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**FRIENDS OF
FAIR ISLE
NEWSLETTER**

Edited by

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As another busy Observatory season draws to a close, it is time to update all 'Friends' on the happenings during the summer and autumn months.

We hope you enjoy reading the last of this year's newsletters and hope to see you in the near future.

Staff changes

The season finished with a full suite of staff and no major upsets or surprises.

We were fortunate enough to find another two General Assistants to finish the season, replacing the original two who left in June. A new face, Clare Porter, joined us in July. Her worldly knowledge and calm nature has blended in well with the hustle and bustle of Observatory life! On a temporary basis, we had Adam Rose help out from June to the end of August. Hailing from Shetland, he became the youngest member of the team and left to study at Aberdeen University. Replacing him was a very familiar face, Becki Rosser who returned to ease the pressure until the end of October.

Lois Smallwood left, as arranged, at the start of September and was replaced by Ann Prior (another very familiar face at the Obs) who has took up the role of Cook for the remainder of the season.

Janet Gibson, our New-Zealander child-minder also left as arranged in August and was replaced by another Janet (Janet McNie) who comes from Australia.

Summary of Bird Sightings

Following on from where the last newsletter finished.....Another small pulse of migrants on the 17th June included another Marsh Warbler, a Garden Warbler, five Chiffchaffs and

a late Willow Warbler. A sea-watch for more year-ticks paid off on the 18th as an adult Long-tailed Skua drifted along the east coast of the island. Things tailed off after that as attention turned to seabird monitoring and ringing. However, on the 24th, a fine Honey Buzzard drifted very slowly north against the strong northerly wind and a female Red-backed Shrike was trapped in the Plantation. A south-easterly breeze on the 26th heralded the final few scarce migrants of the spring with a Quail, two Red-backed Shrikes, Icterine Warbler and a Common Rosefinch all seen.

July is often the quietest month of the season as seabird monitoring takes full priority. However birds do turn up on Fair Isle at all times.....A Common Rosefinch, two Long-eared Owls and an un-seasonal Long-tailed Duck were all found on the 3rd. The following day, four Crossbills were seen at Naaversgill. A Reed Warbler on the 8th was a typical mid-summer sighting and "autumn" passage was evident from the 11th as the first southbound migrants started to trickle through with 3 Grey Herons, 8 Redshank, 8 Turnstone and 2 Black-headed Gulls. Another Long-eared Owl was found Fulmar-oiled in Field Ditch on the 14th (remaining until the 27th) and a Quail was found near Ward Hill (the same site as June's bird). A male Reed Bunting on the 15th (remaining until September) was a surprise capture in the Plantation as was a Lesser Whitethroat the following day. Eleven Swifts and 17 Lapwings were also noted and the first Storm Petrel ringing session of the year took place during the evening - fifteen birds were trapped. A light south-easterly breeze on the 19th inspired a census and migration was evident as counts included 24 Lapwing, 2 Sanderling, 14 Purple Sandpipers, 2 Dunlin, 2 Whimbrel, 56 Redshank, 38 Turnstone, 70 Black-headed Gulls, 50 Common Gulls, 19 Lesser Black-backed Gulls and 25 Swift. As is often the case during the summer months, fog quickly followed the good weather, but surprisingly birds were still found with an un-seasonal (but still welcome) Marsh Harrier in Gilsetter and a, more typical, Wood Sandpiper on Sprittery Hole - both on the 22nd. The Wood Sandpiper remained faithful to the north of the island until the 27th and another census in good weather on 23rd produced 231 Oystercatchers, 3 Golden Plovers, 6 Sanderling, 6 Dunlin, 21 Redshank, 4 Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, 11 Turnstone, 23 Black-headed Gulls and 133

Common Gulls. Bird of the day went to the first-summer Hobby seen on the Rippack – only the third ever summer record for the isle. A Sedge Warbler on the 26th was the first migrant warbler of the month (although 2 or 3 Chiffchaffs 'summered' on the island) and a Short-eared Owl was near the Observatory on the 27th. A Rosy Starling near the school on the 30th was the last sighting of the month before the fog once again descended.....

