

Ongoing Membership Surveys

Just a reminder that both our New Zealand Flatworm/Earthworm, and Ash tree surveys are still underway and we very much welcome more responses.

You can find the details of these surveys on our website www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/FIELDCLUB

Bag the Bruck

Although Bag the Bruck will not be happening this year, OFC have bags and gloves available if anyone wants to do their own individual clean up of a local beach or area. Contact Megan to get gloves/bags on OFCSecretary20@gmail.com. Please make sure you take away what you collect and dispose of it, as OIC cannot collect bags as they usually do for Bag the Bruck.

OFC Membership Award Fund

Members are reminded that the Club has its own grant scheme. The purpose of the fund is to provide some financial support for OFC members who are engaged in, or wish to establish, a small natural history research project. The potential research topics are wide-ranging and could involve almost anything that may further our biological or ecological knowledge, or support the conservation of Orkney's wildlife.

Grants of between £50 and £500 are available for each application to cover, for example: materials; equipment; travel etc.

For full details please see

<https://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/FIELDCLUB>

We look forward to receiving some more applications.

Orkney Field Club

Founded in 1959

Aim: To encourage the study and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the County.



Orkney Field Club is a Registered Scottish Charity and SCIO No. SCO12459

Newsletter April 2021

As we await news of easing of Covid restrictions, there is still uncertainty of what group activities we will be able to hold over the summer, but we have our fingers crossed that some may be possible. We have aspirations for a Durkadale picnic, a beach clean, a visit to Berriedale and many other expeditions, but cannot confirm any as yet. So please watch out for emails about any planned activities and in the meantime take a look at our Facebook page for all sorts of natural history news and information.

After much deliberation, we are starting some virtual talks by Zoom. Other natural history societies have found these to be very successful, and surprisingly sociable! Instructions for joining each meeting will be emailed to all members in advance, so look out for emails from our Secretary.

30th April at 7.30pm via Zoom : 'Arctic Skuas on Rousay'

Helen Aiton will talk about a long term study on Arctic Skuas productivity on Rousay, including using technology to monitor feeding areas during incubation and where they go outside the breeding season.

21st May at 7.30pm via Zoom : 'Nature Showcase'

Some short talks on Bumblebees, day flying Moths and Butterflies, and Damsel and Dragonflies.

June 26/27 - 'Virtual Bioblitz 2021'

Last year's virtual Bioblitz was a great success, with so many participants finding a great variety of plants and insects in their own gardens and having fantastic assistance in identification from the experts who were taking part. So we are hoping to hold another this year, with everyone encouraged to take on their own local patch. It's something that can be enjoyed by everyone, so please keep an eye out for further details.

We also hope that an in-person bioblitz may be possible later in the year.

(See the Orkney Bioblitz 2020 Facebook page for a reminder of the activity last year).

EARTHWORMS and Other Soil Animals.

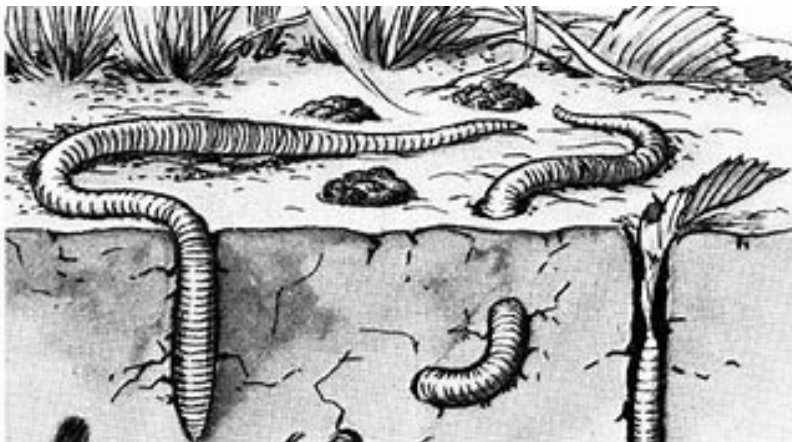
Keith Fairclough

Spring is the time when many people turn over their vegetable patches and flower borders. It is therefore also the time when you are most likely to see Earthworms, if you have any. How many people in Orkney have wondered why, when they used to have lots of Earthworms, do they now have none or very few. One reason, and perhaps the main reason, might be because at some point in the past, you have inadvertently introduced New Zealand Flatworm (NZF) into your garden, perhaps in a plant from a garden centre or friend. By far the most frequent food source for NZFs are Earthworms, and they are rather partial to the big, fat juicy ones.

So why is this such a bad thing? “So I have no Earthworms in my soil, so what?”

If I asked you who wrote *‘On The Origin of Species’*, many of you would know it was Charles Darwin. But if I had asked you who wrote *‘The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through The Action of Worms.....’*, published in 1881, I bet far fewer people would have known the answer. In his lifetime, his book on worms sold far more copies than his book on evolution. Charles Darwin studied Earthworms throughout his life, carrying out lots of long-term studies and was possibly the world authority. I must repeat a quote which I used in my article in the 2012 OFC Bulletin:

“.....it may be doubted if there are any other animals which have played such an important part in the history of the world_as these lowly, organised creatures.” In the history of the world!!



Note the worm pulling the leaf into its burrow

What are the benefits to the soil of having a healthy Earthworm population?

- They turn over the soil. You could say that they plough it by creating tunnels.
- These tunnels aerate the soil and allow water flow. This is essential for micro-bacteria and plant roots to function efficiently.
- They fertilise the soil by passing it through their body. Large worms producing the familiar casts. Casts are rich in nitrogen, calcium, magnesium and phosphorus, essential minerals for plant growth.

The OFC Facebook page still has a form on which you can record whether or not you have Earthworms and/or NZFs. You can give details of numbers, dates, if and how your Earthworm population has changed. In fact the more information you give the better.

Incidentally, there are about 30 different species of Earthworms in Britain, of which 14 are common. So far in Orkney, we have identified four species but there will be more yet to be pinned down. However, what is most important to most folk, is not what fancy Latin name their earthworms have, but do I have any? Are they declining? Do I have NZFs? What can I do about it?

Some of the answers may be found in two longer articles in the forthcoming OFC 2020 Bulletin.

There is an age-old myth that if you cut an Earthworm in half, the two halves will regenerate into two worms. This is not true! The tail end will always die. The head end may survive as long as the cut isn't too close to the head. It may even grow a new but shortened, stubby tail end.

Earthworms are obviously not the only things which you encounter when turning over soil. This medium can be absolutely fascinating if a little time is spent examining a soil sample. Some obvious, running/walking creatures might include beetles, spiders, centipedes, millipedes and woodlice. Wriggling/crawling things might include snails, slugs, the larvae of moths, beetles, craneflies, etc. If soil can be examined with a magnifying glass you might find roundworms, flatworms, mites, the small but extraordinary pseudoscorpions. And if you have access to a microscope, then the world (of soil) is your oyster! Enjoy it.