

Scottish Raptor

Bringing you the latest news from the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme

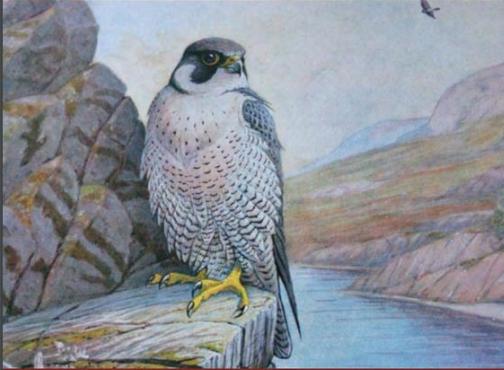
Firstly an apology as it is nearly a year since our last issue of Scottish Raptor. To those of you who have been out there putting in the monitoring hours this breeding season, thank you so much for your efforts. I was pleased that the couple of Red Kite pairs that I monitor in Perthshire were both successful this year. Records from this season have already started arriving in my inbox – please do keep them coming and get them to me by 31st October for inclusion in the 2017 annual report.

It has been a busy year for the SRMS, but I wanted to ensure we were clear about future funding before updating you fully. We were relieved to hear that SNH had successfully secured funding from Scottish Government for 2017-2018, which means that, coupled with funding from Forestry Commission, BTO and RSPB, the SRMS has funding again until March 2018. SRMG are currently working hard to secure the future of the SRMS beyond March 2018.

If you would be keen to offer an article for a future issue I would love to hear from you. Remember you can sign up to receive future issues of this newsletter direct to your inbox via the following link: <http://raptormonitoring.org/contact>

Amy (SRMC)

Raptor event in September – places still available!



**RAPTOR SCIENCE
SUPPORTS CONSERVATION**

Organised by Watson Birds, Scottish Natural Heritage, RSPB Scotland, and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, this is a unique opportunity for experts and the interested public to hear about the very best raptor research in Scotland and further afield.

The event will be held over 22-23 September 2017;
the first day in Edinburgh and the second in St John's Town of Dalry.

Places are still available at a raptor research event to be held 22nd-23rd September 2017. This event is organised by Watson Birds, RSPB, SOC and SNH. The programme includes talks by: Ian Newton (lessons from 50 years of raptor research), Miguel Ferrer (wind farms and raptors), Xavier Lambin (competition between predators), Amy Challis (work of the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme), Jerry Wilson and Staffan Roos (science advances in raptor conservation), Ian Poxton (long-term studies of Merlins), Cat Barlow (reinforcing South Scotland's Golden Eagle population), and Phil Whitfield and Alan Fielding (talking about their recent research on the fate of satellite tagged Golden Eagles).

To book your place please contact Roger Crofts
roger.dodin@btinternet.com



SRMS funding & Memorandum of Understanding

In June we had confirmation of funding for the 2017-2018 financial year. While the funding contribution was around £7K less than we had hoped for, it means that the SRMS work can continue until March 2018. A priority for the SRMS now is to look to secure its future beyond March 2018. Given the level of funding involved, SNH will have to prepare a three year business case to be submitted to the Scottish Government for approval. It is expected that SNH will be still in the position of being able to confirm funding on an annual basis only, however, a three year case will give an indication of what the Scheme can deliver and likely costs so some element of forward planning can be done. Currently FCS, RSPB, BTO and SOC also provide financial contributions to the SRMS and we will very much be hoping that all these contributions can also continue after March 2018.

Over the next few months Andrew Stevenson (Chair of the SRMS) together with Gill Agnew (SNH Funding Officer) will be working closely with other SRMS partners to prepare a strong case for submission by the end of January 2018.

Thank you to Alan Heavisides



The 29th August saw Alan Heavisides attend his last meeting of SRMG as representative for SRSG on a regular basis. Alan has represented SRSG on the SRMG, alongside Wendy Mattingley & Patrick Stirling-Aird, for the lifetime of the SRMS to date – which at 15 years represents a huge contribution. Alan has brought great commitment and a wealth of experience to the Group over that period and will be sorely missed. Alan's place at the table will be taken up by Brian Etheridge, who is certainly no stranger to the SRMS (and you all) having held the post of Raptor Monitoring Officer for the first 13 years of the Scheme. Happy retirement Alan! And welcome back Brian!

