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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by

Alan Bull, Hollie & Deryk 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

With the season having just come to a close, it is time to report on another successful year here at the Bird Observatory. The last of the autumn migrants are still arriving, but both staff and visitors have now departed.

Within this newsletter is a summary of the seabird breeding season, a roundup of observatory and island events since the Spring and an account of the Autumn's migration.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the newsletter and hopefully we will see most of you on Fair Isle, either in 2003 or in the near future.

Your continued support is much valued and greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Deryk and Hollie
(Warden and Administrator)

Staff changes!

As always, staffing the Observatory for six months has its ups and downs. This season proved to be no exception with a large element of bad luck on the domestic side. As originally planned, Rebekah Warner left in late June as child-minder and was replaced by Ruth Cleeves in early July. Ruth stayed on until early September when she left to go to college

and Rebekah returned to complete the season. Both girls were fantastic and the children loved them.

In the kitchen, Sheila McKeever unfortunately broke her leg whilst out walking and everybody had to rally around washing up and cleaning in her six week absence. Thankfully, through her sheer determination, she was back working before the September rush and was with us until the end of the season. Gillian Newman also had to leave around the same time due to illness and returned to New Zealand. This left us very short staffed, but Hollie stepped into her shoes and cooked on Lois' days off until mid-September, when Ann Prior arrived for three weeks to relieve the pressure.

Every staff member worked very hard during this difficult period and a big thank-you goes to all. Special thanks go to Lois, Becki and Alan who worked many extra hours.

Ornithology

Seabirds

2002 turned out to be a below average breeding season for the local seabirds but nowhere near as disastrous as the previous year.

Again there appears to have been a dearth of sandeels in Fair Isle waters. However, this year the disappearance appears to have happened earlier in the season than it did in 2001. This has perhaps benefited the birds in one way in that many just did not even attempt to breed, rather than suffer losses midway through the season (after inputting huge individual effort) as was the case last season. A summary of the breeding success of each species is provided below (Table 1). The remainder of Shetland had an equally poor (or in many cases worse) season. There is definitely something going on in Shetland waters to the detriment of the local seabird populations and it appears to be linked to the food supply i.e. sandeels. Remarkably, reports from Orkney suggest that seabirds there have had the most productive season for many, many years. Further investigation is urgently required.

Table 1: Summary of breeding success of Fair Isle's Seabirds in 2002 - as measured at annual monitoring plots.

Species	Productivity	Previous 10yr mean	Notes
Fulmar	0.47	0.43	Best since 1995.
Gannet	0.61	0.71	Largest no. AON on monitoring plots. Only species still expanding.
Shag	1.98	1.42	Lowest no. AON but highest productivity.
Great Skua	0.16	0.89	Disastrous. Many territorial pairs appeared not to have nested at all. Previous lowest prod. was 0.5-0.8 in 1992.
Arctic Skua	0.28	0.65	Another poor year with no. of territories down 23% on 2001 to 60.
Kittiwake	0.42	0.91	Lowest no. AON and poor prod. but vast improvement on 2001 (0.06).
Arctic Tern	0.00	0.38	Down from 2,836 AIA in 2001 to 114 but resulting in the same complete failure.
Guillemot	0.72	0.74	Consistently successful. However, fledging weights of chicks suggests post-fledging survival may be poor.
Razorbill	0.63	0.62	Average figure but fledging weights were low.
Puffin	0.74	0.67*	Overestimate as late first-checks of burrows meant early failures would have been missed. *Includes 2001 figure of 0.31.

Productivity = number of chicks fledged per AON/AIA/Territory. AON=Apparently Occupied Nest. AIA=Apparently Incubating Adult.

