

Calf of Man Bird Observatory – 2019 season

The season began somewhat belatedly when myself, Dan Woollard (Estate Warden), Di Swayne and Mike Haigh arrived at South Harbour during the morning of the 18th March. An earlier attempt to get to the Calf during the 7th and 8th had been thwarted by Storm Gareth, which persisted for the next 10 days!



Spring migration was already underway with a number of **Goldcrest** around the Observatory when we arrived and two **Sand Martin** flew through on the 19th - the earliest date for eight years. **Wheatears** began arriving from 21st and single **Swallows** were seen on 23rd & 31st March. All Tit species are relatively unusual on the Calf, however we appear to receive a small annual spring passage of **Great Tit** during March and this year was no exception. **Coal Tit** are generally less regular and a single present from 24th – 26th March was just the 13th record for the month. The bird also exhibited characteristics of the Irish subspecies *P. a hibernicus* which has only been recorded on the Calf once before, in October 1993.



A few more migrants arrived towards the end of the month with the first **Willow Warbler** and **Blackcap** on 28th and a **Yellowhammer** trapped on 30th was an unusual capture, being just the 16th ever ringed here.

Since 2012 a programme of Rat eradication and monitoring has been undertaken on the Calf and one of the first jobs of the new season was to activate a contingency grid around the Observatory, after the presence of an individual had been detected near the Observatory compost heap during the winter. A considerable amount of time and effort was also employed in checking and renewing many of the non-toxic bait stations and marker canes, many of which had become damaged or lost due to winter weather. Constant monitoring of these bait points is a key element in ensuring that Rat re-infestation of the island is avoided and we were particularly helped during this season by the appointment of Di Swayne as our Volunteer Assistant Warden. Di's tireless enthusiasm and energy in ensuring that the hundreds of sites were visited and checked each month, often in challenging and poor weather conditions, is greatly appreciated. It is pleasing to report that no signs of any rats were found during the bait point monitoring, although a second individual, for the season, was recorded on camera trap footage at the Observatory compost in August, but as with the first sighting the animal was quickly removed.



April began with a fine **Ring Ousel** around the Observatory on 1st, although in general other migrants were few and far between. The first **Manx Shearwaters** were seen ashore on 4th and the start of a light spring passage of **White Wagtails** was seen from 6th. The first 'fall' of Willow Warblers on the 7th included at least three *P.t acredula* types and other new migrants included a **House Martin** and **Tree Sparrow** on 8th – the latter being relatively unusual as a spring bird on the Calf.

The 9th April marked the 60th anniversary of the start of the Bird Observatory on the Calf; back in 1959, Einar Brun and his wife, Dido, crossed to the Calf and began to record the birds that breed here and move through on migration. There have been 25 Ornithological Wardens during the past 60 years, adding at least 60 species to the Manx Bird List. In the absence of any more formal celebrations, a cake was cut and a toast to the next 60 years was made.



Moderate to strong easterly winds during the 2nd week of the month looked promising but only a handful of spring migrants were blown in, with our only **Black Redstart** of the year on 10th being the highlight. Calmer conditions on 17th released a rush of migrants and included the first **Whitethroat** of the year and our earliest ever **Reed Warbler**, beating the previous record by an astonishing 10 days. Good numbers of **Willow Warblers** arrived over the next few days, along with our first **Grasshopper Warbler** (on 18th) of the spring and a **Long-eared Owl** that roosted in the back garden of the Observatory during the 20th – 22nd. The theme of early migrant arrivals continued with a male **Whinchat** trapped in the Front Field on 25th, the earliest arrival date for 10 years.

Volunteers play a vital part in ensuring that we are able to achieve many of the habitat management and building maintenance tasks on the Calf, as well as providing valuable support in assisting with environmental surveys. The long-term dry stone walling project continued with Dave Fisher and Pat Griffiths maintaining their long-standing service and completing sections of repair work along the front wall and back field in April, as well as starting a new section at the Twin Fields during June. Paul Corrin continues to provide sterling assistance turning his hand to the many different projects and tasks that are found to be needed both indoors and outdoors.



