



## No. 41. July 2012

Welcome to the latest issue of the Friends of Fair Isle newsletter. Our first year has flown by and, as this edition reaches you, we are well into our second season and life on the mainland is just a distant memory!

This edition brings you up to date with the rest of 2011's goings on. There's a summary of the bird highlights, a report on breeding seabirds, a write up of when the Tall Ships came to Fair Isle and more.

This edition accompanies the combined 2009/10 Annual Report, which I'm sure you'll agree is worth the wait. As well as the usual bird news and articles it contains a write-up of the building of the new Obs and a history of the

population of the Fair Isle Wren, so it will serve as an important reference document for Hollie and Deryk to be proud of leaving behind as their final report.

Our spring has been livened up by the usual mix of entertaining birds and visitors, but also by the arrival of Freyja Parnaby on 20th May. David's consolation for not getting off the island for the birth was to find Thrush Nightingale and Hoopoe on the same day, but Susannah vetoed both ideas as a middle name (although we've not filled in the paperwork yet...!).

At the Obs, we're pleased to be introducing discounts in summer, late autumn and also a young person's discount. There are details of these offers on the back page. It could be a good year to come and experience the many charms of Fair Isle for yourself.

We've heard from many Friends of Fair Isle in the last year and we'd like you to keep sending your memories, photos etc to us. There's been some really interesting stuff, including notes from people who've been to every incarnation of FIBO, and we'd love to hear from more of you. We'll maybe include a selection of some of your correspondence in a future issue.

David and Susannah Parnaby  
Warden and Administrator, FIBO



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## FIBO Research in 2011

FIBO exists to study the bird populations that visit and breed on Fair Isle. With data going back over 60 years, our ornithological research contributes vital information towards current conservation issues. As well as the data provided by the daily tasks (census, ringing, seabird studies etc), the observatory also plays host to visiting researchers who are able to look at individual species in greater depth. The new building enables us to provide better facilities for these researchers, with a number of scientists using the observatory as a base for their fieldwork in 2011.

The long-term study into the biology of Fair Isle's starling population continued with Dr Jane Reid, Dr Peter Evans, Dr Johan Nilsson and Jessica Walkup returning for varying lengths of time during the summer. Jess also visited for a short time in 2012 for the final year of her PhD study looking at the morphology of the starling population and we will feature her findings in a future publication.

Adam Seward spent a short spell on the island to complete his final PhD field season as he investigated the effects of climate change on the breeding success and survival of Fair Isle's Wheatears.

The RSPB's Dr Mark Bolton and Rob Hughes, assisted by Beckie Langton, spent the breeding season tracking seabirds for the FAME (Future of the Atlantic Marine Environment) project. GPS tags were deployed on a range of seabird species to characterise foraging behaviour and identify important feeding ranges of each species.

Adam Cross from the University of Glasgow visited to attempt to devise a novel method of puffin population monitoring using time-lapse photography, with return visits planned in 2012 to continue his project.

Finally, Kendra White, a Culture and Society student from Edinburgh University, involved Fair Isle's residents in a philosophy and ethics project to investigate the theory and practice of environmental value.

FIBO supports research through scholarships, grants and reduced rates for researchers.

## A Rosefinch by any other name...



The 'Rosenfink' at Schoolton

### ...would still be a Swede.

Common Rosefinch (formerly Scarlet Rosefinch or Scarlet Grosbeak, the 'new' name is more suited to Fair Isle, where most of our sightings are brown immature birds) is a scarce passage migrant to the UK. Fair Isle is one of the best places to see them and here they are a regular visitor in spring and autumn in small numbers. In 2011 there were sightings on Fair Isle in every month from May to October.

Birders waiting to see the Eastern Olivaceous Warbler at Schoolton on 3rd September were passing their time admiring a Red-backed Shrike and a flock of Rosefinch in the garden, when one of the Rosefinches was seen to be sporting colour-rings. The combination was noted, the relevant ringing scheme was located and the following information was received:

**"Great! I have ringed this Common Rosefinch on 25th August 2011 at Ringenäs, outside the town of Halmstad on the west coast of Sweden. There is still a stable population at this place, a military shooting range close to the sea. It is a juvenile bird (wing 82mm and weight 19.7g). Best regards, Kåre Ström."**

It's an expected movement for a young bird that has essentially gone 'backwards' on its first migration, but is still fascinating.

