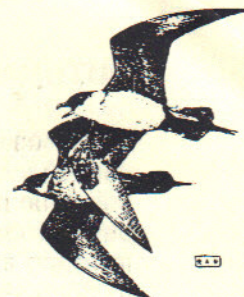


# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by Wendy Christie



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## A VERY BIG THANK YOU TO OUR 'FRIENDS'

I am quite overwhelmed by the generosity of all the 'Friends' who responded to my chairman's appeal. I wrote the letter on the plane to London en route to an expedition in the Yukon. My wife, Marina, improved the first draft and Wendy organised the rest and sent it out to all Friends of Fair Isle, along with the newsletter. Imagine my pleasure to hear, on my return to the Highlands, of the first positive responses.

In total, so far, 'Friends' donated a total of £14,280 plus £2,500 redeemable income tax. At the same time, the appeal letter, along with the first indications of support from FIBOT's membership, was used by David McLehose to write to a range of charitable trusts and companies. This resulted in a further £14,500, bringing the combined total to an astonishing £31,280. This has helped the Observatory in a most dramatic way and we can look forward to a more secure future.

Wendy sent all the letters to me and it was marvellous to hear from so many people. Some I knew from the 60's when Marina and I lived on Fair Isle. Others ranged from the newest Fair Isle enthusiasts of 1995 to a few who had visited the Bird Observatory on Fair Isle in 1948 during its first year of operation. I hope I have now replied to all the signed donations received so far. But my gratitude, on behalf of the Trust, goes well beyond what I could say in a short letter.

Thank you again for responding so magnificently and I send you best wishes for 1996. Maybe we'll see you back on the island - that would indeed be a pleasure.

Roy Dennis  
Chairman

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## YOUNG ORNITHOLOGISTS ALERT!

Two items for younger birdwatchers:

British Birds 'Young Ornithologists of the Year'  
This annual competition is run by British Birds magazine and sponsored by a host of organisations and companies. It aims to encourage up-and-coming birdwatchers and promote a conscientious attitude to wildlife and the recording of observations. Entries are judged in three age categories (1) under 13 years, (2) 13-16 years and (3) 17-21 years. Entrants need to submit simply their field notebooks for scrutiny by the judging panel. The three winners share prizes worth over £2,500 (in the past two years including a Kowa TSN-3 telescope and a full set of 'Birds of the Western Palearctic'). If you are eligible, why

not take part?; alternatively if you know someone who is, then please encourage them to enter. Youngsters associated with Fair Isle have an impressive record in this competition. Last year, Steve Votier, who was assistant warden in 1992 was the winner, whilst this year, Jane Reid, a long-term volunteer here in 1994 took the top prize. Well done to both of them, please help the good FIBO tradition to continue.

Similarly, all young birdwatchers are eligible to apply for grants from the John Harrison Memorial Fund, set up in memory of John Harrison, to assist young people financially in visiting Fair Isle. Write to the Bird Observatory for details and an application form.



## AUTUMN MIGRATION, 1995

Early August brought a steady trickle of early autumn migrants to Fair Isle, gulls and waders being the most obvious species on the move, but with scarce migrants during this period including a Leach's Petrel trapped on the 1st, a Corncrake on the 12th and four Barred Warblers. Then on the 17th, a hot, sultry August day sparked into life with the discovery of a crisp first-winter Citrine Wagtail on the beach in South Haven. The earliest ever record for Fair Isle, and one of the earliest autumn records in Britain. Observers were stimulated to scour the island for further rewards from a light south-easterly wind, and the following day, the 18th, saw a good arrival of migrants, mostly waders and warblers, including Wood Sandpiper, Icterine Warbler, 2 Barred Warblers, 2 Wood Warblers and 6 Pied Flycatchers. The rest of August was rather quiet, though the long-staying adult Rose-coloured Starling (which arrived in mid-July) was present and showing well throughout the month, favouring the Shirva area and the west side of the Houll. Barred Warblers reached a peak of 6 on the 26th (a day of good wader passage when a fine Spotted Redshank was the highlight) and Common Rosefinch numbers peaked at 4 on the 30th-31st. Then on the 31st, the gentle east winds provided a thrilling end to the month when a Great Snipe was located in the damp area south of Pund. A second Corncrake lent the supporting cast, though was rather less obliging than the snipe, hiding in the bracken forest at Wirvie.

