

MaCCOLL

(Marine & Coastal Conservation of Loch Linnhe)

Spring Newsletter

May 2026



Welcome!

In the second edition of our newsletter, we'll be sharing project summaries from our AGM reports, turning the spotlight on Spurdog Sharks and catching up with Duror Nature Club and our new bunch of birders!

MaCCOLL Annual General Meeting (AGM)

We held our AGM on Thursday 26th February 2026 and reports were provided by our project leads. Below are summaries from each, with the full reports accompanying this newsletter.

Flapper Skate Project – AGM Report Feb 2026 by Campbell Thomson

From September 2024 – February 2026, we undertook 21 Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV) surveys in Loch Linnhe to investigate the presence of Flapper Skate (*Dipturus intermedius*), a species listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Although Flapper Skate have not yet been recorded, the project has significantly strengthened our technical capacity, partnerships, and understanding of deep-water habitats in the loch. Surveys confirmed the presence of multiple Priority Marine Features (PMFs), including tall sea pens, and we have recorded IUCN Red List Vulnerable spurdogs at depths exceeding 50 metres.

This work is building an essential evidence base to inform future conservation management and aligns directly with Scotland's Marine Biodiversity Strategy and 30x30 commitments.

In 2025–2026 we will:

- Increase survey effort at depths > 50–80m and widen survey area to include West side of the loch and the Corran Narrows
- Record other PMFs along with the flapper skate
- Complete and deploy the second BRUV system
- Recover or replace the acoustic recorder
- Strengthen and improve data collection, analysis and sharing
- Continue collaboration with NatureScot and regional skate researchers

This project has moved us from exploratory surveys to structured, evidence-building marine monitoring. While Flapper Skate remain elusive, the foundations are now firmly in place for long-term, credible conservation work within Loch Linnhe. We are building knowledge in a place where little previously existed. We are strengthening partnerships, developing local expertise, and creating the foundations for long-term marine stewardship in Loch Linnhe.



Otter Project – AGM Report Feb 2026 by Jennifer Bodde

Monitoring Team Activity

Our small volunteer team continues with the two year survey plan started in April 2025 to monitor defined coastal areas for otter signs, habitat, and animal sightings. All data collected will be shared with the Mammal Society and the Highland Biodiversity Recording Group.

Duror Primary School Collaboration

Our weekly after-school club, Team Otter, started in April 2025, and has recently been renamed to Duror Nature Club to better reflect the range of sessions we enjoy with the children, and plan to include in future. In summary, the club seems to be popular and going from strength to strength.

Plans for 2026

Otter Monitoring

Set up an otter sighting reporting program for the MaCCOLL community.

Duror Nature Club

- Strengthen connections with the Argyll Hope Spot to raise awareness of MaCCOLL's unique location and activities, with further school collaborations.
 - Invite local nature experts to share knowledge with the children.
 - Submit an application to Fauna & Flora International for funding to pay travel expenses and fair reimbursement of visiting experts.
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Salmon Project - AGM Report Feb 2026 by Karen Tant-Ezard

River Duror, Salachan Burn & Loch Linnhe Catchment – 2025

Summary

The 2025 programme has:

- Confirmed strong habitat potential in the River Duror with the same expected for the Salachan Burn.
- Established collaborative pathways with hatchery, fisheries trust and board, academic, estate, environment and community stakeholders.
- Responded proactively to the significant environmental implications of the Storm Amy farmed salmon escape.
- Secured agreement for robust scientific baseline surveys in 2025, subject to funding.
- Established sources for historical data collection to inform baselines for future data collection
- Included responses to Scotgov consultations and contributed to Coastal Communities Network discussions

This integrated approach—combining science, community engagement, and partnership working—positions the project to make a meaningful contribution to the protection and recovery of wild Atlantic salmon within the Loch Linnhe catchment.





Monthly Species Spotlight by Vicki Last

Spurdog were recorded by the BRUV (Baited Remote Underwater Video) system off Balnagowan in February this year. The spurdog, or spiny dogfish (*Squalus acanthias*), is a small shark found throughout temperate waters of the Northeast Atlantic, including around Scotland. They take their name from the sharp spines in front of the dorsal fins, which can be used defensively by arching the body and striking at predators. Spurdog can reach up to around 1.6 metres in length and weigh up to 9 kg. The species is slow-growing and long-lived, maturing late and producing relatively few young, characteristics that make it particularly vulnerable to over-exploitation.

Unlike skates and many rays, spurdog do not lay eggs. They are viviparous, giving birth to live young following a long gestation period that can exceed 18 months. This reproductive strategy further contributes to their low population productivity and sensitivity to fishing pressure. Intense historical fishing pressure and bycatch led to severe population declines during the 20th century, and although there are now signs of cautious recovery at the wider Northeast Atlantic scale, the species remains of conservation concern. In both UK and Scottish conservation frameworks, spurdog is recognised as a Priority Species / Priority Marine Feature, reflecting its biological sensitivity and long history of depletion.

