

KINGHORN BIODIVERSITY MONTHLY REPORT – JANUARY 2024 *by Robert Mill*



Storm damage caused to a tree by the Pond by either Storm Isha or Storm Jocelyn, 24 January 2024. Photo Robert Mill.

Weather-wise, January 2024 has been summarised by the Met Office as ‘a month of contrasts’ (Met Office, 2024a). The cold spell that had started in the last few days of December 2023 continued into New Year’s Day although in England it was much milder; this mild weather, associated with Storm Henk, reached our area the following day, bringing rain (Met Office, 2024b). Kinghorn largely escaped the impacts of both the rain and the wind of this storm, whose winds were strongest in southern England and, although much of NE Scotland had a period of exceptionally heavy rain, that was not the case here. After this short mild and wet period from 2nd-4th, there was a longer cold and largely dry period from 5th-19th. It was not entirely dry; in the 15-day period, eight days were rainless but on each of the other seven under 1 mm of precipitation fell (SEPA, 2024). Some of this was light dustings of snow, although whenever snow did fall it did not lie for very long. The cold spell ended very abruptly with the arrival of another two named storms, Isha and Jocelyn, on 21st/22nd and 23rd /24th respectively, bringing more rain, strong winds and mild temperatures. Of these two, Isha was probably the more damaging and Jocelyn the wetter locally, although both had impacts. At the Loch, one of them caused a tree trunk to snap in two, bringing one half of the tree down into the recently renovated Pond at the marsh at the Loch’s west end (see photo above). Total rainfall collected by the SEPA gauge at Kinghorn Loch in January was 55.6 mm, just below the site’s long-term average of 59.1 mm (SEPA, 2024). Of this 55.6 mm total, 10.2 mm (18.3%) fell during 1st-4th (Storm Henk), another 12.6 mm (22.7%, 10 mm of it on 21st) during Storm Isha and another 18.4 mm (33.1%) on 23rd (17.2 mm) and 24th during Storm Jocelyn (SEPA, 2024), meaning that together these three storms were responsible for three-quarters of Kinghorn’s January rainfall. Largely due to the mid-month cold spell, sunshine amounts locally were significantly above the long-term average (Met Office, 2024a, b).

Recording at the Loch got off to a slow start, with no records by anyone (including contributors to the Kinghorn District Wildlife Group’s [KDWG] Facebook page) until I made the first of four general recording trips on 11th; for this reason, phrases such as ‘all month’ and ‘throughout January’ in this report should be understood as the period 11th-31st January. My other visits to the Loch were on 15th, 24th and 30th. Paul Williams was offshore until mid-month but made five visits between 19th and 30th, recording birds and occasionally mammals. Nigel Voaden also made a bird-recording trip to the Loch on 18th. No new Loch records were made during the month. However, while reading the 2010 *Fife Bird Report* (Fife Bird Club, 2012), I discovered that a **Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)**, normally a coastal species, had visited Kinghorn Loch on 14 January 2010. That bird species has therefore been added to the Loch’s total list, which now stands at **1,669**, an increase of one from the figure of 1,668 at 31 December last year; of that total, 125 are birds. The report also included a summary of the year’s weather: in Fife, January 2010 had started very cold

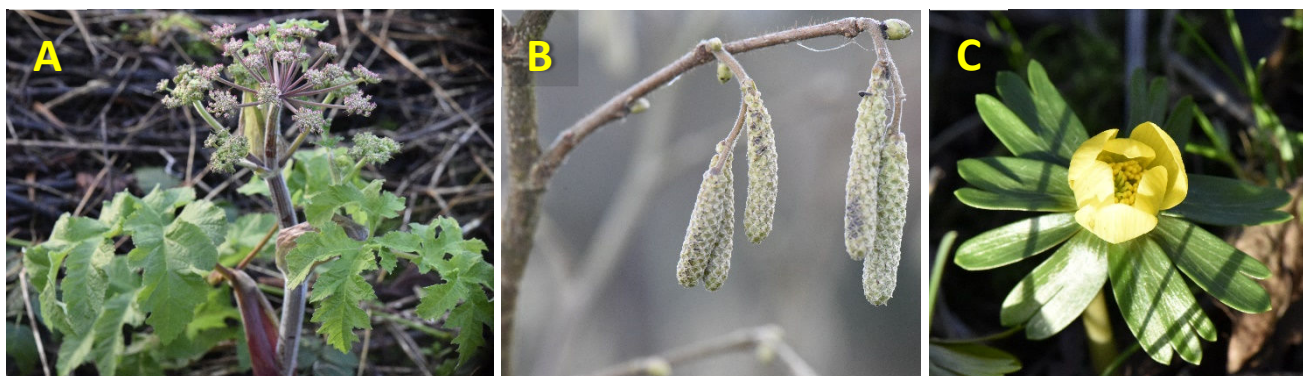
with frequent snow showers during 2010's 'Big Freeze' but a 'rainy south-easterly set in' from 11th-16th. Maybe this drove the grebe to seek shelter inland.

