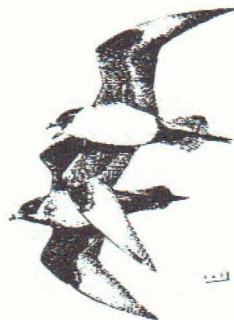


FRIENDS of FAIR ISLE

newsletter



No. 7 Autumn 1990

FAIR ISLE'S SEABIRDS IN 1990

Many of us thought that the plight of our breeding seabirds could get no worse than in the 1988 and 1989 seasons, but this summer was to prove us wrong. Once again the species worst hit by the continued sandeel shortage were Kittiwake, terns and Arctic Skua. Worse still, there was evidence to suggest that many other breeding species, previously unaffected, are now experiencing problems in raising their young.

Some 19,000 pairs of Kittiwakes breed on Fair Isle, but this summer just two fledged chicks were seen! Although some adults deserted their eggs, hatching success was moderate, with the majority of chicks starving shortly after hatching. Analysis of food samples is not yet complete but it appears that this season many Kittiwakes had to resort to feeding their chicks on offal scavenged from behind fishing vessels, due to the shortage of their preferred food item - sandeels.

Arctic Terns had an equally depressing season. A record 400 pairs attempted to breed but only one chick fledged. The Common Tern population meanwhile crashed to 7 pairs, all of which failed completely. As for Arctic Skuas, the 104 pairs attempting to breed raised just 3 chicks to fledging. There were again heavy losses to predation by their larger cousins, the Great Skuas.

Many of our previously 'relatively successful' species also had their poorest breeding seasons since monitoring began in 1986. Fulmars fledged just one chick for every 4 pairs, while brood reduction was frequent in Shags, which did not even manage to raise one chick per pair. Puffins too fared less well, although flooding of

breeding burrows during a freak summer storm may have contributed to this.

Guillemots and Razorbills again experienced normal breeding success, obviously still able to locate sufficient sandeels to feed their chicks. However it is worrying to report that, in both species, chicks weighed significantly less for a given wing-length, and fledged at lower weights, than in 1989. Is this the first sign that the reduced availability of sandeels is affecting this species too?

In long-lived species such as seabirds it will obviously be several years before the effects of these poor breeding seasons are reflected in the adult populations, and as yet populations of most seabird species breeding on the Isle remain fairly stable. Guillemots are, however, an exception with numbers again decreasing (on average by 27.6%) at monitoring plots. This decrease is presumably related to an increase in adult mortality in winter. If this trend is reflected in the Isle's population as a whole, then some 8,000 of the 32,000 Guillemots counted last summer have subsequently disappeared.

AUTUMN HIGHLIGHTS

In many ways it was a strange autumn; common migrants were in short supply until the latter half of October and yet rarities continued to turn up from mid-August. Even as early as late July we were entertained by our first 'autumn' rarities - a super pair of Two-barred Crossbills. Four more were to follow, 3 juveniles in August and another female in October. Indeed the autumn was something of a Crossbill spectacular; Common Crossbills numbered over 200 on many days, reaching a peak of 225 on 23 August, and a tame female Parrot Crossbill allowed itself to be trapped on 24 September. Irruptive species have been very much the flavour of the autumn. Great Spotted Woodpeckers were regular after the first on 17 August, peaking at 5 on 18 October, and Waxwings have been near daily since 5 on 15 October, peaking at 30 on 18 October.

A Greenish Warbler on 16 August was the first of our regular Scandinavian/Siberian rarities, other regulars including an Arctic Warbler, 2 Citrine Wagtails, a Rustic, 2 Yellow-breasted and 4 Little Buntings, and 4 Richard's, 9 Olive-backed and a single Red-throated Pipit. The autumn twitchers were again rewarded with 2 very obliging Lanceolated Warblers, indeed one of them was so tame that it was picked up for ringing!! Less regular Siberian visitors were 2 Dusky Warblers, the sixth and seventh records for the island.

Nearctic species, though, were the stars of the autumn. A Long-billed Dowitcher fed at Easter Lothar on 14-15 September, the second for Fair Isle, while Hjukmni Geo played host to Scotland's second, and Fair Isle's first, Swainson's Thrush, from 30 September to 6 October.

Lesser rarities included several Bluethroats, Red-breasted Flycatchers, Barred Warblers, Rosefinches, Yellow-browed Warblers, Red-backed Shrikes, Wrynecks and single Woodchat and Great Grey Shrikes. One of the Yellow-browed Warblers was sporting a Norwegian ring! - the first foreign-ringed bird of this species to be caught in Britain.

Waders were in good supply all autumn, good counts being 13 Black-tailed Godwits in August, 10 Curlew Sandpipers in September and 20 Jack Snipe and 150 Woodcock in October. The best fall of traditional summer migrants occurred on 7 September, when 7 Little Stints, 12 Whinchats, 11 Pied Flycatchers and 20 Willow, 3 Barred, 15 Garden, and 2 Wood Warblers were counted. Far more spectacular, however, were the thrush numbers in October. Fieldfares peaked at 5,000 and Redwings at 2,000 on 18th and Blackbirds at 500 on 22nd. Chiffchaffs reached a new record island count on 18th, when 100 were present, all but a handful being of the northern/eastern race.

Finally, the migration of wild geese is always one of the highlights. Passage was particularly strong on 5th and 6th October, with more than 500 Greylags each day, and on 12th October when 110 Barnacles were recorded.

Paul Harvey

FIBOT AFFAIRS

We now have both an Administrative Secretary (Michael Murphy) and a new Membership Secretary (Sylvia Laing) working for us part-time at 21 Regent Terrace. Both are also employed by the Scottish Ornithologists Club, so there is now every chance that 'Friends' who phone in during office hours will actually be answered by someone who knows what they are talking about!

Booking forms for our Spring Meetings are enclosed with this Newsletter: Edinburgh - Friday 15 Feb, 6.30pm at Heriot Watt campus, Riccarton (Note change of time and venue). London - Monday 18 Feb, 6.30pm at The White Hart, 71 Theobald's Rd, Holborn. Paul Harvey will speak at both meetings and at Edinburgh we hope also to have an invited speaker to talk on research work currently being carried out on the isle's seabirds. Friends are invited to bring along their own slides to the London meeting and to participate as much as possible.

Also enclosed is the 1991 brochure, which gives details of next season's tariffs and programme of one-week courses. After much discussion it has been decided to increase the deposit required to 50% of the holiday cost; visitors are consequently strongly advised to take out holiday insurance, so that in the event of cancellation a refund can be obtained.

Like everybody else, FIBOT is feeling the effects of inflation. Increasing costs for printing and postage have meant that over the current financial year Friends' subscriptions have done little more than cover the cost of servicing the membership. The Board of Directors have decided, therefore, to make an increase in the subscription to £10 per annum from April 1991. It is hoped that most Friends will be able and willing to renew at this level, and so will continue to provide the important financial back-up that was envisaged when George Waterston first initiated the 'Friends of Fair Isle'. No action is needed at present; subscription renewal forms will be sent out with the Annual Report, hopefully in early March.