

Report of the Orkney Field Club Chair - AGM 2020

Welcome to this year's Orkney Field Club AGM, which has a very different format in 2020 due to the vagaries of a global pandemic. Since the previous AGM, the world has changed in many ways and, obviously, the Field Club and its membership have not been immune to these changes. However, whilst Club activities were necessarily curtailed by the restrictions placed upon us all during lockdown, thankfully we were able to find new and inventive ways to connect with the natural world and you all as Club members.

Following the last AGM, the Club's officers all remained in post, and committee members with specialist roles all continued in those roles. In hindsight, that has helped the Club enormously in dealing with the challenges of Covid-19, so I will here express my gratitude, as Chair, for the sterling work of all on the committee. Also following the last AGM, Lindsey Taylor stood down from the committee and we were joined by Nigel Harding and Reuben Johnston.

At the 2019 AGM, the members present were treated to a wonderful presentation by the Orkney Islands Council Environmental Policy Officer, Eileen Summers, on wildflower meadow creation, which helped us remember the summer just past and made us look forward to the one to come. If only we'd known, eh?

The winter programme continued apace with outdoor events for the Grey Seal pupping at Burwick, the Bryophyte sub-group in Burray, and longer walks on Shapinsay, in Finstown and on Hoy. Indoors, we enjoyed a variety of talks: 'The wildlife and landscape of the Falkland Islands' with Steve Sankey; 'Blue Carbon – what is it and why does it matter' with Dr Joanne Porter of ICIT; and an update on the progress of the Orkney Native Wildlife Project with Sarah Sankey. The Club hosted the annual Environmental Quiz in The Girnol, which I must say is a different kind of pressure from actually competing! My thanks to the organising team for superbly meeting the challenge of putting on a sustainable event with a small budget, not just with fiendish questions, but also in catering for a large bunch of ravenous quizzers.

By the end of March 2020, we were all aware of the implications of a global pandemic, so the Club ceased all meetings (indoor, outdoor, committee or otherwise) and our attention switched to online contact. As well as ramping up the amount of content on the Club Facebook page, we promoted a survey into the extent and spread of New Zealand Flatworm in the county. This data will be invaluable to Earthworm recorder Keith Fairclough, as well as to the local Records Centre.

In May, a small team of members organised a virtual garden bioblitz, allowing us all to spend 24 hours looking for, identifying and recording the wildlife in our gardens. To be honest, I was unsure whether there was sufficient time available to organise such an event between conception and fruition, but I need not have worried, the day was a huge success, thank you to all organisers and contributors. Local experts and friendly colleagues all pitched in to help identify all manner of flora and fauna, and the inclusiveness of the event was commented upon by many. I hope that we run such marvellous events again in the future, whether in a lockdown or not.

At the beginning of June, the latest edition of the Club's Bulletin, *The Orkney Naturalist*, was distributed to members, and with retail opportunities being reduced from previous years, the decision was taken to also offer the publication for sale online. As ever, committee members rose to the challenge, and as we now understand a bit more about the art of the possible, we may use this online resource to sell other Club publications.

In July, the county vascular plant recorder, John Crossley, updated the *Checklist of the Flora of Orkney*, allowing us all to have a timely snapshot of the botanical riches of the archipelago.

As ever, but so much more significantly during lockdown, the Club's Facebook page has been invaluable, with a constant flow of informative, entertaining and educational posts, all brought to us by the click of a mouse. The committee was gently persuaded to come up with short biographies of themselves for a series of 'Meet the team' posts, and we are currently enjoying an 'A to Z of wildlife' through a diverse collection of alphabetically-ordered nature. The Club website has also been updated with more current information.

The Club continues to comment upon planning issues, latterly the wind farm application for Hoy, and its knock-on effects for electricity distribution within Orkney along with the Quanterness and Faray projects. The recent publication of the Orkney Harbours Masterplan will likely be the subject of much discussion for the coming year and beyond.

This strangest of years will shape the 2021 Bulletin in ways which I suspect we will only understand in hindsight as, through the winter, local recorders and contributors will sort through the annual data for 2020 to produce reports and articles documenting the effects upon the natural history of Orkney and also its human inhabitants. Contributors new and old are always welcome.

I hope that Life will find a new normal for us all in the not too distant future and that the Orkney Field Club can once again put on indoor and outdoor events for its membership. If anyone is inspired to come and help on the committee, you would be very welcome, as are thoughts and ideas from any member as to what activities and events you would like to see. If I have missed out anything or anyone with this swift trip through the twelve months since the previous AGM, please accept my apologies and belated thanks.

Whatever the future holds, let us hope that we do not lose sight of the ecological and environmental issues which threaten not only our wildlife, but also our own communities. I think that if we have learnt anything during 2020, it is that we need to appreciate more the flora and fauna on our doorsteps, for its ability to sustain us body and soul, even when the failings of our species threaten the very existence of everything we hold dear. If we can all love Nature that little bit more and reflect upon the environmental consequences of our every action, then there is still hope.

Writing this report has allowed me a whistlestop tour through the Club's activities of the last twelve months. The thing which stands out for me personally is the enthusiasm of those who took part in the bioblitz. That particular weekend was intense, but I learnt so much about species which I didn't even know existed in Orkney. A friend on Graemsay discovered not one but two species of Mason Wasp in her garden; small solitary insects which help to pollinate flowers and which prey upon caterpillars. Once my eyes were opened to their presence, I have seen them in countless places through the summer. How much else is out there?

GRW 20/09/2020