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NEWSLETTER 2: WINTER 2014

The 2014 season has been very successful for the island and the observatory with some fine records and a largely successful seabird breeding season. Not only was it a good year for the natural world but the new extension was officially opened to much acclaim!

Another significant milestone was the installation of solar panels which now provide electricity to the Low Light. Other work has included finishing the decoration and the installation of a new stove in the living room. Judging from the comments in the Chatty Log these improvements have been really appreciated and they have been achieved without losing the special character of a stay in the Low Light. Preparation work was started on the water tank bases and hopefully these will be completed in the early spring with new larger tanks installed by April. We do need teams of volunteers able to do labouring (at least some of the time!). My thanks to the committee members who have helped in many different ways and to the volunteers who have so willingly given their time and expertise. Also a big thank you to Harry Scott for creating our very first logo which incorporates one of the isle's iconic birds in a modern design and which we hope will be well received. Very best wishes for Christmas and 2015 and maybe we will see you at the AGM to be held on 4th March 2015 at the RSPB Scottish HQ with more details to come on the website.

Regards

Ian Darling (Chairman)



(Jake Bishop)

2014 WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHTS

A mild winter merged into spring, which proved to be remarkably calm and dry. Although there were very few windy days the prevailing direction was easterly which brought about a flurry of scarce migrants throughout the spring. The autumn was largely dominated by westerlies but occasional blasts of mainly south-easterly produced a few pulses of migrants and a few outstanding rarities.

January

Red-necked Grebe – 2 (20th & 21st records)

February

Egyptian Goose - 1st record



April

5 Tufted Duck – 2nd highest day count

May

Serin – 1st record

Firecrest – 25th record



Hawfinch – 7th record



Icterine Warbler – 4 individuals

June

Red-backed Shrike – 2 individuals

July

Quail

September

Citrine Wagtail – 2nd record

Lanceolated Warbler – 2nd record

Hobby – 6th record



October

Bearded Tit – flock of c12. 2nd record

Long-tailed Skua – 10th record

Wigeon – highest day count

Yellow-browed Warbler – 2nd highest day count

November

Taiga Bean Goose – 1st record

(all records subject to acceptance)

MIGRATION NEWS

January

The 20th record of **Red-necked Grebe** occurred with a bird off Rona on 13th, with a second bird on 14th. A **Black Redstart** around Fluke St on 13th was the first winter record. A 'blue' **Fulmar** was on the sea on from the South Horn on 14th, with it or another on the crossing on 15th. A pair of **Long-tailed Duck** and two **Common Dolphins** were also offshore in this period. Ashore were three **Peregrines** and single **Buzzard**, **Merlin** and **Kestrel**. Few passerines were present in the mild conditions.

February

The first isle record of **Egyptian Goose** with one, first seen near the Low Light, present from 7th until at least 24th.

March

A **Short-eared Owl** on 3rd and a **Black Redstart** on 28th were the most unusual records of the month.

April

A female **Goosander** flew over the isle on the 2nd with three past on 28th. A pair of **Shoveler** were on South Plateau on 19th (less than 20 previous records), while a female **Bullfinch** on 25th was only the 10th spring record and arrived amongst a small fall including **Yellow Wagtail** and **Green Sandpiper**. A **Wryneck** appeared on 27th and was trapped the following day. Five **Tufted Duck** on the Loch on 30th were the second highest isle count.

May

The highlight of the month was the first island record of **Serin**, with a female briefly in the vicinity of the Low Light on 4th. The 9th brought a **Firecrest**, the 25th isle record and first spring record since 2004. A male **Yellowhammer** on 12th was the first spring record for over a decade. A male **Bluethroat** at the Low Trap on 19th was the only record of the year. A first-summer **Little Gull** loitering over the west cliffs on 21st was the first spring record since 2003. A female **Red-backed Shrike** lingered from 25-26th, with a **Red-breasted Flycatcher** following on 26-27th. The most exciting day of the spring occurred on 28th in terms of scarce birds if not large numbers with **Hawfinch** (7th isle record), a red male **Common Rosefinch** and two **Icterine Warblers**. A third **Icterine Warbler** was present on 29th when a **Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail** was noted. At least the fourth **Icterine Warbler** of the month was found on 31st with the **Hawfinch** reappearing, a female **Red-backed Shrike**, and a **Roseate Tern** loitering in Kirkhaven.

June

Three **Icterine Warblers** were still present on 1st with a **Minke Whale** sighted on 2nd. The spring's third **Red-backed Shrike** on 5-6th and fourth on the 10th were both females.

July

A **Quail** was flushed near the Top Trap on 1st. A **Green Sandpiper** appeared on 18th July remaining until at least 22nd. A juvenile **Black Redstart** was present from 21st-22nd with a different bird on 23rd. **Cuckoos** appeared on 21st, 24th and 28th, with **Whinchat** on 26th. A ringed **Roseate Tern** from 28th proved to be from Rockabill in Ireland. A **Short-eared Owl** was seen on 29th.

August

The 9th saw an adult **Roseate Tern** appear in Kirkhaven with two juveniles and remained until 14th. Passerine migrants were seen throughout the month with the most notable being two **Tree Sparrows** on 19th and an impressive 40 on 24th. Three **Pied Flycatchers** were present on 26th, a **Common Rosefinch** was found on 27th and two **Black Redstarts** seen on 28th. A **Long-eared Owl** was seen on 24th and 27th.

September

The month started well with another [Common Rosefinch](#) on 3rd which remained until 5th, but this was bettered on 4th by the isle's second record of [Citrine Wagtail](#) which remained until 5th (previous record in 1968). More common migrants came and went; the highlights being 12 [Tree Sparrows](#) and 25 [Whinchat](#) on 8th when the first [Barred Warbler](#) of the autumn also appeared (remaining until 10th) and a [Great Northern Diver](#) flew past. The next outstanding rarity occurred on 11th with a [Lanceolated Warbler](#) on Rona, only the second record after one in 1987. The year's first [Yellow-browed Warbler](#) appeared on 14th with 1-2 seen daily until 22nd. The 15th brought a [Red-breasted Flycatcher](#) and a new [Barred Warbler](#) while a [Great Grey Shrike](#) was caught on 16th but was sadly/remarkably predated by a [Sparrowhawk](#) on 17th on which date a [Wood Warbler](#) was the highlight of good numbers of common migrants. A second [Wood Warbler](#) was seen on 20th, with on [Osprey](#) over and the start of a passage of geese with 11 [Pink-footed Geese](#) seen. A juvenile [Hobby](#) (the sixth record, 2nd autumn record) appeared on 23rd and was last seen on 28th. The peak of [Pink-footed Geese](#) occurred on 24th with 1300.

October

The first scarce sighting of the month occurred on 5th with a [Red-breasted Flycatcher](#). The 6th brought an arrival of thrushes and other common migrants but a [Water Rail](#) was the biggest surprise. The rarest bird was offshore with a [Long-tailed Skua](#) (10th isle record) alongside a good supporting cast of 20 [Arctic Skua](#), 1 [Great Skua](#), 5 [Manx](#) & 4 [Sooty Shearwaters](#) and 9 [Brent Geese](#). Further arrivals occurred on 7th, with the autumn's third [Red-breasted Flycatcher](#) and at least 7 [Yellow-browed Warblers](#) (the joint second highest day total). An impressive 123 [Wigeon](#) past was a record day total and a [Jack Snipe](#) was lurking beside the Haven Road. The 10th saw one of the more unexpected sightings of the autumn with at least 12 [Bearded Tits](#) pinging across the isle with one of the flock taken by a [Peregrine](#) off the Low Light (second record after a party of 4 in 1999). A male [Stonechat](#) also on 10th was notable. A quiet few days until a [Long-eared Owl](#) on 14th and 2 [Yellow-browed Warblers](#) and a pair of [Northern Bullfinches](#) on 15th (female remaining until 22nd). Two [Twite](#) were present on 19th & 21st either side of a total of 31 on 20th. Up to 2000 [Kittiwakes](#) which had been present off the isle for several weeks were joined by three [Little Gulls](#) on 21st. [Short-eared Owls](#) reached three on 22nd, while 25 [Tree Sparrows](#) appeared on 29th and a large fall of thrushes, mainly [Blackbirds](#), occurred on 30th.

November

The month began with a single [Tree Sparrow](#) lingering while remarkably butterflies were still on the wing with [Peacock](#) and [Small Tortoiseshell](#) seen. A male [Yellowhammer](#) and [Black Redstart](#) were found on 3rd with the former last seen alive on 9th, as it was sadly found dead on 19th. Eight [Whooper Swans](#) flew south on 4th while five [Little Auks](#) on 5th were part of a large movement along the east coast. Also noted on 5th were single [Buzzard](#), [Sparrowhawk](#), [Merlin](#), [Kestrel](#) and [Peregrine](#). The Obs was closed on 5th but reports still trickled in with a male [Snow Bunting](#) on 17th. Brisk south-easterlies on the 19th brought only the second record of [Bean Geese](#) to the isle (after one Tundra on 15/11/11) with two of the Taiga race briefly settled near the Main Light. A 1st-winter [Glaucous Gull](#) flew past the Low Light at dusk while at least 10 [Woodcock](#), 3 [Snow Bunting](#) and 2 [Short-eared Owls](#) were noted. A [Little Auk](#) was picked up in Cross Park on 20th, while one [Long](#) and four [Short-eared Owls](#) were found and a [Chiffchaff](#) and [Blackcap](#) was also present.



Two Taiga Bean Geese

BREEDING SEASON NEWS

SEABIRDS

Following on from three mixed years, 2014 proved to be a good breeding season on the Isle of May NNR. After a late season in 2013 due largely to poor weather through much of the winter and early spring in the region, breeding in 2014 commenced on typical dates for most species. Of the six study species, Fulmars had the most successful season on record while Shags had an above average season and Kittiwakes the most successful season since 1987. In contrast, Razorbills had a poor breeding season. Return rates were average for all five study species. Sandeels (*Ammodytes sp.*) remained the main food of young Puffins, Shags and Kittiwakes. The diet of Razorbills and Guillemots was dominated by clupeids.

- Fulmar breeding success (0.56 chicks per incubating pair) was the highest on record.
- Shags had an above average breeding season (1.58 chicks per pair). Return rate was normal at 77.7%. Diet was dominated by sandeel which occurred in 86% of samples.
- Kittiwakes had an excellent season with productivity (1.17 chicks per completed nest) being the highest since 1987. Adult return rate (78%) was average. The proportion of sandeel in the diet (77% by biomass) was average while the proportion of clupeid (19% by biomass) was also average.
- Guillemots had an average breeding season (0.72 chicks leaving per pair). Return rate of adults (88.7%) was also normal. Adults fed their chicks almost entirely on medium-sized sprats (94% by number).
- Razorbill breeding success (0.53 chicks leaving per pair) was poor but adult return rate (91.9%) was unexceptional. Chick diet contained more clupeids (65% of loads) than sandeels (32%).
- Puffins had an average season with 0.68 chicks fledging per pair laying. The return rate for adults (83.4%) was normal. Chicks were fed mainly sandeels (84% by number) with Clupeidae (mainly sprats) and Gadidae (mainly rockling) both contributing 8%.

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

Manx Shearwater

For the second year running (and only the third recorded time) Manxies successfully bred on the Isle of May in 2014. Activity of the adults had been monitored throughout the season and with a chick discovered it was duly ringed on 23rd August in the hope that it will return to breed and expand the 'colony' in a few years. A camera trap was placed near the burrow and it is thought that the chick fledged on 9th September.

Terns

A peak of 273 fledged terns (predominantly Arctic Terns) were counted this year from a single count of 415 nests. Based on the number of fledged terns divided by the number of nests this was the most successful season on record.

NON- SEABIRDS

Mallard

Three breeding attempts in the same year is a record for the May. A pair & seven ducklings were on the Loch on 19th June, while a female & six ducklings were there on 4th July. A female was found on nest on Rona on 7th July. This is only the fourth year of breeding by Mallard on the Isle of May after two pairs in 1968, 2007 and 2013.

Shelduck

Three to four pairs nested including one pair within the Arnott Trap which required a duckling rescue after hatching.

Eider

The all island count produced a total of 975 nests, an 8% increase on the last count in 2012.

Oystercatcher

Twenty pairs were thought to be present breeding, the highest total for at least six years.

Swallow

After two pairs of Swallows successfully bred in 2012, and five pairs fledging 20 chicks in 2013, further breeding success was recorded this year. Three pairs bred with the earliest in the Bath House successfully hatching chicks, but sadly one of the adults was found dead on the nest resulting in the nest failing. However, pairs in the Fluke St Wood Shed and Quad Bike Shed both successfully double brooded and raised 16 chicks.

Rock Pipit

At least 24 pairs bred which is an increase of six pairs on 2013.

Pied Wagtail

At least 13 pairs bred which is slightly down on last year.

Information provided by Scottish Natural Heritage and Centre for Ecology & Hydrology



(Mark Newell)

REQUESTS FOR HELP

Work parties 2014

New water tanks

In order to improve the water holding capacity for the Low Light work has begun on installing new water tanks which will hopefully allow a continual supply of water through the typically drier summer months. Before the new tanks can be installed new concrete bases need to be built which will be the main task for the 2015 work party.

To carry out this work and open up the Observatory for the year a volunteer work party is planned for much of March and early April 2015 (7th March-18th April). Most of the work is expected to be fairly hard labour so volunteers need to be able bodied and prepared to shift heavy loads of rock, cement and concrete. 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. Mark Oksien will be the overall manager of the work party and will be on the island throughout. 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 by email: markoksien@btinternet.com

Annual Reports

Work is progressing well on the 2013 report with some preliminary work already on the 2014. If anyone would like to assist the editors, particularly if you have previous experience, please contact Stuart Rivers by email: slr.bee-eater@blueyonder.co.uk

Photos and videos

If anyone has any photographic material which they would like to contribute to the website (send to Alan Lauder: alanlauder@hotmail.co.uk) or annual reports (Stuart Rivers: slr.bee-eater@blueyonder.co.uk) it would be appreciated.

Rarity reports

Please send any outstanding rarity reports to Iain English as soon as possible (i.english.t21@btinternet.com).

LOW LIGHT EXTENSION OFFICIAL OPENING

After years in the planning and a lot of hard work the newly redeveloped Bird Observatory was officially opened on Saturday 5th July by SNH chairman, Ian Ross. An audience of over 60 attendees gathered outside the Low Light on a warm, sunny afternoon to hear a brief speech before refreshments, provided by the contractor James Aird & sons, were enjoyed by all.



Ian Ross, SNH chairman, cutting the cake



Ian Darling, IOMBOT chairman, in full flow



Neil Raindow, who spent more days on the redevelopment than any of the contractors, has clearly caught the bug as he was spotted quietly reading the latest issue of Scottish Birds



BIRD OBSERVATORY BOOKINGS

2015 bookings

Bookings for 2015 open to 'ornithologist' members on 1st January. Please note new email address for bookings: bookings@isleofmaybirdobs.org

As usual priority is given to groups booking for a whole week with the cost being £125 per person.

Due to a number of changes to the Bird Observatory and its operations it is imperative that visitors to the Low Light read ALL notes sent to them in advance of the trip and instructions left for their arrival. Failure to adequately follow instructions may result in future bookings being declined.

Amongst the changes it would be welcomed if groups could bring out less luggage and also pack it in more durable boxes rather than shopping bags. This can be achieved by bringing fewer supplies. With transport now via the RIB it is increasingly unlikely that groups will get stuck. At the end of the 2014 season a large quantity of food had to be removed from the Low Light which had been left in the emergency stores but which would not have been in date by 2015. More explicit instructions will be made known to groups visiting from 2015 and it would be appreciated if they were acted upon.

Changes to booking arrangements for 2016

Please note that for 2016 the procedure for bookings will be changing. They will open to:

'Ornithologist' members on 1st November 2015

Non-member 'ornithologist' 16-30th November 2015

"Other" (photographers, artists etc) members of the IOMBOT 1st-15th December 2015

Bookings open to all from 16th December 2015

Full details on the website

RIB Osprey

As announced a year ago the ownership of the RIB Osprey changed hands and we are grateful to Roy Giles and Alex Gardner for the efficient service they have provided throughout 2014. Not only have they run the regular Saturday service for Observatory visitors but transported a large amount of material as the final touches were made to the redevelopment and the installation of the solar panels. We look forward to the continued arrangements in 2015.



