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## TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

### NEWSLETTER No. 22

### FEBRUARY 2010

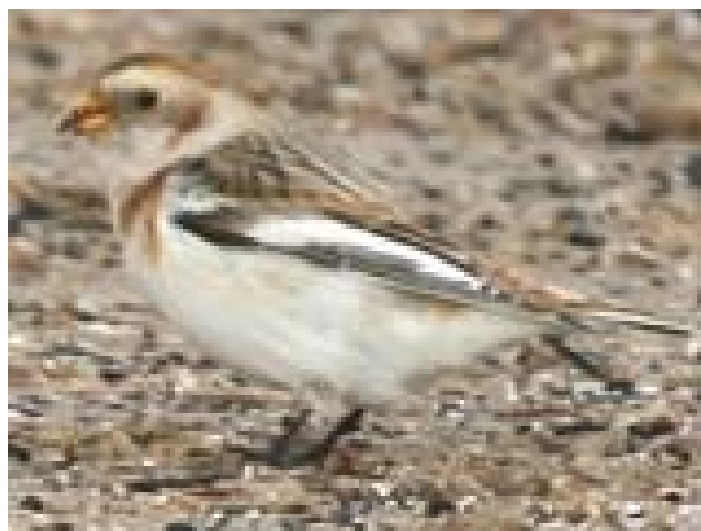
Welcome to the winter edition of the Reserve Newsletter. And what a winter we are having; according to the Met Office it's the fifth snowiest and coldest on record – so far; the snow covered landscape has been spectacular; the dark hues of the trees highlighted against the totally white background is breathtaking. The frozen lochs were almost birdless at times and I have seen roe deer walking out over the surface. It's amazing, for a while at least.

In this issue we bring you some good news - wonderful observations including a first for me, management updates; new species found; a good story all the way from Hungary and some excellent feedback from last summer's fantastic Family Day Event: "Monster Fun".

This edition also has an environmental message. SNH have to manage our resources more sustainably and responsibly I hope that some readers would like to receive an electronic copy of the newsletter in future thereby reducing our usage. Please email if you would like to change and provide an address.

Whilst we have had several weeks of snow and ice, it does have some benefits, making it easier to observe the many different tracks of the animals that use the sites. Next time you are on the Reserve watch out for the signs on the ground.

What else is going on in this edition? Once again the last six months have seen a tremendous amount of management and monitoring work carried out; another new species recorded and where have the seals gone? All will be revealed.



**Snow bunting** Image by kind permission from Jacqui Herrington

Tom Cunningham

Reserve Manager

*There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar love not Man the less, but Nature more.*  
- Byron

## **TENTSMUIR NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE**

### **TENTSMUIR POINT**

I start with a moan (oh not another one of his moans I hear you say) and something that really perplexes me and many other people. Why do visitors not keep a safe good distance away from the seal pups? The few pups that were born on the foreshore this autumn had a very stressful time. We had visitors tormenting the pups by staying too close and staying far too long. I even had visitors phoning me on their mobiles while walking along with the pup who was trying to escape! We all know it is a magical moment to be close to these mammals but really it isn't fair on the young pup or the mother. One pup was abandoned and had to be rescued by the SSPCA, probably as a result of visitors' actions. The majority of visitors are well informed and appreciate this. Please keep a distance away and move on quickly and leave the pups alone.

In fact I have several pleas. The seal numbers on the two colonies that haul out on the Abertay sandbars are dropping and we do not know the reason why, although one explanation could be the disturbance caused by visitors' who walk way out onto the sandbars to get closer to the seals. Some have dogs off the lead and they have been observed running at the colony and causing great panic amongst the seals. WHY do they do it especially when they may endanger their own lives through drowning? Its worth remembering that the Broughty Ferry lifeboats were again the most called out lifeboat station in Scotland for the fifth time in the last six years. Coxswain Murray Brown kindly provided this advice:

"Over the years Broughty Ferry Lifeboats have rescued many people cut off by the tide walking out onto the Abertay Sand Banks. There have been on a few occasions' very close calls. Great care must always be taken if people are to attempting to walk out to them. The tide does not always come in facing you but comes in behind you and cuts off your path. I would not advise anyone to attempt such walks."

