

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by
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Having arrived on Fair Isle, with our son Lachlan, only 2 weeks before the season started, this is the first opportunity we have had to put together a Newsletter. Consequently, this Newsletter is a summary of the whole 99 season; one, which I'm sure you will agree, has had its fair share of good birds. We have both thoroughly enjoyed our first season on the Isle and look forward to many more.

We hope you enjoy this edition of the Friends of Fair Isle Newsletter and we wish you a very happy Christmas and New Millennium!

Deryk and Hollie
(Warden and Administrator)

STAFF OF 99

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff at the Observatory who made this first year so enjoyable. The staff for the season were:

Charlie Holt-Seabird Monitoring Officer

Steve Turner- Assistant Warden

Alan Bull -Assistant Warden/Ranger

Ann Prior - Cook

Beverley Howlett - Assistant Cook

Linda Fayers - General Assistant

Nina Harrison - General Assistant

SPRING MIGRATION

Spring passage started in the middle of March with the arrival of Grey, White and Pied Wagtails, Rook, Wood Pigeon and Coot! (13th-14th), followed by Stonechat and Siskin on the 17th. The last day of the month produced the first Wheatears, a Kestrel and a 'littoralis' Rock Pipit. The April fool bird was Reed Bunting. Our earliest ever Swallow (by one day) arrived on the 3rd April with two Black Redstarts. Our own arrival to the Isle, on the 7th was preceded by two Goldfinch. A lull until the wind switched to the south-east on 11th which brought in a Shorelark (the first of a good early spring run) and, at last, our first Ring Ouzel.

It was fairly quiet on the migrant front for the rest of April although parties of Shorelark (3 and 5), and firsts for the year of Pink-footed Goose, Black-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Short-eared Owl, Moorhen (including one which was spectacularly plucked from the air by a Bonxie), Redstart, Linnet and Yellowhammer kept things ticking over.

May is traditionally a good birding month and it started in good style with Steve at the Obs window, having run all the way from Golden Water, mumbling something about a Lesser Yellowlegs - a vagrant North American wader. The Red Flag was dusted down and Hollie experienced her first "find the rest" jaunt round the island in the van, accompanied by Lachlan on flag waving duty! The bird stayed until the 4th on Golden Water and Easter Lothar and was only the third Fair Isle record, following sightings in 1910 and 1953.

Three Common Buzzards together on the 3rd was also an island record count and a Hoopoe on the 4th led everyone on a merry dance from the Gilly Burn right across the top of Hoini to Gunniwark. An immature male Marsh Harrier was also spotted by several people, as it drifted around the island. Other firsts of the year in this first week of May include Long-eared Owl, Common Sandpiper and Whitethroat (4th), three cracking Short-toed Larks, a fine summer plumaged Lapland Bunting, Hen Harrier, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Whinchat

(5th), Wood Sandpiper and Grasshopper Warbler (7th).

A slight switch in the wind on 8th brought a small fall of migrants, mainly Tree Pipits (30), Willow Warblers (40) Reed Buntings (45) and Redstarts (15) with a few goodies such as Wryneck (2), Bluethroat and Wood Warbler. The next day produced a distant Pomarine Skua at sea and an elusive Nightingale species at Midway – a bit frustrating!

Fog on the 10th grounded a record count of 77 Whimbrel, a Pochard and Lapland Bunting. Easterlies continued and the next few days brought several firsts of the year: Swift (11th), Gadwall, approx. 100 Barnacle Geese, Hen Harrier, Garden Warbler, (all on 12th) as was a delightful record trip of ten Dotterel outside Busta. The biggest fall of this spring occurred on 13th with 100 species recorded, including 100 Tree Pipits, 70 Pied Flycatcher, 25 Redstart, 90 Willow Warbler, 65 Reed Bunting, 10 Sedge Warbler, 10 Cuckoo (highest ever count), 15 Common Sandpiper as well as less common birds such as Icterine Warbler, Bluethroat, Wryneck and Ortolan. A male Ring Ousel sang from the top of the Ward Hill mast!

