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TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

NEWSLETTER No. 26

JANUARY 2012

Happy New Year to one and all, let's hope 2012 is a great year for observing wildlife and is enjoyable for everyone. It hasn't got off to the best of starts with the third gale to hit us in a little less than a month. Substantial damage occurred in and around the car parks, tracks and path networks throughout the forest, the boundary areas of Tentsmuir Point and around Morton Lochs resulted in us flexing our muscles and chainsaws!

Amazingly the gale damage didn't stop people from walking, running and cycling as visitors queued up, (safely) patiently waited as we cut up the trees and dragged them off the tracks.

Have you come across our Behavioural & Attitudes Survey forms or been questioned by Eve on the sites? Many of you have and we should have the data prepared quite soon. Perhaps you missed it, well there might be the opportunity during the Spring and Summer months to partake.

The smell of the sea is one of our favourite outdoor smells but what causes it?

Have you been out and about and spotted any of the Time Line features?

Have you observed any of the new species observed on the Reserve or spotted a white-tailed sea eagle?

Thanks very much to the contributors included in this edition, so enjoy these interesting articles. Read on inside.



Bearded Seal Image by kind permission from Sam Gibson

Tom Cunningham
Reserve Manager

THE NEW RESERVE PLAN – WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Over the coming months we will be writing a new Reserve Management Plan for the next six years. Have you got a view and comments to make? We hope to involve everyone who has an interest in the Reserve and we will be looking for your views.

GREENING SCOTLAND

We are working towards a Greener Scotland by improving the natural and built environment and protecting it for present and future generations. Action is being taken to reduce the local and global environmental impact through tackling climate change, moving towards a zero-waste Scotland.

Many thanks to 158 readers who now receive the newsletter on line which all helps to reduce our carbon footprint. I would ask those who can, to request an electronic copy of the Newsletter. Please email me if you are able to receive an electronic copy as this will reduce our paper usage, photocopier use and postage.

TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

TIME LINE TRAIL

Have you come across the features and information panels yet? Many visitors have and the feedback has been excellent. Two features, the tsunami wave and the March stone had close shaves when the gales brought down large pine trees alongside however; thankfully they remain unscathed.

BEHAVIOURAL & ATTITUDES STUDY

We have recently started a study on Tentsmuir Point, to provide quantitative data on current levels and types of visitor behaviour on Tentsmuir National Nature Reserve focusing particularly on behaviour causing or likely to cause disturbance to wildlife. The second aspect of this contract is to collect data on visitors' awareness, understanding and attitudes towards the wildlife of Tentsmuir and its protection.

Over the last decade the reserve has seen a significant increase in recreational use, in response to the increased promotion of the reserve. Associated with this increase in visitor numbers, anecdotal evidence suggests, there has been an increase in levels of disturbance to the wildlife on the reserve and anti-social behaviour such as dog fouling. The most frequent and significant disturbance relates to visitors with dogs causing birds to stop feeding, take flight and move from traditional roosts.

In the case of seals, the presence of dogs may lead to acute anxiety to pups and mothers possibly leading to abandonment and starvation, movement and disturbance from haul out moulting and pupping grounds.

We have attempted to reduce the impact of recreational disturbance through a number of measures; new seasonal behavioural signage, awareness campaigns, newsletters and working with local communities. However, while this may have had some impact, the issues of disturbance are continuing to cause conservation concern with some features of international importance now recorded as being in unfavourable condition with disturbance likely to be one of the contributing factors.

We are now considering further options for visitor management in an attempt to reduce disturbance. However, to date the only evidence of disturbance is based on ad hoc observations from reserve staff and anecdotal reports from other visitors. There is a requirement therefore, to gather some quantitative data on visitor behaviour to allow us to measure the scale of the problem and to provide evidence for making any future management decisions on the NNR. Data is required on what types of activity cause disturbance, how often it occurs and what level of disturbance exists.

Visitor perceptions regarding their effects on wildlife may influence their behaviour on NNRs. Knowledge of visitor perceptions and understanding can help managers communicate and

encourage appropriate behaviour and increase visitor compliance with any management measures. Therefore it is important to gather data as to visitors' understanding of their impacts on wildlife to evaluate the effectiveness of measures undertaken at present and to plan future management. Any future management measures will need to be planned within the context of access legislation which requires responsible behaviour by both those exercising their access rights and those managing the land.

This is phase one of monitoring visitor behaviour and attitudes, the seasonality of the different wildlife interests being affected i.e., to determine impacts upon wintering wildfowl and pupping grey seals. We collected data over a four month period, October to January, recording visitor behaviour, recording in detail any visitor behaviour causing disturbance or likely to cause disturbance to wildlife and a note of the impact of that disturbance.

You may have been asked by Eve Schulte to complete a short questionnaire or picked up one of the self completion forms, many thanks if you have. There is a prize of an exclusive tour of the Isle of May NNR at stake and if you haven't already done so there will be the opportunity later when Phase two will take place over Spring and Summer.

TENTSMUIR POINT

THE DYNAMIC COASTLINE

The winter storms and high tides continue to be dramatic and sculpt the dune edge. Near the south boundary sea fence where the dune systems is well developed and mature a huge chunk was plucked away overnight and just as amazing a week later the sand was dumped back again!

The Abertay sandbar shifts daily and coupled with the storms the seaward side of the south sea fence really took a pounding again and it will be re-built in the Spring by Bob Ritchie and his team.

MANAGEMENT

Three gales in less than a month, who would have believed that? No sooner had Assistant Reserve Manager Alex Easson along with the trusty chainsaw expertise of Forester Graham Paul and I cleared the windblown damaged trees off the car parks, tracks and paths (which involved muscles that hadn't been used that much by yours truly) throughout the forest and the NNR sites than we had to do it again.... and again. I slept well during December and early January. Our regular volunteers, Robert, David, Eve and Kirsten, who assist and carry out brilliant management work also helped during their weekly visits, and their work is gratefully accepted by us.

Due to the gales we also had many boundary fences to repair which have just been recently completed. Shortly our annual management tasks will start again: crow, grey squirrel and mink controls along with the herbicide management throughout the sites.

You might remember in the last Newsletter I mentioned our coastal ecologist Stewart Angus visited Tentsmuir Point. Stewart has a particular interest in sand dune management and deforestation of dune systems. He was impressed and pleased with the management of the site. Stewart provided this feedback:

"Most of the large dune systems of eastern Scotland are 'acid', because the sand is almost all mineral, as opposed to shell fragments. Apart from the dunes of the Grampian coast, most of these systems are succumbing to invasions by scrub and trees, including sea buckthorn, birch and self-sown conifers from neighbouring plantations.

Many land managers now recognise this problem and devote considerable resources to removal of the scrub, notably the Forestry Commission and East Lothian Council, but cutting back the scrub is the easy bit: it is maintaining the cleared area free of scrub that poses the real challenge.

At Tentsmuir, SNH has succeeded in removing 95% of the scrub and conifers from the dune system, and keeping it clear, which probably makes this the most successful project of its type in Scotland. When I visited Tentsmuir at the end of May with Reserve Manager Tom Cunningham and Area Officer Caroline Gallacher, I was immensely impressed with the success of their endeavours. The warm sunshine and the profusion of Small Copper butterflies helped, of course.

Though I was there primarily to look at the scrub clearance, I was possibly even more impressed with the interpretation of this popular reserve. The fascinating history of this site has been vividly told by the Time Line Trail.

The nature of my job is such that I usually visit sites that have problematic issues that require resolution, but here I was able to enjoy the tour and take great pleasure in seeing a challenging job brilliantly handled. Both site management and interpretation here are superb, and all involved are to be warmly congratulated on their success.

Now, about this remaining 5% scrub”

EDUCATIONAL VISITS

During 2011 to date we have had 33 educational visits from schools, colleges and universities which may look down on last years 38 visits. However, local nursery groups visit Morton Lochs weekly and colleges come in to carry out their own investigations, research and monitoring species on a regular basis which are not included in the figures. All in all the education value of Tentsmuir NNR remains very high.

