

October 2007
**FRIENDS OF
FAIR ISLE
NEWSLETTER**

Written by
Deryk Shaw and Ben McCallum
Edited by Deryk Shaw

Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle,
Shetland, ZE2 9JU
Tel: 01595 760 258
E-mail: fairisle.birdobs@zetnet.co.uk
www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk

Seabirds on Fair Isle in 2007

Overview: Following a comparatively successful breeding season in 2006, the 2007 season has reverted to recent type. Apart from Northern Gannet and Eurasian Shag, every species had well below average breeding success, a lack of suitable food being the primary cause. Lesser Sandeels were still very scarce and those that were available were particularly small. Snake Pipefish were still very much in evidence, rejected by chicks and found discarded around many nests and colonies.

Northern Fulmar: Numbers of AOS on the plots fell by 12.1% compared to 2006, to the third lowest on record and are currently 37.1% lower than when monitoring began in 1987. Productivity was below average with a mean from the five plots of 0.35 (range 0.24 - 0.43).

Northern Gannet: The breeding population continues to rise, reaching a new record of 1957 AON. A new breeding colony has been initiated on Lerness (56 AON) and the Sheep Rock site also continues to increase, from 44 AON to 50 AON. Breeding success was

characteristically high owing to this species having huge foraging ranges and an ability to take larger fish species such as Mackerel and Herring.

European Shag: This species had a better breeding season than most. Following a high number of nests on the plots in 2006, numbers fell slightly this year (-4.4%) whilst breeding success (1.40 chicks fledged per nest) was only just below the long-term mean (1.44).

Skuas: Following four years of extremely poor breeding success and falling numbers, Great Skuas had a surprisingly successful season in 2006 (record numbers of AOT and a productivity of 0.95). They increased again this year, up 18.5% to 224 AOT. However, only 101 chicks fledged (a productivity of 0.45) (Fig 1) with starvation and intra-specific depredation the suspected reasons for failures.

Arctic Skuas have been in trouble since 1998 with falling numbers and very low breeding success. The years 2003 - 2005 saw a total of just ten birds fledge. Things improved dramatically in 2006 with the highest number of AOT (105) since the early 1990s and good productivity (0.82). In 2007 however, the situation deteriorated again and from 68 AOT (a 35.2% decrease), not a single chick fledged (Fig 1).

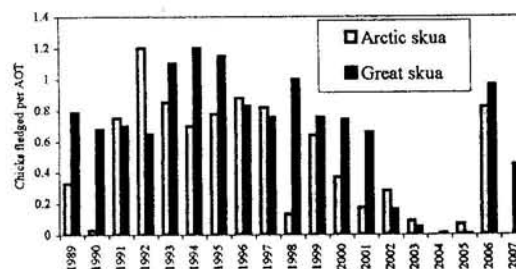


Figure 1. Breeding success of Arctic and Great Skuas on Fair Isle, 1989-2007.

Note: Arctic Skua failed to fledge any young in 2004 & 2007.

Black-legged Kittiwake: The species in most trouble! Numbers of AON at the plots continued to fall (by 27.0% since 2006) to the lowest ever – 82.4% less than in 1987 (Fig 2). Although the vast majority (91%) of pairs built nests and laid eggs, 44.8% failed at this stage whilst those chicks that did hatch were lucky to survive beyond two weeks. Only four chicks fledged from 254 nests on the monitoring plots – only the complete failures of 2003 & 2004 have been worse. Depredation and starvation were the causes of failure. Many chicks and adults regurgitated Snake Pipefish and these were also evident as discards in nests, indicated a lack of availability of favoured food (ie Sandeels).

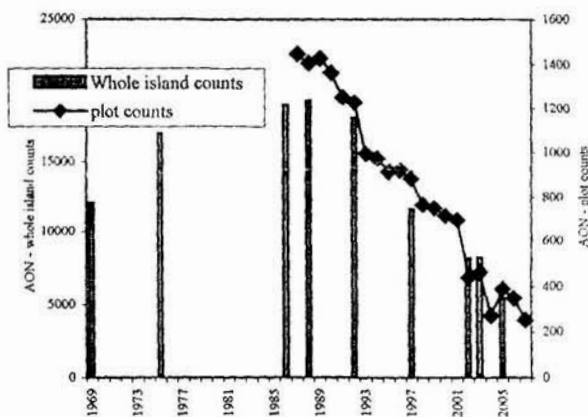


Figure 2. Whole island and plot counts of Black-legged Kittiwake nests on Fair Isle, 1969-2007.

