

## Welcome to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ Project Newsletter

Machair LIFE+ staff are employees of RSPB Scotland, Managing Partner for the Project, working in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the Scottish Crofting Federation. Our office can be found in the CRP Building at East Camp, Balivanich, Benbecula and our door is always open...

Please explore our Facebook page to find out what has been happening up to the minute and take part in any discussions ... [www.facebook.com/MachairLife](http://www.facebook.com/MachairLife) and don't forget you can also visit our website [www.machairlife.org.uk](http://www.machairlife.org.uk)

## Seaweed as organic fertiliser

In 2012 we commissioned Scottish Agricultural College to carry out two tests to analyse the nutritive qualities of seaweed as an organic fertiliser so that we can share this information with crofters.

One test is measuring the effect of seaweed on the nutritive quality of soil by taking soil samples before and after the application of seaweed followed by analysis of crop yields which have a reduced

application of artificial fertiliser.

We have also commissioned tests on the nutritive quality of seaweed at various stages of decomposition. Results from this show that as the seaweed becomes more decomposed the level of phosphate increases while the level of potassium decreases. Nitrogen content is more sporadic. Based on an average of all three stages of decomposition (fresh, semi-rotten and rotten) the



Machair LIFE+ and township tractors seaweeding



Machair LIFE+ tractor and spreader

average nutritive quality of seaweed in terms of nitrogen phosphate and potassium is 0.55 : 0.17 : 0.15.

The required application of seaweed which was at an average stage of decomposition would be a rate of 11 tonnes/ha. This would satisfy the levels of potassium required to promote crop growth. However, the

levels of nitrogen and phosphate at this rate of application would be below those recommended. Nitrogen levels can be increased through ensuring that the sward contains a good proportion of clover in fallow years. An addition of farmyard manure or other organic phosphate additive (providing P at 31kg/ha) would also be advisable.



Project Advisory Officer, Matthew Topsfield replaces Julia Gallagher who moved to work for the RSPB in Dumfries and Galloway. We wish her all the best with her new role.

## Welcome to Matt and Hazel

Matthew has a background in wildlife and land management having worked in conservation and environmental advisory services for 11 years. A frequent visitor to the Uists, he looks forward to working closely with crofters to help them maintain cropping on the machair.

Contact Matthew to enter into a management agreement or for assistance with land management.

We also welcome Hazel Smith as our Community and Education Officer. Hazel volunteered with us this autumn whilst conducting a socio-economic study of crofting on the machair for her MSc. She now wants to make her place here in the community and landscapes of the islands and looks forward to returning in January to work with schools and other groups.



Contact Hazel to find out more about our community and education events in 2013.

# An interview with Chrissie Laing of Drimsdale



Chrissie Laing

Chrissie Laing lives on her croft in Drimsdale, South Uist, where she is also the Township Grazings Clerk. She keeps a mixture of Simmental, Angus/Highland and Shorthorn cattle and has a share in the Drimsdale sheep stock club, who still use their hill-grazing on Beinn Choradail and Hecla.

Having followed at least three generations of crofters and crofted most of her life alongside two brothers, Chrissie is used to the hard work involved. Though she admits that crofting can be an expensive hobby, she would not have it any other way. Chrissie prefers the older methods and when the corn at Drimsdale was combined last year she missed the processes of stooking and stacking. Whilst the new methods are much quicker and (against the weather and geese) can guarantee a good harvest, she maintains that the corn stacks provide better feed for the cattle and that traditional methods are still important:

*"You're keeping a tradition going,*

*and you appreciate it from start to finish, you're watching it grow and then you can't wait 'til it's ready and it's cut and thrashed and then you're ready to start all over again."*

Chrissie says that she is grateful to Machair LIFE+ for helping with the seaweed, as they also showed her how to work the machinery in

order that she could get on and do it for herself. She also adds that when the Machair LIFE+ reaper-binder broke down this harvest, it encouraged a group of crofters in her township to buy and refurbish an old Albion binder of their own, which they sourced from Islay and shipped over this autumn.

