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# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

*Edited by*

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As another season at the Observatory draws to an end, it is once again time to inform all 'Friends' of the main news from the latter half of the season. Another autumn full of rarities is drawing to a close and it is with baited breath that we await spring 2004!

Within this newsletter is a summary of the autumn migration, an update of the seabird breeding year and a roundup of Observatory and island events since July's newsletter.

We hope you enjoy reading this newsletter and hopefully we will see some of you in the near future.

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

Deryk and Hollie  
(Warden and Administrator)

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## Ornithology - autumn migration

After an excellent spring for rare migrants, it was with much anticipation that we waited for the autumn to get going! Autumn started on the 18<sup>th</sup> July when an early Icterine Warbler was found in the Plantation. A confiding Wood Sandpiper on Field Pond (23<sup>rd</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup>) was a nice year-tick whilst good numbers of Black-headed Gulls passing through attracted a real rarity onto the island, with a Little Gull at

Skerryholm (28<sup>th</sup>). This was nothing to prepare us for the 30<sup>th</sup> though, when a Scops Owl (first island record) was caught in the Plantation!

August started well with good numbers of gulls passing through the island with counts of 271 Common Gulls and 65 Black-headed Gulls on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Waders were also on the move with 137 Oystercatchers, 4 Greenshank and 5 Ruff on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 115 Redshank and 3 Whimbrel on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Sea-watching on the latter date produced 4 Manx Shearwaters and 5 'commic' Terns. Seven Crossbills on the 4<sup>th</sup> were not the vanguards to another invasion, but to a steady passage through the month. A Sedge Warbler on the 7<sup>th</sup> was the first warbler of the month, followed the next day by a Barred Warbler at the shop. Waders and gulls were still passing through with 210 Common Gulls on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 3 Green Sandpipers and 2 Black-tailed Godwits on the 10<sup>th</sup>. A light south-westerly wind on the 13<sup>th</sup> brought a good arrival of waders to the island with 85 Turnstone, 24 Curlew and 39 Dunlin. However, cream of the crop was the adult Semi-palmated Sandpiper in Kirki Geo - only the second Fair Isle record following one in May 1992. The Sandpiper could not be found the following day, but a new arrival of waders included 36 Purple Sandpipers and 15 Sanderlings. The first 'fall' of the autumn in light and variable winds saw 145 Wheatears logged along with 58 Skylarks. The 18<sup>th</sup> saw another small arrival with 12 Willow Warblers, a Fieldfare, Barred Warbler, Chiffchaff and Mealy Redpoll. The following day produced more waders as the wind switched to the south-west, with 179 Redshank, 12 Knot and a Common Sandpiper. More sea-watching on the 21<sup>st</sup> included 4 Manx Shearwaters, 2 Sooty Shearwaters and 45 Kittiwakes. Light and variable winds persisted for a few days with small numbers of common migrants passing through, but the 24<sup>th</sup> provided much interest when a Marsh Warbler was found at Setter and, more unusually, an escaped Saker Falcon was found in the trapping area. This latter bird had previously spent some time at Sullom Voe where it was captured on CCTV cameras! Counts of migrants included 10 Wigeon, 5

Garden Warblers, 2 Lesser Whitethroats, 2 Pied Flycatchers and a Bar-tailed Godwit. The Saker was still present on the 25<sup>th</sup> when a Nightingale was found at Quoy. Another arrival included 24 Grey Herons, 15 Cormorants, 11 Teal, 6 Whinchat, 4 House Martins, a Barred Warbler and a Grasshopper Warbler. Three Barred Warblers and 2 Common Rosefinches were the birds of the day on the 26<sup>th</sup> with counts of 10 Sanderling, 340 Skylark, 10 White Wagtails, 2 Great Northern Divers, 2 Sand Martins and a Wood Warbler. The remaining few days of the month were quiet, with a Wryneck on the 30<sup>th</sup> being the highlight. August then, was fairly quiet, surely September would be better.....