Of course it isn't just the seals that suffer, the bird species also suffer from these same irresponsible people.

Enough of a moan or two, but you can see the need to balance nature with people. We encourage people to visit our wonderful places; however we need to show respect and act responsibly. When you think about it we are walking in their habitats, walking around their homes and we are the guests.

### **MANAGEMENT**

The Limousin cattle were removed from the site in October and returned to the byres on Scotsraig Farm to overwinter. Their grazing effect over the site was excellent. You may have seen them taking in the sun on the foreshore, appreciating the sea breeze which kept the pesky flies off them.

The ten year old wind pump on the Great Slack finally gave up. The casing cracked on the turntable head and, as it was no longer efficient, it is being replaced with a modern equivalent. Contractors are working on the tower installing a dual green energy device. Replacing the old wind mill will be a solar panel, wind generator and battery back-up system which will pump water onto the Great Slack over winter. This management is rebalancing man's intervention through the adjacent forest where the efficient ditch management has affected the water which would have naturally filtered through onto the slacks in the winter months.

The annual maintenance of the sea fences will take place in Spring after the high tides and hopefully the worst of the storms. The sea froze around the south sea fence and resulted in many posts popping out. It's quite remarkable to observe sea water frozen to a depth of six inches.

Other management tasks include hand pulling the many pine seedlings that try and grow in the heath and dunes. The crow and grey squirrel controls will start again in early Spring as well as the ongoing annual herbicide treatment of the flora target species (mainly all tree species, gorse and broom).

## **THE DYNAMIC COASTLINE**

The transformation of the foreshore and dunes has again been breathtaking as well as awe-inspiring. Ever wondered how many tons of sands are moved around with each tide or storm? A little dune erosion was experienced in early winter. However, lately the foreshore build up and the long narrow tidal channel has moved away from the dune edge to flow directly out to sea further south. Will we see the dune and foreshore build up again? We wait in anticipation.

Erosion along the dune edge eased a little especially in the old observation tower area, now called the Green Hut area. However, there has been erosion at the southern end of the Great Slack which now touches the dune edge. What will the next tides reveal? The storms and high tides have again pushed flotsam and sand well in land and thankfully erosion was negligible and the flora should push its way through the sand and the mainly natural sea debris.

The southern end of the Reserve and southward towards the beach adjacent to Kinshaldy car park continues to accrete at a quite incredible rate. The marram and lyme grass quickly colonises and consolidates the young dune edge as it grows eastward sheltering the dune system behind it.

The northern finger of sand dune spit continues to creep further into the Tay and hopefully the sand dune system will continue to grow behind it. These are both excellent areas to observe and study plant colonisation and sand dune development. If you would like to know more about these fascinating studies please contact me for further details.

## **EDUCATIONAL PACK**

The second edition of the Education Pack was printed and distributed to every school in Fife, Dundee and Angus, as well as requests from schools further afield, and continues to be in demand through promoting and by word of mouth. This magnificent education resource can be enjoyed by everyone; have a go with the activities and the benefits by looking at the pack on our website – see the front page. Helen Waggot of Forfar Academy recently said their geography department thought it was a “fantastic” resource and they have been using it throughout the academic years.

School interest picked up after the summer holidays and we were busy with High Schools and several Primary Schools. Even on cold wet days the students enjoy a day away from the desks in the fresh air and observe the stunning sights all around them.

## **WILDLIFE UPDATE**

For three weeks over the Christmas period the snow covered landscape was indeed a very pretty picture and the footprints left behind by many animals and birds just let us know how busy it really is.

A young white tailed sea eagle hung around for several weeks and was beautifully pictured by local bird enthusiast Rob Ford and the bird was admired by many visitors.

Among the list of over wintering birds are the beautiful little snow buntings and volunteer bird expert Paul Blackburn observed 23 this month, a superb record!

