

KINGHORN BIODIVERSITY MONTHLY REPORT – FEBRUARY 2024 by Robert Mill



Green Snowdrop (*Galanthus woronowii*), one of three new Loch records (NLRs) made during February. **Inset top right:** flower close-up showing small, pale green mark on inner 'petal'. **Inset bottom right:** *Galanthus nivalis* flower showing, larger, darker mark. Photos all 13th February by Robert Mill.

February 2024 was a much quieter month in our area than January in terms of its weather. No named storms affected us. England and Wales both had their warmest February on record; Fife was also milder than average but by about 2°C rather than England's record-breaking 3°. The big contrasts between Fife and most of England were in sun and rainfall – England was deluged by more than twice the average February rainfall and was very dull, whereas we, in common with eastern Scotland in general, were the only part of the UK to enjoy below-average rainfall and above-average sunshine (Met Office, 2024a). The Kinghorn Loch rain gauge registered 46.8 mm, 80% of the site's average (SEPA, 2024). Maximum temperatures were above average from 1st-5th, 13th-21st and 24th-29th and below average on 6th-11th and 22nd-23rd (Met Office, 2024b).

I made five general recording trips to the Loch during February, on 6th, 7th, 13th, 18th and 26th (afternoon). Paul Williams also visited the Loch five times, recording birds and a few mammals, on 1st, 5th, 8th, 26th (morning) and 28th. Three new Loch records were added during February, one flowering plant and the other two both fungi. These brought the cumulative total up from 1,669 (31 January) to **1,672** on 28 February.

AROUND THE LOCH Birds: Fifty-four bird species were recorded on and around Kinghorn Loch in February, three fewer than in January. As usual, I am indebted to Paul Williams (abbreviated PW) for many sightings. The last sighting of the first-winter drake **Greater Scaup** which arrived at the Loch last year was on 1st February by Paul Williams. Both male and female **Red-breasted Mergansers** were present on the Loch during February; a female was seen on 1st by PW and remained until at least 28th, while on 5th it was joined by what is presumed to be last month's drake. **Goldeneye** were also on the Loch all month, mostly drakes, with the highest counts being 6 on 1st and 5 on 26th and 28th. **Tufted Ducks** also remained throughout, though numbers slowly dwindled from 9 on 5th and 8th to only three on 26th. **Pochards** were absent, however. Like last month, a single **Great Crested Grebe** was seen on various dates throughout February and **Little Grebes (Dabchicks)** also remained all month although there did not seem to be as many as in January. An unusually high number (for the Loch area) of **17 Feral Pigeons** was seen in the ecocemetery area on 6th. **Coot** were again present all month although, like some other water-bird species, numbers seemed less than last month's peak. **Curlew** was again the only **wader** species recorded in February, on six occasions, mostly in small numbers (1 to 6) but 34 were counted by PW on 28th. **Lesser Black-backed Gull** visited the Loch once (8th, PW) while its bigger cousin, **Great Black-backed Gull** (the world's largest gull species) paid at least three visits, being seen by PW on 8th and 28th (two on the latter date) and by me on 26th. Raptor records included **Sparrowhawk** on 8th near the hide, **Buzzard** on 1st and 6th, and **Kestrel** on four different occasions. **Kingfishers** were regular visitors all month to the west end of the Loch, with two present on 28th. **Rook** was

seen by PW on 28th and some lucky person noted **Jay** on the hide whiteboard. Another even more notable anonymous record on the whiteboard, if correct, was of a **Nuthatch**. These do seem to visit the lochside woodlands occasionally – I heard one on 29 March 2022 and a former member of the TEC staff heard them regularly in 2021. However, while in the hide on 26th, I was struck by how similar one of the calls of **Little Grebe** is to one of the Nuthatch's several different calls. Paul Williams spotted **Skylarks** on both 1st and 26th. He also recorded **Mistle Thrush**, **Redwing** and **Fieldfare** on the same two dates while I also saw Fieldfares in the ecocemetery meadow on 6th. **Goldcrests** and **Tree Sparrows** were each recorded by PW on three occasions and **Yellowhammers** were recorded twice, by PW on 1st and Tim Nicholson on 6th. The full list of birds recorded at the Loch during February 2024 is: *Blackbird, Black-headed Gull, Blue Tit, Bullfinch, Buzzard, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Common Gull, Coot, Cormorant, Curlew, Dabchick (Little Grebe), Dunnock, Farmyard / hybrid geese, Feral Pigeon, Fieldfare, Goldcrest, Goldeneye, Goldfinch, Great Black-backed Gull, Great Crested Grebe, Great Tit, Greater Scaup, Greenfinch, Grey Heron, Greylag Goose, Herring Gull, Jackdaw, Jay, Kestrel, Kingfisher, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Long-tailed Tit, Magpie, Mallard, Mistle Thrush, Moorhen, Mute Swan, Nuthatch, Pheasant, Pink-footed Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Redwing, Robin, Rook, Skylark, Song Thrush, Sparrowhawk, Tree Sparrow, Tufted Duck, Wood Pigeon, Wren, Yellowhammer.*

