

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER No. 36, August 2008

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Spring 2008 Bird Sightings

It was an excellent spring for migrants on Fair Isle with *four* firsts for the Isle and some cracking birds as a supporting cast.

March

It was a quiet start to the month with poor weather producing only small arrivals of bird. Things picked up from the 12th with a reasonable fall of thrushes including 45 Blackbirds, 38 Redwing, 5 Fieldfare and 2 Song Thrush. There was also 3 Robins, 6 Siskin and 92 Snow Buntings. The number of Snipe on the isle peaked at 65 on 12th, when a change in the weather brought a heavy covering of snow along with appropriate parties of Whooper Swans (5 & 13). The **Black-bellied Dipper** that had spent much of the winter on the Isle reappeared briefly in the Vaadal on 13th. The first Meadow Pipit was noted on 16th and Brambling, Black Redstart and Greenfinch all put in their first appearance on 27th.

Passage increased towards the end of the month with a southerly wind pushing birds

north. Oystercatchers increased to 100 on 29th with 17 Golden Plover, 120 Skylark, 7 Robin, 50 Blackbird, 4 Song Thrush, 2 Chiffchaff and 4 Siskin. A second summer Iceland Gull joined the long staying first winter on 24th and on 29th the first Bonxie appeared. The 30th brought the arrival of 16 Jackdaw to join the 5 left from last autumn, while 2 Stonechat and 17 Snow Buntings linger. The first Puffins appeared off shore on 30th. The months highlight waited until the last day when a **Common Crane** graced the isle.

April

The month opened with the first Wheatear and Ring Ouzel on 1st and Long-eared Owl on 2nd. The **Common Crane** was still present on the morning of 1st before departing to the north and there were further records on 17th (1) and 27th (3). A new bird for the Fair Isle list was a **Night Heron**, flushed from South Harbour on 5th. It was originally very elusive but later settled down on Field Pond. Amazingly, a second bird was found dead in Klingers Geo on 9th. Unfortunately the original bird was also found dead, on 13th. An **Arctic Redpoll** briefly at Barkland on 8th was a nice find. A Canada Goose began its two week stay from 9th. A **Black-bellied Dipper** found at Wirvie on 12th was a different (unringed) bird to the one that spent the winter here. The main arrival of common summer migrants commenced on 16th and most had been recorded by the months end. The 16th also produced a Slavonian Grebe off Bunes.

Bird of the month appeared on 20th when, whilst we were watching two Hawfinch at Barkland, a **Calandra Lark** landed in a field nearby. It could not be found the next day but reappeared on 22nd when it was much more obliging. It is only the 15th British Record but the fourth for Fair Isle. A **Short-**

toed Lark was present in the adjacent field from the 22nd. Another excellent record was a **Great Snipe** on 24th seen to come in off the sea at Easter Lothar but unfortunately it disappeared into the thick fog and a subsequent search was unsuccessful. A ringed Great Tit, present in the Observatory garden between 25th and 29th, was trapped and had been ringed on North Ronaldsay two days previously.

April was a good month for common migrants, especially thrushes and finches. The 24th saw an arrival of thrushes which included 240 Fieldfare 63 Redwing and 43 Song Thrush. Bramblings also featured with up to 40 birds present at the end of the month. The first winter Iceland Gull was present all month in the south. It was occasionally joined by a second year bird and from 20th a third year **Kumliens Gull**. This is the first confirmed record of this race of Iceland Gull on the Isle.

May

The month got off to a flying start with a female **CASPIAN PLOVER** found by Dr. Jane Reid whilst resighting colour ringed Starlings! Originally found near Upper Stoneybreck it was relocated near Pund later that morning and this is where it stayed for much of that day. It wasn't relocated until after breakfast on 2nd when it was seen in the Upper Stoneybreck field again. Unfortunately it only stayed fifty minutes before disappearing high to the northwest, much to the disdain of the arriving twitchers! Also seen on 1st were the first Wryneck and Osprey for the year and then on 3rd a Dotterel appeared in the south. This began a run of records of this species until 14th including a 'trip' of 6 on Ward Hill. Following an influx into the south of the British Isles, **Black Kite** finally made it onto the Fair Isle list. An individual arrived on 7th and was seen floating around the

north of the isle until 10th. A **Subalpine Warbler** trapped on 9th commenced its 11-day stay and was joined by a second individual on 18th. The first **Bluethroat** was seen on 9th and birds were then seen almost daily well into June. A female **Citrine Wagtail** found on Da Water on 11th stayed around until 13th while yet another **Common Crane** appeared on 12th.

