

Time: 20:40

Place: via Zoom

1. **Present:** Carol Miller, Chair welcomed 17 members of Highland Branch of SOC to the AGM

2. **Apologies :** Susan Seright and Peter Gordon

3.Minutes of 2021 AGM

The minutes were approved. Proposer: Mary Galloway Second: Al McNee

4. Matters arising

The bird box project at the Inverness Retail park was held in abeyance due to Covid restrictions with no nest boxes being installed. However, in mid March 2022 a new centre manager was appointed and the project would be discussed again.

5. Chairperson's Report

It has been another busy year for the committee. We have settled into the routine of online talks, but this year we have managed to re-introduce our outings programme. On the committee, our sincere thanks go to Mary Galloway – Secretary, Alister Clunas – Treasurer, Alex Joss – Highland Bird Report Editor, Pete Gordon – Highland Branch Website manager and Branch Representative to SOC Council, John Poyner – Highland Recorder, Al McNee – sightings contact and HRC Chairperson, Sue Seright – Minutes Secretary, Jon Clarke, Bob McMillan and Tony Laidler.

Indoor meetings

An excellent programme of talks was enjoyed by all who attended our cluster zoom talks. It has been lovely to join forces with Caithness and Orkney, and to welcome members from far and wide. We have had some top quality presentations beamed into our homes each month and our grateful thanks go to all of the splendid speakers: a wee reminder....

September – Ewan Weston – Golden eagles (56)

October – Stephen Rutt – Birds and nature Writing (36)

November – Helen Aiton – Quandale Skuas (61)

December – Darrell Stevens – Forsinard Reserve & Peatland Restoration (71)

January – Colin Leslie – Birds & Other Wildlife of Scotland's Forests (65)

February – Maggie Sheddan & Jude Lane – Gannets (60)

March – Sara Frost – Wildlife of St. Kilda and The Hebrides (63)

April – Kate Clarke – RSPB Speyside Wader Survey (42)

Average attendance at talks – 57

From September- December, SOC HQ are planning to promote an online talk on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. There will be an additional online Highland talk in October and December on the first Tuesday of the month.

6. Secretary's Report – Mary Galloway

I am pleased to report that, with relaxation of Covid rules, a full programme of 18 outings was organised. Many thanks to all the leaders who spared their time and their knowledge.

Most of the outings with photos can be seen on the Blogs page of the Highland Birds website www.highlandbirds.scot/blog Participants ranged from 3 persons to 43 (this large number was from the January Bird Race where 11 teams competed). Four outings – two in April and two in May are yet to come.

Areas covered have ranged from the West – Arisaig, Gairloch and Poolewe, and Lochaber; the north – Tain and Dornoch areas; the east – Whiteness Head, Nairn, Findhorn, Burghead, Lossiemouth, Spey Bay; the south – Strathspey, Nethybridge and Lochs south of Inverness; local Inverness and the Black Isle.

At the end of March, membership for Highland Branch stands at 290 individuals, one less than last year.

At present, a new programme is being put together for the next season, with some new volunteer leaders – to whom I must give our thanks. When finalised the programme will be on the SOC and Highland Birds website.

Carol Miller thanked Mary for all her hard work during the year.

7. Treasurer's Report – Alister Clunas

Income

All meetings were held by Zoom so there was no income from indoor meetings.

The Highland Bird Report is now available online from the SOC website so fewer printed copies are required. There is now no necessity for a separate Highland Bird Report Account. It has been closed and balance transferred to the Highland Branch Account.

Expenditure

There was little expenditure for the year.

The balance on the Highland Branch Account is £3924.09.

My thanks to John Carruthers for auditing the accounts.

There were no questions and the accounts were adopted

Proposer: Fiona Reid Seconder: John Carruthers

Carol thanked Alister for his work as Treasurer and for John Carruthers for auditing the accounts. John Carruthers has volunteered to continue his role next year.

8. Highland Bird Report – Alex Joss

Alex said the Highland Bird Report 2020 was published online in September 2020. 70 reports were ordered from a print on demand company. There are very few left.

The 2021 report is in progress. The species sections are a little behind but the photographs are ahead of schedule with lots submitted as are the articles that accompany the report.

Huge thanks are due to Alex Joss and those who help him edit the records which led to the speedy production of Highland Bird Report 2020.

9. Highland Recorder's Report - John Poyner

It was great to eventually get back to a more “normal” recording situation once restrictions were finally lifted in spring, and as expected many more records started to come in from visiting birders again with a total of 184,884 records entered into Birdtrack up from 179,150 in 2020.