(Mark Newell)

OTHER NEWS

David Pickett leaving

After five years on the Isle of May working for SNH, the last four as Reserve Manager, David is returning to his former post at Flanders Moss NNR in the New Year. During his time he has overseen numerous changes from the new Visitor Centre to the Low Light redevelopment and he was exceedingly helpful in many ways in connection with the recently installed Bird Obs solar panels. His input and assistance to the Bird Observatory includes the numerous contributions to the bird records and his many runs on the quad bike with Observatory residents' belongings and much more. His support to the Observatory will be missed as will the thoughtful and informative blog pieces, but hopefully we will see him visiting in years to come.

The Low Light lights up

Thanks to generous financial support from the AEB Trust, with further assistance from the SOC, we were able to fund the installation of 12 solar panels with the batteries and switchgear installed in Elsie. The work was carried out very efficiently by Solar and Wind Applications from Ayrshire in August with logistical help from SNH staff and Ian Skillings' Low Light group. It has worked very well since then apart from one week of thick haar! The primary use is to provide power to the UV water treatment system with additional power to lights, sockets, immersion heater and remove the reliance on gas for the fridges. Needless to say the system works best in bright conditions and it will take time to assess the amount of available electricity

through the season. As a result groups staying at the Obs should not expect an unlimited source of electricity.



Solar panels situated to the left of the Low Light

Jonathan Osborne RIP

On 28 January 2014, Jonathan Osborne (aka Jon, Jonno, Jonnors, JMA, JMAO) died after a long, hard-fought battle with cancer. In recent years he was familiar to many Bird Observatory visitors due to his role as Bookings Secretary, a far from simple task but one in which he excelled and revelled; and in which he was still assiduously attending to his duties up to within a few weeks of his death. However, to many more he was widely known and respected due to his work with the RSPB, at the Lodge and in Scotland. JMAO was always a highly entertaining public speaker - a skill his employers exploited fully - and he was even more amusing in informal settings with trusted colleagues over a couple of beers. Every person should have a place where they feel completely at ease with themselves and their surrounds. For Jonathan that place was the Isle of May. He first went there as a schoolboy in the autumn of 1966 and he made his last visit in spring 2013. Any regular to the May will recognise a JMAO contribution to any of the logs - neat and crammed with information. He found the May's first Red-throated Pipit and the first and second live records of Blyth's Reed Warbler. Jonathan Osborne cared very deeply about Scottish ornithology and nature conservation. He was a scrupulous documenter and contributor. Motivated and determined, he was reliable and always inclusive of others. He could be amusing, deep thinking, forward thinking and is greatly missed. (Adapted from a piece in Scottish Birds).

Jimmy Smith RIP

On 27 November 2014 Jimmy Smith died peacefully in his sleep aged 85. Jimmy was THE link between the May and the mainland skippering the Breadwinner(s) at a time when communications and ease of travel were not what they are today. It wasn't just his expert seamanship but the many tasks he performed above and beyond the call of normal duty as a boatman and he was critical to the seabird studies and the functioning of the bird observatory for decades.

SOC sponsored week for young birders

The inaugural Young Birders Week occurred following the Official Bird Observatory opening on 5th July 2014. Six keen participants from across the UK spent a week undertaking a variety of activities involved in a stay at a bird observatory and the wider work undertaken on the Isle of May. In addition to undertaking census and trap rounds, the group experienced an assortment of seabird ringing and a chance to participate in various aspects of seabird research, reserve management and several social activities such as an intra-island quiz. Thanks to Marion Watson, Catherine Wilkinson, Radina Atanasova, Daniel Gornal, Justin Gillings and Harry Martin for their enthusiastic participation. Further thanks to the leaders: Mark Oksien, Stuart Rivers and Pam Moncur and various members of SNH and CEH for providing insights and activities.



Plans are advancing for a Scottish Ornithologists Club sponsored week again, in July 2015, for young people. The intention is to provide leaders 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. Keep an eye on the Observatory and SOC websites for more details in the next few months.

Visit the website:

www.isleofmaybirdobs.org

Follow us on Facebook or twitter for regular updates:

<https://www.facebook.com/isleofmaybirdobs>

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

Charity Number: SC001783