

CBO News

Quarterly newsletter of Copeland Bird Observatory

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Editorial Welcome to the August 2012 CBO News. This new format of newsletter will be distributed electronically, replaces our e-news emails and is designed to reside on the CBO website where it will be available to everyone, and form an archive as we publish future editions. I hope you find it informative and enjoyable.

This issue covers all the news for the Island during summer 2012. After several poor years for breeding seabirds it is good to report that 2012 has been a great year. Arctic Terns have bred successfully on the Observatory island – the first time for 60 years! The chicks that fledged are the first on the Copeland Islands to do so since 2006. Black Guillemots have recovered after a poor 2011. Common Gulls have also increased and spread around the island. And the Copeland Puffin project has had instant success.

As I write this, autumn migration is well under way – indeed most of our Willow Warblers, Sedge Warblers, Cuckoos and Swifts have already left. Our volunteer Duty Officers on the Observatory give their time to monitor our migrants, as well as the breeding seabirds, but they need the help of as many others as possible. Why not get involved by visiting the island?

We hope you like the new look newsletter, please feel free to send it on to all who may be interested, and make sure to let your friends know about our news page.

Shane Wolsey, Newsletter Editor



Shane Wolsey

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Kerry Leonard

Tern attraction This summer has been a roller-coaster for breeding terns on Copeland. The season started well with close to 700 pairs nesting on Big Copeland. Initially they were doing well with chicks hatched close to the jetty. However in late June torrential rain caused most of these birds to abandon their nests. Over the course of a week these birds started to relocate to the outer two islands until, quite unbelievably, there were approximately 500 pairs on the southern shore of the Bird Observatory. These birds started nesting extremely late – usually all terns on Copeland give up by early July.

By early August the shore was covered with young flying terns and we estimate as many as 200 have fledged, the first confirmed fledged since 2006 on the Copeland Islands and the first on the Bird Observatory for about 50 years! In a year when many other Northern Ireland colonies have done very poorly it is very pleasing. Approximately 260 chicks were ringed.

The success this year must be down to a continued supply of food to feed the chicks, but is probably mainly due to the amount of cover available on Copeland for chicks to hide under. The southern shore is covered in Campion and other vegetation under which chicks can shelter from heavy rain. Indeed weather which would have been disastrous for the terns on Big Copeland was shrugged off by the birds present. Although some small chicks were killed by heavy rain survival of larger chicks was very good. Another factor was the tern decoys and playback system on Mew. One of these systems could be heard clearly from the Observatory and I am convinced this encouraged the terns to stick at it. A considerable amount of physical and emotional effort goes into monitoring and trying to look after these birds so it is tremendous to see them do well after so many poor years!

Kerry Leonard

Copeland Puffin With a £8,600 grant from NIEA Challenge Fund (administered by Northern Ireland Environment Link), we have, during the 2012 breeding season, been trying to attract Puffins to start breeding on the island. Puffins are not doing well at their two NI breeding sites – Rathlin Island and Gobbins – for reasons that are not entirely clear but could include possibly food availability, climate change or predation. Lighthouse Island, in Copeland group, has no rats, mice, cats, mink, foxes or ferrets and so is almost ground predator free (not entirely because we have the Otter!).

Puffins tend to be faithful to their natal site, but they have prospected on our island in the past, and so we decided to see if they could be encouraged to take up residence. The project has involved 50 Black Guillemot nest boxes being deployed, vegetation management of Puffin colony area (near the Shag slope cliffs), 50 Puffin decoys being deployed along with a solar powered sound attraction system.



Copeland Puffin sound system

First (real) Puffins visited on 9th June, and were present daily until near the end of July, with a maximum count of 38 Puffins. They were visiting burrows, and very active on the ground and adjoining water. The project was too late to lead to breeding this year, but the response of the puffins has been extremely positive and so we have real hopes for 2013. A successful Puffin colony would add greatly to the interest on the island and be a real economic benefit to our stakeholders.

Shane Wolsey



George Henderson

Black Guillemots It has been a good year with 43 nests found on the Observatory island. We can never find them all (burrow nesting birds are particularly difficult to locate) so there are probably around 50 pairs on the island. There were also six known nesting attempts on Mew Island. From these 43 nests we ringed 42 chicks – a good haul. Copeland Black Guillemots produce an average of one chick per pair attempting to breed so this is about normal. This amount of activity is especially pleasing given the very poor 2011 when an Otter killed 20 adults and destroyed 15 nests. It shows that there is a large pool of immature birds ready to take over one of the nesting spaces, and that we probably miss a significant number of nests each year.

Kerry Leonard



Margaret Adamson



Otter update Positive news on the Otter front this year. Thanks to an NIEL Challenge Fund grant we were able to purchase additional ultrasonic deterrents to try and prevent the high level of seabird predation witnessed in 2011. An Otter is still present with spraint found throughout the season and the resting holt in use. However only a single shearwater has been found predated during the entire year. Of five or six terns found predated (all but one being chicks) two may have been predated by an Otter but it is much more likely a Kestrel or Buzzard was the culprit for the other birds, remains being found below known raptor plucking posts in Bluebell Gully. Overall the project to deter the Otter, while still allowing it to go about its business on the island, has been a great success.

Kerry Leonard

Breeding season news Apart from the good news about Puffins, Black Guillemots and Arctic Terns, the variable and mostly cool wet weather has not had too serious an effect on the island's breeding birds. A pair of Jackdaws and another on Mew were successful. Hooded Crows and Magpies were not apparently successful, despite the extra food supply in the form of the Pheasant eggs produced in quantity by at least 3 pairs. No Moorhen territories have been recorded, however 4 territories of Water Rails produced young and there may well have been more. Of the passerines, 2 pairs of Chaffinches and 2 pairs of Blackcaps were successful. A Willow Warbler pair tried but the outcome is unknown. Four Reed Bunting territories and five Sedge Warbler territories showed a good effort by these birds, but just one Meadow Pipit and no Linnets, not even on Mew Island, was disappointing.

