

Welcome to the 4th edition of the Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project Newsletter

Machair LIFE+ staff are employees of RSPB Scotland, Managing Partner for the Project, working in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the Scottish Crofting Federation. Our office can be found in the CRP Building at East Camp, Balivanich, Benbecula and our door is always open...

Please explore our Facebook page to find out what has been happening up to the minute and take part in any discussions ... www.facebook.com/MachairLife and don't forget you can also visit our website www.machairlife.org.uk

New machinery for traditional reaping

We piloted our new reaper binder on the Uists and Barra this harvest season. The binder is a modern version of traditional machines and was sourced from Alvan Blanch in Wiltshire, England. Since it is getting more and more difficult to source and maintain parts for traditional machines which are still prevalent on the island, it is hoped that this machine may prove an attractive alternative to crofters to enable them to maintain the traditional practice of harvesting corn with a binder for stacks or seed. The parts for the new binder are easy to source and its speed of working is also a benefit. It has a four and a half foot cutting width, is tractor mounted and is able to cut very low to the ground leaving little stubble waste.

We harvested eight hectares of corn with the binder from Barra to Berneray on crofts where we had Management Agreements. We were particularly excited about the use



Machair Life reaper binder in action at Drimsdale.

of the binder on Andrew Rodger's croft in Berneray, since there have not been any crops harvested in the traditional way there for over ten years. Andrew has made a stack at the croft house which will do a great deal to attract corn bunting by providing a potential winter food source. The corn bunting population is very vulnerable across the island with less than a 100 pairs and since the RSPB's annual breeding survey did not record any in Berneray this season the addition of a stack in the area is good news.

The wet and windy weather this year was particularly challenging for anyone harvesting corn with a reaper binder and we faced our own challenges on crops which had been laid down with the heavy rain and wind. The effort of drying the crop in stooks and stacks is a significant

physical challenge particularly when you're up against bad weather and so the team here did our best to support crofters with the stooking of crops. We are also paying crofters in designated sites for the effort of making stacks as part of the corn bunting stack scheme. We are keen as well to assist with the maintenance and repair of traditional binders and will be talking to crofters over the winter months to see how we can assist.

Next year we will be demonstrating the new binder at events across the island. If you would be interested in seeing the binder in action or in having your crop harvested with it next year and are not currently in a management agreement with the project, please contact us to discuss the options.



We will be assisting with the repair of old binders next year.

Inside this issue

An interview with Neil MaCaskill



The start of a series of interviews about the changes in crofting across the Islands.

Goose News



An update on this years' schemes on the Uists and on Tiree and Coll.

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What has been happening in our other project areas.



A interview with Neil MaCaskill from Berneray



Neil MaCaskill

We went to see Neil MaCaskill who has been the grazing clerk in the township of Borve on Berneray “for quite a long time”. We asked him for his thoughts on how changes have affected crofting in the townships over the years.

In the last twenty years particularly, Neil has witnessed many changes, including the move to baling of the corn crop as silage and the rise in the population of greylag geese and “more geese eating the corn”. There has also been a big increase in the use of contractors to plough and harvest the land corresponding with a decrease in the number of crofters working their own plots from twenty-three to six at Borve. The changes in agricultural payments available to crofters have had a big impact on the viability of crofting, which combined with an increased cost of living, the growing price of stock feed and the younger generation

leaving the Islands have all led to crofting remaining a tough life. And according to Neil, with the number of bachelors on Berneray, it has meant that there are less crofters using their plots.

However 2011 saw the first stacks return to Berneray for ten years. The new Machair Life+ reaper binder cut an acre for Andrew Rodgers in Rushgarry. Next year it is hoped that other Berneray crofters will have the confidence to leave some areas for stooking to build stacks for threshing using either their own traditional binders or with help from Machair Life. As Neil says “much depends on the weather and the geese....”

Neil has also seen the gradual change over from traditional breeds of cattle to the continental varieties, which has been driven by market prices and demands. Although he laments the loss of his favourite

traditional breeds, he acknowledges that given the average herd size and size of crofts in this area and the general reliance on the market, continental calves are still fetching the best price.

However not all has changed: the crofters on Berneray still graze their traditional Blackface sheep on Boreray all year round and take sheep out to a number of other off-shore islands. The sheep are put on the islands from May to October when they return the machair and the lambs are sold on.

The Berneray crofters maintain the traditional two years crop and two years fallow and have continued to use seaweed as fertilizer on the

machair since the days when Neil can remember collecting it with a horse and cart.

When this year’s bad weather was mentioned, Neil reminded us that in his memory there have been many tough years. He recalled the autumn of 1962 when an exceptional storm and a spring tide brought the sea up over the machair and shifted all the stooks and totchians at least 300 yards. Much of the seed was lost that year. Neil said he is still concerned about the loss of the precious Uist seed this year.

