

Motley CREW Newsletter



Spring / Summer 2001

From the Editor

Another winter season of varied tasks completed and with the start of British summer time, it's time to look forward to spring and summer. With the outbreak of foot and mouth, our tree planting programme, this winter, has been delayed. It is hoped that we get some of this done during April with the rest having to wait till November. The rest of our time will be spent doing tasks such as Woodland maintenance at various sites in the area and some work for SNH at Loch Lomond. Although the foot and mouth crisis may not be over for some time to come it is hoped that, barring an outbreak locally, we should manage to keep going with the tasks we have arranged.

TASK FAX

Date	Task & Venue	No. Of Volunteers
Nov 12	Hedge laying, Auchenhowie Road, Milngavie.	8
Nov 26	Woodland thinning, Heather Avenue, Bearsden.	8
Dec 10	Tree planting, Cawder Sandpit.	7
Dec 17	"Ha Ha" excavation & Tree thinning, Cawder Golf Club.	7
Dec 24	Tree planting, Cawder Sandpit.	6
Jan 07	Woodland thinning, Kirkintilloch.	8
Jan 21	Woodland thinning, Torrance & Kirkintilloch.	7
Feb 04	Tree planting, Keir Golf Course.	8
Feb 18	Hedge planting & Site preparation, Crosshouse Farm.	8
Mar 04	Tree thinning, Lennoxton.	8
Mar 18	Tree planting, Allander Toll.	6

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JUNIPER

The shrub that wards off evil

The Juniper, although widespread, isn't a common tree and is one of only three native conifers found in Scotland: the others being the Scots Pine and the Yew. As I looked, I realised, with a sense of awe, that the juniper in front of me could be more than 200 years old, as the trunk was about 30cm (1 foot) in diameter. The berries, on it, revealed that it was female as, like holly, male and female flowers grow on different trees. As I took a closer look, I noticed the sharp prickles, the green berries from this year's growth and the blue berries from last years. The sharp prickles make it easy to see why, in some areas; juniper has been laid on the top of stone walls to keep livestock in. Despite its prickly protection, however, sheep, deer and wild goats graze the new shoots. You seldom see young junipers and there is concern for the trees future, with so many areas being over grazed by burgeoning red deer herds.

Young juniper twigs were used, in the kitchen, to smoke hams, though the faintly turpentine-like flavour may be rather off putting to those of sensitive taste. The ripe blue berries were also used for making drinks such as liqueur, wine and tea. In the 17th century a Dutch professor of medicine mixed the oil of juniper berries with a clear alcohol based on barley to treat certain disorders. The medicine was called GENVER and became popular as an alcoholic drink. The British imported it and shortened the name to GIN. Juniper is also associated with alcohol in an entirely different but

previously important way. When there were many illicit whiskey stills in the highlands, juniper was used for fuel, for two reasons. One reason was that juniper wood gives off so little smoke, it's nearly invisible and so would go unnoticed by the excise men. The other was that in the remote places where the stills were usually operated, juniper might well have been the only wood around. Highlanders were known to use juniper berries to cure a wide range ailments from epilepsy to adder bites. The cure was generally taken in hot whiskey – which may account for its popularity.

Legend has it that juniper is a very powerful plant and, if hung on walls or slowly burnt, would ward off evil spirits, devils, elves and witches. It was once believed juniper was connected with the FURIES (in Greek mythology these were three terrible winged goddesses with serpents for hair) and the berries possessed the power to drive away evil spirits and destroy magical spells. The berries were also burnt at funerals to ward off evil sprits and in hospitals to purify the air. Whether the wearing of plant badges by the various clans was for identification or as omens, charms or talismans is open to debate but the use of juniper is an identification of its popularity. For example, when the Duke of Atholl's ceremonial bodyguard, the only private army in the country, assemble for formal occasions, they wear a sprig of juniper. It's also the plant badge of the clans Gunn, Macleod, Nicolson, Brodie and Ross. How this came about is lost in history but, whatever reason they are worn, the practice has been traced back to 1600.

