

Supplementary notes on Bute Vertebrates

Mammals, Birds, Reptiles and Amphibians, Freshwater Fishes

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Over the past thirty-five years, quite apart from the major works on the vertebrates of the entire Clyde Faunal Area, of which the Island of Bute of course forms part, the standard accounts of Bute vertebrates have all been published in the Buteshire Society's *Transactions*, with regular updates as required.

These accounts have usually appeared as separate papers for each vertebrate class, plus a cumulative account in the *Atlas of Bute and Cumbrae Vertebrates* (Gibson, 1980b), but since relatively few really significant changes have taken place within recent years, this updated account is a combined paper covering all vertebrates. For ease of reference, details of the standard accounts published in previous volumes of the *Transactions* are listed at the beginning of each vertebrate section.

MAMMALS

Gibson, J.A. (1970-2000). The mammals of the Island of Bute; plus additional notes. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 18: 5-20; 20: 78-80; 21: 93-95; 23: 65-79; 24: 75; 25: 106-109.

WATER SHREW *Neomys fodiens*

As previously reported (*Transactions*, 25: 106) the Water Shrew, at one time thought to be uncommon on Bute, is now known to be widely distributed throughout the island wherever there is suitable habitat. It is fairly well known by most naturalists that shrews are very aggressive little creatures, the larger Water Shrew particularly so, but it may not be so well known that the Water Shrew is also one of the very few mammals which is actually venomous, albeit moderately so. Water Shrew saliva contains a venom which affects the nerve, respiratory and blood systems, thus immobilising any prey to stop it struggling and so enabling a Water Shrew to attack prey much larger than itself. Recently a fellow naturalist witnessed a Water Shrew (in another area of Clyde, not on Bute) killing a Field Vole *Microtus agrestis* by a bite to the vole's rear quarters.

There is no actual danger to humans, although anyone bitten by a Water Shrew will probably experience a burning pain and skin reddening which can last for several days, so anyone examining the contents of a Longworth trap should certainly exercise some degree of care, and, of course, as with any animal bite, anti-tetanus treatment should be promptly instituted.

NATTERER'S BAT *Myotis nattereri*

The use of bat detectors has completely revolutionised the study of bat distribution, and Natterer's Bat, at one time considered to be extremely rare in Scotland, has now been shown to occur in several places throughout the Clyde area. To the best of my knowledge, no actual specimen of Natterer's Bat has yet been found on Bute, but its presence has been detected from its echolocation calls; much additional work, however, will be necessary before its precise status on Bute can be confirmed.

SOPRANO PIPISTRELLE *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

The Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* is well known and widely distributed throughout the Island of Bute, but the recently recognised and described Soprano (or 55) Pipistrelle is now known to be fairly widely distributed throughout many parts of the West of Scotland. With the aid of a bat detector, it has now been shown that the Soprano Pipistrelle also occurs on Bute, but much additional work will be required before its exact status can be determined.

FOX *Vulpes vulpes*

The Fox, absent from Bute as a breeding species for well over 250 years, when it was last reported in John Blain's *History* (Blain, 1810-20), may now have returned to breed on Bute. Mr. Angus Hannah has recently published a comprehensive account of the past history and present status of the Fox on Bute in the national journal, the *Scottish Naturalist* (Hannah, 2004), which in view of its importance is worth quoting in some detail:

"There is some evidence that a small population of Foxes may now be established in the north-western part of the Island of Bute, which, if correct, will be the first evidence of Foxes breeding on Bute within recent historic times.

Residents at Glecknabae (NS 005684) and at Kilmichael Farm (NR 993708) have both reported occasional sightings over the past year (2003), and Sheriff Margaret Gimblett of Glecknabae also mentioned the characteristic Fox smell. The author had a close-up view of a young adult Fox near Kilbride Farm (NS 034678) on 24th October 2003, when the animal stood in the road in the beam of the author's car headlights, thus causing him to slow down and finally stop before the Fox walked off. The localities where these sightings took place are several miles apart, so it seems very probable that more than one individual Fox is involved, although this has not yet been proved.

How the animal(s) reached Bute is a matter for speculation, but it has been suggested that a pregnant female may have swum from the Argyll shore near Colintrave to the Burnt Islands, perhaps in pursuit of nesting birds or their eggs, reaching Eilean Mor by way of Eilean Buidhe and subsequently continuing to the Bute shore. This would involve three short crossings of not more than 100 metres each, which would present no great difficulty at slack water" (Hannah, 2004: 39).

