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FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by

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Now we are in mid-season, it is time to inform all 'Friends' of the season so far. The excellent run of spring migrants has now ended and we anticipate the autumn's birds. The seabirds are still breeding and the next newsletter should contain a report on their success, although signs so far are not promising!

Within these pages is a summary of the spring migration and a roundup of Observatory and island events since the last newsletter back in November.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the newsletter and hopefully we will see most of you in the near future.

For those of you who have yet to pay your subscription for this year, please do so as soon as possible to ensure you remain on our database of members.

Your continued support is much valued and greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Deryk and Hollie
(Warden and Administrator)

Staff news

After a problematic season with staff illness last year, we were looking forward to an uncomplicated start to the 2003 season. However, despite securing a full team of domestic staff, fate was yet again

to deal us a poor hand with the news that our General Assistant had broken her arm just three days before she was due to arrive! By now we were already into mid May and the Observatory was rapidly filling up with guests, so a hurried advert in the Shetland Times for a stand-in General Assistant brought Becky Tonge onto the island. Becky proved to be just what the doctor ordered and eventually stayed on for 6 weeks, helping us through an extremely busy May and June. Becky was replaced in early July by Sue Hutchison (Assistant Cook and then Cook in 2001) who will be seeing us through to the end of the season. Other familiar faces in the kitchen include Lois Smallwood (Cook) and Becki Rosser (General Assistant). Finally, the position of Assistant Cook has been filled by Rosalind Seeley who is experiencing her first season on the isle. Finding ornithological staff was not a problem (although there seem to be less and less suitably qualified and experienced people to choose from each year) with Torcuil Grant (a past volunteer at the Obs) joining us as Assistant Warden and Rebecca Nason filling the post of Seabird Officer. Alan Bull returned once again as Ranger and this summers indispensable child-minders were Debbie Hard followed by Ruth Cleaves.

Ornithology

Spring migration

The winter months on Fair Isle are often quiet for birds and winter 2003 was no exception – with the highlights of January being a Taiga Bean Goose (from 2002) remaining all month, a Waxwing (19th – 20th), two Long-eared Owls (20th – 27th) and six Mealy Redpolls (20th). More unusual though was the Puffin in North Haven on 23rd! A small fall on 20th included 50 Blackbirds, 90 Fieldfare, 60 Redwing, 25 Song Thrushes, three Woodcock, 165 Turnstone, two Knot and a Kestrel – not bad!

February was much quieter, but started off with the first Gannets seen back on territory (1st), a Dunnock on 5th and two Canada Geese on Easter Lother Water on

the 10th. The two Long-eared Owls remained until 25th with Glaucous Gulls (an adult and second-winter) and a single Iceland Gull noted. Waders started trickling through from the 9th with small numbers of Oystercatchers, Curlew, Lapwing and Ringed Plover seen. Passerine migrants were represented by single Pied Wagtail and Rook on the 20th and Black Redstart and two early Stonechats on the 24th (the latter increasing to seven birds the following day!).

March started exceptionally well with a Common Buzzard, Iceland Gull and the two Canada Geese (from February) re-appearing on the 1st. An influx of migrants on the 2nd included a Hawfinch at the Observatory, two Glaucous Gulls, two Rook, Kestrel, Long-eared Owl, four Mistle Thrushes and 48 Wood Pigeons! However, the highlights were a Red Kite seen by a lucky islander over Pund and a pale-bellied Brent Goose near Utra! Another star bird arrived on the 3rd, this being a Woodlark at Barkland – only the second record in the last ten years! The 6th produced another good spring migrant with a Coot found (then later trapped) on Field Pond. Skylarks increased to 425 birds with new birds including four Stonechats and two Reed Buntings. A quiet spell followed as the weather turned summery. The Woodlark and Brent Goose remained until the 12th, departing in the good weather, a day when Skylarks again increased (to 625 birds!) and six Stonechats were noted. Goldcrest and Chiffchaff were year-ticks on the 16th followed by a Siskin on the Observatory peanut feeder (19th). Three Whooper Swans were on Golden Water (22nd) and while most of Britain eagerly awaits the first Cuckoo of the year, Fair Isle anticipates the first Bonxie – arriving over Bunness on the 22nd. More birds soon followed on the 29th as 'proper' census started, with a Canada Goose on Lerness causing much debate as to which race it belonged to! The first Wheatear arrived on the 30th and the first Puffins (following the winter bird) were ashore on the 4th April. A few early Crossbills were also seen on this day with the first Brambling of the year. The 8th was notable for a passage of

Meadow Pipits (136 counted) and year-ticks which included three Linnets, Sand Martin and Ring Ouzel. The 9th produced more year-ticks with a Green Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail, while Meadow Pipits increased to 252 birds! A phone-call from North Ronaldsay on the 10th had us scurrying up Malcolm's Head to witness the arrival of a fantastic White-tailed Eagle! It was close enough for us to see it panting as it arrived (almost touching the waves), but it soon circled high again and headed for Shetland (where it came in off the sea at Sumburgh Head). Year-ticks over the following few days included Willow Warbler (14th), Blackcap and Sanderling (15th), Swallow and Whimbrel (16th) and Arctic Skua (17th). The 15th produced the first large arrival of Wheatears of the spring, with 144 logged, increasing to 171 the following day. A Common Sandpiper in Steensi Geo on 19th was nice, but not as nice as the adult male Marsh Harrier in Gilsetter on 20th. The 23rd produced no less than five year-ticks with Jackdaw, Redstart, Sedge Warbler, Whitethroat and Garden Warbler. Fieldfares numbered 750 and other 'numbers' included 50 Brambling, four Black Redstarts and a few Chiffchaffs of the grey, Scandinavian race *abietinus*. Fifteen Ring Ouzels on 24th was an excellent count and Tree Pipit was added to the ever-increasing year-list. Shetland and Fair Isle's earliest ever Spotted Crake was seen briefly in Gilsetter on 25th, remaining until the following day, when a Wryneck was trapped after lunch and a Short-toed Lark was seen after dinner! A phone-call after breakfast on the 28th had us rushing down to Lower Stoneybrek to see an unusually showy Corncrake walking around the garden! This bird was possibly a returning chick or adult from last year's breeders, although no further sightings or sounds emerged from Boini Mire.

May started well with a Pied Flycatcher at Kirki Geo on the 1st and a Coot nearby on the 2nd. The 4th saw a Common Nightingale in Hjukni Geo and other year-ticks included Spotted Flycatcher (3) and Wood Warbler followed on the 5th by Goldfinch and Lesser Whitethroat. A roosting Long-eared Owl outside

Stackhoull had shoppers reaching for their binoculars and a small 'fall' included 70 Swallows, 27 Wood Pigeons, 23 Tree Pipits, 12 Willow Warblers, 11 Reed Buntings, seven Chiffchaffs, six Whinchats, five each of Collared Dove, Sedge Warbler and Blackcap, four each of Redstart, Black Redstart and Whitethroat and a single Wood Warbler. What a day! A female Peregrine on the 6th kept most birds on their toes, but had departed the following day allowing the year's first Quail to be found along with the first returning Arctic Terns. A Little Bunting on the 9th was a good spring find. A Reed Warbler trapped in the Plantation and a Pomarine Skua past Bunes were year-ticks on the 10th followed by Barnacle Goose, Yellow Wagtail and two Tree Sparrows on the 11th. A Manx Shearwater from the Good Shepherd IV on the 13th was nice, but not as nice as a Nightjar seen at Wester Lothar - another excellent spring find, but sadly it did not hang around to be admired. A very early sea-watch on the 15th produced another Pomarine Skua past Bunes and a Common Buzzard flew over there after lunch. However, nothing could prepare us for the event on the 16th. Following the lunar eclipse, a strange warbler was trapped in the Vaadal by Glen Tyler, an ex Assistant Warden. He brought it to the Obs, knocked on Alan's door (at 05:15!) and in the ringing room a few minutes later it was identified as only Europe's fifth (but Shetland's fourth) THICK-BILLED WARBLER! Amazing! Two planes and a boat came in that day, with about 30 twitchers who all left thoroughly contented. Unfortunately, the weather closed in that night - frustrating many more would-be Thick-billed listers on the Saturday. However it was only seen very briefly by Rebecca on this day, but not after. It was the first spring record of a species which breeds in Southern Siberia and Mongolia! A Red-throated Pipit, two Bluethroats and a Red-backed Shrike on the 16th were also nice but completely eclipsed! A foggy morning on the 18th soon cleared and a census produced four Red-backed Shrikes, a Dotterel, a Great Northern Diver and two Swifts. May 19th saw a change to normality following the euphoria of the

Thick-billed Warbler and a beautiful day produced a scattering of common migrants, four Red-backed Shrikes, a Wryneck and two Goldfinches. A Quail singing at Lower Stoneybrek on 20th was followed by a typical spring rarity on 21st - a female Subalpine Warbler at the Sheep Cru. It had moved down to Schoolton the following day. The 23rd was another nice day, with good weather and plenty to see. The best was a smart male Rustic Bunting at Aesterhoull and a Bar-tailed Godwit at the Haa. Counts included 40 Swallows, 16 House Martins, four Swifts, three Red-backed Shrikes and a Common Rosefinch. We didn't have to wait long for another rarity as a Thrush Nightingale touched down at the Havens on the 25th. As most Obs staff listened to the football in the afternoon a Long-tailed Skua drifted past Bunes and an Icterine Warbler was found in the Obs garden. Another 'fall' on the 26th consisted mainly of *hirundines* with 51 Swallows and 12 House Martins passing through. Two Red-backed Shrikes remained faithful to their chosen spots as did the Thrush Nightingale which remained in the Havens. The star bird of the 28th was a Pectoral Sandpiper on Easter Lothar Water. This was only the eighteenth record on Fair Isle, and the third in spring, of this American wader. Supporting cast included two Dotterel, two Common Rosefinches, a female Bluethroat and a very late Woodcock! The following day dawned with a drab male Rustic Bunting found outside the Obs, then seen later in the Gully and then eventually settling at Setter! Two Red-throated Divers flying over the island were presumably heading straight for Shetland, but birds that settled included a Cuckoo in the Raevas, a Grey Wagtail and a very smart Wood Warbler in the Havens! A quiet few days followed, despite a southeasterly winds, with the highlights being a Dotterel, Common Rosefinch, Red-backed Shrike and Bluethroat on the 30th and another Icterine Warbler on the 31st. June started with a year-tick in the form of a ring-tail Hen Harrier seen flying toward Shetland. However, more unusual for this time of year was the thunder storm that passed through which severely hampered attempts at census. Our second Subalpine