There were some interesting ducks in South Harbour mid month. Firstly was a first year male **Surf Scoter** on 16th (only the second Fair Isle record) and then on 18th a first year male **King Eider** arrived. The Scoter hung around until 26th, but the eider was only present for three days. They were occasionally seen together in South Harbour but the Surf Scoter seemed to range wider and often appeared at Hesti Geo.

The first **Icterine Warblers** were trapped on 20th and on 22nd. The most notable falls commenced on the 22nd with the arrival 21 Spotted and 4 Pied Flycatchers, increasing to 30 Spotted and 8 Pied Flycatchers the next day along with 6 Redstarts. These few days also produced an immature **Golden Oriole** and a Wood Warbler. Most notably however was a very elusive **Savi's Warbler** trapped at the Chalet on 22nd. A female **Rustic Bunting** on 24th was a taster of things to come in the last few days of the month

After a very settled month of weather to date, an easterly gale on the 28th resulted in a large fall of birds. This included a **Red-breasted Flycatcher** and a possible **Tawny Pipit**. It also brought the first **Red-backed Shrikes** (10), **Marsh Warbler** and Reed Warbler of the year as well as 6 Grey-headed Wagtails, 7 **Icterine Warbler**, 4 **Common Rosefinch** and a Hawfinch. The fall also included 25 Lesser and 5 Common

Whitethroats, 13 Garden Warblers, 23 Spotted Flycatchers and a lone Pied Flycatcher. The 29th produced 6 Whinchats and 13 Grey-headed Yellow Wagtails. Yet more birds on the 30th included 21 Barnacle Geese, 6 Common Sandpipers, 12 Common Swifts, 28 Willow Warblers and another influx of Spotted Flycatchers (33). These were joined by quality birds in the form of nice male **Rustic Bunting** and **Little Bunting** together at Wirvie, a brief **Red-throated Pipit** in the same area and a very obliging **Nightjar** at the Obs.

June

Scarce migrants were holding on into June with at least 1 Bluethroat, 5 Marsh Warbler, 3 Icterine, 10 Red-backed Shrike and 1 Common Rosefinch. The island was shrouded in thick fog from 2nd, which severely hampered observations and put a halt to anything arriving. The mood was hugely brightened up on 6th when a first for Britain was found – a stunning male **CITRIL FINCH** at the Haa. It showed well for the afternoon and most of the evening but disappeared into the fog with two Twite at about 8pm. It was relocated the next day at Barkland where it showed on and off for the whole day. In the late afternoon it landed right in front of the Barkland heligoland trap and was caught and taken back to the Obs where on examination was found to be in pristine condition with (thankfully) absolutely no signs of ever having been kept in captivity. From 8th it seemed to become more elusive moving to Quoy/Schoolton/Aesterhoull area before disappearing on 11th, but not before around 80 twitchers had made the long journey north to see it!

A Honey Buzzard on the 9th toured the island a couple of times before continuing its journey. Things were much quieter from 10th with the onset of strong northwesterly

winds. Although there was little arriving, the wind probably brought a few birds in, including a few small groups of Common Crossbills and an interesting large, white Common Redpoll (11th - 16th), but the highlight was a pair of **Waxwings** first seen on 11th. One flew high to the north but one seemed to settle and although very elusive was last seen on 19th – a wing was later found in the Goorn gull colony on 27th. This appears to be the first midsummer record for the isle and the latest spring migrant in Shetland (previous latest was one in Lerwick on 2nd June 2001). Other birds of note were an Osprey north on 15th, a Great Northern Diver south 16th and the last Red-backed Shrike on 19th. There was a summer-plumaged Slavonian Grebe in South Haven on 25th.

Seabirds 2008

Unfortunately, early signs in 2008 point towards a continuation of the downward spiral for both numbers and breeding success of most species. It looks set to be possibly the worst ever season for productivity with many birds not even attempting to breed and many others abandoning clutches of eggs. Fulmars seem to be only slightly down whilst breeding Arctic Skuas dropped by a third and have already completely failed, even at this early stage. Kittiwakes have decreased again with many not even laying eggs; a whole island count gave a total of just 2,688 nests (compared to 5,433 in 2005) and the vast majority on monitoring plots have already abandoned or failed. No Arctic or Common Terns have even attempted to settle down despite the presence of 500+ birds in mid-May.

