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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by
Hollie Shaw

Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle,
Shetland, ZE2 9JU

Tel: 01595 760 258

E-mail: fairisle.birdobs@zetnet.co.uk
www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk

Now in the midst of a Fair Isle winter, last autumn seems a long time ago and the seabird season even further. This quieter time, however, does give us the opportunity to update the Friends of Fair Isle on the successes and failures of last years seabird breeding season and to complete the summary of the year 2000 birding highlights.

The 2001 season is looming and consequently the annual tasks of maintenance, bookings and staff recruitment are all well under way.

We are pleased that some of last years staff will be returning to lend a hand in the forthcoming season and we are also looking forward to meeting a few new faces. We will also miss members of staff who have been with us in both seasons since we moved here but have now moved on to pastures new.

Chas Holt, after three seasons, has had to call it a day and is now working for MAFF, monitoring badgers. Diana De Palacio, who had also spent varying lengths of time here over the last three seasons, has returned to Spain and is working as a ski instructor

whilst completing her study towards a degree. Alan Bull, who has filled a variety of roles during his four seasons here, will be on mainland Shetland in the spring, working on Skuas, so we will no doubt see him back here at some point in the season!

Hywel Maggs (Migration Assistant in 2000), will return as Seabird Monitoring Officer. He has been touring New Zealand for the winter, combining working on organic farms with birdwatching. Beverley Howlett will also be returning, this time as Cook, until the end of August. Ann Prior will once more be cooking for us all but this year just for September and October (she will be spending the summer months sailing around Britain on a yacht!).

Two new members of staff have already been recruited, Paul French will be arriving in late March to begin work as Migration Assistant and Chris Rodger will be taking on the post of Ranger from early May. Paul is a Wildlife Conservation graduate from Kent. He has visited Fair Isle twice before, as part of the Young Ornithologists Club groups in the mid 1990's and is a very active birder with a British list approaching 400 species! Chris graduated in 1997 with a degree in Zoology from Glasgow University and has since spent his time fulfilling a variety of ecological research contracts. He is well used to the Shetland environment, having been the Warden on Hermaness for the 2000 season. Finally, Alex Wood will also return as our much-needed childminder. Unfortunately she cannot get here until early July by which time our newest arrival (which is due in May) will help keep her busy! As yet, the positions of General Assistant and Assistant Cook still have to be filled.

Bookings for 2001 are looking promising and we hope to continue the general trend of increasing visitor numbers that has become established over the last couple of years. Although this increase is very slight and we have a long way to go before we once again reach the peak numbers of the late 1980's, it is none the less encouraging and certainly in the right direction.

2000 SEABIRD SEASON

As promised in the last Newsletter we can now bring you a comprehensive analysis of last year's seabird breeding season:

Fair Isle's seabirds generally enjoyed a productive year in 2000. Unseasonal storm force winds on June 13th dented the fortunes of species nesting lower down on the west side; Shags and Razorbills appeared to suffer most.

Kittiwakes recorded a mean productivity of 1.15 chicks fledged per apparently occupied nest (AON), which has to rank as another excellent year following the record figure of 1.33 in 1999. Small losses were recorded on the west coast during the June gale, and a site on Bunes recorded virtually zero productivity due to predation by gulls and skuas. A whole island count of kittiwakes recorded 8,175 apparently occupied nests, a 29.8% decrease on the 11,650 in 1997.

Guillemots experienced a typically successful year, with a mean productivity of 0.77 for the two sites at Peitron and Da Swadin. Both being east coast sites, this figure will not take into account losses suffered during the June gale.

Razorbills at the productivity site at Easter Lothar experienced a poor year, with a productivity of 0.47 being fractionally the lowest ever. Fourteen

out of 85 clutches were lost due to the June storm. An island population of 3,600 birds was estimated in 2000; a 9.2% increase on 1998.

Shags in Finnequoy Bay experienced a successful year; an average productivity of 1.79 (from 76 nests) being the second highest since monitoring began, bettered only by 1.81 in 1993. However, Finnequoy is a sheltered east coast site and so this figure is not representative of losses on the west side in mid-June. These were estimated to be approaching 50%.

Fulmars recorded a slightly higher than average productivity, with a figure of 0.45 chicks fledged per AON being the best since 1995. There was little variation between sites, with all five monitoring plots recording productivities of 0.43 - 0.47. A whole island count of 20,424 AONs suggests a drastic halving of the island population since 1996. Similar reductions have reportedly been experienced on Foula, Shetland.