The Editors of the *Scottish Naturalist* agreed that Mr. Hannah's suggestion seemed a very possible explanation, and added "Another possibility is that a Fox being pursued, say by dogs, might have no option other than to enter the sea in desperation and strike out for the far shore. This is less likely, since although Foxes are good swimmers, an exhausted animal would be unlikely to survive, especially if the currents were strong. It is always possible, of course, that an animal was deliberately introduced, although if this were the case the culprit is unlikely to confess!"

Although, as Mr. Hannah has indicated, there have been various rumours and possible sightings of single animals in the recent past, and a dead Fox (origin unknown) was found near Barone cemetery on 15th December 2001 (*Buteman*, 21st December 2001), the cumulative evidence may now indicate the real possibility of the Fox again breeding on Bute, so it is obviously very important that any additional evidence should be reported at once.

AMERICAN MINK *Mustela vison*

Although the Mink is now widely established throughout Bute, I believe it has not yet reached Inchmarnock. I had heard rumours that Mink had been seen on Inchmarnock, which would be disastrous for the Eider Duck *Somateria mollissima* population, but have been unable to obtain any positive evidence. During a visit to Inchmarnock in 2001 no Mink were seen, and there was no obvious evidence of predation on Eider nests. Any additional information, however, will be very welcome.

MONGOOSE *Herpestes ichneumon*

An old record of a possible Mongoose on the Island of Bute has recently been discovered and reported (Gibson, 2000). Searching the columns of any local newspaper in the hope of discovering some interesting natural history items is a wearisome and usually unrewarding task, but just occasionally one finds something unusual, and in the *Buteman* for Friday 5th December 1900 I was fortunate enough to discover the undernoted paragraph:

"That well-known trapper, Mr. Robert Morrison, had the luck to trap on Saturday last, at Plan Farm, south end of Bute, an animal certainly not native of this country. It is believed to be a mongoose, and was caught in a trap set in a rabbit hole".

So far I have been unable to trace any later reference to this occurrence, but the Mongoose is a fairly distinctive creature and there is no real reason to doubt the identification, even although no confirmatory details were given. At first, it might reasonably be assumed that this occurrence resulted from another introduction, as yet unrecorded, by the Bute family, but the Bute family Archives were very thoroughly searched by the late Marquess and myself when we were endeavouring to obtain as much information as possible about the Wallaby and Beaver introductions, and nowhere in the Archives did we find any indication at all that the Mongoose was ever introduced.

There is, however, a much more likely explanation. In my 1976 account of the land mammals of the Clyde area (Gibson, 1976a) I reported the old records of an adult Mongoose trapped at Blanehead, West Stirlingshire, on 1st June 1928, and five weeks later a barely half-grown specimen trapped at Duntocher, Dunbartonshire. At that time, the origin of these animals was unknown, but eight years later, by the time of the publication of my separate account of the mammals of Dunbartonshire (Gibson, 1984), my colleague Mr. John Mitchell had discovered that "in the 1920s Mongooses were kept by at least one Dunbartonshire bakery, since their mousing ability was considered to be greatly superior to that of cats" (Mitchell, 1983). Later investigation showed that this practice was more widespread, in several parts of the country, than had previously been realised.

It seems most likely, therefore, that the 1900 Bute Mongoose was an escape from a local bakery or some other establishment, but it is clearly desirable to draw attention to this occurrence in the hope that some other records may come to light, and needless to say, I shall be most grateful to receive any additional information.

BOTTLE-NOSED DOLPHIN *Tursiops truncatus*

The Bottle-nosed Dolphin is now known to occur fairly regularly in many parts of the Clyde sea area, particularly in the Kilbrannan Sound and lower Loch Fyne (Gibson, 1976c and 1980a). Recently, however, there have also been several valid records from the Sound of Bute, with some Bottle-nosed Dolphins seen from Garroch Head, so a watch should certainly be kept for any additional sightings.

PILOT WHALE *Globicephala melaena*

Although, to the best of my knowledge, no specimen of the Pilot Whale has ever been stranded or otherwise obtained in the Clyde sea area, a long series of perfectly valid sightings by experienced observers, mainly in Kilbrannan Sound and lower Loch Fyne, has now confirmed the occurrence of the Pilot Whale in Clyde. There are several good records from the Sound of Bute, on the fringe of our area, although, as far as I am aware, none has actually yet been seen from the shores of Bute; Garroch Head would appear to be the best look-out position.

