

DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 13 –
MARCH/APRIL 2023



Surf on the West Sands at St. Andrews.

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THE WEATHER ROUNDUP.

March saw 50mm of rain, compared with 17mm in March 2022. A month-on-month record can be misleading as the first 3 months of 2022 had 86.5mm compared to 97.9mm for the first 3 months of 2023. I recently had an interesting conversation with Peter Forster who farms at Peacehill (with his son, Ross) – he tells me that, when he first started farming, he was told that for every mile one travels inland there is an extra half inch of annual rainfall and, once one gets to Perth, this increases by one inch per annum as one continues westwards. Peter has to irrigate his crops around Peacehill and has an elaborate system of ponds which he can control from his mobile phone, but farmers west of Newburgh don't have to irrigate at all! This is not based on scientific fact but I'm sure there is some truth to this old-timer's assertion.

April's rainfall measured 26.7mm as against 22mm for April 2022. Surprisingly, overall rainfall for the first 4 months of 2023 is 124mm compared to 108mm for the comparable period of last year.

PETS BEWARE! – Dogs (and cats) should be aware that it is the ground nesting season in the grassy and meadow areas around the golf course and the Drumoig estate. Pets are respectfully requested to keep their owners under control or, preferably, on a leash when crossing the meadow areas. These are also areas where you may pick up ticks.

WINTER TURNS TO SPRING.

It is a delight to see the spring flowers coming and going. Here are a few images from round our lovely estate –



Early snowdrops (Jennifer Laidlaw)



Daffodils – a bit later this year.



Solitary daffodil with early azalea.



Early Camellia.

MORTON LOCHS REVISITED.

Due to the long closure of Morton Lochs after Storm Arwen, we had not visited Morton Lochs for some time. It was a delight to be back but also a shock to see the continuing aftermath of Storm Arwen with swathes of forest still not fully cleared.



During a brief visit to the hides, we saw a variety of wildlife including a heron, a coot, swans and mallard duck, male and female.



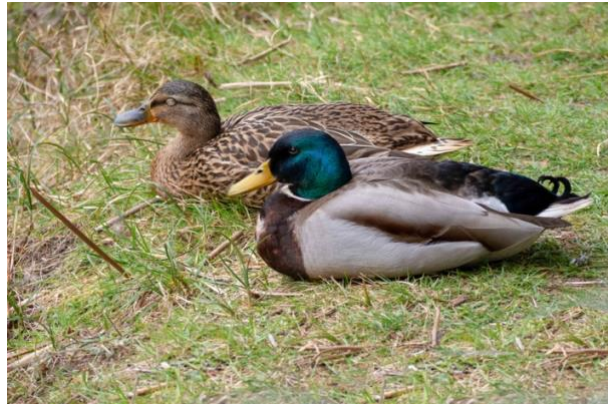
Heron



Fungus on a dead tree



Coot



Mallards



Swan attempting take-off!

Of particular interest to me was the John Berry hide. Dr. John Berry, who lived in the Tayfield estate in the middle of Newport, was a world-renowned conservationist and a charming man whom I knew quite well. When he died, I was astonished to find that during the war he had been Chief Intelligence Officer for Scotland – a master spy, and “he was one of the few people who was not surprised when Rudolf Hess parachuted into Scotland”. A full account of his extraordinary life can be found on a plaque inside the hide - I suspect it is taken from the funeral address given by Prof. Smout of St. Andrews University. Well worth a visit!

