

## **DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 7 – MARCH/APRIL 2022**

March was a peculiar month and much milder than usual. Rainfall was down to 17mm which is a very low figure for March. We were blessed with a warm, sunny week towards the end of March with temperatures reaching the upper teens – probably higher if you were sitting in the sun. If we thought summer had arrived early, we were deluded as Nature ended the month with hail and snow flurries and temperatures below freezing at night.

Whatever happened to the April showers? I recorded only 22mm of rain during April which is well below average – so that’s 2 months in a row with below average rainfall – the farmers must be praying for more rain! Talking of farmers, Rob has told me that the local farmers are too busy planting to give him a rundown on their activities but Rob will resume his column in the next newsletter.

There is much in this newsletter about declining and endangered species and I think it is worth noting that we can all play our part in encouraging wildlife and enhance our enjoyment of Mother Nature at the same time.

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### **OTTERS.**

The photos in newsletter 6 of an otter enjoying a bath in our lakes set me thinking (a rare event) - what do otters eat? Where did it come from? The prospect of an otter hiking over fields and roads didn’t seem too likely to me! I posed this question to Christine Edwards who came up with the following comprehensive reply.

#### **Christine’s reply**

News is that at least one otter has been spotted on the larger of the two ponds on the Drumoig Golf Course. This has got people wondering what there is for them to eat there. Although fish were put in the pond originally, it is not sure if there is any left, after the otters last visit!

So, I thought I would find out more about otters and their lifestyle.

The Eurasian Otter (*Lutra Lutra*) is one of seven species of Mustelid in the UK, which are a family of carnivorous mammals (others include the Weasel, Stoat, Pine Marten, Polecat, American Mink, and Badger). They vary greatly in size and behaviour, but are long-bodied, short-legged, with thick fur and tend to be active at night.

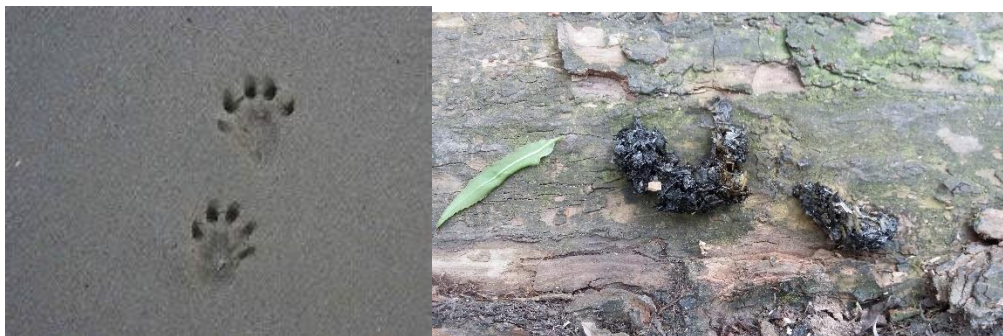
Otters live along the seashore and on the banks of rivers, lochs, and burns and can travel over large areas in search of food, some are known to use twenty kilometres or more of river or coastal habitat.

They are well suited to a life on the water as they have webbed feet and rudder-like tails which make them excellent swimmers. Their thick fur is warm and waterproof, and they can close their ears and nose when underwater. However, otters that swim in the sea need to look after their coat by regularly rinsing off the salt in freshwater pools or streams. The average length of an otter is 90cm plus tail of 45cm and weigh around 10kg with males being larger than females.

They need to eat at least 1 kg of food a day and this consists of crabs and small fish, but they will snack on almost anything that is easy to catch, including frogs, toads, larger fish, waterbirds, and voles. They use their long sensitive whiskers to help detect prey moving underwater. Sometimes they will look for food on land, selecting birds, eggs, insects, and small mammals.

Although they can be seen throughout the year, they tend to be elusive, but you might spot one swimming, they have a distinctive V-shaped wake as they swim on the surface or a long chain of bubbles as they breathe out slowly underwater. You may also hear them calling to each other in high pitched squeaks or chattering angrily if threatened. When seen on land they have a distinctive lolloping run.

