

# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

*No. 38, December 2009*

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## **New Observatory Project**

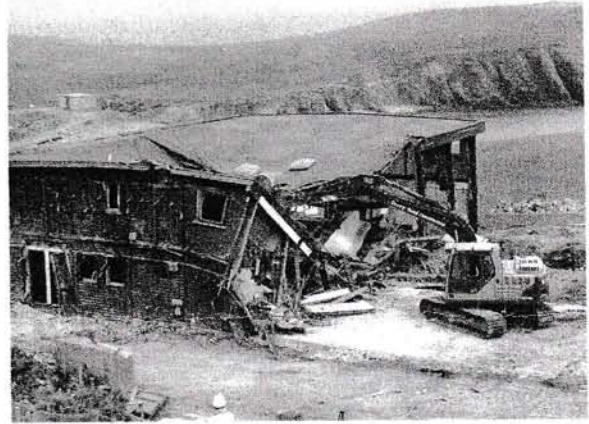
It has been a strange year without the Observatory and with no guests to cater for. It has still been busy nevertheless.

In early April, we received news that our application for £1.9M from the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) had been successful. This, added to the £1.15M we had already been promised from Shetland Islands Council (SIC) and the £400,000 granted us by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) meant that we were in a position to sign contracts and proceed with the £4M project, with the confidence that the thousands of friends of Fair Isle would help us raise the remainder. Once the euphoria/relief had sunk in it was action stations and following a week of frantic packing, the Shaw family had been moved into Burkle – the large red & blue house in the south-east of the isle and the two Assistant Wardens, Simon Davies & Jack Ashton-Booth, into the Chalet, complete with its fantastic garden.

Then, as the Northmen moved in to begin carefully dismantling re-usable parts of the building, we began the mammoth job of packing the Obs contents and moving them into storage at South Lighthouse.

After several weeks of salvaging internal parts of the building and removal of external

blockwork by the Northmen the main building contractors, AHWilson of Orkney, arrived on 2<sup>nd</sup> July.....and at 1105 hrs on 7<sup>th</sup> July, the old Obs was finally laid to rest.



**The final phase of the demolition was carried out by just one digger and lasted a mere 25 minutes!**

Then began work on preparing for the foundations, involving the removal of several tonnes of rubble and earth. The new foundations were laid and the first sections of the new building arrived by barge on 2<sup>nd</sup> September. Two large cranes and a big lorry were used to manoeuvre the pods into place. Thankfully, the weather remained largely calm and dry and by 15<sup>th</sup> September (less than two weeks after the first pods arrived) all 20 sections had arrived and had been slotted in place. The new building is much larger than the previous one with larger spacious rooms and en-suite facilities.....and (thankfully) a pitched roof!!! It also has an interpretative room where information boards and displays will decorate the walls and where we will present slide shows and talks.

As donations continue to arrive from well-wishers all over the world, the small army of builders, electricians, joiners, plumbers and digger drivers are working hard to complete the project and they are well on course to finish in early 2010 so that we can open to guests in May.



The new Observatory is much larger and more pleasing to the eye, with a pitched roof!!!

### **Appeal Latest**

In October we reached the £4M target required to complete the build. Our own appeal has so far raised close to **£350,000**, including over £60,000 from FOFI members alone. A great effort! "WELL DONE AND THANKYOU!" to all those who have donated or fund-raised for us.

We are now looking into furnishing the new Observatory and have calculated we require **£45,000** to do this. We have sent out another letter to this effect and donations have been arriving each week. Hopefully with your help we can kit out the superb new Observatory Lodge to a standard that befits the building.

### **Bookings**

Friends of Fair Isle members will be able to book from 2<sup>nd</sup> January and non-members from 10<sup>th</sup> January. Prices for the new season in the new Observatory Guesthouse will be:

Single Room - £55

Twin/Double Room - £50

Single occupancy of twin room - £70

Family Room - £50 per adult (Under 12 - £20, Under 5 - free).

All prices are full board, per person, per night.

