

## Fair Isle visit, 1956

Having spent a fortnight on Foula, Norie and I crossed back to Walls on 25<sup>th</sup> August to be in time for the place I had booked on the 'Good Shepherd' to Fair Isle on the 29<sup>th</sup>. My chance to compare Foula and Fair Isle as stations for the study of bird migration across the North Sea had at last arrived. I was agog with anticipation, having heard so much about the Fair Islanders and the particular problems of their community, including the imbalance between the sexes as a result of no girls having been born on the island for many years. In a community roughly the same size as Foula, it had more men of working age but they were all bachelors.

George Waterston, knowing its ornithological potential, had plotted with Ian Pitman, an Edinburgh business-man, when they were both prisoners of war in Germany, to set up a bird observatory there. They had bought the island in 1948 and established the Observatory in the old Naval huts near the harbour.<sup>1</sup> Then in 1954, to secure the future of the community, they offered it to the National Trust for Scotland. The Trust's plans for improvements were just getting under way by 1956.

We crossed from Grutness on the Sumburgh peninsula at the south tip of Shetland and, arriving at low tide after a rough crossing, had to transfer to a flit-boat to land at the pier. With a following wind and favourable tide, the journey had taken only two hours and fifty minutes, a good time even for the 'Good Shepherd' which was a much larger and more comfortable boat than the 'Island Lass' but with a longer crossing to make. Both the mailboat and the sheltered harbour at Bunes made a comforting impression as compared with Foula's exposed and unprotected harbour and far smaller vessel. We landed at 6.30, just in time for a most welcome meal. The wooden huts offered warm living space and comfortable bedrooms, and the atmosphere showed a distinct bias towards birds and talk about birds. One exception was the renowned journalist and writer Alasdair Alpin Macgregor, an interesting and talkative visitor who promised to offer alternative conversation – and plenty of it – mostly on politics and sociology.

The bird-watchers wasted no time and my diary for the first evening and morning reads:

“Did a preliminary round of the traps with Ken after tea but caught very little. The array of wire-netting is certainly impressive.”

It was the realisation of a dream to be able to talk shop with Ken Williamson, the Director of the Bird Observatory, who had been so helpful to me in my own studies in Norway and on Foula. He had a longer list of bird species recorded on Fair Isle than at any other locality in Europe. His theory of North Sea 'drift' migration was based on his first-hand observations related to weather patterns and wind directions over the North Sea. These in turn were related to the migration studies of Gustav Rudebeck, who had been our mentor in studying migration out of Scandinavia in the 1950s. I had always hoped to make use of his method of deducing when falls of migrants would take place to guide my choice of the date when I first visited Fair Isle. Of course, it doesn't work like that in practice as other factors usually decide when one can pay a visit. This autumn it had to be fitted in between my first return to Foula in August and the promised school excursion to the Isle of May in late September.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a photograph of the Observatory in naval huts on the Stills page ([www.chrismylne.com/stills/places/fair\\_isle/](http://www.chrismylne.com/stills/places/fair_isle/))

At first it looked as though the weather was against us, with high pressure in the south and a westerly airstream off the Atlantic across Northern Britain and the North Sea. At the start of the migration season, there would be whole populations of small passerines, their numbers swollen by the annual crop of young birds which normally are the first to leave, ready to head south for their winter quarters. They would be flying overland following their 'preferred direction' (south-west according to Rudebeck) through Scandinavia or down the Western coasts of Europe and so on through the Low Countries and France to the Iberian Peninsula, the Mediterranean and Africa.

In high pressure with clear skies, they would navigate by the sun, moon and stars by night, as Rudebeck had proved in his laboratories, and find food by day in ideal conditions. This was the basic survival pattern of most of the smaller migrant species, which need to feed by day and migrate by night, with their only likely sea crossing the narrow channels of the Skaggeiak or Kattegat, on either side of Denmark. None of them, except perhaps the larger species like thrushes, with bigger reserves of fat to keep them flying, would deliberately fly across the North Sea. As Ken pointed out that night, birds would already be moving south out of the vast breeding areas of the Arctic and Scandinavia, but we would see none of them unless the wind changed.