Guillemots also are much reduced being, on most plots, half of last year's counts. Only a small number of eggs were laid and very few chicks were seen anywhere.

Colonies were virtually all deserted by late June. Razorbills however seem to have carried on regardless with high nest occupancy on our monitored plots, but the resulting chicks were failing to thrive and trips into colonies found all chicks to be small and weak. As with Guillemots, *none* have been ringed.

Puffins too have been laying well and the majority of monitored burrows now (in mid-July) have chicks but it is too early to reach a conclusion on how they will fare - but signs are not good with adult birds returning ashore with only tiny Sandeels and beaks full of Rockling and Gadoids have been a common sight. Unlike recent years however, Pipefish have been comparatively scarce!

Bucking these depressing trends are Gannets which, as every year since they first nested, are still increasing with the existing colonies growing larger and new areas being taken over. Also, Bonxies, which after last years record territory number, have increased again by another 70 (31%) to 294! Most of these have recently hatched young, so we can only hope they will find enough food without having to resort to eating each others chicks!

Cetacean Sightings

Spring 2008 was pretty poor for Cetacean sightings. There have only been a few sightings of Orcas this year; A pair made a very brief visit on 14th April and a pod was seen from the *Good Shepherd* on 5th June. The only one that obliged was a bull on 21st June. It was first seen in Furse before dinner and was later seen in Finnikuoy before heading north past Bunes. Two were seen close to shore at South Harbour and South Light a week later. There was a Harbour Porpoise on the 12th May but the

highlight was probably a Basking Shark seen from Meoness on 5th June.

Other Observatory News

2008 Staff

Both Mark Breaks and Simon Davies returned for their second season as Assistant Warden and Seabird Monitoring Officer respectively. Phil Bell returned from a trip to Cambodia and Vietnam to become Head Cook for his third year. This year he is joined by Molly Dowland as Assistant Cook; a welcome addition to the team. Both Jean Manning and Tracey Weekes return as the ultra-efficient Domestic Staff. Simone Sommer joined us as temporary childminder until early July.

For the first time there was great difficulty appointing a Ranger with the applicant offered the job dropping out at the last minute. Thankfully, two volunteers were willing to take up the post. Rob Hughes, on a placement from university, returned from last year as a long term volunteer and Paul King arrived in April to gain experience and help out. Having two dedicated Rangers is working out well and all reports received so far have been excellent. Unfortunately Rob will be leaving us in August to complete his final year of university.

New Obs

Invitation to tender for a 'design and build' was put out in May. A FIBOT Directors meeting was held in Shetland on July 11th to choose a preferred contractor. This was an extremely positive meeting and an announcement will be made shortly. We are still hoping to build in 2009 (subject to funding) and therefore are, at present, not taking any bookings for next year. However, the project will cost in the region of £ 4m so a lot of hard work is to be done before we can go ahead with the rebuild. The official launch of the New Bird Observatory Fund-

raising Campaign will be on Fair Isle and Shetland on 14th August and in England, at the Rutland Bird Fair, the following day. It will also go 'live' (with details of how to donate) on our website at the same time. All Friends will be receiving a letter from our Chairman soon, outlining our exciting plans.

Old Obs!

On 28th August this year, Fair Isle Bird Observatory celebrates its 60th Birthday! An island celebration will be held at the observatory that weekend and it is hoped to use this as a platform to push forward the New Observatory Project. It is extremely encouraging that after 60 years of existence and on the eve of a major new venture the observatory is busier now than it has ever been before!

Vehicles

The People Carrier returned in late April after being on Shetland for extensive repairs so should hopefully be trouble-free until the end of the season at least! Even more exciting was the arrival of a new Obs van in early May – this one is Silver!

Corncrake Project

The last pair of Corncrakes to successfully breed on Fair Isle was as long ago as 1966. A pair attempted in 2001 but a tractor accidentally destroyed the nest. A scheme to create areas of appropriate habitat to hopefully encourage this elusive species back to the island has begun, initiated and funded by NTS and delivered and managed by FIBO and the islanders.

