

# CBO News

Quarterly newsletter of Copeland Bird Observatory

ISSUE 02

November 2012



**Editorial** Well, the first issue of CBO News was well received, and so it looks as though we will be producing a new issue every three months or so. My initial worry was that I would have difficulty finding material for each issue, but if this issue is anything to go by, my problem will be trying to fit it all in! So much has been happening on the Observatory that it is almost impossible to do every story justice in a newsletter of this length. Nevertheless, I hope that the activities detailed here will both help to keep you up-to-date with what is going on, and whet your appetite to become more involved in the detail.

I was privileged during August and September to assist with leading a number of day visits to the island – school visits, Island Guardian visits, and one for Northern Ireland Environment Link which included two MLAs as visitors. Peter Weir (North Down) and Simon Hamilton (Strangford) learnt first-hand about the research and conservation work that CBO is involved in. I believe they were both extremely impressed, and I hope they will stay interested in what we do.

Shane Wolsey, Editor



MLAs Peter Weir and Simon Hamilton share a shearwater moment during their visit to CBO during late August (Shane Wolsey)

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St Helena Wirebird (Neil McCulloch)



South Trap work party, Philip Galbraith, Jenna Potter and Erin Galbraith – see page 5 (Shane Wolsey)

## Winter Meeting Programme

Three winter meetings will be held this season. They will be held in the Ulster Museum, access via the Stranmillis Road entrance, at 7.30pm, finishing at 9.30pm. Admission is free.

**Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

There will be two talks:

Plovers in Exile: getting to know the St Helena Wirebird, by Neil McCulloch, and

How the wild things get there: tackling the mystery of bird navigation, by Richard Holland

**Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2013**

There will be two talks:

A bit of birding around India, by Ian Enlander, and

Lough Neagh diving ducks, by Irena Tominkova

**Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2013**

There will be forms of entertainment:

Annual General Meeting, and

Puffins and terns on Copeland 2012, and plans for 2013, by Shane Wolsey

These meetings are open to CBO members and non-members alike. Please feel free to bring along anyone you think might be interested.

**Shearwater tracking 2012** Oxford Navigation Group at University of Oxford returned to the shearwater colony on Copeland Bird Observatory (CBO) to track 20 incubating adults and 20 chick-rearing adults in June and July 2012. Five of us, Annette Fayet and Phillip Collins (during incubation) and Akiko Shoji, Daniel Burke and our principal investigator Tim Guilford (during chick-rearing), stayed on the island and worked at the study burrows. Our aim was to understand behaviour in a free-ranging marine animal and study the decision-making process under varying environmental conditions by using GPS loggers during incubation/chick-rearing. Until recently, due to the difficulty of following these animals all year around, behaviour outside the breeding season in seabirds was poorly understood. With recent technology developments in the field of miniature data loggers, we are able to track at high resolution animals as small as shearwaters (~450g; see Fig. 1). GPS tracking, combined with the use of geolocators, allows us to understand when, where and how they move (or not) in addition to various phenological insights, and has considerable potential for application in future biologging studies and in other taxa (Dean et al. 2012). As seabirds are known to be good indicators of marine environment, this kind of study of seabird behaviour helps us to develop management and conservation plans. We expect that our study will provide important information to help future conservation policy makers. In 2012, one of our GPS deployed birds went into Atlantic (Fig 1), and overall most birds tend to take longer time at sea. By analysing data, we hope to find an answer why they have different foraging trips between years, and what is the implication of the trip length and location. We thank Phil Collins and Daniel Burke for their help in the field. During our stay, we received great hospitality from Copeland Bird Observatory. Our work at Copeland would not have been possible without CBO's support. Thanks to all of those who we met on CBO!

Akiko Shoji

Dean B, Freeman R, Kirk H, Leonard K, Phillips RA, Perrins CM, Guilford T. 2012. Behavioural mapping of a pelagic seabird: combining multiple sensors and a hidden Markov model reveals the distribution of at-sea behaviour. J R Soc Interface.



Shearwater chick being processed (Akiko Shoji)



**Figure 1.** An individual GPS track from Copeland 2012 during incubation. The black star indicates the location of Copeland Bird Observatory.