What we needed was high pressure in the north, with easterly winds round the bottom of the anticyclone, so that migrants would be triggered to leave in the fine weather, and travel south, often guided by coastlines on either side of the Baltic. With luck – for us, not them – they might then encounter low pressure coming up the English Channel or over the south of the North Sea. If this happened at night, the migrants would run into cloud and rain, and lose their way. 'Drifted' over the sea by the easterly airstream and unable to navigate any longer, they would follow their instinct to fly with the wind to make the fastest time to landfall, which was often decided by seeing the beacon lights of lighthouses down the east side of Britain or on the Northern Isles. So Ken's message that first night was "Sorry, but it's the luck of the draw and you'll just have to listen to the forecasts and hope for the best. At the moment there's not much to see at all."

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August I was up at 5.45 for a round of the traps before breakfast. I could have saved myself the trouble. There were a few pipits and one or two wheatears, probably residents not migrants. It was much what I would have expected on Foula with Willow Warblers the only migrant species, probably breeding birds from the Shetland mainland. We trapped a few pipits and Ken took the opportunity to show us the laboratory routine for all trapped birds, which often occupies most of the time before breakfast at 9.00. All birds were put in a cloth bag to save handling between trap and lab, and then taken out, measured (wing, tarsus, bill, tail) and identified, with the wing formula measured in difficult species. Parasites like feather lice and flat-flies were then removed by chloroform vapour, and the bag examined for further specimens. The bird was then weighed, its stage of moult checked, and finally ringed and released. All this took several minutes even with easy species, but with rarities it could be a long procedure. This was basically the same routine I had followed in the schoolroom on Foula, but with less professionalism and precision.

For the rest of the day little was seen except a single kestrel. Ken called it "a rather poor day". I began to rue my luck in the 'choice' of dates.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> the wind was in the north and it was bright, clear weather. We found some interesting waders on the grassy slopes of Malcolm's Head, an impressive array of sea-cliffs much weathered by the winds off the Atlantic. Largely because I had plenty of time to look for them, there appeared to be rather more birds about the crofts and fields than on Foula, but the only migrants were a single Wryneck, which had been on the island for some days, a merlin, and a few willow warblers. Only pipits were trapped. At the weekend of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> September, there was little change and we had two Church services on Sunday, Kirk in the morning, Chapel in the evening, and much the same congregation and robust singing at both. By this time, I had met many of the islanders and was intrigued most of all by their sing-song Shetland accent, so different from the quieter Foula speech. It was almost like a different dialect, and I found some of it quite hard to understand at first hearing.

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> I had been on Fair Isle for five unusually calm days, a third of my visit, and seen very little in the way of birds except meadow and rock pipits, probably residents or birds moving out of Shetland, and an assortment of waders on the grassy slopes: Knot, Turnstone, Ruff, a single Curlew and a Sanderling in summer plumage, more than I would have expected to see on Foula at this time of year. But at last the forecast was hopeful, with easterly winds and a low moving up the North Sea from the continent. Wagers were exchanged that the next day we might see a change from the empty landscapes of the past week. We did; but nobody could have forecast the change we experienced on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September.

I had indigestion first thing. It was wet and windy outside so I stayed in bed until 7.30. I struggled out for an early drive of the traps. Nothing. After breakfast it rained steadily for two hours and few ventured out until the weather front had passed. What happened next is perhaps best recorded in the words of my diary, to capture some of the immediate effect of one of the most remarkable experiences of my life as an ornithologist:

“I ventured out at 11.45 after lying up most of the morning with a bout of indigestion. Alasdair Alpin Macgregor came with me, though not an ornithologist and on Fair Isle solely as a sociologist. He came out, as he said, for the exercise and experienced one of those occasions that most ornithologists live for. A positive avalanche of birds had come in ahead of the front and, with the weather now brightening, they seemed to transform the island from a wet, birdless landscape to one where every wall, fence, ditch and hummock was alive with birds.

