

# CBO e-News

Copeland Bird Observatory e-Newsletter (Spring 2015)



## Diary Dates

### CBO Day Trips

The day trips planned for 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> May are both fully booked. Sufficient interest for the 23<sup>rd</sup> May was shown to allow a second boat to be put on. There are still a few places available on this boat. The cost of the day trip is £15 for adults and £10 for under 16's.

### Volunteer Opportunities (Habitat Management)

Please see page 11 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 approximately 36 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.the.cbo.org.uk](http://www.the.cbo.org.uk)

#### **Facebook:**

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



**Observatory building**

## New Roof Planned for Observatory

The Observatory building is the central hub on the island, accommodating volunteers carrying out important observatory and conservation work, visiting university researchers and habitat management teams. In June, the building will be getting a much needed new roof. The new roof will be a Kingspan Trapezoidal insulated and Firesafe roof.

The roof project is planned to start on the 7<sup>th</sup> June. The observatory will be closed to visitors during the installation, which will probably take around two weeks. A small number of physically able and willing volunteers will be required to assist the Engineering contractors during this period. It is likely to involve at least two overnight stays. If you think you can help, then please get in touch.



**David and Philip Galbraith measuring roof**

Finally, our thanks to the NIEA Challenge Fund 2015 administered by the Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), who financially supported the project.

Test Your Identification Skills (Answers on Page 11)



(a)



(b)



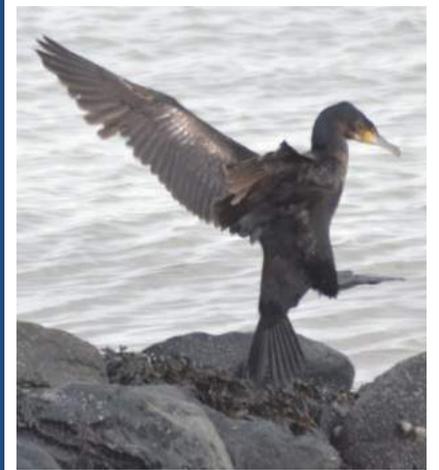
(c)



(d)



(e)



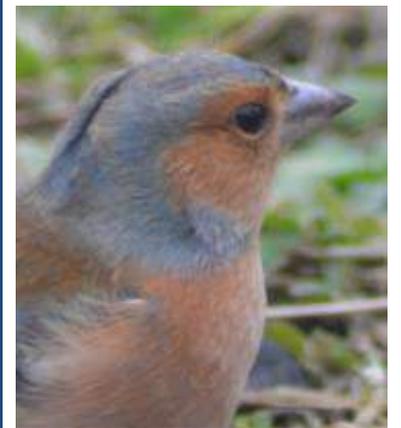
(f)



(g)



(h)



(i)

**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](mailto:davidgalbraith903@btinternet.com)

## **Iceland Expedition (1955)**

The aim of the 1955 North Iceland Expedition was to contact and photograph the Iceland (Gyr) Falcon and Pink-footed Goose, among others. Besides Arnold Benington, the North Iceland Expedition 1955 team members had all been early members of the CBO, and were either from Workers' Education Association or were former pupils of Friends' School, Lisburn of which Arnold was Vice-Principal.



**Team members from left to right: Herbert Jeffery, Brian Moller, Arnold Benington (sitting), Jack Gray, Michael Benington, John Wilson (sitting), Jack (Dusty) Miller (sitting at back) and Gordon Greeves**

The overall span of the Expedition was from 28 May to 6 July 1955 (including nine days out and back). A requirement was to transport enough dry foods to sustain the whole team for the month-long camping trip. These supplies were kindly provided by sponsors.

The first setback came on arrival in Glasgow, when the team had to take taxis to Edinburgh due to a national rail strike. The Iceland Steamship Company ran a fortnightly sailing on MV "Gullfoss" from Leith, from where the eight set off on 30 May.



**B. Moller, A. Benington, J. Wilson, J. Miller and J. Gray with supplies**

Arriving in Reykjavik at 8am on 2 June, they later went to Thingvellir, their first camp. They were unsuccessful in finding Great Northern Diver or Snipe, but did see Redwing. On Sunday 5 June a short service was held in the small local church, when Psalm 91's reference to "preservation from the snare of the fowler" was appropriately recalled.

