

Mapping Arran's birds

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Plate 219. The Northern Range - Goatfell on the right, Arran, August 2005. © Jim Cassels

I have a long connection with Arran, developing, in birding terms, from being a summer migrant, to a regular passage migrant to, on retirement in 2005, a resident. On retirement the previous bird recorder saw me coming and I found that for 2006 I was the bird recorder for the Arran Natural History Society (ANHS). I need to learn to say no.

During that first year as bird recorder news began to come out about a national bird atlas. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Regional Representative, Richard Allan, came over and spoke with Terry Southall, our local ringer, about what was involved. Terry and another local birder, Alan Hollick, then met with me and it was seen that the organisation of the Arran contribution to the national atlas, a small selection of areas in each of Arran's 10kmsq, fell within my remit of bird recorder. I need to learn to say no.

I took it on, but decided that it would be an excellent opportunity to do a local bird atlas. This would be a first for Arran. Instead of aiming to do a small selection of areas for the national atlas we would do all the areas, all 139 tetrads, cover the whole of Arran and produce an Arran Bird Atlas. The committee of the ANHS agreed. That was the start.

Arran - a special place with special birds

An island in the Firth of Clyde, Arran is roughly 20 miles long by ten miles across and sixty miles round. It is not remote. The ferry terminal on the mainland is less than an hour from the centre of Glasgow and the crossing is less than an hour. It is described as Scotland in miniature and, in terms of habitats, Arran has most of the habitats of Scotland with individual tetrads often containing a wide range of habitats. The Arran Moors Special Protection Area (SPA) linked to



Plate 220. Female Hen Harrier, Clauchlands, Arran, January 2013. © Brian Couper

previous Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), was established in 2003 through the work of John Rhead. It covers an extensive area of Arran. This SPA is of outstanding interest for the variety of upland habitats and breeding birds. There are large tracts of blanket bog, wet and dry heath and upland grassland. With small areas of broad-leaved woodland and several small lochs, this diversity of habitats supports a rich variety of moorland breeding birds. The area is internationally important for its breeding Hen Harriers. In addition the area is nationally important for Red-throated Divers, Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Short-eared Owl. Round the extensive coast, Great Northern, Black-throated and Red-throated Divers can all be seen most months of the year. There are decreasing numbers of breeding Eider and increasing numbers of breeding Black Guillemot. Arctic Terns breed on the off-shore island of Pladda and Purple Sandpipers are regular winter visitors. That is just a flavour of this special place with special birds.

Collecting the data

For the national atlas, data was to be collected over four breeding seasons, April through July and four winters, November through February. For our local atlas, in order to cover all 139 tetrads that covered Arran, the data was collected over five breeding seasons and five winters. The last data was entered at the end of September 2012.

The biggest challenge to collecting the data was getting volunteers to take part in the field work.



Plate 222. View from North Goatfell, Arran, December 2012. © *Lucy Wallace*

The number of experienced birdwatchers on Arran is very limited. For example, the Arran membership of the SOC consists of three pensioners and an adult. A small group who, even if they were all willing, would not have been able to cover all the tetrads. The net needed to be cast wider, not only to include residents, but also visitors and particularly regular visitors.

The system was established of putting bird notes in the local paper, usually two a month, and always ending by encouraging people to send me their sightings. A web site was set up and run by me again to share bird information and encourage others to send me their sightings. Material produced by the national atlas team was used to keep members of the ANHS up to date. There were talks, not only to the ANHS but to other diverse groups on the island. As well as talks there were organised walks, usually two or three each winter run by ANHS. For five years in a row, there was an Arran



Plate 221. An Arran Natural History Society walk, Kingscross, Arran, February 2010. © *Jim Cassels*

Wildlife Festival - 80 events in a week in May. For the last three years finishing in 2010, the festival was run by the ANHS in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Scottish Natural Heritage.

All of this was part of trying to get people involved and trying to build up people's confidence and skills. In October 2010, Bob Swann, the Scottish organiser of the national atlas came over and spoke to the ANHS about the developing bird atlas and encouraged people to get involved.

What was the result of all this encouragement?

The intention was to visit all 139 tetrads twice in the breeding season for up to two hours and twice in winter again for up to two hours. This was achieved with the exception of some remote areas that only received one winter and one breeding visit of two hours. It was emphasized that everyone could take part by supplying roving records. The result was that over 36,000 records on 177 species were collected over the five breeding seasons and five winters and it involved over 700 people. At the end of September 2012 the last record was uploaded into the national bird atlas website.

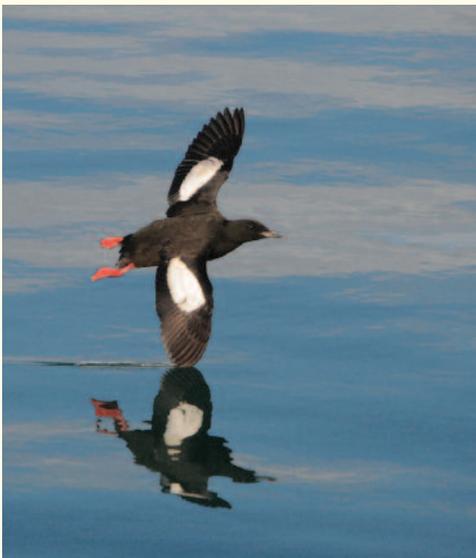


Plate 223. Black Guillemot, Brodick, Arran, June 2014.
© Angus Hogg

The publication

Once all the data was in, the challenge was to get it in a form that was going to be accessible and helpful. The emphasis was to be on the maps. The intention was to produce an atlas and this was done in 20 months with the help and support of a great many people. These included: the central support staff for the national atlas under the leadership of Dawn Balmer; Ian Andrews who produced the base map and directed me towards the DMAP computer programme; the skill and experience of Phil Davis from Gloucestershire was inestimable in the production of the maps and Russell Porter from Arran whose knowledge and understanding of computer programmes was invaluable in setting out the pages for each individual species. For each species there is a photograph, a fact box, maps and a brief description of the current status. The fact box contains information on the number of tetrads in which the species was recorded, as well as trend information from previous national atlases. The maps are distribution maps and some relative abundance maps. For more information including some sample pages visit the website Arran Bird Atlas www.arranbirding.co.uk/arran_bird_atlas.html

The resulting publication is 168 pages, with more than 400 maps and more than 200 photographs provided by more than 30 local and visiting photographers.

With the support of funding from the SOC, the Arran Trust and the Marsh Local Ornithology Award for 2013, the ANHS is able to have a unit price of only £8.00.

Final remarks

The mapping of Arran's birds for the first time was an ambitious project for the ANHS. The collecting of the data and the production of the publication were both achieved through the combined efforts of a great many people who share a passion for Arran and its birds. I trust that the final publication adequately reflects the team effort of all the contributors.

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