

OBSERVATORIES' ROUNDUP

Observatories' Roundup is a regular bi-annual feature about our bird observatories in Scotland. The intention is to publicize the work of the observatories, visiting opportunities, as well as incidental snippets of news from the islands.

Any divers, swans... a project to computerise the Fair Isle Bird Observatory daily log

Daily log - it's an institution at all observatories. On Fair Isle, every single night during the migration seasons of spring and autumn, more or less on the dot of 9.00 pm, the stentorian voice of the warden booms out to quell the background hum of conversation. There is silence (as a working biro is sought), an air of palpable anticipation (which may be related to whether or not the cocoa and homebakes have arrived) and finally the science of the log begins...

An average log might see counts of 60–80 species, more on a good day. Log on a *really* good day can take quite some time - ample justification for those sticky cakes, since log can require energy-sapping levels of concentration. Let's say for argument's sake 70 species a day, every day for six months of the year. That's a lot of numbers. Multiply that by the 60+ years of Fair Isle Bird Observatory's history and you have a quite monumental pile of numbers. This is a phenomenal historical record of the observations at one of Europe's foremost migration sites.

The value of that written record has never been in doubt, but building the new observatory highlighted just how potentially fragile that record is. Although the key observations (such as rarities, peak counts, first dates and so on) are summarised in annual reports, the raw data for many of those years exist in a single, printed copy. Realising the potential for losing those data to a catastrophic event such as a major fire spurred us on to think urgently about a long-term back-up.

Some progress was made over the last decade in computerising the data for the year in question but the majority of our daily logs remained as single paper volumes. And it soon emerged that there was another important factor to consider too. Looking to the future is crucial to FIBO in all sorts of ways, and ornithology is foremost among those. What should our main ornithological goals



Plate 308. David Parnaby taking the log on Fair Isle. © David Parnaby

be? Where are the efforts of our staff best directed? Should we continue the long-term programme, monitoring migration through the whole island, or would we gain more from switching to a smaller census area combined with a more intensive study of certain key species? In order to answer to those questions about the future we need to be able to analyse the past. What are the strengths and weaknesses of what we already have? Answering that question is effectively impossible until all those numbers are computerised...

So began phase 1 of the project, which, at the time of writing, is almost complete. Over the course of the winter of 2011/12, we scanned over half of the existing log pages. They were digitised off the island by AEL Data Services (the scanning process ensures that the originals remain on the island, reducing the possibility of

them being lost or mislaid). The remaining logs were scanned in 2012/13, and we have just received the files back from AEL. This will then allow us to produce some basic analyses of a phenomenal dataset, which, for some species, stretches over 75 years (since there are in fact quite good records for some species dating back well before 1948 when the Observatory was founded, back to 1936 in some cases). Those initial analyses comprise phase 2 of the project, which we shall embark on in winter 2013/14.

The purpose of this article is twofold - to tell SOC members about the project, but also to thank the various people involved so far. In particular, we are indebted to the Club, who have generously grant-aided the digitisation process with a grant of up to £15,000 from *The Birds of Scotland* Fund. In addition, I should like to thank all those who participated in the brainstorming meeting on Fair Isle in July 2011, but particularly David Jardine for his role in securing the above-mentioned funding and Ian Newton for acting as a referee on the application; Alan Knox for much very helpful advice on the practicalities of the digitisation process; and Will Miles for scanning the data. We plan to report again in *Scottish Birds* soon, with some initial results and analyses.

Roger Riddington, Chairman FIBOT

May Days - past, present and future

As I start to pen these words, the rain is lashing down and the wind is blowing a gale from the west. It's definitely not a day for being on the Isle of May! But, it's 15 September and by an odd coincidence, 47 years ago to the day, the weather was quite similar and that's exactly where I was.

To put it into context, it was just a few weeks after England won the World Cup and a few days after the first episode of *Star Trek* appeared on TV! 'It' was my first ever visit to the Isle of May in September 1966, as a member of the annual party from the Ornithological Society of the Edinburgh Academy. According to the report of our visit in *The Edinburgh Academy Chronicle* by our leader, John (Jock) King, "the weather conditions were hopeless for migration and we did indeed have a lean time". But, despite being stuck on for an extra day, our bird list included a Long-eared Owl and my first ever Green Sandpiper. Perhaps our expectations were lower then, but from that point I was hooked!

It was no coincidence that my first experience came through the Edinburgh Academy, as the school had ornithological 'history' being also the *alma mater* of George Waterston and the group of fellow birdwatching pupils who founded the observatory in 1934. It had all begun five years before when a group consisting of George

Plate 309. The Low Light (The Isle of May Bird Observatory) after its recent renovation. © Mark Oksien

