



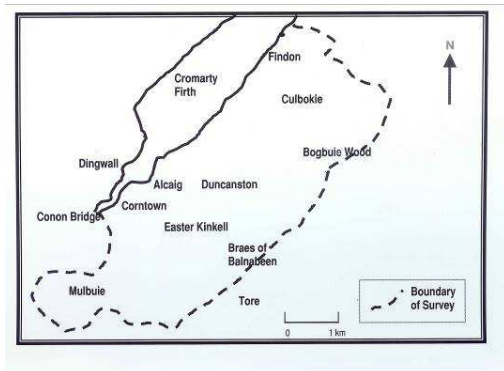
Just the one Moa in Ferintosh



'A year-long survey of the birds of the Ferintosh Community Council area: a good idea, but how to make it happen? Answer - get together a group of individuals interested in wildlife and keen to get their local community active, throw in a birdie woman, stir it all about and see what happens' Kenna Chisholm, RSPB NE Scotland

How do you pull a dispersed community together and give them a common interest?

First you have to think of something which everyone can relate to then sell the idea that the project is really for all – younger and older, working, house-managing or retired. Working on the premise that the wildlife really is for everyone turned out to be a good starting point.



The area covered by Ferintosh Community Council is quite linear, stretching over approx fifteen square miles. The landscape is varied including coast, farmland and woodland and accommodates numerous settlements and four primary schools. Capturing interest and sustaining it seemed, at the outset, to be a huge challenge.

Keen amateur birdwatchers, Sheila Maher and Graham Sullivan proposed the idea of conducting a year long Community Bird Survey to the Community Council early in 2004. Community Council membership was low and the group were keen to see the different settlements in this scattered community link up, get to know one another, participate and co-

operate as a unit. The catalyst for this became to gather some biologically useful information about the local area.

The Community Council agreed and a steering group of nine was formed, including, by invitation a member of the RSPB. The steering group was responsible for producing a project plan and of course, with raising funds – often daunting, always time-consuming. As is often the case, progress was made using the particular expertise of one member of the group, with support and input from the others. And by using the umbrella of the Community Council, the group succeeded in avoiding the most onerous aspects of the applications.

Funding was obtained from SNH and Leader+ and the Highland Council. Colin Craig, Chair of the Community Council says:

'Don't be afraid to seek funding even if it feels daunting. It can be a lot of work, but that's not a reason to shelve your idea. This project is one of the most successful things this community has ever done.'

Hi I heard that you wanted my opinion of the Ferintosh bird survey group. Here it is:

Well I really enjoyed seeing all of the different birds especially the Ospreys.

It made me think about how many birds actually exist in the world! I had so much fun and would love to go back and find out more about birds.

I learned a whole load and it only happened because dad pushed me outside and said it would be fun. IT WAS!!!

Thank you for reading.

Susannah Mack Age 11 Corntown

To say that volunteers flocked to join the survey would be too much of a pun, but amazingly recording sheets were distributed to over forty volunteers aged 8 to 86, and more people turned out to the activities and events run throughout the year. Over 6,500 records of over 100 species were submitted via regular return of monitoring sheets. A delightful booklet was produced at the end of the year containing both survey results and the story of the project.

Why did it work so well and capture the imagination and dedication of all concerned?

Keep it simple, stay flexible and don't be overambitious.

Projects like this can be a roaring success, sink like a stone or go off on tangents. The steering group in Ferintosh did plan a strong framework for the survey, but the project was also allowed to develop along the way. There is a real art to being able to pull things together and also pull back and reassess if it's not all quite going to plan, and it seems that this group had the right mix of personalities to maintain momentum, face challenges and optimise what worked well.

It wasn't all plain sailing. As data gathering and processing got underway, the group realised the magnitude of the task of putting it into spreadsheet format for analysis. Spreading the load was suddenly really important and offering an IT training workshop to as many participants as possible seemed one way forward. The spin off of learning a new skill attracted a good number of people and the data handling was eased.



