

CBO e-News

Copeland Bird Observatory e-Newsletter (Spring 2014)



Diary Dates

Habitat Management Trips

See pages 5 & 6 for details

The Copeland Bird Observatory (CBO) was formed in 1954 and is Northern Ireland's only bird observatory. The CBO is situated on Old Lighthouse Island off the County Down coast, at the southern side of the mouth of the Belfast Lough. The Island is 40 metres high and 16 hectares (40 acres) in area.

The main aims of the Observatory are to collect data on migratory and breeding birds, to manage the island for the benefit of birds, and to develop and manage a conservation education programme. It is operated on a part-time basis by volunteers and is open from late March to the end of October.

CBO Website:

www.copelandbirdobservatory.org.uk

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/copelandbirdobservatory



Old Lighthouse Island

Newsletter Articles

Please forward your stories and photographs for future issues to Niall Waterman.

Email: niallwaterman@hotmail.com

Boat Testing in Scotland (4th January 2014)

Davy Galbraith phoned me up before Christmas and explained that he would be bringing a delegation (including Wesley Smyth, Philip and Erin Galbraith) over to Scotland to test a couple of boats out for a potential acquisition by CBO. I thought, yes, Scotland is a big place, it is unlikely to be within travelling distance of me, being stuck out rather on a limb in Mid Argyll, just across from Ballycastle, nowhere near the main populations or boating centres. But, Davy told me the boat was at Ballachullish, just north of Oban. Great, I thought - my patch, and "did I want to come along and meet up with them and look at the boat?" - You bet I did!!!

It turned out to be not that far north of Oban, near Glen Creran forest that I visit quite a bit for my work. Definitely my patch. Another (power boat trained) CBO member Philippa Revill came with us to look over the boat.



Testing Party (minus Ian)

The photos speak for themselves. It was the first weekend after Hogmany (New Year), great weather, dry, sunny, calm and crispy cold, and the boat turned out to be a great prospect. Paul, the current owner was very accommodating, answering all of our questions, and had clearly looked after the boat extremely well. The best bit was that he was keen to take us out for a run from Creran marina. We launched from the slip, into deep, dark, enthralling but flat calm water, with a backdrop of beautiful snow capped mountains.



Getting ready to launch



Scenic backdrop with snow capped mountains



Testing underway at Cruise Speed

The boat was a fantastic prospect, running very well. It was quite surreal meeting up with a group of CBO members that I usually only see on CBO, but in a familiar place for me, with a special purpose.

The story ends there for me, but not for Davy. He had to negotiate the price, transfer the money, arrange delivery, registration, rating, and dear knows what else, all extremely time consuming, and I imagine frustrating and hard work. Thanks Davy, see you all on the boat this year! *"Slainte"*

Ian McKee

NIEA Challenge Fund Secures Humber RIB for CBO

On our trip to Scotland we investigated several potential boats, but were unanimous in agreeing the one at Ballachulish was not only in the best condition, but was also best suited to our particular needs. We agreed a price with the seller and that was that. All that had to be done was to organise the transportation back to Northern Ireland.

That came around a month or so later, when it was delivered (by road) to Northern Ireland. The previous owner, Paul Mills, has been extremely supportive to us and as well as offering lots of great advice, he also kindly offered to transport the boat and all equipment over to us. A small sub-committee was formed to deal with all matters relating to the new purchase. We had a lot of paperwork to complete and various official inspections and surveys. The new boat is fully licensed to carry 12 passengers and all of the safety equipment was closely checked and updated where necessary. This now gives us an alternative option to complement the existing boat service and will allow us to transport visitors to the island with speed as well as safety. We hope to be able to run various sightseeing and bird watching trips this year and details of these will be advertised later.



'Copeland Shearwater' – Humber RIB (8.5 metres long with a 300 hp outboard engine)

This is a big step for the observatory and will hopefully help to sustain and complement the excellent service provided by our boatman, Philip McNamara, who will skipper the new boat. We have also had lots of help and advice from Philip and without his support the project would not have been possible. The new boat, now named 'Copeland Shearwater' is ready for service and we hope to have it operational very soon.

Finally, our thanks must also go to the NIEA Challenge Fund 2014 administered by the Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), who financially supported the project and without this support it would simply not have been possible.

David Galbraith

Test Your Identification Skills (Answers on Page 10)



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)



(h)



(i)



(j)

Updating Contact Details

Please contact the Membership Secretary if your contact details change (e.g. new email address).

Ron Bishop (Membership Secretary) – **Tel:** 028 9336 4040, **Email:** rh.bishop1@gmail.com

Habitat and Path Management

The last newsletter promised to tell how you can get involved in the path and habitat management work that has been carried out for many years now on CBO. We have planned a number of weekend and week long trips, and a special day trip to showcase the work that has been going on and what our hopes are for the future, and (optional) how you can help.

There is a huge benefit to birds, rabbits, and visitors in continuing this work, and it is cumulative: ***the restoration areas have required less and less work as they have progressed from rank to short sward vegetation.*** So if someone wishes to gain experience in a “cutting edge” conservation project – CBO has got a lot to offer people studying ecology or environmental sciences.

CBO is looking for volunteers to carry out the mowing, wheel-barrowing cuttings, bringing refreshments, or providing some much needed motivational encouragement! How much and what you want to do is totally up to you. Everyone is welcome, and new volunteers will be coached and looked after.

If you know someone who may be interested in helping out on CBO with this work, please tell them about it and pass on the contact details below. Several new lawnmowers have been purchased this year, including the one in the photograph below which has been chosen to be especially user friendly for beginners.



Mowing on CBO



New lawnmower for volunteers

The following opportunities have been planned, led by Ian:

The weekend from Friday 9th to Sunday 11th May: We will be cutting down a group of 12 to 15 Sycamore trees in the Millennium Wood, taking the firewood up to the buildings, and replanting the glade with Hazel, and protecting them with rabbit proof plastic netting. This is to enhance the future foraging habitat and net-site capabilities.

The weekend (and week) beginning 30th May through to 1st and 6th June: First mowing week of the season. The bracken and red campion will be growing fast. Lawnmower and wheel barrowers welcome, however this is the toughest gig of the year, with bluebells making mowing difficult on some areas and paths.

The weekend (and week) beginning on 18th July through to 20th and then 25th July: Second mowing weekend/week opportunity. Beginners very welcome, this is usually a great time to work on the island!

The weekend (and week) beginning 12th September through to 14th and 19th September: Third and last mowing of the season, preparing the paths and areas for the winter. All welcome.

For the week long trips, volunteers can also stay from the Sunday to Friday only if this suits better.

Please contact Ian McKee by emailing ian.s.mckee@gmail.com if you wish to find out more details about how you can get involved. Bookings for the trip will be taken by David Galbraith.

Ian McKee

Special Day Trip (Habitat Management)

Saturday 19th July 2014: Special day trip for those people interested in finding out all about the habitat management that is carried out on the island.

We hope this is of interest to people who:

1. Want to find out what we do on CBO to manage the important and valuable habitats
2. Want to know what it is about so that they can tell others
3. Perhaps want to help with the work in the future



A healthy rabbit population (May 2013)



Fescue dominated short sward



Pennywort spreading through restored maritime sward



Restored pennywort and fescue grass sward

Ian McKee will lead a guided tour of the island, telling the story of how the paths and areas have been managed to improve the habitat for birds, the quality of the habitats themselves, and access. Topics covered will include:

- a) What the valuable habitats are and what they look like (including how they function for birds and for visitors)
- b) How the habitats have changed in type and quality over the years
- c) Management techniques – the good and the bad
- d) What is involved in working on the island

Usual membership and visit fees apply. Please contact Ian at ian.s.mckee@gmail.com if you wish to book or find out more about the day trip.

Ian McKee

Early Years at the Observatory

BEFORE MY TIME

With the Observatory now 60 years old, it seems an ideal opportunity to look back at the early experiences of the pioneers who had the vision and drive to establish the first and in many ways, the only, Bird Observatory in Northern Ireland. Island life in the early days was undeniably tough (by modern standards), but the foresight, determination and sheer hard work then laid the foundation on which we have continued to build to ensure that generations still enjoy the magic of the island and the superb ornithological opportunities which enthrall us from time to time during the more usual pleasure and enjoyment.

Old photographs in the Observatory's archive open a fascinating window to show various aspects of what those early experiences were like. Those of us who are used to running hot water, comfortable beds, family rooms, gas ovens and hobs, flush toilets, electric lighting and, dare I say it, fast boats at the Observatory might well marvel at – and enjoy – this brief look at the way things were during the first few years of operation.

THE JOURNEY

As we celebrate the recent acquisition of our new (second-hand) Humber 8.5 m RIB, which will complete a single journey to the island in 7 or 8 minutes, it is interesting to look back at the arrangements in the mid-1950s, just as the Observatory was beginning to operate.

In those early days the service was provided mainly by Andy White and John Trimble. Andy retired during the 1959 season. John continued to be CBO boatman through the early-mid 1960s, at which time William Lennon came increasingly into that role. John continued sporadically up to about 1970.