Into September, the hopes of all at the Observatory were high, since the long range weather forecast suggested an almost constant stream of eastern-quarter winds. The 1st was rather quiet, though Great Snipe and Rose-coloured Starling were seen and an eastern Lesser Whitethroat trapped. Heavy rain hampered observation on the 2nd, but during the evening, as the rain cleared, migrants were literally tumbling out of the sky. The highlight that evening was a smart Arctic Warbler at Field, and the next day an impressive variety of waders, chats and warblers graced the island. Common migrants were led by 20 Whinchats, 200 Northern Wheatears, 60 Willow Warblers and 12 Pied Flycatchers. Scarce migrants included Spotted Redshank, Wryneck, Barred Warbler and Common Rosefinch but it was perhaps disappointing that the Arctic Warbler, staying on from the previous evening, was the only rarity. The following week simmered and

bubbled without really boiling over, although the 6th was a good day, with a first-winter Citrine Wagtail at Field and a Yellow-breasted Bunting at North Leogh. A Greenish Warbler trapped at the Plantation continued the high quality theme on the 7th. Conditions were grim on the morning of the 8th, an east wind gusting force 6 or more with heavy rain. As the rain cleared during the late morning, however, the drama unfolded. In the hour before lunch, a new Great Snipe (at Taing) and a new Rose-coloured Starling (a juvenile, near the Chapel) were discovered. After lunch, the birdwatching was mesmerising, quite simply Fair Isle at its best. New birds were found round every corner, and expectation was sky high. Two new Yellow-breasted Buntings, at Shirva and Upper Stonybreck, were the star finds, 4 Ortolan Buntings, Red-backed Shrike and a deluge of common migrants (including 30 Tree Pipits, 70 Redstarts, 30 Whinchats, 65 Garden Warblers and 180 Willow Warblers) were the support act. Truly a memorable day: and with the wind remaining a stiff easterly, the 9th was set to be equally good. We were not disappointed. New rarities were a Paddyfield Warbler at Leogh (remaining until the 17th) and a Greenish Warbler at Shirva, whilst Little Bunting, Corncrake and Marsh Warbler added quality and variety. These two days formed the pinnacle of a magnificent spell, but the rarity wave continued throughout the following week; the winds remained easterly and large numbers of common migrants remained on the island. New birds on the 10th were a fourth Yellow-breasted Bunting of the autumn (this one staying until the 19th, and visiting several different crofts) and a Red-breasted Flycatcher, preceding a slightly quieter couple of days. The pace quickened again on the 13th with the discovery of a skulking Pechora Pipit near the Haa. Little Bunting, Bluethroat and Red-breasted Flycatcher were other new arrivals that day. Next day, the one that got away - a small, dark wheatear in Hjukni Geo was identified as a Black-eared Wheatear by its two finders. Sadly the bird was never seen again by other birdwatchers on the isle, all of whom were now firmly convinced that it was only a matter of time before a dream bird, possibly a first for Britain, turned up. Efforts were doubled in searching for the wheatear, and new finds included the second Arctic Warbler of the autumn, whilst Little Buntings increased to 3. On the 16th, a new arrival of Redstarts pushed the island count to a staggering 155. Every geo, every sheltered corner concealed one or two shivering red



tails, whilst 42 Whinchats, 145 Northern Wheatears and 115 Willow Warblers added to the volume of migrants still drenching the isle. It had been a staggering first half of September, and adrenaline had flowed freely among the observers and staff lucky enough to be there. Surely the omens were good for the best September ever? Sadly, it was not to be, for the midway mark of the month saw a turning point in the weather. Almost pure westerlies during the last half of September did not produce the required excitement for the assembled observers. (And, traditionally, the Obs. was full to capacity late in the month, yet with few visitors early on). Inevitably, the end of September did produce new birds, it always does on Fair Isle, but the real anticipation was missing. Great Snipes provided a real focus during this period, two were recorded for a while mid-month, with an obliging individual, probably the third of the autumn, allowing observers unprecedented views on the ground near Pund. Good variety of scarce migrants was maintained, with species such as Osprey, Spotted Crake, Corncrake, Dotterel, Richard's Pipit and Yellow-browed Warbler involved. The third Greenish Warbler of the year was found on the 18th, but this proved to be the last new rarity until the 30th when an unseasonal Great Reed Warbler was discovered in the turnips at Quoy. It is sad that so many observers will regard this as a poor Fair Isle September. Most observers were here for the duller last half, but those who were there in the early weeks will look back on a stunning spell.

October saw a continuation of the westerly-dominated weather pattern for the majority of the month. Notwithstanding, most of the regular late autumn migrants made appearances passing through the isle. On the 1st, 225 Song Thrushes and 45 Redwings were the precursor of a series of good thrush counts, the best coming on the 12th, with a marvellous fall of 6000 Redwings and 500 Song Thrushes. Barnacle Geese made a good showing, with a flock of 140 on the 5th including several Spitzbergen-ringed individuals with darvic rings that were seen back at Caerlaverock soon after Fair Isle. During the first half of the month, excitement was provided by two Rustic Buntings (on the 2nd and the 8th), a Siberian Stonechat on the 14th-21st, 3 Little Buntings and a scatter of other scarce species. However, the latter part of October was rather better than the first half, the undoubted highlight coming right out of the blue on the 19th when a Hermit Thrush was trapped in the Observatory heligoland.

