

April 1989

Floods and Storms

Last winter was the warmest in Scotland since records began in 1868; strangely that was not altogether a good thing. January's temperatures averaged 6.3 degrees C., ten times the average, February was 2.3 degrees above normal. That was coupled with very heavy rainfall. January's rainfall was two inches over average on Loch Ness side. Ten inches fell in February, most of it in the first week, the highest recorded since 1979. In all, just under half the area's annual rainfall has fallen in the first two months of the year. This could point to the summer being a nice dry one, but knowing Scotland that is not certain. The problem with so much precipitation in mild conditions during winter is that it falls as rain, which runs off the surface very quickly. It should come as snow which lies for weeks, or months at altitude, and seeps slowly through into the water table as it thaws. All this rain culminated in a great flood on 6th/7th February. About 100 people were evacuated from their homes in Fort Augustus when the River Cich rose five feet and burst its banks. Worse damage was prevented by the hard work put in by council staff, and members of the emergency services and military. As can be expected in such conditions Loch Ness rose far above normal level. I have seen the figure of six feet given, which is a tremendous amount of water. Perhaps it was not quite that high but it was over the jetty/piers at the Clansman marina. At both ends of the loch Inland Waterways staff did all they could to put as much water as possible into the canal system. It may have done some good but was really a drop in the ocean. The River Ness broke its banks and caused some damage to property in and around Inverness. Once more further damage was prevented by prompt action and hard work by the authorities. Around 70,000 sand bags had been used in the area. The good news was that there was no loss of life or serious injury. The climax was the collapse of the Ness railway viaduct. In the lower reaches of the river the situation was made worse by high spring tides. At 8.40 am the viaduct went down. Eye-witnesses said the central span collapsed very suddenly with no warning, leaving the railway lines sagging above the raging river. The same evening as the tide went out and the current became stronger, two further spans collapsed. After the first span gave way the police closed the Waterloo Bridge (Black Bridge) which is just a little further upstream. The loss of the 126 year old viaduct cut the whole of northern Scotland off from the rest of the British Rail network. Scotrail set up a bus link from Inverness to Dingwall for passengers. They later (29th March) undertook the job of ferrying five the the new Sprinter trains and a number of carriages and coaches North to Inverfordon. This will ease the situation during the summer season on the northern portion of the network. Two 108 ton locomotives and some other items of rolling stock were brought south by return. A temporary depot has been erected at Muir of Ord, to take care of cleaning and maintenance. Plans have been drawn and passed for a new viaduct, and if all goes to schedule it should be in operation by May 1990. The Plack Bridge was re-opened, but later inspection showed that it had suffered some damage and immediate work was needed on it. The Citadel Quay, in Inverness Harbour, suffered damage from the debris and material scoured from the river bed. Up to date the authorities have dumped thousands of tons of stone into the river bed in a bid to stabilize it, and dredging is under way to clear debris from the harbour. The flooded river was featured, briefly, on the national TV news, but the isolation of the whole of northern Scotland from rail traffic did not get much attention south of the border. On Monday, 13th February, high winds struck the Highlands. Some houses in Inverness had their roofs blown off, cars were damaged by flying debris, residential caravans were blown over, and as many as 50,000 consumers suffered electricity failures; 20,000 were still without power on Tuesday and almost 4,000 were without it until Wednesday. North Skye and the Western Isles were among the worst hit in this way. Further chaos was brought by the number of trees blown down. Railway lines north and south from Inverness were closed for a time by fallen trees. Many roads in the area were blocked, the Inverness/Dores road was choked with fallen trees as far down as Scaniport. TV and radio transmissions suffered problems caused by either direct damage to transmitters by the wind or by the failure of power supplies. The Forestry Commission closed down most of the Farigaig Forest's network of trails and walks owing to fears for public safety. The longer trails have been closed but the shorter walks to the Loch Ness viewpoint and the River and Road trails are still open. The wind has devastated almost 90 per cent of the network. It is the larger mature conifers that have suffered most. They were planted over 60 years ago and gave the Farigaig trails an unique forest atmosphere. It has been estimated that about 4,000 tonnes of fallen timber will need clearing, and much restorative work

