



CONSERVING SCOTLAND'S MACHAIR
A' DÌON MACHRAICHEAN NA H-ALBA

MACHAIR LIFE+ NEWS

Issue 1, June 2010

Hello, welcome to the first Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project Newsletter

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide you with some background information about the project, its ultimate aims, objectives and progress to date.

We will be issuing more of these newsletters as the project progresses.



What is the Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project?



Cultivated machair

© RSPB

We are a four year project, aiming to conserve 70% of the world's machair and its associated species. We started in January 2010, and we will provide support to the crofting community to implement and demonstrate sustainable land management that optimises the

conservation interest of the machair. The project is supported by the European Union LIFE+ scheme, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) and the Scottish Crofting Federation (SFC). We are

based in Balivanich, Benbecula and will focus on machair within the designated Natura 2000 sites, which occur mainly in the Uists, but also encompasses areas of Lewis, Barra, Coll, Tiree, Islay, Colonsay and Oronsay.

Inside this issue

Getting to know us

Meet the Team who will be working with crofters to maintain the machair's rich wildlife.



Project objectives

Read about the project's ambitious plans to support traditional crofting practices across the Isles.



Project Highlights

Learn about how the project has begun to make progress through securing machinery and funding management works.



What species will the project be helping?

Find out about some of the species that the project will help to conserve through its work.



What is Machair?

Machair is a rare, bio-diverse coastal grassland, unique to the north-western fringe of Europe. 70% of it is found in western Scotland, forming when fine shell sand blows landwards on prevailing westerly winds, creating a fertile, low-lying plain. For generations, man has worked and moulded machair in a low intensity crofting system that has created a mosaic of open habitats. Working the machair is a large part of Gaelic culture, supporting communities and wildlife like no other habitat.



Traditional stooks on South Uist

© RSPB

Getting to know us

The Project is being managed by a small, dedicated team, from their offices in Balivanich, Benbecula.

For contact details, see backpage.



Binding at Vallay Island

© RSPB

Jonathan Hudson

Project Manager

Before taking up this post, Jonathan was an ecological consultant; but also has wide experience of national policy, IT and business change project management, gained within the Civil Service. This role brings the conservation and project management elements of his diverse past experience together and he is looking forward to working with crofting communities and partner organisations, to manage the project towards a successful outcome for all.

Julia Gallagher

Project Advisory Officer

Julia has worked for 12 years with the RSPB and other conservation organisations helping and advising farmers and land managers about how farming practices can benefit

farmers and wildlife alike. Julia is already enjoying meeting and helping crofters to access funding which will enable them to continue crofting while benefiting the machair's unique wildlife interest.

Margaret Howarth

Project Administrator

Margaret's is probably the first voice you'll hear if you phone the project office. After enjoying several holidays in the Uists, Margaret relocated to North Uist to be closer to the wildlife and the natural unspoiled surroundings. As such, she leapt at the chance to be part of a project that would work with crofters to ensure the future conservation of the machair.

Project Objectives

Traditional crofting systems are at the very heart of biodiversity across the machair landscape. This project will work with crofters to help maintain this special agricultural system. Machair has been traditionally cropped with oats, barley and grass to produce feed for cattle and sheep stock. Since the cropped land is left fallow for two to three years between crops, it allows for the growth of annual plants which attract seed eating birds and nectar loving insects. The nationally scarce Great Yellow Bumblebee is one such insect to benefit from this system of farming; whilst ground nesting birds such as lapwing also benefit from the bare ground of fallow years, for nesting.

Crops have been traditionally harvested using reaper binders, which collect and bind the corn

into stooks. These stooks are then stacked and left to stand until being fed out to cattle in the winter. The stacks are great for seed eating birds such as the corn bunting, which is in drastic decline both nationally and on the Isles. This "low intensive" style of

farming is now unique to the British Isles. The ability of crofters to maintain these traditional practices are increasingly under pressure; contributing factors include loss of manpower to harvest and stack crops, a lack of suitable machinery, and a decline in the area of fallow

ground due to recent practices of under sowing crops with grass to provide additional cattle feed. This project will support crofters to maintain traditional practices in support of machair's rich wildlife, while still maintaining viable crops for stock.



Stack building at Clachan

© Jamie Boyle, RSPB

2010 Machair LIFE+ Land Management Options

We have now developed the 2010 Machair LIFE+ Land Management Options for promotion to crofters for this season. These options are being offered to encourage traditional crofting practices and to preserve genetic diversity of the machair habitat. The options are for the 2010 crofting season and will include an annual payment to compensate the crofter for any reduction in crop yield or quality caused by the later harvesting of crops.

Late-cut Arable Silage

Through delaying the cutting of cropped machair fields, this measure will provide cover for corncrake and corn buntings at a time when the juvenile birds are very vulnerable to predation. It will

increase the chance of plants in the crop to flower and seed. The corn seed will have ripened and hardened and be of more benefit to small birds when the corn is fed out in winter.