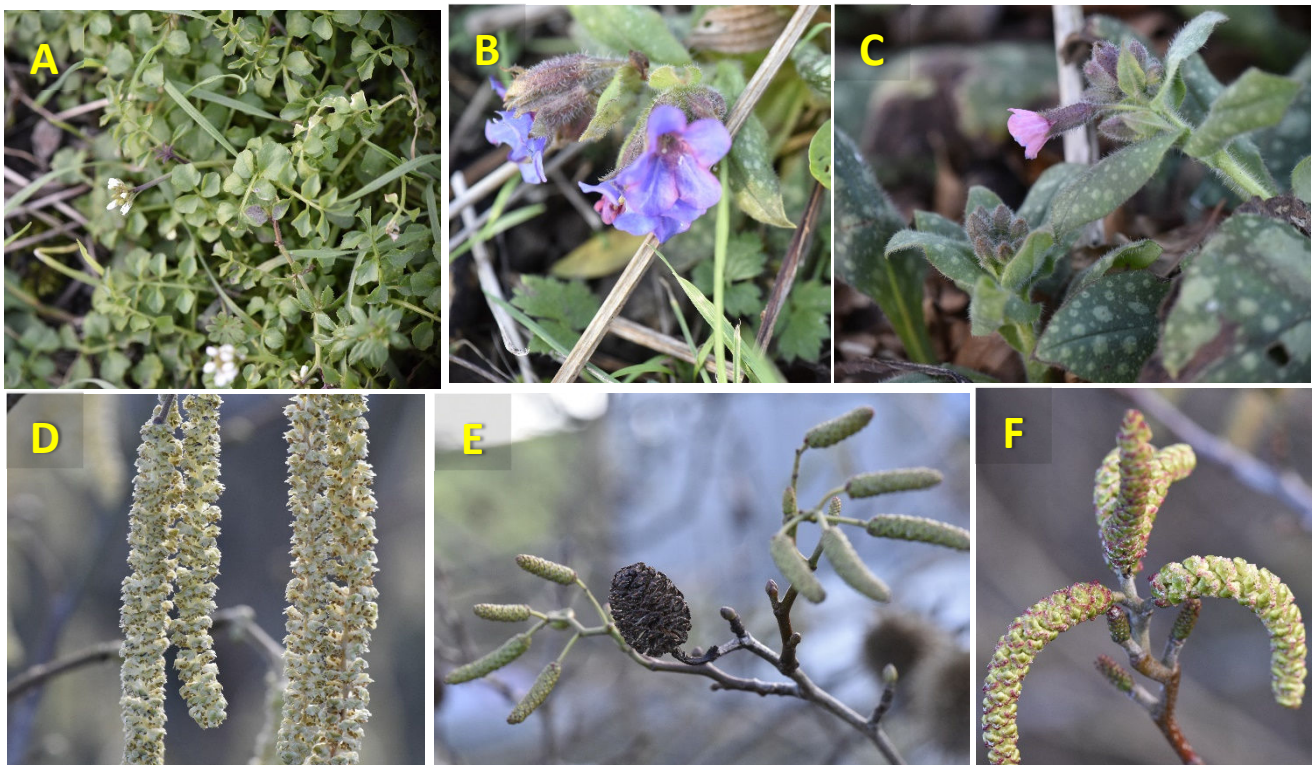
Mammals, amphibians and fish: **Grey Squirrels** were seen on two days, by Paul Williams on 1st and by both him and me at different times on 26th. Paul recorded **Roe Deer** on 28th. Once again there were large number of fresh **Mole** hills at various spots around the Loch on all my visits. No **amphibians** were noted.