“The first surprise was a redstart on the edge of the cliffs. The first drive of the traps produced dozens of birds, so a quick lunch was taken (in spite of my indigestion) so that we could get down to work. The whole afternoon was spent gathering birds into the laboratory and dealing with them there. Ken and Eva Crackles, who had been at the south end when the rush hit the island, said the arrival was sudden and dramatic. We were almost snowed under with birds. Two Arctic terns on the beach and another Sanderling were just a momentary diversion from passerines. Then it was back to the traps. By 4 pm we had trapped, ringed, weighed, measured and de-loused 75 birds, mostly Redstarts but also Willow Warblers, Flycatchers, Garden Warblers and Tree Pipits. Finally I managed to get away, and went south, leaving several birds, trapped on my way, in bags to be picked up on my return.

“The island was transformed from yesterday. One could not make progress for looking at birds. Every wall and fence was dotted with Redstarts, Whinchats, Wheatears, Pied Flycatchers and Tree Pipits. These were the largest numbers and also the most

prominent species, all being conspicuous types. A transect from the crofts of Vaasetter to Stoneybreck, then as far West as the Reeves and as far south as Shirva, produced the following rough count: Redstart 30; Pied Flycatcher 20; Spotted Flycatcher 3; Tree Pipit 12; Whinchats 17; Willow Warbler 7; Garden Warbler 4; Chiffchaff 1. There were, by all accounts, far more birds the further south one went. Ken counted 40 Whinchats in one small field and one could see half a dozen on every fence. Tree Pipits were calling everywhere, and the flirt of a redstart's tail became a blur of orange to the eye, it was seen so frequently. Numbers are quite impossible to estimate, but Redstarts, the prominent species, went down in the Schedule for the island as 1000+ for the day. Trapping went on till dark, every visitor arriving back with another dozen birds until a total of 98 was reached. In five minutes, we had topped 101 by catching a Redstart roosting in the Observatory trap, a Garden Warbler lurking in an empty barrel, and a tired Willow Warbler in thistles down by the shore. A well-deserved century.

“5<sup>th</sup> September. Another fantastic day. The ‘Good Shepherd’ took out half a dozen visitors and brought in George Waterston, Irene Kinnear and four others. During the bulk of the day therefore, only Geoff Stansfield and I were in the lab. While Ken beat the traps, we ringed birds steadily both before and after breakfast. Ken had been out first at 5.00 am and I followed after saying farewell to the ‘Good Shepherd’ and watching Alasdair Alpin Macgregor pushing the flit-boat off from the pier with his umbrella! I reached the Double Dyke trap about 5.50 and got 7 birds in the first drive, mostly Wheatears. Ken had left about the same number in bags, so I returned with these to make a start on the ringing. He followed at breakfast time with another 40 or so .... There had been another minor rush of Wheatears on top of yesterday's arrivals. Birds were everywhere. A Wryneck flew the wrong way down the Gully trap. Again, prominent species were numerous – Redstarts, Whinchats, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Wheatears – so that every fence and wall-top seemed alive with birds. Yellow first-winter Willow Warblers were common too and several Common Whitethroats and Garden Warblers were caught. A 1<sup>st</sup> winter Barred Warbler was brought in ....”

And so it went on, my diary recording details of such birds, of which I had only seen one before in my life. After lunch, Ken and I went south and at the North Grind trap I got a ‘lifer’ (the first Bluethroat I had ever seen in Britain) by dint of a flying leap over the wall, so that within seconds of first seeing it, I had it in my hand for close examination. Round the crofts we were putting birds out of the crops on the rigs everywhere. The species were largely the same as the first day but with a fresh influx of Pied Flycatchers, which were everywhere. Also:

“Today's Willow Warblers were different from the young yellow birds handled in the lab. yesterday. They were brown on the back and greyish on the wings and tail, with very little yellow on the underside; clearly from a different breeding area, the *acredula* subspecies. Two Ortolan Buntings were feeding on the road below Mires, and another Barred Warbler dived into the bushes at Leogh ... At least three Bluethroats were seen there in the crops, one an adult male in lovely plumage and carrying a ring on its left leg. There was also yet another Barred Warbler and a strange bird like a brown Garden Warbler, very plain and brown on the back but too large to be of the *acrocephalus* type. Even KW admitted defeat. There were several exciting possibilities.”