Harvesting Local Seed

Increasing the area of corn kept as a seed crop will secure the supply of local seed, and preserve the genetic integrity of Uist seed, which will help to maintain traditional machair rotations. Like the late-cut arable

silage option, this measure will also provide cover for corncrake and corn buntings at a time when the juvenile birds are very vulnerable to predation.

For further information about these options, please contact us.

Project Highlights



© John Allan MacLellan

Project seaweed spreader will be used to fertilize cultivated machair

© RSPB

The project office is now fully operational.

We have sourced and purchased a project seaweed spreader. This has already been used on some areas of the North Uist Natura site.

We have ordered a modern reaper/binder to enable traditional stacking of harvested corn. This is being shipped from a company based in Turkey. More project machinery is planned very soon.

We've ordered a large batch of baler twine to assist the binding process for this season. Twine will then be distributed to crofters free of charge.

A large agricultural storage shed has been ordered and supplied to the Argyll location of the project; and we are currently investigating various options for storage on the Uists for the project machinery and locally produced seed.

We have promoted and paid for a seaweed scheme for North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula crofting townships. Over 20 townships that responded have now collected and applied seaweed for this season within the designated sites.

We are working with crofters to access government funding to manage the machair under the Scottish Rural Development

Scheme. Applications in 2010 will be submitted by the project on behalf of crofters from South Uist, Barra, Baleshare and North Uist. This management will help maintain machair habitat within Kilpheder, Smerclate, Eoligarry and North Uist SAC/SPA.

We are working with partners and stakeholders to develop an enhanced coordinated Goose Management scheme to improve crop protection.

We now have a dedicated project website. Make sure you take a look to keep up to date with project progress and events.

See www.machairlife.org.uk

A contract for botanical and invertebrate biodiversity monitoring on arable machair has been awarded. We are seeking help and support from crofting townships in surveying areas of arable machair within Natura sites. Several township clerks and their associated crofters have already very kindly offered their support for this work.

We have now developed the menu of 2010 Machair LIFE+ Land Management Options for promotion to crofters for this season. Full details of these can be found at the top of this page.

What Species Will The Project Be Helping?



Corncrake

Crex crex

Corncrakes migrate each spring from their African wintering quarters to the machair. Its rasping call is familiar to locals and visitors to the Western Isles alike. Corncrake is red-listed in the UK inventory of Birds of Conservation Concern, and is listed on Annex I of the EU Birds Directive. The UK population is just 1,278 calling (territorial) males. About half of this total is found within the project area, with most of the remainder found adjacent to the project area on the islands off the west coast of Scotland.



Great Yellow Bumblebee

Bombus distinguendus

Once found across the UK, the great yellow bumblebee is a UK BAP priority species, and is now nationally scarce. It is confined to traditional crofting areas, such as the machair of the Hebrides, Orkney, Coll and Tiree. Like all bees, the great yellow bumblebee needs an abundant food supply in its breeding season, but intensification of summer grazing is now damaging already declining populations because the plant life protecting their nests is eaten back and flowering is prevented. Autumn and winter grazing is better because it allows the pasture to grow wild in the spring time when the bees nest.



Ringed Plover

Charadrius hiaticula

Ringed plover is a migratory bird species using the sandy soils to lay its eggs along the western coasts. The project area supports large numbers of ringed plover in both summer and winter. In 1984, the UK breeding population was estimated at 8,600 pairs, with 25% of these on the Western Isles. However, there have been declines on the Isles in recent years. The project area currently supports an estimated 1,000 breeding pairs.



Corn Bunting

Emberiza calandra

Known locally as "fat bird of the barley", corn bunting is a lowland farmland bird. It is a stout, brown bird which flies off with a fluttering flight and with its legs characteristically 'dangling'. In summer they prefer open farmland and in winter they are found in stubbles, root crops, weedy fields and cattle or stockyards. It is red-listed in the UK inventory of Birds of Conservation Concern.



Chough

Pyrrhcorax pyrrhcorax

This member of the crow family is confined to a relict population centred on the Argyll islands. It has a curved crimson bill and red legs and feeds in cattle grazed machair areas. Listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive, the most recent estimate of the UK chough population is 498 pairs (2002). The project area supports around 35 breeding pairs. Choughs are amber-listed in the UK's inventory of Birds of Conservation Concern.



Dunlin

Calidris alpina schinzii

Dunlin nest on the machair and can be found feeding in wetter areas or along the shores. Dunlin is a migratory bird species listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive. The UK has an estimated breeding population of 9,150 breeding pairs. The project area supports up to 1,300 breeding pairs of Dunlin – about 14% of the UK population.

Rare plant species associated with machair which will also benefit from the project

Irish lady's tresses

Spiranthes romanzoffiana

More information about these species can be found at the UK Biodiversity Action Plan website.

White pyramidal orchid

Anacamptis pyramidalis

Early marsh orchid

Dactylorhiza incarnata



Contact Information

We're on the 'net! For more information, please visit www.machairlife.org.uk

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