

Mull's bird of the summer night

THE STRANGE 'churring' noise of one of Scotland's rarest breeding birds has been heard punctuating warm, still evenings on Mull this Summer.

The Nightjar, a fascinating crepuscular (active at dusk and dawn) species, has been reported from various areas on the island, fuelling hope that one or more pairs may have settled to nest.

Nightjars are extremely difficult to see, as their plumage is so cryptically patterned that the bird seems to blend perfectly into its background. Most often, it is located at dusk by way of the male's silhouette and distinctive, two-toned purring song, as it displays widely over its chosen habitat of young or recently-felled conifer plantations.

Nightjars have suffered a dramatic decline in Britain during the past century, a sad fact that now affords this species the highest conservation priority in this country.

However, numbers of this slim, long-winged and long-tailed 'night hawk' (which resembles a Cuckoo or Kestrel in flight) appear to have stabilised recently. It may even be one of those species that is benefiting from

climate change in this country, as birds seek to re-colonise areas previously abandoned. The British population of Nightjars consists of little more than 3,000 'churring' birds, the



bulk of which are found in southern England. Of 35 pairs found throughout Scotland in 1981, none were located in Argyll, and a national survey of this weird and wonderful species found very few Nightjars anywhere in Scotland in 2004. Such findings give added significance to the birds recently encountered on Mull.

The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland (compiled between 1968-1972) recorded two probable breeding pairs on Mull, but reports have been extremely scarce throughout Argyll since then, although it is likely that a pair attempted to breed near Dalmally during 2004/2005. A visiting Scientific Officer, from the Department of the Environment in Northern Ireland, as well as a group of French scientists from the Universities of Caen and Besancon, the Ecole Centrale of Nantes and their colleagues from the University of Edinburgh were among those lucky enough to have seen and heard the Nightjars on Mull this Summer.

The Nightjar is a Summer migrant to Britain, overwintering in forest clearings in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert. It arrives back in this country in early Spring, and is best searched for

at dusk during warm and still evenings, when the male's 'churring' song, which rises and falls with a ventriloquial quality, may be heard within suitable habitat.



Nightjars hawk for moths and other insects at dusk and dawn, utilising their small bills and very wide gapes to maximum effect. Their mottled, streaked and barred, grey-brown plumage make a daytime roosting bird impossible to detect on the bare ground it frequents. The felling of mature conifer plantations has had a very positive effect on the population of this night flyer. Clear-felled areas produce the bare ground and associated debris that Nightjars require to nest in. Newly-felled and young plantations (up to the age of five years) appear to hold the greatest densities of breeding Nightjars, habitats that appear to widely exist throughout Argyll.

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, added: 'To birdwatchers, there are few more exhilarating sights and sounds than that of the secretive Nightjar.'

'It would be absolutely fantastic if this extraordinary bird was to regain a toehold in the West Highlands in the years to come.' Because of their mysterious nature, Nightjars have developed an almost supernatural reputation, further fuelled by their mythical ability to steal milk from goats. Down through the centuries, country lore has provided many vernacular names for the Nightjar, based on the bird's generic name, *Caprimulgus*, which is Latin for 'goat-milker'.