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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Apology for January Newsletter

It may not be the best first impression but we would like to send out an apology to all 'Friends' for the lack of a January 1998 *Newsletter*. With Roger Riddington departing as warden in December of 1997 and Paul Baker, and myself, not arriving until mid January 1998 we were unable to bring you the expected *Newsletter*. We hope this early summer edition, sent out with the 1997 annual report, will make up for that.

Goodbye to Roger Riddington

After four years as warden Roger left the isle in December 1997. One of his final acts was to introduce the Observatory and the islanders to the two of us. We are very much indebted to him for this invaluable experience. In January, he attended the Meeting of Directors in Edinburgh, and was thanked for doing such an excellent job over the last four years. He has spent the last few months still busy with FIBOT business, representing us at the

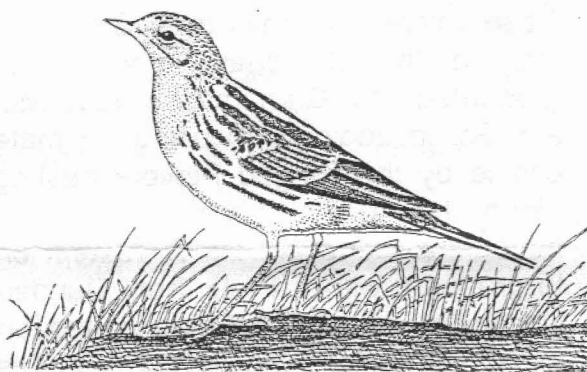
Bird Observatories Council meeting at Portland in February, and then writing and editing the 1997 Annual Report.

While, I am sure many 'Friends' will miss him at the Observatory, you may not have seen the last of him. Roger has just become the manager of the new Shetland Biological Records Centre based at Shetland Amenity Trust in Lerwick. In this capacity, and a personal one, I am sure he will maintain his close links with the Observatory and the isle.

The New Warden and Administrator

Dr. Paul Baker is the new warden of the Observatory and hails from Silloth on the north Cumbrian coast. He graduated from Durham University with a B.Sc. in zoology, focusing on mate choice by the Ringed Plovers nesting along his home coastline for his honours dissertation. He then went on to graduate with a Ph.D. from Dundee University, his thesis being based on the winter social behaviour of Blue Tits in woodland alongside the banks of the River Tay. After a year at the Wetland Trust in East Sussex spent ringing birds, managing the habitat and studying Water Rail, he became a research assistant with the Game Conservancy Trust. He was responsible for monitoring Capercaillie populations throughout the Highlands, focusing especially on measuring productivity of individual hens. While in this position he was given the opportunity to go to Hawaii to do research on endemic forest birds and the Nene and has spent the last four years doing that, ultimately heading up a US Geological Survey research team working on one of the rarest birds in the world, the Po'ouli. Helen Baker is the new administrator and hails from the tiny village of Etwall, near Derby. She

graduated from Liverpool University with a B.Sc. in environmental biology and then went on to graduate with a Ph.D. from Dundee University for her thesis on habitat use by Crested Tits. Having met Paul at Dundee she went with him to the Wetland Trust and then to Newtonmore. While Paul was working for the Game Conservancy she worked in the hotel industry and then became a countryside ranger with Highland Regional Council working at their sites throughout the Strathspey and with local schools. In Hawaii, Helen worked for the University of Tennessee and then the University of Hawaii doing research on forest birds and the Nene.



Red-throated Pipit – Bill Morton

The 1998 AW and SMO

By coincidence this year the assistant warden and seabird monitoring officer are both recent graduates in environmental sciences from the University of East Anglia. They even shared digs during their time there.

Charlie Holt, AW, is from Hove in Sussex. While at UEA he was secretary of the East Anglia Bird Club, and he is a keen contributor to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme. He was a past captain of Brighton College Soccer 2nd XI, and is now a member of the Fair Isle 'Rest of the World' soccer team. Steven Turner, SMO, is from Newcastle-under-Lyme near Stoke. He was president of

the UEA Bird Club and a runner up in the *Young Ornithologist of the Year* competition in 1993. His other interests include moths, he is also a keen footballer and a talented artist.

