

**DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 19**  
**MARCH/APRIL 2024**



The reed beds at Morton Lochs.

|                                                                     |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>THE WEATHER ROUNDUP.....</b>                                     | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>MORTON LOCHS REVISITED – Martin Hepworth.....</b>                | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>MALTING BARLEY – Rob Pirie.....</b>                              | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>A HEN PHEASANT VISITS COMERTON PLACE – John Cuthbertson.....</b> | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>SQUIRREL POX – Martin Hepworth.....</b>                          | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>THE BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH.....</b>                                | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>BITS &amp; BOBS.....</b>                                         | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>THE NIGHT SKY – Steve Norrie.....</b>                            | <b>10</b> |
| <b>PROPOSED OPEN GARDEN DAY .....</b>                               | <b>11</b> |

**THE WEATHER ROUNDUP.**

Although it seemed to be wetter in other parts of the country, March still seemed a pretty miserable month with 60mm of rain recorded over 23 days. This compared to 50mm last March. It was notable that there were definitely less frosty days.

April started off with 18 consecutive days of rain and the lakes on the golf course were very full with persistent puddles scattered across the course and greens. Overall, there were 25 days when rain fell, totalling 67.8mm, compared to 26mm in April 2023.

Over the first 4 months of 2024 we have recorded 194mm of rain compared to 125mm in 2023.



The overflow channel near the bottom of Craigie Hill.

**MORTON LOCHS REVISITED.**

We recently revisited Morton Lochs which can only be 2 miles from Drumoig as the crow flies. As usual there was a variety of wildlife and we were fortunate to visit on a calm day with reasonable light conditions.



Morton Lochs and reed beds.



Canada geese which we see frequently on our lakes at Drumoig.



You can get good views of the swans.





.....and the robins too!



And a pair of amorous toads!!!

Morton Lochs is well worth a visit. It can be accessed via a sign-posted, pot-holed track off the Tayport to St. Michael's Road (I would not recommend taking the Kirkton Barns short cut through to the Tayport road as it has deteriorated to the status of a farm track!). A better way to access Morton Lochs is to park in the Larick Centre and take the public foot-path opposite which crosses Scotsraig Golf Course – it's about a 20-minute walk.

### **MALTING Barley (Malt) - the heart of good Whisky & Beer! by Robert Pirie**

The malting process starts with the supply of good quality barley of known and tested varieties; in Scotland this is predominantly from Spring sown varieties as opposed to Autumn sown varieties. At harvest time grain is selected with a low nitrogen (protein) content and

dried to around 12% moisture for safe keeping and have a minimum of 96% germination. If it doesn't grow you can't make malt from it!

I have used Glenesk Maltings near Montrose as an example of the process although there are a number of different plant designs but the 3-part process remains the same as it has done for many generations – Steeping, Germination & Kilning.



During the first half of the 20th Century and before, malt was produced by hand in floor maltings which was very labour intensive and in much smaller batches.

Mechanised malting took over post WW2 and Glenesk was built in 1967. At the time it was seen as the Rolls Royce of plants and had a distillery attached producing Glenesk whisky. Sadly, this closed in the mid-eighties. The plant capacity is around 49,000 mt malt from around 60,000 mt barley and it has 24 conical steep tanks holding 24 tons of barley which feed 24 germination drums and 5 kilns to dry the green malt. The process runs continuously 24 hours a day 365 days of the year.

The first phase of the malting process is STEEPING, where the barley is put in large conical tanks and immersed in water, increasing the moisture content from 12% moisture to around 40/45%. After about 48 hrs and a number of steep waters and ventilation periods to oxygenate the barley, it starts to grow or chit.



From the steep tanks the barley is then transferred by gravity to the drums where the second phase, GERMINATION, begins. This part of the process which takes 4/5 days encourages the barley, now known as green malt, to grow further in a temperature and humidity-controlled environment thereby modifying the starch in the grain to make it more friable. The ventilated

drums slowly rotate to avoid overheating and stop the developing rootlets from becoming matted.



From the drums the green malt is transferred by conveyer for the final phase, KILNING. Temperature controlled hot air is passed through the grain to halt the germination process and reduce the moisture to around 4/4.5% thereby preserving the natural enzymes in the grain. At his stage peat can be burnt in a specialised kiln to produce “peated” malt for distillers who distil peat flavoured whisky similar to Laphroig, Talisker or Bowmore.