PORPOISE *Phocoena phocoena*

Throughout the Clyde sea area the Porpoise continues to increase in numbers, with small schools being seen regularly, particularly in Kilbrannan Sound, Loch Fyne, and the Sound of Bute. This is most encouraging news, and one hopes that this welcome increase continues. There have also been several recent Clyde strandings, including at least two from the Island of Bute, at Glecknabae towards the end of June 1999 and at Scalpsie Bay on 4th June 2002.

SPERM WHALE *Physeter catodon*

There are some old, quite authentic, records of the Sperm Whale from Kilbrannan Sound, Loch Fyne, and other neighbouring parts of Clyde (Gibson, 1976c), and recently there has been at least one good sighting of a Sperm Whale in lower Loch Fyne, off Ardlamont Point, near the western entrance to the Kyles of Bute, during the last week of August 1998; other possible records have been reported.

DOLPHINS - General statement

As previously reported (*Transactions*, 23: 71) sightings of the White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*, at one time far and away the commonest dolphin in Clyde waters, with records from the Kilbrannan Sound going back to 1879, are now few and far between. On the credit side, however, sightings of the Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis*, once rare in the Clyde, are now fairly well known in the Kilbrannan Sound, lower Loch Fyne and the Sound of Bute.

WHALES - General statement

Again as previously reported (*Transactions*, 23: 71-72; 25: 107) the Killer *Orcinus orca* and the Lesser Rorqual (or Minke Whale) *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* remain the two commonest large cetaceans frequenting the Clyde sea area, and can regularly be seen from Bute shores in the Sound of Bute and lower Loch Fyne. Unfortunately the Bottle-nosed Whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, at one time so well known in the Clyde, with records going back well over 200 years, has now virtually disappeared from the Clyde sea area, with hardly any valid records during the past ten years.

GREY SQUIRREL *Sciurus carolinensis*

There have now been numerous sightings of Grey Squirrels from many places in the south of the island, with a few further north, and there seems little doubt that a small breeding population has now become established; it will be interesting to see if the population continues to thrive. As far as I am aware, however, the origin of these squirrels on Bute remains unknown.

BANK VOLE *Clethrionomys glareolus*

As an experiment, during May 2001 extensive live-trapping with Longworth traps was carried out near the summit of Suidhe hill (c.500 feet) near Kilchattan Bay. In addition to many Field Voles *Microtus agrestis*, several adult Bank Voles were caught, examined and then released. The presence of Bank Voles on higher ground is a little unusual, but does confirm that the Bank Vole is very widely distributed in all suitable habitat throughout Bute.

BIRDS

- Gibson, J.A., Hopkins, I. and Stephen, A. (1980). Notes on the birds of the Island of Bute, 1927-1980. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, **21**: 69-92.
- Gibson, J.A. and Hopkins, I. (1990). Notes on the birds of the Island of Bute, 1980-1990. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, **23**: 113-124.
- Gibson, J.A. and Hopkins, I. (2000). Notes on the birds of the Island of Bute, 1990-2000. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, **25**: 97-105.

The regular report updating our knowledge of Bute's birds, by myself and Mr. Ian Hopkins, appears every ten years, but since the last ten-yearly report only appeared in the previous volume of the Society's *Transactions* (for 2000) the next report is not due until around 2010. In the meantime, however, it is well worth recording the undernoted new record for Bute, which was also new to Britain.

SNOWY EGRET *Egretta thula*

From at least 5th November 2001 until 12th December 2002 a Snowy Egret was reported from many parts of the West of Scotland, with most of the sightings coming from the Clyde Faunal Area, including Knapdale, Upper Loch Fyne, Cowal, Arran, Bute, Dunbartonshire, and Ayrshire. With regard to Bute, the Snowy Egret was seen at Ettrick Bay on 9th May 2002, and again at Ettrick Bay from 15th to 18th May; it was at Loch Riddon, on the outskirts of our area, on 19th May. I myself was fortunate enough to see the egret at several places throughout Clyde. A detailed account of this unique occurrence was published in *British Birds* for June 2004 (Jackson, 2004), and to the best of my knowledge this is the first occasion on which a species new to Bute has also been a first for Britain. A photograph of the egret was also published in the *Buteman* for 28th June 2002.

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

- Gibson, J.A. (1970-1990). The reptiles and amphibians of the Island of Bute; plus additional notes. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, **18**: 31-32; **21**: 97-98; **22**: 127; **23**: 53-56.

