Friends of Fair Isle Newsletter No. 51
December 2023

The 2022 Annual Report is now available to Friends of Fair Isle in pdf format. Please follow this link: https://bit.ly/3Goichy If you encounter any problems, please email info@fairislebirdobs.co.uk

Observatory Rebuild Update

Having previously managed to bring over our remaining modules and install them all together, I'm pleased to advise that we have now completed the roof and had the building rendered meaning it's now wind and watertight.

In usual Fair Isle fashion, we were subject to a number of trials and tribulations which caused a number of delays. However, and most importantly, we have achieved our objective of making the building wind and watertight before the ravages of winter strikes.

Reproduced here are, exclusive for FoFI members, the first photographs of how far the Obs rebuild has now reached. As you can see the new Obs is now really beginning to take shape. With the exterior now completed, we can now move forward to completing the interiors.

The remaining work will require to be done in a number of phases as it is sequential in nature to allow each service and trade to be undertaken of which

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there are a number. Fortunately, given that it is now the interiors we are moving onto, we should hopefully not be subject to the same amount of delays encountered previously but no doubt they will occur.

Work has started on the newest phase, however, it will take until at least late spring before it's completed. The following two phases thereafter will also take several months to complete meaning it will take at least until early autumn before the Observatory is completely finished.

Thereafter as we have previously indicated we will have to furnish the building. The preparatory work for this is currently well underway so that hopefully we can complete this relatively quickly after completion of the building.

At present it is simply not possible for us to indicate when we reopen given the amount of work that still requires to be completed which will no doubt be hit by delays for various reasons. As previously indicated, we will not be taking any bookings until we are certain of a date when the Obs rebuild will be completed. FoFI members will be given prior notice of this before it's made public and will also as before have a period of preferential booking.

It's been a long hard road to get to where we are now however as I'm sure you all will agree it's extremely heartening to see the new Obs as it now is.

Can I thank you all for continuing support, which is greatly appreciated, and I look forward to seeing you at the new Obs sooner rather than later!

Douglas Barr, FIBOT Chairman
29th November 2023

In late November, with the scaffold removed, the new Obs can now be seen to be taking shape. Photos supplied by IDMH.

Fair Isle in 2023

Late March saw the return of the seasonal team to Fair Isle, with myself and Georgia Platt returning for our fourth season, alongside Sally Kunzig (our new Ranger) and Patrick Safford, the first in a series of residential volunteers.

The spring started in typical fashion, with overwintering geese and white-winged gulls scattered across the isle, along with unusually high numbers of **Water Rail** wintering in the crofts. As April arrived, so did many of our early spring migrants, with **Wheatear**, **Sand Martin**, **Black Redstart** and **Willow Warbler** all putting in their first appearance by mid-month. A count of **Black Guillemots** along the isle's east coast showed the population to be remaining stable at just shy of 200 breeding individuals. The remainder of April saw some good early spring birding, with '**Northern Bullfinch**', **Woodlark**, **Little Ringed Plover, Stone-curlew** and multiple **Shore Larks** and **Hawfinches** being highlights, helped by periods of pleasant southerly and east-based winds.

May is one of the most exciting months to be in the isle, with migration in full swing and seabirds covering the cliffs as the breeding season gets underway. The opening week of the month saw some early scarcities in the form of the first **Wryneck** and **Quail** of the year, as well as a smart female **Citrine Wagtail**, and a visit from a pair of **Cranes**. A drake **Garganey** was a welcome find (the first since 2014) but was subsequently somewhat overshadowed by a stunning adult **Long-tailed Skua** that joined the breeding **Arctics**


Long-tailed Skua

All photos by Alex Penn

around the Airstrip for a few hours on 11th. After a quiet spell mid-month, 22nd May proved to be one of those Fair Isle days that will live long in the memory, with two male **Western Subalpine Warblers**, a close-in visit from two bull **Orca** hunting along the cliffs, and finally a pristine male **Snowy Owl** found near the Airstrip, which went on to give amazing views to the biggest crowd of the year. The remainder of May was quieter on the migrant front, but a smart singing male


Snowy Owl

Rustic Bunting and first **Icterine Warbler** of the year sneaked in before the end of the month.

June marks the transition between time devoted to census counts of migrants, and full-time seabird monitoring, with the increasingly extended nature of spring migration blurring the line between the two. Dan Nesbit joined us for a short stint in the volunteer role, and with uninspiring winds, the first week of June could be put to productive use on the seabird front, with plot counts of auks and **Fulmar**, marking of **Puffin** burrows and an initial check of the gull colony all carried out. The final census of the spring took place on 9th, with the following days typically bringing an excellent spell of easterly winds, with an accompanying strong push of late spring migrants. A cracking male **Collared Flycatcher** on the west cliffs was followed by another male **Rustic Bunting**, three **Blyth's Reed Warblers** and a **Red-breasted Flycatcher**, along with several **Marsh Warblers** and **Red-backed Shrikes** to distract from seabird work.

Mid-month saw a change of volunteer, as Marcela Poddaniec joined us for the seabird season, with the remainder of June and July taken up with monitoring of the isle's breeding birds. The general seabird theme this year was one of birds returning late, but in reasonable number, although productivity was fairly poor across almost all seabird species. This was thought to be mainly due to a lack of available food, with chicks being slow-growing and underweight. **Great Skuas** showed an expected population drop of over 70% since 2021, the result of two years of high mortality due to HPAI, but bucked the general productivity trend this year, with good numbers of chicks fledging.

Although the breeding success of passerines and waders in the isle are not closely monitored, it

appeared to be an excellent year for both, with large numbers of fledged **Meadow** and **Rock Pipits**, **Skylarks** and **Wheatears** scattered everywhere across the isle. **Curlew** and **Lapwing** also had productive seasons, with good numbers of young reaching fledging. After being unable to carry out any **Storm Petrel** ringing in 2022 due to HPAI restrictions, this year saw a welcome return to form, and nocturnal sessions from mid-July resulted in over 1,000 birds being ringed along with two **Leach's Petrels**. All-day feed watches of **Puffins** and **Common Guillemots** were carried out, as well as food sampling and further GLS tagging of **Puffins**.

As the seabird season wound down in early August, autumn migration kicked off almost immediately, with the first **Sedge** and **Willow Warblers** appearing on the


Leach's Petrel

first day of the month, swiftly followed the following day by a **Greenish Warbler**. We were joined shortly after by the first of our autumn volunteers, Matt Broadbent, and mid-month saw the first **Marsh** and **Barred Warblers** of the autumn, a precursor to an exciting arrival of early autumn migrants on 18th. An impressive nine **Wood Warblers** (the second-highest autumn count ever) was the highlight for many, alongside **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Wryneck**, three **Icterine Warblers** and a range of other scarce and common migrants. Birds kept coming over the following days, rising to eight **Icterine Warblers** (the highest autumn count since 1997) as well as another **Greenish Warbler**, the second of a total of four recorded through the remainder of August. Regular bursts of south-easterly winds also brought a rather mobile **Woodchat Shrike**, **Honey-buzzard** and further **Barred**, **Wood** and **Marsh Warblers**, **Red-backed Shrikes** and **Wrynecks** – very enjoyable early autumn birding fayre. The first BBRC rarity of the autumn sneaked in before the end of the month, in the form of a **Booted Warbler** feeding voraciously around the sunny banks of Gully.

September began in less exciting fashion, with highlight of the first ten days being the first Yellow-browed Warbler of the autumn, a **Melodious Warbler** and a


Greenish Warbler

Corncrake, in a distinctly quiet spell that gave little return for the team's efforts. The arrival of Sam Langlois, our final volunteer, on 12th was the most migration noted for a while, but eyes on the sea a couple of days later produced an exhilarating sighting of **Orca**, surging through a wild sea off the South Light rocks under a cloud of **Gannets**. There was also a significant southerly movement of **Common Terns**, with 59 logged through the day being the highest day count since the species bred in reasonable numbers in the late 1980s. A better spell of birding from the middle of the month saw two **Arctic Warblers** on 15th and 17th, a **Red-flanked Bluetail** skulking in the bottom


