

Castle & Hightae Lochs  
Wildlife Report 2008

Dumfries & Galloway Council Ranger Service



Contents;

Introduction

Insects

Mushrooms & Fungi

Birds

Mammals

Plants and trees

Further Information

Acknowledgements

All Photos taken by Ross Gemmell,  
DGC Ranger Service (Annandale & Eskdale)  
except those marked otherwise

## Introduction:

In my first 8 months as the Council Ranger for Annandale & Eskdale I thought I knew the area ... after all I had spent the best part of 20 years growing up here. I thought I knew the Castle Loch as I'd spent 10 of my 20 years sailing it.

The truth is, after starting the post in June 2008, it turned out I didn't know the area as well as I thought, and as for the loch I've learnt a great deal about its character, history, wildlife, and importance.

Prior to my arrival the Council Ranger Service produced an annual wildlife report for the Castle and Hightae Loch which spans from 1980 - 2008. The reports are kept in a small black folder above my desk (which does nothing at all for its 'street-cred' and doesn't exactly sell them well), but to those who rely on this information it has proved invaluable. Once I opened the folder I was confronted with a list of scientific information that a small museum would be proud of, and is undeniably a proud asset that the Ranger Service can keep hold of.

The publication of an annual 'scientific' report has now been taken on by a volunteer, which he has kindly agreed to pass onto the Ranger Service, so that we can keep adding to this invaluable 'black box' of wildlife sightings.

What I am proposing with this report is a simplified version of the scientific report. I hope to grab the interest of the public, and to promote my interest of the wildlife found at the Castle and Hightae Loch. All my day to day sightings are kept in a small lilac notepad, and this report is simply a few chosen sightings from 2008 which I've selected to expand upon.

2 species of Insect, Fungi, Bird, Mammal, and Plant/Tree will be explained on the following pages, and anyone who would like further information (or their own copy of this report) can contact the Ranger Service, and I will have this forwarded out to you.



Mute Swan

## Insects:

Both the Castle and Hightae Lochs are excellent places to expand your knowledge of insects. This year I have run a few 'minibeast' sessions along the new footpath with Primary School Groups and I've always been surprised at what specimens the children have managed to prise from a rotting log!

\* Keep your eyes open this coming year (2009) as 2 public minibeast events are planned during the school summer holidays.



Cockchafer

Insect no 1;

Golden - ringed Dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*)



Photo taken by Paul Morantz

Where do I Live? Moorland, Watersides and Surrounding Country

Where was I Seen? On the old Embankments of Lochmaben Castle crossing an open section of woodland

When can I be seen? Adults common from June - August

How big is my Wingspan? 9.5 - 10.5 cm

Ranger's Notes: Most of the Dragonflies lifetime is spent either in the egg stage or what's called the nymph stage. As an egg and a nymph they live underwater in the silt and gravel at the bottom of a stream. They can remain a nymph for several years. The nymph is one of the top predators of other smaller insects (including smaller nymphs). Eventually wings will form and the Dragonfly will leave the water to become what we would recognise as an adult Dragonfly, however they will only live for 4-6 weeks. 350 million years ago it would have been common to see Dragonflies with a wingspan of up to 1 metre!

Insect no 2:

Woodlouse Spider (*Dysdera crocata*)



Where do I Live? Anywhere you'd find a woodlouse! Try looking under logs, rocks, and damp places such as woodland  
Where was I seen? The woodland surrounding Lochmaben Castle

When can I be seen? All year but spring / summer is best  
How big am I? 1 - 1.5cm long

**Rangers Notes:** There are around 640 species of named spider in the UK, with around half of these being less than 3mm long. As the name suggests this little spider kills woodlice and eats them. Its fangs, (which can be seen in the photo) are large for the size of its body, and it produces enough venom to kill a woodlouse. The tips of its fangs are tough enough to pierce a woodlouse's skin. The front end of its body (the Thorax) is usually a deep red colour. The back end, (the Abdomen) looks as if this spider carries a baked bean on its back, which makes it easy to identify. All spiders belong to the Arachnid family, hence the term Arachnophobia.

## Mushrooms & Fungi:

Mushrooms and Fungi are truly magical. They appear out of no-where, and vanish back to no-where. Without these vital decomposers we would be wading about in piles of leaves, logs, and dead animals! So why do children feel they have to kick them into a near geostationary orbit?! I have to confess I did it too as a child, but now my love of all things 'Fungi' has grown! Being a damp, wet area of land the Castle and Hightae Lochs boasts a good variety of common Mushrooms, including my all time favourite, 'Dead Mans Fingers'. Can you guess what it looks like?!



Dead Man's Fingers

Some people have a deep and resounding fear of trying to identify Mushrooms. Mushrooms and Fungi received bad press this year in the media due to a number of poisonings, however if you are careful and use a bit of knowledge and common-sense there is nothing to be frightened of. I would **never** say to someone to go and harvest a load of woodland mushrooms, but I would encourage those with an interest to acquire a couple of mushroom books. Learn 10 mushrooms that you feel confident identifying, and expand on that knowledge by learning the other mushrooms you can confuse it with. To identify a mushroom doesn't mean you have to eat it!

Mushroom no 1;

Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)



Where do I Live? *Deciduous Woodlands (the further south you travel the more likely you are to find it growing in Coniferous Woodland)*

Where was I seen? *Along the new footpath (Lochmaben - Annan Road) growing under Birch*

How big is my Cap? *5-15cm*

When can I be seen? *Summer Time (July - September)*

**Rangers Notes:** This is one of the easiest mushrooms to identify, and is often illustrated in children's books and novels. A common use of the Fly Agaric (hence the name) was to cut it up finely and add it to milk. This killed unwanted flies that drank the milk.

The Vikings also used to consume this poisonous mushroom to heighten their senses and reactions before going into battle, allowing them to leap wider burns and swing battle axes harder. It can also cause violent stomach upsets, muscle spasms, and hallucinations.

Mushroom no 2:

Amethyst Deceiver (*Laccaria amethystea*)



Where do I Live? *Deciduous Woodland (often found under Beech)*

Where was I seen? *Along the new footpath (Lochmaben - Annan Road) in the Beech plantation*

How big is my Cap? *2-5cm*

When can I be seen? *Late summer to autumn (August - Late October)*

**Rangers Notes:** This is an edible mushroom and is good for brightening up salads or the mushroom basket in general. It is commonly found in damp areas of woodland under beech. Amethyst relates to the colour of this mushroom, while Deceiver is what this mushroom does best. It comes in a variety of shapes and sizes therefore deceiving any budding mycologist. You have to be extremely careful picking wild mushrooms, and this is not one recommended for beginners, due to **poisonous look-alikes**.

## Mammals:

At last the group we can call our own! This really demonstrates how varied this group of the animal kingdom is. From Wood Mice to Foxes and Hedgehogs to Deer; you couldn't really get much different if you tried! Obviously we are also included in this extremely varied group of animals.

Scotland has welcomed back a native mammal this year. 4 families of European Beavers, (*Castor fiber*) arrived in Argyll in late 2008, and are being kept in quarantine for 6 months. It is part of a programme which hopes to see these beautiful mammals re-introduced back into to our lands by spring 2009. Re-introduction of European Beavers has already taken place in England and Wales. During the initial introductions the Beavers were kept in a habitat which was specially designed for them, but then fenced off. In the Scottish trials transmitters will be fitted to each Beaver, which allows them to be wild. If they wander too far they will be returned to the trial site.

For more information and updates on this exciting project visit [www.scottishbeavers.org.uk](http://www.scottishbeavers.org.uk).

European Beaver is believed to have been present in Dumfries and Galloway before they became extinct throughout the UK. What was believed to be the remains of one was found outside Lockerbie however these were never authenticated.

Mammal no 1:

Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*)



Photo taken by Paul Buxton

Where do I Live? Mostly seen in Coniferous Woodland

Where was I seen? The woodland surrounding Hightae Loch and Lochmaben Castle

How big am I? Body length is up to 20cm's, plus 18cm's for the tail

When can I be seen? All year round but most active in autumn collecting food

**Rangers Notes:** Sometimes Red Squirrels take on a greyish colour during the summer months. Their coat can be lighter in the summer but gets darker again in the winter. Red Squirrels generally have long tufts on their ears which grow during the winter months, whereas Grey Squirrels don't have ear tufts at all.

