

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Everyone at Fair Isle Bird Observatory would like to wish all 'Friends' a happy and prosperous 1999. Last year was a good year for the Observatory, with good visitor numbers, and several special events, not least our 50th anniversary. We hope that the coming year will also be good for visitors and birds, even if there are fewer excuses to celebrate. The new year will see a new warden and administrator, as well as some familiar faces from last year. Charlie Holt and Steven Turner both return for a second season and Alan Bull returns for his third. The kitchen will be womanned by Ann Prior, who has ably provided the food from the hatch in a number of seasons in the past. She is currently cooking aboard a fishing boat off the Falkland Islands but should be back in Shetland by mid April.

The newly appointed warden, is Deryk Shaw who we hope will be arriving at the Observatory in early April, together with his partner Hollie Craib, who has the post of Administrator. They have a son, Lachlan, who is nearly 6. Deryk, originally from Dumfries-shire, completed his degree in Zoology at the University of Newcastle. Since then he has worked at Sandwich Bay BO and is currently carrying out fieldwork at the E.G.I. in Oxford. When not birding, he

enjoys sport, plays football, and supports Newcastle and Celtic.

Hollie also did her degree at Newcastle, but in agriculture. She met Deryk at Sandwich, the village where she lives. She is currently running the administration side of her father's business. She also enjoys sport, especially horse riding and hockey. She enjoys working in allotments, where she grows vegetables. The small Observatory garden and the Fair Isle winds will provide a challenge for her green fingers.

Meanwhile, Lachlan is looking forward to Puffins, new friends, and a new school.

Everyone wishes them well in their new home.

Paul and Helen Baker would like to thank all 'Friends' they met in 1998, who gave a helping hand and wish them many more enjoyable trips to the isle.

Autumn migration 1998

The autumn migration was again excellent. Winds from an encouraging direction yielded plenty of scarce migrants and several rarities, proving that Fair Isle is still the place to be in late September.

Seabird passage was average with a few Sooty Shearwaters, the first being noted at the end of August, and seven noted offshore between the 8th - 16th September. Poor weather during mid September gave plenty of sea-watching opportunities with Sabine's Gull, Leach's Petrel and two Manx Shearwaters reported. The regular tape luring of Storm Petrels from mid July to the end of August gave many of our more determined visitors the chance to see Leach's Petrel close up, as twelve were caught. From mid July

onwards wader passage began in force, with good numbers of the regular species recorded. It was a good year for Ruff with birds seen regularly from mid July to early September, peaking at 60 on 5th September. The end of August saw the arrival of the first Little Stints, heralding a superb passage in early September, which peaked with a maximum daily count of 55 birds on the 4th.

September 28th produced one of the best wildfowl days of the year with 266 Barnacle and 45 Pink-footed Geese logged, while 28 Grey Herons were also present. Two Taiga Bean Geese appeared on Meoness on 3rd October, remaining until the 9th. These were the first Bean Geese since 1996.

Passerine migration got off to a slow start in mid August with the first notable bird being a Barred Warbler from 15th – 21st. The first 'rarity' of the autumn was an Arctic Warbler which showed well near the Sheep Cru and later at Springfield from 29th – 30th. On the 30th August easterly winds brought new arrivals including Wryneck, six Common Rosefinch and a scattering of commoner species including 25 Willow Warbler and an early Goldcrest.

The encouraging airflow continued through the first week of September, yielding several Wryneck, Cuckoo, Bluethroat, Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and up to four Common Rosefinch. The 3rd September witnessed the first 'fall' of the autumn with Icterine Warbler and Red-breasted Flycatcher on the sheltered west cliffs, a Great Snipe briefly at Groggy's Cup, and at the south end; Corncrake, six Wryneck, two Barred Warblers, Grasshopper Warbler, Icterine Warbler and Ortolan Bunting. The day-totals of the commoner species were noteworthy with 32 Whinchat, 100 Northern Wheatear, 50 Willow Warbler and 64 Pied Flycatcher recorded. Raptors were on the move,

with Kestrel 'flocks' providing an unusual spectacle; the largest being a group of 14 birds. The day ended on a high with a well-marked juvenile Citrine Wagtail on Malcolm's Head. A second Ortolan appeared next day. On the 5th a Yellow-breasted Bunting was located at Da Water; it remained till 11th often at Shirva. Another Ortolan joined the two already present at Quoy. A further fall of common migrants included 70 Willow Warbler, 55 Pied Flycatcher, 35 Garden Warbler, 25 Redstart and 16 Spotted Flycatcher. A Hobby hunted over Gilsetter along with 70 Swifts.

