

# ISLE OF MAY BIRD OBSERVATORY TRUST

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## NEWSLETTER : WINTER 2013

On behalf of the Trust I am very pleased to welcome you to the first in a regular series of newsletters. It is intended to keep trust members, and others interested in the island, informed about bird and other wildlife news and as a means of letting you know about recent developments at the Low Light and more generally about issues that affect the island.

Our plan is to produce two newsletters each year with the winter newsletter reviewing and summarising birding highlights of the season just ended. It will also be a means of engaging more easily with members and friends of the island as we continue to try and improve our facilities at the Low Light. The newsletter will complement Jonathan's weekly website updates ([www.isleofmaybirdobs.org](http://www.isleofmaybirdobs.org)) produced throughout the season and also, of course, each year's annual report. In the first instance the newsletter will be emailed to Trust members and in due course carried on our website. We very much hope you enjoy the newsletter and comments or letters for inclusion in future editions will be very welcome. Finally my thanks to Mark Newell for assuming the roles of junior reporter, production manager and editor in chief!

Regards

Ian Darling (Chairman)



Mark Oksien

## 2013 WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHTS

Despite a cold start to the main season there were a number of notable birds in the early part of the year. There were no prolonged spells of easterly winds at anytime this year resulting on no significant falls in the spring and only sporadic falls in the autumn. Despite the less than optimum conditions for migrant arrival there were a steady flow of additions to the year list resulting in a final record annual total, should all records be accepted, of 165 including two firsts for the isle. Some of the highlights are below:

**January** - White-billed Diver. 1<sup>st</sup> record for the Isle of May



**April** – Sperm Whales

Red Kite 3<sup>rd</sup> record

**May** - Gadwall 3<sup>rd</sup> record

Hobby 5<sup>th</sup> record



Woodchat Shrike 5<sup>th</sup> record



**June** – Spoonbill 4<sup>th</sup> record



**July** – Bridled Tern 1<sup>st</sup> record for the Isle of May



**August** – Basking Shark

Manx Shearwater – 2<sup>nd</sup> successful breeding

**Sept** –Yellow-browed Warbler, highest day count

Olive-backed Pipit 5<sup>th</sup> record

**October** – Radde's Warbler 7<sup>th</sup> record

Great Spotted Woodpecker, highest day count

(all records subject to acceptance)

## MIGRATION NEWS

### January

A couple of brief trips at this unseasonal time of year were surprisingly productive. Seven Short-eared Owls were present on 7<sup>th</sup> but the 23<sup>rd</sup> produced the isle's first **White-billed Diver** off Altarstanes. Also present were 4 **Great Northern Divers**, 1 **Red-throated Diver**, 2 **Black Guillemots**, 1 **Red-breasted Merganser**, 40 **Woodcock** and a **Long-eared Owl**. There was no sign of the White-billed Diver the following day and many of the Woodcock had also left but 2 **Long-tailed Duck** were offshore and 3 **Twite** were on Rona.

### March

A brief visit late month yielded a **Woodlark** (20<sup>th</sup> record) on 26<sup>th</sup> with a male **Stonechat**, both in the Beacon area. At least 30 **Woodcock** were present with 24 **Lapwing** and 30 **Skylark** all in unseasonably high numbers. The Stonechat lingered until late April while the Woodlark was still present the next day.

### April

The first notable record was a **Red Kite** (only the third record) on 15<sup>th</sup>. A very early **Reed Warbler** appeared on 18<sup>th</sup> while there was a notable Corvid passage the next day with a **Jackdaw**, 2 **Rook** and 12 **Carrion Crow**. A **Coal Tit** was all too brief near Lady's Bed on 20<sup>th</sup>, only the 11<sup>th</sup> record and 2<sup>nd</sup> in Spring. A **Treecreeper** was out of place feeding along rocky outcrops near the Low Light on 21<sup>st</sup>.

One of the sightings of the year occurred on 25<sup>th</sup> with at least 12 **Sperm Whales** passing to the north of the isle. Apparently they had been sighted from a microlight near Fidra before they were observed from the isle midway to Anstruther from where they were observed for more than an hour as they cruised eastwards and last seen well to the east of Fife Ness.

