

## Welcome to the 7<sup>th</sup> 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](http://www.facebook.com/MachairLife) and don't forget you can also visit our website [www.machairlife.org.uk](http://www.machairlife.org.uk)

## 2013 new-cropped machair targets reached

Machair LIFE+ will achieve its Project target for 'new'-cropped machair – bringing previously cropped but now uncultivated machair back into cropping rotation.

In 2013 we are likely to support 9.6 hectares (ha) of new arable cropping on the machair, some areas of which have not been cultivated for 25 years or more. Of this, 8.8 ha will be new arable cropping under Machair LIFE+ Management Agreements throughout the Uists and in Ness, Lewis. In addition, a further 0.8 ha of new cropping will be achieved through a gift of Uist seed to Tìree, where crofters are keen to start growing corn crops again.

The break down by island is:

ISLAND	HECTARES
Benbecula .....	5.5
South Uist .....	1.3
Ness, Lewis .....	2.0
Tìree .....	0.8
TOTAL .....	9.6



Cropped machair provides essential cover for corncrake

All of these additional areas of arable cropping will mean significant biodiversity benefits across the island, including:

- more opportunities for waders to nest;
- more arable and fallow wildflowers setting seed;
- more late cover for corncrake;
- more winter food for farmland birds;

- more corn as winter fodder for stock; and
- more of the valuable indigenous Uist seed mixtures to be saved.

Corncrake numbers on Benbecula have declined in recent years and whilst the reasons for this are unclear, lack of cover could be a contributing factor. Though cover can mean early cover in Spring (such as iris and reed beds), it also refers to late cover provided by arable crops, which can

be a significant refuge for adults and late broods, therefore increasing the area of cropped machair could improve the chances for corncrake in the later months.

Progress towards this project target was initially slow but our success in this achievement is thanks to the positive response of those crofters involved, and we would like to say "thank you" for your support.



Scottish bluebells (harebells) on the machair in fallow

## Machair LIFE+ Editorial - This Season *by Hazel Smith*

Since joining the team in February, the sun seems to have shone indiscriminately on the Islands, which has meant perfect weather for walking and running, and I continue to be amazed by how beautiful the Islands are. The weather of the last few months has not, however, been kind to the crofters. With heavy frosts at the beginning of lambing and cultivation, there have been

serious concerns for the year ahead.

However, on talking with the crofters who pop into the office, it seems that lambs and calves are, on the whole, doing well this year. Given the conditions of farming around the rest of the UK this winter, where the headlines are full of the Schmallenberg virus and heavy snow storms causing

thousands of animal deaths and seriously affecting the growing season, perhaps we should look on the bright side?

As we gear up for the summer months, the phones have started to ring with journalists and researchers wanting to know all about the machair. Indeed, it seems that Uist will get a lot of exposure this year, thanks to the

stunning 'Islands on the Edge' coverage.

As Machair LIFE+ is now well into its final year, the future is uncertain, though the Team do not see this as the end. The Project is working hard to secure further funding for a second, or similar project to ensure that the work we have done will carry on in different guises. Indeed, for us all it is watch this space...

# An interview with John Buchanan of Torlum



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John Buchanan with his father's refurbished Massey Ferguson

John Buchanan keeps both sheep and cattle on his four crofts at Torlum. Having followed at least five generations of crofter, he claims to have always had an interest since he was a boy and after over fifty years crofting (John is in his early seventies), he certainly has a wealth of knowledge concerning the old ways, remembering back to a different time;

*"In the old days it was different, because it was all tied by hand. I remember the Lincilate machair; there used to be crowds down there with the scythes and doing the tying by hand. And everyone was helping each other. In our township they mostly do the silage on the corn now, there's only me and one other that do the binding."*

Why does John prefer the traditional ways over the modern? Firstly because of the costs, as fuel prices rise and new machinery uses more and more, the cost of silage baling can easily escalate, he also

thinks that the larger machinery isn't always well suited to the ground here, causing damage on the machair. Last but not least, John prefers traditional crofting because he enjoys it: being out in the open and physically tying and stooking the corn by hand. John maintains that the dried corn is better than the silage;

*"If you have your cattle in for a few weeks for calving, it's easier to feed with the corn. It's better bound than silage because of risk of rats and that."*

Today, John keeps six Limousin cows and fifty Blackface and Cheviot sheep. He was pleased with the prices for lambs at last year's sales, adding that lambing and calving is going well this year, with five calves and twenty five lambs to date. John decided to change back to more traditional Blackface crosses from Suffolks a few years ago, owing to difficulties in lambing, claiming to have much less trouble these days.

We asked John what it is about crofting that he enjoys so much, he told us that it's the cattle that he gets attached to, as he's kept the same line of stock that his father started. He also feels that the way of life is really suited to him, having never really enjoyed football or hobbies when he was younger- he always wanted to be "Out, in the fresh air all the time", doing something useful.