The boat arriving at the East Landing (9th April 1954)

This group in transit to the island (top of page 8) in June, 1954 includes Miss Edith Addy (Committee member, 3rd right, with glasses) and John Wilson (extreme left). John, a founder member, is great-grandfather of Iain, Philip and Erin Galbraith, making the Galbraiths one of Copeland Bird Observatory's two fourth generation families. The other, of course, is the McKee/McCrory line – Neville's father, Hugh McKee, was also a founder member and the Observatory's first Honorary Treasurer (until 1961). Hugh's great-grand daughter is Lily McCrory, daughter of Fiona (nee McKee).



A group in transit to the island (June 1954)

John Trimble (below) ferries a group back to Donaghadee from the island on 27th May, 1956. The more eagle-eyed may just be able to spot the old radar screen on the skyline behind the buildings. John's working attire, including shirt and tie, provides an interesting reminder of how things were then.



John Trimble (27th May 1956)

THE BUILDINGS

When the Observatory was established in 1954, the only building on the island which actually had a roof was the one which we now refer to as “the Old Building” on the North side of the old lighthouse complex. Most people are familiar with the stories of meals cooked on primus stoves in the glow of light from tilley lamps and “mattresses” of bracken laid directly onto the stone-slabbed floor.

With any thoughts of comfort far from their minds, our early predecessors preferred instead to put much effort into re-roofing a room in the front range to serve as a ringing laboratory. The sequence of photographs below documents the establishment of the Observatory’s first lab and gives us a peek inside.



Jack Loftus and Errol Butler surveying the new ringing laboratory roof (19th May 1956)

Two members (above), Jack Loftus – who was the motivational force behind much of the early building work – and Errol Butler, survey progress on the new roof of the first ringing lab on 19th May, 1956. This photograph was taken from the front garden, looking towards the front of the buildings. The doorway under the ladder is what is now the main front doorway into the kitchen (now enclosed by the porch, of course), while inside this the internal doorway leading off to the right provides access to the new lab. Note the pitched gables with tall chimneys (to reduce the effect of the wind on smoke blow-back from the coal fires) and the fact that no other part of the building is roofed yet. The right-hand gable marks the East wall of the current large Common Room – still a far-off project.

Visiting the Copeland Bird Observatory (CBO)

Trips to the CBO should be booked in advance through the Bookings Secretary.

David Galbraith (Bookings Secretary) – **Tel:** 028 9338 2539, **Mob:** 07885 834398

Email: davidgalbraith903@btinternet.com



Old Lighthouse Buildings (27th May 1956)

The most noticeable feature in this general view of the old lighthouse buildings (taken 8 days later, on 27th May, 1956) is the old radar screen behind them, a relic of the island's role during the war. The roof of the new lab can be seen in the centre of the front range. All accommodation is located in the Old Building, seen between the right-hand gate-post and the radar screen.

Most of us know the site of the old radar screen as the Manx Shearwater sub-colony "Radar", beside the Wall trap. This excerpt from the 1959 Annual Report is interesting –

"In August, we finally managed to fell the old radar screen. The condition of the girders in this structure was such as to give us cause for worry, but with two hacksaws (one of them home-made the night before) a few members brought the structure to a condition where it could be pulled over."

