



## Curragag Newsletter : January 2014

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### Introducing your new newsletter editor.

As Christine mentioned in the last newsletter (Spring / Summer 2013) the position of newsletter editor was becoming vacant in order to enable Christine to devote more time to OHBR. I've been a Curragag member for a couple of years now and have always looked forward to receiving my copy of the newsletter - when I read the position of editor was becoming vacant I therefore wasted little time to let Christine know of my interest to take on the role, and she wasted equally as little time to welcome me aboard!

A little about myself - I've lived in Nottinghamshire for all my life and have had a strong interest in Natural History ever since being lifted up as a young boy to peer into the nests of the birds that used to call our garden-hedge their home, that and pestering my mother almost weekly to take me to our local museum each time we went into town shopping, our museum in those days was a classic Victorian affair with lots of fascinating dead things in lovely wooden cases to healthily feed an enthusiastic boys curiosity.

Birds are my main area of interest although I certainly wouldn't consider myself to be an expert in any respect. I am a British Trust for Ornithology nest recorder and a trainee ringer with the Birklands Ringing Group based in the Sherwood Forest area. I'm a keen photographer and some of my photographs have been included in the BTO's recent field guide on monitoring birds nests. I've been lucky enough to travel abroad in recent years in search of breeding birds to far flung places, from the battlefields of the Falkland Islands to the deserts of North Africa and Western Sahara and up into the tundra of the Arctic Circle. I've been visiting Scotland at least once a year now for the past 8 or so years, most of my trips being to the Inner / Outer Hebrides & outlying islands, the Hebrides always draw me back and there is nowhere I'd rather be.

I shall look forward to being your newsletter editor and I will welcome any news, sightings or articles, big or small, that you would like to share with your fellow members.

Ashley Jackson FLS  
Editor@curragag.org.uk



## Chair's update

Matt Topsfield To my mind the weather could have had better this summer, but after the long cold spring we were delivered a good balance of sun and rain giving perfect growing conditions and many folk have said that the wildflowers were the best they've seen, so maybe it wasn't that bad after all.

Nonetheless, it feels as though we've made the most of 2013, with the newly constituted Lewis & Harris group laying on an excellent programme of events in the spring and following on here in Uist with a good number of Curracag and OHBR events throughout the summer and on into the autumn/winter months as and when the weather has permitted (and we're still looking forward to the much anticipated and much rained off bryophytes event).

We were also able to run the Curracag Photographic Competition again in 2013 and were very impressed with the entries received. See inside this newsletter for a selection of the submitted images.

Looking forward to 2014, the Curracag **Annual General Meeting** is almost upon us. This will be held at the Dark Island Hotel, Benbecula on **Thursday 27 February 2014 at 7pm**.

We will review the activities of the Society over the last year, look forward to the coming year and elect members to the committee. There are a number of committee positions available including Vice-Chair and Events Coordinator which are currently vacant. There is also an opportunity to take on the role of Treasurer, which comes with the offer of training and support from our current post holder. If you are interested in any of these roles please contact the Chair for an informal discussion (Matthew Topsfield, 12 Griminish, Isle of Benbecula HS7 5QA, [maxwell\\_topside@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:maxwell_topside@hotmail.co.uk)).

Copies of the Accounts and Treasurer's Report will be available from the Treasurer (Ian Thompson, "Suthainn", Askernish, South Uist HS8 5SY, [treasurer@curracag.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@curracag.org.uk)) or via the Membership pages of the Curracag website ([www.curracag.org.uk/membership.html](http://www.curracag.org.uk/membership.html)).

Members wishing to raise business at the AGM can notify the Chair in writing prior to the meeting (contact details as above).



### Outer Hebrides Bird Report 2008-2010

At long last the Outer Hebrides Bird Report covering 3 years has been published. With 184 pages and 8 pages of colour plates the report covers new species - Stilt Sandpiper, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Bee-eater, Brown Shrike, Iberian Chiffchaff, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, two Hermit Thrushes, Pechora Pipit, Trumpeter Finch and Blackburnian Warbler. Also there were first records for Hudsonian Whimbrel and Siberian Stonechat and a Black Tern of the North American race.

Available from: Brian Rabbits, 6 Carinish, Isle of North Uist HS6 5HL or email [admin@curracag-wildlifeneeds.org.uk](mailto:admin@curracag-wildlifeneeds.org.uk).