Before the finished malt is transferred to the silo block for onward delivery, the rootless or “culms” are removed and pelletised then sold for animal feed. Glenesk’s production is exclusively for distilling and whisky production, predominately in Scotland but also for export to a number of countries in the Far East.

Cheers to all you whisky drinkers who love a dram.

My thanks to the Manager at Glenesk, Malcolm Pirie, who helped with the content and supplying library photographs of the plant.



### **A HEN PHEASANT visits Comerton Place. – John Cuthbertson.**

John Cuthbertson sent me this account of his recent encounter with a hen pheasant.

“Today we had the first visit of the year from a lovely hen pheasant. I think she heard that there was a excellent display of daffodils in Comerton again this year and she had come to visit. I guess she prefers the early spring flowers in Comerton than in Forgan and Craigie Hill! She was very tame and was not scared when I approached to photograph her. What I didn’t realise was that the cock pheasant was in my neighbour’s garden and couldn’t quite work out how to get over the fence to join her. If you look closely, you can see him peering through the fence!”



### **SQUIRREL POX – Martin Hepworth.**

Many of you will have seen Ian Wilson’s circular from the DRA about the spread of Squirrel pox in the red squirrel population as far north as Dumfermline.

Squirrel pox is not something I had heard of; I am familiar with cowpox, smallpox and chickenpox and a few other poxes perhaps better not mentioned, but squirrel pox is a new one on me!

The origins of the squirrel pox virus are a bit of a mystery but it seems to have first appeared in East Anglia in the 1980’s. It has slowly spread northwards, reaching Durham and Northumberland in 1999. The recent report of a case in Dunfermline has spread concerns for the red squirrel population in Scotland. Significantly it does not seem to affect grey squirrels but is fatal to red squirrels. This may be a factor in the decline of the red squirrel but, for as long as I can remember, people have been bemoaning the rise of the grey squirrel population. I can remember in nursery school in Lincolnshire in the 1940’s being shown a stuffed red squirrel in a glass case and being told that they were all but extinct.

Grey squirrels have developed immunity to the virus but can be carriers. It is believed that the virus may be transferred by feeders, traps or other equipment used in areas occupied by squirrels which is why red squirrel preservation organisations recommend that squirrel feeders etc be disinfected regularly. Vikron S is the recommended disinfectant which is a broad spectrum anti-viral preparation effective against bird flu, foot & mouth disease etc so

is often used to clean poultry sheds and in dips to sterilise boots and vehicle wheels. We used a kitchen disinfectant containing bleach which should be effective against the virus. From now on I shall clean our squirrel feeder much more diligently.

### **SCOTTISH BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH 2024 RESULTS - Leaderboard top 10.**

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch results are now out. Volunteers throughout the country record their sightings of birds in their gardens from the 26<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> January. A total of 610,000 volunteers took part with 9.7 million birds being counted. There is no distinction between urban and rural locations and presumably people living in multi-storey accommodation are excluded. Nevertheless, the results are interesting with a variation between Scotland and England (and the other UK constituent nations) being apparent.

#### **SCOTTISH**

1. House Sparrow
2. Starling
3. Blue Tit
4. Chaffinch
5. Blackbird
6. Woodpigeon
7. Great Tit
8. Robin
9. Goldfinch
10. Coal Tit