Did you monitor raptors in Scotland in 2017?

Thank you to everyone who has been involved in monitoring raptors in 2017. If you have monitored breeding raptors in 2017 **PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOUR DATA REACHES THE SRMS BY 31ST OCTOBER!** If you are involved in monitoring White-tailed Eagle please take note of the information with regards to submissions for this species below.



Changes in White-tailed Eagles data submission for 2017

It has been the case for many years that SNH/RSPB have taken the lead on monitoring of the reintroduced White-tailed Eagle data in Scotland and as part of this RSPB have maintained a long-term database of White-tailed Eagle breeding attempts. Other volunteers across Scotland (mostly members of the SRSG) have contributed significantly to this monitoring effort, and increasingly so in recent years.

Currently RSPB monitoring of White-tailed Eagle (joint-funded by SNH) by RSPB staff and volunteers covers the islands of Mull, Islay & Jura, on mainland Argyll and the reintroduced population in East Scotland. Across the rest of the range in Scotland monitoring is mainly volunteer lead.

Under the contract RSPB produce an interim report in September and a final one in February annually. In this report to SNH, RSPB attempt to summarise the total population so you may have been asked recently for information for the interim report regardless of where you monitor. This does not constitute a data return to the SRMS.

We would like to ensure that White-tailed Eagle data is as complete as possible so can you please note that depending on where you are your data should be submitted as follows:

RSPB staff and RSPB volunteers operating in the areas mentioned above should continue to submit data direct to **Tessa Coledale** (in RSPB's Conservation Data Management Unit). Tessa will then collate and forward the data on to the SRMS for inclusion in the SRMS master dataset.

All other volunteers (including members of the SRSG) operating outwith the areas mentioned above should submit their data direct to the SRMS on the standard SRMS spreadsheet.

With the ongoing data sharing work that the SRMS is pursuing (see above), it is hoped that a two-way flow of data will be developed between the SRMS and its partner organisations. In this case, White-tailed Eagle data sharing would be reciprocated between the SRMS and the RSPB (in addition to other SRMS partners). Currently a lot of time is spent by Tess and Amy each year trying to reconcile slightly different data that reaches the SRMS by different routes. The arrangement outlined above will make it more straightforward for processing and analysing the data when it comes in to the SRMS to produce robust summary totals and the annual report.

Update on progress with National Survey Papers

The recent national surveys under the SCARABBS programme of Peregrine, Golden Eagle and Hen Harrier are in the process of being written up and published as scientific papers. The 2014 Peregrine survey paper will be submitted by the end of September, and the 2016 Hen Harrier survey paper is at an early draft stage. The 2015 Golden Eagle survey paper has been submitted and accepted and will be published in Bird Study very shortly

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00063657.2017.1366972>.



SRMS Annual reporting

Our annual report, reporting on the 2016 breeding season is currently being written and we hope to get this published by Christmas. We are already thinking ahead to the report on the 2017 breeding season. If you do have any good quality photos from your monitoring in 2017 that can be considered for inclusion in this next issue (and considered for other SRMS use) then please do send them in.

Update on SRMS online data entry

The building of the new SRMS data entry system is currently underway. Dave Leech (BTO) attended the August SRMG meeting to give SRMG reps their first look at the live DEMography ONline system, which is forming the underpinning structure for the SRMS system. Progress with developing the DEMON system has been slower than originally anticipated but it is hoped that by next breeding season some SRMS contributors will be prepared to try using the SRMS data entry system for the first time. There is still a way to go to that point though, not least finishing building the system, discussing permissions and access levels with SRMS contributors and pre-loading raptor sites onto the system ready to be used.

The Donald and Jeff Watson Raptor Award



Wendy Mattingley - winner of the Donald and Jeff Watson Raptor Award in 2017.