Students from Universities have carried out many research studies and an increase in students from High Schools have hit on Tentsmuir to carry out site investigations for their Higher and Advance Higher Geography and Biology certificates.

Remember anyone can look at the second edition of the Education Pack on line and use any of the interesting activities. See the front page for the website address.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

Two new species have been recorded recently; a Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus*), was observed on Tentsmuir Point and Sam Gibson snapped it in Tayport Harbour. This same seal has appeared around St Andrews and St Cyrus. The seal is quite a character and recognisable by the long whiskers. Ailsa Hall from the Sea Mammal Research Unit says it is a vagrant as it should really be way up north around the Arctic Ocean.

Other species around at the moment include snow buntings (7), white-tailed sea eagle (3 at times), pinkfoot and greylag geese, eider duck (3000), scaup, common scoter, long-tailed duck, cormorant, dunlin, redshank, curlew, oystercatcher, grey & golden plover, buzzard, kestrel, peregrine, green and great spotted woodpeckers and many other species.

The second new species was discovered by Eve Schulte and Eve kindly provided this article which describes her day:

Winter Reflections on Tentsmuir NNR

“Spending whole days on the reserve at Tentsmuir Point while conducting our visitor survey, allows plenty of time for observation of the ever-changing environment of the foreshore and dunes.

There are the obvious pleasures of seeing a sea eagle majestically soaring above or being harried by cheeky crows, who despite the disparity of size managed to drive the eagle down on top of one of the tank traps, where they perched on either side of it and continued to be utterly annoying. There is the pleasure of discovery that not all grey seals are actually grey, but that there is one individual with an amber coloured coat that glows in the sunshine like a precious gem speckled with black.

But time and solitude will also allow the observer to look beyond the obvious to the smaller and at first glance less spectacular creatures that can be found at Tentsmuir.

An example is the Sea Mouse (*Aprhrodite aculeata*) I found washed up on the beach after the very stormy high tides in November. This scale worm is normally found living at the bottom of the ocean where it camouflages itself from predators by moving along just below the sandy seabed and preys on other worms by sucking them out of the sand.



As unremarkable as this specimen looked you can imagine my amazement when I placed it back into the water and the bristles along its side lit up in all the colours of the rainbow. This is a warning mechanism the worm has to make predators think that it is poisonous and it instantly transformed it from something drab and dull into quite a thing of beauty.

Another lesson not to dismiss the little things nature presents us with, as they will often reveal the most amazing secrets.”

DID YOU KNOW

The smell of the sea that we all like is caused by bacteria feeding on the plankton and the bacteria “fart” which gives off a gas and it is this that gives us the seaside ozone. (As quoted and demonstrated on BBC Coast programme.)

You may have seen dozens of ladybirds grouped together in a sheltered spot in the bark of a tree for instance but what is a group of ladybirds called? A Loveliness. Sums them up perfectly.

MORTON LOCHS

MANAGEMENT

To make your walk safer we installed hundreds of gripper strips on the access boardwalks to the Berry and Christie bird hides. Shortly contractors we will replacing the short boardwalk at the Railway bird hide which has rotted in several places with a sustainable recycled plastic boardwalk which will last a life time. Another use for recycled plastic.

As mentioned before we have cleared the footpaths and car park of the fallen trees, THREE times! Don't your arm muscles ache at the thought of rolling huge trunks and dragging branches for days on end?

And of course many trees fall onto the fences, once again these boundary fences have been repaired throughout the site. Off the tracks, a specialist tree surgeon will shortly commence work on some of the more tangled mess of fallen trees on the Reserve.

Sadly the green engineering project on the west loch outflow ditch did not survive the pounding of the inquisitive cattle's hooves as they walked all over the banks to drink the water.

Contractor David Mackie will start the herbicide treatment of target species throughout the site including bracken and phragmites on the lochs during the summer months.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

Success! The mute swan pair successfully reared eight cygnets this season and they are all still on the north loch. Occasionally the ten swans fly down to the River Tay and feed when

the lochs have been frozen over. Teal numbers (550) have increased this year again with these timid birds preferring the quieter areas of the Reserve.