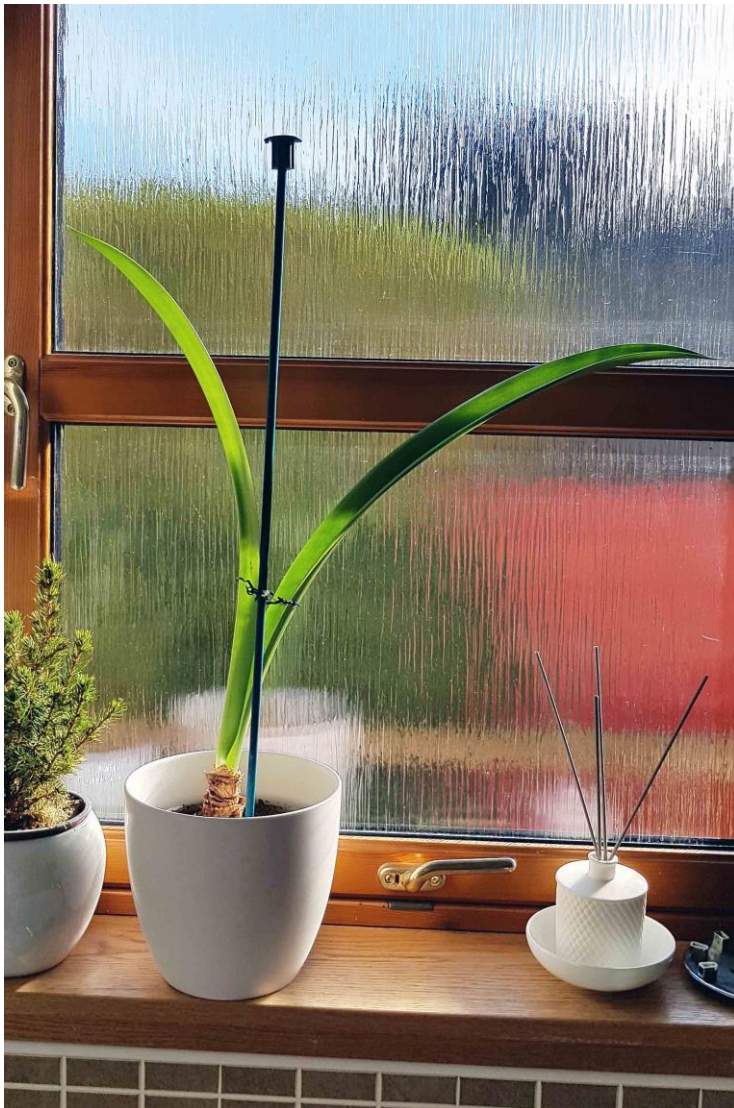
#### **UK WIDE**

1. House Sparrow
2. Blue Tit
3. Starling
4. Wood Pigeon
5. Blackbird
6. Robin
7. Great Tit
8. Goldfinch
9. Magpie
10. Long-tailed Tit

#### **BITS AND BOBS.**

1. Remember the story about recycling amaryllises in the last newsletter?

I've had 2 responses; the picture on the left is of an amaryllis which was allowed to die back



naturally, then stored in a cool place before replanting and watering etc. in December. It has grown and flourished.....but it hasn't flowered!

The second response was from a friend whose mother lived in Malta and she left hers outside all year round!! A different climate, of course, but with global warming we may be able to do that here in a few years' time!!

2. Sue & Malcolm Fabian, who have recently moved into Forgan Drive, sent me this picture of a wasp nest.



"We have recently moved into Forgan Drive. Whilst in the attic, we noticed this large wasp's nest, which appeared to be uninhabited by living wasps, but possibly had live eggs with queens, ready to appear.

We contacted pest control who confirmed our thoughts, then removed it, along with two dead mice.

Fantastic piece of architecture/construction on the part of the wasps. We now need to seal up their point of entry, and hopefully not find another, or more mice!"

Editor – Sue tells me that it is the size of 2 footballs, side-by-side!!



3. John Cuthbertson's hen pheasant also visited further down Comerton. I think it was attracted by the bird seed rather than John's daffodils!



They really are a lovely bird when you look closely. I was able to get a close up shot as it seemed more interested in the bird seed rather than me!

4. I'm sure everyone has noticed how early things have started to flower this year. Our camelia and an azalea started to flower in mid-March. The camelia was prolific and I swept up half a refuse bin of dropped flower heads.



Azalea



Camelia bloom

Although the early flowers were nice, there is a downside to global warming – for the first time ever I had to cut the grass in March!!

5. A white-tailed sea eagle was spotted over the woods in the middle of the golf course in April. They are seen rarely over Drumoig but nest somewhere in Tentsmuir forest as part of a re-introduction programme. They usually fly much higher than buzzards and have a large territory which is probably why we don't see them too often.

6. James McNeill from Pickletillem Avenue e-mailed me a short video (too big a file to reproduce here) of a yellow bird behaving rather oddly! It was a yellowhammer which was flying round in circles and then trying to fly through his patio window. My guess is that it was confused by its own reflection.....but it could have been high on the Buckfast!!

