

TWIC Spring Conference, Saturday 16 March 2013

40 people attended The Wildlife Information Centre's (TWIC) Spring Recorders' Conference at Newtown St Boswells last Saturday despite inclement weather. The programme included a range of talks on the theme of upland recording and conservation. Presentations were given by individuals representing a range of organisations, including Hugh Chalmers (Tweed Forum); Andy Tharme (Scottish Borders Council); David Dodds (David Dodds Associates Ltd.); Brian and Sandy Coppins (The British Lichen Society); Alan Heavisides (Lothian & Borders Raptor Study Group) and Pip Tabor (Southern Uplands Partnership).

TWIC Director, **David Campbell**, welcomed everyone to the conference. David talked about some of the developments that are occurring at TWIC, including the new (interim) logo (Fig 1 below). TWIC now have a strong social media presence on Facebook and Twitter and **Graeme Wilson**, TWIC Manager, indicated that there is now a TWIC Manager Twitter feed in addition to the TWIC Twitter feed, which he will use to communicate more personal views on TWIC matters (see twitter.com/TWICManager). There are also plans to develop a LinkedIn page for TWIC in the coming weeks.



Figure 1: TWIC (interim) LOGO

Hugh Chalmers, Collaborative Action Coordinator at Tweed Forum, spoke about the Carrifran Wildwood ecological restoration project in the Southern Scottish Uplands (Fig 2). This project aims to bring back the type of 'wildwood' vegetation that existed before people started practicing settled agriculture, approximately six thousand years ago. In order to speed up the process of scrub woodland colonisation, half a million locally sourced native trees have been planted in the valley, including Juniper from Lothian and Borders sites. The initial botanical survey by Ben Averis is scheduled to be repeated next year; it will be interesting to note how the vegetation composition and diversity has changed in the decade or so since the first trees were planted at Carrifran. Volunteer input has been a key component of the project. Hugh will be leading a weekend high planting camp to Carrifran in April 2013. For further information contact Hugh Chalmers, tel: 07821 374 592, Email hughchalmers@live.co.uk. There is also a dedicated Carrifran Wildwood project website www.carrifran.org.uk/.



Figure 2: Hugh Chalmers presenting his talk on Carrifran (c) Mike Beard.



Andy Tharme, Ecology Officer at Scottish Borders Council, provided an overview of Land Use Strategy, a high-level long term agenda for the future use of land in Scotland, which was published in March 2011 under the Climate Change Act (Fig 3). The Strategy aims to get the best from the land and focusses on opportunities for multi-benefits, based on an ecosystem approach, climate change adaption and people engagement. Scottish Borders is one of two regional pilot areas (the other is Aberdeenshire), which will test the feasibility of delivering the strategy. The results of this 2 year pilot will inform the national strategy in 2016. As yet it is unclear what the strategy will look like. However, the use of existing habitat data and early stakeholder engagement will be key components of the project. There is also a possible role for biological records, for example in flagging habitats of conservation interest. For a short guide to the strategy, visit the Scottish Government website www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Countryside/Landusestrategy.

Figure 3: Andy Tharme spoke on Scotland's first Land Use Strategy (c) Mike Beard.

David Dodds of David Dodds Associates Ltd. covered the interesting topic of upland bats. There is a common misconception that bats do not use uplands, which is based on a number of assumptions about bats foraging and roosting requirements, e.g. the requirement for mature trees to roost in and lines of trees / hedgerows etc. for cover when commuting. As a result of a number of bat surveys for wind farm developments, the situation appears to be different from that previously supposed. It seems that bats will feed in the open and will travel outside of secure routes, including across open moorland. It has also been demonstrated that bats will hunt around upland conifer plantations and will migrate over upland sites. Hibernacula and swarming sites have also been discovered in upland caves and mines. Unfortunately, none of these behaviours are fully understood, meaning that the risk posed by wind farm developments to bats cannot be properly understood. David therefore recommends a precautionary approach to wind farms.



Figure 4: Myotis species (*Myotis* spp.) (c) David Dodds 2007

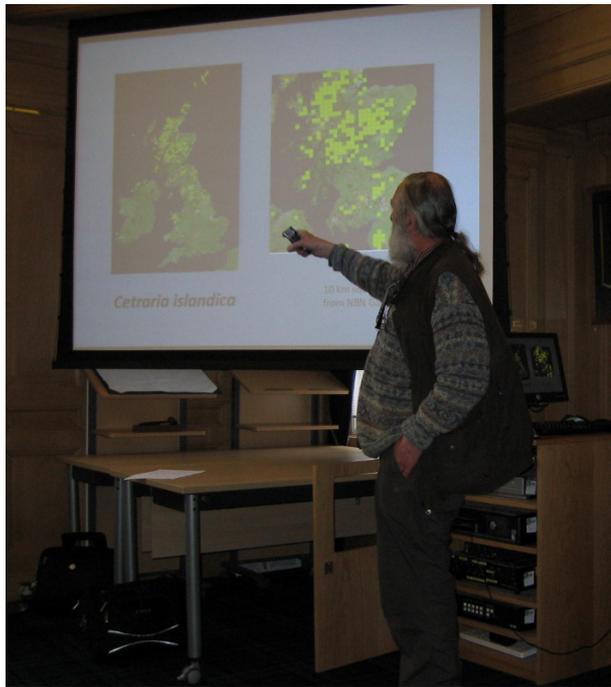
Over a buffet lunch the delegates had time to browse display items from a range of organisations.