Grey Squirrels were introduced from North America in 1876 by the Victorians in Cheshire, and they rapidly spread northwards. Other populations of Grey Squirrel were introduced near Loch Long, Scotland in 1892, and within 25 years that population expanded to cover an area of 300 square miles!

Mammal no 2:

Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)



Where do I Live? Mostly a woodland species of deer, but sometimes seen in open countryside if there is enough cover

Where was my footprint seen? Lochmaben castle car park

How big am I? From toe to shoulder I am 75cm's tall and my footprint is between 4 & 5 cm long

When can I be seen? All Year

Rangers Notes: This footprint was spotted in fresh snow first thing in the morning. We can see it's the footprint of a deer due to the two circular marks at the bottom of the photo. These are called the 'dew claws'. On sheep they are much higher up and don't leave a mark. If the deer is running the dew claws touch the ground, and leave the circular marks we see here. It was most probably a Roe Deer, and due to the snow it came across to the Castle Loch from the Hightae Loch Woodland.

Only the Roe and Red Deer are native to Britain. There are 6 kinds of wild / feral deer in Britain, 4 of which would have escaped from Victorian Deer Farms and spread. Muntjac and Chinese Water Deer are restricted to England whereas Fallow, Sika, Red and Roe are all found in Scotland. Muntjac has been reported in Cumbria, so they may well cross the border soon.

## Birds:

Both the Castle and Hightae Loch play host to a variety of seasonal birds. Wintering geese, duck, and swan may all visit the loch during the winter making it an attractive wildfowling spot for locals between September and January.

Various species of woodland bird can also be found in the surrounding margins of the loch, and further details of these sightings can be provided upon request.

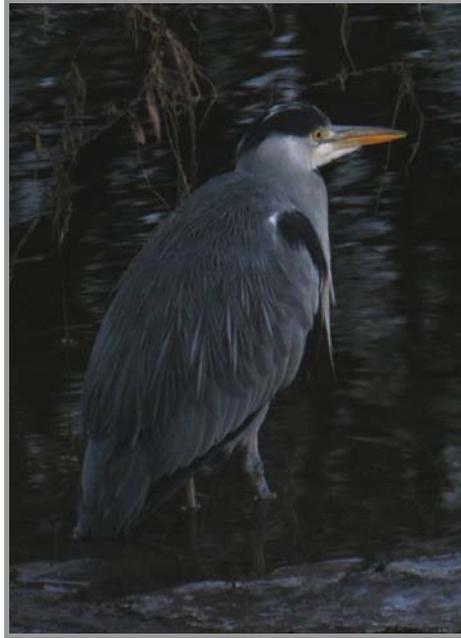
A monthly WeBS count takes place on the loch by a volunteer. This is a Wetland Birds Survey, and proves to be invaluable to both the ranger service and the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology). This survey takes looks at both breeding and non-breeding water birds which use the wetlands directly i.e. the ducks, geese, and divers. Woodland birds such as Nuthatch, Robin, and summer migrants are also recorded on behalf of the BTO. The Ranger Service also keeps an eye / ear open when they are present at the loch for their own records.



Common Buzzard in Flight

Bird no 1;

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)



Where do I Live? I spend a lot of time on the ground feeding, but I nest in tall trees, sometimes in reed beds

Where was I seen? Often seen by the margins of the loch

How big am I? 90 - 100 cm

When can I be seen? All year

**Rangers Notes:** The Grey Heron is a very large bird, usually silent when feeding on small fish, but can give out a loud, harsh call in flight. Although the diet of the Heron is largely made up of fish, ill-fated small mammals may also be taken as well as small birds, and insects. This year I saw a photo of a Heron eating a baby rabbit!

As Herons are at the top of their food-chain, pollution absorbed by fish and amphibians can eventually kill this graceful bird. Herons are a good indicator of unpolluted water, and obviously need a steady supply of food.