It followed just a few weeks after the only other foreign ringed bird caught in 2011, a Kestrel trapped in the roadside Heligoland that was found to be wearing a Swedish ring.

## When the Tall Ships came to Fair Isle, by Carrie-Marell Gunn



What a pleasure it was to be a part of the Fair Isle community during the summer of the Tall Ship Races 2011. This event really brought out the true Fair Isle spirit as every single person of the community pulled together to make the event a roaring success.

All hands were needed on deck at the start of the season to prepare the Havens for the event: the old stores were cleared out, repaired and renovated; the harbour buildings were brightened up with a coat of paint and decorated with beautiful artwork; hundreds of thistle were eradicated from the grassy area and extra seating was provided by hand-made picnic benches. Right up until the weekend before the event the work continued and finally the marquee was erected (after a few attempts!) complete with a working bar and stage for the night's entertainment.

The women of Fair Isle had decided relive an old tradition and set about knitting Fair Isle fishing keps to barter with the passing ships in return for foreign goods! In the spirit of the event, the girls from the Obs attended the evening knitting sessions down at Busta and each of us (after an incredible amount of support from the experts) produced a fishing kep worthy of bartering.

But it wasn't all hard work and no play, a lot of money would be spent in the preparations so the Fair Isle school children were set the challenge to fundraise for the event. The bairns came up with some brilliant ideas that meant the FIBO staff and visitors enjoyed a summer of film nights, poetry evenings and puppet shows and even the vehicles received a thorough scrub at a carwash afternoon.

With the amazing effort of the community the island was ready to play host to the Tall Ships on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of July. Twelve ships representing a number of different countries safely docked in the Havens over the two days and the crew came ashore with big smiles and good banter. The assortment of daytime activities created a real bustle on the Isle as sailors and guests wandered around the local art and craft demonstrations and participated in the various tours on offer. At the new Observatory the lounge was rearranged to provide room for Fair Isle spinning wheel and chair making demonstrations, the bar was doing a good trade and the ranger-led walks were well attended. The Fair Isle children were also busy during the day as they attended a creative workshop and their final animation is well worth seeing: <http://vimeo.com/28191928>.

On the second afternoon when barter was scheduled to take place the weather had taken a turn for the worse and only after an exceptional effort by the crew of the Sørlandet, the boat finally came to anchor just off the South Harbour. Although the seas were too rough to allow the tradition of the island yoals rowing out to the ship, the Sørlandet crew came ashore to perform the barter at Skadan. Lise did a fantastic job representing the women and exchanged a selection of the hand-knitted keps for Norwegian goodies. Everyone at home had a chance to get

The Sørlandet approaching in poor weather.

a little taste of what it was like to be here at the Tall Ships, as the BBC Coast team were aboard the Sørlandet as it sailed from Orkney to Lerwick via Fair Isle and the episode featuring the barter was aired this summer.

Each night the celebrations in the marquee kicked off with an arrangement of sea-shanties from the Fair Isle Choir, which really got everyone into the spirit of the event, before the night carried on with a selection of local musicians. The nights ended with some old classics (the songs, not the people playing them!). What an amazing party; incredible entertainment, a fully stocked bar and plenty of room to dance, a perfect way to end a perfect few days. All in all this was an incredible summer which I will always remember and I hope that the small community of Fair Isle is very proud of what they have managed to achieve. Well done.



Carrie (and Archie!) in nautical party spirit.



## July – December 2011 Sightings

### Wildfowl

A lone summering Whooper Swan was joined by the first autumn migrants from 13<sup>th</sup> Sep, with a peak in numbers of 99 on 5<sup>th</sup> Oct. Goose passage also started in mid-Sep, building up to a peak in mid-Oct, with high counts of 585 Greylag (15<sup>th</sup> Oct), 363 Pink-footed Geese (5<sup>th</sup> Oct) and 86 Barnacle Geese (10<sup>th</sup> Oct). Mid-Nov saw a record breaking arrival of Bean (mostly 'Tundra Beans' but also up to four 'Taigas') and European White-fronted Geese, with peaks of 63 and 87 respectively.

The highlight amongst the ducks was Fair Isle's first Lesser Scaup, a female on Buness from 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Oct.



Lesser Scaup

### Divers to Herons

A Red-necked Grebe in Gunnawark on 26<sup>th</sup> Oct was a good find, but rarer still was a Great Crested Grebe on 15<sup>th</sup> Nov in North Haven. Great Northern Divers were seen regularly in the autumn, with a popular summer plumaged adult lingering in the Havens. Small numbers of Sooty Shearwaters were offshore from 18<sup>th</sup> Jul to 16<sup>th</sup> Oct and a good year for 'Blue' Fulmars saw a peak of 12 on 12<sup>th</sup> Oct. Regular Storm Petrel ringing sessions from early July saw a total of 685 Stormies trapped, along with six Leach's Petrels between 9<sup>th</sup> July and 7<sup>th</sup> August.

### Raptors

A good autumn for birds of prey, with the highlights the juvenile Pallid Harriers on 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Aug and 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Sep. It was a record breaking autumn for Hen Harriers, with nine, including a peak count of four in mid-Oct. A Rough-legged Buzzard showed well on 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Nov and was joined by a Buzzard on the latter date. A peak of eight Kestrels in Sep included a Swedish ringed bird.

### Rails, Crakes etc

After a strong spring showing, Quail were seen on two July dates and a late bird on 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> Sep. Two Corncrakes included one caught in the Plantation. A Spotted Crake on 29<sup>th</sup> Oct was the latest ever for Fair Isle. Several Water Rail were seen in autumn and one overwintered. Two Moorhens were noted.

### Waders

A Baird's Sandpiper was seen 25<sup>th</sup> Sep. Great Snipe showed a return to form, with two autumn birds to follow the spring sighting. A Dotterel was on Ward Hill in late Aug, up to seven Grey Phalaropes were seen and a late autumn influx of Woodcock brought a peak count of 52 (in the north of the island alone) on 9<sup>th</sup> Nov.



Baird's Sandpiper and Ringed Plover

### Skuas, Gulls and Terns

An adult White-winged Black Tern hawking over the fields at Setter (16<sup>th</sup> Jul) that was found from the van whilst picking up a shop order showed that it's never safe to switch off from watching birds on Fair Isle! Adult Sabine's Gulls were reported on sea-watches on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Sep and Little Gull carried on a recent good run of records with at least four in the autumn, including one that became the first to be ringed on Fair Isle. Glaucous Gulls appeared from 8<sup>th</sup> Oct and Iceland Gulls from 16<sup>th</sup> Oct, with at least three of each seen by the end of the year.

### Auks to Swifts

Little Auks were seen from 9<sup>th</sup> Oct, some gave good views in the Havens and the peak count was 221 on 22<sup>nd</sup> Dec. Puffins lingered to 21<sup>st</sup> Sep. At least three Cuckoos were seen in the autumn, a Stock Dove was seen on 26<sup>th</sup> Sep and both 'eared' owls had good autumns, with a peak of 15 Short-eareds and several sightings of Long-eareds, including six caught and two in the Obs garden in Dec.

## Wryneck to Wagtails

There were five each of Citrine Wagtails (between 13<sup>th</sup> Aug and 10<sup>th</sup> Oct) and Olive-backed Pipits (between 1<sup>st</sup> Oct and 12<sup>th</sup> Nov). In contrast, just one Richard's Pipit was seen (30<sup>th</sup> Sep). Peaks of the commoner pipits included 583 Meadow and 104 Tree (on 25<sup>th</sup> Aug). There were Short-toed Lark sightings between 7<sup>th</sup> Aug and 7<sup>th</sup> Oct, with two birds probably involved. An impressive fall on 24<sup>th</sup> Aug saw 19 Wrynecks, with one also on 1<sup>st</sup> July.



## Waxwing to Thrushes

The only Waxwing was on 5<sup>th</sup> Nov. Impressive thrush falls included peaks of 2900 Redwing (9<sup>th</sup> Oct), 985 Fieldfare (21<sup>st</sup> Sep), 800 Blackbirds (mid Nov) and 87 Song Thrush (26<sup>th</sup> Oct), with several Ring Ouzels between 19<sup>th</sup> Sep and 10<sup>th</sup> Nov. Black Redstarts had a protracted autumn migration, with records from 2<sup>nd</sup> Aug to 5<sup>th</sup> Dec, Redstarts peaked at 15 during the 25<sup>th</sup> Aug fall. Bluethroats were seen on 19<sup>th</sup> Sep and 14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> Oct and Wheatears remained until 10<sup>th</sup> Nov.