**Manxie update** Manx Shearwaters seem to have had an average year though doubtless the extreme June rain caused them some problems. The study burrows seemed to indicate all was well. There was a lot of disruption to our normal shearwatering routine due to the breeding terns this year, this meant we could not visit Lower Shore, Cliff or East Promontory at night. If everything goes to plan this may be the case every year so we may have to re-evaluate our routines.

The first part of the chick ringing season saw low manning (the only part of the autumn missed) but it did not matter as there was a full moon at the start of September. Under these conditions chicks hardly venture out of their burrows at all, only making a mad dash for the sea when ready. This means that few are caught.

From the second week of September, effort was better, and it was noted by several members that a lot of chicks seemed quite light. Indeed in the third week of September it was considered that 50% of chicks were too light to undertake a successful migration. The other 50% however were in excellent health with some extremely tubby birds – a case of the haves and have-nots. On Skomer Island chick weights this autumn have been lower than normal and this seems to match what we were seeing on Copeland. GPS tracking in July resulted in some very long feeding trips, so overall, it appears that many parent birds have had a difficult year finding food.

Kerry Leonard



**Reed Warbler** An adult Reed Warbler was caught in the 60' Withy net at noon on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2012. This was the 5<sup>th</sup> to be ringed at the Observatory. Interestingly, the first Reed Warbler, in 1983, was a spring bird on 7<sup>th</sup> May and was also an adult. The remaining records, including a ringed adult from Denmark in 1998, have all been in autumn, and all between 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> September. The new birds caught in 1992, 2008 and 2009 were all birds of the year and were all caught in the North Garden nets.

This bird had a consistently more olive tone to the upper parts as far as the rump than would be expected of a young bird. The rump and tail were warmer brown. Five old, worn tail feathers were bleached brown, contrasting with new darker brown outer feathers, two on the right and one on the left. On the head, the flat crown was brownish olive with a pale stripe on the lores and a pale buffish eye-ring. The upper mandible was dark brown, the lower pink, tending to pale orange at the base, which was noticeably broad. The pale creaminess of the chin became increasingly buffish through the throat and breast, becoming creamier again on the belly. The flanks were warm buffish brown. Tongue spots were absent.

A full written description, including measurements and wing formula, and several photographs were taken. It seems likely that, with the continuing breeding success of this species in Northern Ireland, Reed Warblers will occur on the island more regularly in future, even if not quite annually.

Chris Acheson.



Reed Warbler (left - Adrienne Poots, right – Ian McKee)



Common Rosefinch (David Galbraith)

**Common Rosefinch** 8<sup>th</sup> September dawned as a typical early autumn morning at the observatory, most folk were tired after a busy night ringing shearwater chicks, so the fact there were not too many morning birds was a bit of a mixed blessing. A small day trip with some newcomers to the island, including a ringer from the Czech Republic, arrived mid-morning and whilst showing them around the nets, an unexpected catch was discovered at the Withy. There had been little all morning, so the presence of a Common Rosefinch required something of a quick double-take! It was quickly extracted and taken to the lab, where its identity was confirmed. This was only the third ever to be caught on the island.

I well remember the first one, in September 1977, when as a bleary eyed teenager, I was woken from my slumbers on a very wet and windy morning to see what was one of very few birds caught the entire weekend. The 2012 bird was a bird of the year, so relatively drab, but exciting none the less. An extensive photographic record was obtained before it was released, flying off strongly into cover, not to be seen again.

David Galbraith

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[www.facebook.com/copelandbirdobservatory](https://www.facebook.com/copelandbirdobservatory)

**Autumn ringing 2012** Following a spring which saw pleasing numbers of a range of scarce species ringed, a summer which saw spectacularly successful breeding of Arctic Terns at the Observatory and recovery of the Black Guillemot colony following Otter predation in 2011, the autumn season (August – October) has also been good in a number of ways.

Two rarities were ringed in September – a young Common Rosefinch on 8<sup>th</sup> September, the third to be ringed on the island, and ringed by Davy Galbraith who had also been present for the capture of the first Common Rosefinch in 1977! (A female was ringed in 1989 and another seen in 2003 – these 4 birds remain Northern Ireland's only records for the species). Then an adult Reed Warbler turned up exactly a week later, at exactly the same time and in the same net. This was ringed by Ian Humphreys and was the fifth new Reed Warbler at the Observatory.

