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Balmacara Estate Newsletter

Issue 24 – March 2007

More Staff Changes at Balmacara

In the last newsletter we reported that our secretary Jenny Hey had gone off on Maternity Leave and would be temporarily replaced by Kim Bennett. Well, how time flies, Jenny is due to return to work at the beginning of April and we welcome her back. We would like to thank Kim for her contribution to our work and particularly her sense of humour and excellent customer care. The Trust have also just appointed a new Seasonal Gardener to Lochalsh Woodland Garden. Chris MacDonald is returning to work at the gardens after a gap of some eight years.

Burnside Housing

The Trust's governing Council has approved the sale of land at Burnside, Plockton for social housing development and has applied to resume the land from crofting to enable the sale to Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association to proceed. There have been a series of obstacles to this sale that have arisen over the past year, but we now hope that the sale will be concluded before the end of the financial year. This sale will allow the Housing Association to proceed with developing their detailed plans for the construction of 24 affordable housing units. Every effort has been made in drawing up the title deeds to ensure that any houses will remain in occupation rather than drift into the holiday market. A local lettings policy will be developed with the Housing Association, the local community and the Trust over the coming year.

Redevelopment of the two houses at Balmacara Square.

After five years it looks like we are almost ready to start work on renovating the two houses at Balmacara Square. Funding has been secured from Communities Scotland and the Highland Council towards the costs of conversion and renovation. The two houses will be converted to three units, two for affordable long lets and the third to be used as volunteer, contractor or researcher accommodation for work being done on the estate. It is anticipated that the work will take four months to complete and so we hope to have two more letting units available late in the summer.

Garden Paths Improvements

Over the winter a significant amount of the Lochalsh Woodland Garden has been closed to visitors. This is the result of improvements to the footpath at the western end of the garden. Skye Conservation Services were engaged to undertake work that involved improving the drainage in a few problem areas and resurfacing the whole of the main path at the western end. Also, the Lochaber College Footpath Training Programme team completed the work on a new section of path through the eastern end of the woodland walk leading to the garden. This now provides an alternative to the old route and offers a bit of variety to our more regular visitors. The work is now complete and the garden is open as normal. The project will continue over the coming months with improvements to the drainage of the main drive leading to Lochalsh House. We also hope to undertake further improvements to the garden paths over the next few years if sufficient funds can be sourced.

Lochalsh Woodland Park

The Lochalsh Woodland Park Steering Group has appointed Steve Heap as Community Resource Worker, funded by the Skye & Lochalsh Community Economic Development Programme, to develop plans for a range of features and facilities at the park. Ideas so far include alterations to the reception hut, provision of a storage shed for equipment, road signs, a permanent orienteering course, a permanent BBQ and bonfire site, a website and possibly a permanent outdoor classroom facility. Any enquiries should be directed to Fiona MacEwan (01599-566766).

Traditional Croft Management Scheme

The pilot Traditional Croft Management Scheme was run for the first year last year and was a great success. Some 16 crofters from Drumbuie, Duirinish and Plockton participated in the scheme aimed at ensuring that traditional crofting agricultural activities continue in these townships. The Trust established a series of long-term monitoring projects to record any changes in the species diversity of the cropped areas, particularly the meadows. This work included a Common Bird Census at Drumbuie and Duirinish (Plockton will be surveyed this year); a quadrat survey of the species composition of the plants in the meadows; and a pitfall trap survey of invertebrates in the meadow areas. Actual land use was recorded in each of the townships in order to measure any trends in activity levels over the years as well. The scheme will run again in 2007 in the same three townships with a few minor amendments to the support structures to further encourage the full range of traditional rotational cropping. Crofters wishing to enter the scheme should contact the Balmacara Estate Office.

Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum Wildlife Leaflets

The Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum, a local organisation interested in promoting biodiversity and environmental issues has just produced a leaflet highlighting the wildlife of Skye and Lochalsh that also directs visitors where and when to see it. The Environment Forum, in conjunction with Highland Council's Senior Ranger for Ross, Cromarty, Skye and Lochalsh, John Phillips have published 10,000 copies of "Wildlife – A guide to finding wildlife in Skye and Lochalsh". The main aim of the leaflet is to showcase local wildlife and to direct visitors to appropriate locations at the right time of year to see wildlife which they might not otherwise be aware of. Designed by Skye-based Ronan Martin Design, the leaflet features colourful images and an introduction to biodiversity. It also includes a location map directing people to wildlife viewing sites on the sea and coast; freshwater areas; croft and farm land; woodlands; mountain and moorland; and within the built environment. A list of walks, graded by difficulty is included in the location map to allow walkers to choose routes according to their own abilities. Anyone interested in getting involved with the Environment Forum should contact David Ashford (Secretary) at The Old Police Station, Isleoronsay, Sleat, Isle of Skye (01471-833463).

Balmacara Country Day

The annual Balmacara Country Day will be held on Saturday 12th May 11:00 am to 4:30 pm at the Lochalsh Woodland Park. As always entry and parking are free, as are all the activities and competitions. We hope to have a few new attractions this year, but we always welcome more ideas. This year we hope to introduce a Tug O' War competition with two categories: primary school groups (i.e. teams of four representing their school); and adults, again with teams of four. So if you want to compete, remember to get a team organised and report to the NTS stall on the day. If you want to take part in the event, or have suggestions for new and imaginative activities please contact Iain Turnbull at the Balmacara Estate Office. Following the unfortunate events after last year's dance it has been decided not to have an evening event this year.

Pine Marten Survey Complete

Over the last couple of years Roger Cottis from Sleat on Skye has been carrying out a survey of the pine marten population on the estate. The pine marten is almost cat-like in appearance and size but with a flatter head and more pointed face, typical of the Mustelidae (weasel family). It has rich dark brown fur with a creamy or orange chest and throat patch, long fluffy tail and large rounded ears. They climb well with the aid of sharp claws and can sometimes be confused with squirrels when seen in trees. Pine martens are associated with areas of human habitation, woodland, rock outcrops, especially coastal and to a lesser extent moorland. The survey was carried out in two phases, initially by means of a questionnaire circulated around all households via this newsletter and then by follow-up field survey. The results suggest an estimated population of approximately 48 individuals. The majority of people contacted were not concerned by the presence of pine martens; however a small minority were concerned for various reasons. The report makes a number of recommendations including: continuation of recording by staff; the integration of survey findings into future Estate Design Plans, with regard to *Rhododendron ponticum* control and to enable visitor management to minimise disturbance.

Improvements to Balmacara Estate Paths

Over the past six months or so the Trust has been working with the Skye & Lochalsh Area Mountain Bikers group (SLAMB) to plan improvements to various footpaths on the estate that are used by both walkers and cyclists. The result of this work is that we are about to start work on improving some 600 metres of very poor path at the Loch Achaidh na h-Inich end of the Coille Mhór and the resurfacing of the first 200 m or so of the Reraig to Kirkton path. The improvements to the Coille Mhór path will include creation of culverts rather than open cross-drains as these drainage features pose difficulties for cyclists, traying and resurfacing of some of the wettest sections and hopefully drainage of the first part of the path, which is not on NTS land, that is particularly prone to flooding. The Trust has recently applied for natural regeneration payments under the old Woodland Grant Schemes on the estate and we hope that this income stream can be utilised for further footpath improvements over the next 3-4 years. So this work will represent the first phase in a series of phases of work that should bring the whole path up to an excellent standard over the next few years.

Storm Damage to Trees – A Plea for Help

The winter storms of the last few years have been fierce and with the season of storms upon us again we have experienced more fallen trees. There is often damage caused by the storms on the estate with trees losing limbs or falling completely. Also, footpaths being damaged or washed away is not an uncommon event and often can be easily managed and repaired. The Estate Tree Inspections will be carried out late in February/March to check for changes or damage in the large trees found in public places. The trees in the tree inspections are mostly marked with an orange numbered tag (although not always). Many of the trees are found over footpaths that are regularly used for walking and cycling. There are over twenty two kilometres of footpath on the Balmacara Estate and checking all of the network after a storm can be difficult. Therefore we are asking for your help. To help, if there are trees fallen or other damage to footpaths on the estate please email Barbara, the Estate Conservation Officer at bsoutar@nts.org.uk or phone the estate office on the number below and we will come and carry out a proper inspection as soon as possible. This will help us pick up on damage at an earlier stage and hopefully prevent the situation becoming worse through lack of attention.

Reraig Allotments Still in the Pipeline

After a wait of almost 21 months the Trust finally received outline Planning Consent for the development of allotment gardens at Reraig in September. Unfortunately, due to the delay in obtaining this permission the original funding for the project has largely disappeared. That being said, there is still a considerable amount of interest from the LEC, the Highland Council and other possible sources of money as well, and we still hope to be able to bring the project forward in partnership with interested members of the community. With this in mind we held a meeting at Lochalsh House on 1st March to discuss how to proceed. We were very lucky in having had contact from the Scottish Allotment Gardens Society and one of their members came up to the meeting to offer advice on how to develop new allotments. Mr Peter Wright was on the steering group that brought forward, very successfully, the development of 60 new allotments in Edinburgh recently. This experience was invaluable and his attendance at the meeting was very much appreciated. The following morning, 2nd March, we met at the proposed site at Reraig, to look more closely at the practical issues associated with the site. We are now proposing to hold another public meeting open to anyone who is interested in having an allotment on the estate. The meeting will be held on **21st March at 8:00 pm in the Auchtertyre Community Education Centre**. We already have about 12 names on the list for allotments, but if you are interested in getting involved please contact Iain Turnbull at the Balmacara Estate Office.

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We currently send out by post in excess of 700 copies of this newsletter, to every household on the Balmacara Estate, including then whole of Kyle. The postage for this is expensive and as a charity we need to reduce our running costs all the time. You can help us by providing us with your email address so we can send you the newsletter by email instead. Please contact the office by email if you wish to help and we will do the rest. Our office email is Balmacara@nts.org.uk - Many thanks.