

August 2006

# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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## Spring/Summer 2006 Bird Sightings

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### March Highlights

Spring began with a few good island records including a fine drake King Eider past South Light (29<sup>th</sup>), the first Island record since 1991 and a Little Grebe (24<sup>th</sup>). A probable 1<sup>st</sup> winter Kumlien's Gull seen on the 27<sup>th</sup> would have been the first for the island if it had stayed long enough for its identity to be confirmed! Other notable sightings included a Black-bellied Dipper (26<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup>) and several sightings of white-winged gulls. A spectacular 'fall' of early spring migrants during the last week brought the island to life with record spring counts of 163 Black-headed Gulls, 1,500 Song Thrush and 26 Mistle Thrush on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

### April Highlights

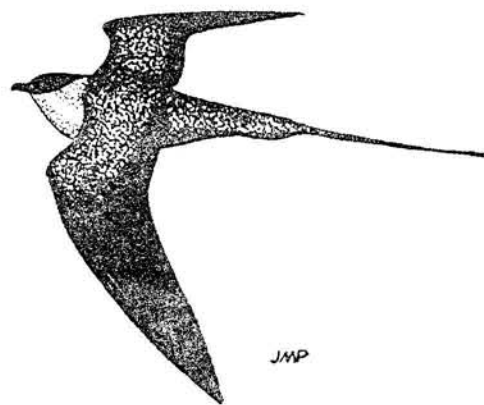
Another impressive fall early in the month featured mainly thrushes with counts of 2,200 Blackbird, 670 Fieldfare, 170 Song Thrush and 1,000 Redwing. Highlights included two Great Tits, the first at the Obs (27<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>) and another at Barkland (29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>). A Hawfinch was also around Barkland (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>) and two Goldfinch were seen (14<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>). Three Shorelark were briefly on the airstrip (24<sup>th</sup>).

### May Highlights

A Scops Owl trapped in the Gully (16<sup>th</sup>) was undoubtedly the month's best bird and only the second record for Fair Isle. A

long staying Corn Bunting (8<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>) was the second in 2 years yet only the fifth record in the last thirty years. A Red-throated Pipit was present (11<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>) and a possible Siberian Stonechat (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>) caused much frustration as it wouldn't keep still! Two Marsh Harriers were seen, on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>, while three Ospreys passing over together (14<sup>th</sup>) were an impressive sight.

It was a good month for migrants with several falls of the 'expected' species throughout the month. Scarcities included a peak of 5 Dotterel (10<sup>th</sup>), 2 Wrynecks (mid month) and at least three different Short-toed Larks (6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>). There were plenty of Bluethroats (from 7<sup>th</sup>) with a minimum of 13 individuals. The only Icterine Warbler was a late evening bird (19<sup>th</sup>). The first 2 Red-backed Shrikes of the year were found (8<sup>th</sup>), with 5 more during the month. A Hawfinch (10<sup>th</sup>) didn't linger and only one Common Rosefinch was present (30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>). A cracking male Ortolan Bunting (8<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>) gave everyone the run around for a while, with a further bird recorded later in the month (24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>). An adult Long-tailed Skua flew over the Island (25<sup>th</sup>), while a sea-watch (30<sup>th</sup>) produced 2 Manx Shearwaters and 2 Pomarine Skuas.



The most significant fall was on the 4<sup>th</sup>, when an early Turtle Dove, 3 Long and 2 Short-eared Owls, 17 Tree Pipit, 191 Wheatear, 9 Ring Ouzel, 15 Chiffchaff and 39 Willow Warblers were all recorded. A Wood Sandpiper was present (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>), and a subsequent influx of birds (8<sup>th</sup>) included

8 Common Sandpipers, 8 Sand Martin, 94 Swallow, 24 House Martin, 23 Tree Pipit, 35 Redstart, 3 Reed Warbler, 15 each of Common and Lesser Whitethroat, a Wood Warbler, 17 Pied Flycatcher and 18 Reed Buntings.

### June Highlights

The first Bee-eater since 1982 (22<sup>nd</sup>) added a splash of colour and a singing River Warbler (16<sup>th</sup>) left everyone frustrated as it failed to show or sing once the crowds arrived. A female Subalpine Warbler (6<sup>th</sup>) showed well and a Hobby (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>) was a good Island record. Common Nightingale (16<sup>th</sup>) and a late Short-toed Lark (12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>) were also notable.