Mid-September saw a relative lull with a switch to northerly winds producing associated species. Twenty-eight Ravens passed through on the 12th, a sudden influx of Snow Buntings built up to 680 on the 17th, and Lapland Buntings also became a daily feature of the log. Shorelarks were noted on 12th and 17th-20th, and a 'Greenland' Redpoll on 16th-18th.

The winds switched to a southerly origin on the 18th when a Great Snipe was found in Boini Mire; it remained on the island into October. On the 19th a Moorhen was at Gilsetter, while a Richard's Pipit on Malcolm's Head began a run of sightings of this species. A sultry 20th provided much excitement in the shape of a new species for Fair Isle – an Isabelline Wheatear. It remained on Malcolm's Head till the 30th and gave many birders the opportunity to compare this tricky species with Northern Wheatear. A Dotterel on Ward Hill was an added bonus. The 21st produced a Melodious Warbler at Busta; a notable record this far north.

At last the winds went easterly on the 24th, beginning a period of 'classic Fair Isle'. That day, a Pechora Pipit began a three-day stay at Quoy, two Rustic Buntings were the first of an unprecedented influx, and a Yellow-browed Warbler was seen.

On the 25th, three more Rustic Buntings joined the two at Skerryholm, and Little Bunting and five Yellow-browed Warblers were noted. There was no let-up in the action on the 26th when a Lanceolated Warbler showed well at Kenaby, the sixth Rustic and second Little Buntings appeared, and three Richard's Pipits added further spice. A second Lanceolated Warbler arrived at Burkle on the 27th along with good numbers of common migrants including 150 Swallows.

Good migration conditions on the 28th allowed at least 400 Song Thrush, 750 Redwing and scattered Ring Ouzel to arrive. A third Lanceolated Warbler was discovered at Pund on the 29th, while things were even better on the 30th when a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler afforded excellent views at the base of Malcolm's Head.

The south-easterly winds continued through the first week of October, and the 1st was arguably one of the best days of the year. A second Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler appeared in the Havens, while Pechora Pipit at Shirva (till the 6th), Red-throated Pipit, three Short-toed Larks, and a Treecreeper on the cliffs at Easter Lothar were also new finds. The latter represents only the seventh record for Fair Isle. The Great Snipe, five Rustic Buntings and Little Bunting also remained from September. Major thrush movement was evident on the 2nd with at least 1500 Redwing present along with 200 Robin, 160 Goldcrest, 40 Reed Bunting, 28 Wood Pigeon and three Tree Sparrow (two remaining throughout the month). On the 3rd, a third Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler was found in Boini Mire (till the 6th) and a Spotted Crake was trapped in the Plantation. Shorelark, two Bluethroat, and two Richard's Pipit were also seen. After an Ortolan on 4th, a fourth Lanceolated Warbler arrived on the 5th but was elusive in the Meadow Burn

area. The record-breaking fifth 'Lancy' was found in the Plantation next day, and remained in the Observatory garden till the 10th.

The opening week of the month saw a gradual exodus of Rustic Buntings, but birds which were considered 'new' appeared on the 5th and 6th, both of which remained for eight days. The 7th produced a smart Arctic Redpoll in Gilsetter, Barred Warbler, two Little Buntings, Yellow-browed Warbler and Black Redstart. The final highlight of the autumn was a female Pine Bunting at Skerryholm from the 8th to the 11th. With shifting winds going more northerly, observations took on a wintry feel with good thrush passage towards the end of the month. In addition, at least one of the Short-toed Larks remained. A single Waxwing on October 18th spent a short time in the Observatory garden, as did another single on 29th. The only Great Grey Shrike of the year trapped itself in the Double Dyke trap on the 3rd November.

The autumn migration of 1998 was fittingly a superb one, and goes to show that even after 50 years Fair Isle can still provide exciting surprises.