Throughout August and September, 77 Swallows (including 5 pulli) and 2 House Martins were ringed, along with a Spotted Flycatcher. Migrant warblers were very disappointing, with only 19 Willow Warblers, 8 Chiffchaff and 3 Sedge Warblers ringed. Autumn Blackcaps were better with 14 ringed, while the Goldcrest recovery continued – 29 were ringed in September with a further 35 in October. Robins also continued to arrive or pass through regularly in small numbers. Fourteen Dunnocks were ringed, a few staying for a couple of weeks.

Autumn on the island is characterised by the passage of finches and, to a lesser extent nowadays, thrushes. As usual, Lesser Redpolls were most numerous, the first catch of 30 on 15<sup>th</sup> September occurring quite a bit earlier than in previous years. Ironically, the final total of 414 matched that of 2007 and 2010, thus becoming the second equal highest total ever recorded at the Observatory. Goldfinches were also numerous this autumn and the annual total of 123 (115 ringed through September and October) is far and away the best for the species ever recorded at CBO. A sprinkling of other finches included 4 each of Greenfinch and Siskin, 11 Chaffinch and 16 Linnetts. A similar sprinkling of thrushes in September and mainly October included 13 Blackbirds, 9 Song Thrushes and 2 Redwings.

Despite some visual passage of Meadow Pipits, only 2 were ringed all year, both in autumn. Similarly, although several Sparrowhawks were seen, none was ringed. Moorhens continue to be scarce and elusive, but the good news is that Water Rails are thriving and 4 were ringed, 2 in September and 2 in October. As a result of the species nesting on the island this year, 2 Wood Pigeons were ringed – an adult at the end of July and a juvenile in mid-October. Five new Storm Petrels (and 2 controls from elsewhere) have been caught and by the end of the Manx Shearwater ringing season (20<sup>th</sup> September) 488 Manx had been ringed – 31 adults and 457 pulli/juveniles.

Chris Acheson

**Autumn migration 2012** It has been a good autumn on the Observatory with a high level of manning and some good migration noted, despite some variable weather, with the bird of the autumn being a juvenile Common Rosefinch on the 8<sup>th</sup> September (see page 3). Lesser Redpoll has become one of our principal autumn migrants in the last ten years. There was an early start to migration this year with birds passing from mid-September. Many of these birds were coming from Scotland. A maximum of 120 was recorded with 30+ on many days.

It has been so-so for Goldcrests as they slowly recover from the catastrophic lows of the last few years. However the maximum count was still only 12 and most days only 3-5 arrived. This is still a long way from what would be expected in good times. It was a poor autumn for Meadow Pipit with peaks of 78 on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 120 on 28<sup>th</sup> September and 50 on 13<sup>th</sup> October. Apart from these, numbers were mainly in single figures and even on perfect migration days it was a struggle to record any migrant pipits. However, it has been a good autumn for Skylark (peak day 30), Robin (up to 35) and Dunnock. Robins and Dunnocks are not traditionally thought of as migrants by most people but there is considerable autumn movement. No Dunnocks, and just 2 pairs of Robins, breed on the Observatory, so arrivals of new birds are obvious.

Chaffinch numbers were disappointing and Siskins trickled through in single figures on many days. Greenfinches were occasionally present with a peak of 14 on 9<sup>th</sup> October. The first 2 Twite of the winter passed through on 9<sup>th</sup> October. A Crossbill on 10<sup>th</sup> October was an excellent record. Unusually Tree sparrows made an appearance with 2 on 10<sup>th</sup> October and 20 on 20<sup>th</sup> October, these birds moving into Ireland. There were some notable movements of Reed Bunting with 15 on 19<sup>th</sup> and 12 on 20<sup>th</sup> September. A flock of up to 250 Goldfinches were present throughout September, feeding on the bountiful ragwort seeds, and these were a target for several Merlins throughout the autumn.

Two Mistle Thrushes on 3<sup>rd</sup> October was a good record as they are uncommon on the island – both these birds arrived from Scotland. Song Thrush peaked at five but Redwing were in single figures during October. A late willow warbler was present on 9<sup>th</sup> September and a late sedge warbler on 18<sup>th</sup> September. 1 to 3 Chiffchaffs were present most days as were 1 or 2 Blackcaps.