The 14th and 15th were pretty uneventful but were followed on the 16th by Steve discovering a CALANDRA LARK (another 2nd for the Isle) at Skerryholm. It gave good views to all the local enthusiasts before roosting at Setter, where it was still, the next morning but had flown by the time the Shetland birders had arrived at 08.30 hrs!

Star bird of the 19th was a smart male Rustic Bunting outside the Obs, overshadowing the Lapland and 2 Ortolans or indeed the Quail, Wryneck, Corncrake, Short-toed Lark, 2 Bluethroats, 2 Icterine Warblers and Red-backed Shrike. A good day!

Several days of south westerlies followed which stopped any new arrivals, but it did keep the Rustic Bunting here awhile. Nice! The 27th saw a hint of south easterly and hence new birds in! – a superb male

Red-backed Shrike trapped in the plantation and a cracking adult Long-Tailed Skua at the airstrip. The day will be remembered however for another Nightingale species which slipped the net (quite literally!!) around the Haa / Skerryholm area

The month ended with more Rustic Buntings, Quail, Bluethroat and Red-backed Shrike sightings and the first Rosefinch – at Midway.

As the beginning of May brought the Lesser Yellowlegs, the beginning of June (2nd) brought a Blyths Reed Warbler (found by myself, in Barkland garden), which even sang briefly! After that I jetted out to Mainland to complete a 2 day power-boat handling course in Scalloway. I left strict instructions for the lads not to find any more rares whilst I was away.... And in true AW style, barely had the plane left the runway, when they found a Red-Throated Pipit. Typical! But to rub salt into the wound a Yellow-rumped Warbler was found the following day (3rd) at Smirri Geo near South Light. After disappearing for the day it was relocated by the shop late on Friday 4th (and I saw it on my return!) It is only the second record for Fair Isle (The first was in May 1977) and only the third record in spring for Britain. Two Red-throated Pipits, 2 Marsh Warbler, 2 Wood Warbler, Icterine Warbler and Quail also showed on the 4th. Whilst the Yellow-rumped Warbler was still present on the 5th.

A further Rustic Bunting was found on 9th (the fourth of the spring) and a Long Tailed Skua on 10th was the second record this spring.

As first Springs for Wardens go, spring '99 has to be one to remember. The large falls of common birds are a sight worth seeing in themselves, but with unexpected delights such as Lesser Yellow-Legs, Calandra Lark and Yellow-rumped Warbler it proves why Fair Isle really is a world apart at this time of year.

Deryk Shaw

1999 SEABIRD SEASON

With spring migration over the work of the Obs team switches emphasis to seabird monitoring.

The monitoring plots had mixed fortunes this year, ranging from the best breeding season since monitoring began in 1986 for Kittiwakes to the worst since 1990 for Shags!

The westerly gales in May washed out the majority of Shag nests and many of the lowest Gannets. The Shags never recovered from that with many deserted nests being found (although the few late nests did OK). A few of the Gannets nested again and hence, a handful of chicks were in the nest to the end of October! This year large numbers of non-breeding Gannets were seen on Fugli Stack for the 1st time, so this may well be the next place to be colonised.

An apparently good Sandeel year and calm, sunny weather for the majority of the summer certainly benefited most of the seabirds, especially the surface feeding species such as Kittiwake which had a very productive year with the majority of successful nests producing two chicks and even some with three! The Arctic Terns however, although undoubtedly pleased to see the fish and sunshine, were late to arrive in the first place and after suffering the May rain and harassment from Skuas, moved from Eas Brecks to Bunes. Terns are notorious for deserting colonies en masse if they have a poor breeding season (such as last year, when only one chick fledged) and hence the island population was more than halved to approximately 600 Apparently Incubating Adults (AIA's). They fledged more chicks this year, approximately 150 were estimated to have flown which although a vast improvement on last year is still a very poor success rate. They also suffered from predation, with many chicks disappearing shortly after hatching and signs of cats having been into the Tarryfield and Bunes colonies.

