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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Seabirds in 2006

Note: AON/AOS/AOT = Apparently Occupied
Nest/Site/Territory

Overview: A much better season than of late with record numbers of some species and lots of chicks produced. There does still seem to be a shortage of 1-group Sandeels at the correct time, however this was partly compensated for by an apparent abundance of Gadoids. Things were not all rosy however as a large number of Snake Pipefish were collected in colonies and from regurgitates of all bird species. These are particularly hard for chicks to swallow and digest and are also very low in nutrition. Many are just discarded by chicks.

Northern Fulmar: Numbers of AOS on the plots increased by 13.5% from 2005 (and by 95% since 2004) but are still nearly 40% less than 20 years ago. Breeding success was high with a mean productivity of 0.50 (at the five monitoring plots) being the highest since 1994.

Northern Gannet: Following two years of slow growth, the island breeding population increased this year by 18.1% to 2,145 AON, including a large jump from 23 AON to 44 AON at the newest colony on Sheep Rock. Breeding success looks to be characteristically high.

European Shag: Overall numbers of nests at the population plots were the highest since 2001 and a massive 41.2% up on the 2005 figure. Productivity was 1.60, the highest since 2002 and over twice as productive as 2004 & 2005. The few food samples collected consisted predominantly of Sandeel.

Gulls: Ten pairs of Common Gulls raised eight chicks to fledging – the highest number on record – whilst Herring Gulls and the few pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls also fledged the majority of chicks. Gulls seemed to be feeding predominantly on Snake Pipefish with large numbers regurgitated by chicks during handling.

Skuas: Surprisingly (following several years of extremely low productivity), both Arctic and Great Skua had a very successful breeding season. A record number (189) of Bonxie pairs set up territories (previous highest was 152 in 1997) and around 180 chicks fledged – a productivity of 0.95. Similarly, 105 Arctic Skua AOT (the highest since the early 1990s) produced 86 chicks to fledging – a productivity of 0.82.

Black-legged Kittiwake: The least successful of all species. Numbers of AON fell by 10.3% compared to 2005 (although still 27% higher than in 2004). Fledging success, whilst better than the complete failures of 2003 & 2004, was quite low. A productivity of 0.38 is similar to the 0.37 recorded in 2005. Productivity during the previous ten years has ranged from 0 – 1.31 (mean 0.54). Many chicks and adults regurgitated Snake Pipefish and these were also evident as discards in nests indicating a lack of availability of favoured food. Butter Fish, Gadoids and a 15-spined Stickleback were also collected but no Sandeels.

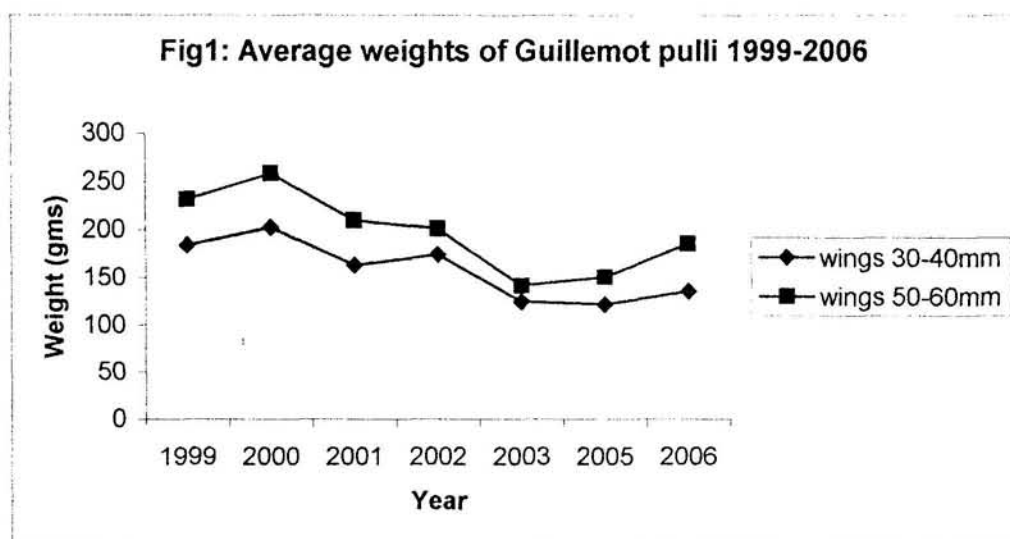
Arctic Tern: 'Tirricks' were the great success story this year. After five consecutive years of failure to fledge any chicks and with numbers of nesting birds dwindling each year (47 in 2005), it was a surprise to record over 800 AIA this year and even more surprise that over 300 chicks fledged – a productivity of 0.39.

Whilst Sandeels were evident during the courtship period, by the time chicks had hatched adult birds were mainly seen carrying small individuals of other fish species. Samples collected during ringing trips into colonies were almost exclusively 3-spined Stickleback but these may have been the few discarded items rather than the majority of food items offered to chicks.

Common Guillemot: Numbers of attendant adults were similar to the previous year (+4.2%) but numbers apparently laying eggs on the productivity plots were low and, whilst a mean productivity of 0.57 is twice that of the previous year (and the highest for four years), it is still well below the 1991-2002 mean (0.73). Fledging chicks were also underweight, which will no doubt affect their future survival chances (Fig 1). Feeding watches and collected samples showed that a variety of fish were being fed to chicks. During the 24hr feeding watch in early July, 40% were Sandeels, 26% were Gadoids and 5% Pipefish. Food samples obtained during ringing trips were varied; Lesser Sandeel, Pipefish and Gadoids – several individuals of Poor Cod were identified.

(0.44) and only the complete failure in 2004 was worse. The ten years prior to these (1994-2003) saw a mean productivity of 0.60. As in recent years, chicks were also very underweight this year with some even losing weight between visits to the colony. The majority of food items collected were small Lesser Sandeels (mean length 66.9mm).

Atlantic Puffin: Breeding success was particularly low – a productivity of 0.47 is the second worst on record (0.31 in 2001) and some way below the 1990 – 2005 average (0.68). During the 24hr feeding watch on 14th/15th July, 43% of feeds were 0-group Sandeels and a further 26% 1-group Sandeels. A significant proportion (21%) were Pipefish, the majority of which would have been discarded by the chicks near the entrance to the burrow. Feeding rates were 4.46 feeds/burrow/day – a below average figure. Food samples collected from adults returning to colonies in July were; 41% Snake Pipefish, 40% Gadoid and just 7.4% Lesser Sandeel (mean length 63mm). During one colony visit a total of 85 discarded Snake Pipefish were retrieved from a *single* burrow!



Razorbill: The number of eggs in the breeding-monitoring plot was again (as last year) a new record but fledging success was low. A productivity figure of 0.23 is only half that of the previous year

Autumn 2006 Bird Sightings

August Sightings

It was a late start to the autumn migration and it was not until 11th that a small fall

produced 200 Wheatears and 20 Willow Warblers, while scarcities that day included the only Icterine Warbler of the month, a Marsh Warbler and the first of at least 16 Barred Warblers. The first Rosefinch of the autumn was located next day.

A larger arrival (18th) produced afternoon totals of 200 Wheatears, 4 Barred, 25 Garden, 100+ Willow Warbler, the first of 2 Greenish Warblers this month and a juvenile Woodchat Shrike, the first record since 1992. This intriguing individual exhibited many features of the eastern race '*niloticus*' (potentially only the 2nd British record!). The following day produced yet more arrivals with at least 80 Garden and 160 Willow Warblers, 8 Wood Warblers, 2 Wrynecks (of 8 seen during the month), a Red-breasted Flycatcher and Red-backed Shrike (the first of 5 August birds). An island record flock of 19 Black-tailed Godwits flew over (20th). Another fall (25th-26th) produced counts of a single Corncrake, 5 Wrynecks, 8 Whinchats, 6 Barred Warblers, 6 Rosefinch, and the month's second Greenish Warbler. Another good record was the island's 15th Melodious Warbler (27th - 31st).

Two Leach's Petrels were trapped during Storm Petrel ringing sessions (3rd and 26th). Other oddities this month included an un-seasonal Woodcock (8th-16th) and a Common Buzzard (28th).

September Sightings

The month started with an unlikely second Woodchat Shrike of the autumn (2nd-13th), closely followed by a Citrine Wagtail (3rd-12th). An impressive fall of migrants later in the month produced several rarities including 2 Lanceolated Warblers (both on 15th) and singles of Pechora Pipit (15th-23rd) and Yellow-breasted Bunting (15th-16th). Another good island record was an Aquatic Warbler (16th-21st). Different Olive-backed Pipits were found on the cliffs (18th & 22nd). The island's 9th record of Buff-breasted Sandpiper was present (19th-21st).

A good month for scarce species, September saw daily sightings of Wryneck (at least 7 birds), Barred Warbler (at least

20 birds) and Common Rosefinch (at least 13 birds). A Red-backed Shrike was present (1st-6th) with 2 others (11th & 24th). Two Ortolan Buntings arrived (7th) with further singles (15th & 29th). There were singles each of Marsh (9th-11th) and Icterine Warbler (12th), but there were at least 16 different Yellow-browed Warblers with the first (12th) and a peak count of 7 (22nd). A Red-breasted Flycatcher was present (14th-16th) and a juvenile Garganey (14th-21st) was the first autumn record of the species on Fair Isle. A Corncrake was trapped (21st-22nd) and a Little Bunting was on the cliffs (22nd). An Eider showing many features of the race '*borealis*' (Northern Eider) has frequented the Havens (from 22nd). Two Short-toed Larks were seen (23rd & 27th-29th) and fly-over Honey Buzzards were logged (23rd & 27th). Other non-passerine highlights were a Dotterel (25th-26th), Grey Plover (26th-28th), Iceland Gull (28th) with an Osprey and Slavonian Grebe (both 29th).