Brian's Scones get Royal Approval

Brian Skinner has returned as cook for the second season this year, a popular choice on the isle and with guests last year. He arrived as a volunteer in late March and two days later was cooking for staff and guests, we had a team of divers from Shetland who spent three weeks replacing the bolts in the Good Shepherd's slip-way. A major event for the isle took place on 31 March with the automation of the South Light. It was a sad occasion for the keepers and the community, and even from the short time we have known them we can appreciate the community's loss. The event was important in another way as it was the last lighthouse in Scotland to be automated. HRH Princess Anne, the patron of the Northern Lighthouse Board, visited the isle to officiate over the whole event, and many of the NLB Commissioners and Directors were here too. Afternoon tea was a superb spread, here at the Observatory, which included Brian's now famous scones.

Spring Migration Summary

The highlights of this spring were undoubtedly a male Siberian Stonechat on 30th April near Midway, four Thrush Nightingales in May and early June, a male Collared Flycatcher on 28th May along the cliff top at Linni Geo, and a Red-throated Pipit from 5th-12th June near Double Dyke (caught and ringed on 9th June). Other notable species included male Marsh Harrier on 6th April, Black-bellied Dipper from 7th-17th

April, probable Blyth's Pipit on 30th April, male Chaffinch with characteristics of North African race from 15th-30th April, White-tailed Eagle briefly on 3rd May, male Subalpine Warbler briefly on 22nd May, Common Crane from 29th May to 12th June, Richard's Pipits on 11th-13th and 27th May, Ortolan Bunting on 8th June at North Light, and Shorelark 8th and 9th June at the south end. Commoner migrants included peak counts of 7 Red-backed Shrike, 3 Common Rosefinch, 6 Bluethroat, and one flock of 9 Dotterel.

Ringling activity during late winter and spring was increased with the use of whoosh netting to target the finches and thrushes moving through the isle on northerly migration. Totals of note were 405 Chaffinch, 391 Skylark, 176 Robin, 165 Blackbird, 131 Brambling, 115 Dunnock, 102 Snow Bunting, 96 Song Thrush, and 36 Greenfinch. Rock Dove were also caught in whoosh nets with a total of 42 adding to a previous 50 year total of 25. As well as a sprinkling of British controls, which included a Snow Bunting ringed (including colour rings) in Lincolnshire, we had several notable international ones; one Belgian and one Norwegian ringed Greenfinch, and a Danish ringed Arctic Tern. Ringling activity in May was predominantly of Starling chicks thanks to Peter Evans and Jane Reid. Many will know Jane from her time spent here in the past, last year as Assistant Warden. She has returned this year as a Ph.D. student, based at the University of Glasgow, and is studying incubation regimes using Starlings as one study species.

Computerised Log

1998 will be the first year that the bird log, and other logs, will be entered into

the computer as they are collated. This will hopefully save us time when we come to analyse migration data or to provide others with data for analysis. The Bird Observatories Council is preparing a grant application to assist all Observatories with computerisation of all migration data, for us this means 50 years of information, which we estimate will take four years to input. We hope that some of the data inputting will be done by volunteers over the next few years.

50th Anniversary Celebrations

August 28th is the official 50th birthday of the Observatory. To celebrate we are holding a party, here at the Observatory, to which the whole community and any visitors on the island are invited. The event will begin with some welcoming speeches, followed by a buffet supper, music and dance. If you would like to be here for the celebration there is limited dormitory space still available, please call to book.

50th Anniversary T-shirts, sweatshirts and postcards are now available from the Observatory. The T-shirt and sweatshirt have the Arctic Skua logo with the dates 1948-1998 added underneath. The postcard was created by the children of Fair Isle Primary School and features colour drawings of their favourite birds, with the Shetland names included. Half of the profit made from sale of the postcards goes to the School funds and half to the Observatory. For those that will not be able to join us this year you can order by mail; T-shirts (in usual range of colours and sizes) are £9.50 + 65p p&p each, sweatshirts are £13.50 S-L, £14.50 XL, £15.50 XXL + £1.05 p&p each, and postcards are 35p each + 20p p&p for upto 10.

