



BIODIVERSITY NEWS

Welcome

This is the first issue of *Highland Biodiversity News*, the newsletter for biodiversity in the North. Like its predecessor, the 'Newsheet of the Highland Biodiversity Partnership', this short paper aims to provide a summary of what's happening with regard to biodiversity across the Highlands.

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Introduction

Biodiversity or 'biological diversity' is a relatively new approach that, although linked to traditional approaches to nature conservation, presents a more inclusive approach that focuses on sustainable and wise use of resources rather than designated sites and protection of rare species.

As a region, Highland is extremely important for biodiversity. From the high mountain tops to the deep muddy basins of the West Coast sea lochs, we have a tremendous variety of habitats and richness of species that is unequalled anywhere else in the country. Highland supports 192 of the 238 priority Scottish species and 40 of the 42 priority Scottish habitats identified in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

This presents us with a somewhat daunting responsibility, and the Highland Biodiversity Project represents the first step towards an integrated approach to the management of biodiversity in the area.

Highland Biodiversity Project

Co-ordinated action for biodiversity in the Highlands is underway in earnest with the initiation of the new Highland Biodiversity Project.

The project will support biodiversity works over the next two years. It is funded by The Highland Council, Scottish Natural Heritage, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise and RSPB Scotland, with match funding from the Highlands & Islands Special Transitional Programme.

Janet Bromham has been appointed as the project officer responsible for overseeing the project.



Janet Bromham, Highland Biodiversity Officer

Janet is a farmer's daughter from Watten in Caithness, and has worked for Scottish Natural Heritage, RSPB and the Cairngorms Partnership in the past. She is a keen scuba diver, and has a strong interest in developing opportunities to integrate conservation ideas with ongoing land and marine management.

Aims & Objectives:

The project aims to raise awareness, and identify and initiate priority actions for biodiversity across the Highlands, through an action planning process strongly influenced by local people.

Anticipated Outputs:

Through the project, six Local Biodiversity Action Plans will be produced. These will summarise the distribution of priority species and habitats, and together they will provide a strategic framework for delivering action for biodiversity work in the Highlands.

A key element of the project is also to raise awareness to local audiences as well as visitors. As part of this initiative, a number of events will be held to equip interested groups with environmental skills and

knowledge. There will also be a series of leaflets and a website.

On a more practical level, the project will support 12 community-led projects through an implementation scheme that will result in tangible benefits for biodiversity such as grassland management, woodland coppicing or wetland creation.

For those working in the marine and coastal environment, we will run an annual innovation award for projects that demonstrate new approaches to sustainable resource use.

Lastly, the project will commission a survey of the management and condition of hay meadows in Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber.

Timetable for Action:

In the first year, the development of the local plans, the awareness-raising events and the community-led practical projects will form the focus of the project.

Whilst no one area takes priority, Highland Region has been split up into eight areas, and the timetable for local delivery is outlined below.

• Caithness	May - October 2002
• Sutherland	June - November 2002
• Skye & Lochalsh	July - December 2002
• Easter Ross	November - April 2003
• Wester Ross	December - May 2003
• Lochaber	January - June 2003

The Badenoch & Strathspey and Inverness & Nairn plans are being developed by other initiatives, and updates of these two projects can be found below.

Update from the Cairngorms

The Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan was the first in the Highlands to get underway, and is progressing well.

A biodiversity audit was published in 1999, and a set of draft habitat action plans was produced for consultation last October. These highlighted the scope for taking forward action for biodiversity in the Cairngorms.

A number of practical projects have already been carried out, including very popular and successful work to boost the fortunes of farmland birds by traditional methods of giving them access to grain in winter.

Other projects completed through the Cairngorms Biodiversity Project include work on pearl mussels, aspen and capercaillie, and the project officer has inputted to larger initiatives such as demonstration moors, wildlife tourism, local biodiversity audits, interpretation projects and guidance notes.

Thoughts are now turning to implementation. The Cairngorms Biodiversity Officer is working with Highland and Aberdeenshire Councils, RSPB Scotland and others to produce a series of 'Partner Delivery Plans'. These plans will set out how the Cairngorms LBAP will be put into practice.

It is intended that these first delivery plans will be launched with the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan in August. Anyone wishing to find out more should contact Peter Cosgrove on Telephone: 01479 873630 or E-mail:

peter.cosgrove@cairngorms.prestel.co.uk.

Biodiversity Action in Inverness & Nairn

A first step in the biodiversity action planning process has been taken in Inverness and Nairn, with the production of a Community Biodiversity Action Plan.



The plan is a short, readable leaflet, produced by 'Outreach' consultants following an extensive local consultation process involving schools, businesses, community groups, agencies and voluntary organisations.

The emphasis is on local actions, and the leaflet lists the habitats and species that were found to be important to local people, and suggests a number of actions that could be undertaken to help them.

Once it has been agreed, a number of practical initiatives will get underway to help deliver the plan. Initial ideas for delivery include a 'wild bird cover' project involving 10 farmers on set-aside land, and a 'gardening for wildlife' project for the budding gardeners in the area.

The Partnership for Rural Inverness & Nairn is currently overseeing consultation on the draft plan, and hopes to finalise it this summer.

PRIN also operates a small environmental grant scheme to support community-led biodiversity projects in the area. For further details of this or a copy of the draft plan, contact Nicole Wallace on Telephone: 01463 713504 or E-mail:

n.wallace@hient.co.uk.

Rural Stewardship Scheme

Scotland's principal agri-environment scheme, the Rural Stewardship Scheme is now in its second year of operation. It replaced the Environmentally

Sensitive Area and Countryside Premium Schemes, although farmers and crofters in existing agreements do have the opportunity to continue to the end of their term, and then apply to join the RSS.

The scheme was designed to encourage farmers, crofters and common grazings committees to adopt environmentally friendly practices, and it has a strong focus on biodiversity. Funding is tight, and a ranking system incorporating a list of 30 nationally or locally important habitats and species has been used to help select successful applicants.

Update on 2001/02 Round:

Fears were expressed that many applicants would lose out in the last bidding round. However, some last minute changes were made by the scheme administrators and the majority of smaller applicants did manage to get into the scheme, albeit with a reduced capital expenditure.

In Highland, 87 farmers and crofters entered the scheme in 2001. 104 applications have been received under the 2002 bidding round, which closed at the end of March, and the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department plan to announce the results in early summer.

SEERAD is currently consulting on proposals for improvements to the operation of agri-environment schemes in the short term. Copies of the consultation paper are available from your local office, and the closing date for comments is 10th June.

The Revised Lists of 30 Habitats & Species:

Biodiversity Partnerships across Scotland submitted lists of 30 habitats and species that were seen as priorities for management. Because of its size, three lists have been accepted in Highland: East Highland, West Highland and Cairngorms, covering Badenoch & Strathspey.

Earlier this year, the Biodiversity Partnerships were asked to revise the lists. Thank you to all who inputted to this revision. Contact your local SEERAD office for further information on the scheme and a copy of the new lists for 2002/03.



There's something about squirrels...

The Highland Red Squirrel Group is here!

On 5th September 2001, the Forestry Commission hosted a very successful conference to promote ways

of helping red squirrels across the Highlands. Following the conference, 105 people expressed an interest in helping to record and conserve red squirrels, and the Highland Red Squirrel Group was born.

A steering group has been set up to develop the suggestions from the conference and involve as many people as possible. The group comprises Kenny Taylor, Paul Gallagher (Scottish Wildlife Trust), Ian Collier (Forestry Commission), Katy Stirling (Highland Council Ranger Service) and Malcolm Wield (Forest Enterprise).

Work has started on trying to co-ordinate squirrel sightings throughout the area. We hope people will continue to send in their squirrel sightings because it is vital to get a good picture of squirrel hotspots across the Highlands, every record is valuable.

The group also aims to watch out for grey squirrels coming into the area, promote good woodland management for reds, and implement a red squirrel trail around Loch Ness. It is currently looking for funding to create a 'squirrel officer' job to co ordinate this work full time.

What can you do? Pick up a squirrel survey form, fill it in and return it to us. Forms and more information are available from Ian Collier on Telephone: 01349 862144 or E-mail: Ian.Collier@forestry.gov.uk.



Highland Wild Encounters

The Highland Council Ranger Service is organising a week of unique opportunities to observe wildlife in the northern Highlands.

The week covers everything from wildlife walks of varying grades to cycles, boat trips, car tours and illustrated talks. Early morning walks include opportunities to visit a black grouse lek, hear the dawn chorus on peatland and woodland sites, and watch otters amongst the spectacular scenery of North West Sutherland.

Other events include boat trips to visit seabird colonies on Handa, Stroma and Duncansby, a car tour to visit the best sites for red-throated, black-throated and great northern divers, and a chance to explore a river habitat in Wester Ross with staff from the Wester Ross Fisheries Trust.

If rare plants are your passion, you can discover the distinctive flora inhabiting the sand dunes and coastal

heaths at Dunnet, Dornoch, Invernaver, Inchnadamph and Durness. For the more adventurous among us, there's the opportunity to explore the mountain kingdom of the ptarmigan on Beinn Eighe.

The week runs from Saturday 25th May to Sunday 2nd June 2002. For a programme and details of these and other forthcoming ranger-led events in Caithness & Sutherland, contact Mary Legg or Paul Castle on Telephone: 01847 821531 (afternoons) or E-mail: mary.legg@highland.gov.uk.

Wild Caithness

A new website was launched on 16th April to provide information on the wildlife of Caithness. www.wildcaithness.org gives details on the area: where to go, what to see, who to go with, where to stay and other information for visitors to the area and local people with an interest in their natural environment.



Calling all Budding Biologists...

Members of the Highland Biological Recording Group have a number of atlas projects, surveys and requests for information ongoing, listed below.

Atlas:

- Mammals, Bumble bees, Oak galls

Projects:

- Beach combing, Scots pine galls, Vapourer moth, Freshwater fish, Alder habitat, Winter galls, Butterflies

Requests for information:

- White heathers, Are there Muntjac deer in the Highlands?, Conopid flies, Bracken spores, The alga *Trentepohlia aurea*, Phenology as an indicator of climate change, House moths, Beeflies, Robin's pincushion galls, Pine martin deaths

The basic information required is: **date**, **place** (if possible use a name from a 1:50,000 or 1:25,000 OS map), **grid reference**, and **species**.

In addition to recording, the Group also organises field trips and events throughout the Summer. If you would like to submit any records, or find out more about the Highland Biological Recording Group, please contact the Chairman, David McAllister on E-mail: HBioRG@aol.com.

Other Surveys planned for 2002

We have produced a list of research and survey work to be undertaken across the Highlands by Scottish Natural Heritage and others. The following gives a flavour of the activities planned for the year ahead.

Catchment Management Plans are being undertaken on the Rivers Carron and Spey. The Loch Maree Complex is undergoing a habitat survey, and similar surveys and assessments are taking place on Ben Nevis, Coille Mhor, Glen Coe and Rigg to Bile.

In the Upper Kerry catchment, the effects of Rhododendron control to help freshwater pearl mussels are being monitored.

A nation-wide survey is taking place on hen harriers, looking at habitat use and range management.

SNH is undertaking a review of stocking levels recommended for semi-natural lowland grasslands.

A badger survey is being undertaken around the outskirts of Inverness to help zone areas for development in the local plan.

For further information and a more comprehensive list of forthcoming survey work to be undertaken in the Highlands, contact Andy Dorin on Telephone: 01463 723100 or E-mail: andy.dorin@snh.gov.uk.

LIFE Peatlands Project

In Caithness and Sutherland, the second year of the LIFE Peatlands Project is now underway. The four-year project aims to restore and enhance some of the areas of damaged blanket bog, through a programme of forestry clearance and drain blocking.

Contact Neil Wilkie, LIFE Peatlands Project Manager for details on the project at telephone: 01408 634150 or e-mail: lifep@rspb.org.uk.

And Finally...

If you are interested in the Highland Biodiversity Project or any of the articles featured in this edition of *Highland Biodiversity News*, please contact:

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