

RSPB wildlife notes January 2016

It is no surprise that January has brought us on Oronsay a lot of lovely rain! The barnacle geese look wholly unphased as they plough on in their grazing of the arable fields whilst weather beaten reed buntings scour the ground for seeds like gold dust. Drier days between showers have been designated survey days for the wardens this month as we donned our binoculars (and waterproof coats just in case!) to record bird numbers on Oronsay for the WeBS and NEWS surveys and both Oronsay and Colonsay for the National Goose count.

This month's counts for the Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) were conducted across much of Oronsay's coastline from 13th to the 25th. This survey is incredibly important for recording waterbirds which are missed by the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). It also focuses on recording how birds are using the strandline which is an important and reliable food source for many species. The survey also records other non waterbirds which are using the coastline to feed, this could help to highlight important conservation issues regarding how we manage these habitats. On Oronsay, the intertidal range was dominated by oystercatcher and curlew, with other waders such as ringed plover, turnstone and redshank using the seaweed covered rocks and beaches to probe for invertebrates. Herons were also in good number, making good use of sea, intertidal and inland sections seen mainly feeding on dense seaweed sections and along the edges of tidal pools. Sightings of cormorant, shag, red breasted merganser, great northern diver and eider were frequent on both open water and bays. Non waterbirds recorded actively using the coastline to feed included the chough, hen harrier, starling, hooded crow and a single wren!

For our WeBS survey this month we recorded 120 barnacle geese on the strand along with 3 greylag geese. A good count of 16 godwit feeding in the soft mud alongside 10 sanderling, 48 oystercatcher, 19 curlew, 1 redshank and a lone dunlin.



Sanderling feeding on the strandline

Numbers from the National goose count on the 21st and 22nd were good for both Oronsay and Colonsay this month. The landrover became the ultimate stealth bird hide as we went cross country in search of every goose in every dip of dune grassland. For Oronsay we

counted 1541 barnacle geese, 21 greylag, 15 canada geese and 8 white fronted geese. For Colonsay we counted 650 barnacle geese, 84 greylag and 37 Greenland whitefronts. We had hoped for some rings in all that lot but couldn't find a single one!

The Oronsay otters have been the talk of the office this month after several really good sightings of the dog otter slinking around the beaches and dunes and a trail of fresh tracks around the holt and in and out of rabbit burrows in search of a decent meal.

The starlings have been making full use of the barn with all this rain. Working in the barn just before roosting time is a bit like listening in on a private rehearsal of an impression act, with all manner of bird calls being thrown out from babbling curlew, calling chough, mewing buzzard and piping ringed plover. European starlings are practised imitators of the songs and calls from many species. It has also been heavily documented that starlings often incorporate mechanical sounds like the ring of a telephone as well as human voices into their own song. You may have seen these clever so and so's on your bird table in the RSPB garden birdwatch this month.



Starlings preening in the yard

What to look out for in the next month

The wintering chough can be seen sifting through the seaweed looking for kelp fly larvae or heading back to Colonsay to roost just before sunset. Numbers of wintering geese are still high at this time of year so listen out for their noisy calls as they feed together on the grassland or see them flying in great lines across the sky.