

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

No.10. January 1993.



WARDENS REPORT.

1992 , A RECORD BREAKING YEAR.

1992 has proved to be a record breaking year, both for our breeding seabirds and for migrants. Sandeels were again abundant in Fair Isle waters. Shags, Kittiwakes and Arctic Skuas fledged more chick / pair than in any year since monitoring began in 1986. Fulmars, Gannets, terns, Guillemots, Tysties and Puffins also had good seasons. Only Common Gulls failed to raise any chicks, this almost certainly related to a further increase in the Arctic Tern population, which numbered an amazing 1100 pairs. Unfortunately the gulls had laid their eggs right in the middle of what was to become the main ternery! A few chicks hatched but were all found pecked to death - presumably by the terns.

BREAKWATER UNDERWAY.

Breakwater construction in the North Haven got underway in late July. Those of us concerned as to what effect this may have had on the Common Terns nesting on the Stack need not have worried. Perhaps the terns possessed a sixth sense because they all decided to desert the Stack in favour of Bunes! A more likely explanation is that the adults had moved in response to the repeated loss of eggs and chicks (presumably to Herring Gulls) over the last few years.

RECORD 212 SPECIES.

As I write now the Observatory has recorded 212 species this year. This a new record total, the previous all time high standing at 205! Among these were 6 species new to the Island. In May the island hosted Scotland's first Semipalmated Sandpiper, normally to be found in the Americas. Then in July came Britain and Ireland's first Brown Flycatcher followed only a day later by the isle's first Pacific Golden Plover. Both species that should actually have been on their Siberian breeding grounds! August brought a Ring-billed Gull of Nearctic origin and then a juvenile Montagu's Harrier, while in mid-September Shetland's first and Scotland's third Solitary Sandpiper (another American wader) fed at the Field byre. Not since 1961 have so many new species been recorded on the island in one year!

SPRING MIGRATION.

Not only was the spring memorable for it's rarities - 3 Red-footed Falcons, 9 Red-throated Pipits, 7 Subalpine, 2 Greenish and single Paddyfield and Great Reed Warblers, Thrush Nightingale, 5 Black-headed and one Rustic Bunting; but also for a host of species regular in Britain but somewhat alien to Fair Isle. The first Nightjar since 1976, the first Stone Curlew since 1974, and only the third Firecrest ever.

Common migrants too were abundant - 350 Spotted Flycatchers were recorded on several days in late May, the previous record total numbering 50! Whitethroat were present in greater numbers than in any year since 1970 and there were record day-totals for Wood and Icterine Warblers and Common Rosefinches.

AUTUMN HIGHLIGHTS.

Autumn highlights, apart from those already mentioned, were second records of Eye-browed Thrush and Bonelli's Warbler, a Booted, 3 Pallas's and 3 Greenish Warbler; as well as regulars such as Lanceolated Warbler, Pechora Pipit, Citrine Wagtail and Great Snipe. Bramblings arrived in good numbers with 300 present on several days in late September - early October and there were good falls of Goldcrest and Robin on 1st October, with 500 and 400 respectively. One disappointing feature was the lack of any big Thrush falls in October.

CONTROLS.

On the ringing front it was a good year for foreign ringed birds. Obviously we must await full details but bearing Norwegian rings were 9 Storm Petrels, a Great Black-back Gull, a Blackbird, a Blackcap, a Chiffchaff and a Willow Warbler and from the Faroes came a Storm Petrel.

Veterans too made their mark. In 1992 we trapped a 30 year old Puffin, a 28 year old Razorbill, a 24 year old Storm Petrel and a Tystie aged 22.

Paul Harvey.

THE SUMBURGH HEAD OIL SPILL DISASTER.

As I write, the full implications of this horrendous accident have yet to be assessed. Fortunately for Fair Isle, the wind was not from the North.

FIBOT, through the National Trust for Scotland, has emphasised its outstanding ability to continue monitoring the seabird population. The fact that we have excellent records for the past seven seasons and occupy an unrivalled geographical situation for monitoring puts us in the forefront of any post-accident investigation.

Pat Sellar.

DEPARTURE OF PAUL and ELIZABETH.

We congratulate Paul Harvey in winning his new appointment as Assistant Regional Officer (Shetland) for Scottish Natural Heritage in Lerwick. In these days of severe competition it speaks volumes for Paul's competence and personality. It is comforting to realise once again that the Fair Isle warden's job is never a dead-end but in fact a proving ground held in high esteem. We will all sorely miss Paul, Elizabeth and the three enchanting girls. Theirs has been an outstanding tenure of office - four superb seasons which will go down in our annals as four of the very best. Paul has already left the island; Elizabeth and the girls will probably be taking their leave, sadly, in early February.

Interviews for their replacement will be held in Edinburgh on 12th January.

Pat Sellar.

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE LONDON MEETING.

The London meeting will take place on **Monday 15th February 1993** at the White Hart, 71 Theobald's Road, Holborn at 6.30 p.m. Tickets for the meeting, which includes buffet supper, will be £6.50 per person. Cheques should be made payable to D.P. Bell and sent to him at The Finches, Village Road, Coleshill, Amersham, Bucks, HP7 OLQ (tel 0494 721405) by February 10th, 1993.

The London meeting is always a friendly gathering and is a good chance to meet friends with a common interest. It is hoped that there will be some slides shown as well as a video of a 1992 visit.

If you have any slides or videos you wish to show, please bring them along.

Nick Dymond's, 'The Birds of Fair Isle' and Valerie Thom's, 'Fair Isle, An Island Saga', will both be available for sale.

To reserve your tickets please complete the form included at the end of this newsletter.

JOHN HARRISON MEMORIAL FUND.

There have been very few applications for next season so we have extended the deadline to 15th March. If you know of any eligible young person who would benefit from the Fair Isle Experience, then please make haste and get them to write in. They must be aged between 15 and 21 years and have a supporting letter from an adult.

Applications should be sent to, Michael Murphy, FIBOT, 21 Regent Terrace, Edinburgh, EH7 5BT.

BOOK REVIEW.

THE BIRDS OF FAIR ISLE by J.N. Dymond; illustrated by D.M. Pullman; 1991; 148 pp; £11.95; ISBN 0 9518414 0 8.

When I first visited Fair Isle in 1982, it was more than just a birdwatching holiday. I was experiencing, first hand, one of ornithology's great legends. This book comprehensively documents that legend.

Fair Isle Bird Observatory data since 1948 has been analysed in detail with earlier known occurrences added, to bring the reader up-to-date with 345 species. Each species is dealt with systematically including a brief status description and a narrative text containing a wealth of information. There are also many useful histograms covering 12,090 days of birdwatching.

The short, but interesting, introduction describes the ornithological history of the island since

1905 and highlights the significant contribution made by Fair Isle's residents as well as professionals and visitors.

Appendices deal with Observatory staff since 1948; additions to both Fair Isle's bird list and the British and Irish list; and the number of days coverage on a monthly basis. The additions lists make particularly interesting reading for the birdwatcher. E.g., in a British context the extremely rare Dusky Thrush predated the very common Magpie by 26 years. And on Fair Isle they stand side-by-side as vagrants with only one record each! A map, forward and acknowledgements are also included.

The book is enhanced by a liberal scattering of attractive vignettes. It is nice to see that the artist - Dave Pullman - has taken the trouble to depict many of the birds in an appropriate Fair Isle setting.

Criticisms are few. However, the inclusion of several generally unaccepted records (on the basis of the author's opinion) is perhaps unwise; and I feel the important discussion about the shortage of seabird food would have been better

dealt with separately rather than tucked away under 'Arctic Skua'. An index would have been useful for readers not conversant with a systematic list.

These points however do not detract from a highly recommended book. It's wealth of information reveals a well-researched approach to the documentation of all of Fair Isle's birds from its important breeders to the rarities for which it is famed.

The Birds of Fair Isle will appeal to a wide cross section of the island's residents and visitors from those with a passing interest in birds to the most dedicated enthusiasts. For birdwatchers still considering a visit it is essential reading.

Even birdwatchers who are not planning to go to Fair Isle, surely cannot fail to be attracted to the accounts of almost mystical birds from far flung shores: Lanceolated Warbler; Pallas Grasshopper Warbler; Siberian Rubythroat; Red-flanked Bluetail; Sandhill Crane; Cretzschmar's Bunting and many more.....

Peter Aley.