It was back to Reykjavik on 6 June. Regular service buses on the dirt-road 280 miles northward to Akureyri were currently interrupted by floods, so a four-wheel-drive ten-seater bus had to be hired at some expense! This was towed through swollen and boulder-strewn rivers in places where bridges had been swept away. Arriving late in the evening, a local school kindly let the team stay the night and use their facilities.



Map of Iceland



Travelling in Iceland



Travel from Akureyri to Myvatn on 7 June was by milk-lorry with some seating. A voice from behind the Expedition members enquired "Are you boys from Lurgan?" A Professor Delargy from Dublin was on a parallel expedition!

A week at Myvatn (which lived up to its name of "Midge Lake"! ) revealed how good a place it was for birds including twelve species of wild duck (e.g. Goldeneye and Tufted Duck), Slavonian Grebes, Short-eared Owls, Snow Buntings, Greenland Wheatears, Mealy Redpolls, Ptarmigan, White Wagtails and Arctic Skua.



Jack Gray surveying the Icelandic landscape

Myvatn was also noted for its Alpine arctic flowers and highlighted by marsh violets, moss campion and blue butterwort. The "moon-like" lava landscape, with extinct volcanoes, sharp lava and steaming geysirs, was unequalled, as was the warm water for facilitating dish- and clothes-washing.



Whimbrel on eggs

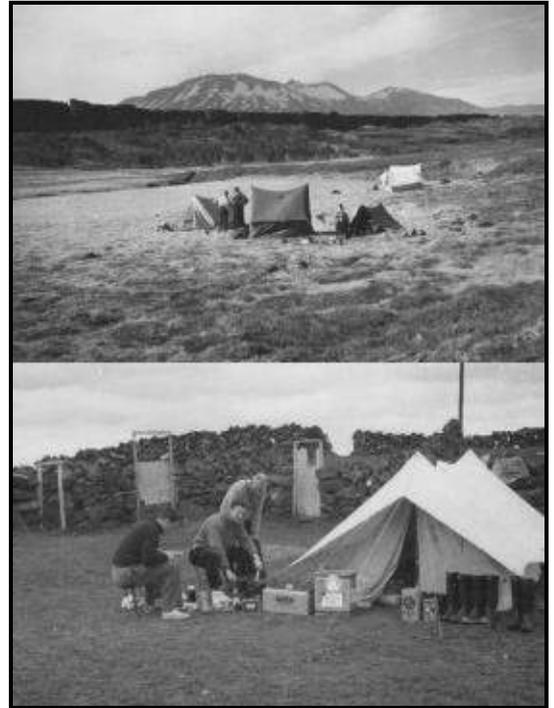


Golden Plover and nest

On June 14, four members had to return to Northern Ireland, as their leave was up. Arnold Benington, Gordon Greeves, Jack Miller and Brian Moller first doubled back to Godafoss in the milk lorry, then went by four-wheel drive jeep with luggage trailer to a farm (Vidiker) where they were able to stay the night in a barn. They were surprised to receive their mail in this remote location!



**Loading Icelandic ponies**



**Camp sites**

The final stage of their journey to the interior desert was by Icelandic ponies alongside the river (Skjalfandaflljot) which drains Iceland's biggest icecap (Vatnajokull). When they eventually were confronted with the amazing sight of Gyrfalcon and Pink-footed Geese with their young, they set up camp at Hrafnabjorg. The discovery of these nests at this site in the North Iceland desert were the high-point of the whole Expedition and made it well worthwhile, for it can be noted that Sir Peter Scott had observed the Pink-footed Goose breeding at Thorsarver, towards the South of Iceland, only four years earlier.



**Pink-footed Geese (© Arnold Benington)**



**Gyrfalcon with young (© Arnold Benington)**

The next nine days were largely spent in securing, moving as necessary and maintaining the hides - made from hessian and steadied by lava blocks - in which Arnold, an expert photographer, would spend many hours at a time with his camera, producing well-focused black-and-white images.