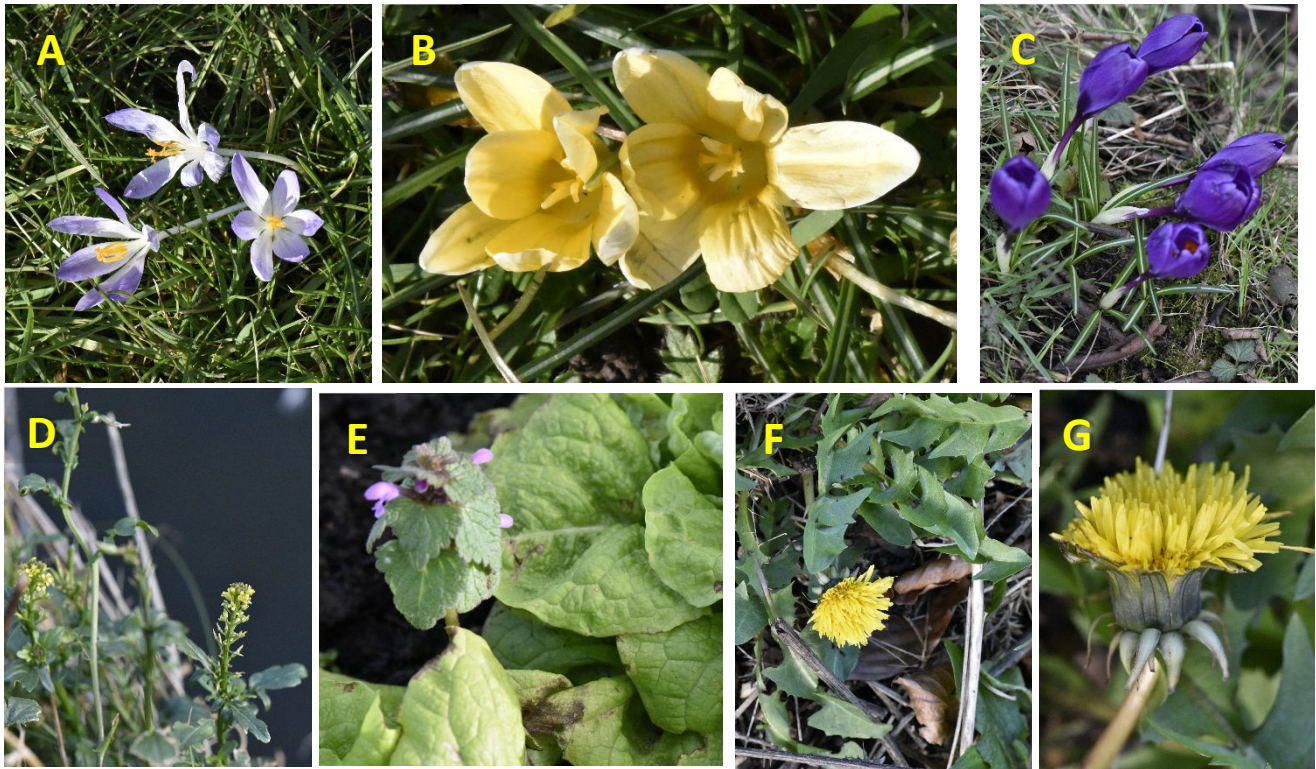
Black Garden Ant (*Lasius niger*), 26th. Photo Robert Mill.

Invertebrates ('minibeasts'): The only live invertebrate seen in February was a **Black Garden Ant** on a stone of a dyke on 26th. Earlier in the month, empty shells of both **Brown-lipped Snail** and **Garden Snail** were found on 7th.

Flowering plants and ferns:



Plants in flower at the Loch, February 2024. **A**, Hairy Bittercress (*Cardamine hirsuta*), 7th. **B**, cultivated Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*), 6th. **C**, Red Lungwort (*Pulmonaria rubra*), 7th. **D**, Hazel catkins (*Corylus avellana*), **E & F**, Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), 24th. Photos Robert Mill.