Autumn migration

Typically, July started off fairly quiet. However, a very young juvenile Cuckoo was trapped at the Observatory and thought to be from a rare breeding attempt, a suspicion confirmed when it was seen to be fed by Meadow Pipits! Another surprise capture was an Icterine Warbler on the 5th. The first Storm Petrels

of the year were seen from the Good Shepherd on the 8th, which prompted a 'Stormy' session resulting in the capture of 13 Storm Petrels and a single Leach's Petrel (our earliest ever). There was little else to report during this period as work was still focussed on seabirds, but a few returning waders were noted with Greenshank (10th), Bar-tailed Godwit (13th) and Sanderling (14th). Also present on 14th were 34 Black-headed Gulls, an early Fieldfare, Song Thrush and a summering Rook. The highlights of the 15th were a first-summer Hobby in the south of the island and a female Crossbill at the Observatory – the vanguard to another invasion year. The 18th was an excellent day when a Nightjar was flushed from the New Plantation – the first record since one found dead in July 1996. The 19th proved to be even better when an adult Arctic Warbler was discovered at Barkland. It was a fairly mobile individual, but showed well for that morning. This was the second Fair Isle mid-summer record of a species usually recorded in September! A quiet week followed but a summer-plumaged Black-throated Diver was seen from the Good Shepherd on the morning of the 25th and a Leach's Petrel was trapped that night. A Wood Warbler was in Meadow Burn on the 29th but, more impressively, four Killer Whales were seen off North Light. They were seen again the following day when another adult Arctic Warbler was found - again at Barkland.

August started with the discovery of a fine male Two-barred Crossbill at Wirvie on the 2nd. A Little Stint was at South Lighthouse on the 3rd, an early Lesser Whitethroat was at Schoolton on the 5th and a Wood Warbler was at the Chalet on the 8th. This day also produced the first 'fall' of the autumn, which included counts of four Crossbills, 199 Oystercatchers, 179 Common Gulls and single Green Sandpiper and Teal. A Shoveler was on Field Pond on the 9th as Wood Warblers increased to two and were joined by the autumn's first Whinchat, Sedge Warbler, Willow Warbler and Pied Flycatcher. More migrants appeared on the 10th with Reed Warbler, two Lesser Whitethroats, four Garden Warblers and 17 Crossbills, but the highlight was our earliest ever autumn

Citrine Wagtail. The first Ruff of the year was found on the 11th followed the next day by another year tick – Barred Warbler - three birds were seen (including one trapped) whilst Crossbill numbers increased to 50. The Citrine Wagtail re-appeared on the 13th when numbers of Crossbills again increased (to 60 birds) and another Barred Warbler was found. The first Melodious Warbler since 1998 was trapped on the 14th and another Citrine Wagtail was at South Lighthouse on the 16th when a family party of four Two-barred Crossbills were discovered on Dronger. This constitutes the biggest 'flock' seen on Fair Isle. They showed very well at times and stayed around until the 19th, when autumn really started. Rarities included a Corncrake, Turtle Dove, two Wrynecks, four Barred Warblers, female Red-backed Shrike and a Marsh Harrier! Counts included four Swifts, four Whinchats, five Reed Warblers, five Lesser Whitethroats, 23 Garden Warblers and 17 Willow Warblers. The following day a Thrush Nightingale (usually a bird you expect to see in spring) was found at Utra. Two new Two-barred Crossbills were discovered in Gilsetter on the 22nd, when Barred Warblers hit a peak of seven birds and two Wrynecks, seven Reed Warblers, seven Garden Warblers and 14 Willow Warblers were also recorded. The wind was firmly in the east on the 23rd when two Greenish Warblers were discovered around Midway (one of which remained on the isle until the 25th). Supporting cast on this day were; Turtle Dove, five Wrynecks, five Barred Warblers, two Common Rosefinches, 123 Crossbills whilst counts of common migrants included two Tree Pipits, five Whinchats, nine Garden Warblers and 50 Willow Warblers. Common migrants were around in good numbers until the 25th when an invasion of butterflies occurred – several hundred Painted Ladies and Red Admirals were counted but the true number must have run into the thousands! Other scarce migrants around this time included a Marsh Warbler and Wood Warbler on the 24th, three Common Rosefinches and Ortolan Bunting on the 25th and an Icterine Warbler on the 26th. A quieter couple of days followed but were enlivened by the

rediscovery of the Thrush Nightingale at Barkland on 27th. The wind then switched to the west but birds still managed to struggle in. A Common Rosefinch was found on the 28th and an Icterine Warbler on the 29th. Two Citrine Wagtails were discovered on the 31st (at opposite ends of the island) and three early Lapland Buntings plus an Ortolan Bunting were also noted whilst sea-watching produced five Sooty and three Manx Shearwaters.