.....It was! Although the winds were generally un-favourable, coming from the west or south-west, migrants were evident and any switch to the east produced almost instant rarities! The opening day of the month logged 16 Swallows, 8 Dunlin, 3 House Martins and a Redstart followed by two days of quiet and another arrival on the 4<sup>th</sup> consisting of a Marsh Warbler at Barkland, 30 White Wagtails, Moorhen, Black Redstart, Sedge Warbler and a Spotted Flycatcher. The 5<sup>th</sup> produced a long-awaited Ortolan Bunting in Gilsetter, a Turtle Dove and counts of 350 Meadow Pipits, 300 Twite and 37 Ringed Plovers. Rarities were thin on the ground though so a 'double whammy' of Citrine Wagtail and Yellow-breasted Bunting on the 7<sup>th</sup> were both very welcome!

The following day dawned with classic 'fall' conditions and it was evident that a small arrival of migrants had touched down. Census of the island produced 20 Willow Warblers, 10 Garden Warblers, 7 Lesser Whitethroats, 6 Whinchats, 3 Barred Warblers, 2 Robins, a Spotted Redshank and a fly-by Pomarine Skua! However, bird of the day was an early Lanceolated Warbler in Schoolton Ditch, unfortunately only admired by its finder! Two Wrynecks on the 9<sup>th</sup> with 16 Goldcrests, a Water Rail, Scaup (year-tick) and Sedge Warbler made for a frustrating day's birding, without the hoped for rarity. Fortunately we didn't have to wait too long as a Blyth's Reed Warbler was trapped in the Plantation on the 11<sup>th</sup>. It remained in the Observatory garden until the 17<sup>th</sup>. Other

new birds on the 11<sup>th</sup> included another Lanceolated Warbler, 3 Yellow-browed Warblers and a good count of 19 Pied Flycatchers. A quiet few days followed with the highlights being a Bluethroat and 5 Common Rosefinches (12<sup>th</sup>), Corncrake (13<sup>th</sup>) and a Pomarine Skua (14<sup>th</sup>). The 15<sup>th</sup> was a better day with an arrival of migrants which included 65 Golden Plovers, 16 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, 12 Lapland Buntings, Bluethroat, 5 Blackcaps, the year's first Lesser Redpoll, a Short-eared Owl and a fine Pectoral Sandpiper on Field Pond. South-westerly winds persisted over the next few days, but a fly-over Red-throated Pipit on the 17<sup>th</sup> was a nice find and was possibly associated with the large arrival of Meadow Pipits counted (700 birds). Other counts included 240 Pink-footed Geese, 38 Wigeon and 16 Siskins. The Good Shepherd IV produced a Leach's Petrel and 15 Storm Petrels on the crossing. A switch to north-easterly winds on the 18<sup>th</sup> produced a good count of 4 Wood Warblers and a Spotted Crake was at Burkle. The 19<sup>th</sup> was once again a windy day, but a Bean Goose was an excellent find in the Parks. Another switch to north-easterly winds on the 20<sup>th</sup> and once again birds arrived almost instantly. A Citrine Wagtail was found at Setter and an Arctic Warbler showed very well at Leogh. 'Supporting cast' included 8 Yellow-browed Warblers, 4 Red-breasted Flycatchers and a Bluethroat. There was no let up on the 21<sup>st</sup> when a Lanceolated Warbler was found in the Meadow Burn and a new Bluethroat joined the existing bird in Homisdale. The good spell continued the following day with a stunning Arctic Redpoll at South Light (which showed down to a few feet), a Grey Phalarope in the Havens and a Little Bunting (remaining until the 26<sup>th</sup>) at the Haa. Numbers of common migrants were not in good supply and a switch back to north-westerly winds halted any last chance of a big fall. As the weather turned wintry, a first-winter Iceland Gull was found in the Havens on the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> saw 2 Little Auks fly past Bunness and 15 Lapland Buntings touch down on the Airstrip. The wind finally switched to a south/south-easterly on the 27<sup>th</sup>, producing a Slavonian Grebe (a welcome year-tick) and a fine Black