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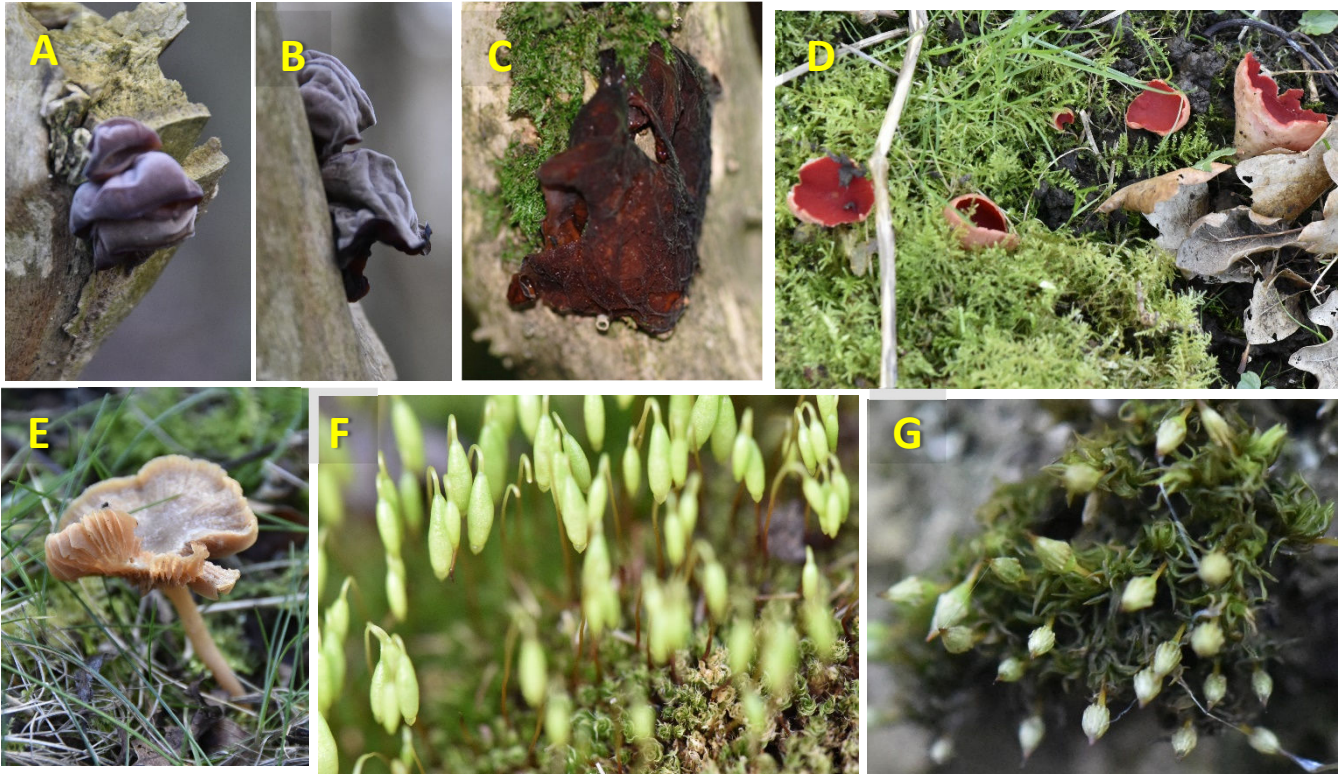
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More February flowers at the Loch. **A**, Early Crocus (*Crocus tommasinianus*), 26th. **B**, Golden Crocus (*Crocus chrysanthus*, yellow cultivar), 13th. **C**, Spring Crocus (*Crocus vernus*, purple cultivar), 18th. **D**, Winter-cress (*Barbarea vulgaris*), 18th. **E**, Red Dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), 18th. **F & G**, Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* agg.), 18th. Photos Robert Mill.

