

Bailies of Bennachie Wildlife Group 2019

The Bailies set up the Bennachie Wildlife Group in 2017 helped by a grant from the players of the people's Postcode Lottery. Throughout 2018 the group continued to discover more about local wildlife.

The group has trail cameras spread over Bennachie that record the wildlife living on the hill all year round. The cameras continue to show the importance of Bennachie as a home for many animals even if we don't see them very often because they are avoiding contact with people. The cameras collect data about these species in a very unobtrusive way without disturbing them. The cameras regularly take pictures of roe deer, badgers, foxes, pine martens and red squirrels and occasionally snap birds too. This wildlife information is valuable because the Bailies can use it to encourage wildlife-friendly management of the hill and to protect the hill from inappropriate developments. We are grateful to Forestry Commission Scotland and other landowners for giving us permission to locate our cameras on land they own.

Last February the group started helping Keziah Hobson from Aberdeen University with her PhD study on pine martens. Pine martens have re-appeared on Bennachie in the last decade after a long absence. Keziah's research is focusing on the recovery of pine martens, looking at how population density varies within landscapes with different land uses, as well as estimating population demographics including individual survival, turnover, and recruitment. There is a socio-economic component in her research too, looking into the different costs and benefits of living alongside pine martens. The forests surrounding Bennachie are one of her three study areas, the other two are in the Borders and the Trossachs. The Bennachie wildlife volunteers have helped her put up feeder boxes baited with food to attract pine martens. A sticky patch on the inside of the lid of feeder box collects hairs from the back of the pine marten as it feeds on the peanut bait. The volunteers collect these hair samples and send them to Keziah so that she can analyse their DNA. Keziah has been kept busy analysing the samples the group has collected so far but she has promised to give us an update on her progress soon.

This summer two very experienced wildlife researchers, Hector and Ana, came over from Spain to help Scottish Wildcat Action find out more about wild cats on Forestry Commission land in the North East. It was a real treat to attend their slideshow presentation describing their work on wild cats in the Cantabrian mountains in Northern Spain. Apparently, they can watch wild cats walking through mountain meadows in broad daylight. Here, in contrast, this incredibly hard-working pair spent many hours not finding cats until very near the end of their stay when they finally struck lucky and recorded a wild cat on one of their cameras.....but not on Bennachie.

Our resident tracking experts, Lizzie and Willow ran another mammal tracking course for the group. These inspirational courses are an excellent way to give local people the skills to identify signs and tracks of wildlife they hardly ever see. This evidence is collated by the North East Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) which manages a database of all wildlife for NE Scotland. It is the NESBReC data which is used for assessing the environmental impact of projects such as the dualling of the A96 or pylon routes or windfarms.

In June, John, our resident bird expert, led the always-popular dawn chorus walk. But the walk is no longer an introduction to the birds that can be heard and see but a more in depth discussion about which birds are singing and calling.

With permission from Dunecht estate, John also led the group to witness another astonishing dawn spectacle. 56,000 geese, almost all pink-footed geese, departing from their roost of Loch of Skene in late November, flying off to graze the fields in the surrounding area. The visit generated quite a bit of discussion about how to count 56,000 geese accurately!

David, our resident plant expert, ran a master class on bogs on Bennachie for the group. Under David's expert tuition the group are no longer bamboozled by bogs and heathlands, but have expert discussions on plant taxonomy, habitat classification and management. And they are always keen to learn more.

We are now developing a programme for 2019. Everyone is welcome, all we ask is that people become members of the Bailies of Bennachie.

If you want to join us please get in touch with wildlife.bennachie@btinternet.com. We keep in touch using email.

Jill Matthews