

SOC/BTO Scottish Bird Camp

This article is based on the Celebrating Scotland's first Bird Camp <https://tinyurl.com/sta57wkv> blog written by Steve Willis at BTO Scotland and published on the BTO website.

The Club was delighted to work in partnership with our friends at the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to lead the first ever Scottish Bird Camp - an exciting new initiative for young nature enthusiasts and the next generation of ornithologists. Both charities share a strong commitment to engaging and supporting young birdwatchers, and to creating opportunities for people to connect with birds, and with one another.

Camp took place on the first weekend of June, and saw 12 young people (many of whom had attended some of our online Youth Events sessions) aged between 10 and 15 years old, with various levels of birdwatching experience between them, excitedly gather at our East Lothian base. Once the Campers got settled in, we introduced the Camp Leaders and gave the participants an overview of what we had planned for the weekend.

Ben Darvill and Steve Willis from BTO Scotland then led a fun bird ID game, which put the group's team-working, bird identification and communication skills to the test – a great and laughter-filled way to break the ice and get to know one another – before the Campers retired to their dorms, fairly exhausted (us leaders too!) but excited about the weekend ahead.

Saturday morning was bright and sunny and we were lucky to be joined by local moth enthusiast and expert, Katty Baird. As 'catch more moths' was voted top of many of the participants' aims for the weekend, the sight of Katty carrying two traps laden with live specimens for the Campers to help process was almost too much excitement to bear!

In a post-Camp feedback survey, 100% of respondents* gave the experience 5/5 when asked if they had fun over the weekend.

There was a dazzling array of shapes and sizes (and disguises!). Poplar Hawk-moth and Buff-tip (the latter pictured below) proved big hits with the group. Cameras were out, as were sketch books, and even watercolours - a common sight throughout the weekend and wonderful to see.



Plate 247. Spot the Buff-tip! © BTO

Katty's session led nicely into a visit from renowned wildlife artist and regular Waterston House exhibitor, Darren Woodhead, who effortlessly and passionately engaged the group on all things arty, assisted by Ptolemy McKinnon, one of our volunteer Camp Leaders and SOC Youth Connect members.

"I loved chatting to him (Darren) and found him really inspiring"

Bird Camp participant

Darren brought with him all sorts of props (wings, feathers and sketchbooks) for his session and soon got the group making their own bird models. Imaginations were encouraged to run wild and the children's creations were soon flying all around the venue garden.

Afterwards, Pritt stick and paints were quickly packed away before the group boarded the minibus for a visit to a local nature reserve, for a peaceful walk in the woods, looking and listening for birds, led by Ben and Steve.

Survey respondents* gave Camp an average score of 4.2/5 when asked if they felt more confident in their birding skills having taken part over the weekend.



Plate 248. Darren shares his amazing portfolio of sketchbooks. © BTO

Chris Marais from BTO's Youth Team - also a qualified Mindfulness teacher - led a dedicated session. The whole group really got into this and hopefully it will be something we can each draw on again to help us find a moment of calm in amongst all the 'noise'.

After our packed lunches, we piled back in the minibus bound for Dunbar and East Lothian's famous landmark, the Bass Rock, courtesy of the team at Blue Wild, Nature Boat Tours www.bluewild.co.uk. We were met by our expert guide, the legendary Maggie Sheddan

and Blue Wild owner, Alan Stewart, who fitted us for lifejackets and made sure we were safely kitted out for the trip. It was sunny with a little wind – perfect sailing conditions – and the fast and comfortable boat made quick work of the trip out to the world's largest single Northern Gannet colony.

Any seabird colony is an assault on all the senses and the Bass Rock didn't disappoint - the air full of swirling seabirds, the noisy rattling call of Gannets, and the unmistakable whiff of seabird guano. What a trip!



Plate 249. Maggie, our expert guide tells us all about the birds. © BTO



Plate 250. Returning from Bass Rock on the boat trip. © BTO

"I don't think I could choose just one thing that I enjoyed the most, but my top three were probably the boat trip, ringing and the nest finding!"

Bird Camp participant

Back on dry land at the venue, the young people were free to do their own thing whilst dinner was prepared. For some, that meant browsing Ben's enviable natural history book collection and Carol Miller's (volunteer Camp Leader and SOC Highland Branch Committee Member) fascinating collection of feathers and skulls from her time spent as a wildlife ranger, or helping Laura Baigrie (our Professional Youth Leader) set up the Kelly Kettle (a camping kettle and stove) ready to make hot chocolate. After dinner, we got some top tips on nest finding from Ben, and then, after a brief wander up the field to look for signs of Badgers, we went off to bed to get ready for Day 2.

It was an early start on Sunday morning as we drove over to meet up with volunteer Camp Leader and Clyde Branch Committee Member, Kevin Sinclair, and members of the Lothian Ringing Group, who kindly put on a bird ringing demonstration for the Campers at one of their Constant Effort Sites. Ringing was already underway when we arrived and we watched the ringers process and release a variety of woodland birds. The young people were shown

the nets and how the birds are carefully extracted. Amazingly, each of the Campers was then given the opportunity to help release a bird - a privilege and a magical moment for anyone!



Plate 252. About to release a bird at the ringing demo. © BTO

"There were some really special experiences for him that he will always remember, he particularly liked the bird ringing and that is something that he wouldn't have been able to see without something like the Camp. I'm really pleased he held and released the Dunnock"

Parent of Bird Camp participant

Survey respondents* gave Camp an average score of 4.5/5 when asked if they felt closer to nature after participating in the event.



Plate 251. Watching the ringers carefully measure and process birds before fitting rings and releasing them. © BTO

After the ringing demo, we made our way down to Levenhall Links on the outskirts of Musselburgh, considered to be one of the best birdwatching sites in the Lothians, for a picnic lunch before enjoying some birding at the lagoons and off the sea wall, which overlooks the Forth estuary. As half the group did this, the other half joined local volunteer Colin Davison, for a nest-finding demonstration and a fascinating introduction to the fieldcraft used to find and monitor nests.

"This last week I have been busy exploring a local wild woodland and finding Wren nests (first time I have ever found one) and a Buzzard nest...which I have been spending many hours watching. Please give a huge thank you to Colin who led the nest finding - I loved it!"

Bird Camp participant

The group were shown the nests of Whitethroat, Song Thrush, and Linnet. Some of the young people even put their new-found skills to the test and found their own nests! The groups then swapped over and got a chance to try the other activity.

By mid-afternoon, we made our way back to the venue to get packed up and conclude an amazing weekend, but not before Ben and Steve helped present a few tales of what we'd seen, done, and learned to the participants' families who had joined us for a chat and a brief presentation of photos from the weekend.

"It was so thoughtfully organised, and Naomi loved all the experiences she had. She has just sent a letter off to one of the girls she met there, she's hoping they can meet up in the summer. Thank you so much for giving Naomi the opportunity to

have this independent experience, doing something she loves, and to make some new friends along the way"

Parent of Bird Camp participant

Our thanks go to session leaders Katty, Darren, the crew at Blue Wild Nature Boat Tours, Lothian Ringing Group members and Colin Davison. All gave so generously of their time, energy and knowledge. Special thanks go to our volunteer Camp Leaders Carol and Ptolemy - who spent the full weekend with the group and helped in more ways than we have space to list here - and Kevin who kindly helped co-ordinate and supervise Sunday's activities. Thanks to Laura our Professional Youth Leader, the staff at SOC and Faye Vogley and Chris from BTO Youth Team for all their help and support throughout. Finally, a huge thank you to Ben and Steve at BTO Scotland who put an incredible amount of work into the preparation and delivery of Camp and were a constant source of support and inspiration throughout. Last but not least, thank you to our fabulous Campers (and Parents!) who were a fantastic bunch and participated so readily and wholeheartedly across Camp. We learned a lot from you!

Jane Allison, SOC Development Officer

We're delighted to confirm that the 2023 Scottish Bird Camp will be taking place in May/June next year. Look out for details in the March issue of Scottish Birds. To subscribe to receive details of upcoming youth events, please join our dedicated mailing list <http://eepurl.com/hFDYg5>

100% of survey respondents* would recommend Bird Camp to their friends!

* At time of writing

The 2022 Scottish Bird Camp was made possible by the generous support of Cameron Bespolka Trust <https://www.cameronbespolka.com>, the *British Birds* Charitable Trust <https://tinyurl.com/282u2a6r> and SOC Lothian Branch. Support was also given by the Aberbrothock Skea Charitable Trust, the Gillman Trusts and the Hugh Fraser Foundation.

