

# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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## NEW CHAIRMAN'S COMMENT

Thirty seven years ago I arrived on Fair Isle to work for a year as an assistant warden to Peter Davis. What a wonderful year that was; my first job as an ornithologist and the start of a fascinating career. The birds were special - the first ever Song Sparrow for Europe arrived not long after me. There was the magic of the island and, of course, the warm hospitality and friendship of the islanders. And then there was George Waterston who encouraged me so much to work in Scotland.

Later, in 1963, I returned to Fair Isle with my wife, Marina, and we enjoyed eight exhilarating years running the Bird Observatory. Our children started their lives there and, for all of us, it was an important and special place. Now I am pleased to be able to help Fair Isle once again by taking over the Chairmanship of the Trust from Pat Sellar. I am sure George would have encouraged me and I look forward with anticipation to celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Bird Observatory in 1998.

In many ways the Fair Isle of 1995 is quite different to the year I spent there in 1959. Transport is easier but also more expensive. In 1959 Fair Isle was the zenith for any British birdwatcher; now they travel to the ends of the earth.

In consequence, we cannot rest on our laurels if we wish the Bird Observatory to succeed. The research work on seabirds and the marine ecosystem is ever a more important part of our work. Nevertheless, the joy of birdwatching on Fair Isle during a fall of migrants is hard to equal.

To succeed we need support as well as a steady stream of visitors to the Observatory. As a Friend, why not come again to Fair Isle or encourage your acquaintances to visit the isle. Maybe you or your company might like to sponsor a part of the Observatory's research studies. Perhaps you are an experienced tradesman who could offer your help in maintaining the Observatory and its equipment in exchange for a stay on Fair Isle.

Please contact the warden on Fair Isle if you would like to discuss any offers of help or any visitor enquiries.

Thank you for your support and interest.

Roy Dennis

## SPRING MIGRATION 1995

The early spring, as usual, was quiet, with the first migrants trickling through towards the end of March. A number of overwintering birds present during March (and indeed much of April) included at least two Goldeneyes, a Buzzard and a male Black Redstart. On the 24th, movements of a few species were noticeable across the island with log counts of 370 Skylarks and 700 Starlings. On the same date, a stunning male Marsh Harrier was discovered quartering the island, and two House Martins flew north over the Observatory. Both represent exceptionally early records, the previous earliest Fair Isle records being April 21st and April 19th respectively. The Marsh Harrier remained on the island for two days, proving to be the undoubted highlight of the month.

April brought a typically varied mix of species and a few surprises. No one will forget the White Stork in a hurry, discovered by Barry Sinclair on the croft at Busta at about 5.00 pm on April 28th. The Obs. van had a hot engine by the time we arrived, just in time to see it circling high over Burrashield, on the west side of the island. Fortunately the stork decided against an immediate departure and returned to the south end of the island that evening where many islanders and visitors enjoyed watching it 'stalking' about the small rigs. This individual had been observed leaving the Grampian coast on the morning of the 28th, and it arrived on Unst early on the 29th. The 3rd Fair Isle record and the first in twenty years. The other main rarity for April was an Olive-backed Pipit, trapped in the Plantation on April 24th. It remained until the next afternoon, when I watched in anguish as a young female Sparrowhawk snatched it as it fed in front of the Plantation, no more than ten yards from where I sat. A regular visitor to Fair Isle in the autumn, this was only the fourth spring record for the U.K. Other scarce birds in April included various splendid wildfowl: up to four Shelduck in Hesti Geo, with a drake Goosander and a female Gadwall in South Harbour together on the 10th. Records of single Hawfinch and Great Grey Shrike graced the log too, but unfortunately each was seen by one or two people only.

Movements of commoner species in April were unexceptional, but there were early records of a number of species, including Arctic Skua (10th), Arctic Tern, Sand Martin (13th), Swallow (14th) and Whitethroat (23rd).

The first three weeks of May were plagued with winds from unfavourable directions, particularly the northerlies prevalent during the middle two weeks. As a result, migration during this period

was almost totally forgettable. Certain members of the Observatory staff took gloomy satisfaction from the belief that this might go down as the worst May in history! However, even during this period there were interesting records. Single Oortolan Bunting and Short-toed Lark were seen on the evening of the 1st, a female Marsh Harrier on the 2nd and a Little Grebe on the 4th. The 10th was a reasonable day, with a Nightingale, and a splendid Spotted Crake in front of the Ringing Hut; the 14th was even better, with five Shorelarks flying over and an obliging Stone Curlew near Utra (the 7th Fair Isle record).