There were good numbers of scarce migrants throughout the month including a sub-adult Long-tailed Skua (4<sup>th</sup>), 4 Red-backed Shrikes, 4 separate Marsh Warblers, a single Icterine Warbler (12<sup>th</sup>), 3 Rosefinches and two singing Quail (23<sup>rd</sup>). A single Dark-bellied Brent Goose (24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>) was eclipsed by a record flock of 26 Canada Geese (18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>). Perhaps the most unusual record of the month was a male Bullfinch (13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>).

### July Sightings

The first few days of the month produced a few good sightings with a Tree Sparrow (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>) and a Common Rosefinch (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>). An un-seasonal Short-eared Owl was seen (1<sup>st</sup>) although an adult Glaucous Gull (3<sup>rd</sup>) was an even stranger record. A few Common Crossbills were seen with two (9<sup>th</sup>) and four (12<sup>th</sup>).

The final week of July saw waders begin to pass through with a Greenshank (29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>), two Bar-tailed Godwits (20<sup>th</sup>) and a peak of two Green Sandpiper (26<sup>th</sup>). A Peregrine toured the Island (from 29<sup>th</sup>), a live Quail (25<sup>th</sup>) was caught by a well-trained cat and released unharmed at Barkland and a few Garden and Willow Warblers were recorded during the last few days.

Storm Petrel sessions at two sites were productive from the start of the month with 10 trapped (15<sup>th</sup>), 24 (24<sup>th</sup>) and 16 (25<sup>th</sup>)

being the highest catches. The latter also producing the first Leach's Petrel of the year.

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## Seabirds in 2006

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### An improved performance

Fair Isle's seabirds had a more productive breeding season compared to most-recent years. A record number of Bonxies established territories (189 pairs), resulting in nearly 300 chicks being ringed. Scooty Allans (Arctic Skuas) had a good season too with over 100 AOT (Apparently Occupied Territories) and a large number of chicks fledging, no doubt benefiting from the 800 nesting pairs of Arctic Terns (the highest number since 2001) from whom they could steal fish. An estimated 300 'Tirricks' fledged – the first Arctic Terns to do so for six years!! Following two extremely poor seasons it was a relief to hear a cacophony of noise emanating from the auk colonies around the island and a large number of chicks were ringed during colony visits. Similarly, Kittiwakes also managed to fledge some young this year. However, before we all start celebrating and thinking that the troubles are over, a note of caution – as in recent years the preferred (and most calorific) food, Sandeel, was still very scarce and a large number of Pipefish sp. were seen being brought in by adult birds and regurgitated by chicks. Pipefish are extremely low in calories and nutrition, resulting in very low fledging weights for most, which will undoubtedly have an impact on their future survival chances. This was partly compensated for by an apparent abundance of small 'Whitebait' species in the sea surrounding Fair Isle, allowing many birds to fledge (albeit low quality) chicks. The detailed monitoring carried out by FIBO becomes even more significant in these times of change to the oceanic ecosystem and we continue to strongly support the Fair-islanders in their demand for a protected sea area around the isle.

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## Cetacean Sightings

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### Basking Beauties

This year has been an excellent year for cetacean sightings, helped by an increased level of coverage! The Ranger Service has added cetacean watching to its list of activities, and on (rare!) flat calm days Phil has taken visitors up to Bunness to look out to sea, with a 100% success rate. Highlights included 2 Basking Shark (only the 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> F.I records) on July 21<sup>st</sup>, a pod of Killer Whales (5<sup>th</sup> June) and peak counts of 13+ Minke Whales on June 7<sup>th</sup>. There were other high counts of Minke Whales, and both the numbers and timing of these sightings are unprecedented. Sightings of Porpoise are common, while Dolphin sightings have been low in comparison to Mainland Shetland.

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## Lepidoptera News

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### Five Firsts

After a very slow start to the season, moth-trapping has been productive since mid-July with relatively good numbers of Dark Arches (*Apamea monoglypha*), Dusky Brocade (*Apamea obscura*), Smoky Wainscott (*Mythimna impura*) and no less than **five** species new to the isle; Lesser Broad-bordered Yellow Underwing (*Noctua janthina*), The Nutmeg (*Discestra trifolii*), Broom Moth (*Ceramica pisi*) Lychnis (*Hadena bicruris*), and Gold Spot (*Plusia festucae*) plus the most northerly record of Thistle Ermine (*Myelois cribrella*). Since the first records of The Magpie (*Abaxas grossulariata*) in 1998 & 1999 followed by c6 in 2001 it now seems to be an established resident with increasing numbers each year since and numerous (30+) widespread field sightings in early July this year.

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## Other Observatory News

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### New Obs

Plans for a new Observatory building are progressing with the feasibility study, based on building on a new site, now completed. The study looked at the socio-economic contribution of FIBOT to Fair

Isle and its wider impact on Shetland. An architect also visited the isle to look at the various suggested sites and to weigh up the pros and cons of building a new building on each. This report has now been completed and a site very close to the current building has been 'recommended' although this is by no means the final choice. The decision on which site to build on will be made shortly.

### New Obs Van

The white 'works' transit van finally died in July of this year. We are now the proud owner of a smart 'new' RED transit, purchased in Aberdeen and shipped up on the Northlink Ferry. The colour means we may have to rethink the 'Red Flag' system for alerting people to a rarity!!!

### Improvements

All the lounge chairs have been replaced with brand new chairs of a similar design making the lounge appear much smarter. Also, the Broadband & Wi-Fi systems installed at the end of last season are now fully operational. Visitors to the Observatory can now (for a small fee) have Internet access to check e-mails either through the Observatory laptop or through their own computer. This addition to facilities has proved to be extremely popular.

### Mid-Season Staff Changes

Julie Lane (Assistant Cook) suddenly left us in July, for personal reasons. Some swift work saw a replacement, Julie Nelson (from the Isle of Arran), arrive within a fortnight. Bronwyn Waddell (General Assistant) unfortunately has to leave us near the end of August for medical reasons. We wish her well and look forward to welcoming Jean Manning in her place.

### Volunteers

July saw the arrival of the first John Harrison Memorial Fund volunteer of the year. 19 year old Richard Else (Rick) had an excellent 2 weeks here at FIBO. He returns to Bolton with an increased enthusiasm and a new hobby – ringing! Josep Rost (from Catalonia) and James Bradley (from Suffolk) are both here at



present for a two-week insight into Observatory work and to gain some valuable experience. Finally, Rory Tallack (2005 Ranger) returns from his round the world trip to help out for the autumn.

### **Research on Starlings....**

This year has seen a "flock" of Starling researchers descend upon the Obs. Directors Dr Jane Reid (University of Aberdeen) and Dr Peter Evans (Oxford University) were joined by Dr Mark Whittingham (University of Newcastle), each supervising a Masters or PhD student researching the island's well studied Starlings. Jeroen Minderman was here from May until July, and fitted superbly into the Obs Team. He will return next year. Masters student Graeme Cook was also a welcome addition to the team for 3 weeks in June. Their enthusiasm for ringing was a great help during seabird colony visits.

### **.....and Arctic Terns**

An American student, Andrew Stowe, is following the migration of Arctic Terns from their breeding grounds in the Arctic to their wintering grounds in the Antarctic. He observed birds on Fair Isle for two weeks from late July (whilst fattening up himself on the ample offerings from the Observatory kitchen) before continuing his southbound journey. We wish him luck and look forward to reading about his adventure sometime next year.

### **Alan Titchmarsh and Co.**

Following a spring visit from a French film company who came to film Puffin courtship, the BBC has been visiting us quite regularly throughout the summer, with 2 different agendas. Fair Isle features heavily in a 'Natural World' programme on the plight of Britain's seabirds, fronted by our Chairman Roy Dennis, which is due to be aired early in the New Year. We were also graced with the presence of Alan Titchmarsh one day in early July who came to experience how Arctic Skuas rigorously defend their young for a programme he is presenting about 'Natural Britain'.

## **Island News**

### **A New Airline**

As mentioned in the last Newsletter, after 35 years of service Loganair have bowed out of the Shetland inter-island contract. A Bedfordshire-based company, *Direct Flight*, took over the contract on 1<sup>st</sup> August. The service remains unaltered with many of the same staff based in Tingwall and with the same contact details as before. We look forward to a close working relationship with *Direct Flight* and wish them well with their new venture.

### **Island departures and arrivals**

We say goodbye to Claire Scott - who lived at the South Light from where she ran the Fair Isle Silver Company. She leaves for a completely new venture on Mainland Shetland and we wish her every success and happiness in her new life. Unfortunately this means that the beautiful Fair Isle silver (and gold) jewellery she produced will shortly no longer be available. The remaining stock is for sale in the FIBO shop.

However, we do gain a whole new family, with the Wiseman's moving from Aberdeen into Burkle. We extend a warm welcome to Darren and Angela with their children, teenagers Mark & Marie and pre-school bairns Amber & Robin. We also eagerly await the arrival of *another* new family - from America! Tommy, Liz and 5 year old Henry will move into the Auld Haa this autumn.



### **Keep checking the website!**

It is updated regularly so remember to log-on when you can, or come and visit us in person.

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