Price: £8 or £10 if posted

## New Outer Hebrides County Bird Recorder

Yvonne Benting & Ian Thompson

As you may already know, Brian Rabbitts has decided to step down as the county bird recorder for the Outer Hebrides after holding the post for 9 years and we (Yvonne Benting and Ian Thompson) will jointly be taking on the role as from the 1st January 2014.

During his time as recorder, Brian served this recording area faithfully and with dignity. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Brian for all his past endeavours and sincerely hope that he will continue to be involved in the recording of our avifauna.

As we take up the responsibility of county bird recorder, we already know our three main challenges: man power, finances and the submission of records.

Most county recorders are associated with a local ornithological society which would resource, organise, support and finance the role. Traditionally the county recorder here has been closely associated with Curracag, the local Natural History Society. Although Curracag has many active members, their disciplines are within the wider natural world and not always focused on birds. It is also a small society in terms of membership and has limited resources.

One area that we will explore is the use of innovative software and web-based facilities, not only in the collection and correlation of submitted records, but in minimising the costs associated with the production and printing of future bird reports.

With this in mind, our emphasis will be to encourage as many people as possible to utilise BirdTrack to submit their records. In addition, we have recently established a new website to be found at <http://www.outerhebridesbirds.org.uk> The site is still in its infancy, but already contains detailed information about bird recording in the Outer Hebrides and includes an on-line record submission form and a downloadable spreadsheet for those who are unfamiliar with BirdTrack. The website also contains an array of other information including a gazetteer of place names and rarity description forms which can be downloaded.

For those who still prefer the more personal approach, we would welcome all records via email, text or telephone. Our email contact details are as follows: [recorder@outerhebridesbirds.org.uk](mailto:recorder@outerhebridesbirds.org.uk)

For additional contact details, see our website <http://www.outerhebridesbirds.org.uk>

As we move into a new era, we would like to remind people that bird recording is not all about rarities. While it is exciting to find rare birds, we are just as interested in what's happening in your back garden - your records count! Your records are important to us, so no matter how you wish to submit them, please ensure that they reach us. This is especially important if you are involved in research or survey work within the Outer Hebrides.

If you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact us.

All best wishes and good birding in 2014!

Your Sightings Count! Post here or visit <http://www.outerhebridesbirds.org.uk/> for more information.  
Email: [recorder@outerhebridesbirds.org.uk](mailto:recorder@outerhebridesbirds.org.uk)

## Sea Slug *Aegires punctilucens* at Gearaidh Gaal, North Uist: An Update

Lee Thicket We visited the promontory of Sgeir Ruadh at Gearaidh Gaal on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> September 2013 to search for the sea slug *Aegires punctilucens*. The occurrence of *A. punctilucens* at this site has been reported here previously. However unlike all previous visits to the site, which took place in July, this one was significantly later in the year. We had no idea whether we would find any at this time.

We need not have worried as we found 5 individuals, with a considerable variation in size. A follow-up visit the following day, to check a different but nearby suite of rock pools found zero, although we did find 3 very colourful examples of the relatively common *Archidoris pseudoargus*.



The photograph shows an individual briefly captured for identification and photography purposes. All such animals should be returned swiftly to the substrate from which they were removed.

## Bog Orchids near the hill Burabhal, North Uist: An Update

Lee Thicket On our first visit to North Uist in September (we usually visit in July) our first priority was to visit the Burabhal Bog Orchid sites to find out if they were still in flower.

On Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2013 we dutifully visited three of the sites and began our searches. At two of the sites we counted 33 and 17 spikes respectively. Of the 50 spikes, about 18 were still in flower, one of them quite freshly, the others with rather 'second-hand' looking flowers. The remainder had flower parts more or less shrivelled. The plants are so small however that from only a short distance away even the spikes with quite shrivelled flower parts could give the impression that they were still in bloom.

Some books indicate that Bog Orchids can flower as late as September and our visit verified that this can indeed occur on North Uist.

## Sighting of Snowy Inkcaps on North Uist

Lee Thicket On Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2013 we set off from the car park at Hosta to walk northwards along the coast in the direction of Scolpaig. The coast here is riven and folded in a most fascinating way, surely a delight for any geologist.

Not far into our walk at NF 717732 we encountered a pair of Inkcaps that attracted us with their graceful shape and snowy whiteness.

The largest one had a cap that was studded with coarse granules on one side, while the opposite side was almost devoid of these, the detached granules (which were falling off as we watched) were accumulating

around the column below. It was noted that the cap shivered with every breath of wind, whereas the column remained as steady as a rock. We revisited the fungi during our return to Hosta and expected to see that many more of the granules had been detached, but actually the fungi looked unchanged from our first visit 4 hours earlier. Photographs submitted to Christine Johnson were identified as Snowy Inkcap *Coprinopsis nivea*.

The habitat here is typical coastal turf, with relatively short grass and other plants due to exposure to the wind. In the summer, short stemmed Frog Orchids can be found here. The area is grazed by cattle and most of the 8 – 10 examples of *C. nivea* we found were associated with dung.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2013, on Berneray, at NF 895806, another two *C. nivea* were also found. Again they were in short, cattle-grazed turf, associated with dung.

## Barnacles!

Caz Walker & Chris Cant

We first visited Harris and Lewis twenty years ago and, though aware of wildlife being around, were mainly interested in walking and climbing. We did know enough to be awestruck when a walk at Northton took us through hundreds of lapwings on the ground and the sight of gannets feeding was fantastic.

Since then we have been back to the Western Isles many times, drawn by the wildness and diversity of the landscape. Immersed in this place it is impossible not to become aware of all the flora and fauna, from the minute to the huge: on our recent trip to the Uig area we found adder's-tongue fern a few centimetres tall and had soaring golden eagles very close. There were also lots of common gull chicks, beautiful to see, and on the lochans a red-throated diver and interestingly a whooper swan. Kneep machair had a stunning array of flowers. The cliffs south of Breanish had aspen, possibly all one organism, juniper pressed against the rock, orchids and shags nesting a few feet away so we could look them in the green eye. In the hills we found starry saxifrage and mountain everlasting, dragonflies, greenshank and golden plovers. Mangersta beach and cliffs are very special, all jagged rock and wild sea, and finding moss campion thriving was wonderful. On one visit we found hundreds of crustaceans washed up on the tideline. These turned out to be buoy barnacles, relatives of the more common goose barnacles, and not reported before in Scotland. Looking back at our previous photos, we found one of a buoy barnacle from 2005 on Vatersay. We suspect that these have been present but simply haven't been reported before.

These days we have a useful knowledge of at least the commoner flora and fauna and when we see something we can't identify Chris's digital photos and research on the internet usually allow us to learn more and we've realised that we should report our sightings.

Goose Barnacles



Buoy Barnacle



# Colour-ringed House Sparrows for the Re-trapping of Adults for Survival (RAS) Scheme. Summary April November 2013

Ian Thompson, Yvonne Denting & Bill Neill

Now that our third RAS season (April August) has come to a close, it is time to take stock and analyse how the House Sparrows here in Askernish have fared compared with previous years.

In March, prior to the season beginning, there were 64 birds (33 male/31 female) in our study area. Of these, 3 birds, all females, were juveniles from 2012 which had returned after an absence of 6 months, one individual residing in South Glendale (11km) for 3 months before returning. During the season, an additional 2 adult males were caught and colour-ringed. These 2 birds were the only adults to be caught during the RAS season, a significant reduction on previous years

A total of 2681 field observations were made during the five month period which indicated a total of 61 adults being present. This compares favourably with the previous year when 57 adults were observed plus a further 19 were caught for the first time, of which 3 remained.

A total of 124 juveniles were colour-ringed, a reduction of 59 from last year. This was probably due to the cold spring delaying the breeding season with the first juveniles not seen until 2<sup>nd</sup> June, some 2 weeks later than last year. 2012 was also considered to be a very productive year with many pairs double brooding but unfortunately, there was no evidence of that occurring this year.

Reports of dispersing birds came from 3 sites, all being locations that have reported birds in previous years. South Glendale (2 birds 11km), had far fewer colour ringed birds this year while Carnan (24km) reported just 1 which was outside of the RAS season. Daliburgh (3km) saw a big increase with 13 individuals being reported in the RAS season, then a further 2 in September and yet another 2 in late November. It is interesting to note that only 1 bird reported in previous years from these sites still remains in-situ, that being B25 at South Glendale, a bird from 2011. None of last years juveniles (2012) were seen at any of these sites after May of this year.