A late Common Swift was seen (18th) and a Shelduck (22nd) was an unusual record. A flock of 12 Tree Sparrows (from 2nd) was a good autumn count, while a sea-watch (19th) produced 2 Leach's Petrels off South Light. Geese began to pass through towards the end of the month with 191 Pink-feet and 160 Barnacle (27th) the highest counts. Another 'fall' was noted on a windy 30th with totals of 72 Wigeon, 5 Red-breasted Merganser, 14 Sooty Shearwater, 13 Jack Snipe, 4 Short-eared Owl, 8 Dunnock, 19 Robin, 100 Wheatear, 8 Garden Warbler, 34 Blackcap, Pied Flycatcher, 5 Lapland Bunting and a drake Gadwall, the first since 2000.

October Sightings

The month opened with the first 'fall' of Redwings (100) plus 2 Yellow-browed Warblers and a Corncrake. Redwings rose to 350 the following day when a particularly orange juvenile Hen Harrier, Ring Ouzel, Common Rosefinch and 6 Snow Bunting arrived. A Rustic Bunting (3rd-5th) was followed with a White-rumped Sandpiper (7th-10th) and the first of three Olive-backed Pipits (10th), a Red-throated Pipit (12th-15th) and a late Wryneck (12th). A Short-toed Lark (14th) arrived with the

first of only two Bluethroats. Yellow-browed Warblers were recorded daily until 22nd (a total of c10 birds). Three Red-breasted Flycatchers (10th, 14th & 17th), 3-4 Common Rosefinch and a couple of Little Buntings (11th, 17th) added to the list of 'scarce migrants'. Thrushes increased further with peaks of 7,000 Redwing (11th), 400 Song Thrush & 17 Ring Ouzel (12th) with Blackbirds (200) and Fieldfare (650) toward the end of the month (28th). Geese too began to arrive from 10th, including a record 2,100 grounded Greylag (18th). The final 10 days of the month however brought the best birds with our 3rd record of Blyth's Pipit (21st-24th), Olive-backed Pipit (22nd), a very late Thrush Nightingale (25th-27th) and two Arctic Redpolls (25th & 30th).

Cetacean Sightings

In keeping with the first half of the season, cetacean sightings were frequent in early autumn. Risso's Dolphins, normally a scarce visitor to Fair Isle waters, became a common sight on calm days with a high count of 15+ (25th August), including several small calves. White-beaked Dolphin counts also increased with 15 individuals seen from the North Lighthouse (31st August). Another 3 Basking Sharks (only the 6th, 7th, and 8th island records) were seen in August bringing the year total up to 5. Sightings of Harbour Porpoise were regular throughout August and September.

Other Observatory News

New Obs

Developments have been slow to progress but we are still confident that building works will commence at the end of next season and completed in time for the start of the 2009 season.

Benches

The Observatory has ordered three new wooden benches to install at different locations around the island. Two of these

will look over the new plantations at the Observatory and at Stackhoull while the third, donated by the family of Gordon Barnes, will be placed at Setter in his memory. Gordon was Assistant Warden at FIBO 1960-61 and then lived at Setter with his young family until 1971. It is hoped that the benches will provide welcome resting and viewing spots for visitors.

Autumn Staff Changes

August saw the arrival of Jean Manning, taking the place of General Assistant and fellow New Zealander, Bronwyn Waddell. In September, the Observatory said farewell to Julie Nelson after 6 weeks as Assistant Cook. Help for the remainder of the season arrived in the form of American, Mareth Griffith, who acted as a 3rd General Assistant while our very own Administrator, Hollie, took on the role of part-time Chef, cooking on Phil's days off. Ranger, Phil Knott left the island in early September. Last year's Ranger, Rory Tallack, stepped into his shoes until the end of the season.

JHMF Volunteers

The Observatory awarded two JHMF (John Harrison Memorial Fund) volunteer places this season. Jim Bradley from Suffolk and Catalanian, Josep Rost, both enjoyed helping out in early August. For information on applying for a JHMF place see the FIBO website (www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk/jhmf_grant.htm).

Media Visits

In late September the Observatory hosted yet another TV camera crew as Fair Isle may feature in BBC's 'Coast' programme. The series, which follows life around the coastline of Britain, will be aired next Easter.

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