Twenty wild or naturalised plant species were found in flower during February, seven more than in January. They included one new Loch record, **Green Snowdrop** (*Galanthus woronowii* -- see photo, top of page 1), easily separated from Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) by its clear green, not blue-green, leaves and small pale green mark on the inner 'petals'. Many of January's species continued blooming throughout February although **Winter Aconite** was beginning to wither on my last visit on 26th. February 2024 first-flowering dates at the Loch included **Hairy Bittercress**, **Lesser Celandine**, **Red Lungwort** and **Dandelion** all from 7th; corresponding dates in 2023 were, respectively, 27 Feb, 17 Mar, 5 Mar and 14 Mar, indicating that all four of these species began flowering at the Loch much earlier this year. A particularly early flowerer this year was **Winter-cress** (*Barbarea vulgaris*). This was flowering by the edge of the Loch on 18th and, from the number of open flowers and developing fruits, must have actually come into flower much earlier in the month. Corresponding dates when I first noticed this species in flower in 2022 and 2023 were 6-7 weeks later, on 1 April 2022 and 10 April 2023. Cultivated blue-flowered **Lungwort** (*Pulmonaria officinalis*) was noted in flower a day earlier (6th) but the wild or naturalised plants elsewhere were not flowering in February. **Early Crocus** (*Crocus tommasinianus*) and **Golden Crocus** (*Crocus chrysanthus* cultivars), both naturalised, were first noted from 13th, compared with 27 Feb for the latter crocus last year, when Early Crocus was not recorded (in 2022 its first flowering was 25 February, also later than this year). Golden Crocus is also known as 'Spring Crocus', particularly in horticulture, as not all cultivars are yellow. **Spring Crocus** (*Crocus neapolitanus*) cultivars, which tend to flower later than the other two, were first seen in bloom on 18th (2023, 27th), as was **Red Dead-nettle** (last year, 9 Jan – possibly a continuation of 2022 flowering). Thus, with one exception, all species began flowering earlier in 2024 than in 2023, sometimes considerably so. As in January, five fern species were found; there was little or no noticeable change in the amount of alien Water Fern at the Pond.

I don't often mention the cultivated plants grown around The Ecology Centre, but I noticed that a group of **Spindle** bushes (*Euonymus europaeus*) has been planted in one of the plant beds close to the Pollinator Beds. This is a British native, with some Fife records, although as it is widely cultivated its native status is difficult to ascertain at the northern limit of its range, which is southern Scotland. Also recently planted near the two boats is a group of different varieties of cooking and dessert **Plums** (*Prunus domestica*), one of which was already in flower.

Cryptogams



Fungi and mosses, Kinghorn Loch, February 2024. A & B, Warlock's Butter (*Exidia nigricans*), 13th, NLR. C, Black Witches' Butter (*Exidia glandulosa*), 11 September 2021 for comparison. D, a group of Scarlet Elfcups (*Sarcoscypha* cf. *austriaca*), 26th. E, Scurfy Twiglet (*Tubaria furfuracea*), 13th, NLR. F & G, Two mosses earlier (2011) records of which were confirmed during February: F, Capillary Thread-moss (*Bryum capillare*), 18th; G, Elegant Bristle-moss (*Orthotrichum pulchellum*), 18th. Photos Robert Mill.

Six species of **fungi** were recorded around the Loch during February. Two of them were new Loch records (NLRs); these were **Scurfy Twiglet (*Tubaria furfuracea*)** at the Loch edge by the fishermen's path on 13th and **Warlock's Butter (*Exidia nigricans*)** on the trunk and boughs of a dead or dying Elder tree by the track to the Pond on the same date (and on 18th). The latter is a close relative of **Black Witches' Butter (*Exidia glandulosa*)** which I found around 100 m away on a different tree species in autumn 2021 (see my September 2021 report on the TEC website). One of my photographs of this is included in this month's report as well as two of the newly recorded Warlock's Butter – the difference in colour between the two species (dark violet in *Exidia nigricans*, dark chestnut brown in *E. glandulosa*) is quite obvious. Also noteworthy was the finding of **Scarlet Elfcup fungi (*Sarcoscypha* sp.)** on 26th in a slightly different, more northerly part of the willow carr than where I found it in 2022 and 2023. The more I see it, the more likely I think it will turn out to be *Sarcoscypha austriaca* (Scarlet Elfcup) than the very similar and much confused Ruby Elfcup (*S. coccinea*), although microscopic examination is essential to confirm which of the two species is present. At least 11 **lichens** were also re-found, including ***Circinaria contorta*, *Lecanora rupicola*, *Melanelixia glabratula* and *Verrucaria nigrescens***. Seven **mosses** were also re-found in February. Three of them were confirmations of 2011 records by my former colleagues David Chamberlain and Liz Kungu who found them at the west end of the Loch. These three were **Capillary Thread-moss (*Bryum capillare*)** on 18th and 26th, **Elegant Bristle-moss (*Orthotrichum pulchellum*)** on 18th, and **Many-fruited Thread-moss (*Plagomnium affine*)** on 26th. However, I did not necessarily find them in the same spot(s) as David and Liz did, although in all cases they were in the same Ordnance Survey monad (1-km grid square), NT2587.