### **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](mailto:rh.bishop1@gmail.com)

A week later, on June 23, Icelandic ponies were again produced. Brian Moller's leave was now up and, getting to Akureyri, he travelled on a night bus which arrived in Reykjavik at 5.30am on 24 June. When the driver discovered Brian was not due to fly to Glasgow until the next morning, he drove the bus round to a hotel. "This will be on the company" he proclaimed as he gave a fifty króna note to pay for a room.

Arnold Benington, Jack Millar and Gordon Greeves were able to return to Myvatn for a further week's valuable observation: concluding a successful Expedition they arrived home on July 6.

**Brian Moller**

*The CBO e-News would like to thank the Very Reverend Brian Moller for sharing his memories and images of the 1955 Expedition in this 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.*

*Additional pictures from the 1955 Expedition can be found in the book "Arnold Benington, Adventures of an Ulster Naturalist (2009)". The book is available from Jonathan Benington (In Flight Books) through Amazon.co.uk. Thanks to Jonathan for kindly allowing the images to be reproduced below.*



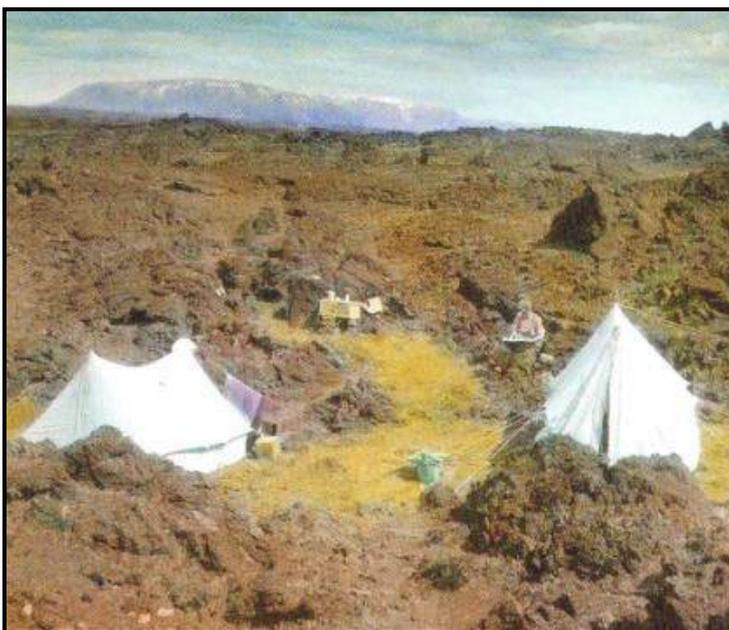
**Jack Millar at hide**



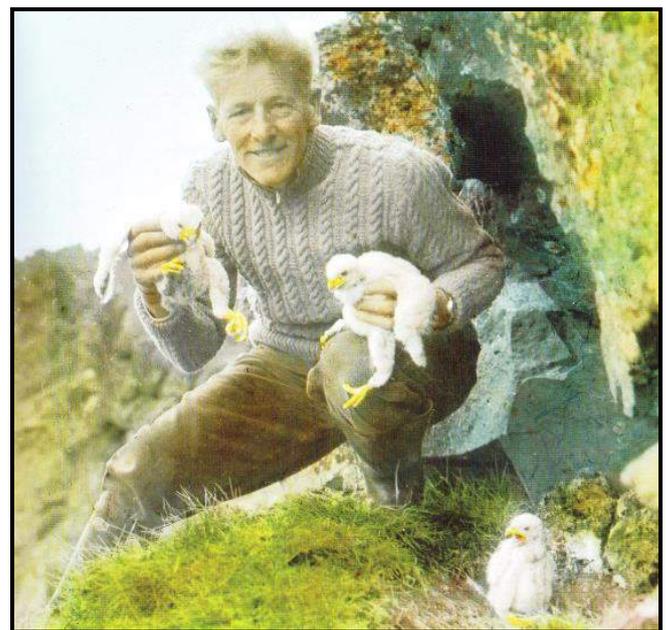
**On board the MV Gullfoss en route to Iceland (1955)**  
 Left to right: B. Moller, G. Greeves, J. Gray, M. Benington, J. Miller and H. Jeffery



**Truck loaded with gear**



**Camp in the lava desert**



**Arnold Benington and Gryfalcon nestlings**

## **First CBO Visit of 2015**

On Tuesday 7th April a team of seven volunteers paid the first visit of 2015 to the observatory – mainly with the purpose of preparing the Gully trap (our East-facing Heligoland walk-in trap) for the new season, but also to check over the buildings and jetties after the winter storms.