AROUND THE LOCH Birds: Fifty-seven bird species were recorded on and around Kinghorn Loch in January, three more than in December last year. As usual, I am indebted to Paul Williams (abbreviated PW) for many sightings. December's first-winter drake **Greater Scaup** lingered till at least 29 January; it was seen by Nigel Voaden on 18th, Paul Williams on 19th, 26th and 29th, and myself (24th). Another very unusual visitor to the Loch was a drake **Red-breasted Merganser**, seen by PW on 19th and by both me and PW at different times on 24th. The National Biodiversity Network has only two previous records of this sawbill duck from NT2587, the Ordnance Survey grid square that contains most of the Loch apart from its easternmost portion; these were in January 2019 and November 2020 (NBN Atlas, 2024). An anonymous observer also listed **Goosander** on the hide's whiteboard during the month; although one might well have been present (there have been Loch records in 2021, 2022 and 2023), that record is here taken to be a misidentification of the Red-breasted Merganser. **Pochards** were seen on three occasions: first, one seen by me on 11th which I believed was an immature drake, and then a female seen by Paul Williams on 19th and 24th. **Goldeneye** were present on the Loch all month, with the highest count being seven (five drakes, two ducks) seen by me on 30th. Varying numbers of **Tufted Ducks** were noted by various observers all month, with the highest count being about 40 seen by PW on 19th. Unusually, **Curlew** was the only **wader** species recorded at the Loch during January, on four dates with 21 present on 29th and 10 on 26th (PW). **Coot** were present all month; numbers finally began to increase, with 6 seen by me on 11th and between 20 and 25 by all observers who noted numbers on subsequent dates. However, December's **Water Rail** was not seen at all in January. As in December, **Collared Dove** was recorded once (26th, PW). Good numbers of **Little Grebes (Dabchicks)** were present all month, with an impressive 28 noted by Nigel Voaden (eBird) on 18th. A single **Great Crested Grebe** was seen by Nigel Voaden and by myself on 24th; Paul Williams has also pointed out that the '11' Great Crested Grebes supposedly seen by him on 9th December last year was a typing error on his part and actually he only saw one that day. December's solitary **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was again seen by me on its favoured buoy on 11th but not subsequently. **Buzzard** was once again seen on four dates in the latter half of the month by PW or myself while **Kestrels** were seen on three dates, and **Sparrowhawk** was noted on the hide whiteboard by an anonymous observer. **Kingfishers** returned to their favourite spot near the hide in January, with either one (a female) or two (the other being a male) watched and photographed by several different observers from 19th onwards. However, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Starling** were both unrecorded during January. The only sighting of **Treecreeper** in January was by PW on 29th. **Fieldfare** (three dates), **Redwing** (twice) and **Mistle Thrush** (18th and 19th) were all recorded, as last month; PW noted over 20 Redwings at Rodan Braes on 29th. **Goldcrest** was noted on the hide whiteboard by an anonymous birdwatcher. **Tree Sparrows** were seen by Nigel Voaden (18th), 26th (PW, with a single **House Sparrow** mixed in the flock) and 29th (PW). Tim Nicholson (KDWG) photographed a **Grey Wagtail** on 18th while Alan Tilmouth (eBird) noted three on 30th, but **Pied Wagtail** was one of January's absentees. Nigel Voaden spotted a **Siskin** on 18th as well as the more usual finch species that were present all month as usual. Finally, **Yellowhammer** was seen on 18th by Nigel Voaden and 29th by PW, and **Reed Bunting** at Rodan Braes by PW on 26th. The full list of birds recorded at the Loch during December 2023 is: *Blackbird, Black-headed Gull, Blue Tit, Bullfinch, Buzzard, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Collared Dove, Common Gull, Coot, Cormorant, Curlew, Dabchick (Little Grebe), Dunnock, Farmyard / hybrid geese, Feral Pigeon, Fieldfare, Goldcrest, Goldeneye, Goldfinch, Great Crested Grebe, Great Tit, Greater Scaup, Greenfinch, Grey Heron, Grey Wagtail, Greylag Goose, Herring Gull, House Sparrow, Jackdaw, Kestrel, Kingfisher, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Linnet, Long-tailed Tit, Magpie, Mallard, Mistle Thrush, Moorhen, Mute Swan, Pheasant, Pink-footed Goose, Pochard, Red-breasted Merganser, Redwing, Reed Bunting, Robin, Siskin, Song Thrush, Sparrowhawk, Tree Sparrow, Treecreeper, Tufted Duck, Wood Pigeon, Wren, Yellowhammer.*

Mammals, amphibians and fish: **Grey Squirrels** were seen on three occasions. As in December last year, Paul Williams recorded **Roe Deer** at the Loch, this time at the marsh on 24th. Very large numbers of fresh **Mole** hills were seen at various spots around the Loch shore. No **amphibians** were noted.