With potential rarities to be identified in the field rather than in the lab, and so many common birds to be counted, using binoculars became quite exhausting. Every bird had to be looked at

carefully and many were not exactly the sort of species I see every day at home. I soon reached saturation point and developed a sort of ornithological indigestion. My eyes needed a rest, but as I put down the glasses, the flash of an unfamiliar plumage pattern demanded to be looked at and identified. Calls helped, as with yet another pair of Ortolan Buntings flying over near the Haa, and there could have been dozens of Ortolans on the island. As my diary records:

“To get home for tea we just had to shut our eyes, and cycle hard down the road, ignoring literally hundreds of small birds flitting to left and right as we passed. After tea, trap driving continued till dusk and the ringing total finally reached 153 – the previous record having been 117 in a day. A new fall of Pied Flycatchers took place after 1500 GMT with another 6 or 7 trapped towards evening. The ‘Good Shepherd’ had reported the species on her way across to Grutness in the morning, and they have undoubtedly come in during the day, probably after feeding on the Shetland mainland after arrival the day before.”

The wind was still from the south-east, but the weather was flat calm and humid, with very poor visibility for the next three days so that no more birds seemed to come in; but numbers gradually fell away in spite of heavy cloud cover and low mist. In my ignorance, I kept rather quiet while the experts discussed whether this supported Raynor’s theory of onward migration or Kramer’s. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, yet another wave of Wheatears had arrived and 20 were ringed, putting the day’s total up to 66. New methods of trapping were tried, and some repairs done to the Heligolands. A mist net on the shore caught four more Bluethroats as well as an unexpected Bar-tailed Godwit, a rarity on Fair Isle. On the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>, a mist net at Leogh caught a whole batch of birds including a beautiful male Blackcap. By mid-day the area seemed deserted, but the day’s count of Bluethroats was 16, mostly immature birds, though some showed the blue gorget, and two adult males showed the red spot in the middle of the blue crescent. Ken declared these in as good plumage as any he had seen in spring.

On Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, I was privileged, though slightly nervous, to be asked to take both church services, Chapel in the morning and the Kirk in the evening. I saw nothing of the migration that day, but there was little about apparently – except Ortolans and Bluethroats!

It was as though such convenient timing was part of my good fortune in choosing perhaps the best ever week on Fair Isle since the Observatory opened. I certainly wasn’t lacking in subject-matter for my sermons, as all the islanders must have been aware of the euphoria among the ‘bird people’ and the hordes of migrants, and bird-watchers round their crofts. Many Fair Islanders are good bird-watchers themselves and take an intelligent interest in the work of the ornithologists. They will often talk to visitors about their wonder at the ability of such tiny creatures to reach their shores across the North Sea, and sometimes even the Atlantic.

I remember George Waterston telling me of a conversation he had with ‘Fieldie’, venerable elder statesman of the croft called Field and a specialist in the identification of such rarities as Petchora’s Pipits, which he could tell by their unusual call. He had no time for Ken’s fancy new theories about how the birds arrived on Fair Isle under the influence of complicated weather patterns. He was firmly of the opinion that they arrived by “some divinely imparted knowledge”, and that was good enough for him. So, as I had also done on Foula, I talked to the Fair Isle congregation about the miracle of migration and the natural wisdom of our fellow passengers on Planet Earth who like us could only survive (as Fieldie well knew) by the Grace of God. I also reminded them that this latest ‘avalanche’ of little miracles on Fair Isle would be as good for them as the quails in the desert in the time of Moses, for when the word got

around among the bird folk and the visitor numbers went up as a result, they could regard the birds of the past week as manna or ‘pennies from Heaven’.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> of September it was all over and we were back to counting individual birds again. If I had been honoured on the Sunday by being welcomed to their pulpit, Monday brought a further privilege when I was invited to join their annual visit to the Sheep Craig to take off the year’s crop of lambs. The Sheep Craig is the prominent landmark just off the cliffs on the precipitous south-east corner of the island, a cliff-bound stack topped by a steep pasture of green grass which has always supported its own separate flock of sheep. There is only one method of access – up the sheer cliff, a route historically made easier by the salvaging of a heavy iron chain from the galleon from the Spanish Armada, which was wrecked on Fair Isle by the storm which scattered that formidable fleet round the coasts of Britain.