Scottish Raptor Study Group Conference devised the Donald & Jeff Watson award in 2007 in association with the Watson family as a memorial to the contributions of both father and son to the study and conservation of raptors in Scotland, and specifically to recognise 'A significant long-term amateur contribution to the study of raptors in Scotland.' In 2017 the award was presented to Wendy Mattingley. Below is the citation from Tayside Raptor Study Group, delivered at the most recent Scottish Raptor Study Group Conference where the award was presented.

Wendy Mattingley is one of Scottish Raptor Study Groups' most modest unsung heroines. Her passion for the cause burns as deep as anyone here today and she goes about her work quietly, diligently, and often unnoticed to the majority of us.

Wendy first caught the raptor bug when working with Sandy Payne, who was at the time a roving raptor fieldworker in Perthshire in the late 1970s. She began to monitor several species, developing a passion for Hen Harrier, Merlin, Raven and Golden Eagle. Until three years ago she was the Hen Harrier co-ordinator for Perthshire and she continues to submit the majority of breeding records for



the area. Of the 67 harrier sites in 2016 Wendy monitored 23 of them, which included 17 pairs - no mean feat! She worked with Bruce Anderson in the early 2000s to provide information to SNH for the classification of the Forest of Clunie SPA for Hen Harriers, and she has monitored winter roosts for many years. She is Merlin coordinator for Perthshire and is an active Golden Eagle fieldworker in the West Perthshire region. She is also the Raven coordinator and is responsible for the majority of the Perthshire records with a fantastic memory for territories, alternates and winter roost sites. She published a paper on Raven diet in 1995. As well as her special interest in these species Wendy is always available to help with national surveys, including the last 3 Peregrine surveys, and helped confirm Honey-buzzard as a breeding species in Perthshire. She also covered a lot of ground as a roving RSPB raptor worker in the early 1990s. Her knowledge of Hen Harrier and Golden Eagle nests, as well as the numbers she monitors, means she often provides sites where birds can be satellite tagged. She has also contributed to many scientific papers over the years and advised several authors.

Despite her many days in the field Wendy spends a great deal of time on the nitty gritty of SRSGs and the monitoring scheme. She was chair of Tayside RSG from March 1998 until 2013 and played a key role in setting up the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme in the early 2000s, attending all of the initial meetings with SNH, RSPB and the BTO when the proposal was discussed and formulated. She continues to be one of the three SRSR members to sit on the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group and has been omni present at the meetings. Wendy often supports Patrick at meetings with other organisations and has met with successive Ministers for the Environment, putting the raptor case forward. She has worked tirelessly with the police in combating wildlife crime, which includes some incidents quite close to home, which has caused her and John a lot of personal distress and upset but not dissuaded her from reporting incidents. Her knowledge of Perthshire raptors makes her a professional, knowledgeable and patient adviser to RSPB on dealing with developments that may affect birds. She has also been involved in the Operation Countrywatch project working with estates since 2002.

In amongst all this work she and John run an extensive garden at their home in Aberfeldy, which in itself is a major physical undertaking yet she still finds time to undertake so much fieldwork. Wendy and John are always very welcoming to visiting ornithologists, regularly putting up guest speakers and visitors from overseas and she is a great ambassador for us. Wendy is a great friend to many RSG members, providing help, counselling and coaching to so many people over the years.

Claire Smith (Chair of Tayside RSG)

New paper on Sparrowhawks in Scotland

A new paper on Sparrowhawk has just been published in the peer-reviewed journal *Ecoscience* (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/11956860.2017.1374322>). The study compares territory occupancy and breeding success of Sparrowhawks in urban (Edinburgh; Mike Thornton's study area) and rural (Ayrshire; Ian Todd's study area) settings. Surprisingly, the results show that urban Sparrowhawk have better breeding success than rural ones.

Mike Thornton (Lothian & Borders RSG), Ian Todd (South Strathclyde RSG) & Staffan Roos (RSPB)



Data sharing

Following consultation with our contributors on two draft documents (Data Usage Agreement between the SRMS & SNH; and Data Usage Agreement between the SRMS & SRS) between 19th September and 21st November 2016 feedback was received and a meeting of SRS Chairs, SRMG representatives and other interested SRS members took place in early December to discuss the feedback and next steps.

At a meeting of SRMG in early February, having reflected on the feedback received to date, the SRMG put forward a modified approach for taking forward the work on data sharing which should be less cumbersome for all partners and with much less paperwork involved. The proposal was to move away from having a separate SRMS Data Sharing Use policy, NBN protocol and individual (bilateral) data sharing agreements with each SRMS partner and deal with all the data use and sharing within a single document – a SRMS Data Sharing & Use Policy. A draft of this document was circulated to partners for their feedback by the 17th March. The feedback from partners was discussed at a recent SRMG meeting on 29th August, and potential ways forward were also discussed at the SRS Chairs meeting on 1st September.

We will reflect on the suggestions made and will be consulting on options with a view to having a clearer way forward by Christmas.

Raptor conservation and multi-purpose forests

Integrating raptor conservation with forest management – a joint research project carried out by Inverness College UHI in collaboration with Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and private estates

Raptors breeding in forests may be exposed to human activities such as recreation and forestry operations. SNH provide advice on measures for reconciling human activities with conservation of protected bird species, and FCS has produced a guidance note to provide advice on how to plan forest management to minimise disturbance of protected bird species.

Mitigation measures to protect raptors include designating buffer zones around nests, within which human activity is restricted. This mitigation measure is often based on an assessment of birds' alert or flight initiation distances. The advice provided is, however, largely based upon expert opinion, rather than scientific field evidence. Three independent reviews of buffer distances (commissioned by SNH 2006, 2016 and FES 2016) highlighted that there is a severe shortage of field studies on bird responses to human activity.

Scottish Government targets for timber production and forest expansion will require a better understanding of the use of forests by raptors and their responses to forest management activities. Government targets to increase visits to the outdoors may further lead to the need to reconcile conservation with human activities, so a robust evidence base to inform assessment and mitigation is crucial.

Dr Louise de Raad, Research Fellow at Inverness College UHI will lead a study that aims to fill the knowledge gap on the response from key protected raptor species, when breeding, to human



activity. The study will investigate the effectiveness of mitigation measures undertaken during forest operations and assess habitat use and the impact of forest expansion on key protected raptor species. During the study there will be close collaboration with the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group (SRMG) and members of the Scottish Raptor Study Group (SRS) and the BTO Nest Record Scheme (NRS). The study will improve the evidence upon which SNH, FCS, FES and other agency staff base their advice on the management and conservation of key protected bird species.

To find out more about the study, contact Louise.de-raad@uhi.ac.uk (Inverness College UHI) or Kenny.Kortland@forestry.gsi.gov.uk (Forest Enterprise Scotland).

Louise de Raad (University of Highlands & Islands)

Raptor Patch – Season 2

Following a successful pilot year of *Raptor Patch* in 2016, the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Group decided to run a second pilot year in 2017.



In March, 16 enthusiastic volunteers from across Scotland came along to a *Raptor Patch* training event at Argaty Red Kite Centre near Doune where they were introduced to raptor monitoring and the *Raptor Patch* approach. Training was delivered by Amy (the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Coordinator) in conjunction with members of the Scottish Raptor Study Group and BTO training Staff. Thank you Brian Etheridge, Ben Darvill & David Jarrett for your ongoing support of *Raptor Patch*.

SRMG will be reviewing the first two years of *Raptor Patch* at the next meeting in November to consider what we can learn from the pilot to potentially take forward into future years should funding allow.

Raptor Patch volunteers at our training day (Amy Challis)



Schedule 1 licence renewal arrangements for Scottish Raptor Study Group Members in 2018

If you are one of the privileged SRSG members who regularly gets a Schedule 1 licence allowing you to disturb the nests of some of our rarest raptors for the purposes of monitoring then you will be keen to hear of the renewal process for 2018. There was some confusion with regards to the process in 2017, which unfortunately resulted in delays in some individuals receiving their licences/permits. SNH, BTO and the SRMS have liaised closely over this and it is hoped that the process outlined below will make things more straightforward for 2018, whether you usually get your S1 licence to disturb direct from SNH Licensing Team or via a permit from BTO if you are a ringer.