The 27<sup>th</sup> saw a summer plumaged **Black Guillemot** near Kirkhaven, it remained until at least 21<sup>st</sup> June and would come and go with the tide often accompanying the male Eider flock. A **Tree Sparrow** and **Short-eared Owl** were seen on 28<sup>th</sup>.

### May

The 1<sup>st</sup> saw a **Stock Dove** and **Yellow Wagtail** while common migrants trickled through as the spring struggled to assert itself. A **Green Sandpiper** appeared on 8<sup>th</sup> while high excitement on 9<sup>th</sup> with a female **Gadwall** initially on South Plateau before relocating to the Loch. It remained the following day and was only the third record after birds in April 1975 and October 1986. The 9<sup>th</sup> began brightly with a bedraggled 1<sup>st</sup> summer **Hobby** amongst the rabbits near the visitor centre while a **Hooded Crow** flew over the assembled observers. An **Osprey** flew along the west cliffs on 12<sup>th</sup> while a **Nightjar** (13<sup>th</sup> record) was disturbed from cliffs above Pilgrims Haven on 15<sup>th</sup>. Remarkably it was found the following day at rest near the Low Trap where it showed exceptionally well.

Good fall conditions on 18<sup>th</sup> brought 3 **Red-backed Shrikes** (2males, 1 female) with a further 2 new males on 19<sup>th</sup> with a female **Bluethroat** which remained until 21<sup>st</sup>. Common migrants drifted through over the following days until a **Red-breasted Flycatcher** appeared on 28<sup>th</sup>. Another female **Bluethroat** appeared the following day while an **Icterine Warbler** was found in the Top Trap which remained the following day. The 31<sup>st</sup> May brought sunshine and a splendid 1<sup>st</sup> Summer male **Woodchat Shrike** around Sheep Well, only the fifth record for the island.

### June

The Woodchat Shrike remained on 1<sup>st</sup>. Further male **Red-backed Shrikes** appeared on 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> with an unseasonable **Long-eared Owl** trapped on 14<sup>th</sup>. The isle's fourth **Spoonbill** flew over on 15<sup>th</sup> with colour rings seen on photos suggesting it originated in Germany. A male **Shoveler** was also noted on this date.

## July

On 3<sup>rd</sup> an **Osprey** flew over while 25 **Crossbill** on 6<sup>th</sup> heralded a scattering of sightings of this species. A male **Black Redstart** appeared on 18<sup>th</sup> while two juveniles on 29<sup>th</sup> indicated breeding must have occurred again on the nearby mainland. A male **Ruff** on 22<sup>nd</sup> lingered until at least 26<sup>th</sup>. A **Green Sandpiper** spent 5 days on the Loch from 23<sup>rd</sup> when a **Cuckoo** was also present. The evening of 28<sup>th</sup> will be noted for adding **Bridled Tern** to the island list. Assumed to be the bird that had spent a month on the Farnes it appeared in the tern roost at Kirkhaven but had moved on early the next morning.

## August

On 4<sup>th</sup> a **Pomarine Skua** was noted while a **Basking Shark** (on 8<sup>th</sup>) lingered off Kirkhaven for much of the evening representing the first record since 2002. A **Greenshank** was present on 9<sup>th</sup> with a lull until 24<sup>th</sup> when an easterly airflow produced a **Barred Warbler**, **Icterine Warbler** and the first of a flurry of **Black-tailed Godwits**. On the 26<sup>th</sup> a **Corncrake** was flushed from Rona (first since 2008 and 24<sup>th</sup> record) with a **Sanderling** also present. A **Marsh Harrier** (15<sup>th</sup> record) drifted through on 27<sup>th</sup> with a **Little Stint** seen on 31<sup>st</sup>.