Observatory News Snippets

Shetland Wildlife Fund was generous in providing another grant that will allow the continued development of the new plantation alongside the Observatory. With donations of plants from Gordon Baker and Dave Okill, and more purchases we have planted over 800 new trees and shrubs this spring. Several islanders and guests helped with planting and we would especially like to thank Pat Thomson of Lower Stoneybrek and 'Friends' Geoff and Christine Grimes. The new plantation is already proving attractive to birds and was used regularly by warblers and Red-backed Shrike this spring.

New Payphone at the Observatory – we have a new payphone that will take all the new coins, including £1 coins.

Scottish Natural Heritage held their area meeting here at the Observatory on 14th May. Included in their time here was an open meeting of Fair Isle Marine and Tourism Initiative, at which the islanders who have been hard at work on the initiative presented a summary of progress to date. An evening slide show by Gail Churchill about St. Kilda was followed by a buffet and was well attended by islanders and Observatory guests and staff.

Other Island News

The island welcomed back Cathy Stout, Michael's wife, and their two children Jenny and Magnus. The family recently moved into Taft.

John and Betty Best's son Andrew, formerly of Utra, married Wendy Jamieson, of Sandwick, in Shetland on 5th June. The couple came to the isle for a Haemfaering the following week

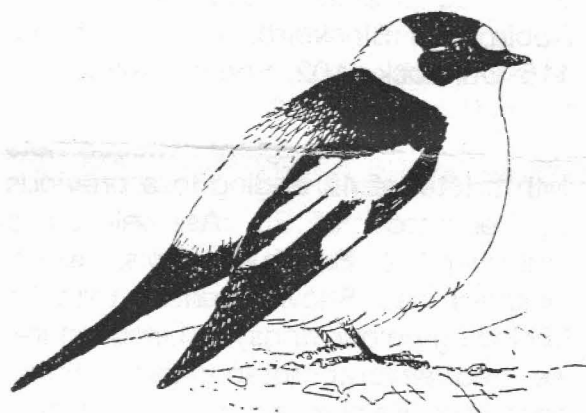
and the whole island celebrated their marriage.

Barry and Anne Sinclair's son, Steven, and his wife Marjolein had a baby girl at the beginning of June, Marin June.

Ian Best of Kenaby completed a ¾ size traditional yoal for Stewart Wilson of Aesterhoull. She was named at Kirkigeo on 3rd June as *Summer Morn*.

The aerogenerators are now functioning well, with many of the early teething troubles solved. There will be an official commissioning ceremony probably in early September, and a commemorative seat is to be placed on the Houll.

The Shetland Fiddler's Society entertained the island with a superb night of traditional and modern tunes on 20th June.



Collared Flycatcher – Steve Turner

Welcome to new Members, Invitation to all Members

We would like to extend a welcome to all new members and thank them for adding their support to FIBOT.

As always we would like to thank all members for their continuing support.

I would like to extend an invitation to members to submit articles or news they consider may be of interest to 'Friends' for inclusion in the *Newsletter*.

Request for Games and Children's Books

For those cold, wet and windy days the Observatory has always tried to have a selection of games available for guests to use. This collection is sadly starting to dwindle as things go missing or have to be thrown away. If any 'Friends' have complete games in good condition that they no longer need we would be delighted to have them if you are willing to post them to us. If you are not sure whether your game is suitable then please call Helen. Any good quality children's reading and colouring books would also be gratefully received.

British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water

The 10th BBWF will take place from Friday 21 to Sunday 23 August, 1998, at the Eggleton Nature Reserve, Rutland Water. Admission is £8 for adults and profits will go to support the Threatened Birds Programme run by BirdLife International. FIBOT will be represented on two stands, our own stand organised and run by long-time 'Friend' Tim Loseby, and the stand run by the Bird Observatories Council. Supplies of various FIBOT shop items, including the 50th Anniversary T-shirt, sweatshirt and postcard, will be available during the Fair from our own stand. For more information on the BBWF contact Yanina Herridge on 01572 771079.

