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Balmacara Estate Newsletter

Issue 30 March 2011

New Ranger for Balmacara Estate

As we go to press the Trust is about to appoint a new Part-time Ranger for the Balmacara Estate. This is not strictly a new post, merely a reallocation of existing resources from Kintail. The post is part-funded by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The new Ranger, Gavin Skipper, is expected to commence work on 21st March. Gavin has extensive rangers experience working for the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park Authority for over ten years and adds a considerable level of knowledge to the Balmacara team. The priorities for the new post include development of a crofting focused schools education programme and extension of the guided walks programme, including a new weekly tour of Plockton village. Gavin can be contacted at the Balmacara Estate office.

Footpath Improvements at Plockton & Drumbuie

Over the past year, the Trust has undertaken significant improvements to the Coral Beach footpath at Plockton and more recently at Drumbuie - Port an Eorna. This work was part-funded as part of the Trust's National Countryside Management Agreement with SNH. The Coral Beach improvements have been designed to withstand the pressures of cattle being able to roam freely throughout the area that the path runs through. The surface is deliberately rough with the aim of discouraging the cattle from walking on it, a tactic that appears to be working based on this winter's experience. The Drumbuie - Port an Eorna work is aimed at addressing the problems of drainage at some of the worst boggy sections of this popular route.

Kirkton Species-rich Meadow Developing Nicely

The new species-rich meadow at Kirkton was sown in September last year, and despite the extremely cold winter and the fact that the ground has either been waterlogged or frozen for the majority of the time since then, it does appear to be growing well. The Trust will be setting up a long-term monitoring project to record how the species diversity develops, and volunteers, working as part of an upcoming Thistle Camp, will be transplanting iris from elsewhere on the estate into the wetter areas. We hope to establish a mini-meadow at Auchtertyre Primary School and involve the older pupils in the monitoring work as well.

Lever and Mulch: the future of Rhododendron Control?

Work on the rhododendron control project, using the new lever and mulch system of control has now ended. The project, which was part-funded by SNH, undertook a considerable amount of control work around the Kyle of Lochalsh and Plockton area and proved to be an effective method of tackling this invasive species. The Trust will continue to monitor work already completed, and undertake appropriate follow-up work, while exploring alternative funding options through the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). A long-term monitoring project has been established in conjunction with the Forestry Commission's Research branch, to evaluate the relative efficacy of this approach compared with more traditional

control measures, such as stem treatment and spraying with Glyphosate.

Survey of Bees, Wasps & Ants

In 2010 Murdo MacDonald, from the Highland Biological Recorders Group (HBRG), undertook a survey of bees, wasps and ants at key sites on the Balmacara Estate. Sites were selected according to the obvious likelihood of species being present and various interesting species were found. Most notable is the hairy wood ant (*Formica lugubris*) which has not been recorded this far north and west before. A more detailed survey of the area will be undertaken to establish the extent of the population.

Crofting Support – concerns over future funding

The Balmacara Estate Traditional Croft Management Scheme (TCMS) has been a very successful and positive project, and very well received by local crofters. The project was commended in the UK Landscape Awards 2010 in recognition of its achievements on a very limited budget. This project has been generously supported by SNH for the past five years. However, the Trust has recently been advised that this support will no longer be available. Instead, it is suggested that elements of the scheme would be eligible for support through SRDP. The Trust has concerns about the viability of funding the scheme in this way and efforts are currently underway to find alternative sources that will at least allow its continuation for another year, to provide time for longer term funding to be secured. At this time it is the Trust's intention to ensure that the project is carried forward and it has been placed on the priority funding list.

Partnership for Improved Visitor Facilities at Plockton

The Trust is currently converting the two garages at Plockton Car Park into a new Visitor Centre. The centre will be open in time for the Easter holidays and will be largely unstaffed. There will be a range of interpretation panels, developed in conjunction with the High School and the Plockton Historical Association, a notice board and a range of leaflets. The Trust will use half of the space, with the other half being used by the Historical Association to display old photographs and artefacts from the area. In addition to this new and exciting development, the Trust has been in discussions with the Harbour Association, the Sailing Club and various other visitor related groups and Highland Council with a view to forming a partnership approach to operating the public toilets which have been closed for nearly two years. At present we cannot be sure when the toilets will re-open but it is hoped that an agreement can be put in place that will allow progress to be made during the coming season.

New Leaflet and Panels for Balmacara Estate

As part of the development of the visitor facilities at Plockton, referred to above, the Trust has produced three new external interpretation panels which are now installed at Plockton (outside the new visitor centre), at Balmacara Square car park, and at the Lochalsh Woodland Walks car

park. In addition to these panels a new, full colour, estate leaflet is in preparation and will be available for the upcoming season. The leaflet provides a summary of the heritage and other points of interest, activities and facilities available to visitors across the estate.