If you are a ringer and usually receive your Schedule 1 permit via the BTO...



1. Individual will submit a renewal request to BTO Ringing Unit.
2. S1 permits will promptly get issued to individuals (taking on trust that appropriate returns have been made via the SRMS for the 2017 breeding season).
3. In December 2017, the SRMS will provide a summary to BTO Ringing Unit of the data received to satisfy licence returns (where individuals have indicated on their return form to BTO Ringing Unit that a return has been made via SRSG).
4. If the BTO Ringing Team is dissatisfied with the information returned for 2017 they will revoke the permit from the individual concerned until the appropriate return information is received.

Any questions? Please contact ringing.schedule1@bto.org

If you usually received a Schedule 1 licence direct from the SNH Licensing Team...



1. In Autumn 2017, SNH Licensing Team will check with SRSG branch Chairs what licenses are being requested for 2018 for their members.
2. S1 licenses will promptly get issued to individuals. This will take on trust that appropriate returns have been made via the SRMS for the 2017 breeding season. Where no data have been submitted by an individual for a species this will be taken to mean that no monitoring activity that resulted in disturbance took place.
3. In December 2017, the SRMS will provide a summary to SNH Licensing Team of the data received to satisfy license returns.
4. If SNH Licensing Team is dissatisfied with the information returned for 2017 they will revoke the license from the individual concerned until the appropriate return information is received.

Any questions? Please contact LICENSING@snh.gov.uk



BTO Ringing Unit and SNH Licensing Team want revoking of licenses to be a last resort, so to avoid being one of these unfortunate individuals please:

- **Ensure that your data reaches the SRMS by the 31st October deadline.**
- **Make sure that your return is as comprehensive as possible and includes observer names, species, visit dates and detailed grid references (100 m resolution or better) for nest sites.**

A couple of other important notes:

- If you hold a licence in a personal capacity (e.g. SRSB member) then it only covers you in this capacity. You will require a separate licence to cover you in a professional capacity (e.g. RSPB staff member or consultant).
- If licence holders are intending to install trail cameras at or near nests to monitor nests remotely they should contact SNH Licensing Team (on 01463 725364) to make sure that they are covered to do so. It is also worth noting that under the terms of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code doing so is likely to require permission of the land manager before installing this equipment.

Oot and about

Since the last issue I have done the rounds of a number of SRSB branch Spring meetings to bring raptor workers up to speed on the latest SRMS developments. In February I had a great few days visiting the Uist Raptor Study Group, one of the four island-based SRSB groups. Gwen Evans of the URSB, and Raven enthusiast, was keen to show me around some of the sites she monitors on North Uist. It was great to be able to put “faces” to the site names that I am familiar with seeing year-on-year in the data submitted to the SRMS. I was fascinated to see a couple of Raven nests up against dormer windows on either side of the sloped roof of a derelict house and it was generally interesting to see the range of sites that raptors were comfortable using in the absence of ground predators and with fewer trees on offer for nesting in. Ahead of the Highland Raptor Study Group meeting I also had an enjoyable day out with Adam Ritchie monitoring a Golden Eagle home range within the Glen Affric to Strathconon SPA, one of twelve SPAs for this species in Scotland. The mission had been to attempt to identify which of two alternate nest sites the pair may have been using this year. Unfortunately during our visit (which we cut short due to rather inclement weather) we did not see any signs of Golden Eagle, however this was a reminder that not seeing your focal species is part and parcel of raptor monitoring and that an essential virtue of any raptor worker is to have a lot of patience.

In mid-March, Mark Wilson and I caught up with Wendy Mattingley of the Tayside Raptor Study Group (and winner of this year’s Donald & Jeff Watson Raptor Award – see above) to get the process of chatting to raptor workers about their long-term studies underway. This is important to gain the valuable information that the SRMS is missing in terms of survey effort and coverage to be able to produce robust trends in numbers and productivity for study area and ultimately regional trends. Over the last month or so I’ve also caught up with David Jardine and Ian Hopkins of Argyll Raptor Study Group to discuss their studies on Colonsay and the Isle of Bute respectively and Harry Bell of the Tayside Raptor Study Group on his study in Fife. Plans are afoot to catch up with more raptor workers over the next few months. Raven and Peregrine are the priority species to progress trends for this financial year so if you work on either of these species you may hear



from me soon.