Time input tailored to individual commitments

Dr Miles Mack, Corntown

'This project got us working as a community in a combined venture. People were able to put in what time they could manage. I went out to the same site approximately every 10 days, fortnightly would have been too little, weekly too much. I used to be a keen birdwatcher as a teenager and the survey made me get my binoculars out again, not having done much bird watching for some time. One great benefit was going back to the same spot, which for me was a bog woodland area. In the middle of winter I regularly saw 20-30 Teal – it was fantastic'

The monitoring process was designed to suit all. Recording sheets were tailored to two different options for recording, with volunteers monitoring 'casually' anywhere in the area, or regularly at a site of their choice. Sites varied from local woods and seashore to one's own garden. This flexibility resulted in good survey coverage of many habitats and no pressure on volunteers.

Ferintosh Community Council
is looking for

volunteers

to help with a year long

bird survey

Interested?
Find out more at

Ferintosh Hall

on Saturday 20 March 2004
starting at 10.30am

it's going to be fun!

About the survey.....

You can choose to record from your garden, the sea shore, woodlands and farmland.
You can do it as an individual or with friends.
No experience necessary.
Support from experts will be provided throughout the project.

Other activities.....

A series of events will take place to link in with the survey,
including walks,
bird ringing,
building nest boxes.

or get in touch with Sheila and Graham on 01349 861991, and corntown@ecocoun.net

This project is part-financed by the European Union under the North Highland LEADER+ 2000-2006 Programme

Volunteers were well supported from the outset. Recording sheets were well designed, requirements explained and training given to improve identification and recording skills. With no background administration, volunteers had all the fun of just enjoying watching for birds and writing it down.

Good publicity into the whole community throughout the project

Local schools were contacted, talks by experts in the field and lots of supporting materials were provided for the pupils. The schedule of activities to stimulate ongoing interest was flagged up early.

Events throughout the project were well advertised to the wider community, so the project was never perceived as solely for those who were taking regular part in the recording process. A real sense of cooperation and friendliness in the community came out of the woodwork, and not always driven by steering group.

Invaluable input from experts facilitated, supported and inspired volunteers

and steering group alike.

'What was really wonderful was hearing woodpeckers on the early morning walk. The person who led the walk could hear and identify all the birds by their song. This was so interesting and really amazing to witness.' Mary Applegate

It's well known that bringing experts into schools has a great impact on pupils, sparking their interest and reinforcing the messages of their teachers. Capturing the interest of adults is not always so easy, so the many messages of thanks and comments in praise of the experts involved in this project pay tribute to their giving of time, enthusiasm and imparting of knowledge, both as part of their formal job and in a personal capacity. All the experts involved here made the project more enjoyable and manageable - from providing brilliant 'fool-proof' bird box kits and guiding walks, to giving talks to schools and supporting the community with gentle patience in handling the birds.



The pivotal role of the school

Schools involvement is really important in any community project, but head teachers are constantly bombarded with ideas for wacky workshops and extra-curricular activities, so finding time to be involved in a year long project could prove difficult.

Shirley-Ann Stevenson, Head Teacher at Culbokie Primary suggests that it's really important get a good balance in the activities involved. Having experts in to talk with the children, doing workshops making bird boxes and setting up bird tables was terrific, but it was also equally important that a teacher could use a spare forty minutes to take the children out bird watching. Just training the children to bird watch is a challenge in itself – it took quite a while for them to see the reward of sitting quietly.

As always, many of the observation and monitoring activities of this project could be easily built in to curricular activities – and even the then 'P2' children seem to have 'spot-on' memories of the project and the birds. Perhaps this is down to the ongoing activity over a long period of time – yes, the school still feeds the birds.



