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# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Now we are at the end of another season, it is time to update all the 'Friends of Fair Isle' on the birding highlights (and lowlights) of another eventful year.

When the last Newsletter was written, the remaining two members of staff were yet to be finalised. Ann Prior, who was due to be Cook for the second half of the season, was unable to take up her post and therefore, Sue Hutchinson (Assistant Cook) stepped admirably into Beverley Howlett's shoes when she left in August. Lois Smallwood arrived in August to aid Sue as Assistant Cook and they were joined by Lillian Crawford (from Australia!) as the second General Assistant. This 'domestic' team was one of the best we have ever had, and kept visitors and staff, well fed and entertained all season.

Additionally, Becki Rosser (volunteer in 1999) returned this year, to help out as a domestic volunteer for 2 months. Alan Bull also returned, yet again, this season to ease the burden of office and administration work, from Hollie, during the last 2 weeks of her pregnancy and the first few weeks after the baby was born. Finally, Alex Wood joined us in July as our much needed child-minder.

It goes without saying that Hollie, Deryk and FIBO as a whole, are indebted to all the staff who helped make this busy season so successful and enjoyable. It is hoped that some of them will be returning next year!

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## Ornithology

### **Spring Migration**

The highlight of the early pre-season was a Velvet Scoter which appeared in early February and remained until April. A bit of socialising and some very picturesque snow scenes were other highlights.

Early Spring, or rather, late Winter saw the first migrants heading north and the first breeding seabirds returning to their colonies. Lapwings, Oystercatchers, Ringed Plovers and Skylarks commenced moving in late February and built up through March, whilst Guillemots and Razorbills were back on ledges in good numbers by mid-February and Kittiwakes by 10<sup>th</sup> March. The first Puffin did not appear ashore until 30<sup>th</sup> March, by which time Spring migration was well underway and the first seasonal staff member had arrived - Assistant Warden, Paul French.

Paul arrived in the nick of time as we only just finished patching up the damage to the Plantation trap, caused by the usual winter winds, before the onslaught of migrants. The first three Wheatears of the year on 28<sup>th</sup> March were a sure sign that Spring proper was just around the corner. With good weather conditions towards the end of the month, not even we were prepared for the tremendous 'fall' on 30<sup>th</sup> March. Birds (mainly thrushes) were everywhere! With only two members of Ornithological staff present and censusing **just the South of the Isle**, the counts which follow could probably be doubled - at least! There were 50+ Woodcock, 400+ Robins, 4,000 Blackbird, 500 Fieldfare, 650 Song Thrush, 400 Redwing, one Ring Ousel, 40 Chiffchaff and 75 Chaffinch. That's

not all of the species recorded that day! A Bar-tailed Godwit, an early Sandwich Tern and Blackcap, a Long-eared Owl and three Black Redstart provided additional year-ticks, whilst three **White-spotted Bluethroat** (remaining until 3rd April), a male Marsh Harrier and a female Garganey were the icing on the cake!

April was dominated by depressions and westerly winds. The final week was warm with south-easterly winds and some nice birds! No 'big falls' took place during the month, with most thrushes seen in early April being stragglers from the March fall. Early April also saw Hywel Maggs returning from an Antipodean winter for his second season at the Obs, this time as Seabird Monitoring Officer. Early migrants were represented by three Whimbrel (17<sup>th</sup>), Sand Martin and Swallow (21<sup>st</sup>), Willow Warbler (23<sup>rd</sup>), Grasshopper Warbler (24<sup>th</sup>), Tree Pipit (25<sup>th</sup>), our earliest ever Reed Warbler (28<sup>th</sup>), House Martin (28<sup>th</sup>) Common Tern (29<sup>th</sup>) and Swift (29<sup>th</sup> - equal earliest record), whilst 150 Common Gull, 110 Wheatear and 120 Brambling on 26<sup>th</sup> with 1200 Fieldfare on 29<sup>th</sup> were notable counts.

Scarce migrants in April included Slavonian Grebe (11<sup>th</sup>), two Wryneck (25<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>), six Waxwing (28<sup>th</sup>), 'Siberian' Chiffchaff (28<sup>th</sup>) and Hawfinch (25<sup>th</sup>).

It was a good month for 'rarities' with a **Great Tit** in the Plantation on 8<sup>th</sup>, a **Black-throated Thrush** on Ward Hill (14<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup>), two very early **Common Cranes** (20<sup>th</sup>), a second-summer **Yellow-legged Gull** on 22<sup>nd</sup>, **Hoopoe** (30<sup>th</sup>) and Fair Isle's second ever **Ring-billed Gull** (adult, 30<sup>th</sup>). April also saw an influx of staff.....Chris Rodger arrived as a volunteer before his contract as Ranger commenced in May, and Rose McCalmont, the first of the domestic staff, arrived on 17<sup>th</sup>. Hollie was beginning to crack under the strain of having to cook for such a large group of people so it was with glee that she greeted (as did we all!)

the arrival of Beverley Howlett on 24<sup>th</sup>. Hot on the heels of this familiar face came another even more familiar one - Alan Bull arrived to ease the pressure in the office from, a by now very heavily pregnant, Hollie.

May started with some terrific weather, and **some** members of staff getting sunburnt! Bird wise, there were small numbers of most expected migrants (Swallow, Sand Martin, House Martin, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff) but no falls.

The 1<sup>st</sup> produced a Blue-headed Wagtail, a Grasshopper Warbler and a Sedge Warbler. Next day there were 20 Wood Pigeons and a Lesser Whitethroat which stayed around the Obs. until 4<sup>th</sup> and a Tree Sparrow at Taft. 130 Wheatears, Yellow Wagtail and Stock Dove were seen on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The Arctic Terns arrived back 'en-masse' on the 5<sup>th</sup> with 50 birds present, quickly rising to 800 the next day! The 5<sup>th</sup> also produced two 'blue' Fulmars, three Collared Doves and a Wryneck in South Harbour...and our Assistant Cook - Sue Hutchinson. The best birds however were discovered on the 6<sup>th</sup> with a Black Redstart in the Havens a male Bluethroat around the Plantation and a stunning **Olive-backed Pipit**, which spent one hour around the Plantation. A fairly quiet 7<sup>th</sup> did however produce a flock of 11 Tree Sparrows at Quoy (with 8 trapped at the Plantation) - a very good count for Fair Isle in recent years. A full complement of staff was achieved by the 8<sup>th</sup> when Becki Rosser arrived as a domestic volunteer. Year-ticks trickled through with an early male Red-backed Shrike and the years first Redstart (8<sup>th</sup>), Whitethroat and a Pied Flycatcher (9<sup>th</sup>), three Bluethroats, one, possibly two, Wryneck and a Long-eared Owl (10<sup>th</sup>). The 11<sup>th</sup> was one of the better days producing peak counts of Whinchat (7), Redstart (4) and Wryneck (4). Also present was a stunning male Red-backed Shrike, which stayed in the vicinity of the Houll until 16<sup>th</sup>. A female was recorded on

17<sup>th</sup>. The latter half of May was by Fair Isle's standards a 'disappointing' month, but we still managed to do as well as anywhere else in Britain! The weather was never favourable, winds predominantly from the west and not much sunshine!! There were no falls of common migrants and 'scarcities' were thin on the ground! Only two Garden Warblers and one Swift were recorded with very small numbers of other species. Peak counts included: 8 Sedge Warblers, 6 Lesser Whitethroat, 6 Whitethroat, 8 Blackcap, 3 Pied Fly, 8 Spotted Flycatchers, 8 Willow Warblers and 3 Sand Martins! However, two good Fair Isle birds and a few unexpected rarities livened up the month. An **Arctic Redpoll** was an unexpected find on the 13<sup>th</sup>. It was in the company of three Lesser Redpolls and was trapped on the 15<sup>th</sup>. It remained until 17<sup>th</sup>. A female Bluethroat was also present (until 15<sup>th</sup>). A more expected arrival was a male **Rustic Bunting** around Easter Lothar from 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup>. The first Cuckoo was recorded on 16<sup>th</sup> (numbers peaking at three on 27<sup>th</sup>) with two Goldfinch also present and a count of four Tree Sparrows (continuing an excellent run of this species). The month's end was a better period, although the weather was still from the west! A **White-tailed Sea Eagle** was a nice sight on the 21<sup>st</sup>, unfortunately it was only seen by one person and soon disappeared (remarkable for such a big bird!). Presumably the same bird, turned up on Unst, Shetland soon after and is thought to be of Norwegian stock – identified from tags in both wings. The 22<sup>nd</sup> produced a **Common Crane** in various parts of the island and a female **Subalpine Warbler** at Schoolton (present until 30<sup>th</sup>). Swallows peaked at 100 on 23<sup>rd</sup> when a stunning red **Common Rosefinch** was found at the Observatory and a Wood Warbler was at Midway. Bird of the day went to a **Corn Bunting** found at Quoy, which is the first record since 1996. A **Canada Goose** species (thought to be a Taverners type)

appeared on the 24<sup>th</sup> and although not very exciting, it required a good 'grilling' and provided the day's highlight! Hawfinch and Marsh Warbler were recorded on the 27<sup>th</sup>, along with a Wood Sandpiper and 15 House Martins.

A most unexpected arrival on 29<sup>th</sup> was that of a **Great Snipe** found at Pund. It is only the second Spring record on Fair Isle (in the FIBO period). Usually this species turns up in autumn, so perhaps this bird wintered in Britain and was on its way back home?

The following day a female Bluethroat was found at the Observatory and an Osprey loafed around for a while before heading out to sea. The bird causing the most excitement this month was a **Black Tern** found in the Arctic Tern colony on Bunes. It stayed around for approximately 15 minutes before heading high to the north. It was the first record since 1967. The 'twitch' was fairly amusing to most visitors at the Observatory, watching staff members old and young sprinting down the road! The last good bird of an unusual month!

Migration is usually pretty much over by June and efforts are concentrated on the breeding seabirds but birds can, and do, turn up at any time – especially here on Fair Isle. So a whiff of easterlies on 16<sup>th</sup> brought the anticipated results. A phone call from the Haa reporting "a pink bird with a black head" had everyone bundling into the van and heading south. Whilst searching for what must have been a **Rosy Starling**, a male **Black-headed Bunting** was found and later that afternoon a singing male **Red-throated Pipit** was discovered at Wirvie. So, *three* good rarities in one day!! Ah! The magic of Fair Isle!

### Seabird Season

Fair Isle's seabirds have suffered a very poor breeding season. Despite huge numbers of sandeels being present in May, encouraging nearly 3,000 pairs of Arctic Terns to nest (a Fair Isle record), there was a very



## **ISLAND NEWS**

As in every year, the summer months on Fair Isle have been busy for the Observatory and the island as a whole.

### **New Bar in the Obs**

Removal of the large (unused) fireplace in the Obs lounge and its replacement with a bar was the new venture for 2001. Robert from Stackhoull kindly donated a large work bench, which was skilfully transformed, by the Northmen, into a wooden drinks bar (including lift up hatch!). The range of drinks on offer to residents and people having meals at the Observatory was vastly increased and the whole project has been a great success!

### **A Fall of Ravens**

The population of the Island was boosted, yet again, by the arrival of Raven Vaila Shaw on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2001. Hollie left the island on 9<sup>th</sup> May (now that is what we call good timing!) but despite the best efforts of the *Good Shepherd* crew, Deryk did not manage to get out in time to see her born at 9.15 am the next day. She returned to Fair Isle via the *Good Shepherd* on 12<sup>th</sup> May and immediately entered the record books as the youngest ever Good Shepherd passenger and the first new-born to return home via the boat for 31 years!

### **Classic Fair Isle**

The Islanders have commissioned a piece of music to be written by Alastair Stout (nephew and grandson of our Jimmy Stouts). Fundraising has taken place all season to pay for the work involved and for the Grand Premier of the piece, (due to take place on Fair Isle next August). As part of the fund-raising, Fiona and Robert at Stackhoull provided tea and coffee facilities in Stackhoull garage to all visitors, during September and October. Visitors could help themselves to tea or coffee and leave a donation for the service.

A total of £130 was raised for Classic Fair Isle through this scheme.

### **School Play**

The FIBO Ranger, Chris, organised an environmentally themed play with the children of Fair Isle Primary. The story was based around the need for sustainable fishing levels and the consequences of over-fishing. The performance, to the whole island at the end of term concert in July, was one of the most popular aspects of the Ranger Service this season.

### **Norwegian Invasion!**

As part of the Northern Periphery Program, Safeinherit project (led by Fair Isle) a school exchange took place in August. 17 Norwegian children visited Fair Isle for 10 days (along with 5 teachers) and took part in a series of organised activities throughout the isle. Two of the children stayed at the Observatory and the Ranger Service hosted 2 days of environmental games and activities up at the Observatory.

### **Plantation and Conservation Areas**

Those of you who have visited Fair Isle in recent years, will have no doubt noticed that the Plantation is in need of rebuilding. This ambitious project is planned for next year. It is also apparent that the amount of crops, shrubs and generally ungrazed areas are becoming less and less on the Isle each year. FIBO therefore, are hoping to encourage more cultivation on the island and have already had permission to fence-off small areas of land to act as conservation 'pockets'. This scheme will hopefully be continued in future years.

### **Appeal for Photos**

We would be grateful for any photos of good birds from the 2001 season on Fair Isle, for possible inclusion in the 2001 FIBO Report. Anyone who is willing to offer photos for this purpose, please send them to us at FIBO.

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