The Auks had a successful season and a total island count of Guillemots put the breeding population at 39257, an increase of 4.5% on the last count (1994), continuing the steady increase of this species. Tysties however, are dramatically declining with the island count of 191 individuals (down 37% from 1994), and many of the traditional breeding beaches deserted.

Table A: Whole Island Counts

Species	No. nests	Change from 1998
Gannet	1,123	+ 0.4%
Arctic Skua	69	+ 3.0 %
Great Skua	132	- 13 %
Common Gull	6	+ 20 %
Common Tern	3	No change
Arctic Tern	562	- 55.0 %

Table B: Summary of the breeding performance of the main seabird species.

Species	Productivity at monitoring plots (no. chicks fledged per nest)	Comments
Fulmar	0.34	An average breeding season
Gannet	0.58	Worst season since 1991
Shag	1.08	Poorest since 1990
Arctic Skua	0.64	Up on '98 but below average generally
Bonxie	0.77	Slightly below average
Kittiwake	1.33	Highest since 1986
Arctic Tern	0.27	Average year but up on the total failure of 98
Guillemot	0.79	A good season
Razorbill	0.51	A declining species
Tystie	1.00	Only 9 nests were found!
Puffin	0.63	An average season.

July is traditionally the time we here at the Obs spend hours outside at night attracting Storm Petrels (with the help of a tape recorder). This year has been exceptionally successful and the FIBO Storm Petrel ringing record finally fell in the early hours of 16th August. We ringed 2707 this year (and 14 Leach's Petrels!)

Migrants over the summer months have, as you would expect, been pretty scarce, however several taloned first (and probably only) records of the year did pass through – Honey Buzzard on 22nd June was followed a couple of days later by an Osprey over the Obs. and an adult Hobby was found on 9th July.

Great excitement prevailed on the 25th June with the discovery of a pale coloured Lesser Whitethroat outside the Obs. which when caught and measured proved to be of a far eastern race and a possible first for Britain!!

Deryk Shaw

AUTUMN MIGRATION

With such a good Spring for birds, it was inevitable that autumn '99 will not go down as one of the best for the rarity hunters (twitchers). It wasn't totally forgettable however:- Things started to happen on 1st August, with the first Barred Warbler and a trickle of waders and commoner warblers. Things continued in this vein with a few Barred and Wood Warblers until the 25th August when easterly winds brought in 600 Meadow Pipits, 120 Willow Warblers, 12 Wood Warblers (highest ever autumn day total), 23 Crossbill, a Slavonian Grebe and a real rarity in the form of a Yellow-breasted Bunting in Hjukni Geo. More of the same the next day with 65 Garden Warblers, Red Backed Shrike, three Wryneck and a Rosefinch. By the 28th the wind was strong SW so sea watching was resorted to. Steve scored with a Little Gull – only the 12th for Fair Isle.

Mutterings about Greenish Warbler for the past fortnight finally paid off on 29th August when one was trapped in single dyke.

Early September continued in a similar vein with Marsh Warblers, Barred Warblers, Grasshopper Warbler, Corncrake, and Lapland Bunting in the first few days. A Pectoral Sandpiper was a nice find on Easter Lothar on 5th and a confiding Arctic Warbler that evening around the Bullock Holes was equally pleasing. Another Pectoral Sandpiper on 7th was excellent with the same day producing yet more Barred Warblers, the first Pied Flycatchers and Song Thrush of the autumn. All the hard census work carried out by the Obs birding staff with the added hope of finding a mega rare or a first for the Isle seemed a bit pointless on the 9th when a KINGFISHER (which is a first record for Fair Isle) was found at the South Light by a group consisting of guests and catering staff!!!

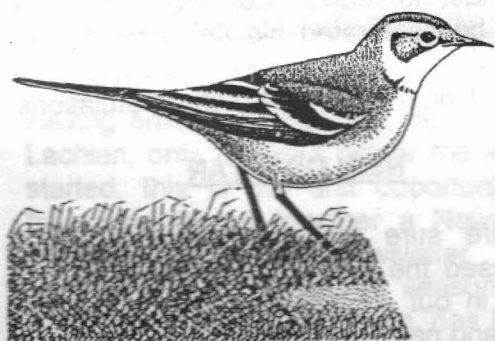
A period of wet and windy weather with fog followed, preventing any further bird movements (or the boat or plane).