After the break, there was an Open Mike session, which included the following speakers and topics: **Natalie Harmsworth** (TWIC Public Survey Update and Events); **Elaine O'Mahony** (Bumblebee Conservation Trust's Surveys & Workshops) and **Christine Johnston** (The Scottish Biodiversity Information Forum, SBIF).

The **Bob Saville Award** was presented by Graeme Wilson. The recipient was **Ray Murray** of the Scottish Ornithologists Club (SOC) and was awarded for 35 years dedication to biological recording. Unfortunately, Ray

could not attend the conference. The award had therefore been presented prior to the conference and a short video clip of the presentation was re-layed at the conference.

The first talk of the afternoon was on the topic of Mountain and Moorland Lichens and was presented by **Brian and Sandy Coppins** of The British Lichen Society. Sandy presented the first part of the talk and described some of the colourful and distinctive species that can be found in the Scottish Uplands. These included *Siphula*



ceratites, which she likened to white porcelain and *Solorina saccata*, which she dubbed the 'easy' lichen because of the bright orange colour to its underside like an easy jet plane. Sandy covered some of the places locally one may look for upland lichens. Fence posts for example can be little havens for lichens in a 'sea' of unpromising habitat. Brian went on to show distribution maps of a selection of upland lichens and indicated that even people with a rudimentary level of knowledge can help to highlight important sites by learning to identify a few key species that are indicative of good habitat. The delegates were set a challenge to go out and look for *Cetraria islandica*, a species that can be found on Scald Law in the Pentlands (Fig 5). The older records for this species are not well referenced. Send your lichen records to Dr Brian Coppins (Lichen Recorder for Scotland) lichensEL@btinternet.com, with a photograph if you wish. Brian will pass on Lothians and Borders records to TWIC.

Figure 5: Dr Brian Coppins demonstrating the distribution of *Cetraria islandica* (Iceland Lichen) (c) Mike Beard.

Monitoring Breeding Birds of Prey in Lothian and Borders was the topic covered by **Alan Heavisides**, Chairman of the Lothian and Borders Raptor Group. This group is one of 11 local raptor groups that cover virtually all of Scotland (the exception being Shetland). Systematic monitoring of raptors in Britain started in the early 1960s and almost immediately yielded useful data, for example demonstrating raptor declines due to organochlorine pesticides. Today, long term datasets exist for a number of raptors. The Lothian and Borders Raptor Group was formed in 1983 and since 2003 has published an annual report with summary information on raptor population changes. Monitoring includes the Raven; an 'honoury raptor' species. Unfortunately, persecution is still an issue for some raptors. As a result there are sensitivities regarding the data. Alan indicated that some raptor populations such as the Peregrine are doing well, whilst others like the Hen Harrier are experiencing population declines. Alan encouraged anyone interested in raptor recording to get in touch and to try it. The Local group currently has 29 members. Their website www.scottishraptorgroups.org/areas/lothian_and_borders.php is shortly going to be re-vamped, so watch this space. There is also a website dedicated to the Sparrowhawk monitoring project in Edinburgh, a hitherto relatively under-recorded species in this area. See www.Edinburghhawkwatch.org.uk.

Concluding the afternoon session was **Pip Tabor** (Southern Uplands Partnership) who described the results of Black Grouse Monitoring in the Southern Uplands. The context to the project was results from a national survey which demonstrated a severe national decline in Black Grouse, with populations in SE Scotland being particularly badly affected and showing a 69% reduction between 1995 and 2005. Initial plans for a nature based tourism project were rejected on account of concerns that such a scheme would put additional pressure on Black Grouse. Instead a 3 year survey of lek sites was initiated. This was completed in 2012 and highlighted four key areas for Black Grouse: The Moorfoots, Bowhill, Langholm / Newcastleton Moors and Stanhope Tweedsmuir. The Lammermuirs lost Black Grouse in the harsh winter of 2010 and so far have failed to re-establish in this area, probably due to a lack of scrub / tree cover. Some management actions, for example marking dangerous fences in order to reduce bird collisions, have proved effective. Future plans include strategic guidance for the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP), a possible extension into South Lanarkshire and national monitoring of fixed 5km squares. Volunteers for surveys in 2013 are welcome. Contact Pip Tabor on piptabor@sup.org.uk for further information.

Sarah Eno, TWIC Director, summed up the conference by commenting on the value of long-term biological datasets for conservation. That concluded a very enjoyable conference event.