

# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle, Shetland ZE2 9JU Tel: 01595 760 258

e-mail: fairisle.birdobs@zetnet.co.uk

---

## Migrants, Spring 1997

It would be unreasonable to claim that spring 1997 will be one to live long in the memory, with low numbers of most common species and rather few rarities. However, as usual, Fair Isle produced some days of great excitement, and sufficient highlights to merit documentation.

After a very quiet first three months of the year, a Coot in South Harbour and along the Walli Burn from March 31st into April ensured that the spring proper started with a scarce migrant to the Isle. However, the first three weeks of April were wintry, with just a trickle of spring migrants braving the journey north through Shetland. Two Greenland White-fronted Geese from April 12th-20th preceded a party of 10 which arrived on April 22nd. One of these birds was neck-collared, and proved to have been ringed as an adult male at Wexford Slobs, south-east Ireland, in the winter of 1992-93, and has been recorded on Islay or the Mull of Kintyre every winter since. A smart drake Pintail on April 22nd-24th was a good Fair Isle record, but a Shorelark on Malcolm's Head on April 24th was perhaps the most unusual bird of the month. This one was the forerunner of an excellent series of records, with a party of five at Wester Lothar on April 30th and four further

singles being seen, the last on May 27th.

May brought the usual scarce migrants that reward birdwatchers on Fair Isle every spring. Bluethroats were recorded from the 10th, reaching a peak of five on the 20th and 22nd. A Short-toed Lark remained at Easter Lothar from 14th-17th, one or two Wrynecks were seen occasionally between the 5th and 19th, an Icterine Warbler appeared on the 25th, a Red-breasted Flycatcher on the 30th, and up to three Common Rosefinches during mid-May (with a fine red male from the 19th-22nd). However, Red-backed Shrikes were the most prominent of the 'regular' scarce migrants, with daily sightings from May 16th to June 11th, reaching a peak of eight on May 25th and 29th. True rarities were few and far between in May '97: an obliging Red-throated Pipit at Wester Lothar on the 14th (surprisingly, the first record for the Isle since 1993), a Thrush Nightingale at North Haven from the 24th-30th, three Subalpine Warblers (a male at Lower Stoneybreck on the 10th, a female near the Gully on the 16th and one at Busta on 28th-29th); and finally Rustic Bunting, one at Midway on the 19th and another, presumed different, at Hjukni Geo on the 24th-27th. All of these, though 'official' rarities in a British context, are virtually annual on Fair Isle, and it was the more unusual records for the island that caused equal if not greater excitement among

staff and regular visitors. As it was for Shorelarks, 1997 was an exceptional spring for Hawfinch records. A female took up residence in the Observatory garden on May 8th, amazingly being joined by a male on the 12th. Both were trapped and stayed until the 22nd, delighting many visitors (mainly at mealtimes) and were even to be seen feeding on the garden birdtable! Three others were seen during the spring, on May 16th, May 26th and June 13th (trapped). A Common Crane seen flying south over the Isle on May 10th eventually thought better of the prospect of a sojourn on Orkney, and returned to the Isle, staying with us until the 13th. A party of four Common Cranes flying north over the Isle on the 23rd were enjoyed by most birdwatchers and islanders, and pitched down on south mainland Shetland, approximately one and a half hours after leaving the north coast of Fair Isle. Other wading birds to reach Fair Isle this spring included a group of six Dotterels on Ward Hill on May 15th (a record count for the island, five remaining the following day), and a 'black' Spotted Redshank in Walli Burn on May 4th. One or two Quails were seen periodically from May 8th until late June, with a regular singing male in the Quoy-Schoolton area from the end of May, raising hopes of another breeding attempt, although so far no positive signs of successful breeding have emerged. Finally, a Hoopoe was enjoyed by one lucky observer at the Raevas on May 11th.

As usual, June added some variety to the main month of May, with a Hobby on 8th-9th, a Corncrake on 4th-6th, two more Thrush Nightingales (one at Barkland, then North Haven, 7th-10th; and a late bird at Lower Stoneybreck on the 26th), five Marsh

Warblers, and further records of Icterine Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch. One of the greatest surprises of the spring was the appearance of three spring Barred Warblers during the month (on 6th, 8th-9th and 22nd-23rd; all trapped at the Plantation), only the 2nd-4th spring records for Fair Isle (following the first in 1992). Crossbills appeared on the island in greater numbers than any year since the last major invasion in 1990. Two on June 4th were the first, with small flocks seen regularly after that, 40 on the 24th being the largest concentration. One of the most frustrating birds of the spring was an *acrocephalus* warbler at North Haven on June 5th: a very strong candidate for a Blyth's Reed Warbler, but unfortunately a bird which didn't offer any opportunities for good quality photographs or to be trapped.

So whilst we will remember the goodies of spring '97, the paucity of common birds, especially in comparison to 1996, will also remain a notable feature. For example, Willow Warblers reached a max. count of just 15 (and log counts were in double figures on only two days - cf. the max. 750 last May!). Similarly, there were one or two Flava Wagtails on just nine dates during the whole spring, with no confirmed records of Grey-headed Wagtail. Tree Pipit was perhaps the only common migrant to put in a reasonable showing, with 25+ most days in mid-May, and a peak daily count of 45. As a result, the Observatory year list at the half-way point of the year was a poor 156, missing any number of regulars (e.g. Osprey, Moorhen, Mistle Thrush, Wood Warbler, Golden Oriole, Ortolan Bunting and Little Bunting). However, a quiet spring is often followed by an

exciting autumn (the staff of 1991 will remember the barren spring and fantastic autumn of that year), so ..... watch this space!! (And phone early to take advantage of those spaces at the Observatory in September and October!)

