

## Visit to the Isle of May, 1956

*[By early 1956, Chris Mylne had returned from 18 months as a teacher and lay missionary on Foula, and taken up a post as Classics master at the boys' preparatory school run by his father, which was by then based in Fife. A few of the boys were keen on bird-watching, so he decided to organise a visit to the Isle of May during the Easter holiday.]*

So it was that a week at the end of April staying at the Observatory in the old lighthouse gave two of my pupils their first experience of bird ringing, identification of tricky species like Meadow and Rock pipits in the hand, counting of breeding eider-ducks and terns – and the joys of island living. We all had the sort of holiday which only an island can give, a few days to make every cliff, rock-pool, inlet and promontory part of our own little kingdom. With hundreds of rabbits to chase even Norie, my dog, was in Heaven most of the time, until sheer exhaustion got the better of him.

My reaction to this rekindling of my enthusiasm for islands was to start planning my first return visit to Foula at the end of the summer term. Then, as I would be in Shetland anyway, why not include – at last – my first visit to Fair Isle? To complete the plan, and because the last week of the summer holidays fitted neatly into the best part of the autumn migration, I thought why not end up with a return visit to the Isle of May just before the start of the autumn term? Indeed, why not make it a joint-schools excursion, by inviting an old friend and fellow teacher, John King, to join us. He ran a Field Club for boys at his school, the Edinburgh Academy, with a view to recruiting youngsters to the ranks of the Scottish Ornithologists Club by giving them exciting field experience. Before long, he had found two enthusiasts in the same age range as my two 13-year old pupils, and six places at the Bird Observatory were booked.

In the meantime, I had arranged accommodation on Foula for a fortnight in August in the Manse during the school summer holiday. I had also booked in for a fortnight on Fair Isle hoping that the weather would allow me to leave Foula in time to catch the 'Good Shepherd' from Grutness on the 29<sup>th</sup> August. I was even able to obtain permission for me to take Norie with me to all three islands. Somehow it seemed almost obligatory for me to take him back to Foula where I knew it would have caused great disappointment had I not had 'da pirie dog' with me. But it is a measure of the more relaxed attitude to such things which prevailed then, as it would almost certainly not be possible now at any of the observatories which are also nature reserves, like the Isle of May. It meant taking him on six sea journeys so I had to pray for good weather for both of us, although my own horror of sea-sickness had waned with the new generation of travel pills.

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[Following the return from Fair Isle at the end of August,] I only had our joint schools expedition to the Isle of May to complete my autumn migration watch. We arrived on 17<sup>th</sup> September on Willie Hughes' boat from Anstruther to find few migrants, so that on the first day we only ringed five birds, including two goldcrests. The boys could hardly believe that any living creature so small could survive a sea crossing and we had to instruct them how to handle such fragile birds, weighing less than 10 grams, without harming them. Our first morning saw several migrants species, probably birds from the 'avalanche' continuing their journey south.

Best of all was a magnificent Long-eared Owl sitting in the catching box of the Top Trap, together with a number of terrified passerines which could easily have been its intended breakfast. Then, after several quieter days when sea-watching and fishing filled up the time, we had a mini-invasion with much the same species as on Fair Isle, especially Wheatears and Redstarts. Conditions were very similar to those on Fair Isle with the birds arriving on a South East wind, but we then had several days of fog with the fog-horns blaring most of the night, which takes a bit of getting used to. Migrants were in single figures in this calm spell, during which the Academy boys left on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and my fiancée Margaret arrived to help us work the traps. Two days later, the fog still persisted and seemed to prevent any birds finding us in spite of the south-easterly winds. But on the 23<sup>rd</sup> the fog cleared at mid-day and we had a repeat of the daytime arrival of a wave of birds, with figures into the tens for several species.

So the boys were able to experience, but on a more modest scale, the same magic I had witnessed on Fair Isle of an island almost empty of birds suddenly alive with tired migrants coming in off the sea after a hazardous journey. One felt one had one's finger on the pulse of an often invisible natural phenomenon which was suddenly converted into an exciting treasure hunt, a miracle revealed; the survival of the fittest made abundantly clear.

We had one or two rarities like Lapland and Ortolan Buntings and a Bluethroat, so there was plenty to keep us happy, though hardly busy. Then, on the very last day, as so often happens, there was a mini-invasion of thirty Chaffinches and sixty Siskins. They seemed very hungry and were feeding on the seeds in the lighthouse keeper's garden. We caught one, and as they called incessantly we tried putting it in a small cage as a call-bird to attract the others, right in the mouth of the Low Trap. It worked, and the flock moved down to the area, shortly before Willie Hughes was due to take us off on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The siskins conveniently went for cover right into the Low Trap and we caught over twenty of them in one fell swoop. While we carried the luggage down to the pier, the boys took advantage of their training and had them all ringed and entered in the book just in time for our departure. The total of birds ringed in our nine-day visit was 101. We were soon back at school for the winter term but I like to think my two budding ornithologists had something special to look back on that winter.

**Footnote:** In June 1960 I received a postcard of the sort that makes all that hard work at a Bird Observatory seem more worthwhile, in spite of the very low rate of recoveries of ringed birds among the smaller passerines. It was from Joe Eggeling, of the Nature Conservancy, who for some years was responsible for the technical side of the Isle of May records and so received the official notification of any recoveries from the British Museum in London. It read as follows:

“Dear Chris,  
You will be interested in the following recovery of a Blackcap ringed on the May by you, John King and associated schoolboys in 1956:

♀ Blackcap (B 76205), ringed 18.9.56 Isle of May; recovered (shot) Kfarsbrun, near AMYUN, Lebanon 25.4.60.

Very special!  
Yours,  
Joe.”

The Blackcap was already one of my favourite warblers – the female for its dapper grey plumage and coffee-brown crown, and the cock bird for its song, one of the richest and most mellifluous of all our summer songsters. But this record boosted the species even further in my estimation. It was an adult in 1956 and so must have made at least eleven journeys between Scotland and the Middle East, presuming that that was its normal wintering ground and Scotland its preferred breeding place. Each journey must have involved flying a minimum of 2,450 miles each way (as the crow flies, though probably far further as the migrating Blackcap flies) making a total of at least 27,000 miles in its lifetime. What an achievement by such a tiny, brave morsel of life! What a wonderful example of the evolution of the migratory instinct which has endowed the brains of such small living creatures, warm-blooded like ourselves, to navigate successfully between summer and winter habitats so far apart in order to survive and prosper!

It seems infinitely sad that some members of our own species have the power with one press of a trigger to snuff out such a life for the sake of making it part of a luxury, gourmet dish. It's also tempting to ask whether the Lebanese hunter has the right to deprive us of part of the rich song-pattern of our summer woodlands for the sake of a mere mouthful. There's a snag, however, in our condemnation of those who hunt passage migrants. Without his gun, and his submission of the ring he found on the bird to the British Museum in London, our efforts to unravel the mysteries of migration would almost certainly have come to nothing. How often, if ever, have you found, out of the millions of birds in our landscape, one that has died a natural death? It could be said that ringing small cover-seeking birds in shrub or woodland habitats is really rather a waste of time and effort. No wonder Joe Eggeling classed our recovery as "very special"!