There are several very secretive breeders on the island which are always hard to estimate. Robins have produced young, silently as usual. Blackbirds have fledged a few but much less success than usual. Song Thrushes may have tried to breed. Wrens are in good numbers, perhaps not yet up to the level before the two hard winters. Starlings (5 pairs), Swallows (5 pairs) and Pied Wagtails (1 pair) have been successful.

The large gulls continue to increase slightly except Great Black-backed which failed to rear young this year. Common Gulls did particularly well but about 30 pairs of Black-headed Gulls on Mew had only limited success. The secondary Arctic Tern colony of about 220 pairs at the lighthouse also suffered near total predation. Oystercatchers have also declined, probably for the same reason.

The big news of the spring was that a pair of Peregrines took over the 2011 Raven nest. This happened nearly 20 years ago too, and that pair failed to hatch its eggs after 6 weeks of incubation. The same happened to this year's pair. It is likely that the female was a first time breeder and there is often a failure to hatch first eggs. The havoc caused by the pair in 1994 did not occur to the same extent this year. Perhaps the 2012 pair travelled further for their food.

Neville McKee

Late July work party A work party from the Bristol area visited the island for a long weekend in late July. This trip had been in the planning for nearly a year. The team had visited about 14 sites over the past 10 years at various sites, nearly all islands, doing all kinds of heavy and skilled voluntary work. Their speciality is stone wall building and repair.

The work they did on the Observatory was varied. The steps down to the flush toilet and to the Storm Petrel net were greatly improved to make the descent to these places less hazardous. The main task was to rebuild the wobbly wall in front of the buildings. The island's rock is very difficult to construct a dry wall with because it is so irregular. However, the skilled Bristolians took only a day to reconstruct it in such a way that it can now be safely walked on without the stones falling apart, as happened before. It looks much nicer too.

They also took on the job of making the wall at the gap through to the Wall Trap secure. It had been badly undermined and clearly was about to fall apart. It has now been made safe with cement mortar.

The final task was the pollarding of some alder trees in the original north garden plantation. Coppicing or pollarding rejuvenates nearly all species of deciduous trees. The process ensures that the trees are healthy, densely branched and twigged with lots of leaves, and therefore dense shelter for a thriving insect life which in turn is good food and shelter for the migrant birds. The cut branches were cut into firewood and kindling sized lengths. The Observatory is close to being self-sufficient for fuel to heat the buildings.

Neville McKee



Autumn 2012 (so far) Migrants have been trickling through the Observatory since late July. Willow Warblers have been mostly present in single figures, but with the occasional day over 10 which included 40 on 17th August which is a late date for this many. Small number of Wheatears passed through at the start of August. Swallows have so far been conspicuous by their absence with a peak of just 70 on 20th August, with one House Martin. The peak for both these species is late August/early September. There were 12 Swifts on 20th and 5 on 21st, feeding on a significant emergence of flying ants. The first Goldcrest of the autumn was present on 19th and the first Grey Wagtail flew over on 20th. A probable Long-eared Owl was seen briefly in mid-August.

Waders are a feature of July and August and the islands host large numbers of migrant Curlew, of which there is a significant turnover. Over 90 have been observed regularly with a peak of 300. Whimbrel have been noted most days with small numbers of Redshank, Dunlin, Turnstone and Ringed Plover.

Away from birds it has been a generally poor year for butterflies and this has been reflected on the island. Just seven Red Admirals have been seen in August and southerlies on 20th brought our first two Painted Ladies of the autumn. A Peacock was seen on 21st and 22nd. Red Admiral numbers can peak in early September so there is hope yet! Several Buff Footman moths trapped on 20th August was a new species for the island. Late August also saw a large emergence of the small grass moth *Agriphila straminella* – every person reading this newsletter will have seen them even if you do not know it! They are the common whitish coloured ‘grass’ moth which are raised from lawns and parklands when out walking. A thousand were estimated on 20th though the true figure may have been five times this number. It is of course possible that many of these moths were also migrant visitors.

Most unusually a Pipistrelle species bat was seen on two dates in August, bat sightings on the Observatory are very rare. Some further work has been carried out on the system to upgrade our water tanks, and the construction of the new South Trap has continued apace thanks to many hard working volunteers. Ian McKee and his team of helpers have been doing a sterling job keeping the island path network open in the face of some amazing rampant growth by Ragwort and Red Campion. Certainly 2012 is turning into a ‘Ragwort’ year with plants growing thickly across the island.

Kerry Leonard

Brownies and Guides On 4th August the Observatory welcomed Brownies and Guides from 12th Bangor, and Guides from 7th Bangor to the island. The girls were shown round the Observatory and given a run-down of what the Observatory does and why it is important. We were very lucky to see two Puffins still visiting the slopes. Most popular of course were the chicks on show and the girls got to see and handle Black Guillemot, Arctic Tern and Manx Shearwater chicks. As usual the weather on the Island was superb, sunny and warm despite a warning of heavy rain, and a great time was had by all.

Kerry Leonard



Shane Wolsey

Don't forget to keep absolutely up-to-date via

www.copelandbirdobservatory.org.uk

www.facebook.com/copelandbirdobservatory



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 your text and photos to shane@swolsey.biz. All contributions and photos are individually credited.

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