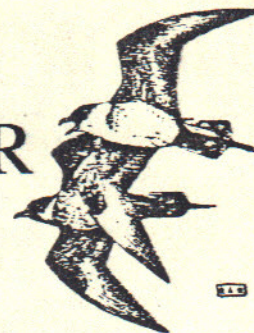


FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

No. 12. July 1994.



WARDENS REPORT.

The early part of the winter was typically quiet, but sharp-eyed islanders still managed to come up with some good records. A *Great Crested Grebe* in North Haven on January 12th was the greatest rarity prize, although up to 3 *Goosanders* in early March were also good Fair Isle records. *Jack Snipe*, *Stock Dove* and *Mistle Thrush* were other species reported during the short winter days, small numbers of the four common thrush species were logged throughout January and February and *Snow Buntings* numbered 50 on several dates.

Wendy and I arrived on the Isle on March 16th. The latter half of March remained quiet birdwise, but saw small numbers of returning waders and passerines. The 28th was one of the best days of the month, 110 *Oystercatchers*, 110 *Lapwings*, an impressive count of 720 *Skylarks* and 120 *Meadow Pipits*, plus single *Water Rail*, *Grey Wagtail*, and the first *Bonxies* of the year.

April saw the spring migration build up slowly rather than spectacularly, the weather being dominated by western-quarter winds. Nonetheless, there were some unexpected highlights! A first-summer *Marsh Harrier*, trapped in the Gully on the 24th by our keen, athletic Assistant Warden, Guy Thompson, remained for the rest of the month, delighting many with good views as it drifted around the south end of the island. This was particularly notable as the first *Marsh Harrier* ever ringed on Fair Isle. Two islanders bagged an impressive double on the 27th, when an immature *White-Tailed Eagle* drifted over them near North Light. A wing -tagged bird from the RSPB release scheme on Rhum, it was seen about an hour later heading north over Sumburgh, and was subsequently reported from Unst. It would seem that this particular individual may be heading firmly back to Norway! Aside from raptors, a Norwegian-ringed *Hawfinch* on April 9th-10th (recovered in a weakened condition on the latter date at Pund), was possibly most interesting record of the month. Ringing details are still to come through, but this looks like

being only second foreign-ringed hawfinch ever to be recorded in Britain. Two *Great Tits*, male and female, took up residence around the Observatory between April 10th-25th, whilst other scarce species included *Little Bunting*, *Iceland Gull* and *Moorhen*. There were no particularly large falls of commoner migrants; 145 *Bramblings* on the 24th and 185 *Wheatears* on the 25th were perhaps the most noteworthy. Summer migrants began to trickle through towards the end of the month.

The start of May heralded a good spell for migrants, with several scarce or rare species recorded during the first half of the month, thanks to the predominantly south-east winds. Two *Ospreys*, one heading south-west the other north, were seen by a few lucky observers. Also short-staying were two *Ortolan Buntings* and a *Dotterel*, though *Wryneck*, *Short-toed Lark*, a stunning male 'Siberian' *Stonechat*, *Subalpine Warbler*, a smart, red *Common Rosefinch* and another *Little Bunting* all stayed long enough to be enjoyed by most of our visitors. May 12th-13th were perhaps the busiest two days of the spring. A *Subalpine Warbler* lingering from the 10th was joined by two more (both males), 15 *Bluethroats* and 60 *Redstarts* were logged on the 13th, and a *Quail* was trapped, in the Axell trap! The rarest bird of all, however, was a *Corn Bunting* at Quoy, only the second record since the seventies, a sad reflection of the decline of a species that used to be a regular breeder in Shetland and has also bred on Fair Isle this century. As the month progressed, two more *Marsh Harriers* continued the excellent spring for this superb raptor, two more *Ospreys* passed through and there were sightings of *Nightingale*, up to three *Rosefinches*, two *Icterine Warblers* and a smart male *Rustic Bunting*.

The end of May proved to be disappointing, with no large falls of migrants. A second male *Rustic Bunting* arrived on the 26th, as did the first *Red-breasted Flycatcher* of the spring, whilst a cold, wet morning on May 30th

unexpectedly produced a *Marsh Warbler* and the spring's 4th *Subalpine Warbler*, this one a female.

The first three weeks of June have been particularly quiet, poignantly so for those of us who remember the heady days of early June 1992! The first *Red-backed Shrike* of the spring eventually put in an appearance on the 2nd, with another on the 5th. The first week also produced *Quail*, *Bluethroat*, *Marsh Warbler* and *Common Rosefinch*, but since then migrants have been painfully scarce, the exceptions being a third *Marsh Warbler* and a *Golden Oriole* on the 17th, with a *Long-tailed Skua* north of Bunes possibly the most outstanding record of the month. Due to a certain dedicated (♀) seawatcher at the Obs.!

As if to emphasise just how unwise it is to assume that migration on Fair Isle is finished, the island's second, and Shetland's third, *Sardinian Warbler* appeared on the 26th, though nurse Mahairi Campbell believed she had seen it in her garden at least three days earlier. A smart male, it stayed until the 28th.

Roger Riddington.

SEABIRDS SPRING 1994.

Despite the run of poor weather during the first half of the seabird season, the seabird monitoring programme annually carried out under contract to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee has (thankfully!) been largely unaffected. In general most species were back on the cliffs in strength this spring, although we must await the end-of-season breeding productivity figures to assess fledging success.

The impact of the Braer disaster on Fair Isles breeding seabirds seems to have been negligible; both *Shag* and *Black Guillemot* - the two species most hard hit by the oil spill - have held their own. Indeed, an April census revealed an island total of 323 adult *Tysties*, a 15% increase on last years count. Similarly, numbers of *Shags* nesting at five monitoring sites have remained basically stable over the last two years.

However the *Terns* have not fared so well this year. The total of 615 pairs of *Arctic Terns* represents a considerable decline from the peak

years of 1992 (1100) and 1993 (808), largely due to the near- complete desertion of the colony on Eas Brecks. Furthermore, a period of wet weather during June contributed to high mortality amongst the newly hatched chicks. The small population of *Common Terns* also suffered, the total of three pairs being the lowest since the species colonised the island in the early 1970's.

Kittiwakes have continued the decline noted since monitoring began in 1986 : although this year's sample sizes at monitoring plots are only down by 3% on 1993, they have dropped by 21% since the successful season of 1992. It is notable that this decline is being mirrored on mainland Shetland, and that predation by Great Skuas has been suggested as one of the primary causes.

Most seabirds are in good numbers though, with *Gannet* and *Guillemot* currently holding their highest levels on Fair Isle. The count of 825 apparently occupied *Gannet* nests is the first time that this figure has topped 800. The ongoing expansion of existing colonies and the spread of non-breeding "club" gatherings suggest that the Fair Isle population will continue its increase. The breeding populations of the most abundant seabirds are censused on a five year cycle, the target species this year being *Guillemot*. The total island count of 37,563 attending adults constitutes a 16.2% increase from 1989, and confirms general opinion on the island that *Guillemot* numbers are at their highest in living memory. Interestingly the increase was most pronounced in the colonies along the east side of the island.

The *Bonxie* population remains stable from last year with 101 apparently occupied territories, although *Arctic Skuas* have declined further to 92 territories; possibly inter - specific competition is a factor here. Casual observations suggest that numbers of the much maligned *Fulmar* are as high as ever, giving rise to concern over this aggressive species' impact on the island's other seabirds - is there any basis to this uncorroborated theory?

It remains to be seen whether the generally optimistic situation apparent in June - with high availability of sandeels - will be reflected in good fledgling rates at the end of the season.

Guy Thompson.

DOING THE SKUA DANCE.

Leaving the soft life in Wiltshire for the rigours of seabird ringing on Fair Isle has become an annual pilgrimage in June. An escape from the mental pressures to the practical pleasures of working with seabirds. The island setting, the quiet tempo, the family atmosphere and the friendships bring a unique quality to the Fair Isle experience. I do not want it to change. With a completely new Observatory staff (save for Joyce doing her second season as cook) and the removal of the FIBOT organisation from Edinburgh to the island, will the formula be right?

Within minutes of arrival Richard Pike, a fellow seabird enthusiast, and I were on Svey doing the skua dance: heads bobbing and arms flailing to the attacks. Finding chicks has a perverse pleasure when such comical human responses are involved. A woolly hat was lost to a Bonxie claw and the skua flew around like a bloated Frigate Bird for a while.

The Observatory looked as solid as ever. The panoramic window of the sitting room, the wet leather and multi coloured fabrics in the boot room and the all pervading fishy smells of the ringing room. Wendy has a lovely staff. Joyce and her daughter, Liz, produce a miracle of varied food three times a day. They are ably supported by Lesley whose earrings matched her tee-shirts and Birgit who could balance a plate of cakes on her hairdo. The family atmosphere was as good as it has ever been.

The drops to the seabird colonies were achieved with the usual happy banter as the hares and the tortoises exhibited their unique styles on the ropes. That ringing room smell wafting up from below. Fulmars and Kittiwake wheeling, quizzical Puffins, Guillemots shrieking, adults and chicks at different pitch, Razorbills immaculate and menacing and Shags all croaking, gaping green-eyed trouble. The ringing was exciting, mechanical and very bloody as the birds exacted their toll on the unpracticed hands poking out of helmeted boiler suits.

Crazy activities like carrying an extended aluminium ladder down the rope into Lericum and placing it on a slippery boulder beach to reach the Kittiwake ledges. Prostrate on the end of 18 foot roach poles noosing adult Puffins at

Roskilie. The final 60 feet up rusting chains on Sheep Craig (they must give way some day) to ring 185 Great Black Back Gull chicks. Roping down the arete on North Felsigeo to ring Gannets. Soaking and shivering in the boat after returning from Greenholm in a heavy swell.

Roger behaves like a man enjoying his wardenship. Nick, his assistant, managed a joke in every situation and Guy, his seabird assistant, could out-climb the sheep. Jane, awaiting university, would appraise behaviour with a delightful innocence. There was lots of enthusiasm, a willingness to accommodate, educate and encourage participation. They worked as a team and were a joy to be with.

Clare runs the FIBOT organisation with vigour and efficiency from her new home in the south of the island. She even boasts a fax to receive our communications. The changes are for the better but the Fair Isle experience retains its unique flavour and I emerge having had a wonderful holiday.

Ian Grier.

REMINDER.

Please remember that all Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust business is now being dealt with by ; The Secretary, FIBOT, Burkle, Fair Isle, Shetland, ZE2 9JU. Phone :- 035 12 284.

KIMO.

The first visitors to The Observatory in spring 1994 were a party holding a national KIMO meeting. It was, perhaps a bit unfair on Roger and Wendy to have 20 people arriving *en bloc* as their first visitors.

But what's a KIMO? I hear you ask. KIMO is the fortunate abbreviation of "Kommunenenes Internasjonale Miljoorganisasjon", a dynamic new international organisation dedicated to the conservation and improvement of the North Sea environment. The group consists of national members drawn from local authorities and other associated organisations from each country bordering the North Sea.

KIMO was formally founded in Esbjerg,

Denmark in August 1990 to work towards cleaning up pollution in the North Sea. The idea originally came from the Vagsoy Kommune in Norway. Vagsoy has been concerned since 1985 about the proposals for further nuclear fuel reprocessing at Dounreay, which they saw as a threat to their fishing industry. The wide spread seal deaths in the North Sea in 1988 and the spread of toxic algae bloom up the west coast of Norway in the same year brought home to them that the threat to marine life in the North Sea extended well beyond radioactive discharges. They also realised that any action taken to clean up the North Sea could only be effective if it was coordinated on an international basis and decided to contact other local authorities from a nucleus of an international group.

The other founder members, Shetland Islands Council, Grampian Regional Council and Esbjerg City Council, were selected, at that time, on the basis that they shared with Vagsoy a common interest in protecting their fishing industries.

From this modest, localised start KIMO has grown in size and in terms of its aims and objectives. It now has 30 members in the U.K., Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Holland with associate members in Germany.

KIMO's key objectives are;

Exchange information on effective pollution prevention and cleaning up operations.

Lead by example by improving regional marine environments.

Lobby national governments and the E.C. to take effective action on issues affecting the North Sea.

Make joint representations against threatening proposals.

The U.K. delegates arrived on Fair Isle by helicopter having left Sumburgh and flown over Mousa, the site of the wrecked klondykers in Lerwick, the Scalloway Islands, salmon farms and the wreck of the *Braer*.

The conference was chaired by Councillor Joan Easten, Chairman of the S.I.C.'s Environmental Services Committee.

At the meeting a wide range of issues was covered. Included in the agenda was; a KIMO Database: A Coastal Zone Information System: Proposals for a Eurocoastguard: The decommissioning of oil installations in the North Sea and the setting up of Nature Fish Reserves: Marine litter: The North Sea bird "wreck": Scottish Water Board's Deregulation and Contracting-out Bill: Increased radioactive discharges from Dounreay in the North of Scotland: The recent klondyker groundings in Lerwick Harbour: The Humber Estuary Plan.

Special interest was shown towards the presentation by Nick Riddiford on the position of Fair Isle and the possibilities of a Marine Nature Reserve.

Appreciation went to the islanders for providing an evening of musical entertainment, to the FIBO staff for hospitality and to the Furse puffins for the evening show. Even the weather was kind to us. It was good to prove that the Observatory can host a national meeting on this scale.

All of the delegates left with a superb impression of the island and a commitment to support local communities and the marine environment that they depend upon.

Dave Okill.

MARINE PROTECTION AREA.

Earlier this year the R.S.P.B. launched their Marine Life Campaign. This initiative exhorts interested bodies to combine together to safeguard marine wildlife.

Their recently published brochure, "Seas: the opportunity" highlights Fair Isle as one of six internationally important sites around Britain which at present receives no effective protection.

A fuller report on the R.S.P.B. campaign and the possible setting up of a Marine Protection Area (M.P.A.) around Fair Isle will appear in the next Friends of Fair Isle Newsletter.

Clare Ross-Smith.
Editor.