JHMF Volunteers

Several JHMF (John Harrison Memorial Fund) grants were awarded this summer. These went to; Tara Proud, Serene Chng, Paul King and Matt Johnson. Each one has been a huge help and participated in a variety of tasks including bird ringing, data

entry, guest liaison, Obs maintenance and the inevitable washing up! For more information on applying for a JHMF placement, please see the FIBO website: (www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk/jhmf_grant.htm)

Island News

Sport Relief 2008

On 15th March, the school children organised a sponsored run around the southern loop. Deryk Shaw and Tom Best won with a time of just over 14 minutes. A grand total of £357 was raised towards Sport Relief.

Island Comings and Goings

The 7th April saw the arrival of Lisa Bracken, (with her husband Declan and children Oisín and Orla), to take up the roll of Headteacher at the Primary School. The whole family has been heartily welcomed and settled into the community very well. Paul Baxter moved back to Aberdeen in November but the Barkland heligoland trap remains in use by Obs staff – and caught the Citril Finch in June!! David and Mati King and their children moved from South Lighthouse to Nedertaft, soon after the birth of their daughter, Saskia, born on 6th February. Finally, Josie Wennekes (our Assistant Cook in 2007) moved into the South Lighthouse flat with her partner, Dave Brackenbury, where they now run a small B & B.

New Hall

On 3rd May there was supper and a dance to celebrate the official re-opening of the renovated Community Hall. The Community Hall is an invaluable island resource, hosting the majority of island events, such as dances, weddings, concerts and film shows as well as providing the school children with a games hall. During cruiseship visits the Hall is busy providing

teas, coffees and homebakes to the passengers and during the winter the Hall is used for activities such as Keep Fit and Darts Club. The renovation work was carried out by the island's 'Northmen'.

Fair Isle Wedding

The first big wedding on the isle since that of Deryk & Hollie Shaw of the Obs (in August 2000) took place on 16th May. Inge Thomson, daughter of Stewart & Triona of Quoy, married Martin Green.

A charter flight on May 12th brought in the bride, groom and their delightful wee son Ewen. We were honoured to have them and some of their family as guests staying at the Observatory. More guests arrived over the next few days and on 16th May the Chapel was bursting with family and friends attending the ceremony, where Ewen stole the show! After the ceremony a reception for 113 guests was held in the newly refurbished Hall, followed by celebrations and dance for the whole isle, into the early hours. Both Inge and Martin are well known Scottish folk musicians and therefore there was a very musical theme to the whole week including an Orkney band, 'The Chair', flown up especially for the wedding, Fair Isle musicians and of course, Inge and Martin themselves. Our best wishes for the future go to Inge, Martin and little Ewen.

Drumming

Shetland based, African drumming group, 'Aestaewast', stayed at the observatory in late May and after a workshop with the schoolchildren and adults on the isle they performed an exciting concert at the Obs. It was a hugely enjoyable evening and demonstrated yet again how the bird observatory can be a valuable facility for not only birdwatchers and tourists but also the local community as whole.

More music....and dancing

On 20th June, Fair Isle's own Malachy Tallack played a few of his brilliant melancholy guitar songs to a packed audience at the hall, followed by a set from a 3-piece Danish folk band called 'Faerd', featuring tunes from Denmark and Sweden. This was followed with a bite to eat and a dance into the small hours with music from the Fair Isle musicians.

Midsummer Night's Celebrations

The isle was visited for the third time by five members of the London-based classical musician group, 'Chroma', who came to work with the school children. On Midsummer's evening they performed pieces from Prokofiev's Trapeze followed by the sad tale of Stravinski's Petroushka. The school children acted out scenes from this play to a packed Community Hall audience and rapturous applause. This was followed with a mid-summer barbecue, bonfire and party on the beach at North Haven and (of course) more music.

Chris Stout Quintet

Barely had people's bodies had time to recover from all the dancing and late nights when Fair Isle's world famous fiddle player, Chris Stout, arrived on 27th June to punish us some more!!!. His 5-piece band performed an outstanding set on the Friday night featuring many of his well-known Shetland tunes but also some new tunes with a distinct South American influence.

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To finish, we would just like to thank all 'Friends' for their continued and invaluable support, especially at this important time for the observatory.

And don't forget.....

To keep in touch with latest sightings and the new observatory project log on regularly to:

www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk