

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Edited by Wendy Christie



Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle, Shetland ZE2 9JU Tel: 01595 760 258
e-mail: fairisle.birdobs@zetnet.co.uk

SEABIRD HEADLINES

- **Population Counts:** New record population counts this year for three species.
Fulmar, 43,300 pairs (apparently occupied sites), up 23% since the last all-island census in 1991.
Gannet, 1,090 pairs (nests), up 13% since last year
Arctic Tern, 1,250 pairs (incubating adults), up 4% since last year

At monitoring plots, the counts of **Shag** nests were up for the first time in seven years, the highest numbers since 1989. **Arctic Skuas** remained steady, **Great Skuas** showed a small decline, but **Black Guillemots** increased slightly on the 1995 count.
- **Productivity:** At the time of writing, most species have fledged, or look likely to fledge, good numbers of young. Some highlights include the numbers of young **Arctic Terns** (1071 chicks ringed in one day constitutes a new day record for the Observatory; over 900 fledglings were counted by mid-July) and **Guillemots** (over 1600 chicks ringed this year, one of the best years on record).
- **Diet:** Sandeels seem readily available this year, and were the most common item in the diet of many species. Collection of food samples from **Puffins** showed particularly high load weights, averaging over 10g.

SPRING MIGRATION, 1996

Looking back through the log for the first six months of this year, it is easy (as always) to remember the highlights and to forget the periods when the island was devoid of migrants. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that the first half of the year has been one of the best in FIBO history. As I write, at the beginning of July, 172 bird species have been recorded so far this year, and many migrants were logged in record numbers during an amazing May fall. In fact, just about the only thing missing was a species new to the Fair Isle list!

Uncharacteristically, the first two months of the year were filled with interest, particularly for wildfowl and other waterbirds, as south-easterly gales lashed the Northern Isles. Three Mute Swans arrived on January 9th, and remained for almost two weeks; only the fourth record for Fair Isle, these perhaps were part of the gradually increasing population on mainland Shetland. Seven species of goose

have been recorded on Fair Isle, so it was a remarkable event to have all of those seven species present together on one day, January 30th. Of the rarer species that day, there were 21 White-fronts, three Bean Geese, plus single Brent and Canada Geese. Not to be outdone, several species of ducks that are scarce or rare visitors to Fair Isle also showed up during this period. Up to three Gadwall were present during late January and early February, Pochard reached an unprecedented five on January 31st, whilst there were records of Shoveler and Goosander too. To round up waterbirds, three Slavonian Grebes spent most of the winter commuting between Furse and North Haven, a Red-necked Grebe was found freshly dead on North Haven beach, and a Coot was recorded near South Light. As usual, there were few passerines recorded March, traditionally a month when the first returning migrants of many species are seen, could not quite offer such a range of scarce species, but there were still some good days. Particularly the 18th, when seven Garganey appeared at the south end of the island; a female and six

pristine drakes. The five previous records on Fair Isle involved just seven individuals! These stunning creatures remained on the Isle for a while, the last two seen on April 6th. Another pleasant surprise was the Black-bellied Dipper that arrived in the evening of March 22nd, and spent the following day along Gilly Burn and in Hjukni Geo. Several passerines put in their first appearances towards the end of the month, among them the expected Grey Wagtail, Stonechat and Northern Wheatear. A particularly strong passage of Mistle Thrushes was observed towards the end of the month, peaking at 20 on the 23rd, the second-highest Fair Isle count.

April continued the theme set in late March, with many species making their first appearance of the year. There were no exceptional arrivals or movements of common migrants during the month, but once again some unusual species in a Fair Isle context. One of the main highlights of the month, if not the spring, was a fine male Goshawk, first seen by three lucky observers over the Plantation on the 20th. As it drifted high and out of sight over Ward Hill, it was assumed gone forever; but remarkably, what was almost certainly the same individual was seen again a week later, on the 27th. After a thrilling aerial performance above Tarryfield and Sukka Mire, sometimes in company with a Peregrine, we were lucky enough to trap it at roost in the plantation, late that evening. The fifth record for Fair Isle, and the second to be trapped. Another surprise record came on the 26th, with a male Citrine Wagtail at Golden Water and Easter Lothar. A species quite regularly seen during the autumn, in its drab first-winter plumage, this canary-yellow male was only the fourth spring record for the country. An early Short-toed Lark on the 29th, which subsequently proved to be the only one of the spring, set the scene nicely for early May.