undertaken before the trails can be re-opened. It is unlikely that the area will be fully open to the public this year. At Cromarty, the Cromarty Salmon Company sustained damage estimated at over one million pounds when fish cages were blown ashore and 38,000 fish were lost. One million pounds, or over, is reckoned to be the size of the bill facing the Inverness Harbour Trustees. This is made up of the cost of repairs and dredging, also lost revenue because tankers have not been able to use the debris clogged harbour for some time. Once again this major storm, and the devastation it brought, received very little media coverage south of the border. Not living by the loch I did not see it in these flooded or stormy conditions; it must have been a memorable sight. I have seen the loch in very windy conditions, but while the waves become very large they seem to reach a certain size and then the wind takes the tops of them. Just a thought, I wonder how many little Nessies were washed down to the firth in the flood?

Pestilence and Conservation

Last year an outbreak of disease caused by a mystery virus killed thousands of seals in the North Sea. The Moray Firth was affected and about a dozen dead seals were washed up on the beaches. The bodies were examined by Ministry vets and were discovered to have suffered from two types of serious infection. They warned dog owners to keep their pets away from dead or dying seals as one of the infections was a canine distemper-like virus. The other, which was found in most but not all the dead animals, was an infectious bacterium (*Bordetella bronchiseptica*) which may explain the severity of the lung and upper respiratory tract damage seen in the Moray Firth seals. The death rate in the Moray and Cromarty Firths was low and only common seals seemed to be affected. In March this year Soviet scientists said that the outbreak of disease in the North Sea area may have been a temporary phenomena. They had noticed that a similar outbreak among the world's only freshwater seals in Lake Baikal in Siberia, killed several thousand seals in just over a year, then the death rate fell back to normal as the seals seemed to develop an immunity to the virus. European researchers are now trying to establish if it was the same virus that caused the outbreaks in Siberia and Western Europe.

Man could be the cause of the next pestilence in the Moray Firth. At the moment Inverness deposits its sewage, more or less raw into the firth through a fairly short out-fall pipe. This is causing contamination problems along foreshores, and there has been a considerable deterioration in the water quality over the years. The Highland Regional Council took advice, and their water and sewage committee came up with plans for the maceration of the sewage and the disposal of the resulting effluent through a long out-fall pipe. They said that by taking it further out into the firth the tides would be able to disperse it more efficiently. This plan has brought something of a public outcry, and objections from local councils along the shores of the firth, Ardersier, Nairn, Alness, etc. While such a plan would be an improvement on the present situation, it is by no means a permanent answer to the problem, just spreading the effects over a wider area. What is needed is a full-scale treatment works. If necessary a financial commitment should be sought from the Scottish Office, which has now called for an environmental impact assessment into the scheme. The water and sewage committee is to carry out such an assessment, although some senior regional councillors have called for independent consultants to be called in. The Greenpeace vessel Moby Dick arrived in the Moray Firth in early June. They are campaigning to protect UK dolphins and porpoises. The Moray Firth, along with Cardigan Bay in Wales, are the only two remaining areas of British waters which are home to semi-resident populations of bottle-nosed dolphins. Greenpeace is seeking to have these areas designated as 'marine nature reserves' and so protect the species. The whole area of the Moray Firth and the inner Beaully Firth are very important sites for water birds of all types. Mergansers winter in the inner firth in large numbers, while perhaps half the British population of scoters and long-tailed ducks winter in the area. It is now the only British site which regularly holds more than 20,000 sea ducks. There are also Harbour Porpoises in the firth, and I have reported whales being seen in the firth. Last November three pilot whales were seen in the Beaully Firth, one of the 24 animals seemed in some distress and the others were trying to guide it back to deeper water. Apart from the general menace of pollution and dreadful consequences, I have another worry about the situation in the firth. While it is not a theory I hold, it is thought by some that the Loch Ness animals sometimes go down the river to the sea and perhaps therefore back again. In the event that such a migration does happen, a polluted firth could endanger Nessie, a very rare species. On the same lines of conservancy and protection, is the word of a new reserve. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has purchased a 200 acre tract of birchwood and moorland on the shores of Loch Ruthven as a reserve for the rare Slavonian grebe. The loch