However, signs of otter are usually far easier to see than the animals themselves. Clues include five-toed footprints (about 6-7cm long), droppings or 'spraints' which are left in prominent places, such as fallen trees, weirs, and bridges as scented messages to help them find mates and defend territories. These contain visible fish bones, and have a distinctive, pleasant smell rather like Jasmine Tea.



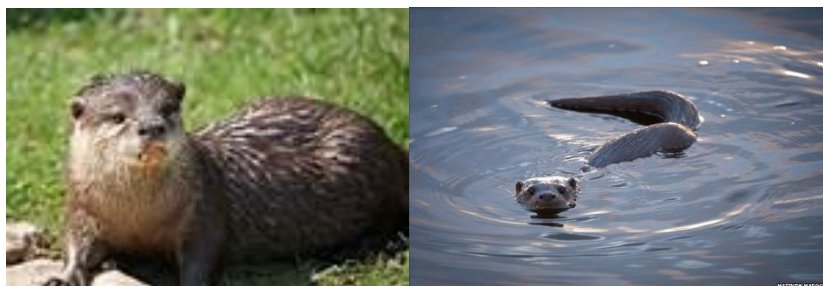
Although they spend most of their time in the water they sleep and breed in burrows, holes in the bank, tree root systems or in caves or piles of rocks known as holts. Otters can have 2 or 3 pups at any time of the year, the mother raises her cubs without help from the male. After about 10 weeks she takes them out of the holt for the first time and a few weeks later they venture out for their first swim. She protects them for their first 12 months, after which they leave to make their own homes and start to breed at around the age of two. Otters can live up to 10 years old in the wild.



Their status is classified as Near-Threatened on the IUCN Red List. Listed under CITES Appendix 1, protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, and classified as a Priority Species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Although rare they are widespread, and are found in most parts of the UK, except parts of central and southern England, the Isle of Man, Isles of Scilly, and the Channel Isle.

Although otters are protected some get injured by snares (the SSPCA supports a complete ban of the use of snares). If a baby otter's mother is injured, killed, or scared off a baby otter under one year old would not survive. If the SSPCA has to rescue baby otters, they are taken to the National Wildlife Rescue Centre, where they stay until they are of an age to fend for themselves. If you find an otter cub calling for its mother and she does not return within an hour or two or before dark, then contact the SSPCA on 03000 999 999. If an otter appears injured, then call them immediately.

It seems that after my research I haven't really answered the question of whether an otter has sufficient food to survive in our pond. If they do not, then they would have to travel overland to find water with more food, such as the Tay Bridgehead, Newport-on-Tay or Tayport, anywhere between 2-4 miles. Is this possible? I have contacted some wildlife experts and I am awaiting their reply, hopefully they can solve the mystery!



My research came from the following websites:

1. Forestry and Land Scotland - [Otter - Forestry and Land Scotland](#)
2. The Otter Trust - [www.theottertrust.org](http://www.theottertrust.org)
3. Countryfile - [Guide to Britain's mustelids - Countryfile.com](#)
4. Scottish Wildlife Trust - [Otter – Scottish Wildlife Trust](#)
5. Scottish SPCA - [Everything You Need To Know About Otters | Scottish SPCA](#)
6. Woodland Trust - [Otter \(Lutra Lutra\) - British Mammals - Woodland Trust](#)

*Click on the links for more details*

In the meantime, I had contacted Marijke Leith of Nature Scotland, based at Tentsmuir National Nature Reserve. Here is her reply:-

“Thank you for getting in touch! I do pass through Drumoig occasionally and it is lovely. The otter could have been feeding on a number of things but at this time of year could have been gobbling up toads and frogs! They also may take some of the water birds. Otters do indeed do a bit of hiking across fields and roads! It's quite surprising how far they can travel when not in water and are more than capable of moving between territories by land. You just have to hope they have road sense!”

### **PROPOSED GARDEN OPEN DAY.**

It has been suggested that we hold a Drumoig Garden Open Day. This was last held in 2009 and was very successful, giving folk the opportunity to see how others had developed their gardens. I'm sure some of the newer residents would welcome a few ideas. I had thought of linking this to providing more bird boxes for Christine, but she has an adequate number at the moment. (Christine & Paul Edwards have a network of bird boxes throughout the woods in Drumoig which need replacing from time to time).

