

Highland

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BIODIVERSITY NEWS

Welcome

Welcome to this special issue of *Highland Biodiversity News*, focusing on the results of the Highland BAP Implementation Programme.

Introduction

Biodiversity or 'biological diversity' is a relatively new term that, although linked to traditional approaches to nature conservation, presents a more inclusive opportunity for action 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 holds at least 42% (>160 species) of the high priority species listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which makes Highland the most important place in the UK for threatened, rare and declining biodiversity.

The Highland Biodiversity Partnership was set up to provide guidance and support to an existing network of local biodiversity groups, and to make progress on the key strategic biodiversity issues in the Highlands. In addition, a wider Highland Biodiversity Forum meets annually to hear about progress and provide feedback to the Partnership.

More information on biodiversity
in the Highlands is available at
www.highlandbiodiversity.com

Highland BAP Implementation Programme

The Highland Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Implementation Programme ran from August 2004 to March 2007, with sponsorship from Scottish Natural Heritage, Highland Council and the North Highland and WHELK Leader+ Programmes. It allocated over £90,000 to 37 community-led biodiversity projects that helped deliver Highland's seven Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

Badenoch & Strathspey forms part of the Cairngorms Biodiversity Action Plan, and as such is covered by the Cairngorms National Park's Biodiversity Grant Scheme.

Although the Highland BAP Implementation Programme has ended, we have submitted an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a further 3 years of funding for local projects totalling £100,000. We hope to hear about the result of our application in June. We are also looking at other possible funding streams and we will report back on these in the next Newsletter.



Pond dipping, Caithness

Funding action at the local level that involves a wide variety of people is a key part of conserving and restoring Highland's biodiversity.

Project Summary

Caithness

❖ Water Vole Survey

34 locations were surveyed using standard methodology based on field signs. The results showed that Water Voles are widely distributed in Caithness, and the highest numbers of occupied sites are in peatland. The project raised awareness through meetings, survey work and a Water Vole Evening. Three members of the Caithness Biodiversity Group received training in identifying Water Vole field signs, which will enable future surveys to take place.

❖ Habitat Enhancements

12 Barn Owl boxes were constructed and put up with help from local school children and volunteers. A Sand Martin nesting barrel was erected at St John's pool, which has public access and a bird hide. Wildflower seed was collected and grown on in a local nursery. The plants were planted out in the dunes by volunteers to increase population of the food plant (Kidney Vetch) of the rare Small Blue Butterfly.

❖ Dunnet Forest Wetland Creation

A ditch was dammed at the edge of Dunnet Forest to create a wetland habitat. This was to increase the diversity of habitats in the forest and allow wetland plant and animal species to colonise the area.

❖ Pine Marten & Water Rail Taxidermy

A Pine Marten and a Water Rail were stuffed and mounted for use as an educational resource for school visits and community events. This provides an opportunity for local people to get a close look at two animals that are difficult to see in the wild.

❖ Lichen Training event

Over two days 20 people came along and learned how to identify and record lichens. All who attended learned a great deal about lichens and how they function, and one new species for Caithness was recorded over the weekend.

❖ Lichen Monitoring at Dunbeath Strath

Dunbeath Strath has a large population of Tree Lungwort lichen on the Hazel trees, which are rare in Caithness. This event set up a monitoring project for the Tree Lungwort and the Hazel. The training looked at how to identify and record the Tree Lungwort and how to monitor the Hazel trees it grew on. This long term community monitoring has not been done before for lichens in Scotland.

❖ Awareness Raising

An evening of three talks about projects that the Caithness Biodiversity Group had run was held in the Environmental Research Institute in Thurso. It was an opportunity for people not involved in the group to make suggestions for new projects and get answers to any biodiversity related questions they may have had. 40 people attended this evening.

❖ Caithness Biodiversity Group Equipment

Equipment for site survey was purchased along with four bat detectors to be used by volunteers for bat surveying.

Inverness and Nairn

❖ Biological Training and Recording

Over a period of 18 months, Boleskine Environmental Network ran 14 full day tutorials on a variety of topics, attracting an audience of 35 people. Recording equipment and identification guides were also purchased.

From the project a moth recording group is now in existence and trapping moths regularly, there is an annual breeding wader survey of the area, surveying for the Highland Red Squirrel Project is underway and individuals are contributing to other local and national recording schemes.

❖ Aspen Enhancement and Interpretation

Trees for Life and Abriachan Community Woodland worked in partnership to plant up an enclosure of Aspen trees. The planting and root collection was done by 20 pupils from Glenurquhart High School. The root cuttings will be used to propagate new saplings for further planting. An Aspen interpretation board was sited beside the enclosure.



Bat walk by the River Ness last Summer

❖ Inverness Bat Group Recording Equipment

The grant helped the Inverness Bat Group to buy recording equipment, mainly bat detectors, for survey work and public events. Last year, nine public events were held by the Bat Group and the Inverness and Nairn Rangers, which were attended by almost 200 people.

❖ Scrub Woodland at Ardersier

Four enclosures on Ardersier Common were planted with native trees by the Junior Ardersier and Petty Environmental Society (JAPES) and a Highland Council Ranger. The planting event was attended by 9 children and 5 adults, and has increased the diversity of native trees on the Common.

Lochaber

❖ Clunes Forest School

This formerly disused Forestry Commission office has been refitted and kitted out with identification equipment to transform it into a forest classroom. Outside, a butterfly garden, community composting site, tree nursery and willow coppice have been created. A community group has been set up to manage the facility and the classroom is used by walkers on the Great Glen Way, schools, rangers and workshop leaders. The project also attracted funding from Forestry Commission Scotland, SNH and the Community Economic Development fund. Forestry Commission own and maintain the site.

❖ Lochaber Food Link

This project looked to link a product sold locally to the management of the land it was grown on. 12 farms were involved in the project, a farm biodiversity action plan was prepared and enacted and

a labelling scheme was developed to identify that farm's product as being "biodiversity-friendly". Promotional leaflets were also used at the point of sale to explain what the labelling scheme was about. The project raised awareness of biodiversity, land management and the role of customer choice amongst both producers and consumers.

Ross and Cromarty

❖ **Easter Ross Cornfield Project**

This two year project run by Highland FWAG (Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group) looked to raise awareness of locally rare and threatened arable weeds (cornfield annuals) like Cornflower or Corn Marigold. The planting of these areas would also benefit birds, insects and mammals in summer and winter. Nine sites including one school planted up areas of Wild Oats and cornfield annuals. Most of the land planted was set-aside. All sites were chosen to be visible to the public, close to roads, paths and townships.



Wild flower border, Easter Ross

The project areas produced an eye-catching display of colour over the summer. Participating farmers were all delighted with the results and many received positive comments from the neighbouring farmers and the general public. 5 talks on wintering birds of the cornfields were given to local schools and 2 farm walks were run annually by FWAG on these demonstration sites.

❖ **Arable Weeds and Biodiversity Seminar**

In February 2007, the Scottish Agricultural College held an event to report on the Highland Cornflower Project and the Easter Ross Cornfield Annuals Project. The seminar was attended by 25 farmers, advisors and interested individuals. Lessons learned from the two projects were discussed, although funding for such management is still a stumbling block to delivery. The issue still has a high profile locally, and it is hoped that the new Land Management Contracts will address some of the funding shortfalls. A new discussion group on Arable Weeds has been set up to look at this issue from a national perspective.

❖ **Easter Ross Grey Partridge Project**

The Easter Ross Grey Partridge Group involves 12 farmers who are looking to take forward Grey Partridge conservation measures on their land. A seminar was run in February 2007 looking at low-cost, landscape-scale options for improving habitat for Grey Partridge.

Skye and Lochalsh

❖ **Biodiversity of Buildings**

This project, run by RSPB and Highland Council Ranger Service, started with a survey of over 1000 people and all the Primary Schools in the area, asking about biodiversity (mainly birds) using their buildings. 321 people responded to the questionnaire and received general information on birds and buildings. 50 bird boxes have been built and will be put up on some of the respondents' buildings.

In the second year, 94 buildings were re-surveyed. This found that over half of the buildings were proposed to be altered or demolished. If this is representative of the whole of Skye and Lochalsh then this activity could have a major impact on birds using such buildings. The final report concluded that the provision of advice, nest boxes and platforms would help to address the loss of nesting habitat locally.

❖ **Wildlife Watching Leaflet**

The Highland Council Ranger Service and Skye and Lochalsh Environmental Forum produced 10,000 copies of "Wildlife: A guide to finding wildlife in Skye and Lochalsh". This leaflet highlights the wildlife watching opportunities in the area and gives tips on biodiversity, wildlife watching, eagles and wildlife on the web.

❖ **Loch Cluanie Diver Rafts**

The RSPB and local volunteers built and sited two floating nesting platforms in Loch Cluanie for Black-throated Divers. Black-throated Divers do breed on this loch, but productivity is low because of the large-scale fluctuations in water levels caused by hydro-electric generation. Floating nest platforms have been used elsewhere in Highland with great success and it was felt that that they would be successful here. The rafts were sited at each end of the loch, and will be monitored by the RSPB and volunteers to see how successful they are.

Sutherland

❖ **What Lives in Our Seas?**

This project was run by the Highland Council Ranger Service in conjunction with three local Primary Schools. Melvich Primary looked at the resources that are harvested from the marine and coastal environment, and produced a DVD of their project. In Lochinver and Stoer, primary children led their parents on a coastal guided walk and created a "What

lives in our sea” mural in Lochinver Village Hall. A week long arts project was run in Helmsdale where the children created models of rockpool life, and turned them into large jigsaws which are currently in Helmsdale Primary School.



Eilidh and limpet glue

❖ Village Wildlife Audits

In 2005 & 2006, people in Scourie and Rogart carried out comprehensive surveys of their local biodiversity, which have been collated into two informative booklets. Over 100 people were involved in the surveys and events, and the communities were visited by wildlife experts to survey the more difficult species and taxa. All this work has produced many new species records, raised the profile of local wildlife, and hopefully encouraged future surveys from local and visiting naturalists.

Wester Ross

❖ River Carron Biodiversity Audit

This project looked in detail at the biodiversity of the aquatic ecosystem, particularly the fish species, the habitat adjacent to the river and the outcome of the restocking of native Atlantic Salmon and Sea Trout populations. The report concluded that the River Carron has the highest diversity of native freshwater fish species of any river system in Northwest Scotland. It is intended to monitor the river from now on, using this Audit as a baseline.

❖ ROV Dive Day

A Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) submersible vehicle was hired and used to provide real-time underwater footage at the Ullapool Fish Festival and an event in Dundonnell. Over 110 people saw the underwater footage on a big screen inside a coach. This project opened a window into the invisible underwater environment, and a DVD of underwater footage was produced.

❖ Loch Maree Fish Project

This project was run by the Wester Ross Fisheries Trust, who undertook a comprehensive survey of Loch Maree and other waterbodies in its catchment to

explore methods of assessing the distribution of small fish species in shallow waters. A field trip was held to raise awareness of the project, and an open day was held at the Loch Maree hotel looking at the different fishes of Loch Maree and how to catch and study them. The final report noted the species found and made recommendations for future work.

❖ Life in the Lochans

This project worked closely with Gairloch and Laide Primary Schools, looking at the rich diversity of plants and animals that live in and around the lochs of the area. The children developed survey techniques and tried them out on site visits. They also collected a variety of aquatic life to identify, study and find out about. Two open days were run for the general public along with the school events.

Highland-wide (projects involving 2 or more LBAP areas)

❖ Highland Cornflower Project

Cornflower is an archeophyte, a plant brought to Britain by man thousands of years ago. It persists on some Highland farms but its distribution was not well known. This SAC run project looked to identify the location of Cornflowers in Highland. 300 fliers were distributed and seven farms responded. Five farmers received advice and information on maintaining their Cornflowers. The farmers contacted were generally keen to maintain their Cornflowers provided their main crop was not excessively compromised or that they received compensation for their lost part of the crop. Seed collection was attempted, with some success.

❖ Highland Bumblebee Atlas

This Atlas brought together information from over 16 years of recording, not just on the distribution of species but also the ecology of them. Several species in Highland are of local and national conservation importance. The publication of the Atlas led to the authors being invited to speak to a wide range of local groups, encouraging the recording of bumblebees and raising the awareness of them.

❖ Highland Red Squirrel Refuge Project

The HBAPIP part-funded this project, which is led by the Forestry Commission and the Highland Red Squirrel Group. The project officer recruited and trained 75 volunteer Red Squirrel surveyors to survey key woodlands identified in Highland. The distribution and abundance information will form a baseline from which to compare and changes in Red Squirrel population and distribution as well as identifying any incursion of Grey Squirrels to the area. Awareness raising has taken the form of talks to groups, school visits and articles to the local press. Over 450 people attended the various events run in 2006.

❖ Highland Environmental Network Conference

This conference took place at Kirkhill Primary School and brought together nearly 140 people from all over Highland to learn more about the potential of school and community greenspace for habitat enhancement. As well as presentations and workshops there was a practical event that created three raised beds, sowed a wildflower meadow, planted willow fences and structures, set up a wormery and built a tepee.

❖ Orkney Recorders Seminar

The grant covered the travel and subsistence of 11 voluntary biological recorders to attend a Recording Seminar in Orkney. Four of those attending gave talks on projects that they have been involved with: the Highland Bumblebee Atlas, Great Yellow Bumblebee Project, Village Wildlife Audits and Water Voles in Caithness. It was a rare opportunity for the two recording communities to meet and discuss common issues and species on either side of the Pentland Firth. It is hoped to follow up this seminar with a reciprocal event in Highland in 2007.



Small Tortoiseshell butterfly

❖ Butterfly Awareness Raising Project

This grant provided a digital camera and collecting equipment for use by the Highland Branch of Butterfly Conservation on its field trips. These field trips were open to members of the public. 6 events were run in 2006, 5 butterfly walks and one moth trapping event. Over 60 people attended these and even if the weather wasn't great on all of them those attending did enjoy themselves. The camera will be used primarily for providing images for articles, talks and their website.

❖ Highland Swift Survey

The Swift is a migratory bird that nests primarily in buildings and is here for only 4 months of the year. This project was hosted by the National Trust for Scotland and delivered by a Project Scotland Volunteer. The Swift survey used local media and a website to get records of Swift sightings all over Highland. This survey was a follow on from the 2005 Cairngorms Swift survey, and over 130 individual records were received.

A conference on Buildings and Biodiversity was held at the culmination of the Swifts project, attracting 65 delegates. It brought together a wide variety of speakers and attendees, and the feedback from the event was very positive.

❖ Spider Training and Recording Event

This project was run by the Highland Biological Recording Group and comprised of a two day, weekend introductory training course for identifying and recording spiders. Eight people attended the weekend training course and hoped to contribute to further spider recording. The tutor, Edward Milner, spent several days in the field and this yielded 123 species records, 17 of which were new records for Ross-shire. This event has done much to promote spider recording in the Highlands.

❖ Fungus Forays in South Skye

The Skye and Lochalsh Scottish Wildlife Trust Members Group organised training to enable participants to identify waxcap fungi found in short sward grassland and Hazel Gloves fungus found in Atlantic Hazelwoods. All these species are restricted in distribution and indicators of high quality habitat.

The project consisted of an illustrated lecture on the above species, three field visits and an identification workshop. The event ran over three days and attracted a total of 42 people. As a result of the field trips three new areas have been identified as important for these species on Skye. It is hoped that the participants use the knowledge gained during this project to identify currently unknown sites where these fungi are present.

❖ Northern Aspen Bank

This project, run by the North Highland Forest Trust, gathered and propagated Aspen cuttings from Caithness and Sutherland to create a bank of local saplings available to be planted locally. Propagation facilities were installed and root cuttings harvested from several sites. Two young people and 12 adult volunteers were trained to do this from five community groups. The cuttings are now being grown on and will provide a community resource of local provenance Aspen.

Contact Details

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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