STOP PRESS: First-summer male Black-eared Wheatear on July 17th, the sixth record for the island.; and a male Red-headed Bunting from July 19th.

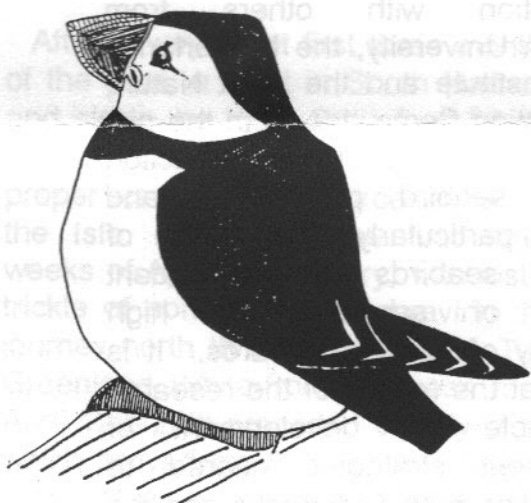
Roger Riddington

---

### AUTUMN VACANCIES

***There are still vacancies at the Lodge for the peak autumn migration times. We have single, twin and dormitory rooms available during early September, and from 20 September 1997 onwards.***

---



### The 1997 Seabird Season

At the time of writing, late July, another seabird season is almost complete, in a year which has seen mixed fortunes for Fair Isle's seabirds. The early signs were good, with Gannet numbers increasing again to another all-time high of 1116 'apparently occupied nests', and Arctic

Terns expanding to 1750 pairs from their 1996 total of 1250. Numbers of breeding Arctic Skuas and Bonxies were also higher than in 1996, with the Tystie population remaining stable. In contrast, a complete island census of Kittiwakes showed a decrease of almost 36% since the last count in 1992. Similar declines in Kittiwake numbers are occurring right across Shetland, with predation by Bonxies possibly a major cause. Despite a rather late breeding season this year, initial success appeared to be reasonably good. However, as the season has progressed, success has been more patchy, and the upturn of Kittiwake fortunes in 1996 will not be continued this year. Skuas also appear not to have fared well this season, with low numbers of chicks on the Hill. On the other hand, Fair Isle Guillemots fledged a healthy average of 0.77 chicks per pair and Razorbills 0.61 chicks per pair, in contrast to some colonies further south in Britain which have had a disastrous season. Over 1900 Arctic Tern chicks were



ringed in early July, when the colony at Tarryfield was a cauldron of noise and activity. More recently, there has been widespread mortality amongst tern chicks (although not as severe as in some past seasons, and Fair Isle seems to have fared better than most colonies on Shetland). It was a depressing feeling to walk through the Tarryfield colony and remove the rings from the dead chicks, though encouraging to watch the remaining fledglings take their first unsteady flights. There seems to have been a late-season shortage in the all-important supply of sandeels. Our studies of Puffin diet show that, at least on some days, sandeels are forming a much smaller proportion of the food brought back than during previous seasons, with the difference being made up by the fry of Haddock, Pollock, Saithe, Whiting and Rockling. Interestingly, young Three-spined Stickleback, Plaice and Lumpsucker are among the more unusual species to have been picked up in the tern colony and adult terns have been hawking for insects over the meadows in the south of the island. This prey diversity suggests that food for young has been in short supply.

We now have just the Tysties, Gannets and Fulmars to keep us busy during August, as well as the ever popular 'Stormy sessions' (mist-netting Storm Petrels at the Observatory). An early Leach's Petrel caught on the

18th July got the season off to a good start.

On the seabird research front, this season has seen the arrival of a team of researchers from Durham University. They are working as part of the EU-funded project 'Modelling the Impact of Fisheries on Seabirds' or MIFOS, and are carrying out research into seabird foraging ecology on Fair Isle. The emphasis this season has been on Kittiwakes and Fulmars, and data has been collected on diet composition, feeding trip duration, chick growth rates and meal sizes. Part of this involves the weighing of chicks at regular intervals throughout the day, a very unpleasant experience when it comes to Fulmars! The Durham researchers are working in collaboration with others from Aberdeen University, the Netherlands Marine Institute and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, with the aim of understanding the interaction between seabird populations and fisheries, particularly the reliance of different seabirds on abundant supplies of sandeels, or high availability of trawling discards. It is hoped that the results of the research will enable the development of management strategies geared to safeguarding both fish stocks and the seabirds which rely on them.

Jenny Bull, Richard Phillips & Jane Reid

---

1997 will be the fourth and final year in charge for current warden Roger Riddington. Roger will be leaving at the end of the 1997 season to join his partner Wendy Christie in Australia. Mark Newell, who took over as Administrator from Wendy at the beginning of the year, will also be leaving the Isle at the end of the season. Advertisements for the posts of Warden and Administrator for 1998 and beyond have already been placed, and it is hoped that the successful couple will be able to overlap with Roger and Mark to ensure a smooth changeover.