Of the birds reported in the RAS season, all were known to be juveniles. Most only stayed at these sites for a few days, the exception being 2 birds at Daliburgh (G50 & H13), both staying for a month or more. Indeed, H13 stayed at Daliburgh until mid August before moving to South Glendale where it resided until September. Another (H27) went from Askernish to Daliburgh where it was seen for 1 day before returning to Askernish a few days later.

The 2 birds that appeared in November at Daliburgh were still to be found in Askernish just a few days before, one being a long staying juvenile, the other ringed in October and presumed to be a wandering first year bird..

As the season drew to an end, our House Sparrow fortunes changed. At the end of August, only 46 (22 male/24 female) of the original 64 birds and 1 of the 2 adult males ringed during the RAS season remained. Only 23 of the juveniles were also to be found making a total of 70 birds in our study area, a reduction of 22 on the previous year.

This could, in part, be explained by the presence of a young female Sparrowhawk in August, but more worryingly, 3 dead birds were found, plus another found dead in Daliburgh (4km). Finding a dead bird is an unusual enough occurrence in itself, but to find in a very short period of time would indicate that something might be amiss.

A simple, crude autopsy was performed on one bird, primarily looking at crop contents, but nothing untoward was found. There were however several small lesions to be found on its neck and back.

This population decline continued with only 47 birds being recorded during the month of September, a near 50% decline compared to the previous year. Several birds were observed with feather loss, especially round the head, and others with puffy or closed eyes. Some of these birds did recover although the replacement feathers, be they head or flight feathers, were now white, even though these birds had not exhibited any leucistic tendencies prior to this.

Analysis of the sightings from August through to October indicated that it was the older birds that had suffered the most, although we have no way of telling how the juveniles were affected due to dispersal. The number of individuals from the original population ringed in 2010 was reduced from 21 birds in August to just 7 in October. In this instance, it has shown the value of continuing the RAS protocol of recording sightings throughout the year and not just for the breeding season.



At the time of writing (November), numbers would appear to have stabilised although at what level is still to be determined. The birds have now become extremely shy and retiring, hardly ever leaving Bill's garden, making monitoring the situation almost impossible without his invaluable assistance.

Once again, through Bill's persistence and long established network of contacts, autopsies were conducted on our specimens by Tom Pennycott (Scottish Agricultural Collage). Extracts of his findings are as follows:-

*"Definitely something odd going on in house sparrows in the islands*



*One of your pictures shows what looks like avian pox lesions on the skin (not uncommon) or it could be bacterial, and the other has more unusual lesions on the head. And one of the birds you sent me had thickened crusty skin on one thigh and the head.*

*No internal parasites were seen and no external parasites were found associated with the skin lesions.*

*Cultures from the latter bird have demonstrated the bacterium **Staphylococcus aureus** from the lesions, but no parasitic mites. Staphylococcus aureus is well recognised as causing skin lesions in other species of animal and bird, but why sparrows?*

*In addition to the skin lesions both sparrows had thickened gullets suggestive of **trichomonosis** (a protozoal infection). Until recently trichomonosis has been an unusual diagnosis in sparrows, being seen more often in finches, woodpigeons and collared doves. However in September we had a suspect case in a house sparrow from Mull, and in November a suspect case in a house sparrow from Lewis, not places we commonly get birds from.*

Unfortunately the freezing process prevented us from doing more tests, but we would certainly be interested in examining more carcasses (ideally fresh but frozen if in the freezer) to see what else we find.

So please, if you come across any more cases, we would like to see them."

Exactly where this leaves our sparrows and the wider population is unclear. It would now seem that avian pox and other fatal diseases have inevitably spread to the Inner and Outer Hebrides and is affecting many species and may indeed explain why there has also been a noticeable decline of Greenfinch here in Askernish. Since being made aware of the situation, we have received several more reports from other parts of the island where House Sparrows have been found dead or dying. With these infections being at their most virulent during the summer period, it is to be hoped that the current sparrow population level can be maintained and improved upon next year, and we shall of course be monitoring the situation.