September started in style with Fair Isle's seventh record of Buff-breasted Sandpiper discovered at North Light. The 2nd was not a day to look for land-birds and attention switched to the sea. Sea-watchers were rewarded with 11 Sooty Shearwaters and six Manx Shearwaters. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper was also still present and 66 Snipe was a notable influx. The 4th was a real red-letter day when an adult female Chestnut Bunting was discovered at Quoy - the seventh record for Britain (or potentially the first!). Unfortunately this species is known to be common in captivity, so it will be a struggle to have its origins proven. Also on 4th were; six Barred Warblers, Marsh Warbler, Common Rosefinch, six Lapland Buntings, Turtle Dove and Wryneck, along with good numbers of common migrants. A quiet 5th saw the Chestnut Bunting still present, a Stonechat on Ward Hill and a Water Rail at Setter. The autumn's first House Martin and Redstart were found on the 6th, but the 7th was another good day when an early Lanceolated Warbler was trapped in the Plantation in the morning and two Common Cranes were found at Setter in the afternoon. The eighth and last Two-barred Crossbill of a splendid year for this species was found on the 8th – a male at Barkland. Sightings on the 9th included 16 Grey Herons, a Corncrake, Jack Snipe, Redwing, Grasshopper Warbler, and 18 Garden Warblers. The 10th was memorable for the number of migrants around including; 10 Grey Herons, 11 Whinchats, 25 Garden Warblers, 18 Blackcaps, 18 Chaffinches, 42 Crossbills and 23 Lapland Buntings, but also a Siberian Stonechat, a Richard's Pipit and a Bluethroat. Two Turtle Doves were discovered on the 11th, before fog rolled in for a few days and quietened things down,

however a Red-breasted Flycatcher was found on the 14th and a Common Nightingale on the 17th (despite winds being in the west). The relatively quiet spell was finally broken on 21st when a River Warbler was trapped in the Vaadal. More rarities followed on 22nd with another Citrine Wagtail (fifth of the year) and two Red-breasted Flycatchers. A Scaup was found on the 23rd when the first skeins of geese were observed (110 Pink-footed Geese counted) and twenty Lapland Buntings and two Snow Buntings were also seen. The 24th produced a Rosy Starling at Aesterhoull, a Grasshopper Warbler and the autumn's first Chiffchaff. Although not typical to Fair Isle at this time of year, westerly winds persisted. Despite this, rarities were still found. Two Pechora Pipits were found after lunch on the 26th at Skerryholm and were often seen together! The Rosy Starling, a Red-backed Shrike and three Barred Warblers were almost ignored! A 'wintry' 28th saw 13 Whooper Swans, 600 Pink-footed Geese and nine Lapland Buntings heading south. Perhaps the bird of the autumn was found on 29th – a superb White's Thrush frequenting the cliffs at Klinger's Geo. This, the seventh Fair Isle record of this eastern thrush, was a surprise for one lucky Assistant Warden and was watched in awe by many others (but unfortunately not the unlucky 24 visitors who had left the previous day!!!). Although fading into insignificance 600 Pink-footed Geese, 64 Greylags and a single Barnacle Goose were also seen, along with a Short-eared Owl. The White's Thrush was still present on the 30th when amazingly an Alpine Swift was found. It gave ridiculously good views as it fed along the cliff-top at North Light and was another seventh record, but first in autumn. A Hawfinch in the Plantation and small numbers of common migrants rounded off a good day.

October picked up from where September had left, with the Rosy Starling, Red-backed Shrike and Hawfinch remaining and skeins of geese continuing to arrive. Mixed in with these was a 'taiga' Bean Goose found near Malcolm's Head on the 1st (a bird which still remains – in mid-November). The 2nd produced the first, long-awaited, Yellow-browed Warbler at

Guidicum and a small fall that included 16 Jack Snipe and 80 Redwings. Highlights of the 3rd – 4th included a Corncrake at Midway, a Red-breasted Flycatcher at Field, three Barred Warblers, 35 Jack Snipe (another impressive autumn for this species) and two Short-eared Owls. The 5th produced the third Pechora Pipit of the autumn, at Barkland (which remained on the isle until the 7th), followed the next day by a Lanceolated Warbler at the Haa – two Fair Isle 'specialities' in two days! The 7th saw a calm day dawn with two Brent Geese over the Observatory and four Yellow-browed Warblers in the south, but strengthening easterly winds boosted this count to eight and small numbers of common migrants had also arrived by late that afternoon. Good numbers of migrants were counted on the 8th. Two Common Cranes over the island (remaining until the 11th) were the rarities and counts included 250 Blackbirds, 200 Song Thrushes, 1500 Redwings, 90 Bramblings, 70 Greenfinches and a record count of 20 Goldfinches! This was a short-lived record though as 27 were counted the following day! A Great Grey Shrike at Pund and two Yellow-browed Warblers were also noted, as well as a Long-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. The 10th produced yet another Lanceolated Warbler and an increase to 13 Short-eared Owls. Other highlights included two Shovelers, a Moorhen and a late Arctic Tern whilst good numbers of thrushes and finches were also still present. Two year-ticks were found on the 11th – an Olive-backed Pipit and a Stock Dove – which broke the magic 200! A Buzzard was found on the west cliffs on the 14th and was seen heading for North Ronaldsay on the 15th in the company of a ringtail Hen Harrier! The latter date also produced a Spotted Crake at Neder Taft, two Moorhen, three Long-eared Owls and two Black Redstarts – all typical mid-October birds! The 16th produced a mini-fall with Stock Dove, 13 Short-eared Owls and 21 Goldcrests. However, two Shorelarks in the North (remaining until the 19th) were both a welcome year-tick and splendid birds to watch. Sea-watching on a windy 17th produced a Velvet Scoter and 14 Great Skuas past South Light. The following day produced a Spotted

Redshank at South Light and an influx of Common Redpolls totalling 25 birds. Not surprisingly, an Arctic Redpoll was found at Guidicum on the 19th in the company of its Mealy cousins! Much more unexpectedly though was a Lanceolated Warbler (the year's fourth) seen briefly in the Meadow Burn. Slavonian Grebe and Little Auk on the 20th were both year-ticks and were accompanied by 120 Skylarks, 60 Robins, 280 Song Thrushes and four Goldfinches on the isle. A very late Swallow on the 21st was followed by two Fair Isle rarities – a Black-bellied Dipper on 23rd (which remained until early November) and a Grey Phalarope in South Harbour on the 24th (remaining until 28th). The Grey Phalarope was the first to be seen from land since 1991! Eleven Blackcaps and three Chiffchaffs on the 25th gave hope of a late arrival of migrants. Hundreds of thrushes continued to arrive but as October gave way to November (and a southeasterly gale) this increased to thousands. The 2nd of November will be remembered not only for the number of birds present sheer but also the strength of the wind which made counting them extremely difficult! Over 3,000 Fieldfare, 2,000 Redwing, 700 Blackbird, 80 Song Thrush and two Ring Ouzel were counted, but also "the largest number of Woodcock seen on the isle for many years" - 200 were counted on the hill by one islander! Also sheltering from the wind were our latest ever Barred Warbler and the first Northern Bullfinch of the year. Thrush numbers have gradually dwindled since then but have been boosted by further smaller arrivals meaning that several hundred are still present in mid-November. The 4th saw two Velvet Scoters pass South Light whilst ten Goldeneye, two late Ringed Plovers, two Reed Bunting and a Black Redstart were also seen. The large numbers of Little Gulls that had been reported off the east coast of Britain gave hope that one may reach Fair Isle and so it was that early morning of 5th saw not one but *four* Little Gulls in the Havens – a record count! Two in South Harbour later that day may have been different but another on 7th most certainly was! Twelve Blackcaps and a Wheatear on 5th showed that autumn was

not yet over whilst 100 Snow Buntings on 7th hinted otherwise! The 9th produced four 'siberian' Chiffchaffs – very clean greyish birds with not a hint of green! Typical late autumn fare were Water Rail (2), Rook and Yellowhammer on 11th whilst Little Auks offshore on 12th & 13th were also to be expected but a summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver on 14th was not! Further arrivals on 17th included two Moorhen, Jackdaw, Black Redstart and Bullfinch whilst Snow Buntings reached 115. The best however was the Coot in Meadow Burn that brought the year list to an impressive 212 species – second only to the 214 of 1992! Is there still time?