Lanceolated Warbler

of Troila Geo, and a rather scruffy **Lanceolated Warbler** trapped at Quoy – the 100th record of this iconic Fair Isle species. A **Rustic Bunting** at the Airstrip was swiftly followed by a stunning adult male **Turkestan Shrike** the


Turkestan Shrike

next day, which showed well to a very appreciative crowd, and went on to linger around the south of the isle for three weeks (an island first subject to DNA results and acceptance by BBRC). A second **Lanceolated Warbler** was found at Setter on 24th, showing extremely well as it scurried along the drystone walls, and a **Cattle Egret** flew past South Light the next day – the first isle record of this expected but nonetheless exciting addition to the Fair Isle list. A smart juvenile **American Golden Plover** and **Radde's Warbler** were further quality additions to the year list in the last week of September, along with a flighty **Richard's Pipit** on Meoness – a difficult species to see in recent years as records have dropped away quickly.


Humpback with White-beaked Dolphins

One of the highlights of the year for many was the concentration of cetaceans that spent several days feeding off the south and east of the isle at the end of September, with a huge **Humpback Whale** sharing the sea with up to 30 **Minke Whales** and 50 **White-beaked Dolphins** – an incredible spectacle to see in UK waters.

Sadly, the early October birding struggled to match the cetaceans for excitement, though a large arrival of


Coal Tit

birds on 9th saw impressive totals of 255 **Goldcrests** and 18 **Short-eared Owls**, alongside a sizeable arrival of thrushes. Rarities were headed up by a female **Stejneger's Stonechat** (a first for Far Isle subject to acceptance by BBRC) that showed well in Boini Mire, and two confiding **Olive-backed Pipits** at Utra. Another rather quiet spell followed, with a handful of **Waxwings** the highlight until the **Coal Tit** irruption occurring through Europe finally reached the isle, with an amazing 14 of these striking continental birds scattered along the south-west cliffs, many actively feeding in small vocal groups. Joining them were a cliff-dwelling '**Black-bellied Dipper**', '**Northern Treecreeper**' and **Bewick's Swan**, the latter looking very out-of-place taking shelter at the base of Helli Stack. A stunning **Pallas's Warbler** at Setter on 24th was a very welcome sight, accompanied that day by a large arrival of **Goldcrests**, with birds in every sheltered section of the cliffs. A striking '**Coues's Arctic Redpoll**' amongst good numbers of '**Mealy Redpolls**', a growing flock of '**Northern Bullfinches**' around Boini Mire and a late **Olive-backed Pipit** were the highlights of the latter part of October, and the final week of what has been another excellent season.

Alex Penn, Acting FIBO Warden
28th November 2023


'Northern Bullfinch'

We are now 75 years young!

On 28th August 1948, Fair Isle Bird Observatory was officially opened. Those present included George Waterston (founder of the Obs), Ken Williamson (the first warden) and many Islanders including George 'Fieldy' Stout (local birder since the 1920s).

Since our formation, the Obs has witnessed many changes both in the material and natural world. Through the data we've collected since our inception, we have monitored large scale ornithological changes in both migration and our seabird colonies.

kept our hospitality operating so efficiently. We are indebted to everyone who has worked in whatever capacity in keeping the Obs functioning over the decades.

Thousands of guests from all over the world have been able to visit and enjoy the delights of Fair Isle and experience its ornithological treasures. From witnessing the spectacle of migration laced with rarities, including firsts for the UK and Western Palearctic, to the spectacular seabird colonies.

The official photograph at the opening of Fair Isle Bird Observatory, 28th August 1948. © FIBO Archives

Over the decades, countless conservationists who now work throughout the world have passed through the doors of the Obs on their employment journey. Numerous volunteers have assisted in the work of the Obs helping the wardening teams and those who have

With work well underway with the rebuild of the Obs, we can confidently look forward to welcoming future guests and conservationists for many years to come.


The original Observatory was housed in the former naval huts by the Havens, 1968. © George Waterston/FIBO Archives


The 2023 wardening and ranger team with Roy Dennis (left to right): Sally Kunzig, Roy Dennis, Alex Penn and Georgia Platt, September 2023. © Sam Langlois