Call for Volunteers to assist at Lochalsh Woodland Walks

A number of people have recently approached the Trust indicating their wish to assist with the management of the plant collections in the Lochalsh House policy woodland (Lochalsh Woodland Walks). There is a range of volunteering opportunities available here, for anyone interested in helping. The type of work that might be possible includes general tidying, clearing of paths and drains, collecting leaves, weeding and mulching borders, pruning and cutting back, propagation of new plant stock and planting out new plants and generally helping out around the site. We hope to host a coffee morning for prospective volunteers at end March/beginning April to work out what will be possible and to set up appropriate procedures, etc. If you are interested, you would be very welcome to attend so please contact the Balmacara Estate Office to confirm your interest and receive details of the date and time.

Volunteer Recorders Encouraged to Submit Sightings

Last year, the Trust established a volunteer recorders group following an introductory meeting in Plockton Hall. The uptake by volunteers has been excellent. Highlights from last year undoubtedly include a record of a chough in Plockton from Moira Linnington and a record of a narrow-bordered bee hawk moth at Reraig from Joy MacKenzie. We also have unconfirmed records of marsh fritillary butterflies in Kyle. The unconfirmed status of this last record highlights the need for recorders to pass on their sightings quickly, so we can visit the site and attempt to confirm the record before the subject in question moves on perhaps. So, as the new season draws closer we would like to encourage all interested individuals to submit any records of wildlife, plants, etc. to us at the office. The information will be verified and passed on to the relevant organisations who keep records regionally and nationally.

Step It Up Highland

Step It Up Highland is a local walking group which is sponsored by the NHS and the Forestry Commission and evaluated by Paths to Health. All their walks are Assessed for Safety, led by trained volunteers and held locally every second Wednesday. The walks are designed to be accessible to as many people as possible, avoiding steep hills and set at a pace so that all can take part. Just by walking, you will build a stronger heart, feel better, strengthen your legs and improve your balance, on top of that you'll get out and about and meet some new people. The local group has been meeting for about 2 years now and would welcome new members who are interested in safe low level walks in the local area (they currently meet for walks anywhere between Shiel Bridge and Broadford). For further details contact Ron Porter on 01599-566281 or Kimberley Spence on 01463-729997.

Kyle Conversation

Kyle Development Group (KDG), an informal group of people who live in or around Kyle has recently received funding from the Scottish Community Foundation to

investigate ideas for community initiatives to enhance village life in Kyle. This once thriving village that used to have important transport, trade and service functions has been badly affected since the opening of the Skye Bridge in 1995. KDG wants to encourage groups to work together towards a common and shared vision of developing Kyle and consider how existing assets – such as the harbour, train station, and a rocky, redundant outcrop of land called the Plock - could be reinvigorated and help catalyse Kyle's social and economic regeneration.

In considering the existing community 'assets', the group are focusing on the area of land between the village and the bridge, called 'the Plock'. This land was left in trust for the people of Kyle in the 1950s. The Plock Trust has not been active for many years, and as a result the area of land itself is increasingly derelict, with an overgrown golf course, walkways, and much of the land inaccessible - defeating the objectives of the original bequest. The Kyle Development Group is therefore exploring how this could be revitalised into being a more meaningful community asset - designed to meet the needs and wishes of the community, for the benefit of all.

KDG is keen to extend out to the broader community and engage the people in shaping what the group can become and what activity it might undertake. A three day consultation process, *The Kyle Conversation*, (24-26th March) with people who live, work or use services within the Kyle Community Council area is being planned. KDG has two reasons to conduct this *Conversation*. The first is to share the group's existence and vision with the wider community and secure support toward shaping their overall purpose. The second is to listen to people's ideas and responses about the Plock to inform KDG's thinking about pursuing community ownership of this area of land from the Plock Trustees. The group want to engage the community in thinking about the future of the Plock and how it could add value to the life of the community.

Specifically KDG want to know:

- General views about Kyle as a place to live and work
- Perceptions about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to Kyle
- What kind of services and facilities are needed now and in the future
- Usage of, and views about the Plock
- General views towards a local development group keen to drive forward some local regeneration and how best to engage the community in the process.

Kyle Conversation will be based in the Kyle Hotel with focus groups throughout the area. Further information is available from Brian Easter: 01599-534306, Fiona Begg: fiona@portnacloich.co.uk or visit the Kyle Conversation Facebook page and leave a comment.

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