VILLAGE, BEACHES AND COASTAL PATH



Cellar Cup (*Peziza cerea*), damp bricks beside coastal path, 28th. **Left**, younger; **Right**, older. Photos Robert Mill.

Graham Sparshott (GS) noted a single **Greylag Goose** going SE off Pettycur on 18th and a small skein of 17 **Pink-footed Geese** going in the same direction on the same migration watch. **Long-tailed Ducks** were seen off the Kinghorn end of the coastal path on 26th (PW) and 28th (myself) and off the Seafield end on 26th (PW). No **scoters** were noted in February but **Eiders** were off the coastline all month. As well as those of both species present on the Loch in February, **Goldeneyes** were seen off Pettycur on 18th (GS) and East Braes on 23rd (GS) while **Red-breasted Mergansers** were off the Kinghorn/Seafield Tower stretch of the coastal path on 5th (PW) and off Seafield itself on 8th (PW). Somewhat more unusual for our local area was a single **Shelduck** off Pettycur on 18th (GS) – contrast that with over 120 that my wife and I saw at Aberlady Bay (an

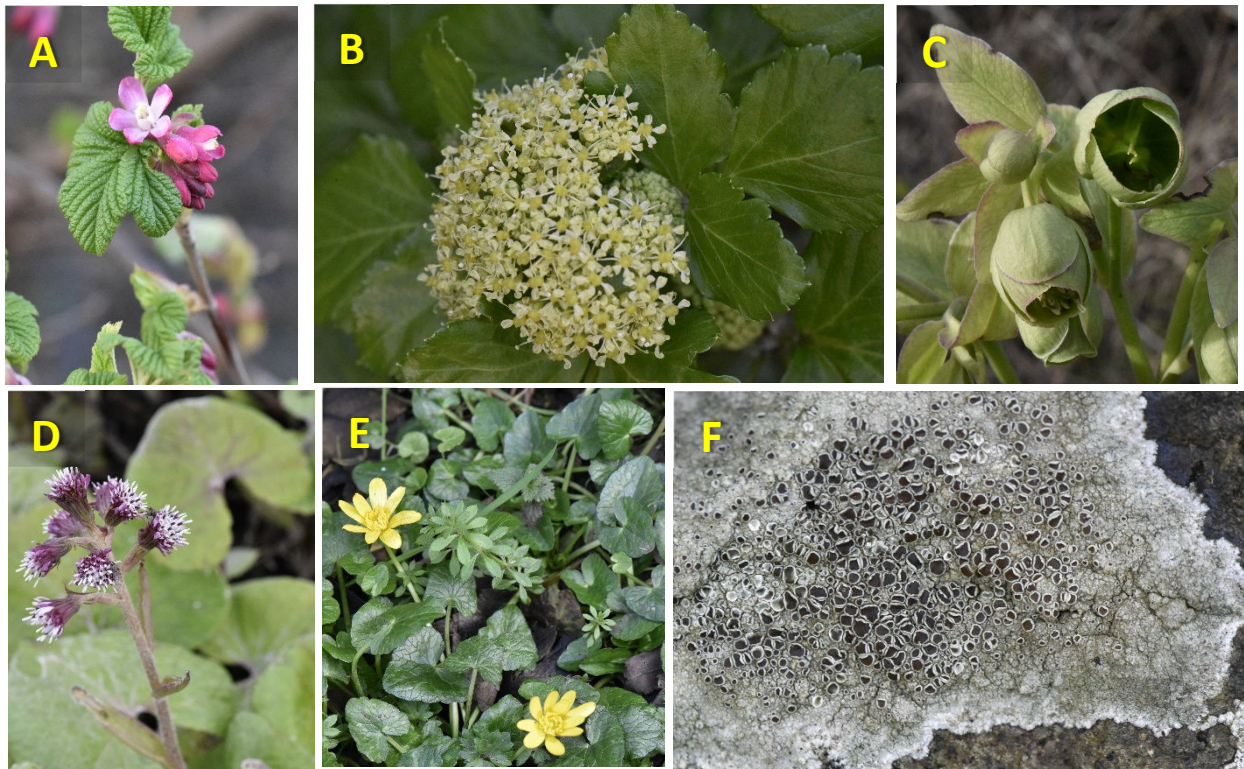


Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), fence post by coastal path, 28th. Photo Robert Mill.

excellent place to see them) on the the other side of the Forth in East Lothian on 5th! Three **Great Crested Grebes** were offshore at Kinghorn (27th, Ronnie Mackie). Two **Red-throated Divers** were off Pettycur on 18th and another two, plus a **Great Northern Diver**, off East Braes on 23rd (GS). Both **Bar-tailed Godwits** and a **Black-tailed Godwit** were seen at Seafield by Paul Williams on 5th and 26th respectively so I'm now inclined to agree that last month's sighting of a Black-tailed there by Alan Tilmouth was correct, despite it being rather out-of-season. I also saw a single Bar-tailed Godwit off the coastal path on 28th. Other Seafield wader sightings by PW during February included **Knot** (3 dates), **Turnstone** and **Purple Sandpiper** (8th). A single **Common Guillemot** off the Kinghorn end of the coastal

path, seen by me on 28th, was the month's only **auk** record. A trickle of **finches** were seen by GS flying SW off Pettycur on 18th as part of the year's first 'visible migration'; less common species among them included six **Common Crossbills** and four **Siskins**. Finally, I was fortunate to photograph an exceptionally tame (or possibly unwell) **Robin** from just inches away from me beside the coastal path on 28th.

