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# FRIENDS OF FAIR ISLE NEWSLETTER

*Edited by*

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As another season at the Observatory draws to an end, it is once again time to inform all 'Friends' of the main news from the latter half of the season. Another autumn full of rarities is drawing to a close and it is with baited breath that we await spring 2004!

Within this newsletter is a summary of the autumn migration, an update of the seabird breeding year and a roundup of Observatory and island events since July's newsletter.

We hope you enjoy reading this newsletter and hopefully we will see some of you in the near future.

Your continued support is much valued and greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Deryk and Hollie  
(Warden and Administrator)

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## Ornithology - autumn migration

After an excellent spring for rare migrants, it was with much anticipation that we waited for the autumn to get going! Autumn started on the 18<sup>th</sup> July when an early Icterine Warbler was found in the Plantation. A confiding Wood Sandpiper on Field Pond (23<sup>rd</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup>) was a nice year-tick whilst good numbers of Black-headed Gulls passing through attracted a real rarity onto the island, with a Little Gull at

Skerryholm (28<sup>th</sup>). This was nothing to prepare us for the 30<sup>th</sup> though, when a Scops Owl (first island record) was caught in the Plantation!

August started well with good numbers of gulls passing through the island with counts of 271 Common Gulls and 65 Black-headed Gulls on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Waders were also on the move with 137 Oystercatchers, 4 Greenshank and 5 Ruff on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 115 Redshank and 3 Whimbrel on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Sea-watching on the latter date produced 4 Manx Shearwaters and 5 'commic' Terns. Seven Crossbills on the 4<sup>th</sup> were not the vanguards to another invasion, but to a steady passage through the month. A Sedge Warbler on the 7<sup>th</sup> was the first warbler of the month, followed the next day by a Barred Warbler at the shop. Waders and gulls were still passing through with 210 Common Gulls on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 3 Green Sandpipers and 2 Black-tailed Godwits on the 10<sup>th</sup>. A light south-westerly wind on the 13<sup>th</sup> brought a good arrival of waders to the island with 85 Turnstone, 24 Curlew and 39 Dunlin. However, cream of the crop was the adult Semi-palmated Sandpiper in Kirki Geo - only the second Fair Isle record following one in May 1992. The Sandpiper could not be found the following day, but a new arrival of waders included 36 Purple Sandpipers and 15 Sanderlings. The first 'fall' of the autumn in light and variable winds saw 145 Wheatears logged along with 58 Skylarks. The 18<sup>th</sup> saw another small arrival with 12 Willow Warblers, a Fieldfare, Barred Warbler, Chiffchaff and Mealy Redpoll. The following day produced more waders as the wind switched to the south-west, with 179 Redshank, 12 Knot and a Common Sandpiper. More sea-watching on the 21<sup>st</sup> included 4 Manx Shearwaters, 2 Sooty Shearwaters and 45 Kittiwakes. Light and variable winds persisted for a few days with small numbers of common migrants passing through, but the 24<sup>th</sup> provided much interest when a Marsh Warbler was found at Setter and, more unusually, an escaped Saker Falcon was found in the trapping area. This latter bird had previously spent some time at Sullom Voe where it was captured on CCTV cameras! Counts of migrants included 10 Wigeon, 5

Garden Warblers, 2 Lesser Whitethroats, 2 Pied Flycatchers and a Bar-tailed Godwit. The Saker was still present on the 25<sup>th</sup> when a Nightingale was found at Quoy. Another arrival included 24 Grey Herons, 15 Cormorants, 11 Teal, 6 Whinchat, 4 House Martins, a Barred Warbler and a Grasshopper Warbler. Three Barred Warblers and 2 Common Rosefinches were the birds of the day on the 26<sup>th</sup> with counts of 10 Sanderling, 340 Skylark, 10 White Wagtails, 2 Great Northern Divers, 2 Sand Martins and a Wood Warbler. The remaining few days of the month were quiet, with a Wryneck on the 30<sup>th</sup> being the highlight. August then, was fairly quiet, surely September would be better.....

.....It was! Although the winds were generally un-favourable, coming from the west or south-west, migrants were evident and any switch to the east produced almost instant rarities! The opening day of the month logged 16 Swallows, 8 Dunlin, 3 House Martins and a Redstart followed by two days of quiet and another arrival on the 4<sup>th</sup> consisting of a Marsh Warbler at Barkland, 30 White Wagtails, Moorhen, Black Redstart, Sedge Warbler and a Spotted Flycatcher. The 5<sup>th</sup> produced a long-awaited Ortolan Bunting in Gilsetter, a Turtle Dove and counts of 350 Meadow Pipits, 300 Twite and 37 Ringed Plovers. Rarities were thin on the ground though so a 'double whammy' of Citrine Wagtail and Yellow-breasted Bunting on the 7<sup>th</sup> were both very welcome!

The following day dawned with classic 'fall' conditions and it was evident that a small arrival of migrants had touched down. Census of the island produced 20 Willow Warblers, 10 Garden Warblers, 7 Lesser Whitethroats, 6 Whinchats, 3 Barred Warblers, 2 Robins, a Spotted Redshank and a fly-by Pomarine Skua! However, bird of the day was an early Lanceolated Warbler in Schoolton Ditch, unfortunately only admired by its finder! Two Wrynecks on the 9<sup>th</sup> with 16 Goldcrests, a Water Rail, Scaup (year-tick) and Sedge Warbler made for a frustrating day's birding, without the hoped for rarity. Fortunately we didn't have to wait too long as a Blyth's Reed Warbler was trapped in the Plantation on the 11<sup>th</sup>. It remained in the Observatory garden until the 17<sup>th</sup>. Other

new birds on the 11<sup>th</sup> included another Lanceolated Warbler, 3 Yellow-browed Warblers and a good count of 19 Pied Flycatchers. A quiet few days followed with the highlights being a Bluethroat and 5 Common Rosefinches (12<sup>th</sup>), Corncrake (13<sup>th</sup>) and a Pomarine Skua (14<sup>th</sup>). The 15<sup>th</sup> was a better day with an arrival of migrants which included 65 Golden Plovers, 16 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, 12 Lapland Buntings, Bluethroat, 5 Blackcaps, the year's first Lesser Redpoll, a Short-eared Owl and a fine Pectoral Sandpiper on Field Pond. South-westerly winds persisted over the next few days, but a fly-over Red-throated Pipit on the 17<sup>th</sup> was a nice find and was possibly associated with the large arrival of Meadow Pipits counted (700 birds). Other counts included 240 Pink-footed Geese, 38 Wigeon and 16 Siskins. The Good Shepherd IV produced a Leach's Petrel and 15 Storm Petrels on the crossing. A switch to north-easterly winds on the 18<sup>th</sup> produced a good count of 4 Wood Warblers and a Spotted Crake was at Burkle. The 19<sup>th</sup> was once again a windy day, but a Bean Goose was an excellent find in the Parks. Another switch to north-easterly winds on the 20<sup>th</sup> and once again birds arrived almost instantly. A Citrine Wagtail was found at Setter and an Arctic Warbler showed very well at Leogh. 'Supporting cast' included 8 Yellow-browed Warblers, 4 Red-breasted Flycatchers and a Bluethroat. There was no let up on the 21<sup>st</sup> when a Lanceolated Warbler was found in the Meadow Burn and a new Bluethroat joined the existing bird in Homisdale. The good spell continued the following day with a stunning Arctic Redpoll at South Light (which showed down to a few feet), a Grey Phalarope in the Havens and a Little Bunting (remaining until the 26<sup>th</sup>) at the Haa. Numbers of common migrants were not in good supply and a switch back to north-westerly winds halted any last chance of a big fall. As the weather turned wintry, a first-winter Iceland Gull was found in the Havens on the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> saw 2 Little Auks fly past Bunes and 15 Lapland Buntings touch down on the Airstrip. The wind finally switched to a south/south-easterly on the 27<sup>th</sup>, producing a Slavonian Grebe (a welcome year-tick) and a fine Black

Redstart. The 28<sup>th</sup> however, was an excellent day's bird watching with reasonable counts of migrants and a few rarities! A Lanceolated Warbler in the Gilly Burn started things off nicely, quickly followed by the discovery of a Blyth's Reed Warbler in Guidicum – the second of the year. Counts of migrants included 2 Red-breasted Flycatchers, 8 Yellow-browed Warblers, 55 Redwing, 45 Brambling, 8 Lesser Whitethroats, 5 Garden Warblers, 4 Crossbills, 3 Chiffchaffs and 2 Redstarts. Another Lanceolated Warbler was discovered on the 29<sup>th</sup>, again in the Gilly Burn, but this bird was obviously darker and more heavily streaked than the bird of the 28<sup>th</sup>. A Citrine Wagtail was found feeding with the cows at Quoy and showed exceptionally well whilst a count of 30 Jack Snipe was nice. The Gilly Burn once again produced a rare *Locustella* warbler on the 30<sup>th</sup>, as a Savi's Warbler was found and trapped there. This was only the sixth Fair Isle record, the first in autumn and possibly belonged to one of the eastern races.