Other News

Plantation Trap Repairs!

At the start of the 2002 season it was decided that the Plantation trap, in desperate need of major repair, was to be completely taken down and re-built!

Work started in early August when the wire fence was removed, the frame was taken down and the telegraph posts were dug out. Luckily there was enough old wood for us to enjoy an impromptu bonfire on North Haven beach!

Some of the trees were cut down to make room for new growth and the dead trees were placed alongside the Vaadal stream to provide a 'habitat corridor' between the Plantation and Vaadal traps which will hopefully increase the catching potential of the latter trap. Re-building began with the telegraph posts being concreted back in, followed by construction of the rest of the frame, covering the whole in wire mesh and finally re-attaching a ramp and all-important catching box. The whole was then painted with wood preservative, an aesthetically pleasing, Forest Green.

The bulk of the work was carried out by the two Assistant Wardens, Paul French and Simon Pinder, but several visitors (who just happened to be joiners!) spent many hours offering advice and lending a hand. Thank you! Mark, Steve and Toby!

It was completed in early October (in time for the easterly winds!) and has so far survived the first test - very severe winter storms in early November but will hopefully withstand many, many more!!?

ISLAND EVENTS

Fair Isle Folk Festival

The 5th-8th July saw an event labelled as a 'Festival of Music and Culture' held on the island, where more than 100 visitors descended on the isle for a weekend of lively music! There were full-blown concerts and dancing on the Friday and Saturday nights, with Fair Isle's own bands 'Friderey' and 'Lowri's String', being joined by Shetland bands 'Fiddler's Bid', 'Hom Bru' and 'Da Fustra' and an accordion set from Martin Green and Fair Isle's own Inge Thomson. The daytime was for more informal sessions, with the likes of Irish opera singer Cliona Cassidy and country singer Dean Owens from Edinburgh. The weekend had everything – except of course the chance to catch up on sleep! A bar was set up in the Community Hall – where most of the events took place, ensuring singers and spectators didn't go dry! The weather held out, with sunshine throughout the whole weekend (resulting in an outdoor concert on the Sunday afternoon). The weekend was a huge success and we hope that it happens again in the near future!

School booklet

As part of the Ranger Service, the Ranger and Administrator visited the school for a series of lessons based on an environmental theme and relevant to Fair Isle. This year we are producing a booklet with the children based on their own ideas and thoughts about Fair Isle and its Natural History. It is hoped that these booklets can be sold to visitors to help raise money for both school funds and the Observatory.

Bird bags needed!

Once again we would like to appeal to any 'Friends' who would be willing to make some bird bags. These bags are necessary for carrying birds safely from the traps to the ringing room. As you can imagine, they get heavily used and worn and a new supply is needed again. Old sheets and pillowcases are an ideal source of material. The ideal bag size is approximately 8 inches wide and 10

inches long (although slight size variations do not matter too much). Preferably, the bags should have folded seams and a draw string around the top hem which, when pulled tight, has enough string to tie around the top of the bag. It does not matter what colour the bags are or how few you make – every little helps! Please send any bags to us here at the Observatory. Thank you.

Web success!

This year saw the web-site become even more popular with just over 500 visitors each day!

New pages have been added and the bird sightings and pictures pages are updated daily throughout the peak migration periods. If you haven't 'logged on' yet then please visit us at:

www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk

Peak season vacancies

The Observatory still has vacancies for September 2003. If you are interested in this or any other dates during 2003, please call Hollie at the Observatory. For details of special offers during August and October, please visit our web-site or speak to Hollie.

Staff Vacancies

There are many jobs available at the Bird Observatory for 2003. Assistant Wardens, catering/domestic staff and a child-minder are required from April – October. For details please call Deryk or Hollie, or e-mail us at the Observatory.

And Finally!

We are constantly striving to improve the facilities and services we offer to guests. So if you stayed with us recently we would love to hear from you with your comments and any suggestions on how we can (within our limited resources) make Fair Isle an even more enjoyable place for yourselves and others to stay. Thank you for your continued support and please remember to renew your subscription to FIBO (due on 1st April) or why not change to a Direct Debit or Banker's Order? If you would like more information on any aspect of FIBO, please contact Hollie at the Observatory.
