

DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 15

JULY/AUGUST 2023



The West Sands at St. Andrews – August 2023

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THE WEATHER ROUNDUP.

July was widely regarded as the wettest July in most parts of the UK for many years. Drumoig was no exception with 88.9mm over 24 days when rain was recorded. The result was greener fairways than we have seen for some time, lush lawns and a bumper crop of weeds.

August had 38.4mm of rain spread over 14 days, compared to 45mm last August, with 6.9mm added in a 10 minute cloudburst on 6th August.

POSSIBLE AVIAN FLU VISITS DRUMOIG.

On Saturday 8th July at around 12md we noticed an immature common gull sitting in the middle of our drive. It sat there for about 2 hours and then started to move around cautiously only to sit again for long spells with the occasional meander around. There was no obvious sign of injury & no sign that it may have flown into a window. We obviously thought it was ill and wondered if it could be bird flu.





The following day we found it dead on the path at the side of our house. I reported this to the gov.uk, “report a dead bird” website but didn’t hear a thing from them.

On Monday 10th July it was still lying in the same position. On Monday evening we heard on the Scottish TV news that 350 gulls had been found dead at Stonehaven, presumed due to Avian flu. I e-mailed the RSPB and received this reply –

“Many thanks for your email and sorry to hear about the poor bird’s demise.

The most important thing is that you reported the find via the correct channels.

I hope this information helps and, in the meantime, thank you for contacting us and for your interest in the RSPB.

Sincerely

Colin Tate

Administrator”

On Tuesday (11th) the bird had disappeared and we later found out that our neighbour had removed the bird (fortunately) using a garden fork. There was also an additional report on the Scottish TV news that a further 100 dead birds had been washed up at Stonehaven.

On the following day there was a report on the TV news that dead birds had been found on the beaches from Aberdeen in the north to St. Abbs Head in Northumberland.

About a week later there was an article in “The Times” entitled –

“BIRD FLU BLAMED AS SWAN NUMBERS DIVE”.

Apparently, from ancient times, their majesties have laid claim to all the swans in Britain to ensure a steady supply of swans to the royal feast table! In more recent times this claim has been confined to the Thames and instigated an annual Royal Census. The practice of “swan upping” (counting swans) dates back to the 12th century. Today there is an official Royal Swan Marker with a team of Swan Uppers who sport a newly updated scarlet uniform bearing the C111 cypher. The annual census is undertaken by the Marker and his Uppers of the Vintners & Dyers livery companies, using 6 traditional skiffs on a five-day journey up the Thames to Abingdon Bridge in Oxfordshire, even though swans are now an obsolete item on the royal table.

The article went on to say that the number of cygnets had fallen by 40% due to bird flu compared to last year. The H5N1 strain of bird flu is responsible for hundreds of thousands of avian deaths globally but only 292 cases have been registered in the UK since October 2021. One can only assume that there are many suspected cases but not many that are scientifically proven and registered.

Although avian flu can affect any bird species it is most common in sea birds. Two hundred Sandwich Terns were recently suspected of contracting bird flu at the Forvie National Nature

Reserve, north of Aberdeen and 600 dead chicks have been reported at Long Nanny in Northumberland.

I also contacted Richard Tough, a local RSPB observer in Tayport, and he confirmed that dead seabirds are regularly washed up on Tentsmuir beach. While I was talking to Richard, two of the receptionists at the Larick Centre in Tayport told me that they had each observed exactly the same scenario of sick seagulls in their gardens.

So, was our dead gull a victim of bird flu? We shall never know as my report to the government website seems to have been ignored, but I am fairly convinced that this was the cause of death. The good news is that avian flu is not readily spread to humans. So, what do you do if you suspect avian flu? – the RSPB have issued the following advice-

DEAD SEABIRDS

There is a risk that dead or ill sea birds may appear on Fife's shores. Avian influenza may be the cause so it's important that the following guidance is followed:

- Don't pick up or touch dead or sick wild birds
- Keep pets/dogs away from any dead or sick bird
- Don't feed wild waterfowl
- Don't touch wild bird feathers or surfaces contaminated with wild bird droppings
- If you keep poultry or other birds, wash your hands and clean and disinfect your footwear before tending to your birds

If you find a single dead bird of prey, swan, goose, duck or gull, or five or more dead wild birds of any other species at the same time, you should report them on <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds> or call 03459 33 55 77. If you find a live but ailing bird call SSPCA on 03000999 999. For removal of dead birds contact Fife Council on 03451 55 00 22. Officers will assess and uplift if required.

EUAN MCGREGOR'S BIRD FEEDER.