When asked about the future of crofting, John seems positive that it will carry on, though perhaps on a lesser scale as more of a sideline. However, John believes that there is a concern with the younger generation, who perhaps don't see crofting as a good source of income, and as too much work, stating that;

*"...all they want to do is sit on a tractor and not do any hard work."*

At the arrival of the rocket range, and the jobs that it created, John

believes that the Islands, and crofting, over the years have thrived. However, there now needs to be something new created; *"to boost the work here."* if the Islands want to return to this.

*"We need a new industry or scheme to get young people to stay."*

Despite issues of geese, rising costs, and the increasing amounts of complex paperwork, John is positive about the agricultural schemes on Uist. As a valuable commodity, the machair is well worth saving, and John would be sorry to see the peewits and the corn buntings go. He adds that the presence of the greylag geese means that crofters have to change and adapt all the time to protect the crops and grazing, but that:

*"...luckily we've got the scarers out there, doing a good job."*

## Machair in schools



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Machair art students stooking the corn

The second phase of our Machair Art project is now well under-way, with a new group of S1 and S2 students from Sgoil Lionacleit. The group of enthusiastic artists have already enjoyed stooking the corn on lochdar machair, counting sheep- and learning the different breeds- at the Lochmaddy sales, seaweed collection at Balranald and lambing at Lincilate with the regular S3 crofting course. Plus there's still shallow cultivation and biodiversity to come.

The students will be displaying their work in the school at the end of the Summer term, plus there will be a special showcase assembly to demonstrate everything that the group have learnt.

Machair LIFE+ will also be working this year with the Primary Schools to learn about the machair via various workshops and biodiversity days, including the Mad Machair Tea Party hat-making workshops (see back page for details).



# 2013 Crop Protection Scheme

This year is the last year of the Machair LIFE+ crop protection scheme, as in previous years, scarers will be working to protect ripening corn crops from early-August until harvest is safely gathered in. Machair LIFE+ contracted scarers will be protecting crops in areas of Berneray, North Uist and north Benbecula, whilst the rest of the Islands will be covered by Storax Ubhist, North Uist Estate and Newton Syndicate, who employ their own scarers. Rory MacGillivray, will be coordinating the programme across the Islands on behalf of the Project and if you

need advice please contact your corresponding office.

Scarers' allocated hours will be similar to last year; hours and areas will be published in the local press in June. Equipment will be available again, though we are in discussion as to how this will be made available this year. Rockets and bangers will be allocated to scarers, as we have found that their general use causes problems with shooting later in the season.

To avoid further confusion we would like to explain, Machair LIFE+ are

running the Crop Protection Scheme and SNH are running the 'Adaptive Management' 4-year trial that controls goose numbers. However as members of the Uist Goose Group we also support the trial and agree that Adaptive Management needs to work alongside a transitional crop protection scheme to reduce the population to manageable levels in the timescale funded. We are all concerned that funding for crop protection from geese is to be halted in 2014, as part of recent government cuts, and are working with SNH and SGRPID to find more funds.

The Scottish Crofting Federation visited the islands last month and discussed ways to put pressure on the Scottish Government to continue to fund crop protection and give more

money to the Adaptive Management scheme. Ena MacNeil has a paper petition ready for signing and an e-petition will be online shortly, details of which will be published in the local press.

For crop protection queries call: ML office on 01870 603361  
Rory MacGillivray on 07879 443518.  
For Storax Ubhist call 01878 700101  
North Uist Estate call 01876 500329  
SNH call 01870 620238



## Organic vs. Artificial

### How does seaweed fare against NPK in contracting costs?

Seaweed as an organic fertiliser can bring many benefits in terms of both crop yield and encouraging biodiversity and we are glad to report Machair LIFE+ has spread more than 125 hectares of seaweed across the Uists and Benbecula this year.

Working with contractors over the last year we have gathered some basic costs for seaweed collection and spreading, which may be useful to crofters. Please note that these calculations are approximates at this stage.

Machair LIFE+ has been collecting seaweed from the shore at a rate of approximately 10 loads per hectare, which is about 80 tonnes of fresh seaweed. We have spread up to 2 hectares per crofter at varying application rates according to each crofters own 'recipe'.

Using a tractor and 8-tonne trailer, with another tractor loading (to save constant uncoupling), we have averaged 30 loads per day. This equates to **£230** per hectare excl. VAT at current contractor rates.

Using our 9-tonne spreader at 10 loads per hectare (or 4 loads an hour) the cost is **£125** per hectare excl. VAT.

The **total cost** of collecting and spreading seaweed works out at **£355** per hectare excl. VAT.