Redstart. The 28<sup>th</sup> however, was an excellent day's bird watching with reasonable counts of migrants and a few rarities! A Lanceolated Warbler in the Gilly Burn started things off nicely, quickly followed by the discovery of a Blyth's Reed Warbler in Guidicum – the second of the year. Counts of migrants included 2 Red-breasted Flycatchers, 8 Yellow-browed Warblers, 55 Redwing, 45 Brambling, 8 Lesser Whitethroats, 5 Garden Warblers, 4 Crossbills, 3 Chiffchaffs and 2 Redstarts. Another Lanceolated Warbler was discovered on the 29<sup>th</sup>, again in the Gilly Burn, but this bird was obviously darker and more heavily streaked than the bird of the 28<sup>th</sup>. A Citrine Wagtail was found feeding with the cows at Quoy and showed exceptionally well whilst a count of 30 Jack Snipe was nice. The Gilly Burn once again produced a rare *Locustella* warbler on the 30<sup>th</sup>, as a Savi's Warbler was found and trapped there. This was only the sixth Fair Isle record, the first in autumn and possibly belonged to one of the eastern races.

September, although a classic month for rarities, felt quite slow. Was October going to set a quicker pace?

The wind was from the western quarter for the first eleven days of the month which didn't raise spirits! However, there's always sea-watching and a Velvet Scoter along with 3 Little Auks on the 1<sup>st</sup> was just reward. Despite the wind direction 2 Marsh Warblers, 2 Bluethroats, 2 Wrynecks, 3 Common Rosefinches, 8 Yellow-browed Warblers and a Little Bunting were found proving that you should never give up, whatever the weather. The 2<sup>nd</sup> was a much quieter day, but an Arctic Redpoll was found on Burrashield in amongst the Twite flock. The Arctic Redpoll was still there on the 3<sup>rd</sup> as 200 'Icelandic' Redwings arrived on land and 13 Whooper Swans flew over. More wildfowl on the 4<sup>th</sup> included 128 Greylag Geese and 4 Tufted Ducks, but an adult Iceland Gull outside the Observatory provided rarity value. A calmer day dawned on the 5<sup>th</sup>, with a sunny, clear sky encouraging movement of migrants. Visible migration included 220 Skylarks, 100 Snow Buntings and 140 Barnacle Geese. The hoped for rarity was also found – a Pechora Pipit at Quoy. It remained there until the 14<sup>th</sup>, running