Once the weather settled and cleared enough to allow the first crowd of twitchers in (and our stranded, very good humoured guests, out) on 12th September, autumn migration began to pick up pace. Several scarce migrants put in an appearance – Buzzard, Corncrake, Curlew Sandpiper, two Black-tailed Godwits and an Oortolan. Firsts for the autumn, including Chaffinch, Snow Bunting and Jack Snipe added to the expectancy and, predictably enough, the following day a Great Snipe was flushed near Troili Geo by myself. It was, (presumably the same bird), relocated near Pund three days later by Chas and after an organised search was pinned down near the Hill Dyke – to be viewed by many more. One bird, also seen on 13th, which didn't hang around was a Golden Oriole, seen by a single lady observer (who incidentally lives in Oriole House) – the first and best of several good birds found by Eleanor McMahon. The second was a Wryneck at Pund the following day, one of only two seen this autumn. Thick fog then descended preventing any major new arrivals, however a Hawfinch was a most unexpected find in the plantation on the 16th. It was later trapped there and ringed, though I'm sure that beak could

remove the ring if it so wished – it can crack cherrystones after all (and fingers too no doubt!)

A break in the cloud on the 17th allowed a small fall of Redstarts (12), Whinchats (20), Warblers (20 Garden, 30 Willow, several Barred and a Yellow-browed) and Pied Flycatchers (50). A 'fly over' Osprey was also seen that day (but by then I had flown out myself to the Gilbert Bain Maternity Department!)

The 18th September saw the arrival of three plane loads of twitchers and Hollie and myself with our youngest member of the Obs team, only 17 hours old!



Citrine Wagtail by Bill Morton

The fog returned but a Dotterel on Burrashield on 20th was a nice reward for tramping North, however, things really started to kick off on 21st when a Citrine Wagtail was found near Pund / Setter. A huge fall of birds on 22nd consisted mainly of Blackcaps (300) and Robins (200) but also 60 Redstart, 30 Whinchat, 60 Tree Pipit, 60 Willow Warbler, 40 Chaffinch and 120 Siskin plus 2 Red-breasted Flycatchers and 2 Yellow-browed Warblers, a Red-throated Pipit and a Shorelark. Bird of the day however, was a Paddyfield Warbler, flushed into the Gully trap by an excited Chas Holt. It remained for another day, giving excellent views as it hopped around in the thistles down at the Havens. A Rosy Starling, found on early morning trap round on 23rd, (again by Eleanor McMahon) eventually settled on Meoness and stayed around for over a week. A Blyth's Reed Warbler was found by a visiting ex member of staff, near the Obs on 26th ... and then two days later he

found another at the base of Wirvie. That makes three this year! Not much to look at but very educational! The last few days of September produced more scarce migrants; Barred Warblers, Yellow-browed Warblers (max 8 on 27th) Red-breasted Flycatchers, Rosefinches, Ortolans, Lapland Buntings, Snow Buntings, another Buzzard and a Hen Harrier. The final September day this century provided an elusive Yellow-breasted Bunting, a Slavonian Grebe, a Black-throated Diver (only the 5th Fair Isle record) and a confiding Bluethroat on the midden at Quoy.

October arrived in typical fashion – wet and windy. Virtually all of our guests left, to be replaced by more ex AW's and Directors, but the Westerlies were finally pushed out by a high pressure on 15th and South easterlies prevailed... and that means birds! Census became exciting with thrushes everywhere (estimated highest day totals of 3000 Redwing, 2000 Fieldfare and 600 Blackbirds). At least 12 Great Spotted Woodpeckers were found – not bad for a place with no trees! Rare birds started to appear...3 Pallas' Warblers, Rosefinch, Bluethroat, Richards' Pipit, Rustic Bunting, Ortolan and best of all, Chas had brief views of a small duck off Meoness as it flew away from him – all dark except for large white cheek patches!! A stressful lunch was followed by a high-speed van trip to south light with telescopes and it was refound: a HARLEQUIN DUCK, just off Da Keels. Only the second Fair Isle record (a pair frequented Mavers Geo in Jan / Feb 1965).