The next few months will see me attending as many Autumn SRSG meetings I can fit in, presenting at the Watson Birds event in Edinburgh later this month and also attending the Northern England Raptor Forum where I have been invited to talk about the first couple of years of *Raptor Patch*.

Highland Raptor Study Group – Training Days 2017



Highland Raptor Study Group woodland training day (Adam Ritchie)

Two successful raptor training days were held again this year. The first of these took place on the 23rd April and focussed on forest raptor species at a number of woodland sites on the Black Isle which was expertly led by Brian Etheridge and was attended by eleven people. Two active Common Buzzard nests, two active Red Kite nests, and two Sparrowhawk nests were located.

The second, on the 30th April, focussed on moorland raptor species again led by Brian and also Jim Craib, near Glen Convinth, west of Beaully and was attended by six people. Although no nests were located, a fine male Hen Harrier was seen and the group had the opportunity to get acquainted with the sort of good heather moorland habitat suitable for breeding Hen Harriers and Merlins.



Highland Raptor Study Group moorland training day (Adam Ritchie)

Adam Ritchie (Highland Raptor Study Group member)



Eric Meek (1947-2017)



We were very sad to hear of the untimely death of Erik Meek earlier this year. Eric was well-known to many raptor workers and conservationists across Scotland. With permission, we have reproduced below the eulogy given by a close friend at Eric's funeral, which is a fitting tribute.

Eric died on 16th February 2017 aged 69, having collapsed suddenly a few days earlier. He was a baby-boomer, born in 1947 and his late mother told me Eric was their miracle baby, arriving late in their life. He gave them much to be proud of, passing his 11+ and going to the prestigious Gosforth Grammar School, eventually becoming Head Boy and winning a scholarship to study Geography at Cambridge. He also became a very

successful sportsman playing rugby for England at schoolboy level.

Somewhere along the line he became passionate about wildlife, especially birds. In his mid-teens, he joined the newly formed Tyneside Bird Club, which was then an amazing hotbed of young and talented ornithologists. Bryan Galloway recalls a red-haired persistent 15-year-old pestering him to start ringing birds with the Northumbria Ringing Group!

He became a close friend with Brian Little who became his mentor and inculcated a deep interest in birds of prey, especially the Merlin, which remained Eric's special bird for the rest of his life. Eric also worked a couple of summers on the Farne Islands and showed huge interest in the research being carried out there.

I met Eric and Brian on Fair Isle and I quickly joined the ringing group, becoming a Hauxley regular. A year later Eric had graduated and decided to do a PGCE at my college in Durham. What a year we had! I had inherited an ancient Ford Prefect from my grandad so we went all over ringing birds, particularly at Hauxley. Along with all his other talents Eric had a lovely tenor voice and we found I could harmonise with him. We spent a lot of time singing in Folk Clubs across Northumberland, never paid, but getting free beer which was just as good really! On one occasion, we gave a lecture to the Tyneside Bird Club which was illustrated by songs rather than slides much to the astonishment of the audience. Another talent he had was to eat vast quantities of food quickly and it was a bit disconcerting to be eating your own sausages and find Eric's haunted face watching you in case you didn't want them all! The other thing I grew to respect at this time was Eric's meticulous recording and Diary keeping. He could go back and tell you exactly what we had seen on what date and where – amazing. One event that year sticks in my mind. He decided he wanted to learn how to drive, so in a quiet moment whilst ringing Reed Buntings at Alnmouth I started to teach him. All was going well



until I realised I hadn't told him how to stop. Trying to find the brake pedal he hit the accelerator and we ended half way up a sand dune. He went to a driving school after that.

Eric started teaching at Heaton School in Newcastle and also ran a couple of WEA classes. In late 1971 he married Christine but, just four months after the wedding, they were separated because Eric gave up teaching to be the Assistant Warden at Fair Isle Bird Observatory. Lots of stories and one of my favourites was when I visited in August: as we were driving a Heligoland trap I saw a large rail fly into the funnel, but as we reached the end there was no sign of it. Eric remembered a drain pipe under the trap and he reached from one end and I from the other, clasping hands in the middle, but nothing. Then he jerked and said "something's gone up my sleeve!" and like a magician he produced a rare Spotted Crake with a flourish. By this time, Chris had re-joined him and they must have been pleased to see each other because 9 months later Terry was born! Eric returned to teaching and quickly rose to be a Head of Department at Blyth School in Northumberland. Terry was followed two years later by Sally and the family was complete.

At this time his contribution to birding rose significantly and he became a key figure in Northumberland and Tyneside. He was the co-author in 1970 of the ground-breaking 'Birds in Northumbria' which subsequently became the annual county bird report and then co-authored the 3 volumes of 'Northumberland's Birds' published by the Natural History Society of Northumbria between 1978 and 1983. Also in the 1970's the Merlin Study in Northumberland really took off, mostly driven by Eric who even went into local museum archives to find where eggs had been collected up to 100 years before, then checked those sites and found many of them still occupied! This typified his enthusiastic and energetic yet meticulous approach to things. It led in 1977 to the publication in British Birds of a paper by Eric, Brian Little and Ian Newton on the breeding biology of the Merlin which is still regularly cited in research publications. That study continues to this day.

In 1981 he made the amazingly brave decision to give up teaching and to move away from Northumberland where he was firmly established. He took his young family to Orkney and became the RSPB's Area Officer, a job he loved and carried out superbly for 31 years.



It is difficult to encompass the scope of his achievements on Orkney. By 2012, 25% of the land area of these beautiful islands was RSPB reserve and he managed this with aplomb. He carried out and promoted very effectively the protection of and research into particular species such as Merlin, Hen Harrier and Corncrake. To this he brought his own special understanding of the importance of the wider habitat of which he developed a deep and profound knowledge. He established a national reputation for his botanical expertise. Of course, he had to be adept at the public relations side, the public speaking at which he was so good and the diplomacy which he had to learn, transforming himself from his fiery youth. At times this got very difficult, with huge controversy about increased land ownership by the RSPB, much of it directed very personally at Eric (they burned effigies of him on Hoy!). It says much that by the time he retired he was universally respected by those who had earlier opposed him. If this was not enough he played a leading role in the local birding community including the production of Orkney Bird Reports, monthly bulletins and Orcadian newspaper articles. There can be no doubt that he was deeply passionate about the place.



Increasingly he was pulled into roles of national importance and, such was his quiet charisma, charm, natural authority and deep conscientiousness, he nearly always ended up as Chairman. For instance, as Chairman of the BOU Rarities Committee he was the guardian of the fabled 'British List' and, until just a few weeks ago, he was Chairman of the Trustees of Fair Isle Bird Observatory, the place that perhaps he loved more than anywhere.

Eric gave up teaching in schools but never gave up being a teacher. He was a natural, able to give clear and straightforward explanations of sometimes quite complex science. One friend said to me "he enhanced your day and even the most mundane of walks became an informative adventure". Inevitably he became a popular and successful leader of tours both in Orkney and abroad in places as widespread as Alaska and Antarctica.

Although he had developed these wider experiences he never lost his deep love of Northumberland and returned whenever he could. His very extensive library at home had every book ever published on the birds of the county and I am told that he maintained his membership of the bird club to the last. Those who recently built the concrete plinth for the new hut at Hauxley and inscribed his initials in the surface paid him a tribute that he would have appreciated enormously.

Eric was a devoted family man, above all he loved walking with them and his dogs in wild places. When his first wife, Christine, died in 2001 he was devastated but worked hard to support his children Terry and Sally. Then in 2006 he found a soul mate in Aileen and it was good to see him happy and relaxed again. Our condolences and hearts go out to them and to their families. Like them, we will miss him terribly.

John Ginnever (a good friend of Eric's)

Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme (SRMS) contact

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