Arctic Tern: In 2006, after five consecutive years of failure to fledge any chicks and with numbers of nesting birds dwindling each year, it was a surprise to record over 800 AIA and even more surprise that over 300 chicks fledged – a productivity of 0.39. We therefore waited with baited breath to see what would happen in 2007. Around 150 birds arrived in mid-May but all departed a week later. Birds returned in late May

and an estimated 208 AIA were counted in two colonies – on Bunness and at South Light. However, only a handful of eggs managed to hatch (the chicks of which died shortly after) before the whole colony was deserted for good.

Common Guillemot: Numbers of birds on the plots were the lowest on record (32.5% less than in 2006) and only small numbers of eggs were laid. Productivity at the two monitored sites was markedly different; Peitron 0.47 and Da Swadin 0.06 (mean 0.37). Observations during ringing trips into various colonies would suggest that the figure from Da Swadin was (unfortunately) more representative of the isle as a whole. Feeding watches indicated that provisioning rates were very low (1.9 feeds/chick/day) and although 56.6% of food items were Sandeels, these were of less than average size.

Razorbill: The ten years (1994-2003) saw a mean productivity at the Easter Lother monitoring plot of 0.60. However in 2004, productivity was **zero** for the first time ever and despite record numbers of eggs being laid, fledging success has been poor each year since (0.44 in 2005, 0.23 in 2006). A good number of eggs were again laid this year but only half (51.6%) of these actually hatched and, as in recent years, repeat biometrics showed that chicks were in very poor condition (some even losing weight between visits to the colony). For the second time on record no chicks fledged.

Atlantic Puffin: Puffins have always appeared to be fairly successful, with productivity between 1990 and 2005 never falling below 0.57 (apart from in 2001 – productivity of 0.31). In 2006 it

was slightly below this figure, at 0.47. Breeding success in 2007 was much worse (Fig 3). A final productivity of 0.17 is a very disappointing result, bringing Puffin breeding success in line with the other auk species. A combination of a lack of Sandeels (with many discarded Snake Pipefish found in burrows) and a period of wet weather in late July / August (causing several burrows to be flooded) were major factors in this crash.

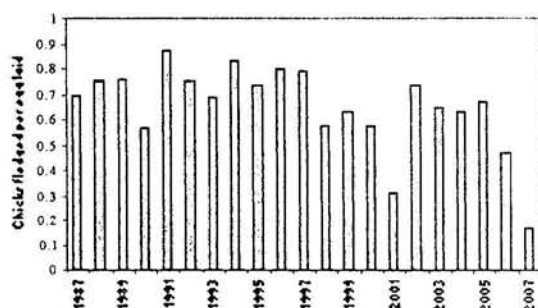


Figure 3. Breeding success of Atlantic Puffin on Fair Isle, 1987-2007.

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

Autumn 2007 Bird Sightings

August Sightings

The Lesser Grey Shrike which was first recorded on May 27th remained until 18th when it either died naturally or was taken by a raptor. The first scarcity of the month was a Pectoral Sandpiper on Vatnagard on 3rd. The first warblers of the autumn didn't arrive until 8th when singles of Grasshopper, Sedge and Garden were seen. An early Fieldfare also arrived. The 11th saw a few scarce migrants arrive with a male Common Rosefinch, followed by a Wryneck and an Icterine Warbler. A Citrine Wagtail was recorded (13th-29th). A small fall on

20th included a Pied Flycatcher, Greenish Warbler and a Red-backed Shrike (which was joined by a second on 22nd).

A sea watch on 26th produced four Sooty and one Manx Shearwater. We had to wait until 28th for the first Barred Warbler of the year, along with 2+ Citrine Wagtails, and a single Marsh Warbler. A Hudsonian Whimbrel from 29th - 31st was the highlight of the month and was Fair Isle's second record. The first was back in 1955 and was Britain's first record!

September Sightings

A slow start to the month with the Citrine Wagtail(s) being the highlight of the first ten days. An early first winter Iceland Gull was seen on 4th. Pomarine Skua, four Storm Petrels and a couple of Sooty Shearwaters were seen from the Good Shepherd on 8th and sea-watching on 12th produced two distant 'large' Shearwaters, five Red-throated Diver, 38 Sooty Shearwater, three Storm Petrel and 79 Cormorant (a record count). New arrivals included Red-backed Shrike and an adult Glaucous Gull.

A few 'north-western' Redpolls began to arrive from 15th, then the 17th provided a bit of excitement with a Barred Warbler, two Common Rosefinch, Corncrake, Pectoral Sandpiper and an adult Glaucous Gull. A juvenile Dotterel was found on Hoini on 21st. Bird of the month was a Buff Bellied Pipit in Suka Mire from 23rd - 25th. This is the second Fair Isle record, but the first was as long ago as September 1953!

The last few days of the month produced classic conditions and some superb birding.....Two Citrine Wagtails were together at Da Water on the morning of 27th and before the day was out two Lanceolated Warblers had also been

found along with Corncrake, Turtle Dove, Bluethroat, five Barred Warbler, two Yellow-browed Warbler, ten Greenland Redpoll and two Common Rosefinch along with hundreds of common migrants. The following day produced a superb (and overdue!) Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler along with Icterine Warbler, Thrush Nightingale. Three Bluethroat, three Barred Warbler, 12 Yellow-browed Warbler and two Common Rosefinch. More birds arrived on 29th and amongst the common migrants were a new Lanceolated Warbler, Red-throated Pipit, two Richards Pipits, two Bluethroats, two Barred Warblers, 11 Yellow-browed Warblers and a Common Rosefinch. A Hen Harrier drifted through whilst a Corncrake was flushed from ditches at Pund. The last day of the month (30th) didn't disappoint either with both Blyths Reed Warbler and Marsh Warbler discovered in the morning, allowing excellent comparison. The best however was discovered mid-afternoon... a Grey-Cheeked Thrush! It is the third island record – the previous two were the 1st & 2nd British records, back in the 1950s!

A Lanceolated Warbler was still present as were two Bluethroats, Common Rosefinch and Richards Pipit.

Early October Sightings

The month opened with a Buff Bellied Pipit in Homisdale, then Vaasetter. From field views it was thought to possibly be a different bird to the one a week previous!! Other sightings that day included Buff-breasted Sandpiper, the Lanceolated Warbler, a single Bluethroat, two Barred Warblers, four Yellow-browed Warblers and a Common Rosefinch. The following days highlights were White-rumped Sandpiper and a Marsh Warbler, but

news broke in the afternoon of a fresh Peregrine kill – a Whites Thrush! The 4th saw geese on the move with 326 Pink-feet, two Greenland Whitefronts, 26 Greylags and 11 Barnacles noted. There was also an influx of thrushes with seven Ring Ouzel, 55 Blackbird, 50 Fieldfare, 45 Song Thrush, 560 Redwing and a single Mistle Thrush logged. A few scarce migrants included a Corncrake, adult Glaucous Gull, Short-toed Lark, two Richards Pipits, the two Bluethroats, Barred Warbler, Marsh Warbler, 10+ Yellow-browed Warblers and two Common Rosefinch. The 8th produced a Little Bunting, then there was a report on 11th from an islander that his cat had just eaten a Great Grey Shrike! A long-awaited Olive-backed Pipit appeared on 12th, but was only seen by one lucky sole as it fed in the Wirvie Burn.



Blyth's Reed Warbler
by Luchian Shaw

Cetacean Sightings

It has been fairly quiet for cetacean sightings this autumn. The obvious highlight occurred on 27th September when the gathered crowd waiting to get views of the Lanceolated Warbler in the Skadan crop were treated to fantastic views of a pod of five Orcas! Three distant Dolphin sp. were spotted offshore on 22nd and eight Harbour Porpoise were recorded on 24th, with three more the

following day, along with a Risso's Dolphin. October highlights so far have been a Minke Whale (6th), two White-sided Dolphin (9th) and a very showy Minke Whale in Hesswalls (10th – 11th).

Other Observatory News

Gordon Barnes

Gordon Barnes was Assistant Warden at FIBO 1960-61 and then moved to Setter until 1971. He passed away in March 2006 and a seat in his memory, paid for by his family, overlooks Setter and is a welcome resting-place for weary walkers.