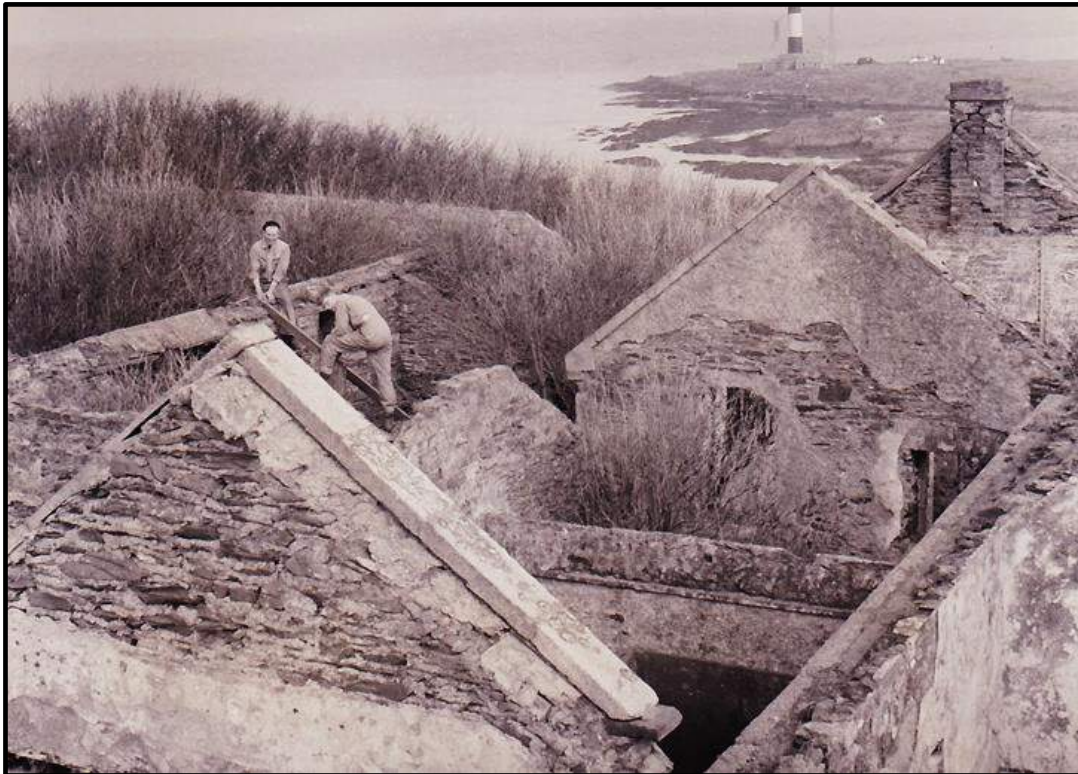
The interior of the new lab (right) on 24th June, 1956. Members were pleased that the new lab was "conveniently sited within a few yards of the catching-box on the Heligoland trap" (which would soon be operating - see page 12). Although conditions are clearly primitive, the natural lighting is very good! However, on the advice of Ken Williamson, Migration Research Officer of the BTO, work began on a new ringing laboratory in the back yard early in 1959. As a result, this lab became the Common Room when the "new" lab was established in the back yard in 1959 and then later on was converted into the current Dorm 2, beside the kitchen.



Interior of the new laboratory (24th June 1956)

Answers to Identification Skills Test on Page 4:

- (a) Swallow (b) Purple Sandpiper (c) Small Copper (d) Siskin (Kerry Leonard©) (e) Oystercatcher
(f) Speckled Wood (g) Redshank (h) *Prunella vulgaris* (Self-Heal) (i) Common Centaury (j) Forget-Me-Not



View over the derelict lighthouse building towards Mew Lighthouse

Looking out over the derelict lighthouse buildings (above), towards Mew Lighthouse, which can be clearly seen. The chimnied gable (top right) and the next (central) gable mark the site of the future East Dorm (Dorm 4). The gable in the left foreground is the East wall of the future Men's Dorm (Dorm 2). The bottom, right-hand corner of the photo marks the beginning of the passage-way from the current kitchen towards the current Common Room.

The photo (right) shows the view from the Old Building, looking South. The right-hand gable (with the chimney) is the West wall of the modern kitchen (where the sink is!). The tall chimney was removed and the gable lowered (for safety reasons) when the modern kitchen was established in the early 1960s. The gable in the centre belongs to the current Men's Dorm (Dorm 2).

A similar view (below) from a slightly different position shows that the old lighthouse tower has not really changed since the mid-1950s.



View looking South



Old lighthouse tower

THE TRAPS

The first Heligoland-type trap was completed on 21st April, 1956. This was a small version of the current Gully Trap, built in the same location. As the 1956 Annual Report states –

“At the first opportunity we intend to enlarge this most useful little trap for it is well sited and has already caught hundreds of birds.” (i.e. by the end of the 1956 season).

“The second small Heligoland-type trap was a wall trap situated just North of the building and visible from the Common Room window. It was ready for operation on May 20th and began to catch birds immediately, but is not yet pulling its weight. Some relatively minor adjustments should make a big difference to the results.” Remember, this refers to a time when the Common Room was on the ground floor of the Old Building. For obvious reasons this trap (and its successors on the same site) came to be known as the “Wall Trap”.

The decision to build a large Heligoland trap among the elders on the East side of the buildings was finally made when Bob Spencer of the BTO confirmed that the selected site was indeed the best position for one. The trap (the Heligoland) came into use on 12th September, 1956, even though it was not yet finished – *“We only got about 50 ft of it constructed before the close of the season, but hope it will be 100 ft long when completed”*.



Original Gully Trap (20th May 1956)

John Wilson extracts a bird from the catching-box of the original Gully Trap on 20th May, 1956, watched by at least 9 other enthusiasts, including Jack Gray (centre, then Hon. Secretary and later Director and Hon. Treasurer) and Joe Mitchell. Joe was the Observatory's first Ringing Secretary, serving in the post from the Observatory's foundation, in 1954, until the end of 1973. **TEN** people on a drive of one of the traps – Happy Days!!

Chris Acheson

CBO is supported by the following:

