

FAIR ISLE BIRD OBSERVATORY VOLUNTEER REPORT

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Wardening Team Volunteer, 10th August to 5th September 2017

Fair Isle is a place which has always fascinated me. Its reputation as a migrant trap is rivalled by nowhere else in the UK... Or in Europe... Or perhaps the world. Boasting a hugely impressive variety of avifauna with peak spring and autumn migration, the highest rate of vagrancy of anywhere in the world, combined with the fantastic work undertaken by the obs team including ringing and seabird monitoring, and the surrounding cetacean-rich waters, I had been mesmerised by this unique and iconic place from a very young age, and it had long since been at the top of my wish list to visit. It's not just about the rarities though, with a huge range and large quantities of common and scarce migrants passing through on a regular basis. In early March 2017 I received the fantastic news that my application to volunteer on the wardening team at FIBO for 3 ½ weeks had been approved, and I was ecstatic! After a few more weeks of ploughing through college, I packed my bags, brushed up on the identification of the more challenging far eastern vagrants (I live in hope!), and began the journey north from Essex, hopping on a coach to Aberdeen and soon to be boarding the Northlink ferry to Lerwick. This was followed by a slightly rock 'n' roll crossing on the Good Shepherd, being greeted with a Storm-petrel frolicking in the open water and arriving on Fair Isle on the evening of the 10th August. Wow. I was actually here. The prospect of what was ahead filled me with excitement. I was instantly amazed with the extraordinary scenery, and I would have the privilege of calling this magical island my home for the next 3 ½ weeks!

I was kindly met by Susannah Parnaby, FIBO Administrator, in the harbour and greeted with a warm welcome from everyone at the Obs followed by an introduction to the island. My first full day produced a quiet seawatch followed by my best ever views of any phalarope; a stunning juvenile Red-necked spinning on Utra to kick off my island list in style, and a few hours of data entry learning about Storm-petrel movements.

I accompanied Richard Cope, one of two Assistant Wardens, on North census the next morning which gave me a further flavour of Fair Isle birding, as well as us proving the first confirmed successful breeding of Linnet on the island. A superb afternoon soon ensued with the legendary FIBO Warden David Parnaby and Eleanor Stroud, a fellow wardening team volunteer, ringing juvenile Great Skuas. Having only seen the species at sea before, this was a great opportunity to appreciate their finer detail. It was great to get experience of ringing this species, and it was fantastic to be adding darvics to these birds too, a method used to increase resightings of individuals in the field. This was already proving to be effective, as I photographed many already darviced juveniles whilst we were out. A brilliant night of Storm-petrel ringing followed this, which produced 136 new birds and 26 recaptures. It was fantastic to gain experience ringing Stormies, especially in such a great quantity, having only been at one prior session on the English south coast on which we caught just one bird. It's amazing what we can learn about their incredible large-scale movements as shown by controls from Portugal and Norway that night!

With my Fair Isle species list building, another addition was waiting at former ex-Warden Nick Riddiford's house, a Common Crossbill which had been found poorly on the road but subsequently regained strength and was ringed at the Obs. Nick also kindly showed me some of the local moths which do not occur or are not as frequent in the south, and species which I would become much more familiar with in the next few weeks whilst running the Obs moth trap, of which my personal favourites were Northern Rustic, Autumnal Rustic and Antler Moth.

The 16th was again spent in the north of the island ringing juvenile Great Skuas and Fulmars, a great experience of using larger sized rings and learning to dodge the inevitable oiling of young Fulmars which I became quite used to over the next few days! Two Red-necked Phalaropes and a Mealy Redpoll were the best birds on 17th, with a Pintail rocking up the following day. Another Storm-petrel ringing session overnight produced a beastly Leach's Petrel in the early hours along with 94 European Stormies. Black-tailed Godwits peaked at 18 on 15th.

The 19th was host to a nice juvenile Woodchat Shrike at Pund, the 32nd Fair Isle record, which interrupted an afternoon of digging the Obs scrape, along with 235 Wheatear, 113 *alba* Wag (45 White and eight Pied) and 503 Meadow Pipit across the island. A Barred Warbler which lingered for a few days was the best bird on 20th and one of three seen during my stay. I was very pleased to be tasked with a Bonxie monitoring survey on 21st and 22nd August across successful breeding areas to resight darvic-ringed juveniles and establish how many were unringed. Of 112+ juveniles seen across 12 areas, 52 darvics were read, 19 darvics were seen but unread and 18 individuals were fully unringed; a pleasant two days. The 22nd and 23rd were spent digging Utra scrape with a Common Rosefinch ringed on the latter date along with singles of the first Kestrel and *flava* Wagtail of the season. A Marsh Harrier on 24th was the fourth record of the year.



The 25th proved to be an excellent day and one of the best days of my stay with a small fall of passerines, truly experiencing a taste of Fair Isle migration. Starting with a cliff-hopping Icterine Warbler at North Gunnawark, a lovely juvenile Red-backed Shrike and a Wood Warbler at Chalet (the latter of which was later ringed), presumably the lingering Barred Warbler and a fall of commoner drift migrants including two Pied Flycatcher, Redstart, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, and across the island 50 Willow Warbler, four Chiffchaff and seven Garden Warbler, with the first Merlin of the season over Hoini. This magnificent afternoon ended on a high point with a Wryneck trapped in the Plantation and ringed in the evening. This strange woodpecker appeared rather perplexed demonstrating its fantastic wry-necking display, something I have long since dreamt of seeing. This day was one of the real highlights of my trip.