A 50% deposit is required at time of booking.

The early part of the year is usually very quiet for birds but periods of strong winds and/or cold weather fronts do encourage some birds to seek shelter on the isle. At least two each of Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull (including a Kumliens type) were seen in January. One Brent Goose, from the six that arrived in late autumn, remained with the wintering Greylag Goose (which peaked at 230 in February), three Pink-feet and lone Barnacle Goose. A *tundra* Bean Goose dallied for a few minutes on 5<sup>th</sup> February. Other wildfowl included up to 13 Wigeon, five Teal, occasional Long-tailed Duck, Goldeneye and a Common Scoter. Three Oystercatchers, a Golden Plover and Dunlin on 18<sup>th</sup> January added to the peak January wader counts of 16 Lapwing, 113 Turnstone, five Purple Sandpiper, seven Curlew, 65 Common Snipe and three Jack Snipe. Passerine highlight of the month was a Waxwing on 13<sup>th</sup> and other passerines included wintering records of Skylark (3) and Meadow Pipit (2) and an unusually high number of Fieldfare (110) plus a couple of Chaffinches, a dozen Twite and 35 Snow Buntings. A couple of Merlin and a Peregrine were seen on and off throughout.

As January gave way to February, common wader numbers gradually increased. Oystercatchers trickled through reaching a peak of 40 by the end of the month with smaller numbers of Lapwings (peak 35) and Curlews (peak 34). The first Ringed Plover was spotted on 17<sup>th</sup> and there were eight a week later.

Skylarks started to appear around mid-month, reaching 30 by 27<sup>th</sup> and Twite numbers slowly increased from c15 to 43. Gannets were back on Yellow Head from 12<sup>th</sup> and a few Guillemots were ashore on calm mornings during the final week of the month.

March kicked off with a male Hen Harrier (3rd-4th) and as the weather improved



arrivals included the first Mistle Thrush (9th), Goldcrest and Black Redstart (14<sup>th</sup>), Great Skuas (17<sup>th</sup>), Pied Wagtails (21st), Lesser Black-Backed Gull & Reed Bunting (23<sup>rd</sup>) and Wheatear (26<sup>th</sup>) as well as three Woodcock. The 30<sup>th</sup> saw the appearance of the first Chiffchaff, Linnet and Dunnock and a second-winter Glaucous Gull. Other significant arrivals were two Woodpigeons (28th), three Rooks (29th) and a handful of Stonechats and Chaffinches. Peak counts included 27 Blackbirds (26th), 26 Redwing (27th) and 32 Fieldfare on the 28th as well as three Song Thrush. Snow Buntings peaked at 16 (10th) and the maximum count of Skylarks during the month was 255 (5th) whilst small numbers of Meadow Pipits from 19<sup>th</sup> were swelled by an influx of 50 on 30<sup>th</sup>. Wildfowl comprised seven Whooper Swans (26th), a single Greenland White-Fronted Goose (31<sup>st</sup>), Barnacle Goose (5th) and the wintering Brent Goose with the 230 strong Greylag flock. Female Common Scoter, Goldeneye and Long-Tailed Duck were also seen. Other raptors included females of Merlin and Sparrowhawk as well as a pair of Peregrines and Short-eared Owl (28th). Wader of the month appeared right at the end - a single Black-Tailed Godwit on 31<sup>st</sup>.

April began fairly quietly, although the first Puffins arrived on 1<sup>st</sup>, with just small numbers of migrants and a possible Kumlien's Gull on 6<sup>th</sup> the highlight. Increasing SE'ly winds on 9<sup>th</sup> brought in a variety of birds including 40 Wheatear and the first Willow Warbler, Blackcap and north-bound Brambling of the spring. Puffins were noted ashore in large numbers the following day and Arctic Skuas arrived on 11<sup>th</sup>. A magnificent White-tailed Eagle on Easter Sunday was an awesome site for some people but only a momentary distraction from hunting for chocolate for other (smaller) folk! A cracking bright Hawfinch arrived at the Chalet that

afternoon. Common migrants continued to arrive with Shelduck, Stock Dove and House Martin added to the year list on 14<sup>th</sup> and Marsh Harrier and Common Whitethroat in the ensuing days. The next good bird was fine Red-rumped Swallow near South Light on 20<sup>th</sup> followed with a pair of Gadwall on 23<sup>rd</sup> - the first in spring since 1999. Another Marsh Harrier began a four day stay on 24<sup>th</sup> and the following day the island was graced with its first ever Green-winged Teal, a male on Da Water which remained until 27<sup>th</sup>, the day that a Great Spotted Woodpecker toured the garden feeding stations and Wheatears topped the hundred mark. A first-summer Glaucous Gull on 28<sup>th</sup> arrived with the first Arctic Tern, Yellow Wagtail and Whinchat of the year whilst Wheatear numbers rose further, to 139. The month ended with Sanderling and Jackdaw added to the year list.

May is often the best month for numbers and variety of common migrants and is not without a few surprises thrown in.

A Long-Eared Owl and a Wryneck were noted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and a Shelduck, a Stock Dove, the years first Sedge Warbler and another Red-Rumped Swallow made for a good day on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. A quiet few days then followed with strong westerly winds, which finally paid dividends on 8<sup>th</sup> when a Brown-headed Cowbird was discovered at Upper Stoneybreck. This (at the time) second record for Britain of this ubiquitous American passerine delighted the nation's twitchers until 10<sup>th</sup>, the day a Richard's Pipit and two Dotterel arrived as the wind switched to a light SE'ly.

Migration then really got going.....

A Wryneck, two Bluethroats and three Wood Warblers on the 14<sup>th</sup> got the ball rolling and by the 16<sup>th</sup> the island hosted a Wood Sandpiper, 49 Tree Pipits, a Grey-Headed Wagtail and a Blue-Headed Wagtail, 15+ Bluethroats, 50 Redstarts, 30

Whinchats, 16 Lesser Whitethroats, 26 Whitethroats, 12 Garden Warblers, four Blackcaps, four Wood Warblers, 84 Willow Warblers, 20 Spotted Flycatchers and 25 Pied Flycatchers.

Numbers of migrants remained relatively constant up to the 20<sup>th</sup> as the SE'ly winds continued with only minor fluctuations in numbers of certain species. Counts on the 17<sup>th</sup> included 11 Bluethroats, three Ring Ouzels, two Grasshopper Warblers, the first Reed Warbler of the year, a Wood Warbler, 98 Willow Warbler, 55 Barnacle Geese, two Sanderling, two Wood Sandpipers, a Long-Eared Owl, two Grey-Headed Wagtails, a Golden Oriole and an adult Long-Tailed Skua. Birds continued to arrive on the 18<sup>th</sup> including Red-throated Pipit, European Nightjar, 19 Common Sandpipers, five Sand Martins, nine Grey-Headed Wagtails, seven Bluethroats, 12 Chiffchaffs, 112 Willow Warblers, three 'Mealy' Redpolls and six Reed Buntings. A Quail, an Osprey, three Cuckoos, three Grey-Headed Wagtails, two Blue-Headed Wagtails, four Bluethroats and a Tree Sparrow were noted on the 19<sup>th</sup> and the following day a first-summer Iceland gull and a plethora of hirundines joined the throng. The 21<sup>st</sup> was another great spring day that began with the discovery of a Subalpine Warbler at Kenaby and a Common Nightingale at Lower Leogh (that subsequently relocated to the mast two days later). A Long-Eared Owl and a Honey Buzzard disturbed the peace that afternoon. New arrivals on 22<sup>nd</sup> included another European Nightjar and a Sandwich Tern whilst a European Bee-eater was also a nice addition to the Assistant Wardens' Chalet garden bird list. A Wood Warbler, Common Rosefinch and the first Red-Backed Shrike of the year were seen on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> produced a Ruff, a Quail, two Common Rosefinches and the islands eighth Stone Curlew - following a gap of 14 years since the last record! The month continued on a

high with a dawn chorus in the Chalet garden on 26<sup>th</sup> from Common Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler and the discovery of a male Rustic Bunting. A new Quail appeared on the 27<sup>th</sup> and Turtle Dove on 29<sup>th</sup>. A Common Rosefinch arrived on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> and set the stage for the arrival of a Great Reed Warbler in the afternoon at Lower Leogh. The month ended in style with a very showy but mobile Hobby and an elusive and equally mobile River Warbler, which was first discovered in Vaila's Trees before short stints at Pund and later Lower Stoneybreck.

Things quietened down a little in June but there was a constant trickle of common migrants throughout with the occasional Red-backed Shrike, Bluethroat, Marsh Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher or Common Rosefinch thrown in and more unusual Fair Isle sightings of Corn Bunting (on 9<sup>th</sup>) and Canada Goose (on 17<sup>th</sup>). The star bird of the month was Fair Isle's second record of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler - on midsummers day! The first of an influx of Common Crossbills began on 24<sup>th</sup> and numbers rose rapidly to 47 by 28<sup>th</sup>. The month ended with a late Icterine Warbler, two Marsh Warblers and 27 Common Crossbills.

### **Fair Isle's Seabirds in 2009**

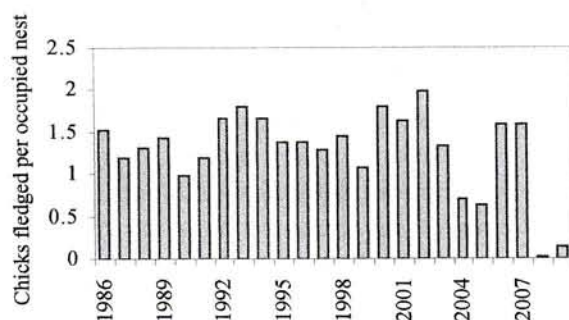
**Overview:** A much-improved season compared to the last four or five years (last year especially) but still below the long-term average. A better, but no means good year!

**Gannet:** Population continues to rise, at an alarming rate – up 43.9% on 2008 to 3582 AON. There are now 95 AON on Sheep Rock (where they first nested in 1998) and many more are prospecting. The rise is set to continue. Productivity on the plots was 0.69 (compared to long-term, 1987-2008 mean of 0.68) from a record 241 nests.



**Fulmar:** Significant increases were noted at three of the five monitoring plots and overall breeding numbers are the highest since 2000. A productivity figure of 0.51 is the best since 1993.

**Shag:** Almost a complete failure. The majority of birds failed to even nest, just single figures were seen on the plots (64% less than in 2008 and just 10% of the numbers noted in 1986). Only four chicks have been ringed this year (usually 350-400 in a good year).



#### **Breeding success of European Shag, 1986-2009.**

Note: number of nests on plot ranges from 32 to 95.

**Arctic Skua:** Increased from just 37 AOT in 2008 (only 33 in 2004 was lower) to 65 AOT this year – 17 chicks fledged but many were then predated by Bonxies.

**Great Skua:** Following record numbers in 2008 (294 AOT), a slight reduction this year with 277 AOT. A productivity of 0.61 is much improved on the 0.39 last year.

**Kittiwake:** Numbers of AON low (but 17% up on 2008 – not including trace nests, 0.1% down if traces are included). Productivity was 0.41 – similar to 2005 & 2006 (but with less than half the number of fledged chicks).

**Arctic Tern:** Around 600 pairs settled, mainly on Bunes (c300) with smaller colonies at Bullock Holes, Horsti Breckas and Shalstane. Around 70 chicks fledged –

only the second time in the last ten years that any have done so

**Common Guillemot:** Plot counts were 49.8% up on the record low of 2008 back to (but still low) levels observed in 2007 (55% less than in 1987). Although much better than in 2008 (when no chicks fledged), only small numbers of eggs were laid and a mean productivity from the two monitoring plots was just 0.30.

**Razorbill:** Following two years of complete failure to fledge any chicks, a productivity in 2009 of 0.47 is similar to that observed in 2003 & 2005 (0.44) and also better than 2006 (0.21) and 2004 (zero).

**Atlantic Puffin:** A whole island count indicated that the breeding population has dropped by a massive 46% since 2001 with just 7,278 individuals counted during an early May census. A productivity of 0.65, although not as high as figures of most of the 1990's (mean 0.72), is respectful compared to the years since then and much better than the most recent three years. Diet consisted almost entirely of 0-group Sandeels (61%) and Rockling fry (37%).

Note: AOT/N = Apparently Occupied Territory/Nest.  
AIA = Apparently Incubating Adult

#### **Other Sightings 2008**

Cetaceans have been very scarce this year with just two sightings of Killer Whales this summer, a single Minke Whale in late June and up to seven Risso's Dolphin in October. A lone Basking Shark delighted several members of the warden's family as it cruised around the Zodiac off South Light on 9<sup>th</sup> August.

The Obs moth trap has not been run this year but from other traps on the isle, it seems to have been a very poor year for migrants.

However, there was a huge influx of Painted Lady butterflies in late May/early June with

several hundred counted on 31<sup>st</sup> May and smaller arrivals later in the summer meant that these were encountered right up to mid-September. Very few Red Admirals were seen in the initial influx but up to 20 were logged in late June/early July. A count of five Small Tortoiseshells on 5<sup>th</sup> August was very good whilst single Large White and Peacock were seen in September.

### **Habitat maintenance**

It has been another good growing year and all our bird-crop areas have been successful in providing much-needed shelter and food for migrant birds. The Obs trap meanwhile had to be removed to make way for the new building, but the bushes there were dug up and transplanted in various gardens down the isle. Hopefully at least some will survive and provide more areas of cover for years to come.

### **New Publication**

A new book about Fair Isle is currently being prepared and is to be launched in time for the official opening of the new bird observatory in June 2010. The book will be a celebration of the island, bringing together stunning photographs of Fair Isle's scenery, its birds, and the life and work of the islanders.

Provisionally titled *Fair Isle: Through the Seasons*, the book will feature images by several excellent photographers (including ex-Bird Observatory staff). These will be accompanied by an introduction to the island's history and used to illustrate the culture, its agricultural foundations and (of course) the ornithological life of Fair Isle. It will be an indispensable book for anyone interested in this unique and fascinating island.

### **Island News**

In July, Triona and Stewart Thomson from Quoy celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary. A celebration at the Hall on

17<sup>th</sup> attended by the entire island and many visiting family and friends included a three course meal, speeches, music and a dance. This was followed the next evening with a less formal musical evening at the Puffinn. Triona originally came to Fair Isle as the Cook at the Observatory back in 1967 & 1968.

With the Observatory being closed and up to 23 workmen needing food and board for several months, as well as the usual numbers of tourists and other visitors, it has been and continues to be an extremely busy season for other accommodation outlets on Fair Isle this year. We are very grateful to all of those who had tried their hardest to meet this demand. Similarly we are also grateful to islanders who helped with demolition, removals, ground works and the many other tasks required to keep the project moving forward.

**STOP PRESS:** As we were about to go to print we got the exciting news that the Fair Isle population has increased by one. A baby boy was born to Lisa and Declan Bracken (Schoolhouse) on 4th December. Lisa, Declan and their children Oisín and Orla will return to Fair Isle with baby Bracken very soon.

It just remains for us to wish you all a very happy Christmas, to thank you all once again for your continued support and to say we hope to see you in the new observatory in the near future.

### **Contact**

Please note we have a new e-mail address [fibo@btconnect.com](mailto:fibo@btconnect.com) and also a new informal but informative Warden's blog <http://fibowarden.blogspot.com/>, which not only contains latest bird news but is also a small insight into Deryk's family life.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!**