On a lighter note, a total of 581 House Sparrows have now been ringed since our project began in 2010. All these birds are sporting colour rings that are white with black lettering which consists of A00-99, B00-99, C00-99, F00-99, G00-99 and H00-99. Once again, we appeal to anyone who sees one of our colour-ringed birds to report the sighting by emailing us at [askernish.sparrows@gmail.com](mailto:askernish.sparrows@gmail.com) or via the Currag Forum which can be found at <http://www.currag-wildlifeneeds.org.uk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=677>

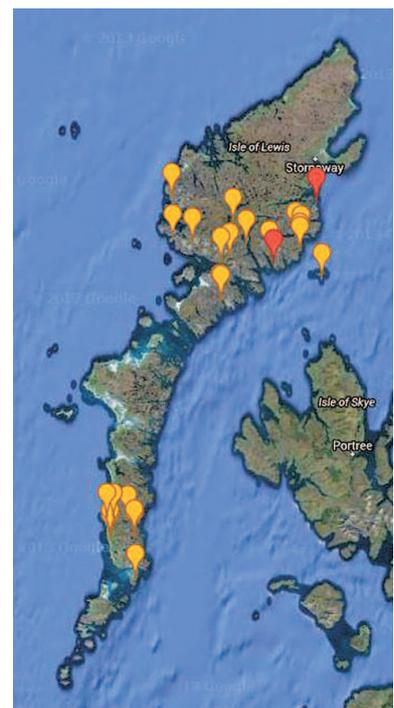
Yet again, our thanks go to Bill for the time and effort he expends helping us with this project. His records are always concise and accurate and the project would be all the poorer without him. We also thank all those who took the time and trouble to report their sightings to us. We can assure you that it is very much appreciated.

## Yes, We've Seen Some Ants!

Jan Thompson As the autumn fades and we all head indoors, it is time to correlate and analyse the results of this years records. I received 29 ant samples from 27 sites in 2013 and have sent them to Rhian who has once again identified them all. This year, the 27 sample sites ranged from Eriskay to South Uist, Harris, Lewis and even The Shiants!

Of the 29 samples, 27 were *Myrmica ruginodis* (yellow on the map), which would seem to be the most common ant on our islands. The other 2 were *Myrmica scabrinodis* (red on the map), one being found in North Harris, the other in Lewis. Although *Myrmica scabrinodis* is a common ant on the mainland, there are but a few recent records in the Outer Hebrides, especially from Harris and Lewis.

Over the past 2 years, a total of 62 specimens from 59 sites have been collected, identified and recorded via the Outer Hebrides Biological Recording (OHBR) database. Through this effort, we have a much better idea about the distribution of *Myrmica ruginodis* within our islands, but records for other species are few and far between. Only 2 other species have been identified, *Myrmica scabrinodis* from 3 sites and a single *Slender Ant*, *Leptothorax acervorum* from an island in a small loch on Harris.



With the continuing co-operation of Rhian and with your help, I hope to continue the search next year for more ant species and improve our understanding of the distribution of those already identified.

My thanks go to all those who took the time to collect and provided specimens this year and to Rhian for identifying them.

## Out and About with the Biological Recorders

Christine Johnson

I am always surprised by the range of species that turn-up on the record sheets from local recorders and visitors from pygmy shrews to pilot whales, micro fungi growing on dung and even other fungi, seaweeds, earwigs, ants, butterflies, bees, plant hoppers and much more. Whether they include common or rare species, found on beaches, in back gardens or mountain tops they are all important and greatly contribute to our knowledge of the composition of our flora and fauna and their distribution.

Some of our local recorders have a wealth of specialist knowledge; others are generalists with considerable expertise often covering both animals and plants, whilst others are just beginners. They are all generous, sharing their knowledge, helping others to acquire new skills and always ready to learn something new themselves. Throughout the year most recorders tend to beaver away quietly but from time to time we get together under the guidance of an expert to try to learn something about a group of species.

As part of the Natural Hebrides Project, OHBR has been providing opportunities for existing recorders and anyone with an interest in natural history to improve their identification skills. With the formation of the new Curracag group in Lewis and Harris we were keen to form a network of recorders in this area. The response to our introductory talks in Tarbert and Stornoway was encouraging, and it was a great disappointment that only one person participated in the insect day on Harris and the fungus walk in Stornoway. Fortunately the network further south is now becoming established and we have had good attendance at both our own events and on walks organised by Machair LIFE+.

