

Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust

# **FRIENDS of FAIR ISLE**

## **newsletter**



No. 6 Summer 1990

Domestically, the start of the 1990 season was 'a doddle' compared to 1989 and with Joan MacDonald in her second season as Cook-caterer menus were soon receiving high praise once more. Chris Donald (general assistant in 1988) is also back this year, as Assistant Warden, but all the other supporting staff are new and - unusually - all but one are Scots. Nigel Milius, Assistant Cook, is from Cheshire; Bob Proctor, Seabird Assistant, from Elgin; and Alan Young, General Assistant, from Glasgow. Leona Johnston from Shetland has now handed over the second General Assistant's post to Lorne Blyth, from Wishaw. With two small daughters now expecting their share of attention Paul and Elizabeth are busier than ever!

### **SPRING MIGRATION**

A combination of almost uninterrupted westerly air-flow in March and April, and clear calm weather for most of May and June, has meant that this spring has been among the quietest on record, in terms of both numbers of common migrants and the occurrence of rarities.

Waders were the most evident migrants in March, with Oystercatchers peaking at 145 on 14th and Lapwing at 110 on 16th. A Slavonian Grebe frequented North Haven for a few days from 15th, the first record since 1988. Good numbers of summer migrants were arriving on the British south coast at this time, but on Fair Isle the sole representative was a Wheatear on 19th, the earliest for more than 10 years. The only notable movement in late



March was 37 Whooper Swans flying north on 28th.

The first few days of April were a little more lively with 175 Meadow Pipits on 1st, 100 Blackbirds and 90 Snow Buntings on 4th, and 380 Skylarks and 45 Wheatears on 5th. The largest thrush 'fall' of the spring was on 13th, when 500 Fieldfares, 150 Redwings and 25 Song Thrushes were counted. 50 Bramblings and 8 Chiffchaffs were also present. 25 Ravens flew south next day and an early Grasshopper Warbler arrived on 20th. A classic frosty Arctic Redpoll put in an all too brief appearance on 23rd, but the star of the spring arrived on 26th in the guise of a male Yellow-headed Blackbird - the first record of this North American species for Fair Isle and only the seventh for Britain. A Buzzard flew north on 27th and a super male Siberian Stonechat was a good find on 28th. Although regular in autumn there are only a handful of spring records of this bird.

May opened with a flock of 155 summer plumaged Golden Plover and a 'black' Spotted Redshank. Waders were to feature prominently all month, with up to 30 Whimbrels and 5 Black-tailed Godwits recorded on several dates. The best fall of the spring occurred on 3rd, comprising 15 Tree Pipits, 8 Robins, 3 Grasshopper Warblers, 25 Chiffchaffs and 15 Willow Warblers. Raptors moving north included the second Buzzard of the spring on 5th and Osprey on 6th. Common migrants were in short supply for the rest of the month, with 5 Whinchats on 5th and 4 Redstarts on 13th being the highest daily counts for the respective species!! Even Fair Isle 'specials' were in short supply, with only a handful of Wrynecks, Red-backed Shrikes and Bluethroats, 2 Rosefinches and a single Icterine Warbler. May rarities comprised Short-toed Larks on 9th and 27th, a super male Snowy Owl from 12th to 18th (if only the Fetlar females knew what they were missing), Little Bunting on 15th, Tawny Pipit 20-26th, Red-throated Pipit on 29th, a 'red' Red-breasted Flycatcher on 30th and 3 Nightingales. After an absence last spring it was refreshing to see 2 Ortolans; this once regular visitor to Fair Isle is becoming increa-



singly scarce. Perhaps the rarest visitor for Fair Isle, though, was a Brent Goose which remained in Hjukni Geo and South Harbour from 15th.

A Crossbill on 29th was the fore-runner of a major irruption of that species, with up to 100 seen daily through June. Early June provided the most exciting birding of the spring. Along with the Crossbills were a good scattering of Whitethroats, Lesser Whitethroats and Garden Warblers, and among them 3 Marsh Warblers, 2 Icterine Warblers, the first Melodious Warbler since 1981 and a Golden Oriole. The highlight for most visitors, however, was an incredibly tame second-summer Long-tailed Skua which on the 4th briefly joined the non-breeding Arctic Skua club.

#### FAIR ISLE SEABIRDS UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Following a series of poor breeding seasons for some of Shetland and Fair Isle's seabirds (see FIBO Report for 1989), the Applied Ornithology Unit at Glasgow University has been awarded a considerable sum of money by the Natural Environment Research Council to research further into the sandeel-seabird problem. Dr Pat Monahan is co-ordinating the work which will continue for the next 3 years. This season a team of four researchers is based at Sumburgh Head and a team of two here on Fair Isle. The Fair Isle students are carrying out detailed observational work on four species, two relatively successful (Shag & Guillemot) and two unsuccessful (Arctic Tern & Kittiwake). Some radio-tracking work is also being undertaken to throw light on the foraging ranges of the birds and to identify important feeding areas.

FIBO will be continuing its detailed seabird monitoring programme under contract to the Nature Conservancy Council, while a combined Aberdeen University and D.A.F.S. team will simultaneously be carrying out research on sandeel biology, much of this work being undertaken in Fair Isle waters. Hopefully, over the next three years some of the reasons for the current reduced



availability of sandeels to some seabird species will begin to become apparent.

As in 1989 the bulk of the sandeels landed in Shetland have come from the Fair Isle grounds and, although the fishery was closed on 15th June, there are already signs that Kittiwakes and Arctic Terns are facing another disastrous breeding season.

Paul Harvey

#### OTHER ISLAND NEWS

Fair Isle air-space has been busier than ever before this year. In addition to the increase in scheduled flights from Shetland, plus twice-weekly Orkney flights, there was a series of large-helicopter visits early in the season. These were charter flights bringing parties of knitwear enthusiasts for a day visit to see Fair Isle's own special craft. Although the visits, organised by Rowan Travel, started as early as April all were blessed with good weather and the packed programme, which included lunch at the Lodge, was carried out according to plan on every occasion - though things did become a bit hectic one Saturday when the Rowan Travel visit coincided with a special National Trust party.

Late June saw the first of the new 'Island Insights' courses, in which FIBO and Fair Islanders together introduce visitors to various aspects of island life. Thirteen visitors (all but two from Scotland) thoroughly enjoyed their week getting to know the isle and its human and other inhabitants. The week 'kicked off', with a dance in the Community Hall and ended with a farewell dinner with the island tutors. In between participants discovered how Fair Isle's weather influences crofting practices; saw boat-building, the knitwear process from shearing to finished garment, and a variety of archaeological sites; learned something of the isle's social history and the seabird work carried out by FIBO; visited the South Light and explored non-ornithological natural history topics. If all goes well we hope to repeat this course in 1991.