Bird no 2:

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)



Where do I Live? Likes lowland lakes, reservoirs and even flooded quarry pits

Where was I seen? Often seen in front of the Victory Park and sailing club

How big am I? 90-100cm but smaller races exist in N.America ranging from 56-110cm's

When can I be seen? All year although late autumn / winter is best for largest groups

**Rangers Notes:** This species of Goose was introduced to Britain in the late 1600's as an attractive 'ornament' to estate ponds, however some wild Canada Geese may arrive with larger flocks of Pink-footed Geese in the winter months. These tend to be smaller than the feral Canada Geese as they are classed as 'Genuine Wild Vagrants'.

Canada Geese can be seen all year round and may be heard 'trumpeting' on the loch. English birds may sometimes fly to Northern Scotland to moult. Cold winter weather may force the birds to migrate to France for slightly warmer weather.

## Plants and Trees:

The term 'plants' covers all things that use Chlorophyll (the green stuff in leaves), to produce food. Trees belong to this group and can be seen merely as oversized plants. To be classed as a tree instead of a plant, it will generally be above 3-4 meters high, and the stem will consist of wood (which is simply a toughened plant stem), which will allow the main structure to survive year after year. A shrub is usually a tangled mess of branches, however in the right circumstances shrubs can become trees ... for example think of Hawthorn or Blackthorn.

Mushrooms and Lichens do not belong to the plant group. They take food from other sources, and would not survive without the presence of plants, trees and animals. They can't produce food using the light of the sun as plants do, so they have to take food from a host (however sometimes provide the host with essential nutrients and sugars).

Plant / Tree no 1;

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*)



*Where do I grow? Holly can be found throughout most of the UK*

*Where can I be seen? Holly grows well throughout the newly thinned woodland on the western edge of the loch. You may notice some young sapplings starting to appear in this area of woodland*

*How big am I? Holly can grow up to 20 meters high. Most trees seen around the loch are between 10 & 15 meters in height*

*When can I be seen? All year. Flowers may be seen on Holly trees from late spring – early summer. Each tree produces either male or female flowers. Holly trees are well known for producing red berries throughout the winter months, however it is only the female tree which does this.*

**Rangers Notes:** The leaves lower to the ground are extremely prickly, which is a defence mechanism against grazing animals. Holly keeps its leaves all year round and is one of the few native evergreens. This makes it easy to spot in the autumn / winter months. Holly bark is fairly smooth, and grey in colour.

Plant / tree no 2:

Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*)



Where do I grow? It can be found growing in marshy places such as ditches, riversides, and loch margins

Where can I be seen? It surrounds the Castle Loch in areas of marshy woodland

How big do I grow? Can grow up to 1.2m in height

When can I be seen? It flowers from June to August and the seeds form and ripen in August and September

**Rangers Notes:** This plant is attractive to wildlife such as bees, beetles, and other flying insects. Some people may find the smell of the flowers sickly however the flowers are sometimes used in flavourings for alcoholic beverages. Meadowsweet has been exploited for its medicinal purposes for many hundreds of years. It was one of the three most sacred herbs to the Druids. Scientific evidence has shown the herb to treat diarrhoea, pains, heartburn, and the boiled root can be used to treat sores and ulcers. It also contains many other medicinal properties.

## Further Information

The Castle Loch Volunteer Group operates on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of every month. Use the contact details below for more information about the activities planned in the coming year.

The Dumfries and Galloway Ranger Service hopes that you have enjoyed reading this wildlife report for the Castle and Hightae Lochs. If you would like more in depth information, or wish to report sightings, please contact the Dumfries and Galloway Ranger Service on 01387 260366 or [ross.gemmell@dumgal.gov.uk](mailto:ross.gemmell@dumgal.gov.uk)

## Acknowledgements

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Thanks also go to the Castle Loch Volunteer Group who help carry out conservational tasks around the loch on a regular basis.

I'd also like to thank Paul Buxton for allowing the use of his Red Squirrel photo, and also to Paul Morantz for his photo of the Gold - ringed Dragonfly.