By comparison, using NPK 20-10-10 at 600kg per hectare (currently £380 per tonne excl. VAT), the total cost per hectare, for contract spreading of artificial fertiliser is **£250** excl. VAT. At a higher rate of application of 800 kg per hectare, the cost is **£325** excl. VAT.

This shows that the difference between contractor costs for using seaweed and artificial fertiliser appears smaller than expected and we are encouraging crofters to continue using seaweed given its many other benefits for the machair and for wildlife. We will carry out more detailed cost benefits as the year progresses.

*For information about seaweed as an organic fertiliser contact Matthew Topsfield at the Machair LIFE+ office.*

## Young people and project legacy

Lews Castle College have agreed to start discussions about setting up a brand new crofting course for September 2014 to be based on Benbecula. Machair LIFE+ have recently secured a 50% grant from HIE to carry out a feasibility study for the course. Meetings will take place this month between the Project, CnES, SCRPID and the College about the best way forwards.

We are hopeful that if a new course goes ahead, it will compliment the excellent existing crofting course run by Sgoil Lionacleit and will provide

school-leavers and new crofters with all the necessary agricultural skills to set up and run a croft. Health and safety, animal welfare and access to grant-aid will be included in providing qualifications at Further Education level in crofting agriculture.

At the Machair LIFE+ public meeting in January, crofters agreed that if a new course is set up, this would be the best place for the machinery from the Project to be used and therefore this will be an integral part of the discussions.



The Machair LIFE+ Machinery on delivery day, back in 2010

## Reaper-Binder repairs

Following last issue's Invite for Expressions of Interest, our commissioned canvas-makers have now begun work making 29 new canvasses to get 10 reaper-binders back in action across the Uists and Benbecula ready for this year's harvest.



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## Machair LIFE+ in the media

BBC Scotland's Landward can't get enough of Uist. This time they have been filming Donald and the rotavator out on the machair and look out for our wading bird surveyor, Yvonne Benting, who gave a great interview on the importance of the machair for birdlife.

## Goose plucker

Machair LIFE+, with help from the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, have now purchased an industrial Bingham Phase 1 poultry plucking machine to help with processing all the greylag geese shot as part of the

The *Islands on the Edge* series due to air this month portrays the machair beautifully, highlighting its stunning scenery and wildlife, and showcasing a few well-known faces, including a great scene with some of last year's Machair Art students building a cornstack.

Adaptive Management Trial by SNH. The plucker is now being tested by Stòras Uibhist, but will be available for public use. Contact the office for more details.

## Machair LIFE+ film

Machair LIFE+ have commissioned Uist Film to document crofting life on the machair for a short film. After a year of filming, the footage is coming together and will be complimented by the talented students from the BA Applied Music course at the University of Highlands and Islands, who we have enlisted to provide the soundtrack.



© UHI?

## Machair LIFE+ Conference



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Toiteans at Howmore

This Summer, Machair LIFE+ will be hosting a 3-day conference of crofting on the machair, at Talla an lochdar.

With local and national speakers, the conference will review the work of the Machair LIFE+ project and discuss future policy for the machair through various workshop sessions. We will also be hosting fieldtrips to Balranald and Drimsdale machairs, a ceilidh and a family tea party.

*Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August:*

**Machair LIFE+ conference.**

*Friday 30<sup>th</sup> August:*

**Fieldtrips followed by ceilidh.**

*Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> August:*

**Mad Machair Tea Party.**

**For bookings and more information:**

**[www.machairlife.eventbrite.co.uk](http://www.machairlife.eventbrite.co.uk) or 01870 603361**

## Mad machair tea party

To finish off our conference, Machair LIFE+ will be hosting a family celebration as a thank-you to all who have helped the project along the way. The theme is all things machair, and Mad Machair Hats are a must. There will be a Mad Machair Hat competition, with excellent prizes to be won in various categories, including adults, so get your millinery skills to work!



© RSPB

## Machair hat workshops

Giving our younger categories a helping hand, we shall be hosting hat-making days with the Primary schools at the end of the Summer term. As machair is the theme, the children will learn all about its many important uses and wildlife, to give inspiration to their designs.

## Guided Walks this summer

This summer will see the return of Machair LIFE+'s guided walk programme. In addition to our regular wildlife walks with Steve Duffield, Hazel will be hosting crofting and Machair LIFE+ walks.

**Crofting and Machair LIFE+ walks**  
**13th May- 17th June.**

**Wildlife Walks with Steve Duffield**  
**24th June- 19th August.**

Walks will take place every Monday at 10am, starting from Howmore church and will cost £2 for RSPB members and £5 for non-members.

## Machair LIFE+ demonstration events

Machair LIFE+ have been busy hosting our demonstration events this season, with rotovating on Barra and rotovating and shallow ploughing at West Gerinish. We shall also be demonstrating reaper-binders, both the modern Alvan Blanch project binder and a traditional Biset binder, at harvest-time.



## Contact Information

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