

Fair Isle

2 – 9 September 2006

Leaders:

Jamie McMillan

Neil Arnold

Trip Diary

2nd September

Four of us flew in on the afternoon plane to be greeted by light southerly winds and glorious sunshine, a sky full of Bonxies, and Hollie with the Toyota to whisk us the half mile or so down to the 'Obs'. We met up with the three early birds who had come on the morning flight and settled down to tea and some super shortbread – a sign of things to come.

The early arrivals had actually been **driven** to see the Woodchat Shrike new in that day – and had some stunning pics to show for it!

No time now to go and see this bird before tea, so we headed for the peninsula of Bunes in the warm sunshine.

At the causeway we paused to look at a Sanderling on the beach, and a few other migrants – Wheatears and a Willow Warbler – all enjoying the sun-trap of South Haven. On Bunes there were few of the usual waders on the grass – a feature of the whole week – though a small flock of Twite gave excellent views.

The sea was calm, and both Neil and Jamie thought it looked excellent for 'fins'. We were almost immediately rewarded by the sight of a patch of rough water, broken by the tall grey fin of a Risso's Dolphin, just a few hundred yards out. Over the next twenty minutes we enjoyed a superb display of at least four of these impressive dolphins, seemingly confined to one area of the sea. We could watch them lunge-feeding on the surface, and breaching: one individual was counted breaching ten times in quick succession. What an amazing encounter: our first cetaceans seen from the shore here in six autumn trips!

On the way back we saw both Red Admiral and Painted Lady butterflies, and a Lesser Whitethroat in the Obs plantation (the trees looking more impressive each year), where it was to remain all week.

After tea our bird log had to be interrupted for... a Barred Warbler in the vegetable garden! It was a new British bird for some, and we had brief but excellent views of it on the ground amongst Hollie's lettuces.

After dark, a most unusual sight: a group of scrubbed and neatly turned-out young men appeared in the lounge, wearing smart shirts and ties. It took us a while to recognise them as the wardening staff on their way to a party. Deryk, the warden even wore a kilt for the occasion!

Jamie was left to fulfil a lifetime ambition: being in charge of a bar on Fair Isle!

3rd September

We awoke to a superb clear, calm morning. Surprisingly, a Robin – a passage migrant here - was singing from the plantation. The 'trap round' produced captures of the usual Wheatear, Rock Pipit and Twite.

After breakfast, Ranger Phil kindly ferried us down to the south end of the island at Utra, where, after being given a brief inspection by the South Harbour Grey Seals, we immediately saw a flock of twelve Tree Sparrows around a small 'rig' of oats – the largest flock we have ever seen here.

A slow meander back up the island produced Whinchat, Willow and Reed Warblers and Shetland Bumblebee. Past Quoy a chunky bird on a fence stopped us in our tracks: it was the juvenile Woodchat Shrike from yesterday! Superb scope views brought exclamations of delight as we marvelled at its intricate plumage.

We continued on in a state of elation, still in sunshine which was also enjoyed by a passing Swallow and rarer House Martin. We paused at the school for a look at the usual 'Bumblebee Hoverflies' (our name!) on the Devils-bit Scabious, before heading for lunch.

Near the Obs we were overtaken by Assistant Warden Mark carrying a few bird bags and mentioning that one contained a Wryneck, no less! Back at the Obs we admired this superbly camouflaged woodpecker writhing its neck like a snake, before it was released. A Garden Warbler was also caught, and a Barred Warbler was seen in the plantation. Phew, what a morning!

A huge roast lunch just had to be followed by a snooze for most, after which we split up: some to try seawatching on Bunes, others going for more migrants down the island.

The migrant brigade had good view of Golden Plover, and at Midway the hoped-for Red-backed Shrike, which we watched for half an hour or so. At one time it was mobbed by a Barred Warbler!

Moving across to Quoy we re-found the Woodchat, giving us a wonderful opportunity to see two shrike species from the same spot – not often you can do that in Britain!

After tea it was announced that a possible Citrine Wagtail had been heard down south, so we piled into two vehicles to investigate. Knot and Dunlin were flushed from Da Water, but otherwise it was the wonderful evening light and a lovely sunset that was the main result: a great end to an unforgettable day on this magical island.

4th September

A blustery start produced just a Starling new on the trap round, while yesterday's House Martin had found some shelter along the North Haven cliffs. The moth trap was quite productive in the overnight showers, and there were to be showers all day with the wind SW veering NW and freshening.

A 'Charlie's Trees' we watched a big Horse Leech crossing the wet surface of the road, while at Barkland, resident Paul Baxter explained the sheep auction that was in progress. Three bidders and a lady auctioneer were in attendance. Neil had to be careful not to wink at the auctioneer in case he found himself the proud owner of a flock of lambs (which could have been a problem given the current baggage restrictions on the flights). The prices were somewhat disappointing this year, it has to be said.

Near Utra we saw Arctic Tern and Golden Plover, and had excellent views of two Knot on the new scrape. To South Light, via a Spotted Flycatcher at the base of some cliffs, where there was evidence of a good seabird passage in progress, with Kittiwakes even sheltering in the bay. As we had lunch, it was Paul who saw the first Sooty Shearwater, and we were to see three more, close in to the rocks, with two lingering long enough for us to get reasonable scope views. There was also a passing Arctic Skua.

On the way back we stopped to talk to former Obs wardens Nick & Liz Riddiford, who showed us a new moth species for the island: Small Autumnal Moth.

We got back to the Obs for a good drying out after the showers, with time after tea for another Arctic Skua off Bunes.

5th September

The blustery showers had died away overnight, and we awoke to a calm overcast dawn, with Barred and Sedge Warblers around the Obs.

After breakfast we headed north. A flock of twelve Mallard were deemed to be 'real' – unlike the ones at Chalet – and a Kestrel was new. There seemed to be a lot more Meadow Pipits and Wheatears about this morning.

At North Light a Sanderling was running about on the turf, and three Knot flew past. We walked out to the foghorn, getting spectacular views along the north cliffs back towards the Gannet colony, increasing noticeably on the adjacent cliffs year by year.

The sea was flat calm, and again ideal for cetacean watching. Within a minute or two we saw our first fins – Risso's Dolphins again. We counted seven, with another five 'probables' further out.

On the way back a Bonxie posed for photos on the road, but a perched juv. Arctic Skua was less obliging.

After lunch we were given a lift south, and walked round to South Light, where a remarkable adult Puffin was on the rocks – a very late record. On the way back we saw the Tree Sparrows again, and the Woodchat Shrike, and had good views of eleven Golden Plover in flight. The wind had strengthened south-easterly with a few spots of rain – would this be a good omen for tomorrow?

6th September

Answer- yes! A Long-eared Owl flew out of the gully trap despite the best efforts of ranger Phil to drive it in. We watched it disappear along the cliffs.

The plantation held a Goldcrest after breakfast, and drizzle began as we walked down to the Havens. Some saw another Risso's Dolphin and Sooty Shearwater from Bunes, while others admired three Sanderling on the beach.

We then had a lift down to the museum, where island resident Ann Sinclair entertained the group with tales of Fair Isle – and announced that she was appearing in an opera in London shortly!

Meanwhile Paul and Jamie were watching a Red-backed Shrike and a flighty Rosefinch. Assistant warden Mark was spotted waving frantically and the group emerged from the museum to the news that the Citrine Wagtail had been relocated. A hasty walk – OK, a run for at least one of us – revealed the bird in unusual juvenile plumage as it walked between the hummocks. On the way back the Rosefinch perched nicely on a fencepost, to Paul's delight.

After lunch the wind had got up, with more drizzle, and we decided to stick to Bunes, being rewarded with Greenshank, six Porpoise, and two Manx Shearwater – the latter new for us on Fair Isle.

After tea we learned that the Citrine Wagtail had again been found at Da Water, and, with a lift on offer, we were all soon watching this eastern rarity.

At the evening log the Long-eared Owl was 'called', and how it had flown hard against the roof of the trap. 'So it's a Short-eared Owl now' said Martin.

The wind blew hard from the north all night, rattling the Obs windows.

7th September

It was a much finer morning, and a Redstart and three Willow Warblers were caught on a productive trap-round.

After breakfast Paul demo'd some nifty footballing skills before we set off south. On the way an Ortolan was reported at Clingers Geo on the east cliffs, so we diverted there, seeing Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Pied Flycatcher in the shelter of the cliffs. No sign of the bunting, though.

On the way back we had the chance to see both Barred and Garden warbler in the hand, both caught in the Plantation.

A sunny afternoon prompted us to head south again, stopping at Double Dyke to look at a superb, bright Wood Warbler, which unfortunately got away. Some went for knitwear at one of the crofts, while others walked along the scenic east cliffs, where there were plenty of migrants to see, including no less than three Pied Flycatchers.

Finally a male Redstart in the Plantation valley was a nice end to a productive and migrant-filled day.

8th September

A cloudy start saw us looking for a Black Redstart in the cliffs next to the Obs without success, before getting another lift down the island.

At Midway we immediately came up trumps, with two Common Rosefinches showing well on fenceposts beside a crop.

Further south the Woodchat Shrike was still at Schoolton, and a Wryneck popped up there to give excellent views.

We again tried for the Ortolan, where Robin and Pied Flycatcher were still about, but little else in the stiff westerly wind.

At lunch it cleared to give a fabulous sunny afternoon, which brought out a Red Admiral and Silver Y moth, but little new until we had another look at Maver's Geo near the Obs, where the Black Redstart was catching insects around Paul's wrecked Landrover (a handbrake problem at Christmas...don't ask!).

In the evening Hollie gave us a fascinating and entertaining slideshow about the island, and then Deryk sprang a surprise – we were going to try to trap Storm Petrels! So in the moonlight (not good for this activity!) we trooped down to the haven huts, with the tape of petrel noises echoing around the cliffs. Within minutes Deryk had caught a Storm Petrel to ring, and for all to admire: a very special experience!

9th September

Fog over Sheep Rock had us worried about whether our return flight would go – but we entertained ourselves watching Barred Warbler, the Black Redstart and female Blackcap in the garden, and yesterday's Yellow Wagtail which reappeared close to the Obs.

But soon the top of Sheep Rock cleared, and, it seemed, all-too-soon, we were bumping our way along the airstrip and soaring over the island, before turning north for Sumburgh and our flights home.

Thanks to Deryk and Hollie once again for making us so welcome, to the Obs catering and domestic staff for making our stay so comfortable, and to the Obs Assistants and especially Rangers Phil and Rory for giving up their time to show us birds and give us lifts around the island.

SPECIES LISTS

BIRDS

KEY

Total records ()
Peak count []

Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	A common breeding bird
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Four 4 th and one 6 th
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	Two on the 5th
European Storm-Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	One trapped 8th
Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	A common breeding bird
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	A visitor (13)
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	A common breeding bird
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	A migrant (13)
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	A male 4 th and three 6th
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	A migrant-at least three
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	At least twelve migrants, many others were of doubtful origin
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	A common breeding bird
Common (Eurasian) Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	A migrant (3)
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	A migrant (3)
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	A single migrant 7 th and 8th
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Up to four
(European) Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	A migrant [11]
(Greater) Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	A migrant [10]
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	At least ten
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	Up to thirteen
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	One 6th
(Ruddy) Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	A migrant [9]
Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	One 7th
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Noted on most days [20]
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	A migrant [3]
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	A migrant. Noted daily [4]
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	A migrant [3]
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	A common breeding bird
Arctic Skua (Jaeger)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Breeds earlier in the season. Two records of immature birds.
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	A migrant [14]
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	A common breeding bird
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	A breeding bird
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	A migrant [6]
(Black-legged) Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	A common breeding bird earlier in the season [25]
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	A common breeding bird earlier in the season. An adult 4th

Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	A common breeding bird. Up to five remaining
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	A common breeding bird. One remaining
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>	A common breeding bird
(Atlantic) Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	A common breeding bird. One remaining
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	A breeding bird [49]
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	A migrant. One on the 6th
(Eurasian) Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	A migrant. One 3 rd and one 8th
(Eurasian) Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	A migrant. [10]
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	A migrant [6]
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	A migrant. One 3 rd -5th
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	One 8 th -9th
Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	An immature 6th
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	A migrant [7]
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	One 5 th -8th
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	A common migrant [110]
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	A common breeding bird
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	A regular migrant. An immature bird throughout
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	A scarce migrant to Fair Isle. An immature bird throughout
(Winter) Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	An endemic sub species. Common
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	A migrant. Three sightings
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	A migrant. Two 7 th and one 8th
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	A migrant. Two 7th
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	A migrant. Four sightings
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	A common migrant [40]
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	A migrant- one 5th
(Eurasian) Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	A migrant-one 3rd
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	A common migrant [12]
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	A migrant- one 7th
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	A migrant. One 9th
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	A migrant. Five sightings
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	A migrant – nine sightings
Barred Warbler	<i>Sylvia nisoria</i>	A scarce migrant- at least two noted
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	A migrant- two sightings
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	A migrant- two sightings
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	A migrant – four sightings
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	A wanderer – one throughout
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Up to six
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	A single bird 2 nd -3rd
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	A breeding bird. [4]
Common (European) Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	A common breeding bird
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>	Very numerous this year. A breeding bird. [90]
Common Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	A migrant- one 6 th and two 8th
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	A breeding bird [70]