The weather during the first half of May was, however, a great disappointment; northerly winds predominated and as a result there were very few migrants. There were isolated records of scarce migrants struggling through against the odds (eg Canada Goose, Buzzard, Hen Harrier, Arctic Redpoll and a Little Bunting trapped on the 1st) but this was essentially a barren spell. This situation changed dramatically on the 18th, when one of the best spring falls in FIBO history materialised during the afternoon. The north/north-easterly winds of preceding days veered easterly and freshened through the day. As a direct result, an island that was migrant-starved before

lunch was transformed a few hours later into one literally crawling with tired passerines. The main species involved in this first wave were Tree Pipit (175), Flava Wagtail (20; mostly Grey-headed Wagtails), Redstart (150), Whinchat (75), Whitethroat (75), Willow Warbler (750), Pied Flycatcher (125) and Reed Bunting (50). During the next week, further arrivals just about replenished any departures as the wind remained in the south-east. The species that figured prominently on that first afternoon were, by and large, the main players for the rest of the week too, together with Northern Wheatears (up to 600) and smaller numbers of other common chats, warblers and flycatchers. For the first few days of the fall, as we struggled to get to grips with the sheer volume of migrants, there were few sightings of scarce or rare species - one or two each of Wryneck, Bluethroat, Icterine Warbler and Red-backed Shrike, though seven Ortolan Buntings on the 19th was a fine sight, and these remained to the 24th. On the 20th, Thrush Nightingale, Great Reed Warbler and Rustic Bunting added some class to the crowds, and from then on, birdwatchers on the Isle enjoyed an exquisite mix of migrant quantity and quality. As numbers of common migrants gradually began to decline, so the frequency of rarities increased to compensate, and maintain high levels of interest. The afternoon of the 24th was particularly memorable. New birds included the third Rustic Bunting of the month, two Subalpine Warblers, Osprey, Common Nightingale and Savi's Warbler, whilst the identity of a tricky luscini was finally established that evening at Lower Stoneybreck, the second Thrush Nightingale of the autumn. Next day, a Common Crane flew in from Shetland for an overnight stay. The last few days of the month at last saw the birding quality begin to diminish slightly, and staff thoughts became increasingly focused on the coming seabird season.

After such a stunning May, June 1996 will inevitably be remembered as a quieter month, with few noteworthy arrivals of common species. A typical mix of scarce species were recorded during the first 10 days, among them Quail, Marsh Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch. But the main event of the month was the discovery of two Blyth's Reed Warblers, the first from the 4th-6th, the second from the 11th-13th. Both were trapped, and constitute the 4th-5th spring records for the country of this difficult-to-identify species. Once the excitement of these two records had

died away, it seemed that spring was all but over. Apart from the fourth Rustic Bunting of the spring, a singing male in Sukka Mire on the 16th, the latter part of June was quiet for migrants as attention was devoted to seabirds. But on reflection: a spring to remember.

Stop press: Long-tailed Skua on July 5th, Roseate Tern on July 24th-26th (the second or third for Fair Isle) and successful breeding by Grey-headed Wagtails, the first nesting attempt by this race on Fair Isle.

Roger Riddington, FIBO Warden

TRAVELLING BLACKBIRD

Some readers may remember the Thornes, who lived at the Schoolhouse from 1976-1981, a period that included Yellow-breasted, Pine, Cretzschmar's, Pallas' Reed, and Yellow-browed - and that's just buntings. This brief story is, however, about a less exotic bird that holds much more interest for us.

On the 21st June 1986 I netted and ringed a male Blackbird a couple of hundred yards from our present Schoolhouse on Sanday, in Orkney. Just two days later, our third son, Magnus, was born. Increasingly regularly over the subsequent years we would see a glossy male, ringed, Blackbird feeding in our garden - but it was not until March of 1994 that we decided to investigate. Tristan and Alistair, our other two sons, whose earliest years were on Fair Isle, fashioned an old-style drop-trap, and - on the second go - we caught the bird. Sure enough, it was Magnus' bird, CV07685, now at least eight years old.

The bird visited very frequently that year - and I wish now that I'd kept a note of the sightings. But then in August of 1995 my brother Chris, a regular Fair Isle visitor in the late 1950's, wrote saying there was an enquiry from the ringing office about the details of CV07685. We feared the worst - that a local island cat or car might have finished him off.

Imagine our delight, then, to learn when the form came through that he wasn't dead at all - he'd evidently moved and had been controlled on our old homeland, Fair Isle, on 14th April 1995, my brother's 60th birthday! More than that, he was given a new number that day - RR02121, since his ring was now adjudged to be rather long-worn and weathered.

We're all very keen to keep track of Magnus' bird, and hope that you might keep us posted of his whereabouts. Never mind about Rustic

Buntings in Greece, we're much more interested in a retrapped Blackbird.

Roderick Thorne, Sanday, Orkney

OBSERVATORY NEWS

Before the season got under way, some of the staff worked hard to create a new plantation of trees adjacent to the observatory at Mavers Cup. This relatively well sheltered site will eventually provide a new area of cover for migrant passerine birds. Some of the species planted include Swedish Whitebeam, Rowan, Sycamore, Alder, Goat Willow, Grey Willow, Lodgepole Pine, Sitka Spruce, Japanese Rose and Elder. It is envisaged that in the long term a Heligoland trap will be constructed here to enhance studies of migratory birds at the observatory. Funding for this project was generously provided by Scottish Natural Heritage and the Shetland Wildlife Fund, while Dave Okill provided extra extra trees from his arboretum in Trondra. Despite a cold, dry Spring that has hammered almost all plant life on Fair Isle, many of the trees have at least survived. The real test for them will no doubt come with the winter, but we plan a replanting programme for the next couple of years to compensate for early casualties among the trees.

Thanks to generous grant aid by the Pilgrim Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Shetland Wildlife Fund, the observatory purchased a replacement boat for the old Sillinger inflatable which after 13 years of good service is showing signs of wear. The new Zodiac, to be named the 'Fair Isle Pilgrim' will enable the safe continuation of the observatory's seabird monitoring programme.

BIRD FAIR

The British Birdwatching Fair is taking place again this year at the Eggleston Nature Reserve, Rutland Water from Friday 16 August to Sunday 18 August. Tim and Irene Loseby will be there again promoting the Fair Isle Bird Observatory. Tim will be giving a slide show (which we recommend very highly!), several times over the weekend and will be selling such items as FIBO sweatshirts, tee-shirts and smocks, annual reports (1995) and Fair Isle booklets.

AROUND THE ISLE

Steven Sinclair (from Busta) married Marjolein Vreeke in the Netherlands on Friday, July 26 1996. Their marriage will be celebrated with a blessing in the Chapel on Fair Isle on Friday, August 2 1996. Steven and Marjolein are living in Scalloway, Shetland.

Schoolton croft house has been completely renovated, and a new croft house at Taft (for Ewen, Emma and Martha) which is well under way is hoped to be completed by the end of the year.

Some 'Friends' may remember Dr John Hunter, who worked on the archaeological survey of Fair Isle in 1984 - 1987. John is now the Professor of Archaeology at Birmingham University, and he and a group of students have just spent four weeks on the Isle excavating the iron age promontary fort at Landberg. They uncovered several layers of habitation and building. There were sufficient exciting finds with this initial 'dig' for the team to return next summer to investigate further. We hope to have a more detailed report of their findings in the annual report produced at the end of this year.