## September

Only a scattering of common migrants before 10<sup>th</sup> when the action occurred offshore with 75 **Manx Shearwaters** and a staggering 269 **Sooty Shearwaters** counted. A **Lapland Bunting** on the 14<sup>th</sup> was the first of several through the Autumn. Notable goose passage was noted on 18<sup>th</sup> with over 1000 **Pink-footed Geese** passing over. A **Black Tern** on 22<sup>nd</sup> was the first since 2011. A return to easterly winds on 24<sup>th</sup> brought three **Jack Snipe** and a good smattering of passerines which were dominated by **Yellow-browed Warblers** with at least 20 present far exceeding the previous maximum day count of 7. Good conditions prevailed on 25<sup>th</sup> but passerine numbers did not increase with only 5 **Yellow-browed Warblers** remaining. However, a count of 30 **Jack Snipe** was another island record. The 26<sup>th</sup> was the turn of **Great-spotted Woodpeckers** with 2 being the herald over the coming weeks. The 29<sup>th</sup> produced a **Little Bunting** and a delightful **Red-breasted Flycatcher** while rarer still was an **Olive-backed Pipit** on 30<sup>th</sup>.

## October

The month's first notable day was 3<sup>rd</sup> with a **Radde's Warbler** near the Main Light, only the 7<sup>th</sup> isle record it was still present the following day as was a **Barred Warbler** while a **Great Grey Shrike** remained until 5<sup>th</sup>. On the 12<sup>th</sup> a notable arrival of thrushes occurred dominated by 400 **Redwing** but the most dramatic sight were the 12 **Great-spotted Woodpeckers**, another isle record. A **Bluethroat** appeared on 13<sup>th</sup> with two present on 14<sup>th</sup> while a female **Northern Bullfinch** appeared on the 17<sup>th</sup> remaining the following day. The 19<sup>th</sup> was dominated by thrushes with totals reaching 3000 **Blackbirds**, 1000 **Redwings**, 200 **Fieldfares** and 100 **Song Thrushes**. Although most of the thrushes had moved on overnight the 20<sup>th</sup> was far from dull with an immature male **Hen Harrier** drifting through and single **Stock Dove**, **Crossbill** and **Twite** appearing. The last week of the month was quieter however 23<sup>rd</sup> saw **Long-tailed Duck** and **Pomarine Skua**, the 24<sup>th</sup> logged 26 **Whooper Swans** south and 6+ **Common Dolphin** offshore and 29<sup>th</sup> an Icelandic **Merlin**.

## November

A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** from the big influx lingered until at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> while a **Long-eared Owl** was noted on 4<sup>th</sup> while 5 **Little Auks** flying south were the last additions to what may prove to be a record breaking year list.



Northern  
Bullfinch by  
Keith Brockie

## BREEDING SEASON NEWS

### SEABIRDS

Following on from two mixed years, 2013 proved to be another variable breeding season on the Isle of May NNR. Poor weather during the winter and early spring delayed the breeding season for most species and reduced the breeding numbers of some, in particular European shags.

Return rate for colour marked adult shags (43%) was poor with only two lower years previously recorded, in 1993-94 and 2004-05. Return rate for razorbill (77%) was also below average while common guillemot (91%) and black-legged kittiwake (81%) were above average. Despite the wreck just prior to the breeding season return rate for Atlantic puffin (85%) was also above average.

Of the six study species, Northern fulmars (0.47 chicks per incubating pair) had the most successful season since 2002 while European shags (1.20 chicks per pair) had an above average season. In contrast, razorbills (0.48 chicks leaving per pair) had the lowest productivity on record, while black-legged kittiwakes (0.41 chicks per completed nest) were also below average. Atlantic puffins (0.70 chicks fledging per pair laying) and common guillemots (0.69 chicks leaving per pair) had slightly below average seasons.

Lesser sandeels (*Ammodytes marinus*) remained the main food of young Atlantic puffins and Black-legged kittiwakes. Shag chick diet comprised mainly Butterfish (*Pholis gunnellus*, 54% of loads) and Sandeels (31%). Common guillemots fed their young mainly on clupeids. Razorbill chick diet contained slightly more sandeels (56% of loads) than clupeids (44%).

