

Letter from Scotland



Brightening up our winter, the
firecrest. Photo from RSPB.

This natty little dresser has caused some excitement in our parish. Though I haven't seen him myself, our visiting "firecrest" has been spotted by some of my fellow volunteers at our wildlife reserve at Duddingston, in the shadow of Arthur's Seat. He's one of Britain's smallest and most beautiful birds and normally is only seen in the south-east of England where there are a recorded 550 breeding pairs.

The orange crest on his head matches the yellow crest on the female of the species and, as you can imagine, they are part of the plumage you need if you go a-courting in the early spring. Not that spring is in the air – in fact, it's been mighty cold, even snowy, in the past few days.

We are wondering if our firecrest is just a stray from Europe – where there are lots of them apparently – or whether he's the result of long-term global warming. The latest bird survey, published this week by Scottish Natural Heritage, shows that Scotland's lowland and farmland birds are increasing in number – your goldfinches and whitethroats – but our upland birds are in decline – curlews, lapwings, dotterel, black grouse. SNH says there's no easy explanation, though a

lot of it is to do with changing land-use.

The planet may be warming but Scotland, as I say, is cooling right now. The hills are blanketed in snow, high level roads have been blocked, strong winds have disrupted the ferry services. Mountain rescue teams have been busy searching for missing climbers in Strathcarron and near Roy Bridge. On Ben Nevis a hill-walker fell through a cornice into the notorious Observatory Gully. Warnings have gone out for avalanches in the Cairngorms, Glencoe and the Nevis range.

Down here in the cities, we've been more concerned with the state of our roads. The latest figures from the local councils have revealed that spending on roads has fallen by 20 per cent over the last seven years. 154,310 potholes were reported in 2016, that's four miles of continuous pothole, a far bumpier ride than on roads in England.

What appears to be happening is that the SNP Government is so intent on protecting the health service budget that everything else is having to be cut, including the local council budget which, the councils say, has fallen by 7.6 per cent in real terms since 2010. There were further strains revealed this week when the Accounts Commission cast doubt on whether councils would have enough money to fulfill the government's promise to double the hours of free childcare, to 30 hours a week, by 2020.



Deputy First Minister John Swinney announced [more funding for early years apprenticeships](#) at Cowgate Under 5s centre earlier this week.

Jeremy Corbyn, on his half-term visit to Scotland, accused the SNP of being content to merely “manage Tory austerity.” And he called on the Scottish government to end “holiday hunger” by providing poor children with school meals during the holidays.

There was further bad news for the 260 workers at BiFab oil rig yards in Fife and in Lewis. They’ve been issued with redundancy notices after a contract to build a wind farm in the Cromarty Firth went wrong. The Scottish government has already tried to save the yards but it now seems those efforts have failed. It’s a pity because BiFab was seen as a pioneering example of oil-related companies switching to renewables and creating so-called “green jobs.”

We were all shocked when we learned this week that Scotland has not quite rid itself of the evils of slavery. Although the term was dropped from the original charge sheet, three men were found guilty at the High Court in Glasgow of 20 charges, including subjecting eight vulnerable men to “servitude.” The

gang made them work for long hours with little or no pay and held them against their will in a gypsy camp, re-capturing them and assaulting them when they tried to escape.



Prince Harry and Ms Meghan Markle were welcomed to Edinburgh by the Lord Lieutenant Frank Ross.

We jumped back into the 21st century when the latest celebrity couple, Prince Harry and his finance Megan, paid their first visit to Scotland. They stood bravely by the One O'clock Gun as it was fired from the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle and they went on to lunch at the "Social Bite", a café raising funds for the homeless. Later they hosted a reception at Holyrood Palace for young people's charities. Megan is quoted as telling one member of the crowd: "It's so exciting (being in Scotland) but it's so cold !"

Not so cold as at the Winter Olympics in South Korea. Scotland's interest has centred on the curling, with the Eve Muirhead's women's team losing to the novices from the USA but then restoring their morale with wins against Russia and China. Meanwhile Kyle Smith's men's team beat Japan and go on to face Sweden. Our champion speed skater, Elise Christie, skidded out of the 500m – just as she did three times at the

Sochi Games in 2014. But she's now fighting back the tears to try again in the 1500m on Saturday and the 1000m on Tuesday.

I wonder why Scots always have to come through adversity to win anything ? Celtic Football Club have certainly done just that. After a series of failures in the Europa League, they finally delivered a deserved win against the mighty Zenit St Petersburg in Glasgow on Thursday night.

And just hours earlier it emerged that Alex McLeish is to try again to take Scotland into the World Cup – 11 years after he was last Scotland manager.