

Fair Isle

Saturday 8 - Saturday 15 September 2007

Leaders:

Jamie McMillan

Neil Arnold



Trip Diary

8 September

We landed in bright conditions with a cool NW wind blowing and Bonxies in the air above.

Deryk, Fair Isle Bird Observatory warden, greeted us in full fireman's gear (multi-tasking as usual on Fair Isle) and we headed down to the Obs in their new people carrier, the old Transit van having sadly reached the end of its red flag days.

After meeting up with Neil and Chris, who had come in on the earlier flight, and had a welcome tea and shortbread, we headed down to the havens and the Bunes peninsula. A pair of Goldeneye in the haven were an excellent start, and were the first we had seen in autumn here.

Twite seemed abundant this year, both around the obs and on Bunes, and we had excellent views of Fair Isle Wren – a distinctive rufous race that isn't always easy to see.

The rabbit-grazed short turf of Bunes is ideal for waders, and today it held a flock of Ringed Plover and a single Knot, but the wind made it difficult to see any small birds, including the Lapland Buntings that had been seen here earlier. The late afternoon sunshine had attracted a group of four Swallows to feed in the shelter of the havens, and a single Grey Heron flew out of the shelter of a nearby 'geo' – the Shetland name for a rocky cove.

9 September

We awoke to low cloud and drizzle, but Peter braved the weather to go on the early morning 'trap-round', getting views of Snipe in the hand as a reward.

After breakfast we employed our secret weapon – a car! We had rented this from one of the islanders as an experiment this year, and it proved to be invaluable during the week.

We shuttled down to the south end of the island, pausing to look at a windswept Whinchat on the way. The 'scrape' held a few Dunlin and Redshank, while Turnstone seemed to be on the move everywhere. The wind had increased to around Force 7 as we got to South Light, and Gannets were showing superbly, some flying right overhead.

Squalls kept buffeting us, and we were soon forced round the corner to the relative shelter of South Harbour. Here we hit a little 'purple patch', with a Red-throated Diver flying out to sea, a pale-phase Arctic Skua chasing three Kittiwake, and two Arctic Terns in quick succession. The rain wasn't hard, but was enough to be annoying, and we decided to 'shuttle' back for Sunday lunch.

It rained hard after lunch, but we braved it to drive to North Light, where it was blowy, wet and birdless, except for a single Common Sandpiper on Lowther Water and nice views of ravens enjoying the wind. Rain set in for the rest of the day and we enjoyed the comfort of the obs.

10 September

Despite an unpromising start with NW gales, Peter saw a Peregrine on the early trap-round. After breakfast we walked to the end of Bunes for views of spectacular waves, and rainbows as the squalls passed over. The Fulmars and Gannets were looking very fine, and in their element. Two

Purple Sandpipers showed very well, but four or five Lapland Buntings were very flighty, showing well to some of us.

The afternoon saw us driving to the south again. A few tried a short seawatch, while the rest headed for the museum and a quick look at the chapel. Then, another novelty : tea at the Puff-inn! The old National Trust volunteer accommodation had been opened up to all this year for tea and shelter – and we made full use of it, regaling each other with stories while the wind and rain rattled the window panes.

The weather improved a bit, so we walked back up the island, where one of the crofters beckoned to us. He was inviting us in to see his workshop, where he hand-crafted wooden spinning wheels. It was a fascinating insight into island life, and great to see at least one of the old crafts thriving.

11 September

The wind had dropped overnight, but the morning started with mist and drizzle.

Another try at the ‘scrape’ met with notable success: the Citrine Wagtail that had been seen earlier was showing well around the feet of nearby sheep, and we watched this eastern rarity, which is coming to be something of a Shetland regular in the autumn.

There was still little moving in the afternoon, though it was nice to take advantage of a break in the weather to explore the island a bit. A Mealy Redpoll, now considered a separate species from the usual British Lesser Redpoll, popped up on a fence amongst the Twite flock. More tea at the Puff-inn!

12 September

A promising start tempted several of us out to the trap-round before breakfast. It was Deryk on duty, and I warned everyone to get their running shoes on. But even I could keep up with him this year. Deryk blamed a footballing injury (what can you expect with the pitch full of rabbit holes?). Anyway, we saw both Kestrel and Merlin along with several Golden Plover.

It turned into a really fine sunny morning for a walk along the south-east cliffs, for views of the convoluted geos, and a single Snow Bunting. As we returned to the road, a chap walked up carrying a propeller on his back! It was Shetland photographer John Coutts, carrying a powered paraglider, and we had the unusual sight of him happily buzzing over the crofts later on.

Two crofters were carefully binding oat sheaves by the roadside. They explained that they were carefully preserving the straw to make the traditional straw-backed chairs. The oats were left for the flocks of finches and other birds that were conspicuously absent today! Another craft visit followed – we wandered into Skeryholm meeting Florrie Stout and a display of Fair Isle knitwear. Neil bought another hat for his collection. On the way back, the Mealy Redpoll was again seen with the Twites.

After lunch we all had good views of this well-marked bird, and further down the road caught up with a fine Red-backed Shrike that had been seen in the morning. As we walked on, a classic Fair Isle thing happened: ‘Just the man I want’, said Jimmy Stout as he saw Neil coming round the corner. ‘Grab hold of that sheep!’ So Neil and Jimmy lifted the trussed animal into the back of the pick-up, ‘for release on the hill’ as Jimmy explained. This one wasn’t good enough for the sales, but Jimmy told us that no sheep were being sold anyway at present in Shetland - because of the foot and mouth outbreak in Surrey!