This was also the first outing of the season for our Rigid-Hulled Inflatable, the ‘Copeland Shearwater’. The sea conditions from Donaghadee to Lighthouse Island were superb; flat calm, with the sky and sea merging into horizon. After five minutes the team had their first sight of the island.



**View from ‘Copeland Shearwater’**

Landing at the South Jetty just ten minutes after leaving Donaghadee, disembarkation was watched with interest from the cliff-top by a group of ten Shelducks. A dozen drake Eiders were milling around the Gavney channel after a few females, and calling with their distinctive nasal mew.

The island is still looking very sparse and spring is yet to get a grip; the Bluebell carpet is just beginning to show and the thick patch of Narcissi around the front of the buildings is still waiting to flower.



**Narcissi in the Front Garden**

Despite the recent spell of dry weather, conditions underfoot were soggy. Both the ponds were full to the brim.



**Pond in the South Garden**



**Pond full to the brim**



**Overlooking Mew Island**

Early double-flowering daffodils were out above the Seat. Mew Island was resonating with the calls of Grey seals.

Philip Galbraith set a mist net in the garden, and worked the Wall and Heli Traps. On the first run of the Wall trap, a Song Thrush was caught and ringed – the first bird ringed in 2015. After that, the Garden net provided a steady catch throughout the day. In total, 12 birds of 6 species were ringed: Chiffchaff (1), Song Thrush (1), Willow Warbler (1), Dunnock (1), Wren (2) and Goldcrest (6).



**Chiffchaff with pollen cone at the base of the bill**

Interestingly, the Chiffchaff had a pollen cone at the base of its bill – probably built-up during feeding in Africa and Iberia. You can find out more about this at the following link:

<http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/article/unlocking-the-time-capsules-of-migrating-warblers/>

Meanwhile, work progressed with the refit of the Gully trap. All the support wire was replaced and tensioned, and the trap is now waiting for a team to refit the wire mesh.



**Work being done on the Gully trap**

On the day, a total of 33 species of birds were counted. In addition to the birds, a group of eight Porpoises were spotted just beyond Mew, and a Peacock butterfly beside the wall trap.

The team departed at 4.30 pm, again in near perfect conditions.

Your support is essential to us. Please consider joining CBO or renewing your membership – check out our new Direct Debit option with our Membership Secretary.

Why not consider a weekend visit? Check our website ([www.thecbo.org.uk](http://www.thecbo.org.uk)) for details.

*Wesley Smyth*

## **A Seal Called Oak**

The Copeland Islands are a known resting and breeding ground for grey seals. The grey seal is the larger of the two breeding seals found in the British Isles, the other being the common seal. The females (cows) give birth to their pups between September and December. The pups are born with a dense, soft white fur.

On Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2014, a young grey seal pup with a very deep open wound to his upper back/shoulder was found on Mew Island. The injury was thought to be caused by a boat propeller. It was obvious from the severity of the injury that the young seal would need to be taken to the Seal Sanctuary at the Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry. The Seal Sanctuary is a purpose built facility for the rescue, rehabilitation and release of orphaned, injured and sick seal pups.



**The young pup with a deep open wound**



**The pup being transported back to Exploris in a sling**

Oak, as he was named, was badly in need of veterinary treatment. He spent over two months rehabilitating at the Seal Sanctuary. During his stay he made a miraculous recovery. The deep wound on his upper back/shoulder healed, though a large visible scar remained, and his weight rose to over 40 kg.

On Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2014 it was time for Oak to be released back into the wild. He was transported to the shores of Strangford Lough where he was able to make his own way down to the water. Once in the water, Oak stopped briefly to get his bearings before heading off into deeper water. A proud moment for all involved in his recovery.



