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National Nature
Reserves



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Tentsmuir National Nature Reserve

Newsletter No. 17 - June 2007

Welcome to the seventeenth Reserve Newsletter. In this edition, read about the amazing coastal changes – this has a certain ring to it, you may have read this introduction before..... Is it this getting a bit repetitive? Well, that's the beauty of a dynamic coastline, it's forever changing and over this winter and spring it's been no different.

Although it's raining as I write, this year has been particularly dry so far and some flora are obviously stressed and slow to grow. However, other species such as butterflies have been bountiful and wonderful to see; read more inside.

More visitors than ever are walking in the peaceful surrounds of Tentsmuir Point and Morton Lochs, and their feedback is really quite touching. Several visitors have remarked that the sites are some of the most wonderful places they have ever been in, and that's coming from people who are serious worldwide travellers.

In this edition, read about the management and changes, which have occurred over the last six months and the fantastic developments planned for the reserve in the next period.

What has happened to the seals? A question raised by a number of visitors to Tentsmuir Point and ourselves. Read on inside.

The monitoring of species programme has once again exceeded expectations with the magnificent volunteers assisting, offering their dedication, knowledge and time. Two more species have been recorded at Morton Lochs, find out more inside.

Read about another volunteer's work on the Reserve; some local issues; flora & fauna observations, a bit of history and what else is going on in the Reserve.

And it's that time of year for the annual Family Day Out, 'Be a nature detective,' and see what's on.

Where will the Reserve Newsletter turn up next? Moscow, or perhaps La Vallée de la Loire?

Tom Cunningham
Reserve Manager

TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

TENTSMUIR POINT

The moment when instinct drives the over wintering birds to depart, and summer birds arrive, is just incredible. With the changes through the seasons and particularly now with the climatic changes, it is always a wonderful sight to see the countryside transform from the bare and yellowing to the lush fresh green spring foliage. For plants to emerge almost on cue, now that's fascinating!

MANAGEMENT

The successful management tasks completed recently include: -

As we clear some of our target flora species for removal from an area, another species free from competition will take off and spread rapidly - but not free from our herbicide management of flora target species, which will start up again shortly. Over winter we carried on hand pulling; mainly pine plants along the boundary with the adjacent forest. Alex and I, greatly assisted by volunteer Andrew Ford and the conservation students from Elmwood College, pulled up thousands of young trees.

Contractors successfully cleared the silt, which had built up in the Cleek Burn in the north of the Reserve, and completed stage two of the water borehole. After testing the water quality, which was found to be fine, the borehole was excavated and two large filter pipes were installed. We will continue to test the water quality over the next few months and monitor the water quantity. If this meets our expectations, we hope to construct a holding tank, install solar panels and a pump system with a trough. This will ensure the thirsty cattle on the Point will have a good supply over the summer months.

The Icehouse footpath, many of you will have noticed, was temporarily out of use after the contractors laid down the new level surface. This was grass seeded to form a fairly natural looking footpath. This will be opened shortly for all to use.

The visitor shelter? Ok, something's just don't always go to plan. The sail maker erected the sails but between one thing and another, the fitting didn't go exactly well and after a day or so of strong winds we took them down. Back to the drawing board, some head scratching and after working out Pythagoras's theorem we will re-install the sails shortly.

The sea fences were repaired after the winter storms and sand bar shift. You may have seen some of the specialist contractors on the TV over winter. Bob Ritchie and Mike Smith are two of the last few salmon nets men in Scotland. Bob has been a salmon nets man all his working life - the third generation of his family to make a living from the "king of fish", caught in the nets stretching along the Angus coastline from St Cyrus to Montrose. Now their livelihood is under threat and they seek to save it, but may have to diversify as well. The

sea fences they constructed seven years ago on the Reserve and have maintained ever since, is one way of conserving a part of their skills.

THE DYNAMIC COASTLINE

Talking to the contractor working on the Icehouse footpath was interesting and perplexing. During the construction of the turning point near the foreshore, the area where we had been standing discussing the work, disappeared overnight!

A further five metres were lost since January in the old observation tower area. The dune edge northward, no longer with high dune protection, is particularly vulnerable to the sea. With the storms and high tides, the flotsam has flowed into the Reserve and has changed the landscape considerably.

In direct contrast to the erosion in this area, the southern foreshore continues to build up and grow seaward and the marram grass continues to colonise and spread towards the sea

EDUCATIONAL PACK

The second edition of the Education Pack is well underway; an expanded version with new activities created to meet the 'Curriculum for Excellence'. We put in a lot of work along with contractors and the first draft has been received from the designers for comments. The new pack should be out shortly.

Schools continue to enjoy the day out on Tentsmuir Point and we recently had students from the Lycée Alfred de Vigny High school from Loches-en-Touraine in France and from the Moscow City State School. They studied the coastal processes and the associated flora and fauna. All understood the Fife dialect perfectly!

However, it's the primary schools who are very rewarding; especially the small schools who come along with the entire school. From primary one through to seven, their faces are a picture when they see what's going on in the Reserve.

TENTSMUIR INTERPRETATION PLAN

The second interpretation plan was completed this year and from this we will develop interpretation and install new information panels to suit each area on the sites. Over the next nine months you will see a new suite of structures popping up, so read up on the interests of each site and let me know what you think.

The new Reserve leaflet, which will include Morton Lochs and Tayport Heath, will be out shortly.

SNH are developing a virtual tour of the Reserve and this will be used on the NNR and SNH websites. This will give visitors a flavour of why this is

Paradise. Lorne Gill, our photographer and video expert, came along and filmed and photographed the features of interest. Lorne will make several visits throughout the seasons, resulting in a two-minute view of the Reserve.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

The decline in the seal colony numbers has been a concern for everyone including visitors. The question on everyone's lips is, "Where have all the seals gone?" The answer is "no one seems to know". The Sea Mammal Research Unit continue their studies of the seals and they too are concerned about the reduction in numbers along the entire UK east coast. However, over the last week several hundred have reappeared and are back, hauled out, basking in the sun, totally blasé, unaware of all the fuss. Now if only they could talk!

What a start to the butterfly year! Peacocks were around early in the year, and April and May have been fantastic for orange tips at Morton Lochs, Tentsmuir Point and around the forest glades as well as around the Fetterdale office. It has to be the best year ever for them. Locally we had two commas in early April, which is a first, but confirms the observation made at Morton Lochs last year.

Perhaps Lorne Gill caught the best observation on video. Passing the humid slacks by the Icehouse footpath, Lorne mentioned he didn't have images of orange tip or green hairstreak butterflies. Well, as if on cue, up popped several of both! Lorne filmed and took images for the next 20 minutes. Yet another magic moment on the Reserve!

Butterfly monitoring was very successful last year on both transects and we are well underway this year. Once again we were a bit concerned about the south transect as the erosion of the dune edge had plucked away parts of the original transect. However, early signs are the butterflies are still enjoying life in this area.

We analyse the data for our own species records, and other organisations, including the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the Butterfly Society also use the data. Our monitoring at Tentsmuir makes an important contribution to the national monitoring of the UK's flora & fauna species.



Green Hairstreak – Image by Lorne Gill

MORTON LOCHS

MANAGEMENT

The lochs look rather splendid once again with the Lead Burn, the water supply for Morton Lochs fully restored. The north loch has benefited enormously with a good flow through the entire loch system.

Alex Easson and Graham Paul have been busy managing the rampant gorse on the north plantation, cutting and burning and spraying the plants. Some plants will be kept for the invertebrates to feed on and small birds to take refuge and nest in.

Contractors cleaned out the silt in several of the waterways increasing the free flow of water, and rebuilt a sand bridge. They levelled off the old peninsula on the north loch and this has enhanced this area, increasing the views from the new bird hide. (By the way, this bird hide needs a name, any ideas?) We also removed some mature willow and the resultant timber was chipped and will be used to resurface the wild path around the south loch woods.

Alex and the young volunteers in the Fairbridge Project planted up a living bird screen by the new bird hide screen, and already the young willow, hawthorn and blackthorn are in leaf. A screen was also planted on the old public bird hide site and around a part of the wild footpath. They also dismantled the old rickety wooden screen by the Fullerton bird hide and constructed a new screen.

The phragmites reed control, now in its eighth year, will commence over summer, opening up the areas of open water.

Local farmer Robert Lamont has kindly provided cattle, and they will graze throughout the Reserve until October. The cattle normally graze the fields adjacent to the site and this was more environmentally friendly than transporting cattle from Newtonmore, where David Finlay manages a farm I thank David for providing the cattle in previous years.

The grazing is an important part of the management of the dune system, opening up the ranker grasses and will improve the habitat for some of our flora species.

We continue with our hydrological monitoring of Morton Lochs and surrounding area and just recently completed a new monitoring system, which was created by the Hydrological department of the University of Stirling. This will give us a better understanding of the hydrology of the area.

The bracken control will commence in June and compliment the management undertaken over the last two years.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

The bird life on the lochs has already responded; mute swan have settled down and are nesting on one of the islands. Great news - around 15 May, the proud adults were seen with five cygnets. A greylag pair have nested and are seen daily swimming with their brood of five young. Mallard chicks are observed scuttling about the mothers, swallows are swooping over the loch surface hoovering up insects and the dog otter has been observed lately. These are just a few of the observations made from the bird hides.

Red squirrel observations are increasing thanks mainly to the winter-feeding stations (set up by volunteers Ron and Cath). They (the squirrels that is!) can still be seen scuttling about the branches feeding on the pinecones.

As part of the management plan to assist the red squirrels in this part of Fife, Elmwood College conservation students are carrying out squirrel monitoring at Morton Lochs and three more transects in the forest. Early observations are good with the reds outnumbering the grey squirrels.

Magpie and cormorant are the two new bird species observed lately at Morton Lochs. The two cormorants hung about for three weeks eating away, probably on the stickleback population and frogs and toads. Over the last thirty odd years I have watched the magpie population spread through the entire breadth of Fife, from the Dunfermline area into Kirkcaldy around 1975 and now Morton Lochs in 2007.