which is on the tons between Dore and Foyers is a favoured breeding site of the grebes. The purchase should ensure that this remains so. Visitors will be able to see these beautiful birds without disturbing them, from the lochside hide. There are many different birds to be seen around the loch, recently ospreys have been seen fishing there. Last year ospreys nested near Loch Ness, the nest was known about by the Nature Conservancy Council and RSPB, who guarded what they thought was a secret. However NCC officers on a Jacobite cruise were astounded when the boat moved closer to the shore and the nest was pointed out to a packed passenger lounge, over the loudspeaker. A spokesman for the Jacobite Cruises said he was sorry they had been pointing out the birds, but thought that everyone knew about them and were interested in seeing them. Over the past three years the Forestry Commission have been developing 'floating islands' in an attempt to provide the endangered black-throated diver with suitable nesting sites. It is estimated that there are only 150 of these birds left in Britain; as numbers have dropped over the years they have been more affected by disturbance to their normal nesting sites. They nest on, and around, highland lochs on low lying shores and islands. On shore disturbance comes from fishermen; on the islands they can be subject to flooding, having nests, eggs, chicks, washed away by rising water. The final design is three 4 by 8 pieces of polystyrene bolted to a timber frame, edges chamfered, slightly oval shaped and the whole covered with carpet underfelt to ensure that the island vegetation will soak up water and stay moist. Mossy vegetation and rushes were laid on the surface and the whole island moored offshore by chains from concrete filled barrels. Three of the Commission's islands were successfully used by pairs of divers last year. The RSPB have adopted the design and built six of their own for private lochs and estates in various parts of the Highlands.

Sightings?

The Sunday Post newspaper carried a report on 4th June that the previous day a boatload of tourists had seen 'the Loch Ness Monster'. The boat is the Caledonian Queen which is run by its owner, Norman McKenzie, from Fort Augustus. Mr McKenzie said that he had recently fitted the boat with new sonar equipment which gives a colour display on a screen. At 2.45 pm the boat was passing Johnny's Point, which is on the northern shore about 2 1/2 miles from Fort Augustus, when a blue blob showed on the screen. This was said to represent a forty foot object some 300 feet below the boat. As I have pointed out before in Nessletters, the interpretation of sonar is very complicated, and while this report is very interesting, it could be open to further investigation. It is also, I believe, the first time a newspaper has reported that a group of people has 'seen' the monster on sonar.

Betty Gallagher, from the Exhibition Centre, sent me the following report. At 9.10 am on 19th May 1989 Mr. D.C. Williams, and a companion who did not wish to be identified, were walking up the path behind the Clansman Hotel. They were on the last day of their holiday aboard the hire cruiser Leven Castle. They had moored overnight at the Clansman marina and next morning took a walk up the hillside. The loch conditions were perfect visibility, sunshine, no wind or mist. They saw what appeared to be the double wake of a boat, but when their attention moved forward of the wake they saw what they described as a pole sticking out of the water. They thought it was moving at about 10 knots, and it was frequently changing direction. They calculated it was approximately a quarter of a mile off the north shore, and heading towards Urquhart Bay. They watched until losing sight of it behind trees. Mr Williams had taken two photographs; the film was later passed to Betty for her to have it processed in Inverness. They made their way back to the harbour where they asked two fishermen there if they had seen a boat or other object pass. They were told that they had seen nothing pass that morning. Aidrian Shine, Loch Ness Project, who lives by the Clansman was around and brought into the discussion. He suggested that it had perhaps been a duck or other water bird. Mr Williams was certain it was not a boat, as it changed course too frequently and quickly. It was his first visit to the loch, so he has limited knowledge of local conditions and fauna. His friend supported what Mr Williams said; he had seen the same thing, but fearing ridicule did not wish to give his name. However when Betty examined the photographs after processing they showed nothing but a good view of the loch. I have no details of the camera or lens used, if it was a fairly ordinary one, no zoom, etc.; it could be that the object was too small/far away to register. It seems very possible that it was a water bird of some description that was seen, giving a far better image to the eye than to the film, or a little Nessie.

In early May 1988 Andreas Trottmann, a NIS member from Switzerland was at the loch. He was watching alone from the Cobb Memorial at 5.00 am on 11th May. It was a beautiful morning, calm loch, good weather, sunrise. Around 6.30 a dense fog, coming from the north-east, covered the loch very quickly. Andreas decided to return to Lewiston for breakfast, the A82 was very foggy. When he reached Urquhart Bay it was free from fog, rounding Strone Point he was driving very fast down the straight stretch towards Borlum.

He caught sight of a longish hump, pointed at both ends. By the time he managed to stop and reverse back up the road (you've guessed) the object had vanished. He made the following notes at once: 4 to 5 m long, 60 to 70 cm broad, height difficult to estimate as he was looking downwards, but it seemed in proportion, dark-grey in colour with a white patch in front, no visual movement; no boats, logs or other large objects nearby. He said the expression of an upturned boat is a very close description. He said that he only saw the object for some two seconds, and his noted details and observations are most probably impressions. The object was in the Borlum Bay area, off the River Coiltie. Another unsettling little episode, Andreas knows the loch fairly well and what should normally be seen there. He called it a 'strange occurrence'. One question: if there was no obvious movement, how did he know the white patch was on the front? Or is it a case of, some animals have white fronts, there was a white patch, so that must be the front.

Loch Ness Project

Having mentioned Aidrian, I have heard from him that the Project is to set up a passive sonar experiment. It will consist of a transducer placed on the underwater slope pointing across the loch, this fixed beam will be monitored from the shore, perhaps the equipment being in a purpose built hut. The suggested site for trial runs was at the Clansman Hotel/Marina. This is in line with my own thoughts. I have said before I feel the animals may have patterns of behaviour; if so and these can be established underwater cameras and other equipment could be deployed to good effect. There are drawbacks to such a scheme I realise. It may, or will, be time consuming; also there is strong evidence that the animals are aware of some types of sonar. Wavelengths will need to be selected very carefully, otherwise the animals will just stay away from the beams.

I have had some adverse comment from some members that the package offered by the Loch Ness & Morar Project (NIS91) had not been forthcoming, and they had been unable to get replies to their enquiries. While I have not yet seen the Project write up, I have recently had word from a member that they had received theirs.

NIS at the Lochside

Andreas sent word he hopes to be at the loch with some sonar gear some time in May. He will be in the Foyers area. No further details.

Doug Macfarlane intends to have his new catamaran up at the loch for a prolonged period from June. I have his report about last season's work which I will pass on next time. He will be using sail as power and hopes to be able to extend his sonar coverage of the loch.

Alastair and Sue Boyd will be at Strone from 29th July until 26th August, staying in the usual chalet, with their cameras. Alastair sent some comments on Ulrich Magin's remarks in NIS 91. I hope to include them in the next Nessletter.

Doris, my wife, our daughter, myself and possibly Doris's sister hope to be at the old pier Abriachan from 22nd July until 4th August. We will be in a high top Bedford motor caravan, white, reg. ODC 503R.

Mike Johnson from Clinton IA, USA, and his wife will be over from 6th/7th October until the 27th, at the Lewiston Arms Hotel, Drumnadrochit. They plan to watch from 5 or 6 points around the loch moving as conditions or whim dictate. They have a 35 mm camera with a 600 mm mirror telephoto lens, and video camcorder with 8:1 zoom. They would be willing to co-ordinate with anyone who will be at the loch at the same time.

Erik Beckjord

NIS 92 brought immediate response from Erik in the form of a telephone call followed by a letter. I have not space to put it all in this time. Erik pointed out that the National Cryptozoological Society has undertaken four expeditions. He objected to the 'just a season or two' remark. But in the overall picture four expeditions is just a season or two. I am not blaming Erik or belittling the work he has done, just pointing out how little is being done. Erik is one of few who is trying. He hopes to be back on the loch for the last two weeks in July and the first in August and would be happy to co-ordinate with anyone of similar mind. I have no details as to where he may be found at Ness. He is looking for a copy of 'The Monsters of Achanult' by R.L. Cassie, published by D. Wyllie & Son in 1935. Any information write: Box 6534, Malibu, CA90264, U.S.A.

Another Nessletter finished. Perhaps I should just carry on then you may receive the next more or less on time. However please, as always, remember your news and views are always welcome, and needed. The address is: R. R. Hepple, 7 Huntshieldsford, St. Johns Chapel, Bishop Auckland, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. Tel: 0388 537359. Subscriptions: U.K. £2.75. N.America \$9.00

Rip