Puffins appeared to experience a poor year, although a productivity figure of 0.58 is about average for recent years. However, it should be noted that the majority of monitored burrows are on Greenholm at the south end, which suffered from the actions of mountainous seas on June 13th. The island population was estimated at 80,000 birds.

A small sample of fifteen **Tystie** nests recorded a mean productivity of 1.07 chicks fledged; a good figure but not statistically reliable because of the small sample size.

Arctic terns experienced a very successful year with an estimated 1000 chicks fledging from 1251 pairs, a productivity of 0.80. This figure has been bettered only in 1991 and 1992, and is a major improvement on a productivity of 0.27 in 1999 and the complete failure in 1998.

Two **Common tern** chicks fledged from three nests.

Bonxies recorded an average productivity of 0.74 in 2000, from 135 territories.

Arctic skuas suffered a poor year, probably largely due to predation by Bonxies just prior to fledging stage. Sixty-two territorial pairs recorded a productivity of 0.37, the second poorest after 0.13 in the 1998 season.

Eight pairs of **Common gulls** fledged six young, an average of 0.75.

Gannets experienced a relatively disappointing breeding season, recording a productivity of 0.56 chicks fledged per occupied nest at the six west coast monitoring plots. Sixteen of the lowest 196 monitored nests (8.2%) were lost due to the June gale. This year's productivity figure is the lowest since 1991.

Deryk Shaw

AUTUMN MIGRATION NEWS

Early autumn sightings were dealt with in the last Newsletter but even as that issue was being stuffed into the envelopes in late August, migration continued and the month ended with a flurry of Wrynecks (c.6), Red-backed Shrikes (3), Greenish Warblers (3), Barred Warblers (2) and Common Rosefinch (2) and good numbers of commoner warblers and flycatchers. Hearts quickened with anticipation as August gave way to the prime month of September... and they were not disappointed. The first day of the month produced a Booted Warbler at Setter and 100 alba Wagtails, followed next day by a Citrine Wagtail on Meoness and 65 Whinchat. Two days later things, hotted up further when a much appreciated Arctic Warbler was found near Aesterhoull in the afternoon, and a Lanceolated Warbler was trapped in the Gully – our earliest ever autumn record of this much sought-after Fair Isle speciality. The

day was rounded off with a Common Rosefinch trapped in the Plantation. A fairly quiet couple of days with light south-westerly winds followed, before the arrival on the 7th of a south-easterly to south-westerly gale! Birding round the crops and crofts is very difficult in such conditions, so most people headed for South Light for a spot of seawatching. Over the next four days it paid off, with 40+ Sooty Shearwater, a couple of Manxies, 50+ Storm Petrels, Leach's Petrel and the first record of Balearic Shearwater for Shetland. The wind eventually died down and returned to the east on 10th, with instant results – another Booted Warbler, trapped at the Observatory, and the following day the second Lanceolated Warbler of the autumn was found at Setter. Even better was to come....The morning trap round of the 12th produced yet another Lanceolated Warbler, in the Gully, and later that morning the fourth of the autumn was found in the Meadow Burn. The first Little Bunting of the autumn was at Skerryholm and later a superb adult Red-throated Pipit dropped in. A scattering of common migrants also included a couple of Barred Warbler and four Common Rosefinch, whilst a selection of Redpolls (Greenland, Mealy and Lesser) kept the taxonomists happy. The highlight of the 13th was a fall of common migrants, including 100 Blackcaps but nothing rarer than a Wryneck. The 14th turned up another Arctic Warbler at Aesterhoull, though rarer in Fair Isle terms were the seven Brent Geese off Meoness. Four Little Buntings, two Common Rosefinch and the years only Grey Plover, added to the interest. Highlights of the 15th were raptors – Hobby and Osprey, although two Bluethroats were also appreciated, and a Dotterel was at the top of Ward Hill. The Observatory was full to capacity by 16th and all got the