Reptiles

COMMON LIZARD *Lacerta vivipara*

Most unfortunately the Lizard, once so well known and widely distributed throughout the entire Clyde area, has undergone a substantial decrease in population, particularly over the past twenty-odd years (Gibson, 2003a and 2003b), and on the Island of Bute, although still fairly well distributed in most suitable areas, in actual numbers the Lizard population is now very much less. Whereas over a generation ago any experienced naturalist could easily see several Lizards in an afternoon's walk, nowadays in many apparently suitable parts of the island there is hardly a Lizard to be seen; a similar decrease has also been noted on Inchmarnock. At present, the reasons for this worrying decline in population are still not clear.

ADDER *Vipera berus*

Although the Adder is so common on the neighbouring Cowal mainland of Argyll, there is no firm evidence that the Adder was ever indigenous to the Island of Bute, at least in recent historic times. The very occasional dead specimen found near the shore on Bute was probably dropped by gulls.

I have always wondered, however, about the statement by John Blain (1810-20) who was writing about the situation on the island probably around the late 1790s; he said "Here there are also adders or vipers, but they are few in number and diminutive in size. The neighbouring little island of Inchmarnock has them much more frequent and large" (Blain, 1810-20: 23).

This is a remarkable claim, quite at variance with our present knowledge. Moreover, as far as I have been able to discover, there is no mention of Adders on Bute in any of the accounts by the early travellers, e.g. Pennant, MacCulloch, Wilson, &c, nor in either the *Old* (1790-91) or *New* (1840) *Statistical Accounts*, nor in either series of the *Agricultural Reports* of 1794 and 1816. If there genuinely were Adders on Bute in Blain's day, then they must have died out since then; but why?

There is no doubt that some 250 years ago there was considerable confusion between the Slow Worm *Anguis fragilis* and 'snakes'. The Slow Worm is, and always has been, common and widely distributed throughout the West of Scotland, including both Bute and Inchmarnock. Was John Blain reporting what he had observed himself, or just what he had been told (possibly inaccurately) by others? I suspect the latter. The only statement I can find in Blain's *History* which records his own direct observations occurs on page 102. When visiting the cairn called "Carnbaan, or white cairn", in the north-west of Bute, he was told by the local farmer that "apparitions are sometimes seen about it", and that "considerable numbers of adders lurked in the cairn", but Blain himself said "In a visit I made to it, though the day was warm, I did not see any of them" (Blain, 1810-20: 102).

Several hundred years ago the Adder was usually regarded with some awe, and its presence was generally reported as an important feature in contemporary accounts of any area, so the apparent complete absence of any confirmation of Blain's statement in any other contemporary account is fairly strong evidence to the contrary. If I have overlooked any early account which does mention the Adder on Bute, I shall be most grateful to have this drawn to my attention, but in the meantime I strongly suspect that Blain's old account of the presence of the Adder on Bute was mistaken reporting of country lore.

LEATHERBACK TURTLE *Dermochelys coriacea*

Since the publication of the original paper listing the occurrences of the Leatherback Turtle (Leathery Turtle, or Luth) in Buteshire waters (Gibson, 1990a), there has been at least one additional valid record; several well-reported sightings of what was presumably the same creature in lower Loch Fyne, near the entrance to the western arm of the Kyles of Bute, during the last week of July 1999 (Gibson, 2003b). Within recent years there have certainly been many more records of Leatherback Turtles from around the British Isles, presumably because of changes in climatic conditions, so it is by no means impossible that further Buteshire occurrences may be recorded.

RED-EARED TERRAPIN *Trachemys scripta*

Although Red-eared Terrapins, imported from North America, had occasionally been kept as pets in our country, during the 1980s the 'Ninja Turtle' craze amongst children generated an enormous demand. Unfortunately, terrapins were apparently somewhat uninteresting as pets, so children rapidly lost interest, and it is clear that many of the terrapins were simply released into local ponds or lochs to fend for themselves. Many records of Red-eared Terrapins, mostly dead

specimens, have been reported from the West of Scotland, usually in the vicinity of towns, as one would expect (Gibson, 1995). After the publication of my Clyde reptile and amphibian update paper (Gibson, 2003b) I received a message that a dead terrapin had been found at the side of Loch Fad "some years ago", but no further information could be supplied. In view of the fact, however, that so many dead specimens of terrapins have been found throughout the Clyde area, it is not impossible that this occurrence was perfectly correct and worth placing on record.

Amphibians

FROG *Rana temporaria*

In common with most parts of the Clyde area, the population of Frogs on Bute has fluctuated widely over the past twenty-five years, but at present seems to be reasonably stable. Very fortunately, the 'red-leg' virus infection, which has recently caused such trouble in some parts of the south of England, does not so far appear to have been a problem in the West of Scotland (Gibson, 2003b), so variations in our Frog population must clearly have been due to other causes.