Along the coastal path on 28th I saw my first **bee** of 2024, a **Buff-tailed Bumblebee** emerging from a Stinking Hellebore flower that it had just visited. My only other February invertebrate records were two **snail** species found on the same coastal path walk, namely **Brown-lipped Snail** and **Garden Snail**.



Coastal plants etc., 28 February 2024. **A**, Flowering Currant (*Ribes sanguineum*). **B**, Alexanders (*Smyrniololus atrum*). **C**, Stinking Hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*). **D**, Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicus*). **E**, Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna*). **F**, Black Shields lichen (*Tephromela atra* var. *atra*). Photos Robert Mill.

Virtually all my February **plant** records, other than those from the Loch, were also made on 28th along the coastal path between Kinghorn and below the old poor-house on which Linton Court (between Kinghorn and Seafield Tower) is now situated. I missed the peak, midwinter flowering period of **Winter Heliotrope** (*Petasites pyrenaicus*) this season but there were a few flowers left at the patch in the sunniest location, nearest the path's hairpin bend. **Flowering Currant** (both typical *Ribes sanguineum* and the paler flowered cultivar, 'Lombartsii') and **Alexanders** (*Smyrniololus atrum*) were both beginning to flower, while I counted 27 flowering clumps of **Stinking Hellebore** (*Helleborus foetidus*), more than three times as many as the highest number I counted at the site last year. **Blackthorn** (*Prunus spinosa*) was also just beginning to flower, unlike at the Loch. **Alexanders** was also flowering near Kinghorn railway station on the same day.

The most notable **fungus** was a pale brown cup fungus, **Cellar Cup** (*Peziza cerea*), that I found in fair quantity on a damp brick wall that forms the boundary between the coastal path and the access to the caravan park at Kerry Brae (see photos at top of this page). Although seemingly widespread in England, there are only 27 Scottish records in NBN Atlas, none of them from Fife (NBN Atlas, 2024). The nearest are from the Cammo Estate in west Edinburgh, and an unconfirmed one from near Tillicoultry in Clackmannanshire. Among various lichens on coastal rocks and dykes, one highlight was **Black Shields** (*Tephromela atra*) which I found on a stone dyke near the steps down to the beach close to Linton Court.

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