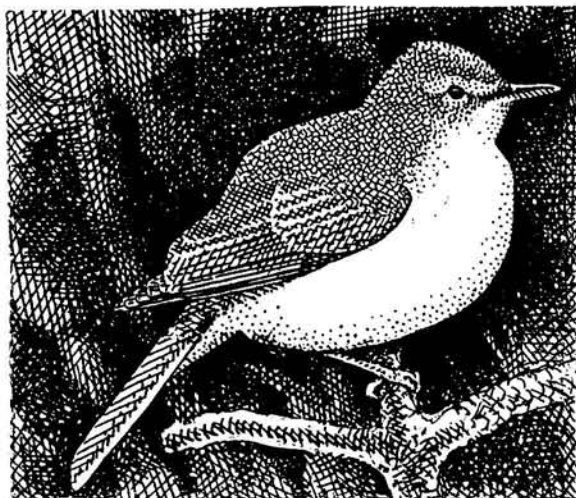
A blast of south-east air during the last third of May had some impact, bringing an increase in the records of scarce or rare birds. But really, the main feature of the month was the virtual absence of 'common' migrants. Swallows and martins, chats, warblers, flycatchers were all present in ones and twos, or not at all. This spring, I personally can recall seeing only one Redstart, two Pied Flycatchers and less than ten individuals of several warbler species. There have been no records at all of regular species such as Wood Sandpiper, Wryneck and Wood Warbler.

As usual, however, it was the rarities that helped to keep Fair Isle at the forefront of most British twitchers' minds, even if they didn't make the trek up here. Two Short-toed Larks, Nightingale, Thrush Nightingale, Subalpine Warbler and three Rustic Buntings were seen during the last week of May, whilst there were excellent numbers of scarce migrants such as Common Rosefinch (up to 17 in a day, a Fair Isle record, and possibly a UK record for one single site), Bluethroat (up to 11 in a day) and Marsh Warbler (at least six individuals). Rarities for Fair Isle were a Canada Goose (on the 27th, the 9th Fair Isle record) and a Hobby (31st) but perhaps the 'best' bird of the month was the River Warbler in Bulls Park on the 27th, the 9th Fair Isle record.

As with all good stories, there was a sting in the tail of spring 1995, and once again June provided the greatest excitement. An Olivaceous Warbler was trapped at the Plantation on the 5th, and stayed until the 13th. A bird that originates from south-east Europe or south-west Asia, this is only the second for Scotland (following one on the Isle of May in 1967), and about the 15th for Britain; the first in spring. However, since a number of the old records are under review and may now be uncertain, our bird is likely to become even rarer! As usual, most of the regular Shetland birders came to see it, and there were a few visitors from further south, with several planes chartering up from England.

The latter part of June was not without excitement either, though again the absence of regular drift migrants was evident, with many gaps in the log. The spring warbler bonanza continued, with a dowdy female Subalpine Warbler at Shirva on the 13th. Then at the Plantation, another eastern surprise when an Arctic Warbler was trapped on the 27th. There has been great debate as to whether or not this clasifies as 'spring'; it was undoubtedly the earliest ever record for Britain, but was it the first spring record?

*Roger Riddington*



*Olivaceous Warbler*

*Kester Wilson*

#### **SEABIRDS 1995**

The Observatory's Seabird Monitoring Programme was again carried out this year. It proved to be an interesting season, the differing fortunes of the various species reflecting the complexity of their interactions with each other and with other components of their environment.

Significant increases were recorded in the breeding populations of Bonxies (up by 29% to 130 Apparently Occupied Territories), Gannets (up 17% to 965 Apparently Occupied Nests) and Arctic Terns (1200 Apparently Incubating Adults being an increase of 95% on 1994) - all these species reaching their maxima since the inception of FIBO! On the debit side, Arctic Skuas decreased by 6.5% to 87 A.O.T's, continuing a recent trend which has seen them increasingly pushed into peripheral nesting areas by the expanding Bonxies, completing the reversal of the situation in the 'fifties when Bonxies colonised Fair Isle. The Bonxies themselves may be benefiting from the rise of the Gannet population, a favourite victim of their kleptoparasitic behaviour.

Both skua species and the Gannets enjoyed good breeding success, as did Guillemots and Puffins. Arctic Terns and Kittiwakes endured a poor breeding season, possibly due to low availability of Sandeels - the main food they provide for their chicks. Many dead and starving chicks of both species were picked up, particularly as they approached fledging age. Both Guillemots and Puffins also typically feed a lot of Sandeels to their chicks, but Guillemot chicks had left the colonies by the time the Sandeel shortage became apparent - perhaps they fared less well during the later stages of their development out at sea? Puffin food samples collected this year contained an unusually high variety of prey species, indicating, combined with their good fledging rates, that they were able to compensate for the lack of Sandeels by turning to alternative foods.

The low fledging success of Kittiwakes was compounded by high levels of predation on their fledglings by Bonxies. With both their food supply and the safety of their nesting areas being disrupted, the immediate future of this species on Fair Isle is a matter for some concern.