A Great Grey Shrike at Da Water on 16th was over shadowed by a Lanceolated Warbler and Little Bunting also seen that day. The Great Grey Shrike was still around the following day and another one was found at the Mast!

Long and Short-eared Owls started to appear as did Bullfinches and several variety of Redpoll – Mealy, Greenland and Arctic together on a fence at Field, provided excellent opportunity for comparisons. Another Lanceolated

Warbler and a second Arctic Redpoll on 18th were outshone (in Fair Isle terms) by at least three Great Tits (first island record since 1994).

The odd good bird still put in an appearance towards the end of October with a Waxwing at Skerryholm (25th), a Black Redstart and late singles of Redstart, (26th -30th), Red-breasted Flycatcher, (26th) and Bluethroat, (29th). The Short-eared Owl 'flock' at Pund reached TEN and more Bullfinches gave a maximum daily count of 20. The best bird (possibly) was, however, too mobile to be safely identified - a 'buzzy' wagtail on 27th was either another Citrine or an Eastern race of Yellow Wagtail.

Deryk Shaw

OTHER ISLAND NEWS

1999 will live long in peoples memories for many reasons, but on Fair Isle the Midwife (Paddy O'Luanaigh) has more reason than some for remembering the year. No less than four babies were born to inhabitants of Fair Isle this year:

On 14th June Lowri John Best was born, in Shetland, to Lise and Ian Best (Kenaby), followed, on 5th August, by Melissa Emily Welch, born in Dundee, to Linda Grieve and Phil Welch (Haa). Not to be outdone by the islanders, the Obs produced their own contribution to the population boom when, on 17th September, Fyntan Merlin Shaw was born in Shetland, to Hollie and Deryk. Finally, a mere two weeks later, Freya Joyce Stout was born on 30th September, in Shetland, to Cathy and Michael Stout (Barkland).

After all that hard work, Paddy and his family will be leaving the Isle in January to start a new job in Oxford. We wish them the best of luck for the future and will miss them all.

Another change for the Isle will come in the shape of a new teacher at Fair Isle Primary School, as Ruth Stout is leaving her post in April. She will be moving into Setter (which is being renovated at the moment), with her family. The school,

itself is also in for change as it is being extended as we speak, to cope with the ever-increasing number of children.

SCHOOL SUMMER CAMP

We held the second Summer Camp for all the island school-age children this year. The nursery age children were also invited to join in for a couple of hours on one of the afternoons. Although noisy, a very enjoyable time was had by all.

JACK'S BIRTHDAY

Another major event of the year was the birthday of Jack Keiser (a long time 'Friend') who has visited Fair Isle 14 times in the last 30 years. Jack was on the isle when he celebrated his 84th birthday on July 20th and a big party for him was held at the Community Hall. Congratulations Jack.

NEW OB'S VAN

We are sure that many of you who witnessed the old red van this year, will share in our excitement at the arrival of our brand new, (well almost), white, transit van on June 12th.

ATTENTION YOUNG ORNITHOLOGISTS

The John Harrison Memorial Fund is still looking for more applicants for next season. If you know of, or are, an enthusiastic ornithologist aged 15 - 21 and would like to spend some time on Fair Isle next summer, please get in touch with Hollie at the Observatory for more details.

JOB VACANCIES

Sadly, our Assistant Wardens from this year will not be returning in 2000. The Observatory is therefore looking for 2 competent ornithologists (with ringing permits) for next season. If you are interested, or know somebody who may be, more details are available from Hollie.

Once again HAPPY CHRISTMAS and we would love to see you on Fair Isle in the next Millennium!