Shirley Ann Stevenson

'What I really liked about this project was the way it involved parents. It wasn't just another school project which ended up in a jotter, filed away at the back of the cupboard. Parents made a big effort to take their children out at weekends and to the bird ringing events. I saw pupils there I wouldn't necessarily have expected to take an interest – clearly we found something here which grasped the imagination of everyone'

In any dispersed settlement, the school often is the community. With four schools involved in this project, there were opportunities for a real joining together and to some extent, the community events were able to facilitate that. There is always scope for more involvement; schools can become really active in initiating and hosting events and exhibitions and widening community involvement. But with increasingly busy schedules, time is really tight, and this makes the partnership approach all the more important.

Events

Holding interest and keeping up the momentum of this type of project can't possibly be left down to regular recording and the hope that the pleasure of watching the birds will sustain enthusiasm throughout the year. Equally, great activities aren't just for children. Guided walks at dawn, nest box building and the most popular Bird Ringing events had a huge impact on everyone providing great pleasure and getting the project lots of publicity. In December, when the timing of the dawn chorus was a little late for most, the community was invited to 'Eagles, Experts and Mince Pies' a film, the opportunity to quiz the experts and some festive refreshments.

The community and their photographs speak for themselves:



'The great thing about the bird-box building is that everyone mucked in'

'Most memorable - 'the sheer enjoyment of the pupils making the bird boxes, being allowed to make as much noise as they wanted whilst the other classes had to try and work through the noise. Plus the look on their faces when they saw the finished product and could say "I made that."'

Ray Griffin has kindly agreed for this photograph of his late wife Joanne to be included in our story. Taken during one of the Bird-Ringing events in Culbokie Woods, the image speaks for itself and Joanne loved it so much she had it copied and sent to many of her friends.

Ray still lives opposite the woods and talks of Joanne's enjoyment of their regular walks there and the tremendous pleasure which coming so close to the birds gave her during the last few weeks of her life.

Lasting impact

The project output was tremendous – a booklet telling the story of the project and providing comprehensive species accounts taken from the real data collected during the year, collated and analysed. Listings for

each species are also given in Gaelic, thanks to the research of a retired biochemist in the community, Ellen Garvie. The booklet was launched at a public event, distributed within the community and also made available to relevant agencies. The cover design is the work of competition winner **Elise Hendry of Culbokie**, who took part in a competition run by the Community Council giving pupils in all the primary schools the chance to participate.

'I got tremendous pleasure out of judging the competition – the drawings were all so good!' Roger Piercy, Vice Chair, Ferintosh Community Council

The impact of this project on the community as a whole seems to be the creation of a greater feeling of cohesion and has evidenced how a common interest can really bring the underlying friendliness and cooperation within a community out into the open. And it has certainly raised awareness of what a good area this is for bird watching and local wildlife and albeit quietly, people seem to still be noticing what birds are around, their migrations and changing trends.

Some people talk of the health aspect and how the survey has helped encourage them to spend more time outdoors, even now a year later. Many mentioned how the survey made them

Birds of Ferintosh



A year long community survey
2004 - 2005

more aware of birds, saying that their own knowledge, or that of their children, had really increased.

The achievements of the Bird Survey project have now inspired plans for the establishment of a Ferintosh Environmental Group. The precise nature of the group and the activities it will become involved in will be defined following a public event and incorporating a few original ideas from those driving the initiative.

Jungle Drums

With awareness raised, the exciting news of a sighting of the rare breeding Red-throated Diver soon spread via a few hot telephone lines in Spring of 2006. Everyone knew not to go too close, and no-one took a photograph, but the RSPB were informed and in the Summer that year, one chick was reared at the same site.

'Red kites circle round now in increasing numbers, more so than during the survey – I don't know why, but it's quite noticeable'

The Moa?

Clearly visible against the backdrop of Black Isle fields, there's only one been sighted since 2004.



Link to downloadable recording sheets and volunteer information pack

Box with links to main organisations
RSPB, British Trust for Ornithology, Highland Ringing Group, The Forestry Commission Scotland, Easter Ross Countryside Rangers, and Ron Graham, The Bird and Bat Box Builder