

Orkney Field Club (OFC)

Chair's Report 2022/2023

Helen Aiton

November 2022 marked the start of my role as the Chair of the OFC committee. First, I would like to thank John Crossley for all his sterling work over the past few years as the previous chair. Luckily for me John is now the Vice-chair and has provided wise guidance throughout my first year. My thanks also go to our industrious and efficient Club Secretary Graeme Walker and to our Treasurer and Membership Secretary Brian Ribbands who ensures our accounts are balanced, audited, and submitted to OSCR the charities regulation body. My thanks to Jenny Taylor who has authored the club newsletter so well for the last seven years and who stepped back from this role this year. Jenny has provided support to Michael Gee who has produced the newsletters over the past year. Thanks are due to: Jenny Taylor and Megan Taylor who curate the website; to Anne Gascoigne who makes our Facebook group a source of fascination far beyond the membership of the Club; and to Anne again, whose columns on Club activities are some of the most readable in the 'Orcadian'. Thanks also go to other committee members Keith Fairclough, Penny Martin and Alexandra Wright who, along with the Club office holders, have contributed to the smooth running of the club. My thanks too to Jamie Moloney and Megan Taylor who stepped down from the committee this year. Megan continues to support the club in our online presence, as our representative for the Nature Festival steering group and also for Bag the Bruck.

This year the committee decided not to appoint a Club President but will continue to review this decision annually.

This past year the Orkney Field Club took the step to go back to holding in-person indoor meetings, but bearing in mind our members who are unable to travel, we endeavoured to provide hybrid meetings using a live Zoom link from the St Magnus Centre where our talks take place. Technology is fabulous when it works, but sadly, we found it hard to provide an enjoyable experience for those at home because of the quality of the Wifi and the poor audio during questions from the live audience. Recently we took the decision to just record our talks, still using Zoom and to make them available to our members as soon as possible.

Our committee members put together a wide range of topics for indoor and outdoor meetings over the past year:

Our November 2022 talk was given by Ashleigh Kitchener who gave a polished and entertaining talk on whales and dolphins she had encountered all over the world 'Can you spot the Beluga?' Flooding across Orkney meant that we had to cancel the talk at the St Magnus Centre but were able to enjoy Ashleigh's beautiful slides over Zoom instead. In

January 2023 we had a short but informative Zoom update on the Orkney Native Wildlife Project's stoat eradication project given by Tom Hadley. Our winter ramble was led by Anne Gascoigne who led a group looking at wildlife in nooks and crannies, parks, and ponds around Kirkwall. In February, Jenny finally found a fair day to lead our popular trip to see Mountain Hares from the path to the Old Man of Hoy. Later in the month, we held our 'Nature Showcase': John Crossley gave a fascinating talk on the Orchids found in Orkney and Helen Aiton presented the sad and devastating impact of Avian Flu on the Rousay Great Skuas. Our March talk was given by an external speaker over Zoom. Jim Pratt a retired forester and tree pathologist gave an absorbing talk on his love and growing obsession with Ash, from the details of its flowering to its uses over the years and the sad onset of Ash dieback disease. Jenny Taylor had previously published an article on the Ash tree survey she carried out in the 2022 'Orkney Naturalist' for those interested in this subject. Early April saw a good turnout for the annual 'Bag the Bruck' at Orphir Bay, organised by Megan Taylor, and Anne Gascoigne led a spring urban ramble exploring the biodiversity of Kirkwall. Our final talk before the summer break was given by Emma Neave-Webb from the Orkney Marine Mammal Research Initiative (OMMRI) who provided a detailed and interesting presentation on the Harbour Porpoise monitoring project which had been partly funded by Orkney Field Club.

In May, Orkney Field Club contributed to the Orkney Nature Festival by organising a trip to Aikerness led by Helen Aiton. We explored the exposed rare Aeolianite site and OFC's expert botanists identified the associated flora to fascinated visitors and locals. We also had time to beachcomb and do some birdwatching. In June, Penny Martin invited members to explore the rich flora of a beautiful meadow in Finstown, made even more enjoyable, by lovely evening weather. Later in the month, Jenny Taylor led a group on an enjoyable botanical ramble from Cuween across moorland and up the Keelylang track, along which we marvelled at the huge numbers of Twayblades and many other species. In July, Anne led an urban summer ramble through Kirkwall following on from the success of the winter and spring rambles. Later in July, we held a successful Bioblitz/family day at Stromness Reservoir, repeating the venue from last year, when numbers had, however, been very limited because of heavy rain. We were joined by a journalist from the BBC Scotland's 'Out of Doors' programme and both John Crossley and Graeme Walker gave excellent interviews. We had planned a ramble to Rousay's Faraclett Head in July which unfortunately had to be cancelled, but hopefully can be rearranged next year. In August our Odonata recorder Graeme Walker was delighted to organise a Field Club trip to a pond in Stromness that held West Mainland's first breeding Emerald Damselflies. In September we returned to our indoor talks and welcomed staff from the 'Species on the Edge' project who took us through their project plans for Orkney. Later in the month, Anne led her final urban autumn ramble around Kirkwall-Committee member and RSPB volunteer Michael Gee has been holding regular 'Guide in the Hide' – introduction to bird watching sessions throughout

the year and Tim Dean has held several well attended Bat group sessions. The Field Club was delighted to fund two new bat detectors for the bat group. Now in October, I write this report looking forward to our first in-person AGM since October 2019 to be held at the end of this month with the enticement of a talk by Raymond Beasant on 'The Art of Nature Photography'.

The 2023 Bulletin 'The Orkney Naturalist' was again a great collection of articles and reports by many contributors. It is produced by an editorial and production team headed by John Crossley. The quality of the bulletin does the Club proud and is provided free to all members. Sales and circulation have increased a little year on year, partly thanks to our setting up an online shop three years ago. The Club is represented on some outside groups; these include Outdoor Orkney, the Orkney Woodland Group, and Orkney Local Access Forum amongst others.

I am pleased to report that an Orkney Wildlife Records Management Group has been formed to revive and carry forward the database from the Orkney Wildlife Information and Records Centre (OWIARC previously run by OIC and mothballed in July 2021). The group has received funding from NatureScot for a laptop and Orkney Field Club has provided funding for the Recorder 6 software used to store the wildlife records derived from the Field Club's recorders and the public. This voluntary group, which includes two of the OFC committee is being supported in their efforts by the Highland and Outer Hebrides Biological Recording Centres and we wish them well in their endeavour.

Looking back over the past year, I am pleased to be able to report on a varied and interesting programme of events for Orkney Field Club. We aim to attract people of all ages and abilities to enjoy and study Orkney's natural history. However, the Club does not run itself and we very much welcome new people coming onto the committee and getting involved; if that interests you, please contact the Secretary or any of the committee.