Summer bird counts were exceptional with swallows (1200 peak count) recorded in July. The tern colonies also did very well with common tern (950), arctic tern (120), sandwich tern (637) along with turnstone (28), sand martin (6) and a wonderful sighting of 600 gannets which must be a record for Tentsmuir Point. Lapwing too had a good season on the Point where 150 were recorded.

Autumn was full of colour and sound with the unique piping call of the golden plover (360). For minutes on end the gold spangled plovers may indulge in aerial manoeuvres, turning, twisting and diving headlong in unison high over the estuary and heath. Each performance ends in a final swoop and a flicker of white underwings at the moment of landing. Other autumnal observations included ringed plover (300) (two pairs hatched two young each), grey plover (340), knot (160), twite (22), common teal (18), sanderling (180) and common scoter (67) were observed

Pinkfoot geese have suffered badly from the severe cold and snow covered feeding grounds and many flew further south. However, over 2000 were recorded at the Point in October. Other species and numbers recorded are: Greylag goose (160), eider duck (2300), cormorant (240), an amazing record of dunlin (1250), oystercatcher (480), red breasted merganser (26) and long-tailed duck (18).

My grateful thanks go to Bill Alexander and Paul & Ruth Blackburn who carry out the observations along with our staff observations when we are out and about.

Another first for the Reserve and Fife was revealed by moth expert Duncan Davidson who has accumulated a number of firsts for the site. The dotted carpet moth was observed on one of Duncan's evening forays and this species now brings the moth records up to 169 species.

Another first for the site was a chafer beetle called *Euchlora dubia*.

We had a very good butterfly season and eighteen species were recorded. Some of the peak counts and highlights were: Peacock (800), small copper (43), ringlet (52), painted lady (202), green hairstreak (10), dark green fritillary (14), grayling (35) and two small pearl-bordered fritillary were observed. My grateful thanks go to Anne-Marie Smout, Daphne MacFarlane Smith, Gillian Fyfe, Ruth Blackburn, Ailsa Malcolm and my colleague Elspeth Christie who carry out the monitoring every week on the two transects.

## **MORTON LOCHS**

### **MANAGEMENT**

In a very busy period my colleague Alex, and on occasions with foresters Graham Paul & John Murray, volunteers Iain Jamieson & Eve Schulte and occasionally Elmwood College Conservation students, carried out the task of scrub cutting the gorse and broom and then burning the brash on Garpit Moor (formerly known as the north plantation). This was a huge task and a lot of work in one large area as we continue to control and eliminate this ubiquitous plant throughout the site, just a pity the heather was such a strong grower!

Contractor Dave Mackie and team came in for a few weeks and continued the annual herbicide of all our target species including the rampant bracken, other target species and reeds in the lochs. The work they carried out is of an exceedingly high standard and continues to exceed our expectations.

The Scotsraig Farm Limousin cattle came off the site in October and they grazed throughout the site, as part of the management of the site. Once again I am grateful to Robert Lamont, sons Rob and John and cattleman Jock.

The Fullerton bird hide stair was replaced and now visitors of all abilities and ages will be able to climb up to the bird hide with relative ease. The excellent construction was completed by the Gilleard Brothers and it may be some time before we see Ron and Craig at Morton Lochs again.

The Morton access road was regraded again in November. However, it was like an ice rink for a few weeks after the snow and ice formed. Today it's in a relatively good condition.

We started work on a third heather seeding plot on Garpit Moor, contractor Patrick Bowden Smith and his colleague Calum have prepared the ground but the soil is too cold and wet to sow the precious seed. We will wait until early Spring to complete the work.

The western margins of the north loch were choked by dense juncus and grasses and I took the decision to open up parts of the loch side to recover silted up shallow pools. This month local contractors A & J W Black plant hire, who have a long history of working on the lochs and go back to the early 1970s completed the work. Jack, will retire in February has run the family business for many decades and will be a sad loss to people like ourselves. Expert excavator driver (try saying that on a Saturday evening) Dave Simpson is an absolute gem to work with and has many years work experience, knew exactly where he had carried out the management work in the 1970s and completed a rare job this month. The shallow margins and bare soil will be an excellent habitat for dabbling ducks especially for the teal. My colleague Sarah Eaton will shortly complete her research as to why their numbers are dropping at Morton Lochs, I'll keep you posted.

Management planned for the Spring and Summer months ahead include: increasing the scrub cutting on Garpit Moor, herbiciding the target species including reeds, bracken, gorse and broom; a mammoth task but we are winning. Trapping mink and grey squirrels will also continue. In response to the requests from various users of the Fullerton bird hide, it has been agreed to install waterproof cushions for the benches. Providing a little comfort for visitors who normally stay that bit longer watching the wildlife.

Volunteer Andrew Ford continues the management of collecting data from our hydrological monitoring system around the Morton Lochs and surrounding area which will give us a better understanding of the hydrology of the area. One of the data recorders, which are made in the USA failed and had to be replaced. The manufacturer is fascinated as they have never had a cable insulation breaking down, we wait the test results.

## **WILDLIFE UPDATE**

There have been some rare observations and great sightings and a first for me around the Lochs.

No word yet back from Edinburgh Zoo on the condition of the beaver. Maybe it's escaped!

I first glimpsed an unusual scurrying in the hedge opposite my office window and thought at first it might be an escaped ferret but no it was ermine stoat, the first I've ever observed in Fife. I later found out there are two in this area and another one was observed at Morton Lochs. Wonder if it was the snow covered landscape that triggered the winter coat?

The mute swan families have had a mixed year, the south loch family produced one young cygnet but it obviously didn't like the surrounds and was found wandering about the Morton Farm land. A few weeks later the wanderlust cygnet was found dead in the north loch, probably drowned by the north loch male.

The north loch pair hatched seven eggs and all was well until two disappeared and then a few months' later two cygnets took to the forest and were later observed being stalked by a fox and were never seen again. The adults and three cygnets remain. It's a hard life in Mute swan world.

Another green sandpiper was observed in July which indicates this species are using the lochs. Recently among many species observed are woodcock, snipe, singing dunnock, displaying woodpigeon and great spotted woodpecker. The bird species list stands at 120 birds recorded at the Lochs over the past ten years. One of my favourites is sightings of the blue dart: the kingfishers haven't been as shy and elusive this year.

The otter has been also observed by many visitors and we have been fortunate to see the wake left behind as it swims away from us. I'm sure the female raised another three kits this season.

Orange tip butterflies had a good season with a maximum count of 12. By far the best day was when 156 ringlets were observed. Thanks go to Gerry Callaghan for carrying out great monitoring and recording.

## **IRRESPONSIBLE VISITORS**

Ok, in for one moan I might as well make it THREE! It's not getting any better with dogs off the lead, dog poo litters the tracks, footpaths and verges at both Morton Lochs and Tentsmuir Point. Used poo bags left behind, what's that all about? I just cannot understand the actions of these irresponsible dog owners.

It's a pity a day out can be spoiled by the actions of others.

***BAG IT. TAKE IT HOME TO BIN IT!***

## **KIDS CORNER**

Well, it didn't take off as much as I'd hope but on the other hand, seeing the many enthusiastic happy smiling faces enjoying the activities at the Family Day Out was brilliant and is sometimes better than a thousand words!

Still, if anyone has a child who would like to write a few lines about what they think of their day. So please let me know, email or write me a story about what you saw, how you felt, or if there anything you would like to do or see on the Reserve sites?

To encourage you we'll have a competition with a £10 book token for the prize. Write a poem about the Reserve or your visit to the Reserve. The winner will receive a £10 book token and the best poems will be in the next Newsletter. Send the poems to my address at the back of this newsletter to reach me by 31 May 2010.

## **WHAT'S ON**

The tenth family day out "Monster Fun" was, well, hmmm (thinks?)..... the best way that I can describe it is "the best one ever" and that probably doesn't do it justice. I don't normally enjoy the day on the day as I'm usually a bit too busy, stressed out, making sure everyone else is enjoying it. However, this year every single person, young and not so young got involved and the feedback was mind-blowingly wonderful. Every activity was superbly led and booked up by enthusiastic kids just dying to get involved. And then..... mesmerised by Dr Bunhead's tremendous scientific fun experiments and activities.... If you weren't there, you missed a grand day out!

Feedback was amazing, as visitors left the site at the end of the day there were expressions of thanks and how much fun and enjoyment they had. Kids clutching their craft work, happy smiling faces and also several emails I received, including these two examples:

Lynda Oxley wrote about her great day out:

Well, it may have been my first Tentsmuir NNR Family Day however, it certainly won't be my last! What a fantastic day out and all for free.

The whole day was well organised by Reserve staff and ensured that we all had a fun day out, whatever age. My son Daniel had great fun in the craft tent and in particular the 'Tentsmuir on a twig' event. He loved the fact he could take his twig home and re-fill it with fresh flowers, which he has done several times since. Although the star attraction was Dr Bunhead this was definitely his favourite part of the day. For me a definite highlight was the free biscuits....mmmm! (They were so good I had to sneak another one.....oops!) What a truly fantastic, FREE day out in the countryside for all the family, even the slight rain we had did not dampen spirits as there was far too much fun to be had! A big thank you to everyone involved in making the day a big success, looking forward to next year already.



### **Enjoying the Treasure Hunt**

Claire Deas wrote in to say:

Tentsmuir is a fantastic place for everyone and the Open day proved so, I came along with my kids Megan 10 and Kirsty 2.

Megan & Kirsty enjoyed making dragonflies that still hang in our kitchen today (they are good). We all loved seeing the seals through the telescopes, it was amazing! Kirsty went on the mini monster hunt and was excited to find a caterpillar that turns into a cinnabar moth, she was truly fascinated! Pencils, note books, seeds and more, the reusable bags were filled with great goodies to take home.

Dr Bunhead, what a well organised & excellent show, Tentsmuir staff again provided juice, tea, coffee and biscuit's to enjoy the science fun and explosives with! It was a great day we even enjoyed the bus trip up and back to the car park after the fun! It has only made my family want to come back even more often to Tentsmuir for more fun days out!

Well done to the staff and volunteers, the open day had something fun for all ages and was very well organised to ensure a fun filled day! Dr Bunhead finished off a fantastic day!

Many thanks to all the visitors', the enthusiastic kids, wonderful volunteers, creative activity leaders and my colleagues who help make the day a great success.

This year's event is already in the planning pipeline, watch this space.

## VISITORS & VOLUNTEER

Tamas Zeke from Budapest in Hungary wrote to tell about his and his families experiences on the Reserve:

It was so nice to read about the Reserve, thank you for the newsletter! You went into the trouble to send it to my Hungarian address, I'm really happy with that, because it was almost 2 years ago I visited the Reserve last. Now I am looking forward to going there again with my family! I guess plenty of people read the newsletter. I have also read volunteer Linda's words on her visits and I just had a feeling and decided to write about some of our old experiences:

It was 9 years ago to visit Tentsmuir with my wife first. We did not expect any special, just went there to see whether there were some birds on the coastline. As a great surprise, on our first visit in June, 2000 we were lucky to enjoy such a special experience on a very nice and long day discovering the seals on the shore and staying there till almost 11pm. It was a long summer day, some kind of mid-summer's night. We still remember that well. Then we kept visiting the Reserve for almost 4 years and always found Real Nature there so close to the city with the seal colonies and fern-invaded pine forest next to each other. A year later we had our first son, Gabor, born. With our little baby we looked for some "very short walks" and discovered the area around the car park and the old rail bridge at Morton Lochs as well.

Although later on we still travelled in the Highland a lot, but both of the Reserve's destinations remained on our list as favourites especially for their friendly environment, which was excellent for our family day out at the weekends. As our little boy was growing up, and learned to walk he enjoyed the sand dunes to run around and we enjoyed the special experience there in the meantime having plenty of photos, videos and we like them very much.

