

Time: Tuesday 13 April 2021, at 8:40

Place: Via Zoom

Present: 28 members of SOC Highland Branch

**1**

**Opening of the meeting**

Carol Miller, Chairperson of the Highland Branch, welcomed all to the Zoom AGM.

**2**

**Apologies:**

There were no apologies.

**3**

**Minutes of 2020 AGM**

Adopted: **Proposer:** Peter Gordon **Seconder:** Tony Laidler

**4**

**Matters Arising:**

There were no matters arising.

**5**

**Chairperson's Report:** Carol Miller

**Thanks**

I would like to begin by saying that, despite the small matter of a global pandemic, this past year has been a busy one for the committee and others who have worked really hard to maintain the smooth running of the branch and some of our normal branch activities. 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 and Bob McMillan.

**Indoor meetings**

From September, indoor talks were transferred online via Zoom, and many of us had lots to learn about video linking with others. We seem to have muddled through and an excellent programme of talks was enjoyed by all who attended our cluster zoom talks. I must say that I have really enjoyed joining 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 – Dr Kenny Taylor – Puffins at the Outer Limits, from St. Kilda to Lofoten (45)

October – Dr John Calladine – Tracking Short-eared Owls (56)

November – David Jardine – Three Crows Sat Upon a Wall – Colonsay (64)

December – Bob Swann – Saving Branta and Chasing Scotland’s Dragons (55)

January – Al McNee – Scottish Birding 400 (61)

February – Stan de Prato – Warblers and other Migrants (83)

March – Simon Gillings - Nocturnal Migration – things that go *tseep* in the night (78)

March – Dr Mark Eaton – The work of the RBBP (64)

April – Dan Brown – A Trip to Siberia and the North Pacific (66)

April – Steve Willis – Birdsong and BirdTrack (42)

Average attendance at talks – 2020 - 41, 2021 – 62

Zoom cluster talks will continue up to the end of 2021.

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### **Secretary’s Report:** Mary Galloway

It is usual for me, in my report, to summarise outings for the past year. Sadly, due to Covid restrictions no outings were possible. However, a full programme for the next season has been arranged which will be published by SOC HQ in June/July. In the main, outings will replicate those that were cancelled.

Following on from members responses to the SOC Highland Survey August 2019, we have taken on board several suggestions. Outings therefore include a Beginners’ Birding Guided Walk; a Lochaber outing; and one to Gairloch and Poolewe where local members will lead or give assistance. Also information from the BTO on bird ID training courses has been shared with SOC members.

At the end of March, membership for Highland Branch stands at 291 individuals.

On the admin side, I have noted that several members are not receiving various emails from the SOC HQ. Members must give their consent to receive emails and there are 4 specific categories:

1. **General Club** news and events
2. **Local Branch** news and events
3. **Waterston House** and events
4. Bird related news, activities, special offers from **Third Parties** which include BTO courses

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If you wish to check or alter your consent form go to [www.the-soc.org.uk/members-area](http://www.the-soc.org.uk/members-area) log in and complete the form.

A request was received from the Manager, Inverness Retail Park for advice on types of bird boxes that would be suitable for a narrow strip of woodland at the rear of the shops. A site visit was carried out. At present they are awaiting funding for this project.

AGM Minutes will be posted on the SOC website.

The Chairperson thanked Mary for her report.

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**Treasurer's Report:** Alister Clunas

A copy of the audited, signed accounts was circulated previously.

There were no questions arising. The Accounts were agreed accurate.

**Proposer:** Bob MacMillan **Secunder:** Alan Jones

The Chairperson thanked Alister for his report and also John Carruthers for auditing the accounts this year and for volunteering to continue with this role, which was approved by the Committee.

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**Highland Bird Report:** Alex Joss

2019 Report. This was published on-line, free to download, on the publications pages of our website [highlandbirds.scot](http://highlandbirds.scot) in December 2020. To meet a known demand for hard copies we ordered 30 copies from Print2demand, at a price which allowed their sale at £10 per copy (+P&P if required). Demand was so brisk that we have subsequently ordered a further 40 copies, then a final 10, of which we have still about half left. Since then, I have been in discussions with two other SOC Branches, Clyde and Borders, who want to replicate our on-line publication. I have encouraged them to do so and have given them contact details for Print2demand.