Maintenance at the Observatory is an on-going task and there were many jobs to complete to give the place a spruce-up prior to the 'guest' season starting. Water ingress through the porch roof continues to be an issue despite a renewed bitumen roof but some remedial works and re-painting with damp-proof paint seems to have made a significant difference. Dampness is a continual problem in such an old building with thick stone walls and repainting the walls and floors is annual task, once spring is here and things have dried out a little.

The wood stoves also play an important role in drying things out and during the summer the stove in the Warden's lounge was replaced for a much more efficient system. In fact a little too efficient and it was necessary to keep the door to the common room open for the remainder of the season and allow some of the heat to disperse to other parts of the building!

Coppicing of the Willow scrub at the Withies, which was started in autumn 2018, was continued with the main Withy



and area to the north of the millpond thinned and reduced significantly in height. Work to enlarge the water-surface area of the Millpond was ongoing throughout the year; with teams from Hansard International and the Civil Defence clearing silt and vegetation during the early spring,



removal of spore-heads of the invasive Horsetail during the summer and clearing of vegetation and raising water levels in autumn.

May got off to an excellent start with a large arrival of commoner migrants on 1st, which included a number of new species for the year with **Cuckoo, Swift, Garden Warbler, Tree Pipit and Spotted Flycatcher**, as well as less commonly recorded **Marsh Harrier** and **'flava' Wagtail**. A **Canada Goose** flushed from the Millpond on 4th was an unexpected record, as were two **Little Egret** that flew south past the Burroo on 6th. A **Short-eared Owl** found in the



Glen on 9th remained until 10th, when it put on a good show for passengers from the MV Ocean Adventurer during their guided tours of the Calf. This is the 2nd year running that this cruise ship, which specialises in nature-based tours, has visited the Island and spent time exploring the Calf.

A good series of four **Lesser Whitethroat** records began on 11th, whilst a Wood Warbler on 12th was the first spring record since 2011. Bird of the month was a **Nightingale** (19th Calf record) trapped at the Observatory on the morning of 17th and was the forerunner to an excellent second half of the month which produced another **Wood Warbler** (18th), **Subalpine Warbler** (20th), a **'tristis' Chiffchaff & Melodius Warbler** (21st), 23 **Sanderling** (7th Calf record) & **Pied Flycatcher** (22nd), **Stock Dove** (23rd) and a second **Subalpine Warbler** (23rd-25th).

It is pleasing to also welcome back volunteers from previous years, with Mike Haigh, Stephen Vickers, Dave Neal, Peter Norrie, Oscar Adedeji, Richard & Gill Watts, Mark Fitzpatrick and Ed O'Connor all returning to assist with bird-related monitoring, as well as welcoming new volunteers Garry & Candice Barker, Andrew (Pedro) Roberts, Miriam Lord, Ian Beggs, David Wilkinson and Frank Street.



It is often the case that early June can be the harbinger of something 'rare' and in recent years we have managed a run of spring **Red-breasted Flycatchers**. Not to be out-done, this years' bird turned up on the 6th, taking this run of spring records to four consecutive years and six individuals in total.

With spring migration hardly over, our attentions turned more towards the breeding birds of the Calf, with the growing **Eider** populations season already well under way and many of the seabirds having one of their most successful years in the past decade. Since **Eiders** first bred on the Calf in 1992 the species has become well established, with perhaps as many as 70 pairs breeding annually.



Efforts to locate nests led to 38 nests being monitored and the recapture of females at nest show a high level of site fidelity from year to year, with 20 previous year re-traps caught in 2019, including birds from as far back as 2009 & 2011. However very little is known about the origins of these birds or where they go once they leave the Calf after the breeding season. Seventeen 'new' **Eiders** were ringed including the first ever two males that were dazzled in the Puddle during early May.

Seabirds in general had a good year for productivity, although the long-term decline in Shag breeding numbers continue with a further 20% decline to just 65 pairs. **Razorbill** and **Guillemot** numbers appear to be remaining fairly stable, whilst the establishment of a small **Black Guillemot** colony below the Lighthouses is encouraging. **Puffin**



numbers remain very low and although a couple of pairs were seen in suitable areas, windy weather during the summer made boat surveys impossible. All three 'large' gulls had their best breeding season for almost a decade, with productivity being considerably higher than in recent years. As a result it was possible to add 305 **Herring Gull**, 53 **Great Black-backed Gull** and 15 **Lesser Black-backed Gull** to our long-term colour-ringing study.

Following on from last year's failure of any raptors to breed, it is pleasing to report that two pairs of **Peregrine** bred successfully; each raising at least one young – the first time two pairs have bred on the Calf in a single year. Passerines also

seemed to have a largely successful breeding season, in particular **Stonechat** and **Wheatear** young were particularly numerous during the late summer.

Autumn passage began early with the first dispersing young **Grey Wagtail** recorded from 19th June and an adult **Green Sandpiper** put in an appearance on the Millpond on 24th - the first ever record for the species in June. The 3rd breeding record of **Willow Warbler** was confirmed the following day, when a newly-fledged juvenile was trapped. For the third consecutive year, a **Redstart** was trapped during the last few days of the June. This time a 2nd year male, following a female (with brood patch) in June 2018 and a recently-fledged juvenile in 2017.

July continued the early movement theme with a number of juvenile **Blackcaps** moving through, along with **Chiffchaff**, **Willow Warbler** and **Goldcrest** recorded in the first week and followed by **Sedge Warbler** on 15th when an adult female **Whinchat** was unexpectedly trapped in the Glen. A second **Green Sandpiper** was on the Millpond on 25th and the beginnings of a mass influx of **Painted Lady** butterflies was noted on 30th when 238 were counted, increasing to a record count of 850 the following day.



2019 was an excellent year for Moth recording on the Calf with 211 species of moths, consisting of 128 macro and 83 micro species recorded. Eleven new species were added to the Calf list, with seven of these occurring during the month of July alone.



August started positively with small numbers of warblers continuing to move through and included the only **Wood Warbler** of the autumn on 2nd. Fourteen **House Sparrow** on the 3rd continued an above average showing for the species and **Tree Pipit** on 8th was the start of their autumn passage. Unfortunately, from 9th, the weather was not conducive to further passerine movements and other than a few **White Wagtails** beginning to move through, attention turned towards the sea in hope of some passage offshore. The 19th produced four new species for the year, with six **Knot**, two **Arctic Tern**, a pale-phase **Arctic Skua** and **Common Gull**, along with a southerly movement of 1600 **Manx Shearwater**. The strong winds continued through much of the remainder of the month keeping passerine migration to a trickle of 'Alba' Wagtails.

An immature male **Migrant Hawker** dragonfly near HG1 on 26th continued the recent trend of this species being relatively commonly seen throughout autumn and confirmed that the species is now breeding on the Calf.

Seawatching continued to provide the main focus during the first half of September and with Ed O'Connor returning to keep vigil from Culbery, we were treated to a good range of species and numbers including **Great Northern Diver**, 14 **Leach's Petrel**, a juvenile **Sabine's Gull** and 12 **Great Skua** on 4th and two **Leach's Petrel**, **Grey Phalarope** and **Pomarine Skua** on 6th. Lighter winds on 7th brought a more significant passerine movement with 47 **Tree Sparrow**, 96 'Alba' Wagtails, 10 **Tree Pipit** and a **Reed Warbler**, increasing with 130 **Goldcrest**, 25 **Blackcap**, 72 **Robin**, 65 **White Wagtail** and 808 **Meadow Pipit** on 8th, when an adult **Hobby** was found near the Twin Fields and remained to 10th.



A quick switch back to the sea produced further **Pomarine Skuas** on 9th & 11th and a **Black-throated Diver** on 12th whilst **Meadow Pipit** passage peaked at 1282 on 16th and a **Wryneck** was seen briefly near Cow Harbour on 17th, when a record count of seven **Buzzard** was also made.

The following week was frustratingly quiet, although the 6th Calf record of **Mediterranean Gull** was recorded flying through the Sound on 20th. Calm conditions on 25th brought a welcome arrival with 42 **Chiffchaff**, 60 **Goldcrest**, a late **Grasshopper Warbler** and a **Pied Flycatcher**, whilst increasing south-west winds on 26th brought a further three **Pomarine Skuas** off Culbery. The first signs of an unprecedented movement of **Pink-footed Geese** were flocks of 22 & 14 on 29th September followed by 71 & four on 1st October and 11 on 2nd. These records of five flocks, totalling 122 birds eclipsed the previous total of 100 birds recorded from eight sightings in 60 years. Two **Brent Geese** off South Harbour on 2nd October were new for the year and the first since 2016.



The now annual arrival of **Yellow-browed Warbler** began with a single from 6th- 12th, with another individual on 13th and two new birds on 14th. Less regular was a **Great Crested Grebe** seen flying south off Culbery, with **Auks**, on 7th being just the 14th Calf record and first since 2005. The eastern theme continued with a 1st year **Red-breasted Flycatcher** in Mill Giau on 12th plus a late-ish **Reed Warbler** at the Withy, a **Pied Flycatcher** in Mill Giau on 13th and the only **Treecreeper** of the year there on 15th.



A second winter **Mediterranean Gull** flew south off Culbery on 16th and three **Short-eared Owl** were around the islet on 19th, when the beginnings of a good autumn thrush passage started, with several counts in excess of 200 Redwing and 300 Blackbird during the latter half of October and into November.

The good passage of divers continued with a further **Black-throated** on 11th and single **Great Northern** on 16th & 26th with at least five birds present on 27th. Seawatching also provided a 1st winter **Little Gull** on 24th and 1390 **Kittiwake**, 30 **Common Gull** and 1628 '**Auks**' south off Culbery on 27th.

Calmer conditions for the last few days of October produced more passerines movement with two **House Martin** on 28th being the 4th latest Calf record. The first of three small parties of **Long-tailed Tit** arrived on 29th and a **Richard's Pipit** was seen and heard in the Lighthouse Fields before it flew off towards Caigher on 30th, when 2574 **Starling** headed west.

Owing to a number of mechanical breakdowns and volunteer illness the number of management tasks achieved during the autumn was somewhat lower than anticipated, although following some severe rainfall which washed a considerable amount of aggregate off the track down to Cow Harbour, repairs and improvement to the ditching along the track were carried out. The 'old' seawatching hide at Cow Harbour, which was originally built in the 1970's, was taken down and a 'new' three-man hide erected in its place. Particular thanks are due to Mark Fitzpatrick and Ian Beggs for help with the dismantling the 'old' hide and laying of the 'new' footings and to Mike Prior who conducted the majority of the re-build.





Numbers of raptors present on the islet were noticeably high during the autumn with daily counts of up to three **Sparrowhawk** and four **Merlin** recorded regularly. This was reflected in the species ringing totals of 10 and four respectively. Three of the **Merlin** were females and biometrics taken suggest that these birds were of the Icelandic race *F. c subaeson*.

Up to 45 **Twite** were present along the East coast during the first week of November and a **Wheatear** on Burroo on 8th was the latest ever Calf record by four days.

The strong passage of **Meadow Pipits** during the autumn led to a record species total of 1235 being ringed and it was rather fitting that, on 6th November, one was

the 8000 bird ringed this year – only the 2nd time in the Observatories 61 year history that this milestone has been passed.

A flock of eight **Long-tailed Tits** arrived during atrocious weather on 9th and remained to 10th when they were trapped at the Observatory. One of the birds was a control and subsequently it was discovered that the bird had been ringed near Doncaster in April 2019. The movement of 285 Km is one of longer distances recorded for the species and perhaps most notable as the first recorded movement between mainland UK and the Isle of Man for the species.



The season ended on the 10th November, with a brief weather window providing the opportunity to leave the island before more autumn storms descended.

One would imagine that life on an isolated island could be a lonely one, however this is far from the case and although the island has a tranquil beauty it is also a vibrant hub of conservation management and scientific study. Many people play a vital role in ensuring everything runs smoothly and we are particularly grateful to the many people that facilitate our programme of work; in particular, the boatmen who bring our supplies each week and during the summer months land day visitors to explore the islet; both Manx National Heritage and Manx Wildlife Trust provide a wide range of support and advice and the many volunteers that pass through each season bring a great sense of achievement and enthusiasm to the place. The Calf is a special place and those that visit are often captivated by its uniqueness.

We are currently recruiting for several long-term volunteer positions during the 2020 season. For further information contact lara@manxwt.org.uk

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