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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Another Observatory season is well and truly under way and this newsletter introduces this year's staff and contains a summary of the spring migration and seabird breeding season so far and other island news. Deryk and Hollie hope you enjoy reading it (and the 2003 Report) and encourage you to visit us (again).

Staff – new & old

As every year, we have a nice mixture of some returning staff members and others new to the isle:

On the birding side we have Assistant Warden Alan Bull and Seabird Monitoring Officer Rebecca Nason – the former for his eighth season and the latter for her second. Both are excellent team members and already know their jobs inside out. Alan can be called on to help out in any situation whilst Rebecca's photographic talent has also been utilised. Her work can be found in many of the bedrooms, the Obs lounge and Obs Shop. Claire Bailly is the Ranger. She hails from France and has spent the past two years, as a language teacher, on Mainland Shetland but is looking for a change in career. Lois Smallwood returns for a third season as Head Cook until September when she will depart to attend a number of family weddings!! Her vast portions are frequently commented on at mealtimes! When Lois leaves, Ann Prior (another well known face) will step into her vacated shoes until the end of the season! Liz Burnett, from Bedfordshire is the Assistant

Cook and her calm nature is a bonus in what can be a frenetic kitchen. The General Assistant positions have been problematical; firstly Lynne Henry joined us from Ireland, but left after just five weeks due to personal circumstances. Amanda Mitchell, from Kelso was our other General Assistant but injured her shoulder after just one week. After four weeks rest it had not improved, so sadly she was forced to return home to see her physiotherapist. This has left a huge hole in the staffing levels but all the remaining members (with occasional help from islanders) are doing their utmost to ensure things still run smoothly, until new staff arrive. Finally, New Zealander Janet Gibson who joined us for the tail end of last season has returned for a longer stint this year as our child-minder - possibly the hardest and definitely the noisiest job of all!

Summary of Bird Sightings

The highlight of the winter months was the first-winter Iceland Gull which arrived here on 2nd January and could be seen daily in the Havens right up until 25th May. White-winged gulls were generally quite scarce with just two other Iceland Gulls seen and a couple of Glaucous Gulls. January also produced a suite of geese species with an overwintering Greylag flock of around 50 birds which was joined (at intervals) by Eurasian Whitefronted Geese (5), a couple of Pink-footed, a pale-bellied Brent and two Bean Geese. Other winter wildfowl sightings included small numbers of Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Long-tailed Duck and Goldeneye. Little Auks were regularly seen offshore and one was even blown into the Obs garden on 30th January! A Merlin was occasionally seen whilst a male Kestrel was an unusual overwintering record. Wader counts were dominated by Turnstones with over 100 seen daily, admixed with a few Redshank, Curlew, Purple Sandpipers and a single Oystercatcher. Overwintering thrushes comprised 20-30 each of Redwing and Blackbird plus a few Fieldfare and Song Thrush. Small passerines included a few Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Robins, a couple of Chaffinches, an (Icelandic) Common Redpoll, a handful of Twite and a flock of 50 Snow Buntings. Heavy snow

at the end of January caused the majority of the thrushes to depart.

Early February saw the first true migrants heading north with Ringed Plovers back at South Light on 6th (although an early male had already arrived on 23rd January) and Oystercatchers and Lapwings from 7th. A male Pied Wagtail on 9th was our earliest ever – the same day that a Slavonian Grebe was spotted in North Haven. Wader numbers began to increase with peaks of 70 Redshank & 210 Turnstone (on 12th) and 110 Common Snipe (28th) whilst Oystercatcher, Lapwing and Ringed Plover trickled through in small numbers. A Long-eared Owl was a surprise find in the Obs Plantation on 15th! Skylarks also began to move towards the end of February but it was in March that passage began to pick up pace.....Curlews were noted back on territory on 2nd and light south-easterly winds on 4th encouraged 50 Skylarks to pass through along with a Wood Pigeon. Pleasant weather and a good days birding on 9th produced 140 Skylark (including the first singing birds) and displaying Lapwings (from 125 counted) as well as a couple of Pied Wagtails and a Rook. A Stonechat arrived on 15th and was followed next day by a Collared Dove, with Mistle Thrush and Reed Bunting on 17th. More year ticks arrived on 18th when Jackdaw, Goldcrest and Tree Sparrow were added to the list and Skylarks exceeded 250. A welcome sight on 21st was the first returning Puffin, in Furse – a day when five Stonechats also arrived. A period of north-westerly winds halted any new arrivals, until a switch to the south-east on 30th had immediate effect. Sparrowhawk, Peregrine, Black Redstart and Linnet were all new additions to the year list and on the final day of March we welcomed our first Wheatears (3) and Bonxie (3), but also Dunnock and Siskin.

