

Bennachie Wildlife Group 2019 - Wet, wet, wet.

Wet, wet, wet - a description of most Bennachie Wildlife Group meetings in 2019 (not the 1980s soft rock band from Clydebank).

In April, the wetness dampened the spirits of those who rose early to listen to the dawn chorus with John Wills. John had better luck on a sunny morning in June when he led a walk alongside the river Don, clocking up 23 different birds. These included osprey and dipper which depend on the water, as well as woodland residents like the jay and great spotted woodpecker, and summer migrants like blackcap and willow warbler.

Only the very hardy, clothed in waterproofs, braved the trip to the Ythan estuary. But their reward was sighting an unusual visitor, a great white egret. These large white birds, almost the size of a heron, are normally associated with warmer climes but have started breeding in SW England in last decade.

The dawn goose watch in November was, yes, you guessed it, very wet. However, the low-hanging cloud meant thousands of geese, mainly pinkfeets, flew low over our heads as they left their roost on the Loch of Skene to fly to their feeding fields. Even in the rain this is a spectacle for the eyes and ears.

Our last event of the year is an evening walk to listen for owls in the dark – what the weather will be like?

Dave Bale experienced similar weather problems when looking closely at the plants in Tilliefour wood but, undaunted, the hardy botanists were delighted by the rain-dropped flowers David pointed out to them. Sticking with the watery theme, David's next excursion was to the misnamed Star Bog, which the botanists learned should really be called Star Fen. What's the difference? Both are wetlands, but a bog is more often peaty and acidic with anaerobic decomposition while a fen tends to be more nutrient rich and often has water flowing through it; each is home to a different suite of plants. Ask David about the hybrid sedges residing there!

In July we tried hard rock geology with Peter Craig who showed us exposures of different granites in local quarries. The rain washed away the dirt leaving clean rock faces for us to examine – what stories these rocks tell when you have an expert telling you how to read them. Geologically speaking granite involves phenomenal forces in the earth's crust over millions of years – the numbers are mind-bending.

As for mammals, we started the year indoors with an update from Keziah Hobson about her PhD on pine martens. Some of the group had collected hair samples from feeder boxes so that Keziah could analyse the DNA. She explained the complexity of the methods for the DNA analysis, which bamboozled many of us, but from her work she could tell us about the individual pine martens which visited the feeder boxes. In September Lizzie Bacon inspired us to carry on studying pine martens. We can't afford expensive DNA analysis, so instead we are using the trail cameras to take photos of the white chest bibs of pine martens as each marten has a bib with a unique shape and pattern. Getting a good photo is not simple, so Lizzie and her husband Philip ran a workshop showing us how to set up a simple rig so that the pine marten faces the camera at the right height, and Lizzie showed us how to draw the bibs to identify each individual. It is early days, but some people are already getting good pictures showing bib patterns on the pine martens.....watch this space for more information next year.

On a dreich day in October Michael Skelly from Forestry and Land Scotland gave us a master class on deer management in the area. He explained the many practical issues with keeping deer numbers low enough to allow trees to grow in the forest without fencing. His work involves everything from how, when and where to shoot deer safely, right through to how much income is earned from selling the meat. There are very few stalkers to control increasing numbers of deer – it's very difficult task.

This year we planned to survey local burns for water voles, but the wet weather put a stop to that. The idea was to find out whether water voles have re-colonised local water courses since mink were removed. We had a great (dry!) day with Prof Xavier Lambin when he showed us how to distinguish water voles, bank voles and field voles and taught us what water vole signs to look for when wading along a burn. But after the training day, it rained and rained and rained, filling the burns with so much water that it was unsafe to do the survey. We're hoping there'll be less rain next year so that we can continue the survey.

The Bennachie Wildlife Group is open to all Bailies of Bennachie. We use a group email list to keep everyone informed about what we're doing. If you want to join this list please contact wildlife.bennachie@btinternet.com.