It should be emphasised that your garden does not need to be a “show garden” – any garden that has an interesting feature or layout would be welcome.

My proposals are as follows:-

- The open day would be Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> August.
- Gardens would be open from 11am to 3pm.
- Owners would have the option to offer refreshments (tea, coffee, biscuits) for a small charge or donation which could go to a charity of their choice.
- Participating gardens would be issued with a small sign.
- Some participants may wish to offer plants for sale.
- Participating gardens would need to register their interest with me at [kaymarthep1@aol.com](mailto:kaymarthep1@aol.com) before 1<sup>st</sup> August and also indicate if they were willing to provide refreshments &/or plants for sale.
- All the above are suggestions and if anyone has any other ideas, please let me know!!

Martin Hepworth

### **A PINE MARTEN HAS BEEN SPOTTED IN A GARDEN IN CRAIGIE.**

Unfortunately, it didn't hang around long enough to have its photo taken (they very rarely do!). Apparently, one was spotted in a garden on Forgan Drive a few years ago. Presumably they live in the woods on the golf course although none have been seen on Christine & Pauls wildlife cameras. A visit to the Scottish Wildlife Trust's website reveals the following information:-

“Pine martens are elusive animals, found primarily in the north of Britain. Mostly chestnut-brown in colour, pine martens have a characteristic pale yellow ‘bib’ on their chin and throat, and a long bushy tail.

**Behaviour:** Pine martens are fantastic climbers that prefer to live in woodlands where they live in holes in trees, old squirrel dreys or old birds' nests. They feed on small rodents, birds eggs, insects and fruit, and although rare, can be encouraged to visit bird tables. During the mating season, pine martens make shrill, cat-like calls. In the spring, they have litters of 3-5 young, which are independent by summer.

**Size:** Length: 45cm plus a tail of 25cm: Weight: 900g-1.7kg: Average lifespan: up to 10 years

**Status:** Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, and classified as a Priority Species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

**Distribution:** Found in Scotland, North Yorkshire and Northumberland.

**When to see:** Jan – Dec

#### Facts

- Bilberries can make up to 30% of a pine marten's summer diet resulting in the droppings turning blue in colour. The species use regular latrines, usually on boulders or logs that are in conspicuous spots. When they're fresh, droppings may have a slimy appearance due to mucous binding them together. They may contain fur, feathers, bones or seeds."



#### **SWIFTS WILL BE ARRIVING SOON.**

The RSPB website has provided the following information about swifts which are another species in decline. Anecdotally, I seem to think that I have seen fewer swifts over the last 5 years. Here is the RSPB information:-

“From the savannas and forests of Africa, to the towns and cities of the UK – and back again – swifts make one of nature's most incredible journeys.

The migration route of our [swifts](#) is an epic adventure from eastern Africa all the way to the UK and back again. This journey is part of a flyway used by millions of birds every year,

including other familiar migratory species, like [swallows](#) and [cuckoos](#). But swifts are just a little bit special. Not only do they do this journey without ever landing, but they can also travel super-fast, zipping along at speeds of almost 70 mph.

Despite these talents, our swifts are in trouble and the same could be said of swallows and house martins. The RSPB is working hard to protect them, [and you can help too!](#) Find out more as you follow our swift on her adventure.



### **SQUIRRELS.**

Perhaps inspired by Steve Norries's cute picture of a squirrel in newsletter 6, we decided to invest in a squirrel feeder, bought at great expense from our friendly Amazon dealer. For those of you not versed in the technicalities of squirrel feeders (we weren't) they are basically a wooden box with a protruding platform. The box has a Perspex front which holds peanuts and has a hinged zinc-topped lid which the squirrel can lift to access the nuts.