chance to see the species they had come for – a Lanceolated Warbler, scurrying mouse-like in the crop at Skerryholm, (which may have been the same bird seen in the Meadow Burn on 12th). The ringed individual from the 12th was also still present - in Field Ditch. Two hundred Wheatears on 17th were followed next day by another raptor highlight - a Honey Buzzard this time, but also a Corncrake, two Ortolans and 650 Meadow Pipits. A south-easterly gale and driving rain on 19th made birding extremely difficult. However, the sheltered west cliffs were teeming with fresh migrants; conservative estimates were of 150 Blackcaps, 150 Garden Warblers, 50 Tree Pipits, 40 Song Thrush, 10 Dunnock plus a Little Bunting, two Bluethroats and topped by the third Citrine Wagtail of the autumn on the back of Ward Hill. A further fall of Blackcaps (200), on 20th, also included 60 Garden Warblers, whilst the following day Blackcaps rose to 250 and were joined by 18 Reed Warblers, 6 Grasshopper Warblers, 4 Little Stints, 100 Snipe, 80 Tree Pipits, 110 Wheatears, 130 Song Thrush, 20 Dunnock, 30 Robins, 60 Redstarts and a late Cuckoo. The 22nd of September produced a couple of rarities to add to the abundance of common migrants; a Great Snipe was flushed from Barkland then flushed again twice more from Da Water and the Rippack, before disappearing..... and whilst all this was going on, one lucky observer found a Paddyfield Warbler at North Ramnigeo, which disappeared all too quickly. A Red-breasted Flycatcher in the evening sun at North Reeva rounded off a good day, which had also included counts of 100 Blackcaps, 40 Willow Warblers, 18 Reed Warblers, 55 Goldcrests, 16 Spotted Flycatchers, 10 Pied Flycatchers, 14 Lapland Buntings, 150 Snow Buntings, three Ortolan Buntings and a Little

Bunting. The last week saw warbler numbers slowly declining, whilst Robins increased to 130, Dunnocks to 70, Redstarts to 65 and Goldcrests to 200. Highlights were provided by a second Great Snipe which showed very well in Boini Mire, another Red-throated Pipit, 2-3 Olive-backed Pipits and a 'Lesser' Golden Plover species. Scarce migrants included; Honey Buzzard (3), Corncrake, Quail, Wryneck (3), Bluethroats (2), Barred Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler (10-12), Red-breasted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike (3), Ortolan (3) and Little Bunting (4).

October was dominated by low pressure systems from the south west, however there were some prolonged periods of easterly winds, resulting in some impressive falls, - the first of which occurred as early as the 2nd. A good fall consisting mainly of Robins (450) also included 40 Redstarts, 25 Willow Warblers, 300 Bramblings, 25 Whinchats, 35 Tree Pipits, 20 Chiffchaffs, 25 Reed Buntings, 60 Snow Buntings, two each of Yellow-browed Warbler and Little Bunting and best of all....another Red-throated Pipit. These were all eclipsed however, by the re-appearance of the mystery Plover from late September, which flew over your warden calling and landed close by enabling it to be positively identified as Fair Isle's second ever Pacific Golden Plover. This fascinating and highly instructive juvenile was scrutinised daily, until its departure on 12th. There followed a relatively quiet period rarity-wise, although the Red-throated Pipit was trapped on 6th, and three Richard's Pipits arrived on 7th with 2,500 Redwing, whilst on 8th, a Mute Swan was only the fifth record for Fair Isle and two Slavonian Grebes were the first of the year. A further fall on 10th, of 100 Goldcrests, 70 Blackcaps, 200

Song Thrush and 220 Redwing, also brought in singles of Short-toed Lark, Black Redstart and Long-eared Owl. Song Thrush rose to 800 and Redwing to 350 on 11th, as five Black Redstarts appeared, whilst another fall of Goldcrests (140) and Blackcaps (130) on 12th were accompanied by two Yellow-browed Warblers, two Red-breasted Flycatchers, two Short-toed Larks and rarest of all..... the year's only Rustic Bunting – at Guidicum of all places! Migrant numbers remained fairly high for the following week but with nothing rarer than a Pallas's Warbler on 16th and a late Barred Warbler on 17th to really get hearts racing! All this was to change on 21st....a mere glance outside at first light and it was evident there had been some movement overnight – the log that evening recorded 6,000 Redwing, 500 Song Thrush, 200 Blackbird and 35 Ring Ouzel, but also 200 Blackcaps. Bird of the day, indeed, bird of the autumn and year, however, was the second British record of **BROWN SHRIKE** – a 1st winter bird trapped in the Gully. The expected invasion of twitchers however, did not occur as the bird unfortunately departed overnight – along with virtually all of the thrushes and Blackcaps. A Great Grey Shrike arrived instead! The 23rd saw another, even larger, invasion of Thrushes. The island was carpeted with 13,500 Redwings, 750 Song Thrushes, 500 Blackbirds, 27 Ring Ouzels, but only 15 (!!) Fieldfares. A fantastic sight! Fieldfares eventually arrived on the 27th, with a count of 260, the first of several similar influxes, which continued throughout November. October ended with a Short-toed Lark on 25th and Olive-backed Pipit on 26th, whilst a Black-bellied Dipper, trapped in the Gully on the last day of the month was a nice surprise.