We asked him about the biggest challenges facing crofters today, and Neil had this advice “Keep on crofting. Never lose hope.”

Machair Life+ Public Meeting



Crofters relax after the meeting at the Dark Island Hotel.

We held a public meeting on Thursday 27th from 7-10 pm at the Dark Island Hotel. This was an opportunity to give and receive feedback on our work across the Uists and to discuss with crofters and other members of the public how the project is progressing. We were particularly keen to get people’s ideas on key issues including the best way that we can help townships with the collection of seaweed this winter, our proposals to acquire new machinery, the crop protection scheme and how machinery may be managed after the project has ended in 2014.

We were delighted with the turnout with more than forty-seven crofters attending. The meeting was chaired by Councillor Uisdean Robertson and a questionnaire was handed round on the night to generate discussion. A copy has now been sent out to all other crofters on our data base to encourage additional feedback from those who were unable to attend on the evening. We look forwards to receiving responses to these important topics since the feedback is particularly important to help inform our project operations alongside the future funding of crop protection and SRDP funding schemes in the Hebrides.

Crop protection News 2011

Uists Goose Scheme

by Rory MacGillivray, crop protection coordinator, Uists and Benbecula



Winning scarecrow from South Uist Workshops.

Year two of the Machair Life + crop protection scheme has had good feedback. We started on July 16th and finished on 14th October bar two scarers who continued through to end-October to assist crofters who had difficulty harvesting crop due to exceptionally poor weather.

The weather overall was difficult this year with a very wet and exceptionally windy May. Throughout the growth period there was little warmth resulting in a delayed ripening of the corn and barley crop. The end result

being that crops were up to a month behind previous years.

This delay caused the crofters and scarers many problems as greylag geese arrived on the machair at the end of July in some places, and by mid August in others. Usually as the numbers increase, the silage crop is harvested leaving stubble and loose/fallen seed for the geese to eat, but as that harvesting was delayed the geese were focusing on standing crop.

There were also some significant changes in the goose movements. Less were flying in at dawn, preferring to come in later in the morning and flying more frequently through the day. They preferred to stay in little groups rather than the usual combining of these groups into larger flocks. There was also more noticeable flying into crop with the moon. This made scaring more difficult as the geese were more unpredictable.

The scaring methods again worked very well indeed with the community built scarecrows, fencing, kites, and bangers all working to good effect. A new product called Humming wire was trialled and worked very well. There was conflicting feedback on rockets, they became a love/hate item!

Overall the seed crop was protected and despite delays there was little or no damage to crop. Feedback says that the crofters are managing to gain confidence in leaving their crop standing for longer.

The general feeling is that there is not the same amount of geese around, and while some areas may have had a slight increase, overall the feeling and count suggests that the numbers are down.

A well attended public meeting was held in October and discussions took place on proposals for next year's crop protection. I have offered to attend township meetings so that we

can get as close a plan as possible to meet those townships specific needs, all that is needed is an invite and date to attend! I would urge townships to consider this at the earliest possible so that our limited budgets are spent in the best areas possible.

I would like to offer my thanks to the crofters, the Machair Life team and the scarers of course, (who were daily up at very unsociable hours in all weathers protecting crops), for making the coordinating of the project achievable. I would ask anyone who has any issues or concerns re scaring methods being used or not used to contact me.

Please Note; Machair Life stress the importance of looking after the scaring equipment loaned out. Due to budget constraints, considerably less equipment can be purchased in year 3 or 4. Those who have had equipment may not get free replacements or parts, hence the need to ask that all equipment is taken in to safe storage.

Tiree and Coll Goose Scheme

by Peter Isaacson, crop protection coordinator, Tiree and Coll

The Tiree and Coll greylag population currently resides at over 3100 birds, so the downward trend continues. This has lessened the economic losses to local farmers and crofters, while meeting the UK's nature conservation obligations for native greylag geese.

Brood sizes were again monitored and surviving brood totals were slightly up, possibly due to the reduction in competition, but it is the overall number that is the main limiting factor regarding goose population.

There was an almost complete lack of barley sown for silage crops in 2011 and only a handful of arable/grass undersown fields. A combination of

seed price, wet field conditions in spring, losses due to rat damage to winter stored silage bales containing barley, and the worry of goose damage were contributing factors. Unfortunately, this is the opposite outcome to what might be hoped for by all parties concerned, namely farmers and crofters, Machair Life+, RSPB and Argyll Estates, but it is envisaged that as fears ease re goose damage confidence will be restored in the agricultural system.

