

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

No.11. January 1994.



1993 AT THE LODGE.

Many Friends will be aware that this last season at the Lodge has not been an easy one. No sooner had our newly appointed Warden and Administrator, Paddy and Megan Jenks, settled in than their marriage broke down. Megan subsequently left the island together with their three children. Paddy, understandably, found the going very hard and this was aggravated by strife in the kitchen leading to the unscheduled early departure of our cook / caterer and assistant cook followed soon after by the temporary departure of the two lady domestic assistants. The latter returned later and took over the cooking until we recruited a new permanent cook, Joyce Hales.

It speaks volumes for the support given by Assistant Warden, Alan Leitch, Seabird Assistant, Ben Stammers and the above mentioned ladies that, by the time the autumn rush set in, things were not just back to normal but achieving a very high standard. Many visitors in September were quite unaware that anything had gone amiss.

Nevertheless, the amount of time and effort that had to be expended by Trust directors in steering the ship towards calmer waters meant that the summer Newsletter had to be abandoned and, regrettably, the London and Edinburgh Friends' meetings too.

One most important activity that was not allowed to suffer was the seabird monitoring and for this we were most grateful to have help from Paul Harvey and other seabird men from Shetland.

Interviews for a new Warden and Administrator are being held in Edinburgh later this month. Joyce Hales is returning as Cook/Caterer and several past assistants are eager to join her. So we look forward with some confidence to a stable and rewarding season ahead.

Did you see Paul Harvey and David Parkin's excellent article on Fair Isle in the R.S.P.B.

"Birds" magazine? Enquiries for accommodation are flooding in as a result, so do make sure you book in good time. Remember that Friends get 10% reduction in August and may also book a whole month earlier, in July, than the common herd for the following year's Autumn migration peak period.

Pat Sellar.

WARDENS REPORT SPRING PASSAGE 1993.

A relatively quiet start to the season this year, with prevailing Westerlies through most of March, modest *Thrush* passage and little to report other than a very early *Chiffchaff* 14th, regular sightings of *Iceland Gulls*, a *Glaucous Gull* 14th - 17th, a *Water Rail* 27th and *Snow Buntings*, 28 on the 3rd, daily records from mid month.

In the first half of April however, along with strong Easterly winds, there were some impressive falls. *Robins* piled in, hitting 350 on the 8th, when *Blackbirds* also peaked at 130. *Fieldfare* numbers were quadruple-figure on the 11th, along with 500 *Redwing*, and over the month there were sizeable counts of *Song Thrush*, *Skylark*, *Meadow Pipit* and *Brambling*, with almost daily reports of *Black Redstart* and *Ring Ouzel*. During a spell of unexpectedly good weather towards the end of the month, summer migrants started arriving, with *Willow* and *Grasshopper Warbler*, *Blackcap* and *Lesser Whitethroat* among the first to show, and notables being a summer plumaged *Black-tailed Godwit* on the 24th, a *Wryneck* the same day, and a *Shorelark* and a *Subalpine Warbler*, both on the 26th. Other rarities for April were a *Red Kite*, 3 *Great Grey Shrikes*, a *Marsh Harrier* 21st, and unusually for Fair Isle, a *Dipper* 7th, and a *Coot* 14th.

As expected, May was a busy time for migrants, although "quality" in terms of

range of species and rarities, was more noteworthy than quantity. Here is a list of some of the month's unusual spottings ; *Short-toed Lark* 3rd-10th, *Savi's Warbler* 4th-7th, *Wryneck* (2) 11th- 28th, *Lesser Grey Shrike* 12th-14th, *Crane* 13th-19th, *Arctic Redpoll* 19th-23rd, 31st, *Hawfinch* 22nd, *Dotterel* (7) 23rd, (1) 27th, *Quail* 23rd, *Red-headed Bunting* 23rd-24th, *Subalpine Warbler* 24th, *River Warbler* 25th-28th, *Corncrake* 27th-29th.

Chat action was all we had anticipated; *Greenland Wheatears* in profusion at the end of April (the first record of the year was 30th March), and within the first two weeks of May , *Redstart*, *Whinchat* and elegant *Bluethroat* were arriving, spreading delight amongst the dykes, ditches and manure heaps. *Shrikes*, *Long and Short Eared Owls*, *Cuckoo*, *Turtle Dove*, *Hen Harrier*, *Sparrow-hawk*, *Kestrel*, *Merlin*, *Peregrine* and flocks of up to 80 *Golden Plover* and 62 *Purple Sandpiper* were seen during May.

Early June saw but a sprinkling of migrants passing through, mostly warblers (including single *Marsh* and *Icterine Warblers*), *Flycatchers*, *Swallows* and *Martins*, and small numbers of *Ring Ouzel*, *Yellow Wagtail*, and *Rosefinch*. Several *Green Sandpiper*, *Ruff*, *Whimbrel* and *Dunlin*, braces of *Greenshank*, *Sanderling* and *Bar-tailed Godwit* and a lone *Knot* concluded the Spring passage,

Paddy Jenks.

SEABIRD BREEDING SEASON.

In general Fair Isle's seabird population seems to have had a productive season this year, with most species enjoying high fledgling success rates. Exceptions to this were *Kittiwakes* and *Arctic Terns*, both of which suffered considerable chick mortality around fledgling time, the cause in both cases being apparent lack of food. Unseasonably rough weather during this period could perhaps have affected the ability of surface-feeders to provide for their brood more than it would Auks or Shags for example, which have to dive for prey.

This year's total island counts for *Shag* and *Tystie* were down by 11.8% and 25.5% respectively on the last census. The total

island count for *Razorbill* showed an increase of 20%.

A new addition to the island's list of breeding birds was made this year, *Redshank*, the first ever confirmed record.

Ben Stammers.

NOTICE - 1994 BOOKINGS.

Due to a minor hiccup in the confirmation procedure we are asking all "Friends" who have made a reservation for the '94 season to double check their booking by telephoning 035-12-258 giving their name and details. FIBO apologise for any inconvenience.

THE COMMON-ROOM LIBRARY REBOUND, RESHELVED AND CATALOGUED.

John Hunter, Chief Librarian of Shetland Library - and a keen birder - obtained a generous grant last March from the Scottish Library and Information Council, (SLIC), towards putting the FIBO library in order. The result is a remarkable transformation which will instantly gladden the eye of anyone who thought that that corner of the Common Room was being neglected.

All the books were removed in stages to Lerwick, inspected, repaired and in many cases rebound, then returned. New shelving was erected and the books arranged in an easy-to-maintain order. Early this season we will have a computerised catalogue of all the books in both the Common Room and the Richard Richardson collection.

In the process of all this upheaval, many treasures have been rediscovered and given the full treatment. Thus we can once more browse through freshly-bound log books from past years and read about George Waterston's not quite post-war visit in March 1944. We find that George's first ascent of Sheep Craig - as it was then called - was with Ian Pitman on 5th September 1945. There are old visitors books and a photograph album of George's with notes going back to 1937.

The Richard Richardson library has also undergone the full restoration. This collection contains many rare books, for example, Gurney's "The Gannet" (1913) and

George Low's "Tour Through Orkney and Shetland" (1774) and is maintained under lock and key in the staff quarters where it can be opened on request.

There is enough money in the ongoing grant to maintain the library as well as to purchase books from time to time. An order is being placed for "Birds of the Western Palearctic", Vols. 6 and 7.

John Hunter and the SLIC are due a very sincere vote of thanks from all of us at FIBO, we look forward to his returning to the isle to relax, read and do some good birding.

REGENT TERRACE NEWS.

Mrs "Peachey" Legg has reluctantly had to give up working for FIBOT at our office in Edinburgh. We have her to thank for inputting all Friends' membership statistics on the new computer and handling all correspondence for the Trust during most of last year. We will miss her dearly.

Pat Sellar.

AUTUMN MIGRATION SUMMARY.

Autumn migration started with a trickle of migrant from mid-July with *Ruff*, *Purple Sandpiper*, *Bar-tailed Godwit*, *Whimbrel*, *Dunlin*, *Greenshank* and *Green Sandpiper* all present in small numbers.

Despite continuous Westerly winds during August they produced a sprinkling of new arrivals; *Wood Sandpiper*, *Barred Warbler*, *Crossbill* and a *Long-tailed Skua* seen passing near the island on the 15th. The start of what must have been the best autumn for *Scarlet Rosefinch* occurred on the 24th with a female "type" present, they became daily with at least 5 on the 28th. A *Citrine Wagtail* frequented Upper Stoneybrek from the 27th until the 31st. The only *Marsh Warbler* of the year was found at the Meadow Burn on the 27th, where it remained until the 29th and a *Wryneck* was seen briefly on the 31st.

During July / August a total of 988 *Storm Petrels* were trapped after being attracted to tape-lures, unfortunately the three *Leach's Petrels* seen were not trapped.

The first sign of passerine passage occurred from mid-August with small numbers of *Tree Pipit*, *White Wagtail*, *Whinchat*, *Sedge Warbler*, *Garden Warbler*, *Wood Warbler*, *Willow Warbler* and *Pied Flycatcher*.

This continued into September with highlights being; *Slavonian Grebe*, *Little Stints*, *Wryneck*, *Bluethroat*, *Barred Warbler*, *Arctic Warbler* (2) and *Lapland Bunting*. *Scarlet Rosefinch* occurred daily with a peak of 7 on the 6th. Also seen in September were *Ortolan Bunting* (2), *Rustic Bunting* (3), *Red-headed Bunting*, *Paddyfield Warbler*, *Yellow-browed Warbler* (7), *Citrine Wagtail*, *Red-throated Pipit* (2), *Dotterel*, *Red-breasted Flycatcher* (3), *Richard's Pipit*, *Olive-backed Pipit*. *Little Buntings* were seen daily from the 24th with 5 on the 28th.

A *Red-flanked Bluetail*, which arrived during a fall of *Willow Warblers* and *Redstarts*, unfortunately only stayed around for an afternoon. During this time it was relatively approachable and was later trapped in the garden of Stackhoull Stores, being only the third one to have arrived on the island.

The only sightings of *Lanceolated Warbler* this year occurred on the 17th when two birds were present. One was caught at the Double Dyke, the other seen briefly by a lucky few observers near Lower Leogh. A *Pechora Pipit* found on the 27th remained until the 5th of October in the Gully.

Despite this very impressive list and barring the *Bluetail*, the biggest rarity on Fair Isle during September was a *Treecreeper*, seen near the Double Dyke on the 30th. This was only the sixth record this century.

During September 13th and 16th, good numbers of common passerines were recorded. They included; *Redstart* (60), *Whinchat* (30), *Tree Pipit* (20), *Garden Warbler* (20), *Wheatear* (70), *Willow Warbler* (250), *Spotted and Pied Flycatcher* (12), *Goldcrest* (10), *Swallow* (30), *Skylark* (250) and *Lesser Whitethroat* (4).

The South Easterly conditions, which dominated September, continued into October. They produced a number of notable arrivals; on the 4th, *Olive-backed Pipit* (3), *Tree Pipit* (10), *Meadow Pipit*

(100), *Robin* (150), *Redstart* (35), *Ring Ouzel* (75), *Blackbird* (45), *Fieldfare* (500), *Whinchat* (3), *Dunnock* (20), *Grey Wagtail* (4), *Redwing* (2500), *Song Thrush* (600), *Mistle Thrush* (3), *Grasshopper Warbler* (3), *Blackcap* (120), an incredible (300) *Siskin*, *Lapland Bunting* (22), *Snow Bunting* (131), *Reed Bunting* (40), *Jack Snipe* (25). During the 7th, *Short-eared Owl* (6), *Skylark* (400), *Chiffchaff* (50), *Chaffinch* (50), *Brambling* (160) and *Snipe* (65). Other counts of note during the month were, *Blackbird* (1200) on the 23rd, *Fieldfare* (2000) on the 29th, *Song Thrush* (600) on the 3rd, *Redwing* (5000) on the 11th and *Woodcock* (80) on the 23rd.

Amongst the more common visitors a host of rarities arrived. They were; *Iceland Gull* (2), *Glaucous Gull*, *Woodlark* (3), *Richard's Pipit*, *Olive-backed Pipit* (5), *Red-breasted Flycatcher*, *Yellow-browed Warbler* (3), *Barred Warbler*, "*Siberian*" *Stonechat* (3), *Bluethroat*, *Waxwing* (2), *Red-throated Pipit*, *Scarlet Rosefinch*, *Rustic Bunting* (3), *Little Bunting* (4), *Black-throated Thrush*, *Dusky Warbler*, *Tawny Pipit* seen briefly on the 22nd and a *Blyth's Reed Warbler* which was trapped on the 22nd, then controlled at Sumburgh later in the month.

Despite the avalanche of rarities the "biggy" was still to come. On the 31st, a large pipit thought at first to be a *Tawny Pipit* was later identified as a *Blyth's Pipit*. Fortunately, with some help from the bird, we were able to trap the individual and our identification was confirmed by in the hand examination. This is the second to be seen on Fair Isle and only the fifth in Britain.

The *Blyth's Pipit* remained until the November 10th. There was also a small influx of *Long-eared Owls* and *Woodcock*. On the 8th an unexpected arrival was a *Red-backed Shrike*, this individual represents the latest autumn record. Also present were *Greenfinch* (7), *Snow Bunting* (70), an adult *Shelduck* and a couple of flyover *Waxwings*.

This autumn was very productive in all aspects with good numbers of both common migrants and more unusual species.

Unfortunately the winter months will be under recorded due to a change of staff.

Alan Leitch.

RECENT BIRD NEWS.

Winter is the quietest time of the year ornithologically, but even then the isle is not without bird interest. Flocks of *Redshanks* and *Turnstones* roam the fields and large numbers of gulls come ashore in rough weather. Rather more birds have chosen to see out the shortest days on Fair Isle this winter, including above average numbers of *Snipe*, *Skylark*, *Blackbird*, *Redwing* and *Fieldfare*, several *Robins*, and *Song Thrushes*, up to 40 *Greylag Geese* *Whooper Swan*, *Long-eared Owls* and *Woodcocks* have been seen and a *Dunnock* is managing to survive among the buildings at North Haven.

Arctic birds have been scarce, apart from about 50 *Snow Buntings*. There has been one first-winter *Iceland Gull*, but no island reports of *Glaucous Gulls* or *Little Auks*.

The most notable, and unexpected, birds were a male *Yellow-billed Grosbeak* at Barkland from 18th to 26th November, a *Stock Dove* at Quoy on 12th January and a *Great Crested Grebe* the same day in North Haven.

The *Yellow-billed Grosbeak*, also known as *Chinese Grosbeak*, was a spectacular bird, built like a *Hawfinch* but with a longer tail, its brown plumage strongly infused with orange and cinnamon, glossy black head and tail and immaculate broad white wing-tips. It is an Asiatic species and, although a long distant migrant, is imported into Europe and therefore will probably be considered an escape from captivity.

No such doubts about the authenticity of the *Stock Dove*, which appears to be the first winter record; nor about the winter plumaged *Great Crested Grebe*, which is only the tenth Fair Isle record and the first since April 1988.

Nick Riddiford.

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