Benches

Two other new seats have been installed. The first looks over the Observatory plantation. The second is located at Stackhoull overlooking the new area planted with trees and bushes immediately north of the shop.

Stiles

FIBO has recently received a grant from Shetland Islands Council (via the new access code) to build and replace stiles around the island. These new stiles have greatly improved access and have received encouraging feedback from visitors. It is hoped that most or all the remaining stiles on the island will be replaced in the near future.

New Observatory

It has been decided that the current building will be knocked down at the end of 2008 and the new Obs (barring mishaps!) will be constructed in 2009. Initial sketches and plans have been circulated amongst the Directors and these have been tweaked and we are just waiting for the final design to come through. Planning application and the

huge task of fund-raising will then begin in earnest.

Another Busy Season

The 2007 season has been our busiest yet for visitor numbers. With the August & October offers in previous years attracting people that have continued to visit, every month has been busy this year. An estimated 600 people stayed with us this year. Due to this success, we have no need to run any offers in 2008. However do remember that FOFI are eligible for a 10% discount in July & August. Why not book a visit to say 'Goodbye' to the old Obs?

Transport Links

Loganair Orkney, has piloted a new twice-weekly air link between Kirkwall and Fair Isle via North Ronaldsay this year. It has been very popular and has contributed towards our busiest ever season for visitor numbers! Loganair have just announced that this service will continue next year, although final details are yet to be confirmed. To take advantage of this new route, Loganair's Orkney office can be contacted on 01856 872494 or visit www.loganair.co.uk

The regular link between Shetland and Fair Isle is now run by Direct Flight and has been busier than ever, resulting in extra scheduled (mid-morning) flights on Mondays and Fridays. Direct Flight can be contacted on 01595 840246 or visit www.directflight.co.uk for information.

Atlantic Airways are also extending their new route between London, Stansted and Sumburgh, Shetland next year to run from 25th May – 25th October 2008. For further information visit www.atlanticairways.com

Of course, the traditional routes to Orkney and Shetland via Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen (the last by ferry as well as plane) are still in existence. Contact details can be found on the FIBO website www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk

Observatory Vehicles

It has been a trying season for the Obs island transport. Having to purchase 'good' vehicles within a tight budget and keep them in condition is very hard in the Fair Isle climate. The red 'works' transit van failed us in the spring and was considered not financially worth repairing. The Toyota people carrier, after just 18 months use, struggled to the end of last season and we purchased a Renault Espace in April this year. This has, apart from a couple of minor ailments, been a worthy investment for transporting guests. We struggled through the remainder of the season without a works van, borrowing islanders vehicles for transporting large bulky items (including the weekly food order) whilst Deryk & Hollie's car has effectively become an Obs vehicle!

The Birds of Scotland

This new book is due out in December of this year. It is a landmark publication updating Baxter & Rintouls 1953 book of the same title and Valerie Thom's 'Birds in Scotland' in 1986. It is a thorough representation of the status of every species recorded in Scotland up to 2005 and, naturally, Fair Isle is mentioned more than any other place. It comes in two full colour A4 volumes totalling 1,600 pages, 1,500 charts and graphs and 900 photographs and is an absolute must for anyone with an interest in Scotland's birdlife. Further details can be found on the SOC website www.the-soc.org.uk

Island News

A 'new' Village Hall

The hall has been closed since August for renovation. New windows, insulation and panelling will ensure more comfort, especially during the winter months, and a lick of paint will give the whole room a 'facelift'.

Puffin 'Tea Stop'

The Puffin Hostel in the south of the isle was once again opened up as somewhere our guests could go to eat a packed lunch and/or make a cup of tea/coffee during the day. It has been very gratefully received and we are thankful to the National Trust for Scotland for allowing permission to use their facility.

Places To Stay

The Bird Observatory Lodge is not the only visitor accommodation on the isle. Aside from the long-running B&B at Upper Leogh and the self-catering cottage at Springfield, two new B&Bs opened up this year. Burkle and Auld Haa have both been receiving guests and with such a busy year for visitors to the isle as a whole, both have recorded successful first seasons.

And Finally....

We hope you enjoy reading the 2006 Report. Extra copies (and a host of other goodies) can be purchased from the FIBO shop for £7 (incl. p&p in UK). Remember to log on to the FIBO website www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk and the Fair Isle website www.fairisle.org.uk to keep in touch with bird sightings and island 'goings on'.