When asked about the future of crofting, Chrissie's concerns lie in the high costs of starting from scratch these days, and also in the rise in fuel prices, adding;

*"The thing with seaweed nowadays is that you've got the costing in of the fuel. You've got to weigh it up, whether it's just as cheap to put fertiliser on the ground..."*

We also asked Chrissie what the machair means to her, she replied;

*"My ties are on the machair, it's where I've always worked. It's the way that I've been brought up, I've known nothing else... when you're lifting tats and you're away in a wee world of your own it's like another place: another planet...It's incentive to keep going, it gets you going: all that fresh air."*

One of Machair LIFE+'s objectives within their European funding is to make a short film about the project, which Chrissie will be featuring in. The film will show the crofting year and highlight the important role that crofting plays in this unique landscape, as well as the issues that crofters on the Uists are facing today.

## Crofters of the future

### Machair Art project

In September 2011, eleven S1 and S2 students from Lionacleit School elected to take part in the pilot Machair Art Project. The project was set up with funding from Scottish Machair LIFE+ who commissioned artists, Olwen Shone and Laura Donkers to work in collaboration with the team over the course of a year following seasonal crofting work on the machair. The students learned to use film, digital photography and drawing as a medium to record the changes and learn about crofting practice.



Students at Taigh Chearsabhagh

The work from the 2011 Machair Art Project has been shown at Taigh Chearsabhagh and was opened by Councillor Archie Campbell on November 16th. Given the success of the project, funding for a second year has been secured. We are delighted that a new group of fifteen students have embarked on the

year-long project which commenced with harvest and has visited the mart. They will also undertake field trips to observe and take part in seaweed collection, cultivations, lambing and calving and end with a field trip in June to see the machair crops and fallow in all their glory.

# Machair LIFE+ seed legacy project

Access to local corn seed mixtures is vital to ensuring the future of crofting on the Uists. The local varieties of seed are based on mixtures of Uist small oat (*Avena strigosa*, a different species to the common oat, *Avena sativa* grown on the mainland), rye and bere barley, which are ideally adapted to the growing conditions here:

- they are able to extract the nutrition they require to grow from the machair soils;
- they can withstand the Uist climate (in most years);
- they tolerate competition with arable wildflowers; and
- they require less inputs, such as fertiliser and pesticides than mainland varieties.

Mainland varieties do not grow well here and require high inputs (for example fertiliser and herbicides), which increases costs. For these reasons, securing the supply of Uist seed is essential to the continuation of the low-input, High Nature Value farming system practiced on the Uists and so Machair LIFE+ has commissioned Maria Scholten to

look at how best to maintain seed conservation on the Uists. We will be seeking crofter views and input to this work at our public meeting in January 2013.

Careful seed processing and storage have a key role to play in improving the quality and quantity of Uist seed available. Every crofter has their own way of handling their seed so we will be seeking your advice and tips for seed processing and storage with a view to sharing best practice techniques in due course. Whilst good processing and storage will help to reduce seed losses through the winter and ensure that more viable seed is available for planting next year, this work will explore options for how the amount of seed available can be increased.

We will also be exploring the merits of establishing a seed reserve. This could take the form of seed storage – either centralised on the Uists or individually – or by promoting the growing of Uist seed in other locations, such as Lewis and Tiree to establish a 'living reserve' so that seed could be available from elsewhere if there is



Machair LIFE+ grain dryer

a poor harvest on Uist or stored seed is lost.

Access to a source of good quality seed is also important for those who do not save their own. To help people find seed, we are proposing to develop a register of seed producers and hope to include an option to register as a 'Maintainer of a Conservation Variety' for growers of bere barley, which could be a valuable commercial asset to Uist crofters.

If you still have seed that needs drying the Machair LIFE+ grain dryer

is available to borrow free of charge. See below for details.

Further information and a first opportunity to give us your views will be available at the public meeting on January 2013 and thereafter as Maria continues with this work throughout the year.

If you have any queries or comments about this seed conservation work in the first instance please contact Matthew at the Machair LIFE+ project office on **01870 603361**.

## Machair LIFE+ reaper binder refurbishment 2013

### Invitation for expressions of interest

In 2013 the Conserving Scottish Machair LIFE+ project will be able to offer help to refurbish some of the existing reaper binders on the Uists that require parts/repair/replacement canvases.