2020 Report. To date, four of the eight species sections are fully edited by Pete and me and incorporated in the master draft for the whole report. We are currently working on two additional first drafts. I consider we are on target to have all eight species sections fully edited in time for the district summary authors to commence at the start of September. Meanwhile we are well advanced with the general parts of the report that can be written now. In addition to the district summaries, I expect the RBBP summary, the Ringing Report, 3-4 invited articles plus the proofreading and, last, the indexing to also be done in the autumn, so that the full report should be ready for publication in December. Feedback from purchasers of 2019 hard

copies indicates that we could safely order more than 30 copies of the 2020 report, probably 50 or 60, at a considerably lower cost per copy, so that we can offer them at £10, including P&P.

The Chairperson thanked Alex and all his bird report contributors for the production of Highland Birds 2019.

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### **Highland Recorder's Report: John Poyner**

For 2020 the majority of records came via BirdTrack, with 179,150 entered compared to 150,643 in 2019. This more remarkable with the limited number of visiting birders due to Covid 19. Around 40,000 were entered in to eBird, however eBird is still presenting some difficulties with access and accuracy of site data. It looks as if moves are being made for eBird to integrate with BirdTrack which will be very welcome. I do however have regular contact with the eBird reviewer for Highland Lynden Schofield and he is happy to forward any records that flag up and deal with contacting observers when necessary. This seems to be working well, giving the opportunity to pick up any important records sooner rather than later in the end of year download. As it is, there have only been a couple of instances anyway.

As well as HRC records covered by Al in his report, I received 8 SBRC records and glad to say all these were accepted, one of these Dusky Warbler a first for Highland. There were 9 BB rarities submitted, of these 5 have been accepted, 3 are still in circulation and one not proven (Lesser Grey Shrike). Another superb first for Highland was of course, the well watched Western Orphean Warbler.

As for records possibly lost, a report of a Black-Browed Albatross off Handa was interesting and seen well, however the observer has still not submitted any description despite promises and requests.

Without going in to too much detail, which would probably require a separate meeting in itself, in light of new research, the assessment of Scottish Crossbill records is currently undergoing a significant review, prompted by a recent (sonogram) submission which has been referred to SBRC. This will hopefully see some clear guidelines from SBRC regarding call assessment and dealing with future submissions at a local level. Watch this space.

We now have an updated Highland Bird list on the website, and many thanks to Bob Macmillan and Peter Stronach for getting this done.

On other matters, I was invited to a zoom meeting with the Carrbridge Capercaillie group last autumn concerning new measures to address disturbance and as a result of this new signage will be posted at key sites this year. I will also be helping trial a new App primarily given to estate workers for recording Capercaillie sightings.

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Finally, as social media now plays such a big part in reporting sightings, I would like to pass on many thanks to Peter Gordon, Colin Leslie and Mike Crutch for scouring the various outlets in the process of getting these on the website. As well as maintaining this faithfully every day! This is a big help in keeping an eye on records that may not otherwise get submitted via BirdTrack.

The Chairperson thanked John for his report.

**10****Highland Records Committee Report: Al McNee**

The Highland Records Committee (HRC) operates on an annual basis and this summary for the AGM focuses mainly on the period 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020.

In 2020, 81 records were forwarded by the Recorder, John Poyner, for assessment. These records were for 34 species and sub-species deemed rare in Highland terms. The species most assessed was Rose-coloured Starling, with 11 records. Overall, 72 records were accepted and 9 found to be not proven. This means that 89% of records were accepted. Almost all claimed sightings of rare birds in a Highland context have been backed up with descriptions from the observers. Inevitably, and despite appropriate efforts by John, one or two claims are unsupported by descriptions and this is known to have occurred with Common Crane and Rose-coloured Starling reports in 2020.

During 2020, the HRC was chaired by myself, ably assisted by 6 others: Martin Benson, Kate Clarke, Toby Green, Dean Macaskill, Andy Williams and Marcus Conway. This was the first year that the committee had appointed a reserve member whose role was to assess any records that were submitted by a current HRC member and Marcus fulfilled that role and had a number of significant records to assess. The appointment of a reserve member was made for two reasons: to remove the recorder completely from all aspects of record assessment [in previous years the recorder would act as the reserve assessor and then have to advise observers of decisions, including not proven ones, leading to possible awkwardness]; 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 decided, or was due, to step down. Happily, Marcus has done this and has replaced Andy from 1 January 2021. We now have a new reserve member of HRC, Stu Crutchfield.

Since the start of 2021, reflecting what is happening in the wider birding environment, the committee is increasingly assessing not just written records, photographs and drawings in record submission, but also sound and satellite tracking files which make the work more interesting and complex.

HRC has worked harmoniously and effectively since the start of 2020 and I would like to express my thanks to all HRC members and to our recorder for their careful and valuable contributions and support.

There were no questions.

The Chairperson gave thanks to HRC members Martin Benson, Kate Clarke, Toby Green, Dean Macaskill, Andy Williams and Marcus Conway, and welcome to new member Stu Crutchfield.

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### **Highland Birds Website:** Pete Gordon

A brief rundown on the website was given. Pete acknowledged that it was not perfect and asked members for suggestions on how to improve the site.

There were no questions arising.

The Chairperson thanked Pete, and the other submitters, Mike Crutch and Colin Leslie for a smooth operation of Highland Sightings.

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### **Highland SOC Council Representative's Report:** – Pete Gordon

Pete's report was circulated previously.

1. All **meetings** were held remotely, using Zoom, in June, September, November and March.
2. **Finance** – net income is up, helped by Covid payments from East Lothian Council, lower office and meetings expenses although art sales income was down. Investments have more than recovered from their earlier fall.
3. **Membership** – has increased with, for example, 69 new members from December 2020 to early March 2021. The multiple categories of membership are to be re-examined.
4. **Scottish Birds** – a free, digital version of the June number is to be hosted on the SOC Website (there were over 20,000 views of an earlier, free, number) the intention thereafter being that Members can access a password-protected digital version as well as receiving a hard copy. Harry Scott is to take over from Ian Andrews as Co-ordinating Editor with a revised editorial structure.
5. **Birding Officer** – External funding will be sought but Council was unanimous that this full-time post should go ahead. From draft job description, duties include “working with Membership, Branches and Staff to develop and fund a programme of na-

tional SOC activity.”

6. **Research grants** - none were successful this year and not all successful applications for last year went ahead due to Covid restrictions.
7. **Conferences** – Spring 2021 is to be held online. Autumn 2021 – option being kept open for now for this to be held at Pitlochry but, if necessary, it will be held remotely with mailing in September. Spring 2022 to be hosted by Moray Branch at Elgin, postponed from 2020.
8. **Other Engagements.** The planned Young Birders’ Training Camp, Isle of May Residential Camp, Recorders Meeting and Branch Reps Meeting in Grantown are all postponed until 2022.
9. **Bullying and Harassment** – the Equality Statement on the SOC Website is to include a policy on Bullying and Harassment, to apply to Members and Volunteers.
10. **Honorary Treasurer** – a replacement is sought for Andy Thorpe who has indicated his intention to resign.

The Chairperson thanked Pete for his report. There were no questions arising.

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### **Election of Office Bearers and Committee members**

There are no changes to the present committee apart from a proposal to further increase our **area** representation by inviting **Tony Laidler** from Lochaber to join our committee. Tony is willing to stand.

**Proposer:** Pete Gordon

**Secunder:** Alex Joss

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**Highland SOC Species Focus 2021**

Highland SOC are asking for your help with our **Species Focus** this year – a citizen science project for a ‘stay at home’ summer.

Whilst out and about bird watching in Highland, we would like you to pay special attention to two resident bird 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. Please submit ALL records of sightings, in addition, please make a note of any signs of **breeding** which you observe. This adds hugely to the value of your sightings.

Crested Tit

- Records of Crested Tits are especially wanted from the N and W extremes of their range, away from their core areas.

Red-breasted Merganser

- When identifying Red-breasted Merganser, be careful with similar Goosander. There is a useful BTO Bird ID video which compares the 2 species
- If you see young RB Mergansers, please try to estimate age and size, such as tiny, half-grown or virtually full grown

If you see a pair of RB Mergansers or Cresties in suitable habitat early in the season, please try to revisit later in the season to check for breeding success.

Submit your records online via **BirdTrack** or you can send them in an email to me (Carol Miller) and I will enter them for you.

Please include date, location (6 figure grid ref if possible), number of birds and signs of breeding. Check out BTO breeding codes.

- Be careful not to disturb birds during the breeding season – view from a safe distance and do not linger.
- If on holiday somewhere in the Highlands, check out there too and submit your records.
- More info on Highland Birds and SOC website. Please encourage others too

Let's see if we can make a difference and improve our Highland breeding records of these 2 species. ...and finally, **Thank you!!**

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One question was asked regarding the most favoured habitat for breeding RB Mergansers. Bob McMillan replied: in the west Highlands they breed on salt water, heads of lochs, narrow inlets and islands. There are also big moulting flocks. He was not aware of any on freshwater.

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**AOB:** There were no matters arising.

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The Chairperson gave thanks to everyone for their continued support during this strange year, as there was no other business, she closed the AGM and thanked everyone for attending.

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**Close of AGM:** The meeting closed at 9.20pm.