Frogs had apparently died out completely on Inchmarnock by the early 1970s, when their limited habitat dried up following several hot summers, but they are now established again after some frog-spawn was recently introduced (Gibson, 2003b); an earlier attempt at reintroduction, in 1972, was unsuccessful (*Transactions*, 21: 97).

FRESHWATER FISHES

Gibson, J.A. and Stephen, A. (1976-1990). The freshwater fishes of the Island of Bute; plus additional notes. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 20: 71-75, 76-77; 21: 97-98; 23: 59-60.

Since the publication of the original paper (Gibson and Stephen, 1976) one naturally-occurring species, the Sea Lamprey, has been added to the list of Bute freshwater fishes, but several additional species have been deliberately introduced to some Bute lochs to provide sport for anglers, and even although the populations of some introduced species originally had to be supported by additional stocking, they now appear to be self-sustaining and, as such, have a reasonable claim to be included as part of the Bute freshwater fish fauna. I am grateful to Mr. Alister McFarlane, Secretary of the Isle of Bute Angling Association, for providing me with detailed historical information about the introductions.

SEA LAMPREY *Petromyzon marinus*

There are at least two valid records of this semi-marine, but officially classed as freshwater, species from the Island of Bute; a sight record at Ettrick Bay on 31st May 1985 and one found dead at Kilchattan Bay on 3rd September 1988 (Gibson, 1990b). There is little doubt, however, that the Sea Lamprey occurs regularly in small numbers around the Bute shores and at the outlets of Bute rivers.

TROUT *Salmo trutta*

As previously reported (*Transactions*, 20: 72), the Trout (or Brown Trout; 'brownies' to the angler), at one time fairly plentiful in Loch Fad, had become uncommon in the loch by the mid-1970s. Some twelve years ago, however, the Isle of Bute Angling Association reintroduced

Brown Trout to Loch Fad, with intermittent stocking since then with fish of around 1½ lb in weight. This has resulted in a successful Brown Trout fishery, in addition to the extensive Loch Fad Rainbow Trout population, with some exceptionally large Brown Trout now being caught. So far, the record specimen is a Brown Trout weighing 7 lb 12oz caught on 22nd February 2004, when fishing for Pike (*Buteman*, 12th March 2004).

RAINBOW TROUT *Salmo gairdneri*

Loch Fad is now a highly developed, widely advertised, and very popular commercial fishery for the angling fraternity, particularly for Rainbow Trout. A substantial Rainbow Trout cage farm was established on Loch Fad in late 1976, and has been a considerable success. For anglers, Loch Fad is now restocked several times a week with Rainbow Trout between 1 lb 4oz and 12 lb in weight (Coutts, 1999; Sandison, 2001), and some extremely large fish have regularly been caught. This year (2004) a 16 lb Rainbow was caught, and so far the largest appears to be a specimen of 19 lb 2oz caught in the late 1990s.

An interesting feature is that Woodend Burn, the main inflowing burn to Loch Fad, was shown to be one of the very few places in the country where Rainbow Trout had been proved to breed in the natural (wild) state, as opposed to escapes (Phillips, Meikle, Beveridge and Stewart, 1984). This still appears to be the case.

PIKE *Esox lucius*

The Pike fishing on Bute, particularly in Loch Fad, continues to be a considerable success, with many more examples of extremely large fish being caught. In addition to the older records previously reported (*Transactions*, 20: 73; 21: 97-98), this year (2004) two Pike each of 35 lb and one of 39 lb were caught in Loch Fad.

CARP *Cyprinus carpio*

Carp were introduced to Loch Greenan in 1992/93, with some additional stock of larger fish, between one and two pounds, introduced several years later. This introduction has been very successful, and there is now a substantial self-sustaining population. Some extremely large fish can regularly be seen, and several specimens of up to 20 lb in weight have been caught.

TENCH *Tinca tinca*

Also introduced to Loch Greenan in 1992/93. Still present, with apparently a self-sustaining population, but only fish of small size and in small numbers.

BREAM *Abramis brama*

Also introduced to Loch Greenan in 1992/93. Still present, with apparently a self-sustaining population, but only fish of small size and in small numbers.

COMMON GOBY *Pomatoschistus microps*

In addition to the records previously reported (Gibson, 1976b), a good many specimens have now been collected and examined from Kilchattan Bay, Dunagoil Bay, and St. Ninian's Bay, so it is fairly clear that the Common Goby is probably well distributed in all suitable places around the Bute shores.

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