The 26th was another fantastically superb day, with fellow volunteer Tom Gale arriving, of course now famous for his exceptional ability to find unicorn-scale rares such as the male Siberian Blue Robin on North Ronaldsay which was all kinds of gripping after his visit to Fair Isle. Nine Wheatear were ringed on the morning's trap round, with the highlight of SE census being a new Wood Warbler beach hopping at the base of Meoness, along with the remaining Red-backed Shrike still near Chalet and a single Pied Flycatcher. The afternoon hosted a great cetacean twitch which produced around ten Risso's Dolphin lingering, frolicking and tail slapping off the south end of the island, a breathtaking animal which was a new species to me. On the way back to the Obs, Fair Isle's 91st Arctic Warbler was showing very well at Chalet, a great end to a great day. A Wryneck was also seen on the morning's trap round.



August 27th saw the Arctic Warbler still flaunting itself magnificently, along with singles of Barred Warbler, Common Rosefinch and Wood Warbler, all presumed to be loitering birds rather than new arrivals. Only the third island record of Rusty-dot Pearl was caught the previous night by Nick Riddiford sparking a mini moth twitch. One Spotted Flycatcher, two Whinchat, three Reed Warbler and one Lapwing were also seen, with two Swift in the north the following day. Two Common Rosefinch together in the Vaadal on the 29th were caught and ringed, providing a unique and fantastic opportunity to see the differences between an adult and juvenile up close in the hand.



The 30th was an awesome day for visible migration, producing one of the highest ever Fair Isle counts of Meadow Pipits with 1714 making their way south across the island on census. Many of these birds ploughed straight out to sea, miraculously not being instantly engulfed by the ominous waves, with many others stopping off for a rest before continuing their journey. The wonders of migration and one of the reasons vismig is one of my favourite aspects of birding. This was in evidence the following day with 1447 present across the island, the majority of which were initially grounded on census. *Alba* Wagtails were also on the move on 30th with 190 censused across the island (60 White and five Pied), the majority of which were presumably young birds moving down from Iceland. It was nice to find the UK's first Lapland Bunting of the autumn with Mipits on 30th and see my first August Fieldfare on the last day of the month along with two more Lapland Buntings seen and a new juvenile Common Rosefinch trapped and ringed at the Observatory. Another overnight Storm-petrel ringing session produced 124 birds, of which 111 were new.

A Barred Warbler at Chalet on 2nd September was the showiest of the three seen during my stay, with a Black Rustic caught at the Obs moth trap being a nice surprise as only the third island record (fourth individual) following two in September 1991 and one in September 1996 and the first in my lifetime!

North census with Tom Gale was rather memorable on the 3rd, starting with four Lapland Bunting seen across the route along with the usual species and a Common Scoter in North Haven. Finishing our census on Bunes, Tom raised his bins to find Fair Isle's 17th Buff-breasted Sandpiper, a mobile and fresh-in juvenile which proved to stay for a few days, giving itself up for the assembled crowd. This excellent find was just a precursor of things to come for Tom. That was not the end of our good luck for the day though, as the evening trap round had one final goodie in store, a superb juvenile Barred Warbler in the Vaadal which was caught and ringed. It's always great to get to grips with the finer details of new and less familiar species in the hand. Wader dazzling was another new ringing experience for me with two each of Ringed Plover and Dunlin ringed over a couple of nights with Assistant Warden Ciaran Hatsell and Ranger Chris Dodd.



Time elapsed very quickly on this incredible island and before I knew it, it was almost time to leave. September 4th was a rather wet and windy day, with the Buff-breast remaining, as did the Common

Scoter which was joined by a Slavonian Grebe and up to 15 Common Terns, the highest Fair Isle count since 1997. Two separate excellent and inspiring talks were given to Obs visitors during my stay by Assistant Wardens Richard Cope and Ciaran Hatsell on bird observatory work and their previous experience which was great to learn about.

The following day was very sadly my last on the island for this trip, but I wasn't leaving before one final Fair Isle tick, a Sooty Shearwater off South Light being the best bird from a seawatch with David where passage was evident. Four Ruff headed out to sea as did a Kestrel, with Razorbills moving offshore – 55 recorded from two seawatching stints (although no actual Stints were seen during my stay). A Rock Pipit was the last bird I ringed at the Obs before jetting off Shetland-bound over Malcolm's Head and waving goodbye to this magical island.

A range of other essential Obs work tasks were undertaken during my stay, including trap repairs and scrape digging on both Utra and by the Obs with other volunteers, as well as creating a small spiral trap for ringing, ringing data entry, ditch digging, library cataloguing, creating leaflets and setting tables. It was great to undertake practical work and contribute to directly improving the habitat for birds.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to everyone at the Obs for making me feel so welcome. Thanks so much to Fair Isle Bird Observatory for taking me on as a volunteer, especially the wardening team for everything they did for me, and everyone else on Fair Isle for making it an absolutely unforgettable trip and one of the best months of my life. My time there was incredible; it really helped me to expand and develop my skills in a professional environment and it was a privilege to be involved with the genuinely fantastic work undertaken at the Obs which has been ongoing since 1948. Many thanks go to the Simon Aspinall Bursary Fund and BTO Young Bird Observatory Volunteer Fund for providing financial support to enable young birders such as myself to experience life at bird observatories at this pivotal point in their ornithological careers. If any young naturalists looking to go into a career in the ornithological sector are thinking of getting involved with bird observatory volunteer work, do it! You won't regret it!

Fair Isle is a place which completely captivated me and a location like no other. It is a place which I continue to miss dearly and have done ever since leaving, and one which I will definitely be returning to in the near future.