We will be out and about throughout 2014 and anyone who has an interest in natural history is welcome to attend any of our events. These are advertised on the OHBR website ([www.ohbr.org.uk](http://www.ohbr.org.uk)), Outer Hebrides Biological Recording Facebook and Curracag Wildlife News ([www.curracag-wildlifeneeds.org.uk/](http://www.curracag-wildlifeneeds.org.uk/)). Records can be submitted at any time, full instructions are available on the OHBR website where you will also find an on-line form for submitting single records. We really would like to know what you have seen.

Christine Johnson Outer Hebrides Biological Recording

*This autumn produced a stunning displays of fungi at both woodland and grassland sites. An abundance of waxcaps provided plenty of challenges for the recorders who attended the Introduction to Grassland Fungi event at Ormaclait at the end of October.*



## Truffles in North Uist

Christine Johnson When foraging for fungi you never quite know what you are going to find. The eye is usually drawn to the large or colourful fruiting bodies but it is often the smaller insignificant fungi which can prove to be the more interesting and usually more challenging to identify. Sometimes the best finds catch the eye when looking at another specimen or when scrabbling around on hands and knees trying to take a photograph. This certainly applied to one of the most interesting fungi recorded in the Uists this autumn.

The word truffle has romantic associations of French or Italian peasants roaming the beautiful deciduous forests hunting for “black gold” the small knobby fungi beloved by gourmets which command £100s for a small tuber. Of the species native to Britain only the summer truffle is considered to be worth eating and with a distribution largely restricted to southern England I am not too optimistic about finding it in the Uists. However, the discovery of *Hydnотrya cubispora* the Cubed Fold Truffle was significant. On both occasions it was found quite by chance at two separate locations in the same woodland. There are only five other records for Scotland, which when you consider that it is small, pale yellowish brown and grows underground, is not too surprising. Truffles are hypogeous and to avoid desiccation have evolved to produce their fruiting bodies underground, although in some species they occur among leaf litter or vey near the surface. There is no mechanism for releasing the spores, they are liberated when the fruiting body decays or when it is eaten by invertebrates or small mammals.

British specimens of this fungus are usually associated with Sitka Spruce, *Picea sitchensis* which was introduced to Britain in 1831. *Hydnотrya cubispora* is probably not a native species and was thought to have been introduced from North America with the trees.

Note: Additional photographs can be seen on the Fungi of the Outer Hebrides website ([www.outerhebridesfungi.co.uk/species.php?id=264](http://www.outerhebridesfungi.co.uk/species.php?id=264))



## Another Fine Mess

Bill Neill

We all know about the value and importance of earthworms for the health of the soil, its structure, the recycling of nutrients and the drainage of our gardens and agricultural land.

But did you know that earthworms are under threat from the New Zealand Flatworm? Yes, New Zealand flatworms have been found in North and South Uist so are probably in Benbecula too and could be in your garden wrecking havoc. The New Zealand Flatworm eats earthworms.

So how do we recognise them and what can we do to prevent their spread?

A good way to find out if they are present on your land is to place some black plastic on the ground weighted down with something and then have a look underneath in a day or two. They are nocturnal so during the day they will be curled up underneath the black plastic. They look like small Swiss rolls; their characteristic resting shape is a flattened spiral. They are brownish purple with a pale buff coloured edge and underside. The Uists are an ideal breeding ground, they like mild damp conditions. When it gets cold they will retreat further into the soil. There are no approved chemical controls but to destroy them you can drop them into salt or a salt water solution. Hot water also kills them, or you can squash them, but take care as they are covered with sticky mucus that can cause skin irritation. Finally look after your black beetles; they may be the only known predators.

How did they get here? They are probably most easily moved from place to place in pot plants either as adult worms or as cocoons containing eggs. Cocoons resemble shiny blackcurrants and are between 4 to 11mm long and 3 to 8mm wide, juvenile flatworms emerge after about a month and are creamy white or yellow at first.

If you find any or want confirmation that what you have found is a flatworm contact Outer Hebrides Biological Recording [admin@ohbr.org.uk](mailto:admin@ohbr.org.uk) or The James Hutton Institute [info@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:info@hutton.ac.uk) or phone Bill Neill 01878 700237



*New Zealand flatworm  
coiled on black plastic*

## Ferrets

Bill Neil

Ferrets may look like attractive pets and have been used as props by comics and sent up trousers legs to raise a laugh, but they have a serious side.