WE MADE A MISTAKE....in newsletter 12 when we described the “obnoxious aroma” evident to Craigie residents as being due to anaerobic plant digestate from Peacehill Farm. Rob Pirie had asked the farm worker in the carrot field where the smell came from and was told it was digestate from Peacehill Farm. When it was pointed out that this was nothing to do with Peacehill Farm, Rob approached James Orr, the farmer in the carrot field who wrote as follows -

“The material we were spreading was not, in fact, from Peacehill but from the Anaerobic Digester (AD) plant at Binn Farm, Glenfarg. At the Binn they take in food waste from homes and businesses (which previously went to landfill) to produce energy from it. After this

process they are left with a dark coloured liquid better known as digestate. As this product is high in Nitrogen, Phosphate and Potash it is a very valuable source of nutrients and organic matter which makes it very beneficial for the soil health and ultimately the following crop. By using digestate we can vastly reduce our reliance on artificial chemical fertilisers and therefore make a large reduction of our carbon footprint and help us on our journey as a business to net zero.

I do appreciate there is often a smell which can linger for a period and it was our intention to incorporate quickly. Unfortunately, on this occasion we were unable to complete this due to our workload harvesting carrots.”

Peacehill Farm, of course, have their own AD plant which is a massive and impressive enterprise. Local farmers produce crops such as sugar beet for use in the AD plant which, in turn, produces enough gas to supply much of Newport and Tayport. In a virtuous circle the digestate residue is also used as fertiliser, so nothing is wasted. Many of us have been fortunate to see the AD plant at Peacehill, which makes you realise that farming is very different from days gone by.

SPUDS, SPUDS SPUDS – Rob Pirie

Potatoes, Tatties or Spuds take your pick! There are about 5.5 million tonnes of them grown annually in the UK making them the most widely grown vegetable, although yields do vary according to weather conditions, soil borne pests and disease pressure, particularly blight.

The field adjacent to Craigie Hill on James Orr's Fordelhill Farm is currently (19th April) being planted in tatties. As you can see from the attached photo's it's quite a labour and machinery intensive operation. The first tractor pulls the previously ploughed land into very large ridges. The second machine, a stone separator, picks up the whole ridge and passes the earth up the elevator, separating out the stones and clods which are then dropped out the side of the machine back between the next ridge. This operation helps to make a perfect seed bed for the tatties and the removal of the stones and clods greatly reduces bruising and damage to the potatoes later in the season when they are harvested and stored.



Tractor creating ridges.



The stone separator.

Finally, the potato planter splits the newly de-stoned ridge into two rows or dreels and plants the tatties from the rear hopper whilst adding granular fertiliser from the front hopper.



Potato planter at rear.



Front hopper (fertiliser) & rear hopper (potatoes).

Potatoes are normally grown for two specific markets; "Ware", for human consumption, including crisps, chips etc and "Seed" for, as the name suggests, onward production the following year. Scotland has an enviable reputation for seed production due to the lack of fungal and soil borne pests, although the EU has currently barred seed potatoes from Scotland entering their market for probably some petty bureaucrat reason! It is hoped this will change in the near future

The field in question is about 60 acres which according to James, should produce between 1200-1400 tonnes of "Saxon" (variety) potatoes.

During dry periods the crop can be irrigated from a lagoon which is situated on the western side of the main road, assuming there is sufficient rainfall to replenish stock!

"OUR" SQUIRREL.....AGAIN.

We recently noticed that we were seeing "our" squirrel less frequently. This was a bit of a puzzle as the nuts in our squirrel feeder, as seen from our kitchen window, seemed to be going down at a great rate of knots. Closer inspection revealed that the glass which fits into a slot had been lifted and the platform which the squirrel normally stands on was overflowing with nuts and seeds. Further observation showed that the most likely culprit was a crow which had learned to get its beak under the glass front and lift it up so that the nuts and seeds shot out onto the platform. The crows were then able to feed to their hearts content. We had watched the battle to oust our squirrel between crows, blackbirds and magpies. We concluded that the crows were the most persistent and vicious but none of the above had the ability or nouse to lift the lid on the squirrel feeder. I removed the nuts from the platform and pushed the glass front right down but within a day our crafty crow had done it again!

But I had a cunning plan!! I cleaned up the platform and pushed the glass front right down and then inserted a screw so that the glass couldn't be moved.



Our squirrel feeder with glass front.



The magic screw!