November highlights were few, however, occasional Black Redstarts put in an appearance, and a late Common Redstart was seen on the 7th. The last Wheatear passed through on 2nd, whilst Blackcaps lingered until 23rd. A late Common Rosefinch was at Leogh on 5th, whilst bird of the month and last official rarity of the year, was another (5th of the autumn), Olive-backed Pipit on 10th.

Finally, December was not totally without birding highlights, as Fair Isle grabbed a piece of the national Waxwing invasion with singles on the 27th and 28th and three on the 29th, bringing the year total to 204 species. A nice Christmas present and end to another excellent year on Fair Isle!

Deryk Shaw



Brown Shrike by Lachlan Shaw (aged7)

ISLAND NEWS

Compared with the last Newsletter, our Island news section in this issue will seem a little thin on the ground. Building work continues and with Quoy completed for Triona and Stewart Thompson, Houll was started for Brian and Mary Wilson in the autumn. This building project has been different to most of the others, resulting in a complete rebuild of the property, incorporating many new ecologically sound elements and a bright, (but

tasteful), blue wooden exterior! The Houll is in the final stages as this Newsletter is being produced and it is expected that extensive work on the South Lighthouse will begin once it is completed. The South Lighthouse will then accommodate a small café, a couple of residential flats, a workshop for the newly established Fair Isle Silver Company, and storage space for the George Waterston Museum.

'Birds of Fair Isle' By JN Dymond

FIBO (with the kind permission of Nick Dymond) are now selling this interesting, readable book for just £2.50 plus post and packaging. This 148-page book, contains a comprehensive systematic list of bird records for all species found on Fair Isle since the establishment of FIBO until 1990. An update for the years since this date is also available for just £1 plus post and packaging. This really is a bargain not to be missed. Please contact Hollie if you would like to buy a copy, or simply send a cheque made out to Fair Isle Bird Observatory for £3.50 (this price includes postage) with your name and address.

FIBO Fashion

We have extended the range of goods available in the FIBO shop and some items are available by post. As in previous years FIBO T-shirts and sweatshirts, in a variety of colours, are available in a range of sizes and prices start from £10 plus post and packing. We also have new T-shirts and sweatshirts in natural unbleached cotton with large bird designs on the front and the FIBO logo on the sleeve. We have three designs available: 'Seabirds', Puffins, and Puffins on Cliff, again in varying sizes, with prices starting at £14.50 plus P & P. For more info. please contact Hollie.

Back Issues of FIBO Reports

Do you have gaps in your FIBO Report collection, or simply have an interest in a particular year? FIBO are now selling back issues of Reports (pre 1998) for just £1 plus post and packing – please note:

some years are out of stock, but please contact Hollie for more details.

A Big Thank you

Deryk and Hollie would like to thank all of you who responded to our appeal for bird bags and pillowcases in the last newsletter. The response was fantastic and we now have a new supply of bird bags that will last for some time to come.

Special August Offer

From 4th August until 24th August 2001 (inclusive), FIBO are offering bargain rate accommodation at 50% off the standard rate. That means **HALF PRICE** on all rooms. We expect to be quite busy as a result of this offer, so please contact Hollie asap to enquire about availability.

Last Spaces for Peak Season

At the time of production of this Newsletter, we now have limited space available for the last two weeks of September 2001, due to a cancellation. Please contact Hollie for more details.

'Island Insights' Weeks

As mentioned in the last Newsletter, FIBO, through the Northern Periphery Programme are co-hosting Activity Weeks on Fair Isle again this year, in conjunction with a local eco-tourism company. Two 'Island Insights' weeks have been set from 30th June until 6th July and from 28th July until 4th August. These weeks will combine history, archaeology, crafts, birds and wild flowers, using Fair Islanders as guides and the Observatory as the accommodation base. Please contact Hollie if you are interested.

And Finally

Thank you for your continued support and please remember to **renew your subscription** to FIBO (due on 1st April), unless you pay by Banker's Order. Deryk and Hollie hope to see you on Fair Isle in the future. If you would like more information about any aspect of FIBO, please contact Hollie, anytime, on 01595 760 258