We went on collecting natural experiences to learn more about these fantastic places. Once (in June again) we visited the car park at Morton Lochs at dusk, and when we stopped there, we luckily saw a tawny owl sitting on a pine in front of our car, turning its head round and round. We waited keeping our breath back, but a few minutes later it flew off. Luckily we had enough time to show it to our little boy. You can see owls in the zoo, of course, but seeing them in their natural environment is somehow really different! Next weekend we decided to "catch" this owl, and went there at dusk again, when we encountered something else, a Woodcock perched on the signpost next to the road! It was just about two metres from our car!

As a birdwatcher I realised that it was a good chance to see this special snipe and several times we repeated dusk visits in that summer of 2002. I hope woodcocks are still there. We could see the displaying flight of woodcock at Morton Lochs and also in Tentsmuir forest (just a few hundred metres off the crossroads at Tayport.

Later we stayed at the caravan site, and the tawny owl was just calling from a tree next to our tent!

Sure, we had quite a few special daylight experiences as well. Golden and grey plovers on the seashore, peregrine catch a Dunlin in front of us in 2001 at Tentsmuir Point and peregrine hunting on a flock of 80 of golden plovers in November 2003 with the hundreds of teals and pinkfeet geese at Morton Lochs.

Our boy was 2 and a half when he visited Morton Lochs before we left for Hungary, and our next visit was just four years later. We were so happy to see that Gabor remembered almost everything, when walking around again on the sand dunes or at Morton Lochs. He enjoyed the seals, they were still there owing to the efficient conservation efforts and also recognised how many freshly hatched baby frogs (Common Toad) were jumping around just like years ago, and the dragonflies, butterflies and the bird hide, which improved a lot.

So it was not an illusion to experience a great time in Dundee, Tentsmuir Point and at Morton Lochs! Best Regards, Tamas

## WALKS & TALKS

Want to know more of what we do, or just want to see the wonderful sights on the Reserve? If you have a few friends or a group who fancy a guided walk or talk about the Reserves, please contact me. If you would like to see how effective the management of the Reserve is, or observe a little more of the hidden secrets and gems, then give me a ring and I will arrange a guided walk or talk.

I look forward to seeing you on the Reserve sometime.

## BIG THANKS

Many thanks to all who contribute to the Newsletters and the valuable data collected for our flora and fauna records and to the local newspapers for articles. Finally, a very BIG personal **Thank You** to all the Reserve staff, honorary wardens, volunteers and visitors who put in a lot of time and effort, provide wonderful information, wildlife data and images without which we would not produce such great results.

Enjoy your visits to all the sites in the Reserve. Take away only memories and images and leave behind only your footprints.

Tom Cunningham.  
Reserve Manager  
Fetterdale Office  
Tentsmuir Forest  
By Tayport.  
DD6 9PF

Tel/Fax/Answer machine. 01382-553704.  
Email: tom.cunningham@snh.gov.uk

PS The reaction from the Raith Rovers reports has been quite amazing, even people who have no or little interest in footie say to me "how's the Rovers doing?" At the moment it's another Rovers rollercoaster time, when we are good we are excellent and when we are bad..... Enough said!

**Be aware of ticks in the UK countryside** and elsewhere in Europe. This is a message from all the responsible environmental organisations in the UK who are aware of the rise in the number of ticks in our countryside. All visitors to our countryside should really examine themselves and check for ticks as soon as you can. If you do happen to have one attached remove it as soon as you can. To guard against ticks: Keep trousers tucked into socks and wear light coloured clothing. Examine your body for ticks in the backs of the knees, groin, under the arms and on the scalp. Dog owners should also check their dogs. Stay safe, be aware.

**Know the Code Before You Go**, its well worth getting a copy of this useful guide from SNH and now there are activity guides you can use for your children. For more information have a look at: [www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/educationresources](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com/educationresources)

Useful websites: [www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk) [www.nnr-scotland.org.uk](http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk) and [www.tentsmuir.org](http://www.tentsmuir.org) for information on the Reserve and surrounding area as well as our work in SNH,

Have a look at [www.placebookscotland.com](http://www.placebookscotland.com) and put your own images, stories and poems on this new website, it's yours to use and put all your favourite places on it, including Tentsmuir NNR!