Mark Newell, Mike Harris, Sarah Burthe, Carrie Gunn, Sarah Wanless and Francis Daunt. Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Edinburgh. For more information on the Isle of May study look up the website:

[www.ceh.ac.uk/sci\\_programmes/IsleofMayLong-TermStudy](http://www.ceh.ac.uk/sci_programmes/IsleofMayLong-TermStudy)

#### **Manx Shearwater**

Only the second proven successful nesting attempt by Manxies on the Isle of May (and indeed along the British east coast) occurred in 2013. Activity of the adults had been monitored throughout the season and with a chick discovered it was duly ringed on 7th August in the hope that it will return to breed and expand the 'colony' in a few years.

#### **Terns**

A peak of 46 fledged terns were counted this year, the highest since 2008.

### NON- SEABIRDS

#### **Mallard**

At least one pair of Mallards were seen well into May. At least two broods were seen on the Loch with the second brood containing only two ducklings on 4<sup>th</sup> June with only one remaining the following day. However, this duckling was successfully raised to fledging on the Loch. This is only the third year of breeding by Mallard on the Isle of May after two pairs in 1968 and 2007.

#### **Swallow**

After two pairs of Swallows successfully bred in 2012 five pairs settled on the isle in 2013, the second highest total on record. Of those five pairs, four laid eggs (2 pairs in Castle, 1 bath house and 1 Radar hut) and three hatched producing a total of 14 chicks to fledging. Three of the successful pairs (Castle and Bath house) had a second breeding attempt with two pairs hatching and fledging a further 6 chicks.

#### **Rock Pipit**

At least 19 pairs bred which is the highest for at least 13 years.

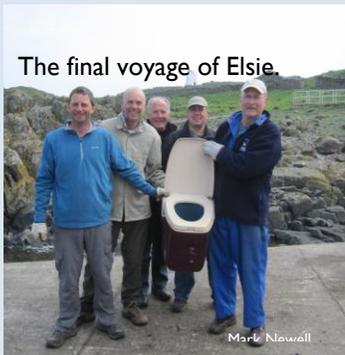
#### **Pied Wagtail**

At least 15 pairs bred which is possibly a record high.

## BIRD OBSERVATORY REDEVELOPMENT



Those that have not had the opportunity to visit the island this year will not have experienced the dramatic improvements to the Bird Observatory. Despite a prolonged construction phase due to poor weather last winter the new extension was opened to its first residents in May. The extra space and change from bunk rooms to twin rooms have proved a resounding success while a fully flushing toilet has brought about a whole new chapter to observatory life.



Internally the new extension was structurally completed and in the main fitted out and decorated by the contractor James Aird and Sons to a standard well beyond the initial conception at the tender stage of the project (a wind and watertight building). This was due to Jimmy Aird's willingness to produce a finished build. The Building Completion Certificate has been received from Fife Council.



There is now much greater flexibility in accommodation with the addition of two single beds allowing up to three sleeping in one room while the maximum staying will still be limited to six. Bedding has improved with the purchase of single duvets and new pillows. Solar lamps in each bedroom and the w/c provide lighting away from the gas lamp lit communal rooms. New fridges have been installed and are working well.

The week in April last saw a very busy work party undertake essential in-house work to bring the Low Light to a sufficient standard to allow the Observatory to open. Since then several subsequent work parties and visitors worked incredibly hard at various times through the season to finish assorted jobs on the new build with the final phase of landscaping due to be finished before the Observatory reopens in April 2014.

## REQUESTS FOR HELP

### **1. Completing the in-house finishing off work.**

The outstanding internal work is mainly decorative (surface preparation and brushwork). The external work falls into two areas: buildings (manually mixing concrete and laying paths, pointing walls, guttering replacement and painting) and landscaping.

To carry out this work and open up the Observatory for the year a volunteer work party is planned for the month of March 2014 (1<sup>st</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>). Accommodation will be in the Low Light with volunteers staying on for a week, or multiple periods thereof. Accommodation and transport to the island will be free for work party members. It is the intention to arrange the catering on a communal rather than individual basis with the cost shared by each weekly party. It would be appreciated if volunteers could indicate any special food needs.

