWHAMMER *Emberiza citrinella*

Formerly the commonest breeding bunting, but a very significant decrease over the past decade and now distinctly scarce.

CORN BUNTING *Miliaria calandra*

One at Kilchattan Bay on 8th May 1996 and again, presumably the same bird, two days later.

Summary

It must be re-emphasized that the foregoing list of seventy-five species is very much a selection. We also possess collected notes on many breeding and non-breeding birds which, although interesting in themselves, in our opinion do not significantly affect the previously-known Bute status of the species concerned. These collected records are kept on permanent file and further details can be supplied on request.

References

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