Tough Times for Animals in the Icy Highland Winter

While February may well be a testing time for wildlife, it's a good time for the nature watcher. Animals in particular are more easily encountered at this time of year than at any other.



Roe deer and brown hares can be seen feeding in daylight along the forest edges and in secluded fields. The shortage of available food forcing them to compromise their instinctive fear of man. Even within the wood itself, the careful observer can observe all deer, hares, foxes and squirrels, as the dead undergrowth offers little cover. Spring may be just around the corner for most species, but for those in the high country it's a luxury they won't enjoy for a long time yet. Perhaps the best suited for winter in the high country is the mountain hare. It's thick under-fur traps body heat while outer hairs protect it from wind and snow.

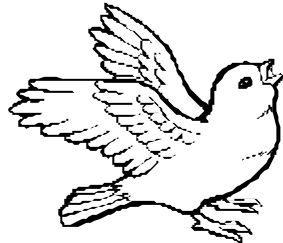


One animal that isn't suited to the riggers of winter on exposed hillsides is the red deer. The red deer of the highlands are in fact forest deer that have been forced to exist on the exposed hillsides now devoid of native forests that once covered most of the country. Some die of exposure and hunger because what little cover there is is usually denied to them. Others mass in large herds, sometimes numbering several hundred animals. This offers shelter within the herd from chilling winds and the safety of numbers. The bodies of those deer that die don't go to waste. They become valuable food for nature's scavenger force.

The Skylark

Resting for a few minutes while walking on a remote moorland. I heard a call that captures the sprits of the wild hills - the Skylark. I watched as a male spiralled ever higher, and then just as quickly came tumbling down to land on the heather. There were 3 singing males each competing to see who could sing the loudest. Although, sunny and mild, I was amazed the skylarks were back on territory as early as late February because any severe weather would catch them out. In the last 25 years the number of skylarks across the U.K. has halved. The use of chemicals over their farmland habitat hasn't helped. Nowadays you are more likely to see a skylark on a golf course, among the dunes at the seaside or in the more remote areas of the country.

Adult skylarks mainly feed on the seeds of grasses and other weeds. New sprouting shoots are also taken and in the past this has classified them as farmland pests. Less than 100 years ago skylark were trapped on the South Downs of England and sent to markets in France. They are still shot as they migrate through France and Italy, brought closer to the guns by a lure bird. I can't for the life of me see that there would be much eating on a skylark.



Skylarks are prolific breeders raising up to 3 broods a year. The chicks are fed on a variety of insects, spiders and caterpillars. They grow quickly on this rich diet, being ready to leave the nest after 9 days and totally independent by 3 weeks old. Nests can be very hard to spot. Usually a hollow in short tufted grass where approaching predators can be seen a long way off. It has been known for them to use the hoof print of a cow as a nest site. When the adult bird arrives at the nest, they tend to land some distance away and creep towards it, stopping now and again to check the coast is clear. This is to fool possible predators, such as the ever-watchful carrion crows who are always on the lookout for an easy meal. Both adults and youngsters can fall victim to birds of prey like merlin, peregrine, hen harrier, sparrowhawk and owl or animals such as weasel, stoat and fox. So the next time you are out for a walk in the countryside, stop a while and soak up the sight and sound of the skylark.



Signs of Survival

We humans have an insatiable liking for signs – signs that direct, signs that provide information and signs advertising a commodity. Perhaps this instinct is inherited from our ancestors, for whom signs played a vital part in survival. Even nowadays, signs can be useful, but so often they are unnecessary and obtrusive.

Animals leave their signs too, but these are relevant and vital to survival. They are usually unobtrusive and secret except to those who can read them, and meaningful not only to their own species, but also to all other creatures within the home ranges and those bordering upon them. Of these signs, scent is probably the most significant and important. Scent from various glands on an animal's body, from urine, on droppings (scats or spraints), will be deposited on tracks, rocks, tree stumps and in the case of certain species like the badger, in special latrines frequently used by the animal. Each animal will also have its own individual scent, which is recognised by all the others of its species in the range. These "messages" give information: I belong to this group or family; let's meet and renew our bonds; I am looking for a mate; keep away, I have small cubs to protect and so on. Scent will establish the boundaries of each range, warn others to keep away, and will continually be renewed.

The interested human can learn to read many of the signs left by mammals and

birds. There are the padded-down tracks criss-crossing the countryside, made by the creatures which live there: the narrow and secretive tracks of mouse, weasel, or stoat, threading through the vegetation; the bolder, more obvious paths used by fox or badger in the wood or on hillside, as each hunts for prey or pads to and from its den; the sometimes damp and blackened tracks made by the otter on its way between holt and river, loch or sea; and the well-worn trails of red deer and roe, always taking the easiest routes to their destinations.

There are other signs to be noted. In suitable conditions on mud, snow or sand for instance, the individual footprints of many species can be recognised. Evidence of bark-stripping and browsing on the foliage of certain trees will indicate the presence of deer. Scratch marks on tree trunks may be made by a squirrel, pine marten, cat, or even badger. A carcass found abandoned and half-eaten may reveal which predator was making use of it. Droppings and pellets, discovered sometimes in the most surprising places, can by their shape, size, colour and content reveal which animal or bird has been present and what it has been feeding on.

Wild creatures lead carefully regulated lives, and it is by reading these signs that we can come closer to understanding how they live and how each plays its part in the delicate balance of nature so important to us all. They should be left undisturbed to continue to do so.



TASK LIST

Minibus pick-up for tasks is 9am at Queen Street Station (North Hanover Street entrance) and 9.30am at Botanic Gardens (Queen Margaret entrance opposite the BBC).

Please Contact Robert or Chris during the week before for details in case the task has been changed at the last minute.

You MUST also contact Chris or Robert in advance if under 16's is coming on tasks.

Bring along a packed lunch and waterproofs, as well as boots or wellingtons. Please remember that appropriate clothing should be worn for the time of year.

Date	Task Details	Driver
01 April	Finishing off the years tree planting. (at Allander Toll, Rookery Plantation, Summerston Residents Association Cottage Copse and Central Wilderness)	Chris Chisholm
15 April	TO BE CONFIRMED.	Chris Chisholm
29 April	Hedge laying in the traditional manner to create a thick hedgerow for nesting birds at Auchenhowie Road, Milngavie	Chris Chisholm
13 May	Path building on Inchcailloch in Loch Lomond to help control visitor damage in this National Nature Reserve. **	Alan Thomson
27 May	Woodland thinning to complete the restoration of overcrowded at "The Stables" alongside the Forth & Clyde Canal and Merklands Nature Park, in Kirkintilloch.	Chris Chisholm
10 June	Removing tree ties to ensure healthy growth of young oak trees in Wilderness woods SSSI, near Bishopbriggs.	Chick Rutherford
24 June	Path building on Inchcailloch in Loch Lomond to help control visitor damage in this National Nature Reserve. **	Chris Chisholm
08 July	Continuing to excavate an historic designed landscape feature (a "ha ha") on Cawder Estate which has been buried for over a century.	Jerry Lang
22 July	TO BE CONFIRMED.	Chris Chisholm
05 August	Path building on Inchcailloch in Loch Lomond to help control visitor damage in this National Nature Reserve. **	Tim Clamp
19 August	Continuing to excavate an historic designed landscape feature (a "ha ha") on Cawder Estate which has been buried for over a century.	Chris Chisholm

** **SUBJECT TO CONFIRMATION AFTER A FOOT & MOUTH RISK ASSESSMENT**

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