To coincide with the archaeological visit, a new book was launched at a ceremony on the Isle. The book, written by John Hunter, is called 'Fair Isle: The Archaeology of an Island Community'. It is available through HMSO.

PAINTED LADY INVASION REACHES FAIR ISLE

Not only will Fair Isle 1996 be remembered for an historic fall of migrant birds, but it could prove to be the best year on record for butterflies, and the Painted Lady, *Cynthia cardui*, in particular. The four regular species have already been seen this year - Peacock, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell and Painted Lady - but it is the latter species that has really caught the eye.

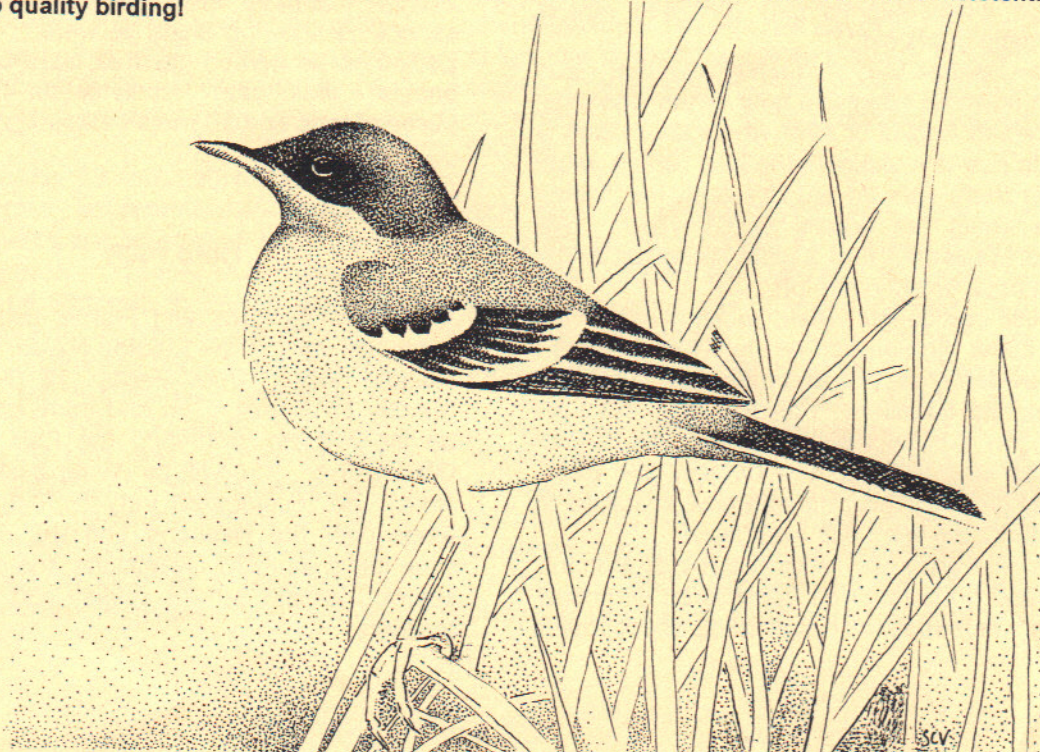
The Painted Lady is the commonest and most regular visitor to Fair Isle but this year has seen exceptional numbers on the island. So far there have been 85 'butterfly-days' with the first occurring on June 3rd, probably the earliest ever. This is already more than twice the 1995 total and is approaching the massive invasions that occurred in 1978 and 1980.

This year's influx of Painted Ladies, especially in early June (max. 25 on the 8th), was mirrored throughout the rest of Britain. Tens of thousands have been sighted, a phenomenal arrival of the species, and yet the season is far from over.

Mark Newell, FIBO Assistant Warden

AUTUMN VACANCIES

There are limited vacancies at the Lodge for the peak autumn migration times. We have single, twin and dormitory rooms available from 28 September 1996 onwards. October on Fair Isle consistently produces top quality birding!



Grey-headed Wagtail. Stephen C. Votier, FIBO Assistant Warden