

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

No. 37, October 2008

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Autumn 2008 Bird Sightings

Although a typically quiet summer for migrants with most efforts focused on seabirds it led into a spectacular autumn with high counts of common migrants and some stunning rarities thrown in.....

July

The most significant news during July was the successful fledging of the two **Peregrine** chicks from an eyrie on the west cliffs. This is the first breeding attempt since 1973 and the first to fledge young since 1969!

There was a trickle of Common Crossbills throughout the month, mainly single figures but with the exception of 42 on the 3rd. A **Marsh Warbler** lingering from June remained in the Obs Plantation until 23rd. A **Hobby**, first seen on 7th made occasional appearances up to 25th and a **Honey Buzzard** flew north on 13th. The Storm Petrel ringing season began on the 10th with 12 caught, reaching a total of 52 for the month along with **Leach's Petrels** on the 13th and 18th.

The highlight of the month appeared on 25th when a female **Two-barred Crossbill** was seen very briefly at Easter Lothar. It couldn't be found the next day but was

relocated on 27th when it was in the company of another on the Skadan. Although occasionally elusive they were seen until the months end, favouring the thrift at the base of Malcolms Head.

Migrants started appearing late in the month with the first warblers from 26th and waders becoming more evident including the first Knet (27th) and Ruff (29th) of the year. More unusual sightings during the last few days included up to 3 **Common Rosefinch** (21st, 29th and 31st), a Cuckoo on 29th and 30th and a Pied Flycatcher on 31st.

August

The month got off to a good start with two more **Two-barred Crossbills** being found, another female and a stunning adult male joining the two females already present on Malcolm's Head. The females had gone the following day but the male remained. The next birds to arrive were a juvenile at the Obs on 5th with a female in Gilsetter later that day. The most extraordinary sighting however was a flock of 9 juveniles with 4 Common Crossbills on Bunes on 6th. These remained in the same area decreasing to four birds on the 12th and were last seen on the 18th.

There was a rather unseasonable Mistle Thrush from 2nd (until 7th) and the first **Icterine Warbler** of the autumn appeared at Skinners Glig on 6th. A **Thrush Nightingale** appeared briefly during the early morning trapround on 13th with a more obliging individual seen on 18th-19th. There were also two **Citrine Wagtails** (both first-years); one around the south from 16th-23rd and a second at Wester Lothar on the latter date.

The first **Barred Warbler** of the year was at Quoy on 16th with regular sightings until the months end. Up to six **Wryneck** were seen in the south in the second half of the month. There were two **Red-backed Shrikes** on

18th (School and Gully) with one staying until 21st. The first Short-eared Owl of the autumn was seen on 21st, with Black Redstart (23rd) and Lapland Bunting (25th) close behind. There was a **Common Rosefinch** on 22nd increasing to three on 27th with one still on 31st.

There were two notable arrivals of common migrants in the latter half of the month; on the 19th/20th (in a fresh north-easterly wind) and 28th (during a southerly breeze and drizzle). The 19th brought Yellow Wagtail, **Wood Warbler**, two Spotted and six Pied Flycatchers. These were joined by three Tree Pipits, 19 Whinchat, ten Reed Warblers, 24 Garden Warblers along with Sparrowhawk and three Kestrels on the 20th. On 28th the main species was 401 Wheatears with 61 White Wagtails, a Grasshopper Warbler and a high count of 28 Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Waders were passing through all month with highlights including a **Wood Sandpiper** (2nd), Greenshank (12th), a **Spotted Redshank** (15th), Bar-tailed Godwit (26th) and Black-tailed Godwit (28th) with the first autumn Purple Sandpipers on 5th. Peak counts included four Sanderling (11th), seven Whimbrel (16th), 108 Redshank (11th), 36 Ringed Plover (20th), 44 Turnstone (25th) and nine Knot (26th)

September

September turned into a truly stunning month, with some impressive falls of common migrants and several quality rarities. It started with reasonable numbers of common migrants and the odd scarcity putting in an appearance. Another **Two-barred Crossbill** appeared on 7th, but during its week stay it was very elusive and very difficult to connect with. Similarly, an **Ortolan Bunting** gave everybody the run around between 3rd & 19th and two more first-year **Citrine Wagtails** arrived; one

around the south of the isle with the second bird at the Havens and Gully. Other highlights on show included **Wryneck** (peaking at four on 2nd), **Bluethroat** (from 15th), **Icterine Warbler** (until 10th), **Barred Warbler** (peaking at six on 2nd) and up to four **Common Rosefinch** all month.

The first big fall of birds commenced on 12th September with good counts of all commoner migrants plus several scarcities thrown in including a fine **Osprey**. On 13th there was an even greater variety of birds and in even larger numbers. A **Thrush Nightingale** and a **Paddyfield Warbler** were the birds of the day but **Marsh Harrier**, two **Corncrake**, two **Wryneck** and three each of **Barred Warbler** and **Common Rosefinch** meant there was plenty to look out for. The first **Yellow-browed Warbler** appeared the following day along with **Red-breasted Flycatcher**, **Red-backed Shrike** and a Great Spotted Woodpecker whilst a **Rose-coloured Starling** was the highlight of 16th. Peak counts of common migrants during this period were 96 Tree Pipits, 100 Redstarts, 49 Whinchat, 42 Robins, 236 Song Thrushes, 9 Grasshopper Warblers, 19 Reed Warblers, 80 Garden Warblers, 34 Blackcaps, 135 Willow Warblers, 17 Goldcrest, 45 Pied Flycatchers, 26 Spotted Flycatchers and 109 Chaffinch. Numbers of common migrants started to decline on 17th but a report of a 'strange' Willow Warbler was followed up and turned out to be a **Western Bonelli's Warbler** - the third confirmed record for Fair Isle. The same day also saw the arrival of a **Pectoral Sandpiper**. This began a run of records to the months end including two together from 28th.

The first proper movement of geese began on 19th with the first 73 Pink-footed Geese reaching a total of 1800 by the months end. The first 20 Whooper Swans appeared the

same day and 77 had passed through by the end of the month.

A **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** on 22nd was the precursor of the second big fall of the month. In a period of bright mild weather and absolutely no wind (a result of high pressure pushing in from the east) one of the most exciting periods for rarities ever witnessed in Fair Isle's long history began. The 23rd started with a **Lanceolated Warbler** in Bulls Park. This bird was extremely tame and delighted those gathered as it wandered between tripods and over people's feet! A **Red-throated Pipit** at lunchtime and was followed with a **Pectoral Sandpiper** at Haa and shortly after a **Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler** was found in Busta Geo. This, Fair Isle's other special, wasn't as obliging as its relation but exciting to see none the less as it ran around the debris on the beach at the base of the Geo. Amazingly a second '**Lancey**' was found in Gilsetter (by the same lucky soul who found the first one!) whilst on the way home for tea!

The next day brought greater excitement when the Warden found Britain's third **BROWN FLYCATCHER**. Initially spotted briefly on Ward Hill it was re-found on the Communications mast perimeter fence, where it put on an excellent display for the rest of the day. Later, a **Red-flanked Bluetail** was found at Kenaby. Although originally fairly mobile it soon settled around the crop. Another highlight of the day was the influx of **Yellow-browed Warblers** with an estimate of 45 on the Isle, which included a flock of ten (with the flycatcher) on top of Ward Hill!!

The Red Flag came out again on 25th when the Warden struck lucky again. This time finding a male **SIBERIAN THRUSH** in Guidicum - while trying to re-find the Brown Flycatcher (which had been present early morning). This fabled bird, the first for

the isle and only eighth for Britain, was faithful to the same Gully for the whole day - allowing birders from Mainland Shetland to hop over to the isle to see it. The day also had a rather nice supporting cast with **Arctic Warbler** at the Haa, plus **Little Bunting**, **Red-breasted Flycatcher** and **Honey Buzzard** all putting in appearances. Things calmed down on 26th but a **Siberian Stonechat** on Da Water was another nice bird from the east. The end of the month was quieter but with still a good scattering of scarce and common migrants including two **Pectoral Sandpipers**, **Bluethroats**, **Red-breasted Flycatcher**, **Little Bunting**, **Yellow-browed Warblers** and **Common Rosefinches** as geese and swans passing through reminded us that winter was not far away!

October

With a strong northerly wind blowing on 1st another quiet day was expected however it turned out to be far from it..... It started off with a not completely unexpected (given the wind direction) **Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll** near Pund. A stunning 'snowball' of a bird that put on a good show for the day (and the next day). Early in the day three lucky observers witnessed a juvenile **Sabine's Gull** flying down the middle of the isle, before heading west towards Hjukni Geo, never to be seen again (only the fifth island record). Then mid-morning a big surprise came in the form of our second **Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler** of the autumn, however this one was an extremely obliging individual as it crept mouse-like through rough grass near Walli Burn, allowing excellent views and some stunning photographs to be taken. Things got better in the afternoon when, after a report during the morning from one of the islanders of a possible **WHITE'S THRUSH** at Schoolton, it was seen again briefly before lunch. It was eventually re-found mid-afternoon in

Swartzi Geo – at exactly the same time that ANOTHER was seen in Sma Trinket Geo. This latter bird unfortunately disappeared into Hesswalls and could not be found, so everyone descended on Swartzi Geo where all had great flight views of this magnificent thrush. It then made its way across the island before ending up at Malcolm's Head.

After this with strong, often gale-force, westerly winds blowing, birding became difficult and few new arrivals were noted. Lingering scarcities from September including **Bluethroat** (until 14th), **Barred Warbler** (until 2nd), **Yellow-browed Warbler** (until 15th), **Common Rosefinch** (until 17th) and **Little Bunting** (until 4th). The first **Richard's Pipit** appeared on 3rd (peaking at three on 7th, last seen on 10th) and there was an all too brief **Citrine Wagtail** on 6th. Two Gadwall on 6th (and another on 8th) was a good record for the Isle.

A much calmer day on 8th delivered our **THIRD WHITE'S THRUSH**. Initially at Quoy, it soon moved to Houll crop where everyone had great views before it flew towards Midway and was lost. A Slavonian Grebe and Ring Ouzel the same day were new birds for the autumn.

The following week was brightened up by another **Pectoral Sandpiper** (8th-13th) and a few year ticks. Greenland White-fronted Geese joined the Greylag Geese (one on 10th, two on 16th) and an all too brief **Grey Phalarope** in Klingers Geo on 11th was gripped back on 15th when two very obliging birds arrived in South Haven. Both were present until 19th, when one disappeared, but another arrived on 23rd to keep the remaining bird company, until both departed on 26th. A Little Grebe in Furse, also on a wet and windy 23rd sparked a major exodus from the Obs lounge!

Seabirds Results 2008

Following on from the report in the last *Newsletter*, when most species (eg Kittiwake, Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, Guillemot, Razorbill, Shag) had already failed in their breeding attempts, the remainder fared slightly better.....

Fulmar productivity, whilst below average, was similar to last year (0.38). A record number of Bonxie territories (294 AOT) raised 115 chicks to fledging – a productivity of 0.39, less than the long-term mean but far better than the years 2002 – 2005. Almost a third of marked Puffin burrows with eggs in mid-May had failed by the next visit in early July. An estimated final productivity of 0.40, although much improved on the 2007 figure (0.17) is the third lowest on record. Mean productivity in the last ten years (1999 – 2008) is 0.53 compared to the previous ten years (1989 – 1998) of 0.74. The 2008 figure may even be an over-estimate as record-breaking torrential rain on 10th August must have flooded almost all of the burrows. Indeed many fledged birds were found around the isle – birds that may have not been quite ready to leave yet and certainly wouldn't have chosen that night to go!

Bucking these depressing trends are Gannets which, as every year since they first nested in 1975, continue to increase in numbers. There were a total of 2,488 nests – a massive 27.1% increase since 2007 and breeding success was characteristically high, although there were some losses during 'The Fair Isle Monsoon' on 10th August.

Autumn Cetacean Sightings

The highlight of a relatively quiet time for cetaceans was a White-sided Dolphin seen from Bunness on a seawatch. Otherwise there were typical sightings of Minke Whale (4th July, 22nd July and 11th September) and Harbour Porpoise (7th July, 16th August, 4th,

9th and 16th September with a peak of 4 on 9th September). The most intriguing report was of a dead whale 6 miles north of Fair Isle. It was large and black with a long dorsal fin and causing quite a large slick.

Lepidoptera Sightings 2008

The moth trap has been run regularly at the Observatory from 24th May but numbers have been relatively poor. The highlight of the season were four reports of Convolvulus Hawkmoth; the first was found in Gilsetter on 16th August, with further singles in the the Observatory heligoland trap three days later, in the moth trap on 31st August and one found dead down the isle on 12th September. A Hummingbird Hawkmoth reported on 17th June and a July Highflier on 16th August were also excellent records. The only other migrant recorded in the trap was Silver Y between 30th May and 25th September with a peak of just four on 4th July. As in all very recent years, there was a notable influx of Magpie Moths in mid-July with counts into double figures. Other species of note were Double-striped Pug (30th May), an Ear Moth (probably Saltun) (2nd August) and Smokey Wainscot (3rd & 17th August).

Five species of Butterfly were recorded during the year. Red Admiral and Painted Lady were seen from late May throughout the summer and there were two sightings of Small Tortoiseshell (4th & 31st July). There was a Large White in the Workshop at Kenaby on 27th June. The most notable event is what appears to be a record year for Peacocks. Recorded from 21st June there were sightings up to 22nd September with a peak of 11 on 16th September.

Other Sightings 2008

One other thing of note was a record of a bat. One was seen flying around the Plantation on 14th September. What was possibly the same one was caught in the

Kenaby shed on 24th and brought to the Obs where it was identified as a Nathusius' Pipistrelle.

Habitat maintenance

It has been a good growing year and all our bird-crop areas have been successful in providing much-needed shelter and food for migrant birds. Meanwhile, the Obs plantation is now so luxurious that we have begun thinning it out and transferring cuttings to other areas around the isle - hopefully these will increase the habitat available for birds.

We have continued to improve the access around the isle and for the second year running SIC funded the construction of stiles. A total of 18 stiles were built with four more existing ones repaired. Also in line with SIC access improvement policy, we ensured as many stiles as possible ran along the 'coastal path' from North Haven to South Harbour.

Moth and Butterfly Project

Through our SNH funded Ranger Service we ran a series of lessons with the local primary school, teaching them about the life cycle of butterflies and moths. The children were, as ever, enthusiastic and especially had fun making symmetrically patterned butterflies.

HAPPY 60th BIRTHDAY FIBO

Fair Isle Bird Observatory celebrated its 60th anniversary this year. There was a party at the Observatory on 30th August where the whole island joined us to mark the occasion. It is hugely encouraging that, after 60 years of existence, FIBOT is still going from strength to strength. The financial and social stability this success brings with it is essential at a time when FIBOT are on the brink of building a new Observatory. This in turn will help to safeguard the future for FIBOT and Fair Isle for at least another 60 years.

New Obs Progress

Progress has been made towards the New Observatory Project and we are eagerly awaiting the final design plans due any moment. The finances are also coming together....Aside from the £1.15M already promised by Shetland Islands Council we are very hopeful of sizeable grants from the Scotland Rural Development Programme and Highlands & Islands Enterprise. Our own appeal launched in mid-August has so far raised over £40,000 purely from individual contributions. A very big 'THANK YOU' to all those who have donated so far, although we still have some way to go to raise the £1.5M as our contribution to the project. Please do what you can to help! For regular updates and to see how you can donate to this exciting project visit the FIBO website.

2008 Staff Changes

There were, for various reasons, several changes within the domestic staff this autumn. Jean Manning left in the last week of August to return back home to New Zealand to be with her daughter and new grandchild. Chef, Phil Bell, moved on in mid-August to a job in the north of Scotland. Molly Dowland stepped up to the position of Chef, until she too left in early September for personal reasons. We are thankful for all their hard work and wish them all the best of luck. At very short notice we gratefully welcomed back Ann Prior for six weeks to cover the busy autumn period. When she left in mid-October for her pre-arranged trip to Uruguay, Ingrid Eunson stepped in to cover for a short while until another returnee, Lois Smallwood, arrived in late October to see out the rest of the season. Gill Rayner, who came to replace Jean as Domestic Assistant valiantly volunteered to step up to the job of Assistant Cook when Molly left. This is no mean feat and we are extremely grateful to her. Lesley Lambert filled the vacated

General Assistant post until the end of the season. Now, a word of praise and huge gratitude must be passed on to our dependable Tracey Weekes who, as General Assistant for the whole season, has remained calm and loyal throughout this staffing disruption. She worked extra hard to ensure visitors remained (mostly) unaware of the crises and were well catered for. Finally we said farewell to one of the Rangers, Rob Hughes, on 2nd September. He returned to University to complete his course in Countryside Management whilst Paul King continued in the Ranger post until the end of the season.

JHMF Volunteers

German student Maggie Burgh joined us for three weeks in August as our last JHMF recipient of the season. She was a huge help and participated in a variety of tasks including bird ringing, data entry and domestic work. For more information on applying for a JHMF place see the FIBO website.

Yachties Wedding

A second Fair Isle wedding took place this summer, when Per and Lisa Holmlöv, from Sweden were married at the Kirk on Sunday 12th July and the whole island celebrated afterward at North Haven where their yacht 'Siri' was moored. They had chosen Fair Isle as the setting for their wedding after visiting the isle previously on their yacht.

David Royal passes away

On 30th July 2008 David Royal passed away at home. David, having visited the isle many times on holiday with his wife, moved to Fair Isle several years ago, after her death. He built his house, 'Breks', near to Kenaby and was a strong believer in renewable energy, having many such features in his new home. His funeral took place a few days later and was attended by the whole island community.