50 Years of FIBOT

On August 28th, Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust celebrated its 50th anniversary by hosting a party at the Observatory. All of the islanders that were on the isle joined staff, directors, past wardens, and other guests. An estimated 120 people were in the Observatory lounge! Everyone was greeted with a wine reception at which they were asked to sign the visitors' book. The current Chairman of FIBOT and past warden, Roy Dennis, gave a speech in which he reminisced about the last 50 years of the Observatory, focusing especially on the exceptional generosity and support of the

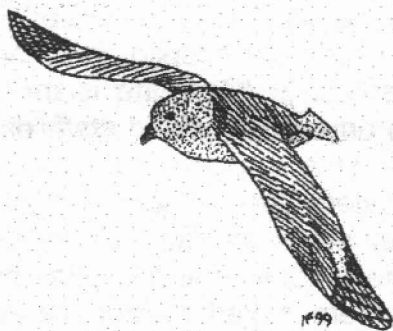
islanders. James Stout, of Skerryholm, then gave a short speech in which he recounted his fondest memories of Observatory history. One of those stories was about Esther Williamson, the wife of the first warden Kenneth Williamson, who had joined us for the celebration along with her son Robin. Mrs Williamson was then invited to unveil a commemorative plaque made on the island by Patrick Ross-Smith of Burkle. With everyone getting hungry the final official act was to cut the celebration cake, made by the Observatory cook, Brian Skinner. The oldest and youngest islanders, namely Jerry Stout and Oscar Whaley, were invited to do the honours.

After final photographs were taken, everyone enjoyed a superb buffet supper and then spent the evening chatting away.

More about the celebration will appear in the Annual Report.

Seabird Summer

Catherine Gray of Cunningsburgh who is currently studying at the University of Durham, stayed at the Observatory and spent the summer on the isle studying Fulmars. We asked her to write a short article so that everyone would know what she had been up to.



Blue phase Fulmar

Ian Fisher

The Fulmar is one of the most abundant seabirds in the Northern Hemisphere and Fair Isle has the third

largest colony in Britain, with approximately 43,000 pairs. Despite its great abundance, little is known about diet and potential for impact on fish stocks.

Like most petrels, Fulmars are long-lived (up to 40 years), mature at 6 to 8 years, and raise one chick per year. Chicks grow slowly, taking about six weeks from hatching to fledging. They store large amounts of fat and reach a peak weight of around one and a half times the adult weight, just before fledging. The excess weight is gradually lost by starvation after the chick is abandoned by its parents, and birds fledge only when light enough to fly. One explanation for slow chick growth is that breeding Fulmars are limited by the scarcity of food, but the large fat reserves in chicks would indicate that this is not the case. Other explanations suggest that fat reserves may provide a reliable energy source for the chick when feeding rates vary, or that the diet may be deficient not in energy, but in nutrients essential for growth.

Previous studies have shown differences in the diets of Fulmars in different areas. Associated with this, there are differences in foraging trip length and the frequency of chick feeding.

I intend to look in more detail at these differences. I am also interested in patterns of fat storage in relation to the nutritional quality of food and frequency of feeding.

This summer on Fair Isle I looked at rates of chick growth by weighing and measuring a sample of chicks on the Stack in North Haven from the age of about two weeks (when the chicks are no longer being brooded), to fledging at about six weeks old. I also wanted to know how often and how much the chicks were being fed. I established this by weighing the chicks at six hour intervals over periods of 48 hours and

observing the nests to see when parents returned to feed the chicks. The time parents spend at the nest can also be used as an indicator of food supplies. If food is plentiful and easy to find parents have more time to spend on the nest, guarding the chick or defending the nest site.

To study diet, I collected food samples from Fulmar chicks at other sites on the island (a lot of people at the Observatory commented on the smell!). These samples are now in the freezer in my lab, awaiting analysis. I will be particularly interested in whether or not Fulmars were eating sandeels this summer as an apparent lack of sandeels was thought to be one reason for the poor breeding success of terns and Kittiwakes. Observatory staff indicated that sandeels were also scarce in the diet of Puffins, which fed their chicks clupeids (herring and sprat) and other small fish.

Also of interest is the importance of discarded whitefish from trawlers. Fulmars around Shetland are very successful scavengers around fishing boats, but in other areas these discards are much less important and their diets consist mostly of crustaceans and small juvenile fish.

Similar work was carried out last year on Fair Isle by Richard Phillips, (Durham University), and although I still have much analysis to do, 1998 appeared to be a poorer year for breeding success. This may be due in part to poor weather when the chicks were newly hatched and a lower frequency of chick provisioning (although the chicks fledged at a similar age and weight in both years). Hopefully you will see the results of this year's work in a future Friends of Fair Isle Newsletter.

Finally, thanks again to everyone on Fair Isle, whether an islander or a visitor, who made my stay so enjoyable, and special thanks to those

of you who helped with my work in any way – it was greatly appreciated!

Observatory News Snippets

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary and because we are getting more visitors arriving by yacht at the North Haven, we commissioned a new sign for the outside of the building. The sign was created by Patrick Ross-Smith of Burkle and includes the Observatory's skua logo as well as our name, all in blue ink on a white background. The sign was erected on the inner corner of the Warden's flat facing the road on 28th August.

FIBOT initiated the development of its own web site this summer, with the expert help of Dave Wheeler of Field. The site is in its infancy but it is hoped that it will include information and photographs about the Observatory, including up-to-date booking details, a profile of the island, general information about birding through the year, and a regularly updated summary of sightings which may include photographs. Creating the site on the isle will allow us to make changes on a regular basis and add new photographs and drawings as we please. The site will be part of the existing Fair Isle one that includes weather, the school and the Fair Isle Times. We will keep you informed of its progress and give you an address soon. If any 'Friends' have archival photographs or drawings that they would like to be considered for addition to the site, we would welcome these and will be happy to return anything sent.

Other Island News

The proposed visit to the isle by Lord Sewell, Minister for Energy and Agriculture, was cancelled due to bad weather and so the official

commissioning ceremony for the aerogenerators and launch of FIMETI did not happen. The community hopes that he will be able to visit in the near future. The launch of the Fair Isle partnership eventually took place in Edinburgh on the 5th March.

Lower Stoneybrek was raised to the ground – in the best possible way. Renovation work on the house begun in August. All but the three original walls were demolished and the floor area enlarged to the back of the house. The new wall and roof were replaced by October, while Neil and Pat Thomson took a holiday to escape from it all. Hopefully they will be in their 'new look' home by early spring.

Margaret Stout of Barkland retired and moved to Lerwick in mid October. Many birders will miss her unique hospitality, but no doubt Margaret will visit the isle often to see family and friends. Her son Michael, and his family, are now living in Barkland.

British Birdwatching Fair – Rutland Water, August 1998

The 10th annual fair, now established as the world's largest event for birdwatchers saw 15,750 visitors through its gates over three days in August.

For the last eight fairs we have promoted Fair Isle and the Observatory on our stand. We are on hand to give advice about how to get there, the best times to visit, etc., and have a full range of Observatory merchandise on sale.

The 50th anniversary T-shirts and sweatshirts were popular and the postcard designed by the island school children was a real hit being snapped up by, amongst others, a number of artists exhibiting in the art marquee. It is always good to make contact with

regular visitors, people who visited in the earliest years of the Observatory and ex-wardens and staff who come to see us to 'talk Fair Isle'. Pat Sellar and John Wood were notable visitors this year.

If you have never been to the Fair you have missed a treat. We will be there again next year so come along and say hello, the dates are 20-22 August 1999.

Tim & Irene Loseby, Kent

Request for Games and Children's Books

Our collection of games available to guests 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. Any good quality children's reading and colouring books would also be gratefully received.

After our last appeal for games and books we received a beautiful set of Lewis Chessmen from 'Friend' Angus Duncan, books from Karen Whaley and Dave Lowe, and comics from Lewis and Vivian Ross-Smith. We thank them for their generous contributions.

Due to the changeover in staff, this newsletter is slightly late, but is a reminder for all of you to book your stay on Fair Isle for 1999 and to pay your subscription to the FOFI - many thanks.

Thanks

This newsletter was put together by Helen and Paul Baker with additional contributions from Alan Bull, Charlie Holt, Dave Okill and Steve Turner. Hope to see you in 1999.