around in the cabbages and showing well to its admirers! More sea-watching on the 6<sup>th</sup>, as the wind blew once again, produced 5 Puffins, 21 Guillemots, 19 Great Skuas, a Storm Petrel and 2 Great Northern Divers. Another adult Iceland Gull was found in Finnequoy bay. The next few days were really quiet as the winds increased, but 2 Little Auks flew past on the 7<sup>th</sup>. The westerly winds finally paid off on the 10<sup>th</sup> as an un-identified *Calidrid* wader was finally pinned down at Barkland and identified as a fine White-rumped Sandpiper – the third record for Fair Isle. A Glaucous Gull, Scaup and 6 Little Auks were also found. The Sandpiper was still present on the 11<sup>th</sup> – a day when 4 more Little Auks flew past and 6 Lapland Buntings were found. The wind finally switched to the south-east on the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> and results were immediate. The morning census found the west cliffs alive with Goldcrests and 180 birds (minimum) were counted along with 120 Bramblings, 45 Greenfinches, 21 Wood Pigeons, 6 Lesser Whitethroats and 2 late Pied Flycatchers. Rarities were provided by 4 Richard's Pipits (remaining until the 18<sup>th</sup>), 3 Pallas's Warblers (2 remaining until the 15<sup>th</sup>), a Red-breasted Flycatcher and the fifth Fair Isle record of Radde's Warbler, which showed briefly in the Kirm O' Skroo. There was no let up on the 14<sup>th</sup> as a further arrival of eastern migrants included a Paddyfield Warbler on Lemess and counts of 1000 Redwing, 35 Blackcaps, 21 Jack Snipe, 7 Ring Ouzels, a Barred Warbler and a 'blythii' Lesser Whitethroat. However, nothing prepared us for the find in the Neder Taft garden, as reports of a strange Sparrow/Bunting had us all in a muddle as to its identification. On prolonged views it proved to be Britain's third record of Savannah Sparrow – from America! This stripy Sparrow remained faithful to the small garden (and the seed pile put out for Greenfinches) and stayed on the island until the 19<sup>th</sup>. Its arrival enticed a few twitchers onto the island and some even made the journey from the Isles of Scilly! Migrants continued to arrive on the 15<sup>th</sup> as counts included 1000 Fieldfare, 300 Blackbirds, 100 Snipe, 90 Song Thrushes, 30 Robins, 20 Woodcock



and 10 Chaffinches - but no rarities. These were to follow.....

A bright sunny day followed with light south-easterly winds and a phone-call in the morning reporting a Black-throated Thrush had visitors in a flap, but nobody knew where to turn as news broke of a Red-flanked Bluetail on Burrashield! Found simultaneously, these birds were unfortunately only admired by their finders. More obliging birds included 2 new Pallas's Warblers, a Red-backed Shrike (the first and only one of the autumn) and a Waxwing. However, it was a much quieter day for common migrants. The 17<sup>th</sup> produced counts of 240 Blackbirds, 120 Goldcrests, 6 Short-eared Owls, 4 Redstarts, 3 Black Redstarts and a late Grasshopper Warbler. Ten Yellow-browed Warblers and 2 Bluethroats were also scattered around the island, but find of the year was a first-year female Siberian Rubythroat at Utra. This was the fourth British record of this Siberian 'mega' and was a dream bird for all staff and visitors present on the island! This encouraged more planes full of twitchers (a record 6 planes on the airstrip at once!) and even included the same group of people who had come from the Isles of Scilly to Fair Isle for the Savannah Sparrow and had gone back again to the Scillies! The Rubythroat remained in the Kirk/Shirva area until the 19<sup>th</sup>. The next few days were again quiet as the wind had switched in direction to the north-west, but an eastern 'flava' Wagtail was found, along with a Glaucous Gull and 3 of the 4 Richard's Pipits (until 21<sup>st</sup>). The 20<sup>th</sup> produced another Waxwing, 13 Chiffchaffs, 2 Slavonian Grebes and a Rook. Another switch in wind, this time to the north-east on the 22<sup>nd</sup> produced more birds, as 350 Redwings were counted, with 50 Woodcock, 3 Bullfinches, 110 Snow Buntings and 35 Robins. Rarity value was provided in the afternoon by a Dusky Warbler trapped in the Plantation and 10 Waxwings around the Observatory, rising to 12 the following day. This day heralded more rarities with an Olive-backed Pipit (much to the delight of one 'Friend') at Shirva and a splash of colour in the form of a Pallas's Warbler at Utra. The Pipit was to remain faithful until the 31<sup>st</sup> at least.

Counts of migrants included 185 Fieldfare, 3 Water Rails, 2 Long-eared Owls and a Goldfinch. A breezy day on the 24<sup>th</sup> found another Olive-backed Pipit in the Havens and a Waxwing in the Observatory garden. Calm conditions followed and the 26<sup>th</sup> produced late excitement with 2 Red-breasted Flycatchers, 6 Waxwings and 6 Little Auks. Things turned more 'northern' after that with groups of Swans and Geese flying over-head and some cracking displays of the Merry Dancers (Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights) rounding off a quite remarkable month and season for birds. Here's to next season.....