April started where March had left off with no less than four year-ticks on 1st; Lesser Black-backed Gull, Grey Wagtail, Chiffchaff and Brambling. An influx of Meadow Pipits (40) was also noted and 5 Wheatears and 2 Dunnocks were seen. Two days of south-easterly gales followed, during which a Greenfinch arrived in the garden, but once the wind had abated an

excellent arrival of birds occurred. The 4th April saw a light south-westerly wind and birds everywhere. Highlights were Hawfinch, Ring Ouzel and Yellowhammer whilst counts included 146 Meadow Pipits, 23 Pied Wagtails, 14 Dunnocks, 39 Robins, 2 Black Redstarts, 4 Stonechats, 19 Wheatears, 68 Blackbirds, 200 Fieldfare, 23 Song Thrushes, 25 Redwings, 10 Chiffchaffs, 55 Goldcrests, 27 Chaffinches and a few Bramblings and Greenfinches – a busy day's walking! Things then tailed off after that, but Moorhen and Blackcap arrived on 6th and a male Goosander was noted on 10th. A White-tailed Sea Eagle on the 12th, flying out to sea off Sheep Rock being mobbed by the island gulls and Bonxies, was an impressive sight. Wet and miserable weather followed, with the first Arctic Skua seen on 14th, followed by sunshine on 16th and the first Swallow and Willow Warbler – spring had arrived! The 17th was notable for the first influx of Wheatears when 53 were counted, including the first of the large Greenland race *leucorhoa*. Additions to the year-list between the 18th and 21st included Pintail, Whimbrel, Stock Dove, Sand Martin, Tree Pipit and Grasshopper Warbler. Wheatears exceeded 100 on 22nd and the peak count (137) of the month occurred the following day when a Short-toed Lark was found at Naaversgill (an early record) and a male Redstart was seen at Furse. A Corncrake was heard singing in Boini Mire on the 25th. A Common Crane flying south on the 28th was an impressive sight whilst more year-ticks trickled through, the best being two Wrynecks in the south on the 30th – the day our first visitors arrived.

May started well with a female Subalpine Warbler trapped before lunch. It was still present in the Obs garden the following day. A male Bluethroat was at Leogh on the 3rd and an Arctic Tern flew past South Light – a true sign of a Shetland summer approaching. Gales the following day hampered our census, but a Wryneck was at Midway. As the winds died down on the 5th birds were found – year-ticks included 2 Yellow Wagtails, a Garden Warbler and a Lesser Whitethroat. Counts of migrants included a Tufted Duck, Kestrel, Green and Common Sandpipers, Short-eared

Owl, a few Swallows and Martins, 10 Redstarts and 5 Ring Ouzels. Glorious weather followed as did more birds... a pulse of migrants on the 7th included a female Red-backed Shrike at Field, another Wryneck at Midway along with a Lesser Redpoll, a Tree Sparrow at the Obs and a Common Tern in the Havens. Morning census on 8th produced very little, but an afternoon wander hinted that birds were starting to arrive on the isle. This meant another walk after dinner and final totals included 3 Wrynecks, 5 Bluethroats, 7 Red-backed Shrikes, 17 Spotted Flycatchers and the year's first Cuckoo. A host of other common migrants were also seen but frustratingly, no rarities. This all changed on 9th when a fine male Collared Flycatcher was found in Sma' Trinket Geo – the third FI record – the last being in May 1998. Any other birds that day were barely noticed, but a Hen Harrier flew north as did 70 Barnacle Geese. The Collared Flycatcher was still present the following day, allowing a few familiar faces from Shetland to 'twitch' in and 4 Bluethroats, 5 Red-backed Shrikes, a Corncrake and 2 bright Wood Warblers were also seen. A fine sight on the evening of 11th was an Osprey flying north, being mobbed by nearly every Oystercatcher on the isle. The Collared Flycatcher was also still present. A Rough-legged Buzzard flew north over the hill on 12th but unfortunately it was a tiny speck by the time most observers could get onto it! Later, a Swallow with a seemingly orange rump flashed past the Obs, but as with the raptor, it had soon disappeared north. A windy few days followed and attention switched to sea watching – a Manx Shearwater flew south on the 16th. Things picked up on the 17th when another Osprey flew north and a Common Nightingale proved elusive at Leogh whilst a couple of Black-tailed Godwits added a splash of colour to the Oystercatcher flock at Setter. Westerly winds and another quiet few days followed but a Dotterel was found on Hoini on the 21st – by the only two non-birdwatchers staying at the Obs! Amazingly, the 23rd produced another rarity – a smart male Subalpine Warbler at Leogh. A Wryneck, female Bluethroat and

Turtle Dove were also seen. The winds eventually switched to the south-east on the 27th, with immediate effect. A Rosy Starling was seen outside the Obs just after breakfast and a nice red male Common Rosefinch there after lunch. The first 'Fair Isle Thursday' also took place at the Obs. A great evening was rounded off nicely with an Osprey flying north over the Obs! A Golden Oriole at Gaila the following day was a fine sight for the lucky few that saw it, as were the Dotterel and Lapland Bunting on Ward Hill. The Rosy Starling also chose to take up residence on the hill. The down-side to the good weather is the fog that follows. Luckily it only stayed for a day and when it cleared on the 30th, more birds had arrived. An Icterine Warbler was at the Chalet and two Marsh Warblers were new, along with a female Bluethroat and three Red-backed Shrikes. The month finished as it started, with a rarity – a smart Red-throated Pipit at Furse. Supporting cast to this were three Marsh Warblers, an Icterine Warbler, a fine male Bluethroat, at least nine Red-backed Shrikes, three Common Rosefinches and a Common Nightingale. June carried on where May had finished, with scarce and common migrants aplenty. Eight Red-backed Shrikes remained on the 1st with one Common Rosefinch and new birds included a female Bluethroat, 5 Marsh Warblers and 2 Icterine Warblers. Other counts included 18 Dunlin, a Sand Martin, 22 Swallows, 16 House Martins, Whinchat, 4 Sedge Warblers, 7 Lesser Whitethroats, 4 Whitethroats, 3 Garden Warblers, 3 Blackcaps, 5 Chiffchaffs, 3 Willow Warblers and a Spotted Flycatcher. The 2nd June provided another nice bird – another Golden Oriole – a green bird at Mopul. Counts of other scarce migrants included 2 Marsh Warblers, the ringed Icterine Warbler, 10 Red-backed Shrikes and 2 Common Rosefinches (including one of May's ringed birds). Counts of commoner migrants included 6 Dunlin, 2 Wood Pigeons, 5 Collared Doves, 5 Swift, 41 Swallows, a Robin, the Nightingale, 2 Sedge Warblers, 8 Lesser Whitethroats, 4 Whitethroats, 5 Garden Warblers, 5 Blackcaps, 4 Chiffchaffs, 4 Willow Warblers and 5 Spotted Flycatchers. An

extremely wet and miserable 3rd had little promise in the air, but an unexpected Long-eared Owl was at Midway and a new Icterine Warbler was found. A great find in South Harbour on 4th was of a smart male Rustic Bunting. It was even heard singing on occasions! It had re-located to the Obs garden the following day where it was also heard to sing! A Cuckoo took up residence in the Raevas and seemed to be doing well, catching insects and grubs. Two Long-eared Owls (a male and female) were seen on the 6th – they are not normally seen on Fair Isle at this time of year but there were *three* present on the 7th as well as a Hobby, Buzzard, Bluethroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Common Rosefinch. Two of the Long-eared Owls lingered for at least a week with one still present on 16th. The 8th was another good day when an Icterine Warbler, another Bluethroat and 8 Red-backed Shrikes arrived but best of all were the two Red-necked Phalaropes, but unfortunately these were only seen by those on *The Good Shepherd*. A cracking and very obliging male Nightjar was found ~~sitting~~ on a rock at Setter on 10th and this ~~eclipsed~~ the adult Hobby, 2 Black Redstarts, Reed and Marsh Warblers also found that day. Late migrants were the highlight of 11th when a male Redstart and 2 Tree Pipits were seen and there was another year-tick on 12th in the form of 2 Canada Geese. A couple more Marsh Warblers followed but a Pink-footed Goose on 14th was most unexpected whilst the Quail the following day was not!

Another Bad Breeding Season!

Fair Isle's seabirds look set for another disastrous breeding season. The 2003 season was the worst since the Sandeel crisis of 1990 (and worst ever for some species) but the signs are that this year is to be even worse. Birds were late to start nesting and numbers on the monitoring plots are low....and getting lower by the day, as birds desert their eggs or are robbed by skuas and gulls. Yet again it appears there is a lack of Lesser Sandeels in Fair Isle waters. A similar situation has been reported in the rest of Shetland and Orkney and possibly even as far south as the Isle of May.

Flight Change (Back) Again

In the last Newsletter *Extra* (March 2004) we informed Friends that flights from Mainland Shetland to Fair Isle can only be booked with Loganair, not British Airways. Whilst this is still the case, the new link to Orkney will not know take place – not this year anyway – and there are still two Saturday flights between Mainland Shetland and Fair Isle. The timetable is as printed on page 2 of the 2003 Fair Isle Bird Observatory Report.

Vacancies & Special offers

We have just completed our busiest May for many years and bookings for the rest of the year are looking very good, however we still have space for almost any time – including during the 50% accommodation periods in August and October. Late September is, as usual, very busy but even then we do have space up to 24th and again from 27th onwards. Phone Hollie & Deryk for details.

Crops and Trees

Several new areas of crops have been sown and several hundred trees and bushes have been planted in sheltered corners of the isle – all primarily for the benefit of migrant birds. Hopefully this will increase the enjoyment of birds (and birders) on the isle for short periods of time whilst they rest and build up fat reserves for their onward journey!!!

New Islanders!

We welcomed Gillian Harrison to the isle in April to take over as the new Head Teacher at Fair Isle Primary School. She was accompanied by her husband Mark, their thirteen year old daughter Bethany, six-year-old son Oliver and one-year-old daughter Daisy.

Upper Stoneybrek Rebuild

Work has just started on the renovation of Upper Stoneybrek. Much of the old building has been completely removed but the four main walls remain intact. Kenny and Sue hope to move into their new-look house in the autumn.

And Finally: Check out the website for regular updates and photos:

www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk