

MY FAIR ISLE EXPERIENCE 5TH TO 28TH JULY

Oliver Beacock - recipient of SABF grant

At the beginning of July, I set off from my local train station just outside Nottingham on the long journey north that would see me arrive on Fair Isle in a couple of days time. I got my first views of the island from the deck of the Good Shepherd IV and this was immediately followed by my first ever Storm Petrels following the boat - brilliant birds and I hadn't even arrived yet! A quarter of an hour or so later and I was greeted at the harbour by the two other volunteers with whom I'd be working for the first two weeks of my stay.

Having taken the opportunity to fuel up on a delicious boat lunch at the Observatory I was ready to begin work that afternoon. The experience of volunteering as part of the wardening team at the observatory was fantastic and so was the wildlife. We got involved with a whole manner of activities from repairing fences and the island's famous Helgoland traps behind some of the birds I could only dream of seeing in central England. As well as the more practical maintenance work the volunteers were able to assist with monitoring work whether this was the Puffin all-day feed watch (though it did get a bit cold on the clifftop after the end of two hour stints!) to completing productivity surveys on Puffins and Kittiwakes.



Plate 115. Oliver Beacock with Common Gull chicks, Goorn, 12th July 2016. © Lee Gregory

As a trainee ringer myself, the opportunity to ring some of the more unusual breeders on Fair Isle was an exciting change from the woodland avifauna I'm used to back home not least because of the profound lack of trees on the island. Out of all the ringing experiences none were quite on a par with the thrill of Storm Petrel ringing in the Haven; the repetitive purring and grunting 'song' of a petrel echoing off the steep sides of the cliffs made for an eerie soundscape, but soon the stormies arrived flying long arcs around the net and a few minutes later a moment of activity around the nets resulted in the first few birds being brought to the ringing hut. It was a real privilege to get to be up close and almost personal with this nocturnal and pelagic species and to marvel at the intricacies of their bills and the extraordinarily long wings.

There were plenty of other fantastic moments of birding during my time on Fair Isle and I got to see lots of species ranging from an unseasonable Long-eared Owl to Purple Sandpipers on the rocks around the South Lighthouse.

One of the more memorable birds was the Black Redstart found at Hesti Geo by Ciaran; the volunteer wardens were busy digging new margins into the overgrown Ultra Scrape when Ciaran appeared over the hill waving his arms at us and calling for us to bring our binoculars over. After a couple minutes of searching the Black Redstart, a female-type, appeared on the fence line with a Rock Pipit and we all got good views, with a Red-throated Diver down in the geo below adding to the excitement.

Despite all the wonderful birding experiences there I was one moment of my trip to the island that stands out miles above the others and that came just a few days into my stay at the Observatory. On the Sunday morning the volunteer team had been dispatched across the road to work on the sluice and edges of the Obs Scrape; after a few hours of work the decision was made to go back to the Obs for a hot drink before continuing with the work. As we were having our drinks out on the patio area we were joined by Ciaran and Chris who had come to examine our work so far. It was at this point the unbelievable happened upon turning to look out over North Haven we saw dorsal fins right up in the entrance to the harbour, it was Chris who exclaimed "ORCAS!" and went running through the observatory building to alert everyone. In the end everyone gathered on the northern tip of Bunes and got excellent views of five of these awesome predators in action as they caught and killed two of the local Grey Seals. One of the female Killer Whales could be identified from a distinctive notch in the dorsal fin as an individual that has been seen regularly around Shetland and also in Iceland - incredible!

All this was only possible thanks to a grant awarded to me from the Simon Aspinall Bursary Fund which covered most of the cost of my travel to and from the Observatory and without which I would probably not have made it out there and wouldn't have been able to see such incredible wildlife (or play in the Obs vs. Islanders football match!).

Plate 116. Storm Petrel, the Haven, 26th June 2016. © David Parnaby



Plate 117. Storm Petrel ringing, the Haven, 21st July 2016. © Lee Gregory