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# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

*Edited by*

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With summer now well underway, it is a good time to report on the spring migration and seabird season for 2002. This newsletter is also a good opportunity to introduce this year's staff (which those of you visiting will hopefully meet) and summarise the main island events.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the newsletter and will hopefully see most of you on Fair Isle in the future.

Thank you for your continued support.

Deryk and Hollie  
(Warden and Administrator)

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## Staff of 2002

This year's staff is again a mixture of old and new faces. The team this year are:

Paul French:	Assistant Warden
Simon Pinder:	Seabird Officer
Alan Bull:	Ranger
Lois Smallwood:	Cook
Gillian Newman:	Cook
Sheila McKeever:	General Assistant
Becki Rosser:	General Assistant
Rebekah Warner:	Childminder

All the staff have settled in extremely well and are proving to be an effective and hard working team. Paul French returned for his second season as Assistant Warden after over-wintering on Shetland. A new face took up the position of Seabird Monitoring Officer in the form of Simon Pinder. Both of them arrived on Fair Isle in late March and immediately began the frenzied tasks of repairing the heligoland traps and decorating the Observatory guest rooms. A few weeks later Alan Bull returned to the isle, this season as Ranger, and joined in with the pre-season maintenance work. The domestic staff began to arrive in late April, with Lois Smallwood returning as one of the Cooks for the season and Sheila McKeever as General Assistant. A week later the full compliment of staff was completed with the arrival of Becki Rosser returning again as General Assistant, Gillian Newman as the second Cook and Rebekah Warner as our childminder.

As in every year we are very grateful to all the staff who work so hard to keep the Observatory running. This year's team is not only hard working and dedicated, but also fun to be with, adding to the family atmosphere which makes the Observatory an enjoyable place for visitors to stay.

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## Ornithology

### **Spring migration update**

This Spring has been a good one for numbers of some of our scarcer migrants such as Bluethroats and Red-backed Shrikes and an average year for numbers of common migrants. The only thing lacking was a real 'rarity', but we can wait until the autumn! After a very wet February and March, the weather has been very good, with

mainly South-easterly winds and continuous days of sunshine! As is always the case though, the warm days have been followed by periods of blanket fog!

The highlight of the first two months of the year was a wintering Great Tit at North Light. Other unusual wintering birds included a few Robins, Water Rails, a Grey Heron, six Chaffinch and c.20 Snow Buntings. Peregrine, Merlin, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk were all recorded whilst Cormorant, Goldeneye and Long-tailed Duck were occasionally seen sheltering in the Havens or South Harbour. White-winged Gulls are usually a feature of the winter months but this year they have been conspicuous by their relative absence with just a single Iceland Gull and a handful of Glaucous Gulls. Early February saw the start of wader passage as Oystercatchers, Lapwings, Curlews and Turnstones began to move north whilst the end of the month saw the first returning Ringed Plovers and Skylarks passing through. March saw migration picking up pace as wader passage peaked and passerines began to move. Thrushes appeared in increasing numbers but the anticipated repeat of last year's phenomenal fall unfortunately never materialised. Mid-March saw a spate of expected early migrants such as Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Grey Wagtail and Yellowhammer but also unexpected birds like Black-bellied Dipper and another Great Tit. Great Skuas and Puffins arrived back in late March, followed by a few early migrants, which included Wheatear (28<sup>th</sup>) Swallow (31<sup>st</sup> – our earliest ever), Ring Ouzel (2<sup>nd</sup> April), Blackcap (4<sup>th</sup>), Scotland's earliest ever Grasshopper Warbler on the 7<sup>th</sup> and Willow Warbler (8<sup>th</sup>). Arctic Skuas arrived back on 14<sup>th</sup> – the day Bonxies had increased to 42!

Three nice birds arrived on a chilly 16<sup>th</sup> – a Short-eared Owl, a summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver and (best of all) a Bohemian Waxwing at Neder Taft. The 19<sup>th</sup>, produced the first day of scarce migrants with two Hawfinches (one trapped at the Observatory), our earliest ever red-spotted Bluethroat and a female Marsh Harrier seen. Several quiet days followed but a phone-call from North Ronaldsay on the 25<sup>th</sup> had everyone looking South as they informed us that a White Stork was on its way. Although we didn't see it that day, we finally caught up with it at Easter Lothar on 26<sup>th</sup> – only the 4<sup>th</sup> island record and what a bird! The final two days of the month saw light NE'y winds, some good numbers of common migrants and included the year's first Arctic Tern, Whinchat, Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat, but a superbly confiding male Little Bunting at Field was the undoubted highlight!

May started off with glorious sunshine and the arrival of a few migrants including ten Arctic Terns, ten Tree Pipits, 96 Wheatears, 11 Willow Warblers, 31 Carrion and 12 Hooded Crows and were followed by the first Wood Warbler (3<sup>rd</sup>) and Cuckoo (4<sup>th</sup>). The 5<sup>th</sup> produced three Dotterel on Vaassetter, a Short-eared Owl and a Short-toed Lark at Shirva, which kept both staff and visitors occupied for a few hours whilst a Goldfinch at the shop added a further splash of colour. Osprey and Quail were the highlights of the 6<sup>th</sup> when Arctic Terns increased to 200 whilst the 7<sup>th</sup> produced two Wrynecks, a Bluethroat and a few Tree Pipits, Ring Ouzels, Whinchats, Common Redstarts, Willow Warblers and a male Pied Flycatcher. Another male Bluethroat was trapped on the 8<sup>th</sup>, which also saw the arrival of a second Little Bunting and a male Hen Harrier. Things really hotted up on 10<sup>th</sup>

when we experienced a 'fall' of migrants which included only our ninth spring record of Great Spotted Woodpecker, a Wryneck, ten Bluethroats, seven Red-backed Shrikes, 14 Tree Pipits, Wood Warbler, 18 Lesser Whitethroats, 11 Willow Warblers, ten Pied Flycatchers and many more common migrants. An even larger 'fall' occurred on 11<sup>th</sup> when amongst the large numbers of common migrants (eg 200 Wheatears, 20 Sedge Warblers, 15 Whitethroats, 22 Willow Warblers) were a Richard's Pipit, 12 Bluethroats, five Tree Sparrows and two Ortolan Buntings. Real quality arrived the following day when our first star rarities were found with a Subalpine Warbler and Thrush Nightingale both found within the space of an hour (and both in the North!) whilst many of the previous day's birds remained and Wheatears had increased to 250. A rare orange-variant Common Rosefinch was new on the 15<sup>th</sup> and was joined by a Common Swift, another Dotterel and a Cuckoo whilst hangers-on from the past few days included the Subalpine Warbler, several Bluethroats, Red-backed Shrikes and an Ortolan. The 16<sup>th</sup> produced another classic Fair Isle Spring rarity, when a Red-throated Pipit was found at Wirvie. Osprey, Wryneck, Great Northern Diver and two Swifts were also nice to see! The 17<sup>th</sup> saw the Richard's Pipit, Red-throated Pipit, one Red-backed Shrike and Ortolan remaining faithful to their chosen locations. Also seen was a Short-eared Owl and two Wrynecks, but new birds for the year included a Black-tailed Godwit, Yellow Wagtail and more interesting – a Corncrake singing in Boini Mire! Possibly around for a few days before being heard, it continues (up until time of writing at least) to sing on and off during the day and night and is thought to be breeding! After three wet and

miserable days, the 20<sup>th</sup> produced a Cuckoo and five Bluethroats. An even wetter and more miserable day followed on the 21<sup>st</sup>, but a female Montagu's Harrier was found in North Park. Only the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fair Isle record (1<sup>st</sup> in 1992) and third Shetland record, it hunted around Boini Mire for a few days but was unfortunately found dead on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The 22<sup>nd</sup> produced Montagu's Harrier twitchers, a Spotted Crake near Aesterhoull, the year's first Eurasian Reed Warbler, four Bluethroats and a late Mistle Thrush. The 23<sup>rd</sup> was equally good with a Eurasian White-fronted Goose, Quail and a singing male Bluethroat, although a rarer find was a Pizza Hut balloon in the new plantation!! The 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> were quieter but the 27<sup>th</sup> produced a Red-throated Diver, two Red-backed Shrikes, three Common Rosefinch, Hawfinch and an (almost certain) Thrush Nightingale seen around Lower Stoneybrek and the shop. A Honey Buzzard drifted over the Havens on the 28<sup>th</sup> – the only decent bird of the day! The final three days of May saw a flurry of year-ticks as Marsh Warblers (two on 29<sup>th</sup>), Wood Sandpiper and Icterine Warbler (30<sup>th</sup>) and Turtle Dove (31<sup>st</sup>) all put in an appearance. Small numbers of other 'goodies' including Hen Harrier, Osprey, Quails, Black Redstart, Red-backed Shrikes, Common Rosefinches and a second female Subalpine Warbler rounded off the month.

Early June saw more Bluethroats, Marsh Warblers and Common Rosefinches appearing whilst the Subalpine Warbler remained until 7<sup>th</sup>. Both 'Grey-headed' and 'Blue-headed' Wagtails were nice whilst the arrival of a few Common Crossbills gave hopes of another invasion year! A small 'fall' on 7<sup>th</sup> brought in six Marsh Warblers, 12 Lesser Whitethroats, four Whitethroats, six Garden Warblers, 14 Willow Warblers, 13 Spotted



Flycatchers, four Red-backed Shrikes, four Common Crossbills and singles of Dotterel and Common Rosefinch. A similar arrival the following day also included two Quail and 50 Spotted Flycatchers. The next few days saw small numbers from the falls lingering plus the odd new arrival such as Quail, Bluethroat and more Marsh Warblers. Two Corncrakes seen together on 11<sup>th</sup> was a good indication that a breeding attempt was imminent! There was a bit of added excitement mid-month when the first of two (so far) Rosy Starlings was seen on the morning trap-round of the 14<sup>th</sup> and a late Long-eared Owl was flushed from the west cliffs. A Hobby the following day was another nice addition to the year-list as was the fine summer-plumaged Spotted Redshank on 17<sup>th</sup>. A male Marsh Harrier on 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> was an unexpected surprise whilst the latter date also provided female Goosander, two Sandwich Terns and a Turtle Dove. The second Rosy Starling of the year was found at Barkland on 21<sup>st</sup> but was elusive and only seen briefly, several times, up to 23<sup>rd</sup>. Even late June can provide surprises and so an Icterine Warbler and a female Red-backed Shrike arrived on 25<sup>th</sup> but the biggest surprise must have been to find a Short-eared Owl in the Gully trap!!

**STOP PRESS!** Even July can provide surprises. A male Nightjar in the New Plantation showed extremely well as it sat on the wooden pallets, ALL DAY on 18<sup>th</sup>, before flying off in the evening. An adult Arctic Warbler was found at Barkland the following day!

### Seabirds

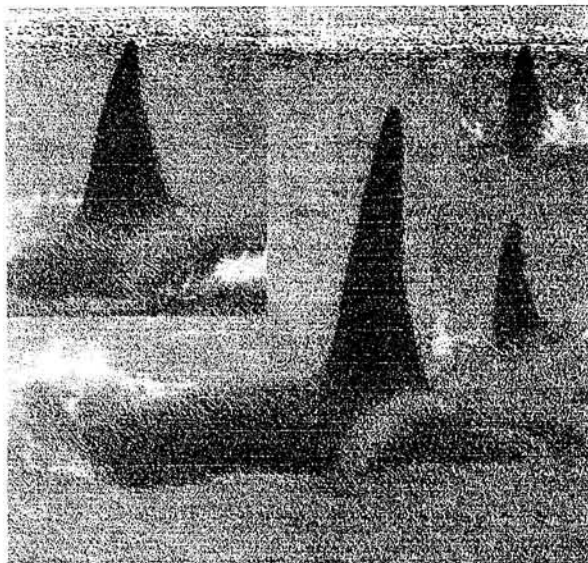
The 2002 breeding season is nearing the end and will not go down as a particularly successful one! Although species such as Guillemot and Razorbill appear to have fledged

in good numbers, others have not done so well. It seems that no Arctic Terns will fledge and there was a high failure rate amongst the Kittiwakes too. It would appear that once again it is the shortage of Sandeels which is to blame. However unlike last year when the Sandeels disappeared in mid-June resulting in a very high mortality of chicks, there was an apparent shortage much earlier in the season this year which meant that many birds abandoned nests much earlier – whilst still building or at the egg stage! A more comprehensive round-up will appear in the next newsletter.

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### Orca Extravaganza!!

Moving on from birds, the non-ornithological highlight of the season (so far, at least) has to be the pod of 10 Killer Whales seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> June. They were initially spotted off North Light, but despite a frantic dash by all concerned they had moved around the coast by the time everyone arrived. A quick drive to South Light paid off with fantastic views as the pod came round the corner at the Holms. They were very close in and showed extremely well at times, even chasing seals right next to the shoreline, before heading off in a South-easterly direction.



## **ISLAND EVENTS**

### **Jubilee celebrations**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June the island community gathered for the celebration of the Queen's Jubilee. The film of the Queen's visit to Fair Isle in 1962, was shown at the Community Hall, followed by the lighting of a beacon on Vaassetter. This beacon was one of many lit all down the coastline of Britain. However, the Fair Isle weather can never be relied upon, and the blanket fog prevented the beacon being seen, even from the road!

### **Swan Trip to Orkney**

The older Fair Isle school children had a real treat when they travelled on the Swan (a renovated 100 year old sailing ship) to Orkney. The five day trip started from Fair Isle and took them around some of the Orkney islands. They set off in the pouring rain and it even thundered as they sailed away! Needless to say, nearly all of them succumbed to sea-sickness, but recovered in time to enjoy a busy few days visiting the sights of Orkney.

### **Sad farewell**

The departure of any residents of Fair Isle is always met with sadness, but in the case of Emma Perring, Ewen Thompson and their delightful children, Martha and Harry, their move to Shetland this summer has come as a real blow to us all. Happily, Shetland is only across the water and we hope to see them regularly, back on the isle visiting family and friends. Emma has already started her new job working for Shetland Islands Council and she will be joined by Ewen, Martha and Harry in August. It goes without saying that we will all miss them very much but we

wish them the best of luck and happiness in their new home.

### **Happy hello!**

The sadness of people departing from the community is in some way alleviated by the arrival of new folk. In March, Barkland croft was again filled with the noise and bustle of a new family, when Glen Tyler, his wife Gina and their children Max and Kate moved to the island. They are, of course, familiar faces here, as Glen was Assistant Warden and Gina was Assistant Cook at FIBO some years ago. Gina is also the sister of Pat Thompson at Lower Stoneybrek.

### **New Royle House**

Those of you who have visited Fair Isle this year, will have noticed the construction of a new building between Kenaby and Busta. This house is being built for David Royle, a regular visitor to the island over many years, who will be moving here as soon as the house is complete.

### **Island Insights**

Another two groups of visitors travelled to Fair Isle this summer to take part in our special activity holiday. The first week was so popular, we filled all the spaces and then opened up a second week. The participants took part in islander-led guided walks on archaeology, weather watching, crofting and wild flowers. The FIBO Ranger kept them busy with seabird walks, skua 'sweeps' and Puffin ringing, whilst the rest of their time was taken up with craft and museum visits, slideshows and quizzes.

### **Fair Isle Thursdays**

A new venture was embarked upon this season, with the introduction of 'Fair Isle Thursdays'. Once a fortnight during May, June, July and August, the Observatory hosts an evening of entertainment. These evenings start at 8pm with a slideshow by an Islander, followed by live music and/or singing by one of the Fair Isle bands. The success of this event is plain to see, with an average of 50 people at each evening – there were nearly 90 people on one occasion! In fact 'Fair Isle Thursdays' are so popular we are already planning to host them again next year and may well extend them into the latter part of this season also.

### **Fair Isle Folk Festival**

Music has certainly played a major role in the activities on the isle this year. This was certainly the case during early July when a three day Folk Festival was hosted on the isle. Visiting musicians joined local performers, such as Lowri's String and Frideray, for three nights and days of talented and inspiring entertainment. Traditional music from home grown violinists, accordionists and singers was alternated with operatic vocals from Irish singer Cliona Cassidy, country singing by Dean Owens from Edinburgh and an electrifying performance from the Shetland fiddle group, Fiddler's Bid. Story Telling in the Museum, an afternoon concert in the church and even an impromptu outdoor concert on Sunday afternoon all contributed to a fantastic and memorable weekend.

### **Classic Fair Isle**

Continuing with the musical theme, the final preparations for 'Classic Fair Isle' are now being put into place. The first performance of this piece of music, commissioned by the island

community and written by Alastair Stout, will take place on the isle on 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

### **Special Offers at FIBO**

FIBO are promoting two half price offers this season. The first is from 5<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> August inclusive, whilst the second is from 11<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> October inclusive. These offers mean that you can stay at the Observatory during these periods for just £21 per night in a single room on a FULL BOARD basis. Twin and dormitory accommodation is also half price, making a trip to Fair Isle extremely good value. The August offer period is filling fast, but we do have some availability of all room types. The October offer period is also currently available in all room types. So, if you were not planning a visit to the isle this year, maybe this is just the incentive you need to reconsider?

### **Plans for the Plantation**

At the time of going to press, the Plantation trap is being demolished in preparation for a total re-build.

### **New Lines in FIBO Shop**

In addition to the famous FIBO t-shirts and sweatshirts, we now sell baseball caps and fleece hats, in a range of colours, with the flying skua logo and the words Fair Isle Bird Observatory embroidered on them. FIBO mugs, with the same design printed on them are also available. Baseball caps are £6, fleece hats are £8 and mugs are £5 – all items incur a small additional postage and packaging cost.

As always, please feel free to contact Hollie or Deryk, anytime to discuss any aspect of a visit to Fair Isle. To be kept up to date with the latest bird sightings, don't forget to check the website: [www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk](http://www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk)

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