The best warbler of the autumn was a Reed Warbler on 15<sup>th</sup> September (see page 3). Swallows peaked at just 180 on 20<sup>th</sup> September, House Martins at 40 on 6<sup>th</sup>. The last Swift passed on 8<sup>th</sup> September. Pied Wagtails trickled through with 2 White Wagtails present on 18<sup>th</sup> September. Grey Wagtail were present on 4 days. Occasional Carrion Crows appeared including 6 on 6<sup>th</sup> October.

Many duck and wader species are scarce and only seen flying past as there is little suitable habitat for most species. So common birds like



Tufted Ducks are actually pretty rare at the Observatory and 16 on 8<sup>th</sup> October was notable. Grey Plover were present on three dates and a nice Long-tailed Duck on 30<sup>th</sup> September. Seventeen Knot on 7<sup>th</sup> October were good. 8 Pink-footed Geese passed on 18<sup>th</sup> September and Whooper Swans were noted on 3 dates.

Finally skuas were generally scarce this autumn. There were single Pomarine on 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> September, and September peaks of 7 Arctic and 12 Great Skuas.

Kerry Leonard

Occasional Greenfinches present (Kerry Leonard)



### New Heligoland trap

On a cool and breezy afternoon at the end of June, a group of island regulars along with a small (but enthusiastic) group of Duke of Edinburgh Gold students from Belfast High School (Rory Sempey, Jenna Potter and Erin Galbraith), left Donaghadee for the Observatory for a week with the sole objective of constructing the new South Trap, a Heligoland style trap. The project was grant aided by NIEL. There had already been trips to the island in March and April to take out the large quantity of materials needed, but many more tools and smaller pieces of equipment were also brought.

Work commenced immediately with a final site survey and transport of materials, but it was Saturday morning before work started in earnest. The trap was designed to cause minimal disturbance to the island's vegetation and breeding birds, particularly by being below the level of the flight path of shearwaters breeding at South Promontory. A small amount of pruning of bushes was required and some strimming of bracken. Holes were dug to concrete in the supporting posts – a difficult job in the shallow, slaty soil, and bedrock was often encountered after only a small amount of excavation. This required the use of a kango hammer to dig sufficiently deep to set the posts.

By the end of the first full day, the team was happy with progress, with all of the outer posts sited, and concreted, despite the cement mixer failing at the most inopportune moment. Even though we were on an offshore island with no parts available, we were able to carry out an improvised repair to the main drive cog of the mixer sufficient to allow us to carry on. The weather was particularly unhelpful throughout the week with frequent heavy rain, mist, drizzle and often cold and windy. Nevertheless, work continued in a generally happy atmosphere! The next few days saw more posts set and wire strainers positioned.

Over 2 tons of concrete had to be mixed – a difficult and back breaking job anywhere, but all of the materials had to be carried to the site in 25kg bags, even the water had to be carried over 200m, a bucket full at a time.

Wednesday saw a rare glimpse of the sun in the afternoon, and with that, the visibility improved beyond the 200m or so that we had become accustomed to. This encouraged us to put out the telescopes as dinner cooked around 18.30, and within 20 minutes of this, we noticed every gull and tern lift off Mew Island suddenly. We immediately suspected a bird of prey, and sure enough after a short search we spotted it flying high over Mew, heading south. The bright sun light behind us and the telescopes meant we got a fantastic view of an OSPREY, only the second ever seen from the island. Within a very short time, it had flown towards the Big Island and then on along the Ards coast, presumably near the start of its southward autumn migration. Shortly after this, we also had a good view of a Minke whale beyond Mew.

Work resumed the next day in the now customary drizzle and poor visibility, and by the end of Thursday, we had managed to complete all of the walls of the trap, most of the wire strainers for the roof, and made a start on the catching box ramp. Despite our best efforts, we did not have sufficient time to finish the job. This is really quite a major construction project and a significant milestone in the Observatory's development, but it was clear that further work would be needed to get the job finished.

The Duke of Edinburgh students thoroughly enjoyed the project and worked extremely hard, often in difficult conditions. It is always encouraging to see young people embrace this sort of project to make it their own. They hoped to return for the final completion of the trap in the autumn.

Two separate work days then followed later in the month, when more progress was made, but it had become clear that we had seriously underestimated the huge amount of labour required to complete a project like this. We were then fortunate to have the benefit of a large work party from the National Trust, led by Craig McCoy, who came for a weekend in early September and made significant progress. Additional roof supports and strainers were installed and further progress was made with the weld mesh covering. There were further bursts of activity throughout September and October, with the final sections of the roof and some minor finishing off being, at last, completed. The trap is now operational and ready for action. There will still be some minor 'fine tuning' required in spring 2013, but hopes are high that the new 'South Trap' will prove a valuable asset to the Observatory.