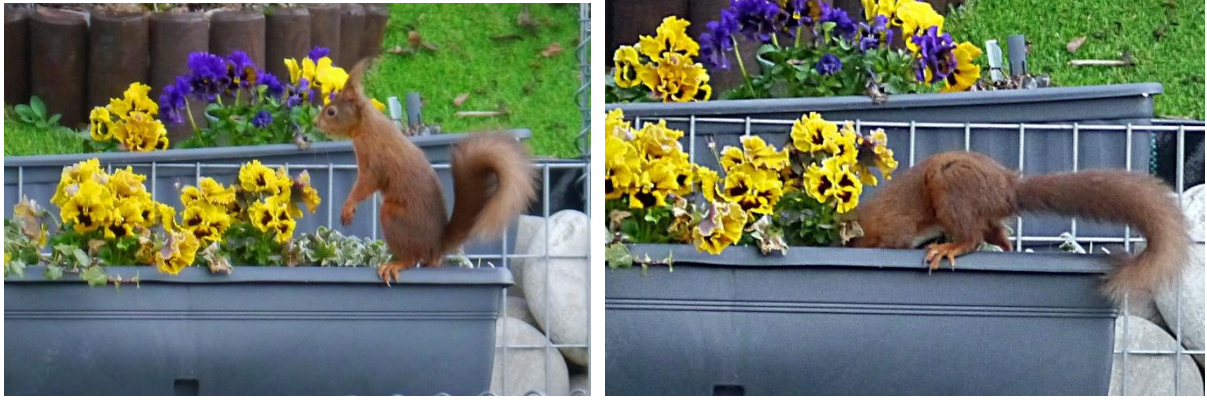


We screwed the feeder to a tree within view of our kitchen window and waited....and waited...for a squirrel to find it. After about 3 weeks a squirrel finally discovered our feeder but was immediately attacked by 2 magpies. Nothing daunted, he came back the next day and we had an entertaining morning watching him run up and down the tree, selecting a prize nut and scurrying down the tree to find a spot to bury it in the garden. He chose so many different spots that we were sure he couldn't remember where he had put them all. One was left with the impression that he was expending an enormous amount of energy fuelled by very few nuts!

Red squirrels in Scotland account for 75% of the UK red squirrel population but that does not mean that they are not at risk from the grey squirrel. A local farmer I know sets squirrel traps and he catches predominately grey squirrels (which he culls) but releases the red squirrels. They feed on (Hazel) nuts and pine cone seeds. They usually live in coniferous forests and have their nest or "drey" high up in the fork of a tree. Red squirrels do not hibernate. So why not invest in a squirrel feeder? They only cost around £17 from Amazon and will give you a lot of amusement and help protect our native red squirrels.



A squirrel at the feeder



Now where did I put that nut?

A neighbouring garden also hosted “our” squirrel but they had something we haven’t had recently – 2 deer.



Margaret Wells has been very active in raising awareness of the skylark habitat in Drumoig and has brought this to the attention of Kirkwood Homes who have consulted an environment specialist as a result. Here is her article on skylarks and related matters:

**SKYLARKS: PROTECTING ENDANGERED SPECIES AND THEIR HABITAT IN DRUMOIG.**





This area of rough grass beyond the trees on Forgan Drive as you enter Drumoig is the habitat of some of the most endangered species of ground nesting bird in the U.K. and beyond. Here is Alec Burden's drone shot of the nesting area showing the main path used by ramblers and dog walkers (starting from the top of Comerton Place) and the numerous animal tracks criss-crossing the area.



Skylarks are on the red list of endangered and protected species, which means that they are at risk of extinction because of very rapid and critical decline in the skylark population arising from loss of habitat. The red list explained for U.K. birds can be found at [rspb.org.uk](https://www.rspb.org.uk) and the British Trust for Ornithology [bto.org](https://www.bto.org)

The rough grass area by Forgan Drive has been home to skylarks for many, many years though there is no sign of them this year. They have been subject to a lot of disturbance and predation, increasingly from cats roaming free and from dogs. The area of new development in Drumoig has significantly reduced skylark habitat and Kirkwood Homes have helpfully appointed a firm of environmental consultants to advise them during the course of the housing development in an effort to protect any nests on the site. It is perhaps a little-known fact that all birds are protected by law during the nesting season.