**A healthy Oak, ready for release**

This is a story from last year but well worth highlighting here due to its successful outcome. Well done to everyone involved with the rescue and release of Oak, in particular the Seal Sanctuary at the Exploris Aquarium. Thanks to Exploris for allowing the photographs to be reproduced here.

Though the Exploris Aquarium is currently closed for refurbishment until 2016, the seal rescue work will continue as normal through this period. More information can be found at <http://www.exploris.org.uk>.



**Oak being released at Strangford Lough**

## **Atlantic Hazelwood Establishment Within The North Garden Millennium Plantation**

CBO members carried out some felling and replanting of trees in the North Garden Millennium Plantation during the 2014 season. This work was very special, because it involved cutting down a small coupe of Sycamores that were planted in 1999. The clearing is surrounded by edge sycamores to shelter the new trees from the fierce northerly winds.



**Before tree felling**



**After tree felling**



**Tree felling**

The two photographs on the left show the same spot, before and after tree felling.

The next task was to plant hazel trees in the newly created clearing, and erect plastic mesh protectors around them to prevent damage from the rabbits. In all, 13 hazels were planted in July by Catherine and Philippa, and 3 beside the North garden net site.

Theresa Stewart and Philippa McKee planted ten more hazel and a birch in September. You can find them in-between the rowan and oak in the upper parts of the Millennium plantation.

The aim of the planting is to create an Atlantic hazelwood habitat, gradually replacing the original Millennium Plantation trees which will act as a nurse. This is one of the most sustainable and important woodland habitat types found on the west coast of Scotland and Ireland. They support many types of lichens only found within them. Our migratory birds will find them very familiar refuges in bad weather.



**Planted trees with plastic mesh protectors**

In addition to the above, windblown willows were cleared from the pond net site, the fuchsia pruned in the North Garden, and the two last remaining Sitka spruce felled in the North Garden plantation (one had blown over in the storms and the other was very likely to in the near future). This truly is the end of an era, these Sitka spruce were planted in the early 1970s!

*Ian McKee*

## **Mowing Paths And Habitat Restoration**

The new CBO website will soon contain a wealth of information about the habitat and path management programme on the island. You can find out why the work is so important, what the methods are, the reasoning behind these, and what the results have been so far. Announcements of when these pages go live will be made on Facebook soon.

Not interested yourself? No problem - maybe you could tell someone you know who may be interested? Someone at University studying an environmental based qualification or just wanting to make a difference?

### **Habitat restoration and path management carried out during 2014 in numbers:**

Number of people taking part	12
Hours spent managing the trees and woodland	16.75
Hours spent scything and raking bracken	22
Hours spent wheel barrowing lawnmower cuttings	5
Hours spent using lawnmowers	145.75
Total hours spent on restoration of open habitats and path management	172.75



**Mowing paths**

*Thank you to Gary Hughes, Brian Poots, Helen and Eve Humphreys, Michael and Isabel McLaughlin, Catherine Jamison, Bob and Elizabeth Pulford, Theresa Stewart, and Ian and Philippa McKee.*

## **Volunteering Opportunities**

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. New volunteers will be coached and looked after.

The work is organised on specific weekends and weeks, led by Ian McKee, details of which will be shown on the CBO website. In particular volunteers are sought to stay on the island with Ian (as he can't go on his own!) on the **week from 17th May to 22nd May, and 31st July through to 7th August.**

Volunteers can choose to stay from the Friday to the Sunday, from the Sunday to the Friday, or for the whole week.

*Please email [cbohabitat@gmail.com](mailto:cbohabitat@gmail.com) if you wish to find out more, what is involved, and what you need to bring. Spaces are limited so early booking is essential. Bookings for the trips will be taken by Davy Galbraith.*

*Ian McKee*

### **Answers to Identification Skills Test on Page 2:**

(a) Turnstone (b) Shags (c) Redshank (d) 1<sup>st</sup> Winter Mediterranean Gull (e) 1<sup>st</sup> Winter Common Gull (f) Cormorant (g) Twite (h) 1<sup>st</sup> Winter Iceland Gull (i) Chaffinch (Male)

CBO is supported by the following:

