

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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WARDEN'S REPORT, AUTUMN MIGRATION 1994.

Even by Fair Isle's standards, the autumn of 1994 was outstanding. A long series of rare and scarce migrants was recorded, and whilst there were no large falls of common migrants such as thrushes or Robins, several species occurred in record numbers.

The first week of August produced a few migrants, including *Barred Warbler* and *Red-backed Shrike*, but an *Aquatic Warbler* at Meadow Burn on the 4th-5th, was the centre of attention. The rest of August was quiet, until a spell of south-easterlies at the beginning of the fourth week livened things up considerably, marking the start of the autumn proper. Completely out of the blue, a superb adult female *Isabelline Shrike* was trapped in the Gully on the 23rd, the fourth record for Fair Isle. The next day saw a marked arrival of several species, with good wader counts, plus 5 *Wryneck*, 40 *Whinchats*, 150 *Wheatears*, 5 *Barred Warblers*, 50 *Garden Warblers*, 60 *Willow Warblers*, and 5 *Red-backed Shrikes*. Next day *Red-backed Shrikes* increased to 8, an impressive sight around the island. The most unexpected event of the whole year, however, was reserved for the last day of the month, when the corpse of a freshly-dead *Red-necked Stint* was picked up at the South Harbour. It was identified when handed in at the Observatory the following day, by finder, Jimmy Stout. The third for Britain, a first for Scotland and the first record of the species for Europe in juvenile plumage (in which it is notoriously difficult to separate from the closely-related *Little Stint*).

September started well with a first-winter *Citrine Wagtail* on the 1st, discovered at Busta at dusk and relocated next day at Golden Water, the same day that a juvenile *Great Spotted Woodpecker* arrived for an eight day stay. The rest of the first week was comparatively quiet, but a superb fall on the 9th comprised excellent number and variety of waders, plus 35 *Whinchat*, 100 *Wheatears*, 80 *Garden Warblers* and 45 *Willow Warblers*, 2 *Ortolan Buntings* and a *Yellow-breasted Bunting*. This marked the beginning of an incredible run of September

rarities. A *Booted Warbler* at Furse on the 11th was a good find, overshadowing an exceptionally tame juvenile *Dotterel* on Ward Hill the same day. A *Pechora Pipit*, trapped in the plantation on the 15th caused great excitement; little did most folk imagine that the following day there would be three of these much sought-after pipits on the island! Happily for many, two were destined to stay for a while, one until the 19th allowing many of our visitors their first encounter with the species. A *Yellow-breasted Bunting* and a *Short-toed Lark* deflected attention away from the pipits on the 18th, although an *Arctic Warbler* in the Gully arrived too late in the day to be enjoyed by more than its finders. A small fall of warblers on the 20th (comprising 20 *Garden Warblers*, 10 *Blackcaps*, 5 *Yellow-browed Warblers* and 30 *Willow Warblers*) brought the second *Arctic Warbler* of the month, a worn adult with virtually no wingbars and an abnormally short bill, which was trapped to confirm its identity. Next day, most people at the Observatory were still asleep when I received a 'phone call from birders staying down the isle who had stumbled across a *Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler* at Leogh. The first here since 1988 (and only the second in Britain since then), this bird perhaps generated more excitement than most; a new *Arctic Warbler* at Furse the same morning went virtually unnoticed. Fair Isle was on a roll, and the next day continued in the same vein: a superb *Paddyfield Warbler* was trapped in the Gully and a *Rose-coloured Starling* arrived for what turned out to be a seven-week stay. Rounding off the month, a second *Paddyfield Warbler* was found on the 24th and a fourth *Pechora Pipit* on the 25th, the latter seen in flight only. Two *Little Buntings* arrived the following day, and the last of the month witnessed a fall of 1500 *Redwings* and 130 *Bramblings*. Scarce migrants, such as *Wryneck*, *Richard's Pipit*, *Bluethroat*, *Marsh Warbler*, *Icterine Warbler*, *Yellow-browed Warbler*, *Red-backed Shrike* and *Common Rosefinch* were reduced to a background role, but all were recorded, most in good numbers.

In many ways October was the best month of the autumn, new arrivals being logged almost every day. In the first few days, there were good

counts of species that arrived in Britain in exceptional numbers this autumn, with 4 *Richard's Pipits* on the 2nd (nicely balanced by the fifth *Pechora Pipit* of the year) and 9 *Yellow-browed Warblers* on the 10th. Also on the 10th, there was a good arrival of thrushes (at least by the standards of 1994), with 1500 *Redwings* and 200 *Fieldfares*, whilst *Olive-backed Pipit* and *Lanceolated Warbler* made the day particularly memorable. A *Short-toed Lark* turned up on the 11th and a second *Lanceolated Warbler* was found on the 15th; late that same day a possible *Black-throated Thrush* was glimpsed near the Observatory. Happily it was relocated next day at Upper Stoneybreck. The following day, the 17th, was one of the best of the year for rarities, with a *Rustic Bunting* trapped at the Vaadal after breakfast, a second *Black-throated Thrush* discovered at North Shirva (with the original bird still at Stoneybreck), and the third *Little Bunting* of the autumn just to round everything off! For the rest of the month, less amazing in terms of rarities, there continued to be much to interest remaining staff members. There were several records of species scarce on Fair Isle: *Great Crested Grebe*, *Little Grebe*, *Goosander*, *Buzzard*, *Waxwing*, *Great Tit*, and *Goldfinch* were all logged. Late appearances were made by a *Pallas's Warbler* on the 20th and an *Arctic Warbler* on the 26th. But perhaps the most outstanding event of the month was the unexpected invasion of "northern" *Bullfinches*, which built up gradually and peaked at a phenomenal 77 on November 1st. To put this into perspective, the previous record count during the Observatory's history was just 16.

November came and despite south-easterlies we all assumed we had enjoyed the last of an excellent autumn migration. Not so! For the third time in four years, November was to provide unexpected rewards for the die-hards who remained on the island. A *Little Bustard* was found at Setter on the 5th, a species new to Shetland, and it remained on the island the following day. The weather, however, decreed that only those on the island should enjoy this late bonus; conditions on the 6th were unfit for flying and on the 7th we searched for the bustard in vain. A stunning male *Pine Bunting*, present for the morning only, perhaps did little for the morale of those waiting on Shetland, but to us it provided a fitting climax to a memorable season.

Roger Riddington.

SEABIRDS 1994, A SUCCESSFUL SEASON.

Since 1986 ornithological work at the Observatory between May and August has been dominated by the seabird monitoring programme carried out under contract to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Its objectives are to monitor the population sizes, breeding productivity and adult survival rates of most seabird species, and to assess chick diet, growth and feeding rates. Data is largely collected by regular monitoring of sample nests at selected plots, which provides information on breeding success (number of chicks fledged per monitored nest) and fluctuations in populations. Continuity of methods and monitoring plots ensures that the data gives an accurate indication of long-term trends and a useful perspective on the national situation.

The work also involves regular drops into colonies down the cliffs to ring seabirds, collect food samples and take chick biometrics. Amongst this year's highlights, descents into two rarely visited Gannet colonies and the Kirn o Skroo for Tysties endure in the memory. Conversely a notable low point was my aborted experiment at taking a flimsy one-man dinghy across to the Puffin transect on the stack at Greenholm! The ringing work includes night-time tape luring of Storm Petrels: this year, intensive effort during a period of calm weather late in the season produced the second highest ever totals of both *Storm* and *Leach's Petrels* (1850 and 6 respectively), providing a fitting end to a productive season of hard work and enjoyment.

1994 has, on the whole, been a successful breeding season for Fair Isle's seabirds: as reported in the Spring newsletter, most species returned to the cliffs in good numbers. Furthermore, very high breeding productivity rates were recorded for *Gannet*, *Puffin*, *Shag* and *Kittiwake*, with *Fulmar*, *Razorbill*, *Guillemot* and *Great Skua* also faring well. On the debit side, *Black Guillemots* had a comparatively poor season with only 0.58 chicks fledged per monitored nest (although because all selected nests were accessible on foot - due to a combination of a broken keel on our Zodiac and poor boating weather - our sample was particularly susceptible to predation by feral cats). *Arctic Skuas* had a rather mediocre season with only around 65 chicks fledging from 93 apparently occupied territories. In contrast,

Great Skuas are currently flourishing, with the number of chicks ringed (151) reaching an all-time high for the third year in succession: the success of Fair Isle's Bonxies are probably the main cause of the declining fortunes of their smaller relative. *Arctic Terns* recovered slightly from a disastrous start to the season, with later broods surviving to give a productivity rate of 0.24; it seems that the poor weather in June was the main reason for high mortality amongst the first broods. However, in common with most of Shetland, excellent productivity rates were recorded for the majority of species.

The corollary of this season's work is that, for the third year running, sandeels were readily available to Fair Isle's seabirds throughout the summer, suggesting that the Shetland sandeel population has recovered from its recent low levels. Systematic feeding watches of *Guillemot* and *Puffin* - recording the number of loads delivered to chicks within a period of time - showed that sandeels formed over 94% of chick diet in 1994, a significantly high proportion. Good sandeel stocks are the primary factor determining the high productivity rates of this season. The Observatory's research into Fair Isle's seabirds was instrumental in initially alerting conservationists to the Shetland crisis of the late 1980s. Given the fact that there is already discussion about lifting the four-year old ban on the Shetland sandeel fishery, the need for legislative protection of Fair Isle waters seems paramount; in this context the potential effect of the proposed Marine Protection Area is therefore of critical importance.

Guy Thompson.

MARINE PROTECTION AREA.

In May 1994 the RSPB launched its Marine Life Campaign, a major part of which focused on the establishment of Marine Protection Areas (M.P.As). These would take the form of locally managed zones integrating nature conservation with other uses of the sea such as fishing, oil and leisure. As Pete Ellis of RSPB Shetland points out, "better management of special marine areas is now required under the European Union Habitats and Species Directive of 1992/93" and that, "in 1992 the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment recommended that government should be considered as one approach to marine conservation". Within their campaign the RSPB have highlighted Fair Isle as one of six UK sites of exceptional importance

for breeding seabirds.

During summer 1994 an area of the Hill Scattald and cliff (formerly SSSI) was designated a Special Protection Area for Birds. It is therefore essential to protect the foraging grounds that sustain these internationally important groups of birds by creating a coastal protection zone. The Fair Isle community has long realised the importance of managing of the island's waters, and since June 1990 has been unanimously proposing the establishment of an MPA.

Nick Riddiford, chairman of the Fair Isle Committee, recently attended the Seas At Risk conference in Copenhagen, where he was able to expose the Fair Isle situation to an international delegation. The purpose of this meeting was to propose a declaration for consideration by European ministers at their Fourth Ministerial North Sea Conference in 1995.

In December, a meeting was called in Edinburgh by the National Trust for Scotland to explore further Fair Isle's quest for protection of its marine environment. Scottish Natural Heritage, the Fair Isle Committee, FIBOT and the RSPB were also in attendance. The meeting decided that the next step was to approach the Shetland Fishermen's Association and Scottish Office of Agricultural and Fisheries Department to see if common ground exists regarding the potential for an MPA.

As yet there is no legal mechanism in place to protect the marine environment but it was emphasised that, if this situation changes, Fair Isle should be regarded as an ideally suitable and willing site.

Clare Ross-Smith.

A VIEW FROM THE "CHAIR".

A final view from the chair - I am due to step down at the February AGM and hand over to Roy Dennis. I much prefer to look forward than back and I see that in the January ('94) Newsletter "looked forward with some confidence to a stable and rewarding season ahead". My confidence has proved well placed. Thanks to Roger and Wendy and their very supportive staff, FIBO has more than recovered its poise after a stormy 1993 and has indeed enjoyed a most rewarding season. Ian Grier's article in the July Newsletter bears this out -