#### **SPRING SUMMER NIGHT SKY 14** – Steve Norrie

The summer triangle now dominates the evening skies as we approach the longest day where the sky will never get truly dark due to our northern latitude. The stars Altair, Deneb and Vega make up this asterism and in June it will be seen overhead as they will be the first stars to appear in the twilight. An interesting bright object to look out for is the red supergiant star Antares which is in the low southern sky at around midnight in June and due to the refraction of the earth's atmosphere can change colour as it shines. Because of its predominately red colour this star was often mistaken for Mars by ancient astronomers. Equally colourful is Arcturus shining well high in the summer skies as a bright orange object. Remember the colour of a star is best seen with averted vision.

#### **Noctilucent Clouds.**

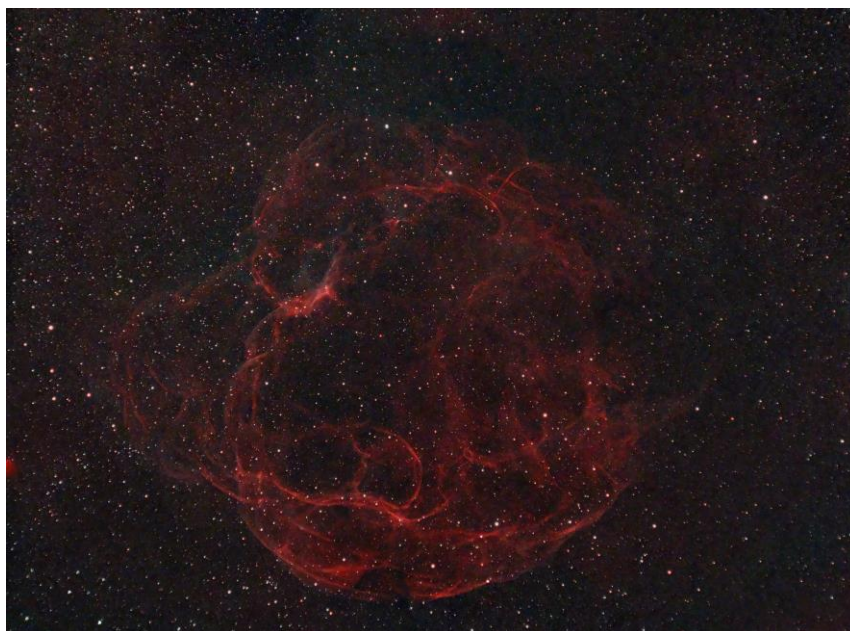
Should be visible in late evening glow - these night-time high level glowing clouds known as noctilucent clouds glow eerily and are thought to be remnants of passing asteroid and meteorite dust combining with ice crystals in the mesopause.

#### **Moon.**

Moon will be visible on its monthly cycle and best seeing is with a pair of binoculars when half waxing or waning Moon. How long till the next humans land on its surface? The robotic probes have problems landing upright!!

#### **Planets.**

Disappointing for this period with Jupiter fast retreating low in the west and both Saturn and Mars extremely low in the evening horizon. We will have to wait till later in the year for an improvement.



Sharpless 2-240 otherwise known as the Spaghetti nebula. A very dim deep sky object in the outer regions of the Milky Way showing the remnants of a supernova.



As usual, Steve sent me a couple of photos of the local wildlife.



A grey heron on the left .....

And a robin on his watering can. Robins seem to be rather popular this month!!

#### **PROPOSED OPEN GARDEN DAY.**

After consultation with the DRA, it was felt that it was worth giving the Open Garden idea another shot. Last year the event was held rather late in the season and only 3 gardens participated. This year I am suggesting that we hold the event on a Sunday afternoon towards the end of June or the beginning of July. The original idea was to give the established and new residents some inspiration and a chance to exchange ideas. Hopefully, some of the newer resident's gardens will be sufficiently established to show off and exchange ideas.

I would emphasise that this is not a competition and we are not looking for show gardens, just a forum for exchanging ideas on a sunny afternoon!!

If you would like to participate, please let me know on [kaymarthep1@aol.com](mailto:kaymarthep1@aol.com)

As always, many thanks to our contributors but **this newsletter will not happen unless you, the members, contribute. Please, please, please send me any observations, comments or photographs – there's always something of interest happening around Drumoig!**

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