The constraints on goose scaring licences are very clear, stating that lethal scaring methods should only be used after a good range of non lethal methods have been tried, and this was again rigidly adhered to. With the lack of barley crop, non



Peter Isaacson and one of the Bangalore Broadside gas canons used on Tiree.

lethal methods worked very well overall. On the islands gas canons, bird scaring rockets and non lethal use of shotgun are the main tools that ensured success.

Sacrificial barley crops left to ripen fully on newly created sites is being

investigated as a method of diversion for greylags, an opening for farmland birds and extension of corncrake territories. It may also act as a boon to open season wildfowling which would help to support the fragile local economy.

News from Argyll Islands



by Ben Jones , Site Manager

The Machair Life+ project is funding the comcrake survey work over the whole of Coll, which entails a total of six nights survey by one person. This year the weather was looking dire for surveys in May, but June turned out to be calm and warm over night and the surveys were completed with ease, thankfully. This year there were 121 calling male

comcrakes on Coll of which 64 were on the RSPB reserve, 29 with RSPB Management Agreements and with the majority of farms on Coll funded by SRDP this is where the other 28 could be found.

In recent years the sowing of arable crops on the Coll reserve had fizzled out for various reasons but in 2010 new kit was purchased to enable crop sowing to recommence. This year 4 hectares of in-bye was cultivated, crops included triticale which was cut green and baled for winter fodder, and a wild bird seed mix under sown with a clover and grass mix. While we positively welcome the birds to feast on the wild

bird seed crop the greylag geese were not so welcome on the triticale. The Goose Management Scheme provided bangers and rockets which were used in June and again at the end of August and proved to be very effective at protecting crops.

Last year on the Coll reserve biennial Brassicas were sown to see if they could be used to create early cover for comcrakes. While the Brassicas were steadily growing in 2010, with it was growing Phacelia, an attractive blue flower beneficial to the Great Yellow Bumblebee. This was the year when the Brassicas would either prove to be useful or not and thankfully they

proved to be good early cover. A male comcrake spent the entire spring calling from a Brassica patch approximately 6x40m. The seed mix of Phacelia and Brassicas has proved to be so great for wildlife that it is now going to be used in the majority of comcrake cover corridors on the reserve.



Phacelia cover crop on Coll.

Smaull update & other areas



by Mary McGregor, Warden Islay Reserves & Crystal Maw, Project Officer Halting Environmental Loss Project

The records from this season's bird surveys have been analysed and confirmed that wader numbers are down, which is echoed in other areas of the island. It was a poor year for raptors on the reserve, but elsewhere on the island they have been doing well, so not too much of a concern. A female peregrine has been spotted on the reserve, periodically hunting along the moorland. It was a welcome sight, but not so welcome upon the discovery of the body parts of one

of this year's chough fledglings! In other news, an estimated 10 pairs of twite bred on the reserve, and a further estimated 5 pairs of linnets. These birds are now back forming large flocks and are feeding on seed heads in the late cut silage fields and in the comcrake corridors.

Insect expert Brian Nelson came to visit Smaull and assess its invertebrate biodiversity, in particular the rare aquatic beetles that are known to be present on the reserve. We look forward to the results. Smaull also welcomed visits from reserves ecologist Nicky Redpath who came to assess both early and late comcrake cover on the reserves and who has given us positive feedback.

The silage fields grew very well, despite a slow start in spring. These will be mown to provide

Smaull's cattle with their winter fodder, and the cut fields will attract chough, rook and jackdaw to the fresh stubble and bare earth. Chough visits have been regular throughout the summer, and not just the resident pairs. On 25th July, 12 chough were seen feeding on an old winter cattle feeding area. These were mainly young birds coming from various locations across the island demonstrating the highly mobile nature of chough at this time of year.

This summer a flock of up to 39 chough has been seen feeding around the area covered by the Machair LIFE+ project on Islay. In this flock the young chough that fledged this spring will be learning the ropes from the 1 and 2 year old choughs that are yet to pair up. It is important that the habitat remains suitable for these young birds as it is while in this flock they learn the vital foraging and

social skills that keep them alive and breeding in latter years.

The Machair LIFE+ funded tractor has been working hard on the Oa Reserve, which is on the south-east of the island, opening up areas where rush and bracken had taken over. This will benefit the livestock using the fields and in turn foraging chough. It is also being used to carry out other habitat management work to ensure they continue breeding successfully in this area, as well as at Smaull. The Oa is also home to the largest flocks of wintering finches on Islay; hundreds of twite and linnets, along with greenfinch, goldfinch, chaffinch, brambling and many other visiting birds. The tractor has helped with the management of the arable and seed crops on the Oa, helping us to provide winter forage for these birds.



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