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### Seabird Summary 2003

The 2003 seabird-breeding season was sadly the worst on record and generally unproductive. By far the most staggeringly poor result this year was the total breeding failure of the Kittiwakes at all ten of the monitored plots. These birds had a worrying 100% failure rate this year, with most failing at the chick stage through starvation. Adults struggled to find sufficient food to bring back to their hungry chicks and many chicks were left unattended at the nests whilst adults spent more time away at sea, leaving them vulnerable and open to predation.

For the second year running, Arctic Terns saw 100% breeding failure this year, with fewer adults returning to breed. Most of those that did return failed to hatch eggs or even lay at all. A pitiful 80 pairs attempted to breed this year, compared to 2,836 in 2001 and 115 last year. No chicks fledged last year and only four fledged in 2001, so this year's result was no surprise for this dwindling recent colonist. No Common Terns attempted to breed this year after one pair nested and failed last year. One Common Gull chick fledged from 5 known territories this year! Last year saw 9 territories held but no chicks fledged. Guillemot and Razorbill breeding success was down by approximately 40% compared to last year, with productivity for both species being the lowest on record. A population count of Guillemots at five monitored plots revealed a decline of 18.7% from 2002. Puffins also had a drop in productivity at the two monitoring sites,

with fewer occupied nests found than in previous years and the lowest productivity since 1993.

Numbers of Great Skua territories increased by 9%, to 145 territories this year, although productivity was the lowest since records began, with only 7 chicks successfully fledging, 30% down on 2002. Similarly, the smaller, declining breeding population of Arctic Skuas had a very poor season, with only 5 chicks fledging from 55 territories found. The Fulmar population showed a decrease this year by 6.4% at the five monitoring plots. On a more positive note, the Gannet as a breeding species continues to steadily increase, with a rise in nesting birds by approximately 17% this year, in keeping with the average annual increases of this species on Fair Isle. It's incredible to think that the first few Gannets bred here in 1974, when the first five nests were found containing eggs and the first three chicks fledged. Now, twenty years on, we have around 1,859 occupied nests, including 13 pairs on Sheep Rock!

Shags too had a comparatively unsuccessful season. Although the number of nests on the monitoring plot was up by 15% compared to 2002, fledging success was one of the lowest on record. A productivity of 1.33 chicks fledged per nest is below the most recent ten-year average (1.54) and the lowest since 1999 (1.08).

Reasons for the ongoing and quickening demise of many of the internationally and nationally important breeding populations of seabirds on Fair Isle are still unclear. Causes of these declines obviously involve problems with their valuable food sources, with continued over fishing of our waters a fundamental cause. Other possibilities include recent changes in fish migration patterns as a result of the continued warming of the North Atlantic, making food sources harder to find. Continued monitoring of our seabirds is essential, as they are early indicators of the health of the wider marine environment. However, equally important should be the research and monitoring of these key species'

essential food sources and the deeper understanding of our oceans if we are to halt and reverse the downward trend.

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## **OTHER NEWS**

### **Staff Changes**

Thankfully we did not have staffing problems like last year, but some staff did part of the season rather than a full season due to other commitments. Rosalind Seeley (Assistant Cook) left us in early September to seek work in Aberdeen and, a week later, Ann Prior once again returned to the island. Ann took up the role of Cook for a few weeks, whilst Lois Smallwood stepped down to Assistant Cook. Miranda Mowat (childminder) departed for college on 13<sup>th</sup> September and her position was ably filled by Janet Gibson, who had the daunting task of childminder for the last seven weeks of the season.

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### **Population changes**

The last Newsletter announced that Jessie McCaffery (Fair Isle Primary School's Head-teacher) was leaving the island for a new post in Aberdeen. She left in late August and was joined by her husband Dennis in October. Jessie's position has been filled temporarily by Gina Scanlan (Barkland) until a new teacher takes over in 2004. The resident nurse, Katherine Morrison, also left this summer and after a run of stand in nurses, the new resident nurse, Amy Bickerstaff, her husband Paul and their eleven year old daughter Star, moved to the isle at the end of September. Two further new arrivals were Ian Thomson and his partner Lisa, who have moved into Quoy with Ian's parents (Stewart and Triona) while they await permanent housing. We wish those who have left the isle all the best for the future and look forward to getting to know the new arrivals.

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### **Island Resident number 74**

The latest addition to the island population is yet another Observatory baby! After a very frustrating two-week wait in Aberdeen

(the baby was 6 days late), Hollie gave birth to a healthy 8lb 3 ½ ounce baby boy at 03.38 on 11<sup>th</sup> September. The pressure to get Deryk back to Fair Isle before a mega-rare turned up was immense, so they all flew home the next day. The baby was duly named on the flight from Aberdeen: Ythan Deklan Shaw, (after the Ythan river and estuary near Aberdeen, which runs just past the window of the house they were staying at). The isle population is as healthy as ever, with 74 permanent residents (23 of whom are children – 7 of which attend the Anderson High School in Lerwick, 11 are at Fair Isle Primary, 3 are in the pre-school nursery and two are under nursery age). With two houses currently empty (the Schoolhouse and Nedertaft), there is potential for the population to reach 80!

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### **Congratulations!**

In early September there were two reasons for celebrations regarding members of the Observatory staff. With the imminent arrival of a new baby preoccupying many peoples thoughts, Kenny Stout (Chalet / Upper Stoneybrek) and Sue Hutchison (Observatory General Assistant) announced their engagement! The wedding next year, is now the talk of the isle and we eagerly look forward to it.

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### **Fair Isle 'Our Island'**

The island school children, with help from Hollie and Alan, produced a booklet entitled 'Fair Isle: Our Island'. This 18 page, full colour booklet outlines life on Fair Isle through the children's eyes and is illustrated with their own drawings. It is intended to act as a brief tourist information booklet and is on sale through the FIBO shop or mail order for £3.00 (plus 50p p&p). A full mail order form can be found on the Fair Isle Bird Observatory web-site.

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### **Cropping / Planting Scheme**

Returning visitors to the isle in the last few years will no doubt have noticed the dearth of crops now grown – to the detriment of tired and hungry migrants seeking food

and shelter and also those who come to see them. FIBOT, in partnership with NTS, RSPB and the Fair Islanders are looking to rectify this situation. Work beginning this autumn should see several areas of crops (oats, turnips, cabbages and forage rape) sown next spring, thus providing much needed cover in the autumn. This added source of food and shelter will make a visit to the isle a more enjoyable experience – for both birds and birdwatchers alike!

Additionally, several areas have been fenced off and planted with trees and shrubs. Although the Fair Isle climate means that successfully growing such plants is a slow process, eventually it is hoped that even more habitat will become available to the birds. Many 'Friends' who have recently visited the island will have noticed that the plantation outside the Observatory is doing exceptionally well and is already an attraction to migrant birds.

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### **Staff Vacancies 2004**

There are a few jobs available at the Bird Observatory for next season. Catering/domestic staff and a childminder are required from April to October. For details please contact Deryk or Hollie at the Observatory.

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### **2004 Observatory holidays**

If you are planning a visit to Fair Isle next year then please contact Hollie at the Observatory for a free brochure and other information.

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### **Web-site reaches new heights!**

The web-site attracted over 59,477 visitors from 92 different countries this season, with the most visits in one day being 1002 – the day of the Siberian Rubythroat!

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**[www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk](http://www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk)**

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### **Subscription reminder!**

Would all 'Friends' please remember to renew their membership (due on 1<sup>st</sup> April) if you do not subscribe by Bankers Order.