The fifth for Britain, it reflected a record year for American passerines in the UK. The other big surprise came on the 25th when a second-winter Mediterranean Gull was seen at Wirvie by one lucky observer on its way north to Shetland: the first acceptable record for Fair Isle. Other scarce migrants included Dotterel, Short-toed Lark, Yellow-browed Warbler and Ortolan. Geese, ducks, thrushes and finches continued to keep up the spirits of the Observatory faithful, until a small flurry of good things at the end of the month. A male Pine Bunting on 29th-30th was in many ways the most interesting bird of the autumn; with a distinctly yellowish tone to the wing edgings suggesting a hybrid (Pine Bunting/Yellowhammer) origin. Other highlights during the last few days of the month were a Little Bunting trapped at the Plantation on the 29th, a late Ortolan on the 26th-27th, Great Grey Shrike and Richard's Pipit on the 31st (both staying into November) and three records of Greenland White-fronted Geese.

November has been a month of real surprises over the past few years. It was not to be in 1995, although birdwatching on the isle was still thoroughly rewarding. The northern isles in general, and Shetland in particular, experienced an impressive influx of Mealy Redpolls during the first half of the month, and inevitably there were Arctic Redpolls travelling with their more familiar relatives. The first real day of the influx on Fair Isle was the 4th, when 45 Mealies and 1 Arctic were recorded; also that day a second Great Grey Shrike and one of the few Long-eared Owls of the autumn were seen. The first Olive-backed Pipit of the autumn was discovered at the Auld Haa in the late afternoon of 9th. Two more Arctic Redpolls were identified, on the 11th and 12th of the month, which were assumed at the time to be the last rarities of the year. But even December has proved to be a good month for birds. An impressive influx of geese during the first week brought up to 33 European White-fronted Geese and five Greenland White-fronted Geese, plus a Bean Goose, the first on the Isle since 1983. Smaller waves of Redpolls continued to arrive, with occasional Arctic Redpolls too. Maybe it is still not too late for Fair Isle's first Nutcracker.....

Roger Riddington



## NEW KIRK WINDOWS

During the summer, two new stained glass windows were installed in the Kirk of Scotland. The windows were designed and made on the isle, by Patrick and Clare Ross-Smith, of Ross-Smith Stained Glass. The windows commemorate the life of Agnes Stout, late of Lower Leogh.

## FRIENDS' LONDON MEETING

This will take place on Monday 26th February at the 'White Hart', 126 Theobalds Road, London WC1 at 6.30pm. The cost, which includes a buffet supper, is £8.50. Fair Isle Warden, Roger Riddington, will be present to talk about the 1995 season, and to show slides. Other Friends are most welcome to show slides or photographs.

Send for tickets, made payable to David Bell, to David at The Finches, Village Road, Coleshill, Amersham, Bucks HP7 0LQ. Telephone 01494 721405. Tickets will be sent out from February 10th.

## COMINGS AND GOINGS ON FAIR ISLE

On June 24, the community was delighted to witness the marriage of Ewen Thomson and Emma Perring at the Chapel. Emma first came to the isle in 1993, and moved up here during 1994. Emma and Ewen are currently living in Aesterhoull, but will move to a new croft house on Taft land sometime during the next year.

The isle has had two welcome additions this year: Erin Mariah was born to Linda Grieve and Phil Welch from the Haa in September. Martha was born to Ewen and Emma on October 1. Welcome to both lasses.

On a less happy note, Edith Stout of Midway passed away on November 10 1995 after suffering a stroke. Not long afterwards, on December 5, Edith and Jimmy's son Ted died from a brain haemorrhage. Our thoughts are with the family.

## FAIR ISLE WINS CROFTING TOWNSHIP OF THE YEAR AWARD....

On Wednesday September 13th, the community of Fair Isle received the £5000 Crofting Township of the Year Award sponsored by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and given in association with the Scottish Crofter's Union (SCU).

The award was given in recognition of the environmentally sensitive nature of good crofting management practices and to acknowledge the continued importance of crofting in the local community. It was the island's strong sense of community and co-operation that, together with environmentally friendly crofting practices, impressed the judges. It is only the second crofting township to win the award - following Aird on Benbecula which won last year.

To mark the occasion, a ceremony took place on September 13 in the community hall on Fair Isle. David Laird (SNH) and Alastair MacIver (SCU) presented the cheque to Nick Riddiford, who is the current chairman of the Fair Isle Committee. Almost all of the community attended (the only absentee being Linda Grieve, who was in Aberdeen with her newborn daughter Erin). Ewen Thomson had been commissioned to write a special fiddle tune to commemorate the award. The piece was played for the first time during the ceremony.

Fair Islanders see the award as recognising the way their predecessors farmed the land - not exploiting it but maintaining it for their use, and for those who will follow on from them. They plan to use the money to enhance interpretation and for other projects including drystone dyking.

## JUST A REMINDER...

Although most members pay their subscription fee to the Friends of Fair Isle by direct debit through their bank, there are some members who subscribe annually by cheque. This note is just to remind those (cheque-paying) folk that subscriptions should be renewed on the first of April each year.