

FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

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50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

In 1998, the Bird Observatory will have been on Fair Isle for fifty years. That year, we intend to celebrate this fantastic achievement. In doing so, we will remember George Waterston and his first 'Friends of Fair Isle', who set up FIBOT, with admiration and affection.

During the year, we will be organizing various anniversary events. On 28th August 1948, there was a party for the islanders at the Observatory. Fifty years to the day we intend to host another island party as a sincere thank you to the islanders for all their help and encouragement over the years.

We will also hold our AGM on the island on 1st June 1998 to coincide with the date that Ken and Esther Williamson arrived to set up the Bird Observatory. We will keep you informed of other proposals as they are confirmed.

We hope that many of our present Friends may wish to join us on Fair Isle in 1998. In order to help you, we will give Friends priority booking. Usually, bookings for the following year are taken from 1st July; in the case of 1998, we will take bookings for Friends of Fair Isle from 1st June 1997 (two months ahead of other prospective visitors).

We also hope to set aside special weeks for ex-FIBO staff in August 1998 - so if you want to arrange a week with a group of ex-staff, please contact Mark Newell at the Observatory as soon as possible.

Of course, we'd also be delighted to see 'Friends' on the island this year, (in fact there's a special 20% discount for Friends in August 1997), and please remember to encourage others to come and enjoy the delights of Fair Isle. There's usually plenty of room!

Roy Dennis, Chairman

Autumn Migration 1996

Numbers of migrants built up steadily during August, with scarce migrants from the 13th when three Red-backed Shrikes were logged, together with the first Wood Sandpiper of the year. This trend continued with a Corncrake and two Common Rosefinches on the 14th, two Icterine Warblers on the 15th, and a very early juvenile Citrine Wagtail together with the first Barred Warbler on the 16th.

The last ten days of the month produced real migrant quality. Two Melodious Warblers on the 20th were unprecedented for Fair Isle, whilst the 22nd produced a Red-necked Grebe, and a Booted Warbler at North Shirva. The 23rd brought Wryneck, four Barred Warblers, three Red-backed Shrikes, two Common Rosefinches and Fair Isle's earliest-ever Yellow-breasted Bunting, whilst the 24th witnessed good numbers of waders (including 85 Ringed Plovers, 80 Curlews and a Dotterel) and a moderate arrival of common migrants - including 20 Whinchats, 300 Northern Wheatears, 10 Reed Warblers, 30 Garden Warblers and 20 Willow Warblers. Barred Warblers peaked at five on the 25th, Red-backed Shrikes reached five on the 26th. The quality of the daily log at this time was comparable with many Septembers.

Weather conditions for the first half of September were variable, but winds were often north-west, ensuring a relatively quiet fortnight. Numbers of common migrants during this period were generally low, although inevitably were spiced with the occasional rarity. The year's second Yellow-breasted Bunting was found at Springfield on the 4th (present until the 5th), whilst the same croft played host to a smart Arctic Warbler on the 8th. The 'standard' early-autumn scarce migrants, such as Wryneck, Barred Warbler, Wood Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch were all recorded regularly; also a flock of seven Greenland

White-fronted Geese on the 12th-27th and a Corncrake on the 3rd. One of the biggest surprises of the month, since it followed several days of north-westerlies, was a Lanceolated Warbler in Meadow Burn on the 13th (trapped).

The wind finally shifted to the south-east on the 15th, and the effect was almost instantaneous, with Bluethroat, Icterine Warbler and four Yellow-browed Warblers providing much-needed encouragement. The 16th was very quiet, but the 17th produced arguably the most-vaunted Fair Isle 'special', a Pallas' Grasshopper Warbler in the tiny roadside ditch at Quoy! On the 18th a Great Snipe was found and there were moderate arrivals of a few common species, including 110 Snipe, 15 Dunnocks, 90 Song Thrushes and 20 Blackcaps. The 19th was undoubtedly one of the best days of the autumn. A particularly bright Pechora Pipit was discovered at Wester Lothar in the morning, whilst in the late afternoon, a Paddyfield Warbler at Skerryholm was seen to be ringed: when trapped, it was bearing a Lithuanian ring! Other sightings that day included Short-toed Lark and Little Bunting, the only Spotted Redshank of the year, six Yellow-browed Warblers and two Red-breasted Flycatchers. On the 20th, two more Great Snipes were discovered, one of them staying until the 30th and delighting many observers with close views on the ground. The 23rd brought a good fall, highlighted by a second Short-toed Lark (joining the first) and two Richard's Pipits, together with counts of three Pochard, nine Jack Snipes, 15 Tree Pipits, 25 Redstarts, 400 Song Thrushes, 75 Redwings, 15 Chiffchaffs and 60 Bramblings. On the 24th, the Island's third Blyth's Reed Warbler of the year was discovered and identified in the field, in the main Homisdale ditch (later trapped and released in the Plantation). The last six days of the month produced no more rarities, with the wind veering to the south-west. However, numbers of common and scarce migrants continued to arrive. Highlights of the 25th were 50+ Sooty

Shearwaters, a Corncrake and a Hoopoe on the Rippack, whilst an exceptional movement of Barnacle Geese (estimated at 600) made the 26th memorable. Also seen on the 26th were Velvet Scoter and the third Little Bunting of the autumn, whilst Short-toed Larks increased to three and Richard's Pipits to four. The dominant theme of the last few days of the month was migrants of north-western origin, with species such as Whooper Swan, Merlin, Meadow Pipit, Northern Wheatear and Lapland Bunting being much in evidence.