Fortified by essential choc supplies from the shop, we went back via Barkland, and one of the week's few Willow Warblers

13 September

Before breakfast we wandered to the Havens where two Sanderling were showing well.

Good calm conditions tempted us to drive to North Light, where we had excellent views of Church Rock and the Gannet colony, and could see right across to Mainland Shetland, and even distant Foula.

This was where the car really paid off as we shuttled down to South Light, where we scanned through the gull flock below Malcolm's Head. Eventually we found the sleeping Glaucous Gull that we'd heard was about – a new bird for both Jamie and Neil on Fair Isle.

After lunch we decided to go back to the south before the weather closed in. The first group at the lighthouse had good views of Sooty Shearwater, while the rest of us had to be content with amazing views of Gannets and an impressive sea. Rain set in about 4pm so after a tea and a few stories at the Puff-inn it was time to set off home – as we now very much thought of the obs.

In the evening an entertainment was promised. We started with a fascinating talk with slides about life in the Antarctic by weather-man (and regular TN client!) David Lee. Then some poetry readings by the islanders included a rendering of Flower of Scotland by Deryk, who was still high on the Scotland victory over France and had worn a Scots flag all day. This evening he was clad in a kilt too.

Then the music started up, with the island band, Fridarey, with three generations of islanders playing and singing traditional and modern songs. It was a delightful evening that continued well into the small hours for some...

14 September

The wind rose in the night, and howled around the obs building, more than rattling the windows. It was a relief to see that the building was all still there in the morning.

The sea looked spectacular in the bright sunshine, whipped up by a westerly gale. We took advantage of the bright conditions to walk up to the Hill Dyke for a view right across the island, and then back via the deserted croft of Pund – which still looks ripe for renovation!

Then we shuttled to the South Light where a Red-breasted Merganser was sheltering in the harbour. Here the waves were mountainous – bigger than anything I have seen off the British coast! There were a few Sooty Shearwaters seen, but apparently more had gone through earlier.

We ended the week as we had started, walking round Bunes and enjoying the views of Sheep Rock and the waves.

15 September

Amazing luck again, as the wind dropped overnight, and allowed the flights in – several more than usual as they had a lot of catching up to do from yesterday!

So we said farewell to our trusty (with a t!) vehicle, and to Deryk and Hollie, and our favourite island for another year.

Although one of the least birdy weeks I can remember here, it had still been very enjoyable, with lots of tales and fun, and as always a great chance to see and learn more of the culture of this island. It is good to see it going from strength to strength.

Many thanks to Deryk, Hollie and the Obs staff for making our stay so enjoyable and comfortable, and to you all for your excellent company. We hope to see you again on another Travelling Naturalist trip in the not-too-distant future.

FAIR ISLE CHECK LIST

KEY

Total records ()
Peak count []

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	Single birds on two days
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	A common breeding bird
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Single birds on two days
Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	A common breeding bird
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	A visitor (14)
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	A common breeding bird
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	A migrant. Single birds on three days
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	Two, only the second T.N. autumn record
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	A single record
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	A migrant. Two sightings of three birds
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	At least four birds were deemed to be wild, many others were of doubtful origin
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	A common breeding bird
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	A pair throughout in North Haven; a scarce species outside the winter months. The first autumn T.N. record
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	One. The second autumn T.N. record
Common (Eurasian) Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	A migrant (1)
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	A migrant (2)
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	A single migrant 10 th . The third T.N. autumn record
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Only one bird on two days
(Northern) Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Only four birds
(European) Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	A migrant [19]
(Greater) Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	A migrant [8]
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	At least ten
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Noted daily [9]
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	A single bird 9 th . The third autumn T.N. record
(Ruddy) Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	A migrant [30]
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Noted on most days [29]
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	A migrant. Five records involving at least two birds
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	A migrant. Two birds
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	A migrant. Two birds 10 th

Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	A migrant [5]
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 adult birds.
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	A migrant [18]
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	A common breeding bird
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	A migrant. (2)
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	A breeding bird
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	An adult 13 th . The first T.N. record
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	A migrant (5)
(Black-legged) Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	A common breeding bird earlier in the season (9)
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	A common breeding bird earlier in the season. (7)
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	A common breeding bird. Up to five remaining
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	A common breeding bird. (12)
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>	A common breeding bird
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	A breeding bird [40]
(Eurasian) Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	A migrant. [20]
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	A migrant [5]
Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	An immature 10th
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	A migrant [4]
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	A migrant [8]
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	A common migrant [60]
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	A common breeding bird
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	A regular migrant. An immature bird 12th
(Winter) Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes fridarensis</i>	An endemic sub species. Common
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	A migrant. three sightings of a single bird
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	A common migrant [4]
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	A common migrant [2]
Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Five sightings of up to two birds
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Up to seven
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Up to three
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	A breeding bird. [5]
Common (European) Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	A common breeding bird
Lapland Bunting (Longspur)	<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	Noted on four days [5]
Common(Mealy) Redpoll	<i>Carduelis hornemanni</i>	Three sightings of up to two adults
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>	Very numerous this year. A breeding bird. [90]
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	A breeding bird [52]

MAMMALS

Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Noted daily. Excellent views of small groups
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Noted daily

INSECTS

Shetland Bumblebee	<i>Bombus muscorum agricola</i>	Single records during sunny spells
Bumblebee Hoverfly	<i>Eristalis intricaria</i>	Single records, again during sunny spells