The orange tip butterfly numbers have been enormous compared with previous years and they were observed out in the open as well as the dappled sunny wooded glades.



Orange Tip – Image by Lorne Gill

IRRESPONSIBLE DOG OWNERS

If you are a dog walker, 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 showing no sign of improving. The other new trend is for the irresponsible dog owner to leave the filled bag by the footpaths and car park. We need our readership to continue to lead by example and show them how it is done.

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Good news on the incidents in and around the Dr John Berry bird hide. The great persistence and work of PC Gordon Miller paid dividends with the arrest and charging of two local youngsters with anti-social behaviour and vandalism. Many thanks to Gordon and his colleagues.

WHAT'S ON

NNR EVENT – FAMILY DAY OUT “Be a nature detective”

The eighth annual NNR event “**Be a nature detective**” at Tentsmuir Point will be on

Thursday, 12 July 2007 starting at 12:45 prompt at Kinshaldy car park.

Sylvia Troon's Kenspeckle Puppets will entertain the families at this year's family day out after the first part of the day's entertainment. We will have the following activities for you all to enjoy:

- Listen, Smell, Show & Tell for the under 5s.
- Nature One for the under 7s.
- Children's mini-beast hunt for the over 8s.
- Nature sand sculptures on the beach.
- Sketch & Paint for the older visitors with David Mitchell.
- Guided walk – “Find out why Tentsmuir Point is so special”.
- Viewpoint telescopes - the staff will be happy to answer questions and help you enjoy your day out.
- Wee picnic
- Kenspeckle Puppets with nature tales, myths and stories of the sea.

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 turn up. Please don't let me or other visitors down.

To book, please phone my office telephone 01382 553704 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 to confirm, you are not on my list!

VOLUNTEERS & VISITORS CORNER

Many thanks to everyone who responded to my plea for help in monitoring birds on Tentsmuir Point. Thanks to Anne Frost and Bill Alexander for hitting the ground running and making a good start to this important monitoring task.

This has been another fantastic period, with volunteers and groups putting in a lot of hard work on the Reserve. Volunteers have an important role within the Reserve, sharing observations and information about new species, or assisting with many management tasks and projects; ensuring success. Volunteering is also about gaining valuable work experience and having an opportunity to develop new skills, but often and perhaps more importantly, it is about people just being on the Reserve carrying out activities they really enjoy doing. What would we do without them? Many thanks again to you all.

I am always keen to receive articles from readers of the Newsletter, so please write to me if you have some experiences whilst volunteering or just chilling out on the Reserve. This next piece is the thoughts of volunteer Pete Cunningham.

'Walking the Shore'

I have been coming to Tentsmuir Point NNR for over nine years, during which time I have witnessed some dramatic changes to the shoreline. The path where I walked with my parents in those early years is gone - washed away; nothing remains of the dunes and the tower but my memories. This was quite thought provoking – I remembered a black and white film, shot some years ago, of the lions in Trafalgar Square. The long exposure captured the unchanging lions and the flickering and fleeting presence of people as they moved across the Square.

Is that what we are? Are we a flickering and fleeting presence over the lifetime of the Reserve? Perhaps we are, but I prefer to think of my visits as part of a continuum of change and development, and even when I am long gone, and the shoreline continues to retreat and gain, others will be coming as witness to the might of the waves.

'Once I stood at the deep sea's door, and thought myself fixed in time and space,
imagining my feet to have followed the well-worn path upon an anchored and ancient place.
Yet the jealous sea roared through this idyll
ripping and tearing through dune and slack, shredding trees in its greedy maw,
spitting out sand and shells in desperate whorls
as it painted the new born shore.'

HISTORY

It's funny sometimes, how things come about. My son Mike was carrying out the annual servicing of the gas appliances in a house in the Cardenden area and got talking to the householder, David Blane, Secretary of the Fife Branch Royal Engineers Association and came away with this little gem.

David talked about aviation at Tentsmuir, which dated back to 1911, with a balloon squadron of Royal Engineers setting up a training camp in the

Tentsmuir area. They were soon joined in the skies by the 'string and sealing wax' aircraft of the embryo Royal Flying Corps; such aircraft favoured the sands of St Andrews, where, not the least of the attractions was the availability of fuel from local garages. Some years later they developed the area around Rere's Farm which is now the Leuchars airbase. More information can be found on www.leuchars.raf.mod.uk/history

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.

FINALLY

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

Tom Cunningham.
Reserve Manager
Fetterdale Office
Tentsmuir Forest
By Tayport.
DD6 9PF

Tel/Fax/Answer machine. 01382-553704.
Email: tom.cunningham@snh.gov.uk

PS The recent rain has certainly boosted everything in the countryside and on the Reserve in particular. The trees, grasses and flowers are greening up well with brilliant splashes of colour as the flora burst open.

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PPS It was a good season in the end for the mighty Raith Rovers, lying second bottom of the league in November, my face tripping me, going nowhere except relegation, until the new manager transformed us into a good side. Well, nearly a good side, as we were defeated in the play-offs.

Upset? Me? Never. Roll on next season!