Invertebrates ('minibeasts'): The only invertebrate seen in January was an unidentified **red spider mite** species among lichen on a tree trunk, seen by me on 30th.

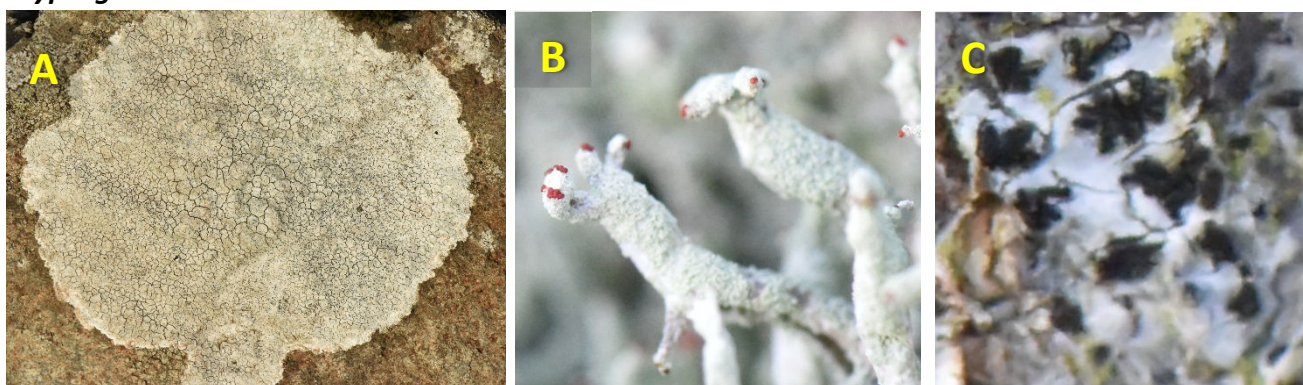
Flowering plants and ferns:



Plants in flower at the Loch or almost so, January 2024. **A**, Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), 11th. **B**, Developing Hazel catkins (*Corylus avellana*), 24th – another bush nearby but not photographed had yellow mature catkins. **C**, Winter Aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), 24th. Photos Robert Mill.

Even fewer plants were found in flower during January than in December: only 13 wild or naturalised species in total, and only eight of those were flowering on my first visit on 11th. They included **White Dead-nettle**, **Scentsless Mayweed**, **Gorse**, a couple of **grasses**, and even a **Hogweed** plant not quite in full bloom, as well as **Evergreen Alkanet**. The latter's flowering ceased, however, at the start of the cold spell and has not yet resumed at the time of writing (mid-February). Later in the month, **Snowdrops** (from 15th), **Hazel** catkins, **Winter Aconite** and **Daffodils** (all from 24th) all started flowering, indicating that spring was slowly on its way. I found another 7 in fruit (mostly as dried seed-heads) and 10 in vegetative states. The latter included recently germinated new growth of annuals such as **Hairy Bittercress** and **Goosegrass**. Only three cultivated plants were found in flower in January (**Heather** cultivars, **Polyanthus** and **Viburnum x bodnantense**). Five **ferns** were also found, including the alien **Water Fern** discovered last month. Its leaves had turned reddish, something they apparently do in British winters. Worryingly, a small patch of it was found in the outflow from the Pond to the main Loch.

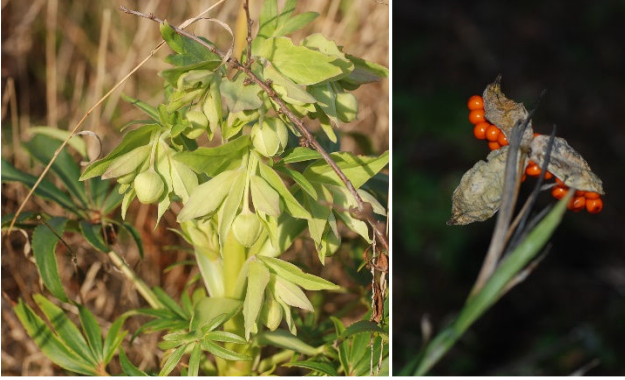
Cryptogams



Some lichens re-found in January 2024 at Kinghorn Loch. **A**: *Lecanora rupicola*, 24th. **B**: *Cladonia digitata*, 30th. **C**: *Arthonia radiata*, 30th. Photos Robert Mill.