Machair LIFE+ will:

- Enable the refurbishment of up to 10 binders across the Uists<sup>1</sup>
- Provide up to £1,000 for the refurbishment of each binder<sup>2</sup>
- Refurbishment will include replacement/repair of parts<sup>3</sup> and/or new canvases

If you have a binder in need of repair please express your interest by contacting the Machair LIFE+ office on: **01870 603361**

<sup>1</sup> Binders must currently be in a condition such that they can reasonably be brought back into operation

<sup>2</sup> Additional costs to be agreed and met by the crofter/township

<sup>3</sup> Refurbishment will include replacement/repair of parts and/or new canvases

## The Machair LIFE+ grain dryer

was rigorously trialled during the harvest season.

The dryer is:

- an Alvan Blanch BD2500 batch tray grain dryer;
- mounted on a single axle trailer so that it is mobile and can be deployed throughout the Uists and Benbecula; and
- has been converted to run on a single phase electric motor.

A total of 7 tonnes of seed – including pure oats and various oat:rye:barley mixtures – were successfully dried at Balranald. All the crofters who have used the dryer have been very satisfied with how quickly seed can be dried to ensure good storage through the winter months.

If you still have seed to be dried, the Machair LIFE+ grain dryer is available to borrow free of charge. You will need:

- a suitable shed/covered building; and
- a 16 amp socket.

To borrow the dryer or if you have any queries call the Machair LIFE+ office on **01870 603361**

# Winter Watching on the Uists and Benbecula

by Stuart Taylor Assistant Uist Species Officer (AKA *The Wandering Warden*)



Despite the short winter days there are plenty of birds to see on Uist and Benbecula. Much depends on the weather but starting at the Balranald RSPB Reserve visitor centre you will find a feed site for corn bunting, a species in decline nationally. Other species come to these sites, including twite and reed bunting and, if the weather is severe, lapland and snow bunting.

However, give most attention to the sea, lochs and shore. Most bays and inlets have one or two great northern diver, eider, long tailed duck and occasionally common scoter. Ignore gulls at your peril! The brutish glaucous gull is easily identified by its large size, pale plumage and white wing tips. Several winter on the islands with numbers picking up in spring as birds move back to their breeding areas.



Twite



Whooper swan

Turnstone mix with purple sandpiper on the stony beaches whilst ringed plover find easier picking in sandy places.

Wildfowl include whooper swan and teal with smaller numbers of gadwall or pintail sometimes hiding in these groups. Check these flocks for regular American visitors. At least one drake American wigeon is

usually found on Loch Bee, whilst a drake green winged teal roams more widely.

Birds of prey will be seen on the machair where food is easier to come by, including merlin, peregrine and hen harrier. Both species of eagle can sometimes be seen in the lower areas. Flocks of panicking birds, including geese, indicate that a predator is close by.



Hen harrier

# Winter waders on Tiree

by John Bowler, Tiree Officer, RSPB Scotland



Bathed in the warm waters of the Gulf Stream frosts are rare on Tiree, so the machair grassland and coastline offer winter feeding for thousands of waders. Well-managed cattle and sheep grazing keep pasture in prime condition and rich invertebrate life accessible. Mixed flocks of lapwing and golden plover total 3-5,000 birds each, whilst up to 1,000 curlew favour the coastal machair. Smaller shore waders join these flocks, including dunlin, ringed

plover and turnstone. Normally found on rocky shores turnstone can be found feeding all over Tiree, the most important wintering site for the species in the UK!



Turnstone

Hundreds of sanderling, dunlin and ringed plover feed on sandy shores with turnstone and purple sandpiper in rockier areas. Colour-ringing studies reveal that individual sanderling return to just a handful of beaches from one winter to the next.

Around 500 sanderling winter on Tiree but migratory flocks of 1,500-2,500 birds include colour-ringed birds that winter further south in Europe, Mauritania and Ghana.

Oystercatcher, bar-tailed godwit and grey plover also winter here. Check these flocks for surprises such as knot or little stint. Autumn passage brings more variety with American waders such as buff-breasted

sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper and American golden plover annually, with rarer Baird's, white-rumped and semipalmated sandpipers recorded in recent years.

Tiree is a great place to watch winter waders and in February 2013 a team of volunteers plan to survey the entire coastline to compare current wader numbers with counts dating back to 1985.



Sanderling



Knot



## Contact Information

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