The domesticated ferret comes originally from Europe; they have never been native to the Outer Hebrides nor are they directly related to the mainland polecat. They have been brought to the islands and released with the intention of reducing the numbers of rabbits, but there is a downside to these introductions.

When released ferrets may have a short term effect on reducing rabbit numbers but studies have shown that these effects are localised and temporary. However if they only ate rabbits they wouldn't be such a cause for concern, they are carnivores and it is when they turn their attention to other wildlife; birds and their eggs including hens and ducks that they cause problems. I have seen the results of their visiting a henhouse and it is not a pretty sight. After all the scientific name for the ferret is *Mustela putorius furo* which translates as 'stinky raging thief'

Ferrets are most commonly seen as road kill. If you stop and look the creamy under fur over most of the body, white ear margins and larger size will clearly differentiate it from the mink which is smaller and dark brown all over except for a small patch of white on the chin. After much hard work eradicating them it is hoped that mink will not return to the Uists and that they are now confined to the few remaining animals in Lewis and Harris where there is ongoing effort to finally remove them.

Recording sightings of ferrets will give a better understanding of their distribution in the islands. It will give an indication of their numbers and the effect they are having on our wildlife. Checking and recording will also help to confirm that mink are no longer present.

Send you records to Outer Hebrides Biological recording. [admin@ohbr.org.uk](mailto:admin@ohbr.org.uk) There is now a user friendly single record form on the web site or you can phone Bill Neill 01878 700237

Ashley Jackson



## Sperm Whale on South Uist

A dead Sperm Whale was found washed ashore at the mouth of The Roe on South Uist on 13th December. Estimated at 12metres in length it must have been an amazing sight to see the worlds largest toothed predator in the flesh. Skin and blubber samples have been removed by Ian and Bill at sent to the Scottish Marine Strandings Scheme - it will be interesting to see if we hear anything back with their findings. The Whale is now resting at Kildonan and is being recycled by Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Thanks to Stuart Taylor for posting the news on [www.curracag-wildlifeneews.org.uk](http://www.curracag-wildlifeneews.org.uk) and to Ian / Yvonne for the photographs.

## 'Meet the scientist' events

Matt Topsfield  
Curragag teamed up with Machair LIFE+ to host two 'meet the scientist' events in July, learning about the work being undertaken as part of the ecological monitoring of the Machair LIFE+ project.

On 29 July Dr. Mike Wilson, Museum of Wales and Dr. Alan Stewart, University of Sussex, demonstrated their Hemiptera (bugs with sucking mouthparts) sampling techniques to a group of about sixteen people. Their garden leaf blower, which has been modified to act in reverse as a vacuum was of much interest and proved to be very effective in sucking up the bugs from the vegetation. Mike and Alan shared their knowledge on what Hemiptera are, identifying the species found on the day and sharing some of their findings from their work across the Uists. This was their second visit of the Uists, having undertaken similar work in 2012. Their sampling reveals some interesting, but as yet unexplained variation in the occurrence of Hemiptera species within and between different machairs. Their initial work provides lots of questions and potential for further work to be undertaken on these taxa and we hope to see them in the Uists again.



*Mike (right) and Alan (centre facing) identifying bugs*



*Luckily Rick's quadrat finds a flowering plant*

On 31 July we met Rick Goater of Applied Ecology at Balranald Nature Reserve, where a group of more than twenty learnt about the botanical monitoring work being undertaken and some features of the machair flora. Rick explained that Applied Ecology's ecological monitoring has been undertaken on the same 62 plots throughout the lifetime of the project. Some were left scratching their heads when he described the Domin scale used to estimate plant cover/abundance. Simply, the cover of each species within a quadrat is given a score as a measure of its vertical projection on the ground, scores representing a range of percentage cover and the total of all Domin values can exceed 100% where plants overlap, i.e. in vegetation with a layered structure (see: [jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/pub06\\_NVCusershandbook2006.pdf](http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/pub06_NVCusershandbook2006.pdf)). As with any estimate there is some degree of subjectivity, so it is fortunate that Rick has consistently undertaken these surveys in all four years of monitoring. He also helped us identify the plant species growing on the machair, highlighting the differences in species diversity and composition between cropped, fallow and uncultivated areas. The day ended with a short wander on the machair to see what else was in evidence, and we were rewarded with excellent views of a singing corn bunting and two little gull hunting for insects over the corn.