Within a day our squirrel had returned to metaphorically thumb his nose at the thwarted crow.



Our happy squirrel returns!

Steve Norrie also supplied me with these stunning pictures of a squirrel on his bird feeder and also of long-tailed tits –





SUMMER SKY 2023 – Steve Norrie

Back to long, bright (hopefully...) days and shorter night-time skies.

Lots of reports of the Northern Lights but so far, I have yet to see them here at Drumoig this year.

Summer also sees the start of the Noctilucent Cloud season – look out for these extremely high-level clouds glowing in the dark and thought to be formed by passing space dust from asteroids and meteors. Your phone camera should image them quite easily.

Planets

Venus is very bright at about 30 degrees high in the west shortly after sunset (avoid looking for planet whilst the Sun is still above the horizon) and if you were looking through a telescope you would see it at a waning gibbous phase of about 66% - but to the casual visual observer just a very impressive star!

All other planets are hiding from visual view and apart from the Moon not a lot to see with the only main meteor shower on the early morning of 6th May but probably obliterated by the near full Moon.



M94 from Drumoig – approximately 16 million light years away.



M81 Bode's Galaxy – just a mere 12 million light years away from Drumoig!

THE RSPB 2023 BIRDWATCH RESULTS

As you probably know, the RSPB asks its members to take part in an annual UK-wide survey of garden birds. Here are the results, although “UK-wide” may not be representative of Drumoig numbers!

1 THE HOUSE SPARROW GRABS TOP SPOT AGAIN!

This bold, noisy, community-minded bird has landed in top spot in Birdwatch, for the 20th year in a row, despite more than 10 million pairs disappearing in the UK since the late 1960s. However, house sparrow numbers have remained relatively stable over the last twenty years with signs of increases in some parts of the UK.

2 BLUE TIT

A favourite everywhere! This familiar and energetic little entertainer at the feeder has made second spot again for the third year in a row.

3 STARLING

The starling is a non-mover at number three. But like last year, this noisy, vibrant and gregarious garden visitor sadly remains in decline.

4 WOODPIGEON

With their cooing call a familiar part of the urban soundscape, woodpigeon numbers have soared in the past 40 years so unsurprisingly it still sits tight at number four. Woodpigeons in Drumoig are going through a frustrating stage! Their numbers have increased to such an extent that solar

panel owners have had mesh fixed around their panels to prevent them roosting underneath. One Drumoig resident reported 19 pigeons on her roof – they are now looking round for a new victim!

5 BLACKBIRD

The blackbird remains at number five and remains one of our most common and striking UK garden birds.

6 ROBIN

The UK's favourite bird retains sixth place this year. Watch out for these bold friends waiting for you to serve up worms when you are digging the garden.

7 GOLDFINCH

The vibrant goldfinch is doing well but is static at number seven. You'll be hearing its familiar twittering flight song again over the coming year.

8 GREAT TIT

Both acrobat and boss at the feeder, our largest UK tit has stayed put at number eight, so that two-note squeaky bike pump song isn't going away!

9 MAGPIE

This smart jack of all trades has steadily increased its numbers in urban areas in recent years making it a non-mover at number nine. My old bird books tell me that magpies are not found north of Edinburgh but global warming means they are a common sight around Drumoig.

10 LONG-TAILED TIT

The delightful long-tailed tit has reappeared into the top 10 this year, an impressive improvement on last year when it sat in 15th.

As suggested above this is a UK wide survey. There is a similar Scottish survey (in Technicolour!) in which over 36,000 people took part – this can be accessed via the DRA website > More > >Wildlife Forum > Newsletters, where you will see "RSPB Big Gardenwatch 2023". It may not coincide with what you have seen in your garden, but it's well worth a look.

As always, many thanks to our contributors but this newsletter will not happen unless you, the members, contribute. Please, please, please send me any observations, comments or photographs – there's always something of interest happening around Drumoig!

A special welcome to our new residents.

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