Spurdog are opportunistic predators with a broad and flexible diet that varies with location, season and prey availability. They eat a wide range of fish, including herring, sand eels, capelin, cod and haddock, as well as invertebrates such as squid, octopus, cuttlefish, crabs and other crustaceans. They feed both close to the seabed and in mid-water, and often hunt in groups,

especially when targeting schools of fish. This feeding behaviour means they are attracted to strong-smelling, oily fish, such as the mackerel used to bait the BRUV cameras.

Within Scotland, spurdog are recorded more frequently along the west coast than in the North Sea, with regular occurrences in the Minch, the Sea of the Hebrides and throughout the Firth of Lorn. The importance of this area has been formally recognised through the designation of the Firth of Lorn Important Shark and Ray Area (ISRA), reflecting the consistent presence of threatened elasmobranch species and evidence of local aggregations.

Around Loch Linnhe, habitat assessments have identified inshore areas that may be suitable for key life stages of spurdog, despite remaining data gaps. Research surveys have confirmed the continued presence of the species in the area, and MaCCOLL's own BRUV (Baited Remote Underwater Video) surveys have recorded spurdog on 4 of 12 deployments to date, adding important local evidence to this broader picture. In contrast, spurdog have not been recorded on any of the SCUBA or snorkelling surveys in the area, which is not unexpected as the species is generally shy and timid of divers.

The recent BRUV sightings may, in part, be linked to changes in how and where surveys are being carried out. More recent deployments have reached greater depths, down to around 80 metres, made possible by the purchase of a longer rope using MaCCOLL funds and by a spell of relatively calm weather that has allowed surveys to take place further from shore.

These MaCCOLL records are shared with NatureScot and Seasearch, and are ultimately shared with OBIS (the Ocean Biodiversity Information System), ensuring that observations from Loch Linnhe contribute to national and international understanding of spurdog distribution. Together, the ISRA designation and MaCCOLL's findings reinforce the view that Loch Linnhe forms part of an important west coast habitat network for spurdog, underlining the value of continued local monitoring and careful management to support the species' long-term recovery. *Spurdog Shark photos by Richard Wilkie.*



March's species focus was on the Slavonian grebe, prompted by sightings by the MaCCOLL bird group in Cuil Bay. In Winter the Slavonian grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) is most often seen around Scotland's sheltered coastal waters, where it feeds by diving for small fish and marine invertebrates. In Winter it has a neat black-and-white appearance with a pale cheek and dark cap. During the breeding season the species becomes far more colourful, developing rich chestnut plumage and distinctive golden "ear" tufts.

The Slavonian grebe is a highly specialised diving bird, spending much of its time on the water and using powerful feet to pursue prey underwater. Like many coastal waterbirds, they can be sensitive to disturbance and to changes in the quality of inshore feeding areas.

In conservation terms, the Slavonian grebe is Red-listed in the UK, reflecting the vulnerability of the national population. Although birds can be seen around many parts of the Scottish coast in winter, the UK breeding population is extremely small and largely confined to a handful of lochs in northern Scotland, where numbers have declined in recent decades. This makes winter records around sheltered bays and sea lochs particularly valuable for understanding which areas provide reliable feeding and refuge habitat.

Sightings such as the recent record from Cuil Bay help build a clearer picture of how wildlife uses the coastline throughout the year. When local observations are logged and shared, they contribute to wider monitoring efforts and strengthen the evidence base used to support effective conservation and management of Scotland's inshore waters. Even a single observation can add to a growing local dataset, helping us track change over time and highlighting the importance of places like Cuil Bay for wintering wildlife. *Photo by Natasha MacCallum Millar.*



Duror Nature Club

Duror Nature Club (previously Team Otter) were so lucky to have the wonderful wildlife artist, Rachel Brooks, visit them on their first session of the new term, with 13 children attending.

Rachel brought several examples of her intricate artwork to show and inspire the children, and explained how her method of filling the body of the main animal with species they interact with in their environment helps show how interconnected ecosystems are in nature.

At first, the children didn't notice all the detailed, often tiny images, and were fascinated once they realised!

They then tackled their own H-O-P-E templates and filled each letter with their favourite marine species, working together in teams to produce really good imaginative pictures. Hopefully we'll display them all later in the year.

Many thanks to both Rachel and the Argyll Hope Spot who arranged and funded the visit.

Seabirds & More Group

Our Seabirds & More Group have been meeting up on the first Sunday of each month to identify and record birds in the area. The highlights as we've transitioned from winter through to spring have been Slavonian grebes, and a rather large flock of Twite (63 to be precise!). The group also met up for International Dawn Chorus Day at the start of May setting their alarms for a 5am meet...now that's commitment! They identified 27 different bird species in the area surrounding the community centre. Well done everyone!

The group's next meet up will be on Sunday 7th June at 9.30am in Cuil Bay.



Ground nesting birds are now getting busy laying their eggs and waders such as Ringed Plover make their nests amongst the seaweed and shingle, where they are well camouflaged. This has the advantage of hiding them from predators but the downside is, we can easily miss them too. These birds are small and the presence of their tiny eggs and chicks can be overlooked.

So we're asking that whilst you're out and about enjoying the sunshine and strolling along the shoreline, please be mindful of where you are walking. Keep dogs on short leads within these areas and ask the kids to look out for the teeny tiny chicks, they are super cute after all. Let's do what we can to help our breeding birds this summer.

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