

Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust

FRIENDS of FAIR ISLE

newsletter

No. 8 Summer 1991



SEABIRD NEWS

During the summer Glasgow University, in conjunction with the Bird Observatory, continued its research into Fair Isle's breeding seabirds. The species studied were Guillemot, Shag, Arctic Tern and Kittiwake. Each species was monitored from the pre-laying stage through chick rearing to fledging. Clutch and brood size, adult attendance, adult body condition, feeding rates and diet were all monitored.

In marked contrast to last year, the birds have had an extremely successful season. Breeding adults have been able to maintain their body weight, chicks have been fed frequently, suggesting a close and plentiful food supply, and as a result fledging success has been good. Perhaps the most significant improvement has been the breeding success of Arctic Terns. A record 650 pairs bred on the island and over 1,000 chicks were ringed. Fledging success at the breeding plot was approximately 1.3 chicks/pair, a vast improvement on the one chick that fledged from 400 pairs last year, and the first real success in Shetland since 1983!

Kittiwakes too have had their most successful season since 1987. Chicks are still fledging now, but the final figure for breeding success is expected to be in the order of 1.0 chicks fledged/pair.

Howard Towell (Glasgow Univ.)

AND WHAT OF OTHER SEABIRDS...

After a series of poor breeding seasons Arctic Skuas have at last experienced good breeding success, which is hardly surprising since their main host species - terns

auks and Kittiwakes - have done well. Predation pressure from Great Skuas is still taking a heavy toll of both adults and newly fledged chicks, however. All the auk species have done well, with sandeels featuring prominently in the diet of Puffins (97% of fish presented to chicks); a welcome change from 1988-90 when sandeels formed on average 53% of chick diet. Razorbills and Guillemots too have had a good season.

Without doubt the factor that has been responsible for this return to normality has been an increase in the availability of sandeels. Why this should be is still unknown, however, although the closure of the sandeel fishery last June must have helped! Let's hope that the D.A.F.S. have the good sense to see that things stay that way.

SPRING MIGRATION

If I open by saying that the wind did not blow from the south east on any day in May, then you will not be surprised that it was the worst spring on record. Indeed the title is something of a misnomer - there was no migration! After a quiet spring last year I was hoping for a record breaker this year. It was a record breaker, but for all the wrong reasons! Only two Redstarts were recorded; there was only one Sylvia warbler in May, etc. etc. As usual, though, there were a few interesting sightings to provide much needed inspiration in the face of what seemed a constant northerly airflow. Great Tit, Goldfinch, Canada Goose, Scaup and Red Kite are all unusual on Fair Isle, while rarities found included 3 Red-throated Pipits, 2 Short-toed Larks, and Little and Rustic Buntings. Those of you thinking of a spring visit should book in for next year - surely we are due for a real stunner!

Paul Harvey

A WHALE OF A TIME

On the afternoon of 16th July, Arfon Williams and I strolled down to the pier to meet the Good Shepherd.

What happened during the following eight hours will remain, for those involved, the highlight of the season.

My usual question to islander Neil Thomson, "Any Cetaceans?", was answered with "Two Minkes two miles north of the isle." The only thing that raced simultaneously through our minds was to get the Zodiac boat onto the water and get out there soon. Sending one of the JMHF recipients running to let Paul know, Arfon and I rapidly collected newly arrived visitors' luggage and returned to the Lodge where Chris Orsmann, Stete Voitier and Paul were getting ready. Within 15 minutes we were on our way, heading north out of Wick O'Furse, full of expectation.

We soon found ourselves drifting around, engine off, looking for indicators such as Gannets and auks taking advantage of disturbed fish. We couldn't find any large concentrations and became somewhat anxious. Maybe they'd moved on...maybe we're in the wrong place...maybe... WOOSH!! All of a sudden our ears locked onto the sound of a whale blowing in the distance, but we still couldn't see it. This continued a few more times before we decided to start the engine and move closer, hoping to see something. After a short wait, Paul saw a whale surface. The large size and relatively small dorsal fin positioned well down the back confirmed it as a Minke. For the rest of us the next few minutes proved tantalizing, until it surfaced again. We soon heard another blow from a different direction, and saw a second whale. By this time the adrenalin was flowing and, after glimpsing them several more times in the distance, we decided to go for broke and raced to get closer views. We were not let down. After a couple of minutes wait the still water broke and, like a scene out of 'Jaws', we were treated, or should I say priveleged, to views of a magnificent Minke Whale down to just a few metres away. The five of us were by this time totally incredulous. Words cannot describe the scene. Almost as if this superlative creature picked up our excitement, it continued to display itself, before heading straight for the Zodiac and swimming a few feet underneath us! The thrill was unreal, and it is hardly surprising that

available cameras were redundant for that scene. They soon came out though, and we were once again given stunning views of its head, blowhole and curved fin. Thinking of our landlubbing friends, we headed back to North Haven, to take other staff and keen visitors out there to see the spectacle. They were not disappointed either. Our friend continued to thrill and delight those on board until late evening, providing everyone with a unique experience and an insight into these friendly creatures.

Minke whales are widely distributed in tropical, temperate, and polar waters of both hemispheres. In the North Atlantic, concentrations can be found off Spitsbergen and the Barents Sea, the coast of Norway and in Icelandic seas. They feed mainly on krill and small shoaling fish such as cod, capelin and pollock.

Hugh Harrop (FIBO)

FIBOT AFFAIRS

We have been much encouraged by the relatively good response to the recent subscription increase. In the hope that some of those who have not renewed at the new rate will yet do so, we are - where appropriate - sending out a reminder with this Newsletter. Those who have still failed to renew, or to update their payments, when the Autumn Newsletter is due to go out will be deleted from the list of 'Friends'. With ever-increasing printing and postage costs we cannot afford to send publications to those who have not paid up.

Because the renewal forms did not go out until April, some £5.00 subs. had already gone through the bank by the time the new rate Banker's Orders were received. In such cases the forms were amended as necessary to provide either for payment of "£5.00 now and £10.00 from 1st April" or postponement of the £10 payment until 1992. In consequence nobody should have paid more than the sum actually due. We hope that we got it right in every case - and apologise for the late delivery of the renewal forms.