**The skylark** is a plain looking, small brown bird with one of the most amazing patterns of flight and song of all British birds. It is a tiny brown speck of a bird that spirals high in the sky, until it's practically a dot, where it hovers singing the most beautiful song. Pretty unique. It has inspired many poets - Wordsworth, Shelley and Rossetti amongst many others - and musicians. In the words of Rossetti set to music by Head:

*The earth was green, the sky was blue:  
I saw and heard one sunny morn  
A skylark hang between the two,  
A singing speck above the corn*

As recently as last week Classic FM posted:

'The Lark Ascending' tops the Classic FM Hall of Fame 2022 in Vaughan Williams' 150th birthday year. 18 April 2022.

### **Nesting**

The RSPB advises that Skylarks nest on the ground, in vegetation which is 20–50 cm high. A decent length then. This vegetation must be open enough to give the birds easy access to the ground. They need to make two or three nesting attempts between April and August to sustain the population.

### **What can we do as a community to protect nesting and endangered birds?**

Skylarks need tussocks and hummocks of uncut grassland to nest and to find the seeds, weeds and insects they depend on. We can't provide miles of this in Drumoig but we can help by preserving what we've got.

DRA is exploring ways including signage and information for residents so that we are aware of the birds in the Forgan 'grasslands' and the small but important things we can do as Drumoig residents to protect them and sustain, and hopefully increase, their population.

### **Things to be aware of and actions we can take:-**

Conservation practice is to try to preserve habitat so that skylarks can use it and to inform pet owners about the importance of not allowing cats and dogs to roam free between March/April and September when ground nesting species are nesting to give them a chance.

**Advice for pet owners about how to protect birds** (and red squirrels and their kits, also a red listed endangered species) can be found at:

[rspb.org.uk](https://www.rspb.org.uk) and wildlife [trusts.org](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

- pets roaming free through the Forgan Drive grassy area will decimate ground nesting species
- many pet owners may be unaware of the importance of this habitat and the risks that pets pose.

- a professional ecologist advises that this is not a large area though it is the largest in Drumoig but it is very important to skylark and other ground nesting species, such as grey partridge, also endangered.

I hope that in Drumoig we would seek to protect our declining and at-risk species by protecting their habitat and informing pet owners (I am one) about the part that they can play in such conservation work in our home environment.

**A REED BUNTING** has been spotted in a Comerton garden. Of relevance to Drumoig is the fact that they are often ground nesters. They are about the same size as a sparrow and the female could easily be mistaken for a sparrow.



Male



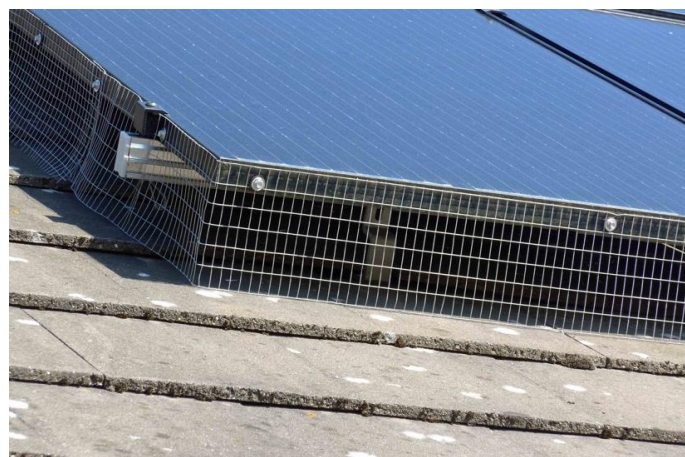
Female

This brings me on to the RSPB annual Big Garden Birdwatch 2022 survey undertaken in January . The top 10 birds are as follows:-

2022 rank	Bird	Number of birds seen	2021 rank	Long term trend
1	house sparrow	1,778,764	— 1	↓ Down 57.9% since 1979
2	blue tit	1,178,156	— 2	↑ Up 14.3% since 1979
3	starling	1,162,553	— 3	↓ Down 81.7% since 1979
4	woodpigeon	1,041,709	↑ 5	↑ Up 1132.8% since 1979
5	blackbird	958,917	↓ 4	↓ Down 43.3% since 1979
6	robin	622,493	— 6	↓ Down 26.3% since 1979
7	goldfinch	591,129	↑ 8	↑ Up 18.3% over the last decade*
8	great tit	587,024	↓ 7	↑ Up 54.4% since 1979
9	magpie	527,125	— 9	↑ Up 212.0% since 1979
10	chaffinch	402,236	↑ 11	↓ Down 68.3% since 1979

### **PESKY PIGEONS AND PHRISKY PHEASANTS.**

Over the last few years, we have been plagued by pigeons. They seemed to sit on our roof just above our bedroom and have taken to roosting under our solar panels. I've noticed that 4 or 5 houses near us have had netting put around their solar panels to prevent them roosting. We decided to join the trend and had netting installed which produced a number of very puzzled pigeons.



But the pigeons have begun a hate campaign, determined to get their own back. Roof ridges are patrolled relentlessly, pigeon droppings are everywhere, and our garden seat is uninhabitable. My secret weapon of brightly coloured fans on our garden seat are just ignored.



Frisky pheasants have now joined in the fun and are patrolling outside our patio windows with their lady friends, preening themselves in the reflection and leaving a long line of pheasant poop. After that they have a dust bath and sun bathe in a warm hollow right in the middle of our rockery.



Whose property is it anyway?.....don't answer that – they were probably here first!!

### **MORE ABOUT QUINCE**

You may remember that in Newsletter number 4 I wrote an article about our quince plant. At the moment it is in full bloom and looking rather splendid. It is a variety of Japonica called Japanese Quince.



I recently put in a guest appearance at the new delicatessen in Newport and noticed that they had rectangular slabs of quince jelly for sale. As I didn't have a clue what to do with quince jelly, no purchase was made, so I can't tell you how delicious it was!

### **SPRING/SUMMER NIGHT SKY 4.**

The summer triangle now dominates the evening skies as we approach the longest day where the sky will never get truly dark due to our northern latitude. The stars Altair, Deneb and Vega make up this asterism (a cluster of stars) and in June it will be seen overhead as they will be the first stars to appear in the twilight.

The planets of Jupiter and Saturn now rise in the morning so unless you are up at dawn you are unlikely to see them. The Moon of course will still be there going through its phases and is a fascinating object to view through binoculars.

### **Noctilucent Clouds.**

With the absence of obvious celestial objects to see at the moment another feature to look out for are the night-time high level glowing clouds known as noctilucent clouds or if you were

to observe them from the space station, Polar Mesospheric Clouds. These high-level clouds made up of ice crystals and dust particles and form in the 80 plus km region of the mesopause. They can eerily reflect the light from the sun and appear to glow in the dark. Cirrus in shape their colour can vary from silver to blue and even red. Some scientists believe that the dust particles in that high region could well be meteoric in origin and therefore these are out of this world clouds!



Noctilucent clouds over Drumoig 2021.

**JWST (James Webb Space Telescope).** At the end of some 4 months of deployment and calibration which so far have lived up to and exceeded expectation – the world now awaits the first images from this long-awaited telescope. It is focused, aligned with the final calibration checks under-way. Soon it will be able to look back further in time than anything we have seen so far – to the big bang some 13.4ish billion years ago. Perhaps by the time you are reading this the first image will be out!

Steve Norrie also sent these lovely photos:



Ducks.



Pigeon bathing.



Bluetits.

### **THE BUILDING DEVELOPMENT**

The Kirkwood Homes development is coming along apace with 5 houses having been roofed at the time of writing. There are also signs of activity at the smaller site near the driving range.



I'm sure you enjoyed Alec Burden's drone shots in the last newsletter so here are a few more of Comerton Place and Forgan Drive – can you spot your house?



Forgan Drive



Comerton Place with pig farm in the background



### **THE DRA WILDLIFE CAMERA.**

Christine Edwards tells me that she has a wildlife camera in her care which she thinks belongs to DRA. As you probably know Christine and Paul Edwards have done a great job over the years providing birdboxes in the wooded areas around Drumoig and also documenting the wildlife with remote cameras. Their videos can be viewed on the DRA website and show interesting nocturnal pictures of foxes, badgers and deer etc.

If anyone is interested in taking over the camera for a period, please let me know and I'm sure Christine &/or Paul will go through the technicalities.

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As always, 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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