I think Al will have covered the 2021 HRC statistics in his report so I won't duplicate this other than to say a big thank you for the superb effort Al and the Committee have made in assessing a steady flow of records I've received. Overall the submission rate has been good, especially from local birders. There were a handful of records as expected where nothing was received, extremely disappointing is the Short-Toed Eagle, a first for Scotland which has to date not been submitted to BBRC. This appeared in the recent edition of Scottish Birds as a

“First for Scotland” and I have since had discussion with Harry Scott the chief editor, who agrees an editorial caveat should have been added clarifying the current pending status. I think this will now become house style for other such articles, which I feel gave the readership the assumption of acceptance before records have been properly processed.

There were only 6 SBRC submissions which I found surprising, all accepted apart from Black Kite and a Serin. Disappointingly there were several other claims of Black Kite and almost certainly a bird in the area, however no other submissions were made. A hard one to get in to the bird report. Serin found by a visiting birder was a welcome first for Highland, with another claim poorly seen and a recording only not accepted. Definitely a bird we should be looking out for.

Moving on to BBRC submissions, there seems to have clearly been some internal administrative issues which are still ongoing. Several records were not acknowledged and emails were not responded to checking the status of these. I am still trying to sort out what is and what is not in circulation. Dave Pullan who sits on BBRC has been assisting with regards records he is aware are going through from Highland. Hopefully we will get these all through in time for the Bird Report.

By far the biggest task of the year was the RBBP submission, especially with the addition of Crested Tit, this was submitted on time by the end of November to Mark Eaton. He had also requested some updated best estimate figures for Goshawk, Short-Eared and Long-Eared Owls. With the help of Bob for his patch and a local Goshawk monitor we came up with some more realistic estimates than were being used by RBBP. Mark thought these were a better indication of these species populations for the region though still a work in progress. Breeding records of Crested Tit and RB Merganser showed improvement thanks to the species action publicity and is worthwhile continuing this for more awareness.

Finally I'd also like to express many thanks to the team who maintain the sightings webpage, collating records from various sources, social media etc. This also provides an invaluable tool for me to refer back to to check records/dates etc. alongside Birdtrack. As well as sourcing observers. Although it doesn't have an inbuilt search...perhaps Bob could advise from his site? One can be done by using the web browser's "find on page" function I discovered. The WhatsApp group between the editors and myself works very well in filtering out and discussing any oddities to keep the page as accurate as it can be before records are assessed.

Carol Miller thanked John for his report and for all his work during the year. John said he really enjoyed the Recorder role.

10. Highland Records Committee

The Highland Records Committee (HRC) operates on an annual basis and this summary for the AGM focuses mainly on the period 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021.

In 2021, 75 records were forwarded by the Recorder, John Poyner, for assessment. These records were for a remarkable 41 species and sub-species deemed rare in Highland terms. The species most assessed were Hobby, Scandinavian Rock Pipit, Tundra Bean Goose and Turtle Dove, each with 5 records. Overall, 66 records were accepted and 9 found to be not proven. This means that 88% of records were accepted. One record, that of a Ring-necked Parakeet, was accepted as correctly identified, but confirmed as an Escape. In addition to these records and knowing that there was a UK-wide invasion of Rose-coloured Starlings, HRC agreed that John Poyner would be able to accept, without reference to the committee, all records of this species showing photos of adult birds. There were 20 such records.

During 2021, the HRC was chaired by myself, ably assisted by 6 others: Martin Benson, Kate Clarke, Toby Green, Dean Macaskill, Marcus Conway and Stu Crutchfield. This was the second year that the committee had appointed a reserve member whose role is to assess any records that were submitted by a current HRC member and Stu fulfilled that role and had a number of significant records to assess. The appointment of a reserve member is made for two reasons: to remove the recorder completely from all aspects of record assessment (RCS-excepted, of course); also, it was hoped that a reserve member would be interested enough in the work involved to take up a full membership of the committee whenever someone decides to step down or is unable to assess any particular batch. Happily, Stu has done this. Both Martin Benson and Toby Green stepped down from the committee after sterling and valued work over several years. The committee asked Simon Eaves to join the committee as a full member and Steve Broyd as the reserve member and both agreed to do so. Their expertise in general birding identification and knowledge of Highland rarity issues is greatly welcomed.

HRC has again worked harmoniously and effectively throughout 2021 and I would like to express my thanks, once again, to all HRC members and to our recorder for their careful and valuable contributions and support.

Carol thanked Al for his report which had been circulated and thanked all the committee members. Welcome to new member, Simon Eaves, and reserve member, Steve Broyd.

11. Highland Birds Website - Pete Gordon

Website is very successful and well used. In the last 30 days there were 5619 unique visits, 9764 page views = average of 1.68 page views.

Many thanks go to Peter Stronach who is standing down, after 3 years, as Webmaster and I have agreed to take over this task from him, after some training.

Mike Crutch, Colin Leslie and I have updated daily sightings, with Sam and Debs Borthwick taking my place in March.

Blogs on Outings are updated regularly.

Please look at site and if you have anything to contribute send to highlandsocwebmaster@gmail.com

Many thanks to Pete, Mike Crutch and Colin Leslie for the smooth operation of Highland Sightings. Pete is stepping down from the sightings side of things, huge thanks to Pete. Sam and Debbie Borthwick have agreed to join the team of updaters.

12 Retiring Committee Members

Three people are retiring from the committee and one person (Carol Miller) is changing their role from Chair to standing as Treasurer. Tony Laidler has decided to resign from the committee. Thank you, Tony for your contribution during the past year. Sue Seright is also stepping down from the committee and from her role as Minutes Secretary. Many thanks, Sue for all your contributions to Highland Branch committee over the past 5 years. The third person to retire is Al McNee who has been on the committee for.....ever..... Carol asked John Carruthers to say a few words.

Al's contribution to Highland SOC goes back so far I think when he started he was in short trousers. He has held a host of roles: Secretary, Chair, Recorder (five years), Highland Records Committee member and Editor of Highland Bird Report.

It is hard to think of anyone who has been more committed. He deserves a gong! It's lucky he has a supportive wife.

Carol thanked John, and to Al for his huge contribution to Highland SOC.
The final person retiring is Carol Miller, Chairperson, having served 3 years.

Election of Office Bearers and Committee members

Chairperson

Alister Clunas has agreed to be our new Chairperson for a year.

Proposer: Alex Joss Seconder: John Carruthers

Welcome Alister, and thank you. Carol agreed to continue as chair until the end of the meeting.

Treasurer

Carol Miller has agreed to be Treasurer and to be Minutes Secretary

Proposer: Alister Clunas Seconder: Al McNee

Committee Member

Colin Leslie has agreed to join our committee

Proposer: Alex Joss Seconder: Mary Galloway

Committee Member

Gavin Woodbridge has also agreed to join our committee with a special remit for youth engagement.

Proposer: Al McNee Seconder: John Poyner

13. Highland SOC Council Representative's report – Pete Gordon

1. Resignation of President – unfortunately, Ian Bainbridge has had to resign through ill-health and Council thanks him for his good work. Ruth Briggs has been co-opted onto Council as Interim President, to be proposed as President at this year's AGM.
2. Birding Officer – Mark Lewis has been appointed and is “hitting the ground running”. He is leading a Steering Group on promoting use of BirdTrack, identifying gaps in current bird knowledge (based on Birds in Scotland), and has already started a program to facilitate and train Voluntary Seabirds at Sea Surveyors.

3. Subscriptions – an increase, the first for four years, will take effect from next year and will be announced in June's Scottish Birds.
4. Finance – there has been a small operating deficit, covered in last quarter by a grant. Easy Fundraising (eg Amazon Smile) has been promoted as an income stream at no cost to Members.
5. Conferences. The Spring Conference, originally planned for 2020, took place successfully in March 2022. Autumn Conference – likely to celebrate 20th Anniversary of Raptor Study Group - is hoped to take place in person at Pitlochry November 2022.
6. Staff – largely working from home. Waterston House open certain days to public.
7. Hon Treasurer – Richard Kerr, an accountant has taken up the post.
8. Membership – still rising, now over 3500 members.
9. A presentation to Council was made by Brewin Dolphin on the Club's investment strategy
10. Endowment Fund awards were made for a studies on Shillay Storm Petrels, sound-recording of Shetland and Outer Hebrides Wrens, East Renfrewshire Tree Sparrows, a Nightjar Survey in Borders using passive sound recording, Rousay Arctic Skuas and breeding Green & Wood Sandpipers.

15. Highland SOC Species Focus 2021

Highland SOC asked for help with the Species Focus last year – a citizen science project looking for records and evidence of breeding for 2 species: Red-breasted Merganser and Crested Tit

Both species are on RBBP list and Highland holds important breeding populations but surprisingly few actual breeding records.

In 2021, John Poyner has had an almost doubling of the records from those submitted in 2020. He had 53 Crested Tit records and 101 Red Breasted Merganser. We believe it has been a successful enterprise, so thanks for your efforts.

We are going to continue promoting our species focus this breeding year for Crested Tit and Red-breasted Merganser, and we would like to add another 3 species, so please also keep a look out for Whinchat, Spotted Flycatcher and Jay. Any sightings of these birds are welcome, but remember to especially record breeding evidence and submit your records online via BirdTrack. Let's see if we can double our breeding records for all these species. Many thanks.

16. AOB

No AOB was raised.

17. Thanks and Close of meeting

Alister Clunas thanked Carol Miller for her three years as a Chair. Carol has had a challenging time with the loss of face to face meetings and talks having to be held via zoom because of Covid 19. She has sailed through these challenges. I came to Highland just over three years ago and found a very friendly club. I hope to continue to promote the SOC as a friendly club that welcomes all who are interested in Scotland's birds.

Carol thanked everyone for attending the AGM and their continued support during the year and closed the AGM.

The meeting closed at 21:30