Fog dominated for the first six days of August, severely hampering census attempts. However, the wind was from the south-east and expectations were high! A Glaucous Gull on the 4th was a very odd sighting for the time of year. A small arrival of migrants on the 5th included 150 Wheatears, 7 Sedge Warblers, a Whitethroat, 5 Chiffchaffs (including the 2 'summering' birds which remained all month) and two Willow Warblers. The following day, the year's first 2 Barred Warblers were found (one remaining until the 7th) along with a Common Rosefinch. As the wind veered firmly to the east on the 9th, an arrival of migrants included 13 Grey Herons, the year's first Greenshank (2), 2 Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, 580 Common Gulls, 6 Sand Martins, Fieldfare, 2 Sedge Warblers, Reed Warbler, 2 Garden Warblers, 5 Willow Warblers and a Pied Flycatcher. The wind was still directly from the east on the 10th and a good fall of common migrants included 6 Ruff, 2 Sandwich Terns, Cuckoo, 2 Redstarts, 2 Whinchats, our earliest autumn Grasshopper Warblers (2), 9 Reed Warblers, 2 Whitethroats, 26 Garden Warblers, 6 Wood Warblers, 32 Willow Warblers and 28 Pied Flycatchers. A number of scarce migrants also arrived with our earliest autumn Wrynecks (2), 2 Icterine Warblers, a Barred Warbler and, rather unusually, a Pectoral Sandpiper which remained on Easter Locher Water until the 13th. Wrynecks had increased to three birds the following day and Barred Warblers to 2 and apart from 'hangers-on' from the 10th further increases of migrants included 43 Garden Warblers, 7 Whitethroats, 3 Lesser Whitethroats, 36 Willow Warblers and a Spotted Flycatcher. The 12th was a quieter day for common migrants with just those birds found in the previous days hanging on, including a Wryneck and an Icterine Warbler. However, things soon brightened up as an Aquatic Warbler was found in the Hegri Burn – the first since 1997.



Aquatic Warbler:

Claire Bailly

The wind switched round to the north/north-east on the 13th (where it was to remain until the 19th) and induced another arrival of migrants with a Water Rail, Greenshank, Cuckoo, Redstart, 3 Whinchats, 2 Grasshopper Warblers, 4 Reed Warblers, 2 Whitethroats, 15 Garden Warblers, 2 Wood Warblers, 18 Willow Warblers, a Spotted Flycatcher, 15 Pied Flycatchers and scarcity value in the form of 3 Icterine Warblers and 2 Red-backed Shrikes. The latter species increased to 4 birds the next day, but only one Icterine Warbler was found. A Wood Sandpiper, Wryneck, Barred Warbler, 9 Reed Warblers, 35 Garden Warblers and 26 Willow Warblers were also found. Another Aquatic Warbler was found on the 16th – this one in the Walli Burn area. Other 'new' migrants included a Spotted Crake in Gilsetter, Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike, Common Rosefinch, Cuckoo, 35 Swallows, Sand Martin, 300 Meadow Pipits, 3 Redstarts, 12 Reed Warblers and 13 Garden Warblers. Waders were also on the move with 38 Lapwings, 31 Golden Plovers, 27 Ringed Plovers, 3 Knot, 19 Dunlin, 24 Snipe, 48 Redshank, 2 Greenshank and 2 Green Sandpipers. A quiet few days followed for common migrants, but scarce migrants on the 17th included a Wryneck, 2 Barred Warblers (one remaining until 19th) and 2 Red-backed Shrikes (both remaining until the 18th and one until the 19th). An Icterine Warbler was found on the 18th (remaining until the 19th) and a further 2 Barred Warblers and a Red-backed Shrike were seen on the 20th. Despite the north-westerly wind, birds were still found on the 21st, mainly migrating waders. Forty-five Ringed Plovers, 11 Knot, 2 Sanderling, 13 Dunlin and 62 Redshank were counted and passerines included 3 Whinchats, 5 each of Reed and Garden Warbler, 8 Willow Warblers, a Spotted Flycatcher along with an Icterine Warbler and Common Rosefinch. The

