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TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

NEWSLETTER No. 19

JUNE 2008

Welcome to the nineteenth Reserve Newsletter. How time flies! It's been nine years since we started the newsletter and the Reserve sites have changed dramatically in that time and of course the amount of newsletter copies printed out. From an initial print run of 82 for the first newsletter they now peak around 1200. I'm sure the newsletter has been fundamental in increasing the amount of visitors to the sites and helped spread the news beyond the UK. Your feedback is welcome and many of you have done most of it is favourable. Here's hoping you enjoy this one.

What's going on in this edition: This last six months have seen a tremendous amount of management work carried out, mostly unseen, until any moment now! New interpretation structures have been designed, constructed and delivered and they are first class. Interpretation panels have been developed and the first two are in situ in the Morton Lochs bird hides. Fences have been upgraded and repaired and a lot more besides.

Weather so far has been changeable to say the least, one day sunny and warm, the evening temperature plunges and the next days are drier and wet, no change there then! The result, butterflies have been a bit slower in showing up so far, however, orange tips have enjoyed another good year..... read on inside.

It's the annual Family Day event in July, time to think about booking up for "Bugs, Birds and Butterflies", and the new activities we have planned for you all to enjoy.

Oh, and another three new species on the Reserve, read on inside.



Ladies day at Morton Lochs 1906 – Post card kindly provided by Mr & Mrs A Law of Tayport

Tom Cunningham,
Reserve Manager

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TENTSMUIR POINT

Hard to believe now we had a fairly dry winter but typically we soon caught up with the rain which benefits the Reserve and just recently the whole countryside is greening up well. The slacks didn't flood but were wet for a long period. Hopefully we will see the Great Slack in splendid colour with some of our slack specialities, such as the grass of Parnassus, northern marsh orchid, the centaury family, birds foot trefoil and creeping willow all bursting forth.

Cowslips and primroses coloured the southern end of the Reserve in small groups and the site is just really starting to green up well. The lesser twayblade is just in flower and what a beautiful colour it is.

The bird species on Tentsmuir Point have enjoyed a fairly good spring and early summer. Counts reveal numbers of eider (5600), gannets (70), mute swans (69), grey plover (550), golden plover (50), dunlin (340) and sanderling (230). Ringed plover dash about the waters edge and the skylarks fill the air, swallows and swifts swooping devouring hungrily and all are feeding young somewhere.

The new Reserve leaflet has been in demand and so far visitors are enjoying the read and the information. Hopefully, you will be able to find one in the new leaflet dispensers which will be erected over the summer months and you can always stop Alex and me and ask for one.

MANAGEMENT

The continuous hand pulling hundreds of young pine plants, along the Reserve boundary with the adjacent forest is easy in winter and spring as the green pines stand out prominently in the faded yellowing grasses. Local sage, contractor and volunteer Jim Allan just informed me he did the same task as a young lad assisting the Reserve Warden Len Fullerton in the 1950s. Some tasks never change!

We have reconnected the borehole and the water tank by the Great Slack footpath, in preparation for the cattle coming in. The blonde Limousin cattle kindly provided by Robert Lamont & sons of Scotsraig, Tayport will soon be spotted grazing the dune heath. It's been some four years since we had the site grazed so the cattle will benefit from good grazing and we in turn will have the benefits from it they open up the ground in places, prevent ranker grassy swards from developing and also munch happily on some of the tree saplings.

The Icehouse footpath, many of you will have noticed, is now a bit shorter due to the continual erosion in this area and shortly we will change the route to the foreshore making it safer for visitors to use. This will connect with the "Shell Walk" route which is being developed as part of the new interpretation for the sites.

The visitor shelter? The challenge continues and the initial structure hasn't gone entirely to plan with the sail roof. However, we are actively seeking a lighter material for the sail and we have additional ironmongery to install and with a prayer or two we should have it erected over summer.

The annual sea fence maintenance was completed after 100 metres of fence line was ripped out by the winter storms and a tree or two sailing violently down the Tay. And we are about to start the twelfth year in the annual herbicide management and all the day-to-day reactive tasks we undertake.

THE DYNAMIC COASTLINE

Yes, the Icehouse footpath is shorter now than it used to be. The erosion at this point of the Reserve continues, albeit a little slower than before. A further six metres has been eroded from the old observation tower area. The eastern dune edge, which is in fact a slack, no

longer has the high dune protection and is particularly vulnerable to the sea. The winter storms and high tides took advantage and the flotsam has flowed some 70 metres into the Reserve changing the landscape considerably.

Of course this regular pattern of plucking sand from one area and dumping it in another continues as regular as the tides. In direct contrast the southern foreshore continues to build up and grow seaward and the marram grass follows and colonises towards the new foreshore. The northern finger of sand dune continues to grow well into the Tay and hopefully the sand dune system will continue to grow behind it. Accretion continues southwards towards Kinshaldy, Earlsall Muir and Rere's Wood.

EDUCATIONAL PACK

The second edition of the Education Pack was completed and we delivered over 200 copies to the Fife Education Resource Centre in Auchterderran. From there they kindly distributed copies to every school in Fife. The pack has also been sent to schools outside Fife and again over to France where they enjoy this magnificent education resource.

As the pack was expensive to develop and print we can only give this out to education establishments. However, everyone can enjoy the benefits by looking at it and downloading it from our website.

It's been quiet over the winter and schools are just starting to book us and use the pack on Reserve. Lycée Alfred de Vigny High School from Loches-en-Touraine in France recently visited the Reserve for the second time and now considers a visit to be an important part of their studies. I even tried out some pidgin French with a hint of broad Fife after some considerable teaching from my wife! This went down well. Teachers Lisiane Bourbon and Vincent Méry couldn't believe the dramatic transformation from last year and of course enjoyed the wonderful change in the weather from last year – it was warm and sunny. Closer to home several primary schools have used the pack on site and everyone has high praise for the content and of course really getting out here and see the wonderful sights for themselves.

TENTSMUIR INTERPRETATION PLAN

The second interpretation plan was completed last year, along with interpretation consultants StudioArc and Rob Robinson. With considerable input from ourselves we have developed new interpretation for each site around the three Reserve sites, the Eden, Tayport and the Forest. And I have to say the interpretation is wonderful, inspiring and the cartoon style behavioural message panels are comical and are importantly, to the point! Soon Danny Griffin of the Sand Blast Signs company will install the splendid structures he constructed and insert the panels. I for one cannot wait and I hope you all come along and enjoy them too. You can get a sneak preview of what's to come as two large panels have been installed in the Railway bird hide and the Christie hide at Morton Lochs.

The script for the virtual tour of the Reserve was completed we now await the next stage in this development and hopefully it will be on our website in the not too distant future.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

The seals continue to enjoy the lazy days hauled out on the sand bars and foreshore and in good numbers too. These large creatures still remain number one on the list of things to see on the Reserve by most visitors.

Duncan Davidson, a moth expert, has started early this year and already has recorded a first for the Reserve and indeed Fife. Duncan said "The moth was a micro... nothing big or exciting unfortunately and called *Agonopterix ocellana*." Duncan continues his moth surveying this season and the species list grows with every visit.

Six-spot burnet moths and cinnabar moths have been observed and you can easily see these day time flying moths in the distinguished red and black colours. As well as the tiny micro moths, whose species I haven't a clue about, flitting about the flora.

Butterfly life on the Reserve has been sporadic all due to the low temperatures and lack of sun. Even so the orange tips have had a good season with the early peacock, green veined whites and small coppers just emerging and last week one green hairstreak was observed on the north transect.

The site is colouring up well with splashes of pink campion and northern marsh orchid, yellows of birds foot trefoil and the members of the buttercup family, whites of plain daisies and many others however, my favourite at this time of year is the dramatic deep red of lesser twayblade.



Sunset over the sandbars and grey seal, a favourite view by Lorne Gill

CORALROOT ORCHID

Professor David Read from the University of Sheffield has been travelling up to Tentsmuir Point for some twelve years and he is hoping we have a change in numbers this year. David has monitored the orchid in many places and he has observed a general decline. However, he recently heard from a friend in Bavaria, where they too are monitoring the coralroot orchid. On one site, after several seasons of declining numbers similar to Tentsmuir, were down to less than 20 plants last year. This year there are literally hundreds of plants. Could this augur well for us? David hopes so and I will be out counting this month.

This could lead to some interesting research particularly looking at weather records over the last ten years. David also suffered like me at the end of the season and probably won't want reminding that his Sheffield United failed to win promotion. Wonder if it's all linked to coralroot orchid!

MORTON LOCHS

MANAGEMENT

Sometimes farmers are known to moan a wee bit about the weather, there's never enough rain or there's too much, never enough sun, or too well, I'm just the same really. The loch levels have dropped because there hasn't been enough rain. (Bang goes another New Years resolution – stop moaning!) As a result the green blanket weed mat, a prolific aquatic weed which consists of the dreadful thick threads has resulted. We have put in some barley

straw bales kindly provided by Robert Lamont and they have reduced the growth to some extent.

As a result of low loch levels, and now there has been no flow through the lochs. We also discovered a leak in a spillway or rather erosion underneath which resulted in the concrete base subsiding. We have temporarily dammed this outflow and the loch water levels are slowly rising once again. Now we need to plan the permanent replacement. Never a dull moment!

My colleague Alex Easson, along with Forester Graham Paul has been busy managing the extensive gorse on the north plantation, cutting and burning and spraying the plants but even this plant is outstripping Alex. We will bring in contractors shortly, to help control the gorse. However, some small areas of gorse will be kept for the invertebrates to feed on and small birds to take refuge and nest in.

The bracken control contract will continue shortly with a contractor coming in to spray this rampant plant and they will also replace the west boundary fence

Alex and the young volunteers in the Fairbridge Project and those “not in education, employment or training” (NEET) have worked away on various projects on the site and in the forest.

Local farmer Robert Lamont and son Robert kindly provided cattle, which grazed throughout the Reserve until October. The grazing is an important part of the management of the grass heathland – a relic dune system, grazing and opening up the ranker grasses and improving the habitat for some of our flora species. Our thanks go to them for providing the cattle.

Volunteer Andrew Ford has kindly taken on the work of collecting data from our hydrological monitoring system around the Morton Lochs and surrounding area. This will give us a better understanding of the hydrology of the area.

Perhaps the one project that sticks out by improving the water ways of the site and of hopefully benefiting our neighbours as well, was the re-profiling of the Lead Burn. The stretch of the burn from our outflow boundary beyond down to the Garpit road end was overgrown with reeds and other aquatic plants, silted up and the banks collapsing in areas was prone to flooding. The reprofiling work was completed by expert machine operator Dave Simpson, who knows this area like the back of his hand. Dave said this was the first time that he or his boss Mr Black can remember this burn ever being cleaned out and profiled. The water flows freely now.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

There have been some good moments, two new species and some tragic sad times.....its normal service at the Lochs really.

The view from the Christie bird hide continues to be enjoyed by many visitors and the swans in particular enjoy preening and just standing in the shallow water of the old peninsula alongside. As you will have gathered we settled on the new name for the bird hide. The Christies were the landowners at the time when the lochs were created for private fishing but shortly afterwards it was evident that the lochs were a haven for bird life.

Great news with two new species observed by local people, the white tailed sea eagle has been observed a few times and just recently it would appear to have settled in the local area. The local avid bird spotters observed a pair of little ring plovers - both firsts for the site. It shows how important it is for local people as well as visitors to the sites to tell us what they see and of course equally pleasing and rewarding for them.

The mute swan pair has again been perplexing, battling away over winter and spring to defend “their” loch from other mute swans intent in moving in amidst some furious squabbles. Then the pair eventually settled down, courtship displaying, building a nest, laying eggs and

letting us view the first days of six cygnets swimming away alongside the parents. Unfortunately a few bird spotters observed the male then taking his young weak family on a journey from the north loch, over into the south loch, through the woodland and then into the pig fields adjacent. The journey ended there for the cygnets. The parents settled back on the north loch, looking a tad lost and forlorn. Why?

The kingfisher, water rail and all the usual residents have been observed on a regular basis and all fascinating to watch. Be prepared to sit around a while and see some great displays!

Otter sightings are on the increase usually in the evenings but also during the quiet days.

Visitors to Morton are increasing and many are fortunate to observe the red squirrels. The observations continue to increase again thanks mainly to the feeding stations (set up by volunteers Ron and Cath). Elmwood College conservation students continue the squirrel monitoring at Morton Lochs setting up three more transects in the forest and the good news is red squirrel sightings are on the increase.

The orange tip butterfly numbers have again increased from last season's good totals and were observed out in the open as well as the dappled sunny wooded glades.

Swallows, martens and swifts are cutting through the air above the lochs and also at Tentsmuir Point. By coincidence I happened to catch a Radio Four programme about the swift, here is a brief fascinating insight to the world of the swift by kind permission from BBC Radio Four.

Swifts spend almost their entire lives flying. They feed while flying, preen while flying, gather nest material while flying, 'sleep' and even mate in the air. Their Latin name, *Apus apus*, means 'without feet'. In fact, Swifts do have feet and sharp claws for gripping on surfaces, but they have very short legs and only land to nest and raise their young. Grounded swifts find it very difficult and sometimes impossible to take off again. The rest of their lives they are in the air!

It's estimated that over the course of their lifetime, swifts will cover 2.8 million miles, or 4.5 million kilometres, which is equivalent to about six round trips to the Moon or 100 times round the earth.

Swifts are summer migrants which arrive here in late April and early May and they leave again in August with only a few birds still hanging around in Britain in September. Their migration is rapid and they arrive in Africa by mid-August. Once here, they respond to changes in weather and food availability and will travel long distances to find food. They feed almost exclusively on flying insects with some birds catching up to 100,000 a day when feeding their young.

Whilst in the nest the Swifts exercise their wings – because from the moment they leave the nest, they need to be able to fly and won't land again until they breed in their fourth year. The adults leave the nest first, and then the young – which have to find their way south to Africa on their own! You just can't help but be impressed by Swifts!

Perhaps the most famous Swift nesting site in Britain is the Museum of Natural History at Oxford University. Here the birds nest in the Museum's spire. The site has been the subject of one of the longest studies of any species of bird, a project which was begun in 1947 by David and Elizabeth Lack. Today Roy Overall is responsible for monitoring and ringing the birds. Inside the spire there are several floors of nest boxes (147), each leading via a ventilation shaft to the outside.

Their wings are very adaptable and change shape to suit and take advantage of the conditions they find themselves in (wing morphing).

I'm sure you will agree when you hear the shrill calls and look up and see this little bird cutting through the air at speed it's been on some journey!

Look out as well by around mid June as the emerging tiny frogs and toads pour over the margins in their tens of thousands and disappear into the surrounding vegetation. A truly fascinating phenomenon, so tread carefully.

IRRESPONSIBLE VISITORS

It's worrying when a visitor photographs her dog barking furiously at a hauled up seal on the foreshore and then proudly posts the image on the BBC website. What a disgraceful action. Innocence is bliss but ignorance is a poor excuse for this behaviour.

The usual problem continues, if you are a dog owner; please keep your dog under close control, preferably on a lead whilst on the Reserve. The problem of dog poo left around by irresponsible dog owners is **still** showing no sign of improving. It's no one else's responsibility of clearing up dog poo and removing and disposing of the dog poo bags – **it's yours!**

BAG IT. TAKE IT HOME TO BIN IT!

WHAT'S ON

NNR EVENT – FAMILY DAY OUT, “Bugs, Birds and Butterflies”.

The ninth annual NNR event “**Bugs, Birds and Butterflies**” at Tentsmuir Point will be on;

Thursday, 17 July 2008 starting at 12:45 prompt at Forestry Commission's Kinshaldy car park.

This year I have developed a new style where you can enjoy as many activities as possible during the afternoon and then relax and sit back, watch or take part in Fergus McNicol's exciting stories and tales of pirates, monsters and the environment of course.

You will be given a passport and every time you take part in an activity this will be stamped and at the end children will qualify for a small prize. Each activity will last around 20 to 30 minutes each, you finish one and then move on to the next. We will keep you up to speed. This year there will be tea, coffee and fruit juice and if you're good a cake. There will be **no** sandwiches so have a bite to eat before you come along or just wait for tea time!

The activities include:

- Make wildlife creatures.
- Different beaks for different food.
- Leaf art.
- Nature Wild art.
- Sketch & Paint for the older visitors with David Mitchell – (all afternoon if you wish)
- The strand line hunt game.
- Nature treasure hunt.
- Viewpoint telescopes - the staff will be happy to answer questions and help you enjoy your day out.

Followed by a short tea break and then listen to Fergus and his fascinating tales.

With the exception of the £1 charge for the car park, it's all free!

There are 120 places available and the event books up fairly quickly. I also keep a reserve list, as there is usually a visitor or two who may have to cancel suddenly. If you are unable to attend after booking, please contact me as soon as possible to let me know, so I can call and let someone else take up your place. **Please don't let me or other visitors down.** Remember all children must be accompanied by a responsible adult.

To book, please phone my office telephone and if I am not in, please leave a short message on the answer machine, with your name and telephone number and I will contact you to confirm the booking. If I do NOT contact you, you are not on my list!

HISTORY

Thanks to everyone who has sent in some really wonderful things and told me lots of fascinating history. I'm keeping it all to myself! No honest, as the next Newsletter will be a special, the twentieth, I'll let you know all about it then.

WALKS & TALKS

Want to know more of what we do, or just want to see the wonderful sights on the Reserve? If you have a few friends or a group who fancy a guided walk or talk about the Reserves, please contact me. If you would like to see how effective the management of the Reserve is, or observe a little more of the hidden secrets and gems, then give me a ring and I will arrange a guided walk or talk.

See you on the Reserve sometime.

STOP PRESS

A window was smashed in the new Christie bird hide recently, which is very disappointing. The local Police have been informed and PC Gordon Miller is on the case.

Isn't it sad that someone's idea of fun is the vandalism of other people's property!

BIG THANKS

Many thanks to all those who contribute information for the Newsletters and the valuable data collected for our flora and fauna records. Also, I send a BIG grateful **thank you** to all the staff, visitors, volunteers and honorary wardens who put in a lot of time and effort, which produces great results.

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

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PS It's quiet these Saturday afternoons why? It's the close season and I'm trying to forget the defeats my beloved Raith Rovers suffered in the league play-offs. But, thoughts are gathering momentum, waiting for the new season to begin. Optimistic, you bet, its promotion this season.....lucky white heather,fingers crossed,still praying!

Know the Code Before You Go, its well worth getting a copy of this useful guide from SNH and now there are activity guides you can use for your children. For more information have a look at: www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/educationresources