The low breeding success of Razorbills recorded in the study colony at Easter Lothar may have been due to site-specific factors, but poor totals from routine ringing "drops" into colonies around the island perhaps hint at a more widespread effect. Record ringing totals of Great Black-backed Gull (230) and Bonxie (160) chicks reflects their expanding populations as much as good rates of productivity, while Storm Petrel ringing was hampered by poor conditions until the very end of July.

In view of the perceived shortage of prey for some seabirds this year, the resumption of the Shetland Sandeel fishery is a worrying development - even with the current restrictions which have been imposed (a 3000 tonnes limit on landings, a restriction to boats under 20 metres long and closure of the fishery on 30th June). Although only 1165 tonnes of the quota was taken, the continued low availability of Sandeels to seabirds makes the installation of the Marine Protection Area around Fair Isle (which would provide a 3-mile fishing exclusion zone around the island) a pressing need indeed.

*Chris Hewson*



## LIFE HISTORY STUDIES OF STARLINGS ON FAIR ISLE

Every year since 1980 Peter Evans has visited Fair Isle to gather information on the breeding ecology and genetics of the island's starlings. Although many birds nest in inaccessible cracks on the sea cliffs, a further 80-100 pairs nest in the island's interior. The latter, mainly found in cavities in dykes and buildings, are monitored annually, generating a considerable long-term set of observations. The combination of longevity and detail of Peter's observations are seldom available from similar studies elsewhere.

Fieldwork takes place during a three-week spell in late May to early June. This enables all known nest sites on the island's interior to be visited towards the end of incubation in order to record occupancy and clutch size. Consequently we note the size and survival of the chicks, and give them unique combinations of colour rings just before they fledge. As these chicks return in future summers and the adults usually remain faithful to their nesting areas, we have been able to build up a picture of the survival and productivity of individual birds on the island. Hopefully future analyses will indicate whether such factors as weather patterns, habitat features, bird age and breeding experience influence longevity and breeding success.

Another important aspect of the project has been the collection of blood samples from all birds handled, which will be used to study the genetic composition of the population. Peter's early work established that three different genotypes of Starlings can be found at one particular gene locus, and that two of these, although rare in other Starling populations, are relatively common on Fair Isle. Furthermore, individuals with different genotypes tended to breed at different times. Differences in spring weather conditions may therefore favour some birds in some years but not in others, leading to the continuance of the rare genotypes in the population, despite immigration from starling colonies elsewhere.

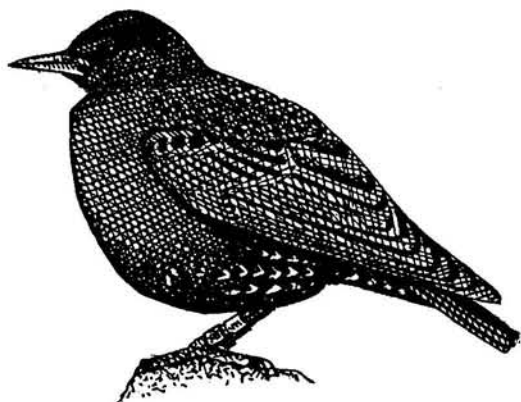
Blood samples can also be used to 'fingerprint' Fair Isle Starlings, telling us whether or not eggs are dumped in neighbours nests, or whether males are tricked into rearing their partners chicks, despite not having fertilised them (due to 'rape' of the females by other males, or active solicitation of copulations by females). We are also measuring the length

and glossiness of the throat 'hackles' feathers to find out whether brightness is an indication of bird quality (in terms of survival or greater breeding success) or attractiveness (e.g. high mating success, and in males high paternity in own broods, or promiscuity elsewhere).

Other interesting aspects of this work include observations of surplus birds (including young from previous years) visiting occupied nests, and occasional infanticide. Relatedness may also affect nestling feeding rates and nest desertion rates although other factors, such as polygamy, bird quality, and environmental influences, will also be involved.

During 1995, Juliet Vickery obtained funds from Edinburgh University for further analysis of this long-term data set. We hope to prepare several papers for publication, as well as submitting applications for grants for future work. Hopefully, colour-ringed Starlings will therefore remain a feature of Fair Isle for several years to come.

*Peter Evans, Juliet Vickery & Rik Smith*



*Starling*

*Kester Wilson*

## CHANGE OF ADDRESS

The administration of the Trust and also of Friends of Fair Isle has recently been transferred to the Observatory itself. We apologise for yet another change of address so soon, but we anticipate this to be a permanent arrangement. The new address and telephone number for any queries are shown on the top of your newsletter. In the process of reorganising the administration, all subscription data is being transferred onto our new computer system. If there are any errors on your address label, I'd be grateful if you would inform me of them in due course.

*Wendy Christie*