## Warblers to Shrikes

There were singles of Eastern Olivaceous (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> Sep), Pallas's Grasshopper (30<sup>th</sup> Sep), Lanceolated (13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> Oct) and Booted (26<sup>th</sup> Aug) Warblers. An impressive four Blyth's Reed, two Melodious, two Arctic and minimum of 34 Yellow-browed (with a peak day-count of 15) Warblers added to an impressive roll-call. The Aug fall saw peaks of 93 Willow and 15 Garden Warblers, with the peak of 62 Black-caps occurring on 1<sup>st</sup> Oct. Goldcrest numbers peaked at just 36 on 14<sup>th</sup> Oct.

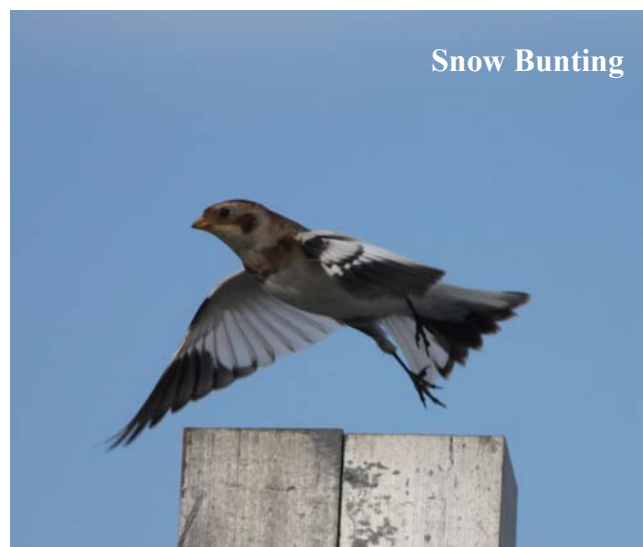


Two Red-breasted Flycatchers occurred in Oct with the Aug fall accounting for the peak counts of Pied (11) and Spotted (9) Flycatchers. Unusually, Great Grey Shrikes outnumbered Red-backed Shrikes with four and three records respectively.

## Corvids to Buntings

A male Black-headed Bunting (3<sup>rd</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> Jul) timed its arrival nicely to coincide with the New Obs Grand Opening. A minimum of four Little Buntings were found between 18<sup>th</sup> Sep and 4<sup>th</sup> Oct. A Lapland Bunting on 3<sup>rd</sup> Jul was a first ever for that month on Fair Isle, with a peak count of 50 for this species (on 12<sup>th</sup> Sep) and 99 Snow Buntings on 30<sup>th</sup> Oct the high count for that species for the year.

Finch passage was light, with peaks of 37 Chaffinch, 56 Brambling, 35 Siskin, 12 Mealy Redpoll, 11 Cross-bill, eight Linnet, five Greenfinch, two Goldfinch and one Bullfinch, most high counts occurring in early Oct. Four Hawfinches between 30<sup>th</sup> Sep and 9<sup>th</sup> Oct was a good autumn total. Common Rosefinches had an exceptional autumn, with a flock of 15 at Schoolton in Sep.



A juvenile Rose-coloured Starling lingered from 25<sup>th</sup> Sep to 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct. Another Jackdaw invasion saw a peak of 77 in Oct.

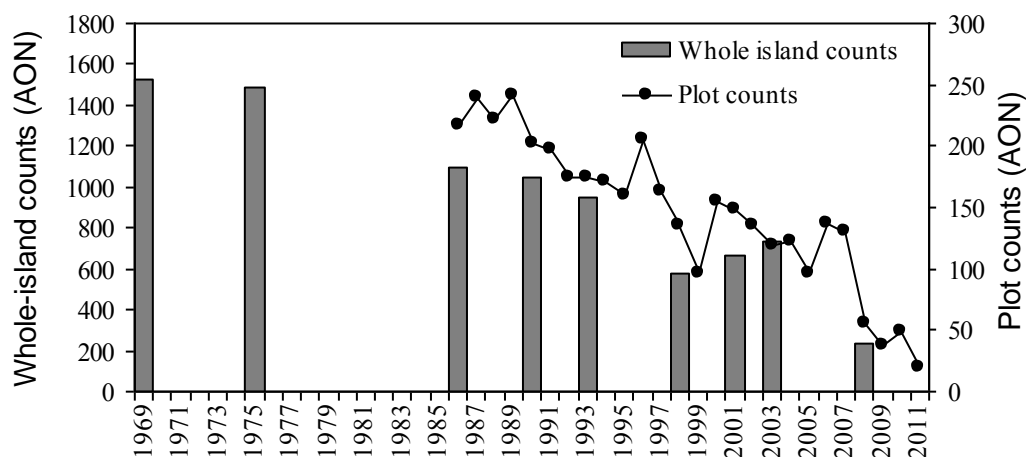
**Overview:** Fair Isle is one of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee's (JNCC) key sites for the Seabird Monitoring Programme, with JNCC providing funding to FIBO to help us carry out an intensive programme of seabird monitoring. For most species there are population plots that are monitored annually as well as productivity plots that help us gauge breeding success. It is not possible to count all of the seabirds on Fair Isle every year, so whole-island counts are done on a three or five year rotation for some species.

Sadly, as has been the case far too often recently, 2011 was a very poor year for Fair Isle's sea birds. Only Gannets did well, although Puffin, Fulmar and Great Skua all had some degree of success. Many species' population totals fell and productivity was generally poor: Guillemot, Kittiwake, Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern and Common Tern all produced no chicks.

**Gannet:** The rising star of Fair Isle's seabirds, this large bird undertakes huge feeding trips and can take a variety of fish, helping them find more food. The breeding population rose again in 2011 (although by only 2.95%) to 4085 nests. Productivity was again good, at 0.72 chicks per nest.

**Fulmar:** One of the more time consuming jobs of the summer was undertaking a complete count of the breeding Fulmars. With 29,460 pairs counted on the cliffs, it took a few hours to log them all! With 52% of nests in the monitoring plots fledging a chick, productivity was only slightly lower than 2010.

**Shag:** After a brief flicker of hope last year, Shag numbers again slumped. The monitoring plots showed a 59.2% fall in numbers since 2010 and breeding productivity was the second lowest ever recorded, with the plots producing just 0.11 chicks per nest.

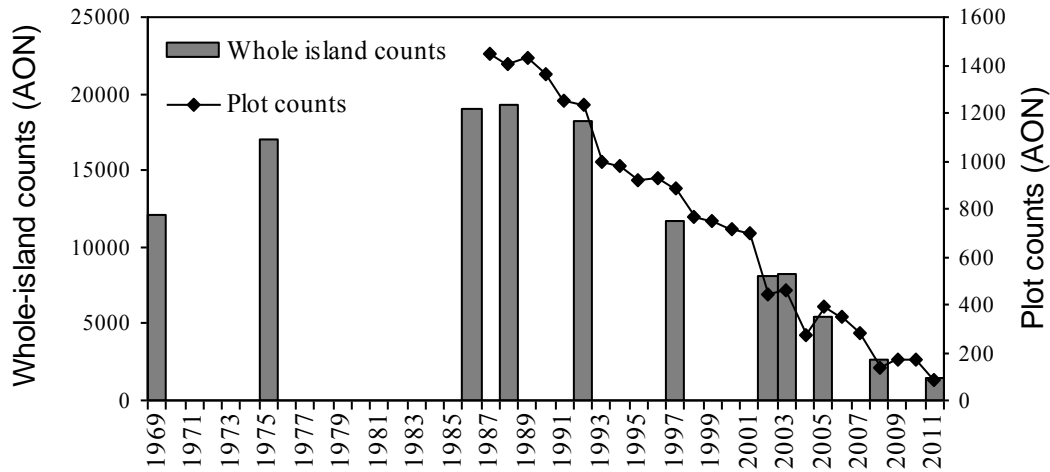


**Figure 1.** Population change of European Shags on Fair Isle, 1969 - 2011 (whole-island counts and plot counts of apparently occupied nests AON).

**Arctic Skua:** After two years of slight increase, numbers fell from 70 territories in 2010 to just 29 in 2011, the lowest total in the FIBO period. No chicks at all fledged in 2011 and only 28 chicks have now fledged in the last ten years many of which were then taken by Bonxies.

**Great Skua:** Numbers have fluctuated in the last three years, but fell in 2011 to 227 territories, the lowest total since 2007. Productivity fell away alarmingly on recent years, with only one nest in four producing a chick.

**Kittiwake:** This delicate gull is in real trouble on Fair Isle, with a total of just 1438 occupied nests found during a whole-island count, down by almost half since 2008. For the fourth year in the last nine, productivity was zero. With the last good breeding season back in 2000 and adult birds still turning up as Bonxie prey (including a bird ringed on Fair Isle as a chick in 2000 found in a pellet in July 2011), the future for Kittiwakes on Fair Isle looks bleak.



**Figure 2.** Population change of Black-legged Kittiwakes on Fair Isle, 1969 - 2011 (whole island counts and plot counts). Plot counts for each year are the sum of counts from ten study plots.

**Arctic Tern:** Birds were slow to arrive and numbers failed to build up (with the highest count for the year of just 190). Less than ten incubating adults were observed, the eggs were quickly predated and no chicks hatched (the eighth year in the last decade to produce no chicks). No Common Terns bred, for the sixth consecutive year.

**Guillemot:** The population continues to decline, a decrease of almost a third on the monitoring plots was noted from 2010 to 2011. A disastrous breeding season saw no chicks fledge from Fair Isle. The Future of the Atlantic Marine Environment project's data loggers showed that one bird made a 700km round trip to Dundee in search of food, evidence of why the species is struggling. A 24 hour feeding watch recorded just 27 fish brought to the Pietron colony, with several chicks taken by Herring Gulls during the day. A sad indictment of the state of the Northern Isles' sea birds was the excitement generated amongst the Good Shepherd crew by one Guillemot chick (presumably from Orkney or Shetland) seen following its parent to the north of Fair Isle in June.

**Razorbill:** Another decrease on the population plots saw just 23 individuals remaining. Virtually no chicks fledged (the average chicks per nest was 0.02) and follows total failures in three of the last four years.

**Black Guillemot:** The population survey produced 161 breeding plumaged adults along the east coast, down 16.1% on 2010.

**Puffin:** Population counts are extremely difficult on Fair Isle, although 2012 will see a full island count. In 2011 just 0.39 chicks fledged per egg laid, an improvement on 2010 but still a low total. A 24 hour feeding watch saw 86 flights with fish into the Roskillie colony (down 69.8% from 2010). As in 2010, the most abundant fish recorded in food sampling and feeding watches were Rockling and small Sandeels.



## Visiting FIBO in 2012

### Open

1st May – 31st July

11th August – 31st October

### Prices

All prices are per person per night for full board accommodation in an en-suite room.

Single Room: £65

Double/Twin Room: £60

Single Occupancy: £80

Family room: adult	£60
12 years and under	£25
five and under	Free

### Young Person Discount

£30 per night (full board)

\* Must be under 21 on 1st January 2012

\* Limited number of places

\* En-suite, shared single-sex room

\* Excludes 15th September – 10th October

### Summer Discounts

25% off all room rates\* from:

1st – 31st July and 11th – 17th August

*\*(cannot be combined with other offers)*

£45 per person per night (full board)

18th – 31st August

### Late Autumn Discount

£45 per person per night (full board)

13th – 31st October

### Transport to Fair Isle:

#### Flights:

Depart Tingwall (near Lerwick): daily except Sunday (one Saturday flight from Sumburgh)

**DirectFlight:** 01595 840246

#### Ferry:

Depart Grutness (near Sumburgh): Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday

**Good Shepherd:** 01595 760363

Subsidised Taxi from Lerwick to Tingwall:  
01595 745745 (must be booked in advance)

**Bookings for 2013 open on 1st July 2012  
for Friends of Fair Isle.**

## Bats all Folks!



Bats are rarely recorded on Fair Isle, being seen less than annually. In 2011 there were two bat records. One seen over the Vaadal on 11th June was typical, in that views were not good enough to enable it to be identified to species.

More unusual was one picked up exhausted outside Barkland in broad daylight during strong easterly winds and heavy rain on 26th October. Thanks to advice from SNH and the Shetland Biological Records Centre, it was identified as a Nathusius' Pipistrelle. This is a migrant species that is probably responsible for most of the previous Fair Isle bat records.

After a short spell drying out and warming up, it was released when the weather improved, having been admired by most of the island's population who were at the Obs for a 'Fair Isle Thursday'!



Photos by Carrie-Marell Gunn