The otter has been observed on numerous occasions along with red squirrels and the kingfishers have been seen regularly but you've got to be quick to spot them. Smew, little grebe, heron, mallard, white-tailed sea eagle, gadwall are among the regular sightings on the lochs.

Sophie Eastwood, the Red Squirrel Project Officer for FCCT, kindly provided the following article, and this reflects on the highly successful grey squirrel management we have carried out over the last five years:

"The Fife Red Squirrel Group was established in 2006 to address the need for a co-ordinated approach to red squirrel conservation in Fife. The first phase of the project centred around two pilot forests; Devilla and Ladybank.

Sophie Eastwood embarked on the next stage of the Fife Red Squirrel Project at the start of April 2011. The second phase of the project will continue to be delivered by the Fife Coast & Countryside Trust. It is a community-based project spanning three years and is now Fife-wide, with a focus on the nine key woodland sites for red squirrels listed in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

The aim is still to promote red squirrel conservation within the Kingdom of Fife, by raising the profile of red squirrels and red squirrel conservation; surveying and monitoring of red and grey squirrel populations; working with schools to teach young people about red squirrels; providing habitat management advice to landowners; planting trees to create new habitat and reduce woodland fragmentation; and advocating targeted and responsible control of grey squirrels.

One of these key red squirrel sites is Tentsmuir Forest! Luckily Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission have already made significant progress with red squirrel conservation work on this site. Grey squirrel control and squirrel surveys (conducted by Elmwood College) have been going on for a number of years. The Fife Red Squirrel Group is also hoping to have their next Red Squirrel Fun Day at Tentsmuir... we look forward to seeing you there!

To find out more about the project visit <http://www.fiferedsquirrels.co.uk/> or contact Sophie.

VOLUNTEERS & VISITORS

The volunteers at Tentsmuir NNR (as you well know by now) are a superb group of people, without them we couldn't possibly carry out the entire species recording, management tasks and many other projects.

Visitor Lesley Fairweather along with her SWT group provided this article after the grand tour of the NNR last June:

"An SWT volunteer group from the Lothians arrived at Kinshaldy car park on an overcast but dry day. Neville and Kevin, who had arrived early, were lucky enough to see 9 Crossbills flying over and to hear the Green woodpecker yaffling. Tom Cunningham, the Reserve manager, met us and took us to the Ice house where he filled in the geological and historical background to the national nature reserve.

On the way to Tentsmuir Point we looked in the Birchwood area for the Coralroot orchid, 7 plants of which had been located earlier – for those not fortunate to see it a Springwatch showing of it the following evening allowed many of us to appreciate its beauty. 3 moths were seen, light emerald, common white wave and clouded border along with the eyed ladybird.

As we walked along the sand 5 Red throated Divers flew past and about 150 Gannets were seen diving and fishing behind a string of 50 Grey seals sharing a sand bank with several Grey plover, one of which was in full breeding plumage.

Returning to the picnic area meant passing several Ringed plovers so care was taken not to disturb their nesting area. Neville had photographed tree pipits, finding them as a result of floating moth wings drifting down from the upper branches of a couple of isolated trees in the dune system. Lunch was relaxed looking at photographs of Cinnabar moths between eating our sandwiches.

Tom kindly guided us to Morton Lochs where we spent a good couple of hours looking at the wild-life. Five nesting pairs of Little Grebes were seen, nesting or resting in the pink Amphibious Bistort. A pair of mute swans sailed forth with eight cygnets making a long straight line and mallard, Canada geese, gadwall, herons and moorhens were seen in different parts of the lochs, observed from the many hides. A sedge warbler serenaded us from an island of reeds and with blackcap, garden warbler, chiffchaff and willow warbler singing in the woodland, our ears were well tested!

Several damsel flies, male and female were seen in the sheltered area beside the railway hide and found to be Azure damsel flies *coenagrion puella*. The lack of sun meant the butterflies were keeping a low profile though a small copper was spotted. All in all it was a great day out."

Scope for Thought

Bill Alexander who carries out the bird survey on the north section of Tentsmuir Point every month provided a fascinating story about his telescope & tripod:

This little article started with a remark to Tom Cunningham, "This telescope has been to the North and South Poles and twice round the world, it has spotted over four thousand species, but unfortunately not in my hands."

The scope belonged to Ann Barker an American audiologist who was president of the Iowa Ornithologist's Union, an authority on North American birds and a little bit more unusual an American who was also an authority on British birds. Ann had a great love for Islay and all things Scottish, her beautiful singing would fill the Round Church with a spiritual warmth.

Every opportunity she had to visit these shores would be taken and I would simply get a phone call from her, Islay on such and such a date the flights are booked. On Islay Ann would take great delight in assisting Dr Malcolm Ogilvie, one of the world's leading authorities on wildfowl, with some of his non-web footed projects such as his work with Hen Harrier and Barn Owl.

Ann was what some may term a rarity, a soft spoken American, who would not hesitate to question any statement from the resident hide "Johnny Expert". You all know him, bristling with optics, a bit loud, statements such as "Look over there everyone that is a first winter female Little Ringed Plover. So Ann would ask "Why is it a Little Ringed Plover? "Errrr Err" says Johnny Expert "I believe there is a Purple Gallinule visible from the next hide, I'd better go!"

Ann passed away after fighting breast cancer for several years. She left me two wonderful gifts, the courage to ask questions, and her telescope which helped me greatly while working with birds in several countries. Take a leaf from Ann's book, increase your bird knowledge, and ask those questions!

WHAT'S ON

The Family Day Out 'Tentsmuir Through Time' last July was a great success. Even after a drizzly start and bit more rain I thought the visitors especially the kids would be put off... not a bit of it. Fortunately we had mainly dry spells with sunshine however, if anything it drove them on, enthusiastically trying out all the activities we set up for everyone. Look out for info for this years Family Day event in the next edition in June 2012.

IRRESPONSIBLE VISITORS

Fife Council in conjunction with the Police has launched a new initiative to catch irresponsible dog owners and posters and cards have been distributed in all the towns and villages. Basically anyone can contact them on 08451 550022 and provide information leading to the identification of the dog owner. Let's hope we can help catch the culprits.

UPDATE: This morning I picked up two poo bags left once again at Morton Lochs car park along with several soiled nappies! What do these people think they are doing?

BIG THANKS

Many thanks to all who contribute to the Newsletter and the valuable data collected for our flora and fauna records and to the local newspapers for articles. Finally, a very BIG personal **Thank You** to all my SNH colleagues, Alex the Reserve staff, Forester Graham Paul, honorary wardens, volunteers and visitors who put in a lot of time and effort, provide wonderful information, wildlife data and images without which we would not produce such great results.

Enjoy your visits to all the sites in the Reserve. Take away only memories and images and leave behind only your footprints.

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PS After the ecstasy and then bitter disappointment of last season its almost nothing but heartache and no amount of moans from yours truly, aye life with the mighty Raith Rovers is not all about glory! Still with recent new signings maybe its time for another rendition of, after three "Always look on the bright side of life"

Be aware of ticks in the UK countryside and elsewhere in Europe. This is a message from all the responsible environmental organisations in the UK who are aware of the rise in the number of ticks in our countryside. All visitors to our countryside should really examine themselves and check for ticks as soon as you can. If you do happen to have one attached remove it as soon as you can. To guard against ticks: Keep trousers tucked into socks and wear light coloured clothing. Examine your body for ticks in the backs of the knees, groin, under the arms and on the scalp. Dog owners should also check their dogs. Stay safe, be aware.

Useful websites: www.snh.gov.uk, www.nnr-scotland.org.uk and www.tentsmuir.org for information on the Reserve and surrounding area as well as our work in SNH.

Keep up to date on our Facebook page  "Scotland's National Nature Reserves".

Have a look at www.placebookscotland.com and put your own images, stories and poems on this new website, it's yours to use and put all your favourite places on it, including Tentsmuir NNR!