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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Well, another season is half way through and the time has come to update all 'Friends of Fair Isle' with a summary of the birding highlights of the Spring and the 2000 Seabird Season.

It is also a good opportunity to introduce this season's Observatory Staff and summarise the main events on the isle this year. We hope you enjoy this edition of the Friends of Fair Isle Newsletter and thank you for your continued support of the Observatory.

We both hope to see you on Fair Isle in the future.

Deryk and Hollie
(Warden and Administrator)

STAFF of 2000

As in every year, the Observatory relies on the dedication of the hard working team of staff who come to live and work at the Observatory for six months. This year we have seen the return of some of last years staff and also welcomed some new faces. We would like to thank them all for their

help, hard work, support and friendship over the last few months. The staff for this year are:

Chas Holt: Seabird Monitoring Officer
Hywel Maggs: Assistant Warden
Diana De Palacio: Ranger
Ann Prior: Cook
Beverley Howlett: Assistant Cook
Roger Parris: General Assistant
Roland Pritchard: General Assistant
Ken Passfield: General Assistant
Alex Wood: Childminder

Chas and Diana are now both familiar faces here on Fair Isle, each having spent two previous seasons working as part of the birding team. Similarly, Ann returned for her ninth season and Beverley for her second. New faces were seen in April, with the arrival of Hywel as Assistant Warden, followed in May with the arrival of both Roger and Roland as General Assistants. Roland left us in July to return home to his family and his post was filled by Ann's partner, Ken, who had single-handedly sailed to Fair Isle from South Georgia! Having initially intended just to visit the isle for a few weeks, Ken has ably taken on his role as General Assistant, but will be leaving in a couple of weeks to fulfil previously arranged work commitments. Luckily, Alan Bull (another familiar face – currently on the Isle on holiday) will be available to take over when Ken leaves. Finally, Alex Wood arrived in June to help me with the children during the summer holidays and as in previous years, has been invaluable, not only in her role as childminder, but with various other tasks as well.

Not all this years' staff will be returning next season, as some are moving on to new projects, jobs and even countries. Therefore we will be looking for keen and hardworking people to fill the positions for the 2001 season. If

you are interested in any of the above jobs and have suitable qualifications and / or experience, please contact me at the Observatory.

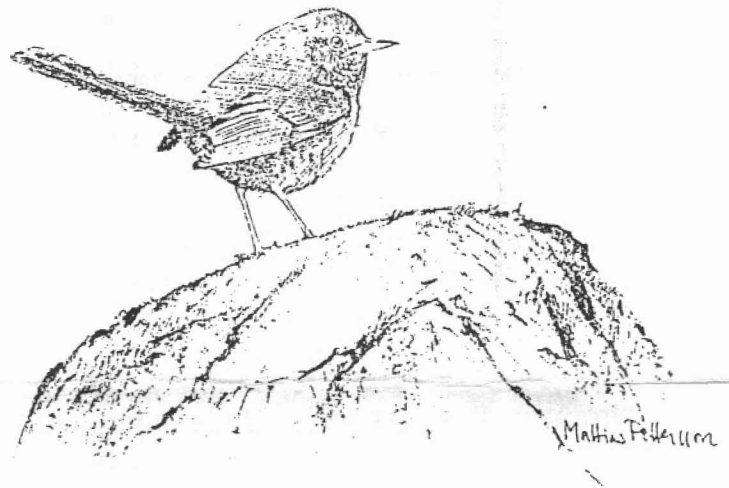
Hollie

SPRING MIGRATION NEWS

The howling winds of the winter (which are now just a memory, but certainly not forgotten!) were replaced by a gloriously calm and sunny spring. The ornithological highlight of last winter was undoubtedly the white morph male Gyr Falcon which spent two weeks on the isle in February, along with at least six Iceland Gulls and two Glaucous Gulls – White Out!

Spring migration commenced in March with movements of partial migrants such as Lapwing and Skylark and early sightings of Short-eared-owl (9th) and Chiffchaff (19th). The first true African migrant arrived on the 29th and, as in every year, it was a male Wheatear. Spring really had arrived. The end of March/early April saw the arrival of my two assistants, Chas and Hywel and we then set about preparing the Obs for opening and repairing the damage done to the traps over the winter. Migration continued at a slow pace until the 18th April when there was a huge fall of Thrushes (120 Blackbird, 250 Song Thrush, 180 Redwing and 38 Ring Ouzel) and Robins (350). The following day was even better with at least 500 Song Thrush and 500 Robins, but also 50 Ring Ouzel, 5 Long-eared Owl, 35 Chiffchaff and a Great Grey Shrike (trapped in the Plantation). Two Hawfinches around this time were a nice find and there was a further bird from 23rd- 25th. The first rarity of the spring arrived on the 20th – a female Subalpine Warbler trapped in North Grind. Year ticks continued to arrive ;

Blackcap (19th), Tree Pipit (20th), Redstart (20th), Whinchat (23rd), Sedge Warbler (25th), Lesser Whitethroat (28th), Whitethroat (29th), Pied Flycatcher (29th). The highlight of the spring was found on 29th by Hywel at Leogh (although may have been present since 27th) - a male Dartford Warbler – the first for Fair Isle and only the second for Scotland (the other was at St Abbs, Borders in 1983). The Shetland crowd came zooming across the waves the following day, ticked it, had some lunch and zoomed off again.



*Dartford warbler by Mattias Pettersson
(Year 2000 volunteer)*

May arrived and the rarities kept coming ; Hoopoe (4th), Rough-legged Buzzard (4th), Osprey (4th & 14th), Red-rumped Swallow (11th) which gave crippling views as it sat on the fence at Shirva, Calandra Lark (13th), which, yet again, had the Shetland twitchers jumping into a boat headed this way but the bird had gone by the time they arrived (we've been here before I think – almost a year ago exactly). They were partly compensated by the Pallas' Rosefinch in the Obs garden which unfortunately probably hadn't flown here from Mongolia, but rather, escaped from a cage much nearer. Sadly it disappeared, strangely on the

same morning that a Sparrowhawk was seen sitting in the garden (with pinkish feathers hanging from its mouth?). A Blyths Reed Warbler on the 15th, trapped in Double Dyke, was the earliest ever record and was the last rarity before the winds switched to the west and halted everything. Although not official rarities, a Canada Goose on 5th, Siberian Stonechat on 16th and a pair of Garganey on 17th are good records for here. Other goodies have been Dotterel 13th-14th, Ortolan 15th-17th, Wryneck 13th and Quail 7th-8th and 23rd - 25th. Two Iceland Gulls, which looked set to remain here for the summer having been here since early April, finally departed on 23rd. The first Swifts were seen on the 8th and the first Cuckoo on 12th.

Mid-May saw a run of raptor sightings, with Buzzards on 14th, 16th and 17th, and Ospreys on 14th and 19th (with a further bird on 7th June). A Golden Oriole on 21st was seen, albeit briefly, every day until the 25th and even flew round the Observatory garden one lunchtime. The last week of the month produced an influx of Red-backed Shrikes, Icterine Warblers and Bluethroats, with maximum daily counts of five, four and three respectively, as well as Short-toed Lark, Corncrake, Marsh Warbler, Killer Whales..... and Bill Oddie!!

June started off with the fourth Subalpine Warbler of the spring and a first summer Hobby. The 4th produced a Thrush Nightingale at the mast, a stunning singing red male Rosefinch at Schoolton and Shirva and more Killer Whales (six off North Light). Acrocephalus warblers then took centre stage: further Marsh Warblers on 9th and 15th were eclipsed on the 12th by the spring's second Blyth's Reed Warbler, trapped in Midway garden, on the 12th and the most

interesting bird of the spring - a possible Caspian Reed Warbler on the same day. The fifth and last Subalpine Warbler of the spring put in an appearance on 10th, whilst Icterine Warbler and Red-backed Shrikes maintained the interest as we approached the hectic seabird ringing phase. A Long-tailed Skua was a nice find as the seabird team returned from a ringing session down Wester Lothar. A singing Corncrake from 20th - 22nd June, was presumed to be just a late migrant and unfortunately went unheeded, as a nest was later destroyed at Quoy as the crop was mown - the first confirmed breeding record since 1966!!

Although not birds, the third and fourth records of Hummingbird Hawk Moth on 22nd and 24th June were very noteworthy.

MID-SUMMER SIGHTINGS

July is generally a very quiet month on the migration front, however this is Fair Isle.....The 1st produced a splash of colour as an adult Rose-coloured Starling was found near the Chalet and two days later a late Red-backed Shrike was trapped and a Crossbill was seen. Although breeding on Shetland, Red-necked Phalaropes are not recorded here often, so a male on Easter Lothar on 18th was very much appreciated (although I think we would have appreciated even more the Red-necked Stint, which turned up on Shetland the same day!). A nice white first summer Glaucous Gull arrived on 21st and spent most of its ten-day stay hanging around outside the Observatory, waiting for kitchen scraps. It's greed led to its capture on 28th, when it was whoosh-netted and ringed. Another very white bird was seen from the Good Shepherd by the crew and arriving guests on 20th - an

albino Puffin just offshore. Unfortunately it has not been seen again since then.

THE AUTUMN SO FAR

A hint of autumn was an early returning Blackcap on 25th July, followed by a Rosefinch on 28th and Wood Sandpiper on 30th. Early August saw more returning waders including Wood Sandpipers, several Ruff, Greenshank and Green Sandpipers. A Sooty Shearwater past North Light on 12th was an addition to the year list. Our equal earliest ever autumn Wryneck turned up on 14th, the same day as the autumns first official rarity – a first winter Citrine Wagtail, which showed well at times, until the 16th. Marsh Warblers on 17th and 18th were followed on 19th by a bird with a Swedish ring – from Falsterbo. The latter date also saw two Barred Warblers arrive and another official rarity... a Greenish Warbler at Springfield. An Icterine Warbler amongst the Willow Warblers in the garden at Utra, on the 20th, was followed next day by three Barred Warblers, and two days later another Wryneck and Rosefinch were trapped in the Plantation. The year list now stands at a respectable 172 and with September just around the corner the excitement is building as we anticipate Great Snipe, Pechora Pipit, Lanceolated Warbler, Pallas' Grasshopper Warbler, Yellow-breasted Bunting and a host of other rarities and semi-rarities. Don't you wish you were here?

Although, as usual, we are fully booked for the last two weeks of September this year, we do have space in October. Early to mid-October is equally as good as September for rarities and large falls of

birds. Please ring Hollie at the Observatory for more details.

SEABIRD SEASON UPDATE

As usual a very busy breeding season filled the late spring and summer periods. Added to the usual intensive monitoring, ringing and population counts, were several whole island population censuses as part of the national 'Seabird 2000' Project. Preliminary results suggest that Fulmars, Shags, Tysties and Kittiwakes are rapidly declining in numbers, whilst the Auk species and Gannet are still slowly increasing. Skuas are fairly stable, whilst the fickle Arctic Tern population fluctuates.

A glorious sunny and dry May meant that the breeding season got off to a good start and most species have had a relatively successful year. However the strongest June winds ever to occur here washed out a large number of nests on the West side on the 13th, with Shags and Razorbills the most seriously affected. Estimated losses of 40-50 % were recorded. A fuller analysis of the breeding season will be given in the next Newsletter.

BAGS FOR BIRDS APPEAL

The Bird Observatory always needs a ready supply of 'bird bags' to carry birds, caught in the traps and nets, safely back to the Observatory or the ringing hut. Over recent years many of our bags have become worn, torn or have broken draw strings. Therefore, we are appealing to any Friends of Fair Isle who may be willing to make bags from old cotton sheets. The ideal bag size is approximately 8 inches wide and 10 inches long (although slight size variations do not matter too much). The bags need to have a draw string around the top hem, which when

pulled tight, has enough string to tie around the gathered top of the bag. It does not matter what colour the bags are or how few you make – every little helps. On a similar note, we also need old cotton pillow cases for larger birds and for holding seabird chicks during ringing sessions. Please send any bags or pillowcases to us here at the Observatory.

ISLAND EVENTS

The year 2000 on Fair Isle has been busy and eventful. Again, we had a few departures and some welcome new arrivals. In January Michael and Cathy Stout and their children, Jenny, Magnus and Freya left the Isle for mainland Shetland. Michael has a new job and the children have settled into their new schools and we wish them the best for the future.

All Change at Fair Isle Primary

In April, Ruth Stout 'retired' from her job as Head Teacher of Fair Isle Primary School but continues to live on the isle with her husband and children in their newly renovated house at Setter. The departure of Ruth from her post at the school was a big blow to the island and she will be missed by all the children at school but happily will still be very much a part of community life. However, with her departure came the arrival of our new Head Teacher, Jessie McCaffrey, who has now moved into Schoolhouse and will be joined by her husband after the summer holidays. The new school extension was completed in time for the summer term and so Jessie had the daunting task of starting a new job, adapting to island life and moving all the children's equipment and furniture out of the Community Hall and back into the school. We wish Jessie all the luck in her new role on the island.

FIBO Past and Present

A new display in the George Waterston Memorial Centre (museum) was completed in time for the beginning of the 2000 season. The display charts the history of bird watching on Fair Isle from pre-Observatory times to the present day.

Fair Isle Crafts Celebrate 20 Years

On 7th April 2000, Fair Isle Crafts celebrated their 20th anniversary. This co-operative, which was set up to help production and marketing of the traditional Fair Isle knitwear, has gone from strength to strength and the knitwear is still very much in demand. The celebration took place in the Observatory, with the few staff that had already arrived helping to produce an Indian style banquet for 20 people. The cooking skills of Jude and Patrick from Burkle also helped to make the evening a great success.

Fair Isle Hosts International Conference

From 21st to 23rd June 2000, Fair Isle (through the Fair Isle Marine and Environment Tourism Initiative – FIMETI) hosted a forum on long-term sustainability and community development in relation to natural and cultural resources. Delegates came all the way from Norway and Sweden to participate in this forum, organised through the EU and Norwegian Government funded 'Northern Periphery Programme'. The Bird Observatory acted as a conference centre for this event, providing lunches and refreshments for the delegates, as well as space for the presentations, discussions, slide shows and displays that took place. It was good to see that the bird Observatory and the Fair

Isle community could work together to host such an ambitious event. The conference ended with a grand buffet at the Observatory.

Building for the Future

Once Setter was completed for Ruth and Iain, work began on renovating Quoy for Stewart and Troina. Quoy has just been finished in the last few days and the next croft on the list is Houll for Brian and Mary.

The South Lighthouse buildings are now in the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland and plans are underway for their use as storage units, workshops, a small cafe and residential flats.

Activity Weeks on Fair Isle

Through the SNH funded Ranger Service and the Northern Periphery Programme, FIBO have led a couple of Activity weeks on Fair Isle this summer. Activities ranged from searching for Skua chicks to ringing Storm Petrels and from visiting the local weather station to guided walks on flowers and archaeology. These weeks were extremely successful and we hope to expand them in future years.

The Health of the Isle

With the departure of our resident nurse in December 1999, Fair Isle has had a number of temporary relief nurses over the past eight months. In August however, the welcome arrival of our new resident nurse, Claire and her husband and two children begins another new chapter in the ever changing Fair Isle community. Having only been on the Isle for a week at the time of production of this Newsletter, they all seemed to have settled in very

well and we hope they will have a long and happy stay on the Isle.

Fair Isle United

August, so far, has certainly been an eventful month and this Newsletter could not be produced without at least mentioning the wedding which took place on 5th August. Deryk and I got married at 4.30pm on Landberg just east of the Bird Observatory in the presence of the whole island and 50 friends and family. In true Fair Isle tradition the weather surpassed itself and the driving rain, blanket fog and high winds meant the planned location for the wedding, on the south end of Bu-ness, had to be abandoned and a nearer spot was chosen. However, the rain did stop for 20 minutes so that the outdoor service could go ahead, before we retreated to the Observatory for the signing of the register. The whole day and subsequent meal and dance at the Community Hall was fantastic and we both send out our heartfelt thanks to all those who helped make it such a special day.

One thing is for sure, Fair Isle folk really know how to put on a celebration and I hope some of you may get the chance to witness one of these events next time you visit the Isle.

Hollie and Deryk

For more information on any aspect of Fair Isle Bird Observatory, from how to get here, to visitor activities or from recent bird sightings to accommodation rates for the coming year, please go to our newly improved website at the following address; **www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk**

Or ring us anytime on 01595 760 258