We are sending this invitation to all members of the Trust so that they can express an interest in taking part in the work party. We would find it particularly helpful if you could let us know if you have particular skills or know of people who have those skills and would be ready to help. Mark Oksien will be the overall manager of the work party and will be on the island for much of March. He will be responsible for drawing up an overall plan and programming the work.

If you would like to volunteer or discuss what is involved could you please get in touch with Mark Oksien (ideally before the end of January 2014) at 32 Struan Drive, Inverkeithing, Fife KY11 1AR. Phone 01383 419503.

Email: [markoksien@btinternet.com](mailto:markoksien@btinternet.com)

### **2.**

The Observatory's funds are limited at present and in 2014, assuming finance is available, we hope to install solar panels to provide electricity. Certain items, though not essential, would enhance the Low light. With a view to further improving facilities for visitors to the Low Light we are seeking donations of the following items:

<i>A second (plastic) wheelbarrow with inflatable tyre</i>	<i>A strong garden rake</i>
<i>A bench for the boot room ideally with storage underneath</i>	<i>Additional log basket</i>
<i>A set of 4 stacking stainless steel pans</i>	<i>2 (traditional style) kitchen chairs</i>
<i>2 Composters for vegetable waste (eg B&amp;Q 330litre)</i>	<i>Outdoor BBQ table</i>
<i>2 outdoor brushes for the front and back doors for cleaning boots</i>	<i>Outdoor seat/bench</i>

If you have any of the above or know where they can be acquired at little or no cost please contact Jonathan Osborne who can let you know as we obtain donations.

### **3.**

In future and when funds permit, we hope to make further improvements to the living room which would involve renewal of plasterwork, joinery repairs, plumbing etc. If you have friends with relevant skills who would be willing to help in any way please get in touch.

### **4.**

If in September 2014, Scotland votes YES for independence, make a will and leave your estate (or part of it) to the Isle of May Bird Obs Trust!

If Scotland votes NO to independence in September 2014, make a will and leave your estate (or part of it) to the Isle of May Bird Obs Trust!

## LOW LIGHT EXTENSION OFFICIAL OPENING

Plans are afoot for an official opening in July 2014. It is intended to have an event for major donors to the Low Light Extension on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> July. There will be an Open Day on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July to which all members of the Trust and all those who donated to the appeal will be invited to see the new look Observatory. Keep an eye on our website for more details.

## OTHER NEWS

### All change with boats to the May

At the end of the 2013 season Colin Murray, owner and skipper of the Osprey announced his retirement. This ends



nearly ten years of involvement with the isle as skipper of the May Princess and the Osprey having taken the Bird Obs residents out to the isle in occasionally poor conditions and also has been instrumental in the building of the Observatory extension in transporting not only the contractors but over 60 tonnes of material. As well as the many trips to the May Colin will have spent countless hours poring over weather forecasts and making untold phone calls. As a big thank you Colin and his patient

wife Cathy were treated to a lunch in Anstruther on 7<sup>th</sup> December and presented with a print by Keith Brockie. Given Colin's enthusiasm for the May we suspect he will still be seen out on regular occasions.

From 2014 folk going to stay in the Bird Observatory will continue to travel with the RIB Osprey as it has been bought in partnership by Alex Gardner who took over the ownership of the May Princess in early 2013. As Alex showed to be an equally enthusiastic skipper we look forward to another co-operative arrangement.

### SOC sponsored week for young folk

Plans are advancing for a Scottish Ornithologists Club sponsored week, probably in July for young people. The intention is to provide a leader who will organise a programme of activities aimed at giving a taste of the work undertaken on the Isle of May and by bird observatories in general. Again keep an eye on the website for more details in the coming weeks.

Visit the website:

[www.isleofmaybirdobs.org](http://www.isleofmaybirdobs.org)

Follow us on Facebook or twitter for regular updates:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/101629733427/>

[@lofMayBirdObs](https://twitter.com/lofMayBirdObs)

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