September, although a classic month for rarities, felt quite slow. Was October going to set a quicker pace?

The wind was from the western quarter for the first eleven days of the month which didn't raise spirits! However, there's always sea-watching and a Velvet Scoter along with 3 Little Auks on the 1<sup>st</sup> was just reward. Despite the wind direction 2 Marsh Warblers, 2 Bluethroats, 2 Wrynecks, 3 Common Rosefinches, 8 Yellow-browed Warblers and a Little Bunting were found proving that you should never give up, whatever the weather. The 2<sup>nd</sup> was a much quieter day, but an Arctic Redpoll was found on Burrashield in amongst the Twite flock. The Arctic Redpoll was still there on the 3<sup>rd</sup> as 200 'Icelandic' Redwings arrived on land and 13 Whooper Swans flew over. More wildfowl on the 4<sup>th</sup> included 128 Greylag Geese and 4 Tufted Ducks, but an adult Iceland Gull outside the Observatory provided rarity value. A calmer day dawned on the 5<sup>th</sup>, with a sunny, clear sky encouraging movement of migrants. Visible migration included 220 Skylarks, 100 Snow Buntings and 140 Barnacle Geese. The hoped for rarity was also found – a Pechora Pipit at Quoy. It remained there until the 14<sup>th</sup>, running

around in the cabbages and showing well to its admirers! More sea-watching on the 6<sup>th</sup>, as the wind blew once again, produced 5 Puffins, 21 Guillemots, 19 Great Skuas, a Storm Petrel and 2 Great Northern Divers. Another adult Iceland Gull was found in Finnequoy bay. The next few days were really quiet as the winds increased, but 2 Little Auks flew past on the 7<sup>th</sup>. The westerly winds finally paid off on the 10<sup>th</sup> as an un-identified *Calidrid* wader was finally pinned down at Barkland and identified as a fine White-rumped Sandpiper – the third record for Fair Isle. A Glaucous Gull, Scaup and 6 Little Auks were also found. The Sandpiper was still present on the 11<sup>th</sup> – a day when 4 more Little Auks flew past and 6 Lapland Buntings were found. The wind finally switched to the south-east on the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> and results were immediate. The morning census found the west cliffs alive with Goldcrests and 180 birds (minimum) were counted along with 120 Bramblings, 45 Greenfinches, 21 Wood Pigeons, 6 Lesser Whitethroats and 2 late Pied Flycatchers. Rarities were provided by 4 Richard's Pipits (remaining until the 18<sup>th</sup>), 3 Pallas's Warblers (2 remaining until the 15<sup>th</sup>), a Red-breasted Flycatcher and the fifth Fair Isle record of Radde's Warbler, which showed briefly in the Kirm O' Skroo. There was no let up on the 14<sup>th</sup> as a further arrival of eastern migrants included a Paddyfield Warbler on Lemess and counts of 1000 Redwing, 35 Blackcaps, 21 Jack Snipe, 7 Ring Ouzels, a Barred Warbler and a 'blythii' Lesser Whitethroat. However, nothing prepared us for the find in the Neder Taft garden, as reports of a strange Sparrow/Bunting had us all in a muddle as to its identification. On prolonged views it proved to be Britain's third record of Savannah Sparrow – from America! This stripy Sparrow remained faithful to the small garden (and the seed pile put out for Greenfinches) and stayed on the island until the 19<sup>th</sup>. Its arrival enticed a few twitchers onto the island and some even made the journey from the Isles of Scilly! Migrants continued to arrive on the 15<sup>th</sup> as counts included 1000 Fieldfare, 300 Blackbirds, 100 Snipe, 90 Song Thrushes, 30 Robins, 20 Woodcock