All of the monitoring work undertaken by and on behalf of the Machair LIFE+ project is currently being collated and analysed, and the final report of the project will be published by the end of March ([www.machairlife.org.uk](http://www.machairlife.org.uk)).

# Curracag Photographic Competition 2013

Matt Topsfield Our photographic competition this year was tied in with the Outer Hebrides Biological Recording 'Hebrides Little Five', which provided the theme for entries, species that are:

- smaller than a corncrake;
- found on the Outer Hebrides; and
- easily identified.

The standard of entries was extremely high this year, which made a pretty tricky task for our judge, Anne MacLellan (formerly CnES Biodiversity Officer). However, the winning images were:

## Up to 15 years

- 1st Compass Jellyfish by Jayde Brannigan
- 2nd Sea Anemone by Skye Brannigan
- 3rd Bird's-foot Trefoil by Thomas MacAskill

## 16 - 20 years

- 1st Pentland Dragonfly by Angus Jenkins
- 2nd Common Winkle by Sandy Davidson
- 3rd Meadow Brown by Sandy Davidson

## 21+ years

- 1st Green-veined White by Chris Johnson
- 2nd Oyster Mushroom by Chris Johnson
- 3rd Purple Sandpiper by Ian Thompson

## Highly commended

- Juvenile Stonechat by Robert Beattie
- Six-spot Burnet by Paul Boyer
- Common Blue by Simon Davies

Congratulations to you all!

Curracag is delighted with the response to this year's competition and the quality of submitted images. The exhibition at Museum nan Eilean, Benbecula has now closed, but a selection of images will be shortly be on display at SNH's office in Stornoway. Also, keep an eye on the Curracag website and forum to find out where images will be on display across the Western Isles.

We are grateful to SNH who provided financial support to run this competition. Our thanks also go to all those who took part and we look forward to seeing your entries in future competitions. If anyone would like to help coordinate this years competition (not an overly onerous task), please get in touch with Matthew Topsfield on 07775 812036 or [maxwell\\_topside@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:maxwell_topside@hotmail.co.uk).

Here follows a small selection of the submitted images.



*Great yellow bumblebee by Paul Boyer*



*Green-veined White by Chris Johnson*



*Juvenile Stonechat  
by Robert Beattie*



*Common Blue by Simon Davies*



*Purple Sandpiper by Ian Thompson*



*Compass Jellyfish by Jayde Brannigan*

## Note from the editor.

Ashley Jackson  
Spring will soon be approaching, my favourite time of the year, and I'm sure we'll all be soon coming out of Winter hibernation and starting to get out and about more frequently once the worst of the cold, wet, windy weather is behind us. It would be great for Curracag members to get in touch for me with their wildlife news, views and observations. I'm keen to ensure that the newsletters remain interesting to you all and that we don't keep relying on the same people all the time for articles, let's keep it fresh and unpredictable, and for this to happen I will need your help. It would also be nice to hear from our younger members, there are no age restrictions on writing an article!

Well done and thank you to everyone who entered the Hebridean Little 5 photography competition, and to everyone that didn't get around to entering (including myself!), please do so this year - don't rule yourself out because you only have a camera on your mobile phone or because you have an inexpensive camera - a good photograph is as much to do with the choice of subject matter and having an eye for composition as it is the camera you use...so get out there and start practising.

Thanks also to everyone who submitted an article for this edition - I wonder how many of us would have spotted (or recognised) a Sea Slug or Goose & Buoy Barnacles? I know I'd have never noticed them, or even thought to look, my eyes are sometimes too used to looking for bird sized creatures to notice the smaller things.

In the next edition of the newsletter I would like to write an update on the Hedgehog and Mink trapping projects - if you have any information regarding this I'd be pleased to hear from you.

# Curracag

Outer Hebrides Natural History Society

## STOP PRESS!

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The Lewis & Harris Curracag group have just released an action packed 2014 events schedule, kicking off with an illustrated talk by Roddy MacMinn and Sophie Marsh of Scottish Natural Heritage, entitled "Extreme Surveying: Counting The Flannan Islands Puffins" on Thursday 27th February, 7:30pm at the Bridge Centre, Stornoway.

Please keep an eye on the Curracag website Events page for full details, it is always a good idea to check the website for any updates regarding the schedule before making your journey.