Seabird News

Early indications are that 1998 will be a poor year for many of the island's breeding seabirds. The Arctic Terns that nested at the southern end of the airstrip in 1997 spread out to other

areas this year, with new large colonies at Setter and South Park. Overall number of nesting pairs was slightly less than last year, but most distressing of all has been the almost complete failure of all the island's colonies. High levels of nest abandonment and large numbers of dead chicks suggest that food shortage may be part of the problem. Other birds seem to be doing better, although at time of press there appears to be a sudden rise in mortality of Kittiwake chicks in the nest. We will report fully in the next *Newsletter* and the Annual Report.

On a different note we have another research student with us for the rest of the year, Catherine Gray from Durham University. As a Ph.D. student of Keith Hamer, who has a long research connection with the isle and Observatory, she will be studying Fulmar. The main focus of her study will be looking at obesity in Fulmar chicks. To do this she will be monitoring individual chicks over time, collecting feeding information and even looking at where adults are collecting food by fitting some with satellite transmitters. She will be working on the isle for just this one season as she intends to compare Fair Isle's Fulmar with those on St. Kilda.

Retrapping Adults for Survival – RAS

The British Trust for Ornithology launched a new nation-wide research project at the beginning of the year called the Retrapping Adults for Survival Project, or RAS. The aim of the project is to look at survivorship of adult birds over a period of five years. They have asked participants to target species of particular interest, those that are currently showing an alarming decline of the breeding population

throughout Britain. One of those species is the House Sparrow, which happens to be one of the few resident small birds here on Fair Isle, so we decided to get involved and begin to study our small population. To make this easier and to enable visitors to get involved we have begun not just putting a metal ring on adult birds caught but a unique combination of plastic colour rings, so that birds do not have to be recaptured for identification. Over the next four years we will continue to fit rings to new adults caught, and each year we will attempt to identify all those birds ringed in the previous breeding season. Hopefully after five years we will have a good idea of how well our own adult population is doing. To help us do this project the BTO were generous in providing a grant of £100 to spend on rings and other materials.

John Harrison Memorial Fund

This year has seen a very high number of applicants for the JHMF. The following successful applicants will be joining us at some time this season to help with the day to day bird work of the Observatory.

Torcuil Grant from Kirkmuir is 17 and wants to pursue a career in biology. He spent the last seven years of his life with his parents and siblings travelling the world in a renovated gypsy caravan. He will be on the isle during the busiest seabird ringing period.

Alex Wood from Ilkley is 18 and has just finished her A-levels. While waiting for her results she is going to be here working partly on birds and partly on administrative tasks. She is going to University in the autumn to study economics.

Jeremy Bird, from Kent, will be with us in mid July and will help out with Fulmar ringing amongst other things.

Matthew Harding, from Blackburn, was winner of the 1997 *Young Ornithologist of the Year* competition and will be joining us toward the end of July.

Henry Walker from Bath is 20. As a student studying ecology at UEA he is keen to improve his ringing skills. His stay here will be through most of the Storm Petrel ringing period and so added to other ongoing activity there should certainly be plenty for him to do.

In the Kitchen

The assistant cook this season is David Carruthers from Maryport in Cumbria and senior general assistant is Alan Bull, back at the Observatory for his second season.

DEATH NOTICES

Ella Henderson of Taft died at home on 28th April 1998, and was buried in the island's cemetery on 1st May. A moving service was given by Stewart Wilson of Aesterhoull in the Kirk, and was attended by Ella's four sons, their families, family members on the isle, and every other island resident. She will be dearly missed by all.

Valerie M. Thom, of Perth, died on 21st May. Miss Thom was the first Assistant Warden at the Observatory, in 1955, and went on to become a prominent figure in Scottish ornithology. Amongst other things she was a past Director and Secretary of FIBOT, past President of the Scottish Ornithologist's Club and editor of *Scottish Birds*. She authored several books of which *Birds in Scotland* and *Fair Isle an Island Saga* are best known to 'Friends'.