Just four species of **fungi** were recorded around the Loch during January: the two bracket fungi **Conifer Mazegill** (*Gloeophyllum sepiarium*) and **Turkeytail** (*Trametes versicolor*), and two lichenicolous fungi, *Illosporiosis christiansenii* and *Vouauxiella lichenicola* on the lichen genera *Physcia* and *Xanthoria* respectively. At least 20 **lichens** were also re-found. Four **mosses** and one **liverwort** (*Metzgeria violacea*) were re-found in January, some of them at additional locations.

VILLAGE, BEACHES AND COASTAL PATH



Left: Stinking Hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*), coastal path, 13th. **Right:** Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*), fruits from shaded site, 15th (see November 2023 report for photo from sunlit location). Photos Robert Mill.

Once again, not many observers recorded birds in the Kinghorn area in January. Apart from Paul Williams (PW) and myself they included Alan Tilmouth (eBird; abbreviated AT), Bruce Meldrum, Ronnie Mackie and Tim Nicholson (Kinghorn District Wildlife Group), Stew Talbot (eBird: ST) and Ian Thomson (eBird: IT).

Notable late bird records from our area from the December 2023 *Fife Bird News* summary published on Fife Bird Club's website in mid-January include **Great Northern Diver** on 30th, a **Grey Phalarope** at Kinghorn Ness on 11th, 61 **Long-tailed Ducks** there on 11th (December 2023's highest count in our area, by a wide margin), a **Mediterranean Gull** and four Scandinavian-race **Herring Gulls** at Pettycur/Kinghorn Ness on 30th,

two **Red-necked Grebes** there on 11th as well as one on 30th, and two **Slavonian Grebes** there on 11th, in addition to the two mentioned in last month's report that were seen by Gavin Wilkinson on 13th.

In January, **Long-tailed Ducks** were once again off Seafield (PW) and were also seen off the Kinghorn stretch of the coastal path by myself (13th) and others (20th, 26th and 30th). One was also off Kinghorn Ness (14th, Ian Thomson). Paul Williams saw about 20 **Common Scoters** off Seafield on 20th but no Velvet Scoters were recorded. A **Goldeneye** was seen off the coastal path by Alan Tilmouth on 30th and there were four records of small numbers of **Red-breasted Mergansers**, off Kinghorn Ness (14th, IT), Seafield (16th, ST), Kinghorn (27th, Ronnie Mackie) and the coastal path (20th, PW). Three **Great Crested Grebes** were offshore at Kinghorn (27th, Ronnie Mackie). **Red-throated Divers** were off Kinghorn Ness on 14th (two, IT) while single birds were seen off the coastal path on 26th (PW) and 30th (AT). I counted 15 **Fulmars** on the cliffs at Kinghorn on 15th, most (probably all) being paired up. The regular **Grey Heron** was at the Burnside Pond again on at least two occasions. Three **Bar-tailed Godwits** were off the coastal path on 26th (PW), while an alleged **Black-Tailed Godwit** seen at Seafield on 16th by Alan Tilmouth was also much more likely to have been a Bar-tailed because of the time of year (Black-Tailed is much more frequently a passage migrant than a winter visitor), the habitat (Black-Tailed prefers fresh water or coastal lagoons to the coast itself) and the fact that Bar-tailed is regularly seen at Seafield in the winter. **Knot** were again seen at Seafield on 20th and 26th (fifteen, PW); on the latter date they were joined by at least one **Sanderling** while earlier in the month ST saw a **Dunlin** there. **Purple Sandpipers** were also at Seafield throughout January. **Razorbills** were off the Seafield-Kinghorn coastal path on 26th (PW) while another **Common Guillemot** was off Kinghorn Ness on 14th (IT).

Bruce Meldrum (KDWG) was lucky to not only see but also take a superb photograph of a **Stoat** on Hunt Brae (20th), while sadly Paul Williams found two dead **Harbour Porpoises** at Seafield on 26th (photos, KDWG Facebook page) that he thought might have been the victims of predation by seals.

Yellow Corydalis (*Pseudofumaria lutea*), which was still flowering on Kinghorn walls before Christmas last year, stopped flowering before 9 January, no doubt in response to cold weather. **Scentless Mayweed** and **Red Clover**, also in flower in December, were also not noted in January. A very small number of species, however, were found in bloom. The most notable was **Stinking Hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*)**, 18 stems of which were flowering along the coastal path on 13th. On the same coastal path walk I also noted **Yarrow**, **Daisy**, **Gorse** and **Lesser Periwinkle** in bloom, as well as new leaves of **Alexanders (*Smyrniolus olusatrum*)**. A couple of days later on 15th, while walking along the Mire Path track, I discovered that *both* of the two known plants of **Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*)** had set seed, contrary to what I wrote in my November report. It is possible that the more shaded plant had set its seed after my November visit. As in the case of the plant in an open situation, two seed-heads had been formed, although on my visit one of them was found detached on the ground beside the plant.

References

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