This project was led by Chris Acheson, with invaluable assistance for the construction from Belfast High School Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award students, the National Trust, and many other willing volunteers, too numerous to mention.

David Galbraith



The new South Trap emerges from the mists of Copeland! (Shane Wolsey)



Chris Acheson with Duke of Edinburgh student, Rory Sempey (Shane Wolsey)

### Seal pupping time

In the early days of the Observatory, Grey Seals produced about 3 pups annually at the end of October. Numbers have risen at an increasing rate so that the number produced in recent years has risen to about 30 on the observatory and around 25 on Mew Island. In recent years, the first pups have been appearing ever earlier. Five years ago, the 24<sup>th</sup> September was considered the typical date for the first pup. In 2012, it was 11<sup>th</sup> September. Nevertheless, the peak is still late October and some births still happen in early November. On 18<sup>th</sup> October there were 21 pups counted around the shores of the Observatory.

There has been a suggestion based on tracking that some of the population of SW Britain have been straying north as far as the North Channel, even to pup. They habitually give birth much earlier than the northern populations. So it is a possibility that the mothers (cows) giving birth in September may have originated from SW England or Wales.

It is easy to view the pups on Copeland without disturbing them – the rocky terrain allows a discrete approach behind rocks. The pups have white to creamy-white fur for the first three to four weeks of their life but quickly moult into a blackish coat and depart about a week after turning black. They are fed by their mothers for about 3 weeks before they are deserted, by which time they are very big. They are reluctant to leave for another 1-2 weeks but pluck up courage when they become hungry enough.

Neville McKee

**New water tanks** The tank team (Larry, helped when needed by Neville) have now spent 13 working days in May, September and October on the NIEA/NIEL funded project to replace all the old rusting and leaking water tanks with new plastic tanks of greater capacity. It has taken a lot of hard work and ingenuity to complete this work. Removing the old tanks has also not been easy but there was help from day visitors for the most awkward tank. Tank 1 behind dorm 2 serves the hot and cold taps in the kitchen. Tank 2 is just outside the back door. It provides water directly for buckets etc around the buildings but it is also a reserve. Connections are in place to transfer water from tank 2 to either tank 1 or 3. Tank 3 is behind the wash and shower room and serves the flush toilet. Being larger than their predecessors, new connections from the roofs and also to the hot tank, kitchen and toilet had to be made.

Tank 2 was largely in place and working by May, tank 1 by September and tank 3 by October. Connecting tank 3 to the back of the eastern roof was difficult as the top of the tank was just about level with the roof gutter. A design change meant the final connection to this tank had to wait until October when more parts were brought out. The hardest parts of the work were the making of a 6" platform of concrete to set tank 3 on. The platform for tank 1 had to be extended to accommodate the larger tank. Hardest of all was getting the old redundant tank 1 lifted up and over the west wall with only two people to do that, using a sort of home-made crane. For Larry, the easiest bits were probably all the skilled plumbing. The third member of the tank team was Wesley who applied for the grant and organised transport of the tanks and ancillary components to the island.

Neville McKee



Copeland Bird Observatory, established in 1954, is Northern Ireland's only bird observatory, and operates annually from late March to the end of October. The manning and administration of the Observatory is carried out entirely by volunteers who visit the island to record migrant and breeding birds. The islands also hold important populations of breeding seabirds, in particular Manx Shearwater (the only colony in Northern Ireland) and Arctic Tern. The Island is part of the Copeland ASSI (Area of Special Scientific Interest) and SPA (Special Protection Area). CBO's mission is to maintain and manage a bird observatory on Lighthouse Island. We wish to enhance the island resource and its biodiversity through the use of sustainable management practice, good science and inclusive education. We will do this in a way that can be managed by, and supports the integrity of the Copeland Bird Observatory as a voluntary organisation and ensures that it is open to all members of the community.

**CBO News** is compiled and edited by Shane Wolsey. If you wish to make a contribution to **CBO News** please send your text and photos to [shane@swolsey.biz](mailto:shane@swolsey.biz). All contributions and photos are individually credited.

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