Rosefinch was still present the next day and a new Barred Warbler was found. The wind switched back to the south-east on the 23rd and 2 Common Rosefinches, a Turtle Dove, 1300 Meadow Pipits, Redstart, 10 Garden Warblers, a Wood Warbler and 20 Willow Warblers were all found. Nineteen Storm Petrels were trapped over-night – the highest night total of the year! The final 'fall' of the month occurred on the 24th as the wind switched to the east. Census counts included 23 Lapwings, 3 Little Stints (first of the autumn), 11 Whimbrel, 3 Greenshank, Short-eared Owl, Tree Pipit, 2 Redstarts, 6 Whinchats, Grasshopper Warbler, 36 Garden Warblers, 6 Chiffchaffs, 66 Willow Warblers, two Wood Warblers and 16 Pied Flycatchers. Mixed in with these were 5 Wrynecks (increasing to 6 on 25th), 2 Barred Warblers and a Common Rosefinch. The final week of the month was quiet as westerly winds dominated. However, notable birds included a Red-backed Shrike (25th), 5 Little Stints (27th), Tree Sparrow (one on 29th with two on 30th) and a Barred Warbler (30th). A good month, just lacking a good rarity which would surely follow in September?!...

...Sadly it didn't! The westerly orientated winds continued throughout the entire month. The month started well enough with 2 Barred Warblers and a Common Rosefinch on the 1st, falling to one Barred Warbler and rising to 2 Rosefinches from 2nd-3rd. A Wryneck was seen on the 2nd and the following day a Red-backed Shrike was trapped in the Vaadal and a Little Stint was dazzled on Easter Lother Water in the evening. The long-staying Canada Geese remained until the 14th. A small arrival of migrants on the 5th included 3 Barred Warblers (remaining until the 9th) and 4 Common Rosefinches. Common migrants included 15 Teal, 54 Golden Plovers, 18 Dunlin, 2 Tree Pipits, 4 Lesser Whitethroats, 9 Garden Warblers, 16 Willow Warblers and 8 Lapland Buntings. A light south-easterly breeze on the 6th-7th failed to produce any of the falls witnessed in August, but scarce migrants included 8 Common Rosefinches on the 6th, falling to 6 birds the next day, when an Icterine Warbler was found at the shop. Interestingly, this bird was seen to be wearing a ring on its left leg. Things remained quiet as the wind backed round to the west, but 2 more Common Rosefinches were found on the 9th, rising to 3 birds on the 10th, when 2 Barred Warblers were

found (one remaining until the 12th). A Water Rail, Sparrowhawk, Common Sandpiper, Redstart, 3 Whitethroats, 2 Garden Warblers, 8 Willow Warblers and 3 Goldcrests also provided some interest. Sea-watchers from South Light and the Good Shepherd were rewarded on the 11th as 15 Storm Petrels, 3 Sooty Shearwaters and a Manx Shearwater were seen. On land, 2 Song Thrushes were new as were 3 Pied Flycatchers, but pride of place went to the 2 Curlew Sandpipers in Kirki Geo. Two Snow Buntings on Bunes the following day were the first of many and numbers soon rose to 31 by the 13th. Despite the strong south-westerly winds, the 13th was a good day with 3 Little Stints, a late Arctic Skua, single Sedge, Willow and Wood Warblers, 2 Pied Flycatchers, a Common Rosefinch, 2 Wrynecks (remaining until 14th) and 2 flyover Shoveler! Things were much the same the following day, but the Common Rosefinch was joined by a second bird, a Barred Warbler was in the south, a late Spotted Flycatcher was near the school and 18 Goldcrests were found sheltering in the geos! A Dotterel was a good find on the Svey on the 15th and entertained visitors at typically close range until the 21st, while a Slavonian Grebe in South Harbour showed only briefly to its finder. Small skeins of geese filled the sky on the 16th, with 46 Pink-footed and 11 Greylags and on land another Wryneck and Common Rosefinch were bonuses on an otherwise quiet day. Despite good finds of a Corncrake (remaining until the end of the month) and Barred Warbler, the 17th was another day for sea-watching with watchers (from both land and sea) notching up a Red-throated Diver, Great Northern Diver, 7 Sooty Shearwaters, a Manx Shearwater, 20 Storm Petrels and an adult Pomarine Skua. A very quiet period for migrants followed as the westerly winds persisted, with the only real highlights being a Curlew Sandpiper and Glaucous Gull on 18th and 5 more Common Rosefinches. Things were looking desperate and talk of 'the worst autumn ever' filled the common room during the evenings. Thankfully the winds dropped to light and variable on the 28th and a flyover Black-throated Diver was the first Fair Isle rarity in a long while, stealing the thunder of another Dotterel on Ward Hill. Things were otherwise still quiet though, but the 29th had real promise in the air as the wind switched to a light south-easterly. Census was postponed to the afternoon as staff helped out with the gathering of hill sheep, but migration

was very evident as thrushes, finches, Jack Snipe and warblers were heard and seen flying over. Expectations were high and we were not disappointed as the afternoon produced good scarce migrants with the year's first Little Bunting, Richard's Pipit, 2 'north-western' Redpolls and 3 Yellow-browed Warblers in the south. The best was saved until last though as a stunning adult male Red-flanked Bluetail was found on the cliffs at North Gunnawark! This bird was found in exactly the same location as the bird in 2003 although was more obliging as it entertained visitors, flicking from rock to rock! The final day of the month was also full of great expectations, but sadly did not deliver another good rarity. An excellent day's bird-watching however, with similar numbers of thrushes and finches – 85 Fieldfares, 29 Song Thrushes, 75 Redwings, 46 Bramblings, 10 Siskins – and scarce migrants that included the Richard's Pipit, a Quail, 2 Barred Warblers, 4 Yellow-browed Warblers, a Red-breasted Flycatcher, the 2 'north-western' Redpolls and 20 Jack Snipe. A fine finish to a very slow month.

Thankfully the slow pace of September did not continue through October as the westerly winds disappeared to make way for a fortnight of easterly-orientated winds. At times they were strong, but spirits were high. The opening day of the month saw Wryneck, Bluethroat, Barred Warbler, Common Rosefinch and the year's only Ortolan Bunting found (which remained until the 5th) and numbers of migrants were generally high with 64 Wigeon, single Slavonian Grebe and Little Stint, 25 Jack Snipe, 4 Dunnocks, 6 Robins, 12 Blackcaps, 7 Chiffchaffs, 11 Goldcrests, 60 Brambling, a Greenfinch, 12 Siskin, 6 Mealy and one 'rostrata' Redpoll and 5 Reed Buntings. September's Richard's Pipit remained until the 3rd while the Corncrake remained until the 5th. Although quiet for common migrants during the next few days, as the wind switched briefly to the south-west, scarce migrants continued to be found, with the 2nd producing a Grey Phalarope, Quail, 2 Bluethroats (remaining until 16th) and 2 Yellow-browed Warblers (until 3rd). A Spotted Crake found in the Meadow Burn during the afternoon of the 4th seemed to be 'bird of the day' until a Lanceolated Warbler was found before dark near the Gully. It was trapped and ringed before being released into the Observatory garden, where it showed briefly on and off to the assembled crowd!

Things did not finish there as the morning trap round of the 5th produced a fine Booted Warbler in the Single Dyke trap. Unfortunately this bird did not show very well after release and, apart from 3 Common Rosefinches, was the only note-worthy bird of the day! Geese were on the move the next day with 3 White-fronted, 45 Pink-footed, 80 Greylag and 51 Barnacles passing over. On land, things were still quiet, but 7 Short-eared Owls, a Grasshopper Warbler, 10 Blackcaps, 20 Goldcrests, 4 Common Rosefinches and a Crossbill were all appreciated. The 7th had a similar feeling to the previous day as 9 Whooper Swans and 4 White-fronted Geese passed over, but 51 Song Thrushes on the cliffs and 25 Goldcrests were influxes and the day remained notable for the year's first Waxwing and a late Red-backed Shrike. The 8th started well enough with the re-finding of the latter two species and a ring-tail Hen Harrier circling the west cliffs and then later in Gilsetter. Thrushes had increased with counts of 14 Blackbirds, 13 Fieldfares, 30 Song Thrushes and 60 Redwing and further new migrants included a Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, Lesser Redpoll, 2 Mealy Redpolls, 4 'rostrata/islandica' Redpolls and, late in the day, a Glaucous Gull in the Havens. Things were quiet on the 9th as the wind dropped to almost flat calm and land birds were thin on the ground. Attention turned to cetacean spotting, which produced a Grey Phalarope and, rarer in Fair Isle terms, a Basking Shark off Bunness! The wind picked up from the south-east on the 10th and new arrivals included 13 Jack Snipe, 3 Woodcock, Long-eared Owl, Turtle Dove, 3 House Martins, 4 Tree Pipits, Black Redstart, 2 Redstarts, 25 Blackbirds, 19 Fieldfare, 23 Song Thrushes, 82 Redwings, 6 Blackcaps, 9 Brambling and 122 Snow Buntings. A Marsh Warbler and 2 Yellow-browed Warblers provided rarity interest. The winds increased in strength on the 11th, but still from the east/south-east (where it remained for a week) and more migrants were evident, particularly thrushes, which filled the hills and heather with calls and chatter. Numbers included 190 Blackbirds, 4 Ring Ouzels, 190 Fieldfare, 53 Song Thrushes and 400 Redwings. Counts of other migrants included a late Whitethroat, 3 Garden Warblers, 50 Blackcaps, 24 Chiffchaffs (including 19 'abietinus/tristis' types), 62 Goldcrests, a Pied Flycatcher and 115 Bramblings. Scarce migrants included a dark-bellied Brent Goose, 3

Yellow-browed Warbler, a Great Grey Shrike and 6 Northern Bullfinches. The winds increased further over the next few days (touching almost gale force at times) and bird-watching became a struggle. However, a Short-toed Lark was found at Naaversgill during the morning of the 12th and a Little Bunting was in Hjukni Geo during the afternoon. One Yellow-browed Warbler remained but sadly, the Great Grey Shrike was found dead at Skerryholm. A Corncrake and two Richard's Pipits on the 13th were good finds, but an unidentified Bat species seen at the Chapel caused more of a stir! Two more Yellow-browed Warblers, another Little Bunting and 12 Northern Bullfinches were found on 14th, as a Little Gull was found 'surfing' in Dutfield. It later moved to South Harbour where it remained for three days. If we thought the 12 Bullfinches were impressive then we were blown away the next day as 55 were counted! Another high Fair Isle count was that of Waxwings as 40 birds were recorded along the west cliffs! Migrant numbers remained at a low to moderate level as birds remained from the fall of the 10th, but a Corncrake was another 'new' bird for the day. Just one Richard's Pipit remained (seen on and off at Setter until the 18th), but a mystery Bunting, thought probably to be a Little Bunting, attracted the most attention. The morning census of the 16th was quiet in general, but Bullfinches continued to increase in number with 115 birds found around the island! The mystery Bunting was still in the Skadan crop and during the afternoon an attempt was made to try and capture it for identification. This was easily done, but for a short while we were still none the wiser. All books to hand were brought out and the bird's identity finally resolved – a Chestnut-eared Bunting! The first British and Western Palaearctic record!

Another Bad Seabird Breeding Season!

The 2004 breeding season will go down as the worst in living memory for Fair Isle's seabirds. Numbers of birds attempting to breed were at their lowest levels for many species (Table 1) and very few chicks were seen. Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Black-legged Kittiwake, Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern and Common Tern all failed to fledge any young whilst just a single Great Skua fledged from a pitiful 96 AOT (Apparently Occupied Territories). As in most years of poor productivity, it is a lack of Lesser

Sandeel (the staple diet of nearly all seabirds in Shetland) that is at the root of the problem. It would appear that there is a complete absence of Lesser Sandeels of the correct age class. Only a handful of food samples were collected on Fair Isle in 2004 and, combined with feeding watches and casual observations in the colonies, it was apparent that the Sandeels that were available were very small. Sprats and other Gadoids were common food items brought into the colonies by all three of the auk species but Puffins were also seen to be bringing in an unusual number of Snake Pipefish. These are almost unpalatable to young puffins and were regularly found discarded near the entrance to burrows.

If, as suspected, this is as a result of "Global Warming"- a change in sea temperature and shifts in ocean currents, resulting in a redistribution (retreating north) of plankton and therefore Sandeels, then the depressing fact is that it may be already too late for Fair Isle's/Shetland's/Britain's seabirds, even if the powers that be brought a complete halt to the production of the contributing pollutants tomorrow. Sadly all we, as Ornithologists in the field, can do is keep monitoring the situation and provide the raw facts to convince the men in suits that this is a serious issue and something must be done!



Guillemot and egg:

Claire Bailly

Table 1: Population trends at annual monitoring plots

Species	2004	2003	% Δ since 1986*	Comment
Gannet (A.O.N.)	221	226	+ 78.2	A slowing down of rapid increase since establishing in 1975. Whole island = 1868 AON
Fulmar (A.O.S.)	160	337	- 68.6	In rapid decline since peak in 1997

Species	2004	2003	% Δ since 1986*	Comment
Shag (A.O.N.)	122	119	- 43.8	A welcome halt to long-term decline.
Great Skua (A.O.T.)	96	145	+ 14.3	Lowest number since 1991
Arctic Skua (A.O.T.)	33	55	- 71.3	Long-term decline continues
Kittiwake (A.O.N.)	275	463	- 81.0**	Another species in free-fall and with poor productivity looks set to continue to fall
Arctic Tern (A.I.A.)	11	80	- 86.7	Numbers fluctuate with previous year's breeding success. Peak of 2836 as recent as 2001
Guillemot (A.I.A.)	1496	2022	- 54.4**	Lowest number on record
Razorbill (A.I.A.)	59	70		Only slightly below average
Puffin (A.O.N.)	40	55		Appears to be in decline but may perhaps be just gradual abandonment of the lone monitoring plot.

Apparently Occupied Nest (AON), Apparently Occupied Site (AOS), Apparently Occupied Territory (AOT), Apparently Incubating Adult (AIA)

*1986 was first year of intensive monitoring programme under contract to JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee)

**Guillemot and Kittiwake counts since 1987

***Razorbill counts since 1990

Sad Departures

It was with great sadness that we said goodbye to two families this autumn. Patrick and Jude Ross-Smith moved out of Burkle in September. They have moved to mainland Shetland to spend more time with their children in Lerwick. Also bound for Shetland were Glen Tyler and Gina Scanlan (with their two children Max and Kate) who moved out of Barkland in October. Gina has a new teaching job in

Dunrossness and the family plan to settle in Sandwick, Shetland. Both families will be sadly missed, but hopefully we will see them back on the isle in the future.

NTS 50th Anniversary

The Fair Isle Community and the National Trust for Scotland celebrated 50 years of partnership this year. Fair Isle was bought by the National Trust for Scotland in 1954, from George Waterston (who bought the island in 1947 and established the Bird Observatory in 1948). A celebration was held on the isle on 16th July, with visiting NTS executives, Shetland councillors and the local press.

Unusual visitors

We had a number of visits this season by individuals and groups with an unusual agenda. Malcolm Russell visited the island as part of a 5 month tour of every inhabited Scottish Island. A talented and entertaining magician, Malcolm had set himself the challenge of performing on each island. During his three days on Fair Isle there were two performances, one at the school and one to a very appreciative islander and visitor audience at a packed out Observatory. Sean Morley, a policeman from England also visited Fair Isle during the summer. He was spending 5 months kayaking round the British Isles and Fair Isle Bird Observatory was the only place he stayed at twice, once on his way north and once on his way south. We were also visited by a group of divers who travelled from John O'Groats on zodiacs and a group of rowers who rowed over from Shetland in a traditional yoal (made by Fair Isle's Ian Best).

STOP PRESS!

Another Western Palearctic first!

On 23rd October a Rufous-tailed Robin, from East Asia, was found by Mike Wood (FIBO Financial Trustee) whilst he walked south with his wife and two young daughters. After much deliberation over the identification of the bird, those assembled stood in disbelief as they watched a second First for the WP in just over a week! One lucky boat load of Shetland birders were quick off the mark and saw the bird that afternoon but unfortunately it left that night.

And Finally: keep up to date with the latest news, via the website:

www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk