

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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Welcome to the latest news from Fair Isle. It has been a successful season so far (unless you are a seabird) and it looks likely to be our busiest yet for visitors. This is no doubt partly due to the new Loganair link from Orkney but also because word is getting around that Fair Isle is a wonderful place to visit and the Observatory a comfortable and relaxed place to stay. Plans for a new Observatory Lodge to be built in 2009 will make a stay on Fair Isle even more pleasurable. Therefore, members wishing to visit us in 2008 to say "Goodbye!" to 'the old Obs' are advised to book soon!

The Spring was very dry and sunny (although cooler than average) - something which has benefited the lambing and the start of the seabird breeding season alike (and also those designated to monitor them!). However, the lack of sandeels soon became apparent once seabird chicks had hatched in June and colonies were depressingly quiet during ringing trips. A sadly familiar story!! Spring migration was quite slow but was brightened up by a fair scattering of quality birds, including two new species for the isle and also several excellent views of Orcas as they cruised round the isle in search of seals.

Migrant Birds in 2007 so far....

January

Highlights included at least three Iceland and single Glaucous Gulls. A wintering Shoveler and two Dunnocks were unusual and a 'mealy' Common Redpoll on 23rd was a prelude to a large influx a month later!

February

Highlights: Two first-winter Iceland Gulls were present all month with a second-winter (1st-5th) and a first-winter Glaucous Gull (1st). An extraordinary influx of Common Redpolls began (22nd) with a peak count of 45 (25th) - however over 70 were trapped and ringed. A Long-eared Owl was flushed from the Gully (17th).

Single Pink-footed and Greenland Whitefronted Geese remained with the wintering Greylag flock (105). Some movement saw the latter peak at 131 (17th) when a Whooper Swan also flew through. Returning waders trickled through during the month but increased in the last week with peaks of 86 Oystercatcher (24th), 80 Lapwing (25th) and 34 Ringed Plover (28th). The wintering Shoveler and *borealis* Northern Eider were spotted occasionally. 'Spring' migration saw the first four Skylarks (13th), increasing to 21 (17th) and 120 by 25th - very good numbers so early in the year. Also, an early Stonechat (19th), increased to six by 25th and the first Pied Wagtail arrived (24th), when a Siskin was also seen. Finally, a Wood Pigeon was new for the year on 28th.

March

A first-winter Glaucous Gull opened the month whilst 'mealy' Common Redpoll numbers remained high with a flock of

40 frequenting the Havens area on 2nd, but began to dwindle from 4th and down to just 5 lingering around the Obs by 7th. From the 2nd onwards skylarks could be heard singing with counts of 2-300 (max 280) being seen almost daily throughout the month. The 3rd saw 2 first winter Iceland gulls as well as a flock of 21 Rook pass over (the third highest count for the island). Two first winter Glaucous Gulls were recorded (5th). One remained the following day along with an Iceland Gull. Three Wigeon on 17th, were followed the next day by 3 Teal plus a Red-throated Diver, Cormorant and a Dunlin. Highlight of 19th was the unexpected arrival of an adult Mute Swan in South Haven – only our 8th record. It was still present the following day when a flock of 21 Curlew arrived and a party of 30 Snow Buntings appeared. The 22nd was the best day of the year so far with nine Whooper Swan flying past and counts of 24 Lapwing, 95 Snipe, 130 Turnstone, 42 Ringed Plover, 75 Greylag Geese (plus the Greenland Whitefront), 7 Wood Pigeon, 280 Skylark, a Rook and 53 Snow Bunting. The 27th saw another two additions to the year list with a cracking male Lapland Bunting and the first northbound Brambling. Five Chiffchaffs were counted and a few more Robins (10) were evident. The month ended with a Great Tit which remained until the 8th of April.

April

Our first Wheatear appeared on the 8th. A small fall on the 12th included three Shelduck, 200 Skylark, 20 Golden Plover, a dozen Wheatears, our first Swallow and a French-ringed Chiffchaff! The first Willow Warbler was recorded (16th) along with 2 Black-tailed Godwits. A Little Gull

(20th) was followed by a fantastic day on the 23rd. A 1stW female Black-throated Thrush topped the bill, supported by a Slavonian Grebe plus a few firsts for the year including single Sand Martin, Tree Pipit, Lesser Whitethroat and Blackcap as well as a good count of three Sandwich Terns. A nice male Garganey the following day was surpassed by a Little Bunting on the last day of the month.

May

The month opened with a Quail followed by a Hawfinch and Wryneck on the 2nd along with two Short-eared Owls, a Tree Pipit and a *rubicola* Common Stonechat. A Corncrake was logged on (7th) along with another Wryneck. An Icterine Warbler (12th) was followed by a Thrush Nightingale and Osprey (13th). The next highlight was the discovery of a female Surf Scoter in Furse on 21st – the first confirmed record for the isle! It swam round to North Haven, where it remained until 25th. The first Red-backed Shrike appeared (22nd) with a Subalpine Warbler (23rd) and a Bluethroat the next day. A large raptor thought to be a Saker was spotted (26th). A superb Lesser Grey Shrike appeared at the Chalet the following afternoon. It found Fair Isle to its liking and is still present in late July. A Rosy Starling appeared (28th). A light to moderate easterly with hazy low cloud on the final day of the month resulted in one of the best days of the spring. It started with an Icterine Warbler in the Havens. Two more were later found (at Leogh & Hesti Geo). An Osprey flew over North Light. A Common Rosefinch at Pund was followed by another at Haa. The Walli Burn produced a Marsh Warbler and moments later, a male Rustic Bunting. The Marsh Warbler was seen to be

sporting a ring and efforts were therefore made to trap it. It had been ringed in Norway! A male Red-backed Shrike shared the fences at Midway with the Lesser Grey Shrike. As everyone arrived back at the Obs for lunch, a Golden Oriole flew into the Obs Plantation! A thin scattering of common migrants (Spotted Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, Redstart, Sedge, Garden & Willow Warbler) was also noted. One Sedge Warbler was trapped bearing a French ring!

June

A new month started with a new bird for the year, but its identity left us puzzled - a female Red/Black-headed Bunting. An impressive record of five Shelduck flew past (2nd). A stunning European Bee-eater (4th) stayed until 6th. A Short-toed Lark on 5th was a welcome addition to the year list as was a Corn Bunting the following day. Other late migrants included the odd Black Redstart, Common Redstart, Whinchat, Ring Ouzel, Redwing and a scattering of all the common warblers with a Marsh Warbler (7th), Reed Warbler (7th), up to four Icterine Warblers and a surprise Paddyfield Warbler (9th). Common Rosefinches were recorded ((1st-3rd & 11th-12th). The 11th saw two Sandwich Terns fly over but were overshadowed by an unexpected River Warbler! The 13th saw one of the best birds of the year with the arrival of a Terek Sandpiper in South Harbour - the first record for the island and only the fourth for Shetland. Late June saw a couple more Marsh Warblers (15th & 22nd) - the latter staying until mid-July and it was joined by a Reed Warbler from 28th June-10th July. A few late Garden Warblers and Blackcaps were seen whilst single Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler appear

to be summering in the Obs Plantation. A Red-backed Shrike appeared on 30th June.

July

Mid-summer is normally a quiet time for migrants but the odd thing does turn up... an Arctic Redpoll on 19th was a most unexpected find in the Vaadal catching box!! A Black Redstart (15th) was followed by a Turtle Dove (18th onwards) and a Sandwich Tern (20th). A scattering of returning waders included Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Sanderling and Ruff. Storm Petrel trapping sessions began mid-month but numbers have been disappointing so far (<20) and though Leach's Petrels have been seen on at least three occasions none, as yet, have been trapped!

Seabirds in 2007

Although not over yet, the results so far indicate that it has been *another* bad year for Fair Isle's breeding seabirds. No young Arctic Terns, Arctic Skuas or Razorbills have fledged whilst almost all other species fledged (or look likely to fledge) very low numbers. Only European Shags (and Gannets of course!) seem to have done well. A full summary will appear in the next Newsletter.

Cetacean Sightings

It's been a good year for sightings, especially of Killer Whales.....the first Orcas (3) were seen on the early date of 21st March but there were no further sightings until 7th May when a pod of five were seen at various points around the coastline. Groups of 2-5 were then seen on a further six dates to 25th May

followed in June by an eight at North Light (5th) and three (11th) – right up against the pier in North Haven!!! Another pod of five was seen on 6th July. Minke Whales have been in evidence too with regular sightings between 28th April – 9th May and further singles on 7th & 9th June. A good record was two Pilot Whales (female and calf) seen from a boat half a mile off North Lighthouse on 3rd May.

Other Observatory News

2007 Staff

Phil Bell has returned from a winter in New Zealand to fill the role as Head Cook and is aided by Jose Manning. The domestic team this year consists of another returnee, New Zealander Jean Manning and newcomer Tracey Weekes. Kate Bailey has joined us as Child minder for the Shaw brood. The Ornithological team has two new assistant wardens this year, Simon Davies from Shropshire and Mark Breaks from Lancashire whilst the Ranger post has been filled by our wee Edinburgh lad, Ben McCallum.

JHMF Volunteers

As in most years, we have awarded several JHMF (John Harrison Memorial Fund) volunteer places this summer. They are; Robert Hughes, Katherine Fraser, Will Balmont and Jean Burgermeister. Each one has gained an enviable insight into Observatory work and participated in a variety of tasks including bird ringing, monitoring, data entry and Observatory maintenance. For more information on applying for a

JHMF place see the FIBO website (www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk/jhmf_grant.htm).

New Obs

After a productive AGM and Director's Meeting in early May, real progress is being made concerning the future of the Observatory. It is now almost certain that the current building will, after 60 years of punishment from the Fair Isle climate, be demolished at the end of 2008 and we will be rebuilding on the same site in 2009. The new building will have an eco-friendly design with much-improved insulation and soundproofing, en-suite facilities in all bedrooms, a conference room/visitor centre, guest laundry room and a games room. It is hoped we will have a grand opening in April 2010 to mark the beginning of a new era in FIBOT's long history. Whilst building works are in progress, Deryk & Hollie and family will hopefully be housed elsewhere on the isle whilst accommodation will also be required for Assistant Wardens and long-term researchers. It does mean however that unfortunately we will have to be closed to guests for the entire 2009 season but hopefully many of our members will be even more keen to visit our new improved premises in the years to come.

Other Island News

The largest gathering on the isle for many years occurred over the weekend of 21st-22nd July when Jimmy & Florrie Stout of Skerryholm celebrated their ruby wedding anniversary. Superb weather and organization ensured everyone arrived and a fantastic banquet in the hall was followed by a dance and music from many of the talented guests.