The weather remained westerly for the first 11 days of October, and consequently, migrant composition continued to have a strong north-western theme. On the 1st, Fair Isle's third Baird's Sandpiper was the star attraction, enjoyed by a select few at the base of Malcolm's Head. The following day, it discovered the sanctuary of Easter Lothar and was enjoyed by a much wider audience. The supporting cast of the Baird's on the 1st was a Slavonian Grebe, 750 Meadow Pipits and 150 Snow Buntings, with a good count of 20 Lapland Buntings on the 2nd, together with 'long-staying' Short-toed Larks (two 1st-2nd, one to the 7th) and Richard's Pipits (two on the 1st). The following week was disappointingly quiet, the more notable sightings being 300 Pink-footed Geese on the 3rd, a Richard's Pipit on the 7th, a Brent Goose on the 8th, and a memorable arrival of 4000 Redwings on the 11th. An impressive variety of species kept observers busy on the 12th, notably 32 Whooper Swans, 1500 Greylag Geese, and 2750 Redwings lingering from the big fall the previous day. Barnacle Geese were in evidence on the 13th (175 logged), with Velvet Scoter and Glaucous Gull. By the 16th, the wind had been in the south-east for four days, and rarities were turning up throughout the Northern Isles. Expectancy was high therefore, though the rarity drought continued. 20 Barnacle Geese, 300 Common Gulls, 40 Dunnocks, 60 Robins, seven Black Redstarts, 120 Blackbirds, 175 Fieldfares, 300 Song Thrushes, 200

Redwings, 50 Blackcaps together with single Red-backed Shrike and Bullfinch were recorded on the 16th: the components of a wonderful day's birding, lacking simply the unexpected. This surely bodes well for a rarity-stuffed October 1997! The flavour of the 16th set the scene for the rest of the month, with wildfowl and thrushes dominating the log. Three Richard's Pipits arrived on the 22nd, whilst on the 23rd a good arrival of thrushes numbered 450 Blackbirds, 650 Fieldfares and 1500 Redwings, with the year's first Great Grey Shrike trapped at the Plantation and 220 Snow Buntings. The 24th was notable for several scarce migrants, including Little Grebe, Hen Harrier, two Stock Doves, Mistle Thrush, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Yellow-browed Warbler, whilst Richard's Pipits increased to five.

Winter set in quickly once November arrived, in contrast to many years when the first week at least has produced some thrilling birding. On the first, the highlights were typically Novemberish: 'blue' Fulmars and Little Auks past South Light, Goldeneye and Long-tailed Ducks in South Harbour, one Richard's Pipit remained from October and there were sightings of Glaucous Gull, Long-eared Owl and Black Redstart. The 2nd produced a juvenile Pomerine Skua off Bunness, one of precious few Fair Isle seawatching highlights this year. The rest of the month was rather wintry, bringing little of ornithological note.

Roger Riddington, Warden

JUST A REMINDER...

Although most members pay their subscription fee to the Friends of Fair Isle by direct debit, there are some members who subscribe annually by cheque. For these members, please note that membership fees fall due on April 5th.

SPONSORSHIP OF ORNITHOLOGICAL PROJECTS

The 1996 report, when it appears later this year, will show you that we have climbed out of the financial problems of a few years ago. Much of it was due to donations from 'Friends of Fair Isle', who loyally came to our rescue. We still need to be very careful with our finances, for it's expensive to maintain a bird observatory on Fair Isle.

It would be extremely helpful to the annual running of the Observatory if we were able to obtain sponsorship for some of the on-going and new bird research projects. Maybe you could help by securing a research project with a financial donation, either a one-off gift or a 3 or 5 year funding.

The warden is now preparing a list of projects for which we need funding. They range from the annual cost of a volunteer to put ringing and migration data on selected species into the observatory computer for analysis (£100 per volunteer), to a study of foraging behaviour and diet of the Arctic Terns (£500/year), to the production of the annual report (£1000/year) to a one-off payment of £5000 to refurbish the George Waterston/Richard Richardson Library.

There are other projects worthy of sponsorship. If you could and would like to help the Bird Observatory in this extremely positive way, please contact the Warden at Fair Isle to see if there's a project which interests you.

Thanking you sincerely for your continued and valued support.

Roy Dennis, Chairman

NEWS AROUND THE ISLE

Ian, Lise, Tom and Hannah from Kenaby were delighted to welcome Alice to their family on November 11, 1996.

A new house, Lower Taft, has been completed, and Ewen, Emma and Martha have recently moved there from Aesterhoull.

Fair Isle's skyline has taken on a new look, with the addition of a new aerogenerator on the Brecks o' Busta. The old windmill is currently being refurbished, and will be reinstalled by the end of March.

A new wall map (A1 size) of Fair Isle has been drawn. Copies may be obtained using the order form enclosed with this newsletter.

OBITUARY

Many of our Friends will remember Ian Spence, a regular visitor from Unst. We were deeply saddened to learn of Ian's death in September 1996. Anyone who met Ian will remember his kindness, happy disposition and enthusiastic approach to bird watching. Ian always had a smile for everyone: we will miss him. Ian has left a box of his books to the Bird Observatory library, and there will be a section of the library dedicated to Ian's memory.

NEW ADMINISTRATOR

In mid-February I will be leaving Fair Isle to return to Australia. Roger Riddington will be staying on for the coming season as Warden, with Mark Newell taking over the role of Administrator. Recent visitors will know Mark. He worked here first as a General Assistant in the Autumn of 1994, and in 1995 returned as a long-term volunteer, helping the ornithological team. In 1996 Mark filled the role of Seabird monitor very capably. There seems to be no end to Mark's enthusiasm for Fair Isle. My heartfelt thanks go to all who have helped make my time here so enjoyable.

Wendy Christie, Administrator