Euan recently sent me this note about his bird feeder:-

“Inspired by a visit to the Ospreys at Boat of Garten, we invested in a fat-ball dispenser and a transparent window feeder. While the fat balls were an immediate success, the window feeder took a bit longer to bring results. The coal tits were first after a couple of days, and they seemed to enjoy the peace and quiet of feeding by themselves whilst there was a stramash around the fat balls. Some of the sparrows watched the coal tits from the safety of the bushes and, after a few more days, the more intrepid of them tried the feeder for themselves. It caught on quite quickly after that and word seems to have got around. We are being eaten out of house and home and it's just as well I bought a box of 150 fat balls and 20kg of birdseed!!

A couple of days ago we spotted a goldfinch and we think there was a blue tit as well, but we have discovered that our book of garden birds is woefully inadequate. The birds don't stay still long enough for us to find a promising photograph in the book! We spend happy hours in the sun lounge watching the birds swarm around. We have an old frying pan that we use for a bird bath and to get a drink, and that has gone down a storm. It is just deep enough for them to have a real wallow and sometimes there can be six trying to bathe at once. I'm having to refill the pan a couple of times a day.

After many years of taking the birds for granted, it is really satisfying to get such enjoyment from them. I can't wait to see our local red squirrel try to get to the feeder!"

I know what Euan means about identifying birds visiting the feeders – the little blighters don't stay still for long enough to easily identify them!! Here are a few pictures of Euan's birds from the RSPB website –



Blue tit



Goldfinch



Coal tit.



Tree sparrow

DRA RAMBLERS – 23 JULY 2023 – Neil Sibbit.

After many false starts due to weather or lack of numbers we finally managed our first ramble of the year on Tuesday 25 July 2023, from Falkland. The ramblers met at the Stables, Falkland Estate, at 10.30 for an energising refreshment before heading off on a 6km ramble.



Pre-departure energiser

The ramble was due to take in Maspie Den, Temple of Decision, Tyndall Bruce Monument, Maiden Castle on the Yidd but due to changeable weather, and a minor hiccup in navigation, the route was modified. Departure was via the cottage and pond at the entrance to the Stables.



The pond and cottage

We then headed past Crichton Stuart Mausoleum, past Falkland House School, up Maspie Den, towards Yidd waterfall. We continued up, until just short of Craigmear car park, as the sun poked through the clouds, we turned and headed back towards the Stables for a 'survivors' lunch.



Crichton Stuart Mausoleum and thistles.



Falkland House School



Photo op as the rain came down – still smiling!



Yidd waterfall, more of a trickle!



The survivors at lunch

Despite the weather and minor navigational miscalculation, the ramble was a great success with much to see and an enjoyable lunch at the Stables to complete the day. If you would like to join the DRA Ramblers and have not already expressed your interest then please e-mail neilsibbit@me.com. The next ramble is planned for 15 September 2023 from St Athernase Church, in Leuchars, along the coastal path into Tentsmuir Forest and then lunch at the Rhynd.

A TAWNY OWL VISITS THE BURDEN HOUSEHOLD.

Alec sent me the following pictures of a tawny owl which alighted on his birdfeeder at 10pm. Alec wrote "Despite watching us through the window, as we fumbled for a camera, it posed long enough to get this grainy picture" Based on the size of the bird feeder Alec reckoned that it would be about 300 -350mm tall.



You may think that this is a very grainy picture, which it is, but these are very difficult pictures to take. First of all, it is taken in very poor light and against what light there is in the sky. Secondly, the human eye would have seen this more clearly and in these circumstances the camera lets you down.

Alec commented that “maybe it was making a visit to ask for more owl nest boxes!! Or maybe we can claim it is a sign that Christine & Paul’s nest box programme is working.”

As reported in the January / February newsletter - Alec made 5 excellent new owl boxes to add to the one previously made. All six were installed by Alec and Paul in woodland around the golf course.



The Scottish Wildlife Trust ([Scottish Wildlife Trust - Scotland's leading nature conservation charity](#)) says that a Tawny owls’ lifespan is about 4-6 years. They normally mate for life and remain on their breeding territories throughout the year. The nesting period usually takes place in February, the female incubates 2-3 eggs in 30 days and the chicks fledge after 35-40 days but remain with their parents for about 60-90 days.

Some interesting facts:

1. Its scientific name – *Strix aluco* is derived from the ancient Greek word of Strix meaning owl and the Italian ‘aloch’ meaning tawny owl which originated from the Latin word ‘uluccus’ meaning screech owl.
2. Across the UK it has various other names including Hill Hooter; Screech Owl and Ivy Owl.
3. A Tawny Owl’s hearing could be up to ten times better than a human’s. Two ear openings differ in structure and are asymmetrically placed to improve directional hearing. A passage through the skull links the eardrums, and small differences in the time of arrival of a sound at each ear enables its source to be pinpointed.

For more information on the Tawny Owl and to hear its call – click here: [Tawny Owl Facts | Strix Aluco - The RSPB](#). And here is an archive picture of a Tawny Owl.



OPEN GARDEN DAY 20TH AUGUST 2023.

Three brave households opened up their gardens for other Drumoig residents to inspect and enjoy on a Sunday afternoon in August. This was not a competition and we were not projecting the idea of perfection – just different styles of garden which can be lovely to see. A total of 15 attendees were spread over the 3 gardens during the afternoon with no more than 11 or 12 attending any one garden. The “volunteers” each agreed that they had enjoyed showing off their gardens and one set of visitors was obviously smitten (?with the garden.....or the company?) as they stayed on until the late evening! Because there weren’t large hordes, each set of visitors was able to have an individual tour. I think the consensus from all who participated was that it had been an enjoyable afternoon and many ideas were exchanged. Of course, the non-attenders will want to know what they missed so here is a pictorial summary of the varied gardens and their individual features (in alphabetical order!) :-

Kay & Martin Hepworth, 43, Comerton Place.



Back garden 2017

Apart from the shrubbery in the front garden, the main feature was the landscaping on the rear slope. In 2017 it was totally overgrown and impenetrable with gorse and broom reaching to over 12 feet high. When this was cleared, we found a small monkey puzzle tree which, once exposed to the light, has shot up to about 15 feet.



July 2023

Lil & Dave Smith, 6 Craigie Hill.

Dave and Lil's garden has some lovely secluded and sheltered areas which follow the sun at different times of day. The burn runs along the side of the property and maintains a constant flow throughout the year. It has been manicured to make a very attractive feature.



The decorative entrance to number 6



The burn at the edge of the property



The secluded and sheltered garden

Margaret & Tony Wells, 22, Comerton Place.

It started out 22 years ago as a 'football pitch' and play area with tough shrubs around the edges. Flowers are a much more recent thing. The main feature is two herbaceous borders which aim to have a variety of colour through the summer and autumn.



Herbaceous border & a striking dahlia

So, is it worth repeating? Everyone I spoke to seemed to enjoy the afternoon although the number of "volunteers" and attendees was perhaps a little disappointing. I think most people felt it should be held earlier in the year as many of our gardens are past their best by mid-August. If you have a view, please let me know!

BITS AND BOBS.

1. I received the following e-mail from James McNeil, one of our newer residents

"My wife, Mairi, and I are new to Drumoig, & we moved into our new home at 6 Pickeltillum Avenue in January. We have developed our garden with wildlife in mind and

already have seen loads of bees and insects gathering around lots of our young trees, plants and bushes. This morning we saw a lovely butterfly resting/warming on the side of our fencing. I was lucky enough to get a decent photo, as attached below. There seems to be lots of butterflies at the moment, several with differing colour markings.”



James' Peacock butterfly (with shadow). An archive photo of a Peacock butterfly.

Editor – I'm sure this is a Peacock butterfly and they particularly like garden buddleias and nettles, where they tend to lay their eggs. This colourful pattern of eyespots apparently evolved to confuse predators. The undersides are dark and resemble dead leaves.

James went on to say “Yesterday morning we also saw a small, light brownish bird with distinct yellow markings on its head and breast bouncing around our plants. I did not get a photo, does this bird sound familiar to you?”

Editor – I'm pretty sure this was a yellowhammer which we see from time to time in our gardens.

2. This handsome fellow is a common toad (*Bufo bufo*) –



The common toad can vary from dark brown, grey & olive green to sandy-coloured, and have a warty skin as you can see. They hibernate in deep leaf litter, log piles and in burrows. I have come across them several times during the winter when I've been raking up dead leaves –

they appear to be a desiccated dead toad and then give you quite a shock when they start to move!

3. We recently noticed this shield bug in our sitting room! Perhaps it came in through an open window.



This turned out to be a Forest bug or a Red-legged shield bug. Shield bugs are relatively common and there are over 40 species in the UK, but 4,700 species world-wide. In America they are known as stink bugs because they can emit an unpleasant smell when threatened (or trodden on!). They can be a crop pest in other parts of the world. They have piercing, sucking mouthpieces and usually thrive by sucking the sap from plants, especially deciduous trees such as Hazel, Alder or Oak. Contrary to some opinion they cannot bite and are not a health threat to humans.

This is an archive photo showing more detail.



4. We have seen a lot of “our” red squirrel recently.

They are very difficult to photograph and don't seem to stand still for more than a second. Our squirrel has had several stand-offs with a posse of magpies who are really quite aggressive, but the squirrel seems to hold its own and is not intimidated. They are remarkably agile and seem to be able to balance on the slimmest of branches. We recently saw our squirrel leap from one fragile branch to an equally fragile branch on a neighbouring tree – a distance of at least 8 – 10 feet! We also saw the squirrel in our neighbour's garden which leapt from a slim branch directly onto the harled wall. It



clung there and I expected that it would fall off but it then proceeded to scoot up to the top of the gable and then down a bit to access the satellite dish pole and hence onto the roof. And here is a stunning picture of a red squirrel supplied by Steve Norrie.



5. Steve Norrie also sent this excellent photo of a wild carrot flower. Also known as Queen Anne's Lace this is, as the name suggests, the wild variety of our domestic carrot but the roots are poorly developed and not suitable for eating. Although the flower heads are white there is usually a solitary red or purple flower in the centre so this example is typical and not an aberration!!



6. And finally, this last photograph from Steve has something to do with flight but nothing to do with wildlife!! The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster landed at Leuchars on its way to Montrose in early August. It's another stunning photograph from Steve & I couldn't resist including it!!



AUTUMN SKY 2023

The night skies, if the clouds would behave, are looking better for planetary observation with Jupiter, Saturn and Venus on show. Jupiter is rising in the east at around 21:00hrs and will climb to approximately 45 degrees of elevation due south appearing as the brightest star to the naked eye. Saturn does not appear quite so bright nor so high but will still present its rings in an open aspect though they are slowly closing relative to us here on Earth. Venus is a slowly improving morning object for all early risers in the east and will climb to some 15-35 degrees as October approaches. All planets (and the Moon!) offering fine views through a modest telescope or pair of binoculars.

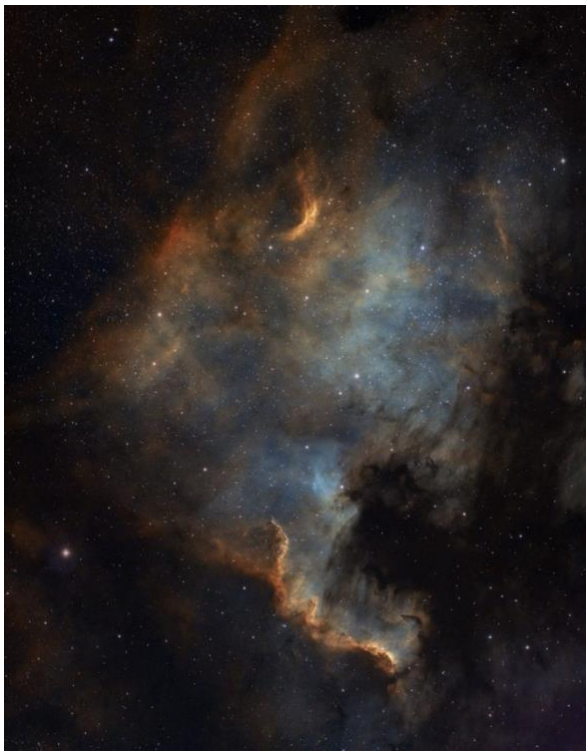
The great square of Pegasus is high in the sky and from it if you look closely, you can make out the fuzz of the Andromeda Galaxy (also known as M31) which is an even better spectacle through binoculars. You need young eyes for this or at least averted vision, but it is a good indicator of light pollution in our skies. A popular way to find M31 is by star hopping from Alpheratz, a corner star of the great square of Pegasus. Take the side of the square of Pegasus that faces the "W" shape of Cassiopeia and then go to the star at the top of this edge (Alpheratz). The Andromeda Galaxy is the only other (besides the Milky Way) spiral galaxy we can see with the naked eye.





M31 from Drumoig 2022

The constellation of Cygnus (the Swan) is also high above and within it lies the nebulosity known as the North America nebula which is a favourite haunt of Astro photographers – including me! Cygnus lies aligned within the Milky Way and easy to identify by its shape. Hopefully from the image below you can see why the North America nebula is so named.



North America nebula from Drumoig August 2023 (not visible with the naked eye!!)

Remember to allow your eyes to adapt to the dark (20+ minutes) to get the best views of our skies – the Milky Way is clearly visible above Drumoig, but you can't just pop out and expect to see it straightaway! Astronomy is a hobby that requires much patience.....

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!**

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