Dodie (George) Stout and his boys came for us at 9.30 on Monday morning with two flit-boats, one with an outboard engine towing the other, from the south harbour of Bunes. It was still flat calm, so we landed without difficulty on the rock slabs below the cliffs and, using the excellent hand-holds on the chain, climbed without too much effort to the top. There we found some wooden hurdles with which they made a rough ‘cruie’, though it proved mostly ineffectual in catching the 14 full-grown lambs, most of which were tackled by the Stouts, who would have made an excellent Rugby team on the evidence of that morning.

The sheep were tied in pairs by their feet and then lowered unceremoniously about 200 feet down to the boats waiting below. Their heavy fleeces prevented too much struggling as the boats moved in close to take them aboard. It was all over by mid-day when we made slow progress, loaded to the gunwales, to the south harbour. We could see why they had chosen such a calm day for this annual chore. For me it was a memorable morning of which the highlight was when we had descended hand over hand down the chain, and then watched the young men, with more bravado than sense but apparently perfectly safely, literally run down the cliff so fast that their hands hardly seemed to have time to make use of the links of the chain for a grip. It was impressive, and made our descent look pathetically slow – as indeed it was clearly designed to do. And the only practice they got was once a year!

By the 11<sup>th</sup> September, the men had started work on their harvest at the south end and blue skies and a fresh breeze made my first photographic opportunity for a week. Only 6 birds were trapped and ringed – back to normal. But this figure brought the total since my arrival to 578. It was a great deal of work for a procedure with a recovery rate often as low as 1%.

After so much calm weather I had not expected to get an extra day on the 12<sup>th</sup>, when a very fresh wind delayed our departure. We spent some time searching the crops in vain for any new arrivals, so I took the opportunity to accept some of the invitations we had had to visit the crofts. I had been warned about the two old ladies at Outra and so was able to feign some interest in their enormous collection of very faded, scarcely discernible photographs, none of which meant anything to a stranger but were all their world to them. But the tea was as warm as the welcome and the home-bakes excellent. At Leogh, our call on old Willie was a real pleasure: “Oh dearie me, yes ...”. And our final visit to Schoolton made a very pleasant evening.

I found Fair Isle speech took some getting used to after what I was familiar with from Foula. Both used many Shetland words and phrases which I knew well enough, like the distinctive bird names, but there were Fair Isle ones I did not recognise. The whole manner of speech was

more sing-song than the gentler Foula tongue, more nasal perhaps. This had seemed also to be their style in Church on Sunday where the singing was robust, joyful, a paean of praise that almost raised the roof. It was heartfelt rather than musical but still lifted the soul. One thing I did notice in our casual chat was their great interest in Foula, which was coupled with a certain tendency to criticize, occasionally quite harshly. Fair Isle has a reputation for being a community which knows its own mind and for people who are businesslike and energetic. By contrast they seemed almost to despise the slower pace of life on Foula and the tendency of people there to put things off till tomorrow. I suppose I naturally jumped to their defence, though I agreed there was a difference of temperament. There is no doubt that the Foula folk are much more isolated and out of touch, and that Fair Isle has far more incentive to work hard as they have far greater opportunities for success. On Foula, poorer living conditions and communications, together with the lack of visitors, would seem to be the most likely causes of their greater insularity.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> we were lucky to get across on a heavy swell but with the wind and tide behind us so that the crossing was comparatively smooth. We were even able to enjoy watching Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters off Sumburgh Head on the way in to Grutness. Just how lucky we had been was all too apparent on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> September. We had left Lerwick on the St Ninian, heading for Aberdeen via Orkney, and at 5 am I went on deck as we came in to Kirkwall and the ship was clearly having difficulty coming alongside. There was a Storm Force 11 gale blowing broadside on, and we watched two of the steel cables snap as they tried to winch her in. Only just in time, a nylon cable was brought into use and I watched in horror as it stretched until it was only half the thickness it had been at the start. But luckily for all concerned it held, and the winches slowly pulled us in to safety. I just hoped the Fair Isle crew had had time to get the 'Good Shepherd' safely winched on her cradle to the top of the slipway at Bunes the night before.