CBO e-News

Copeland Bird Observatory e-Newsletter (Spring 2016)

Diary Dates

CBO Day Trip

CBO is planning a day trip to the island on Saturday 4th June. The cost of the day trip is £15 for adults and £10 for under 18's. The trip will be weather dependent and booking is essential.

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. It is operated on a part-time basis by volunteers and is open from late March to the end of October.

CBO Website:
www.thecbo.org.uk
Facebook:
www.facebook.com/copelandbirdobservatory

The One Show

On 11th May, the CBO Puffins were featured on the popular BBC One programme '*The One Show*'. The five minute story can still be viewed for a limited period on the BBC website: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03ttw9f.

Puffins in the water around CBO (30th April)

Calling all Puffins

In May 2012, a custom made solar powered acoustic attraction system and 50 decoy Puffins were deployed on CBO. The project was organised by Shane Wolsey (BTO) with the aim of attracting Puffins to the island to breed.

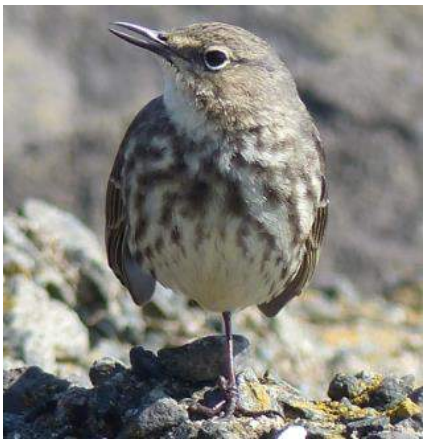
Sound system with decoy Puffins

The solar powered acoustic system and decoy Puffins were deployed on CBO for a fifth consecutive year earlier in March. The first Puffins were spotted approximately three weeks later. The birds gather on the water around the east side of the island close to the system playing the Puffin calls. The weekend party on the 1st May reported 13 birds.

One of the decoy Puffins on CBO

Test Your Identification Skills (Answers on Page 4)

(a)



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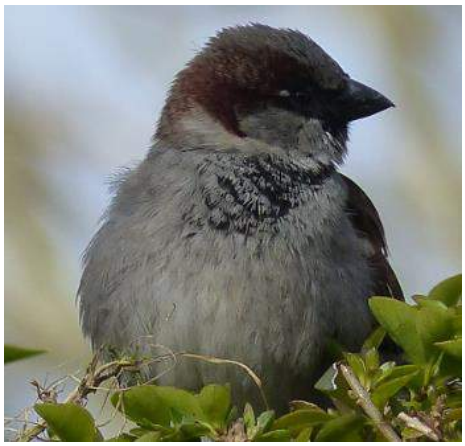

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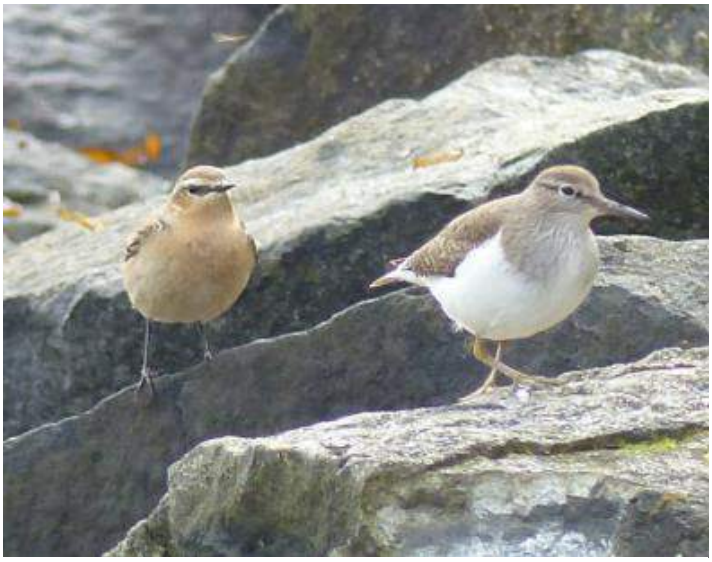

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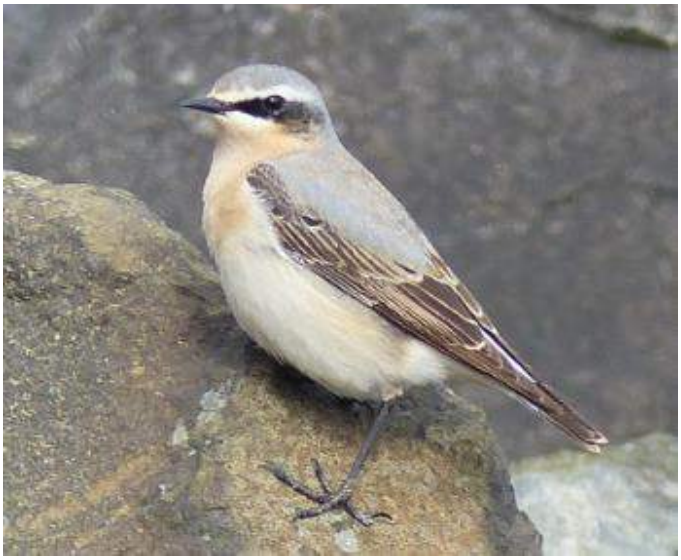


(e)

(f)

(g)

(h)

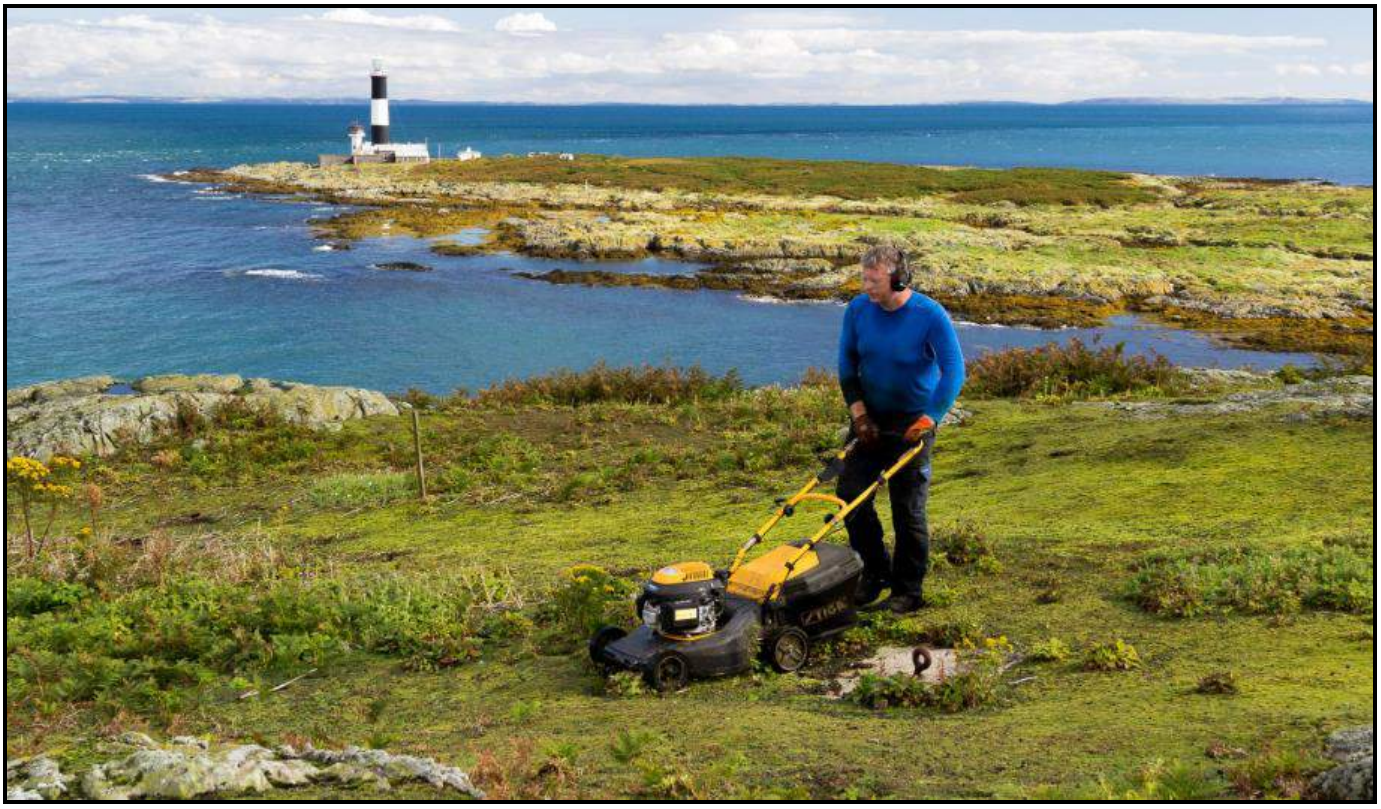
Visiting the Copeland Bird Observatory (CBO)

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

Help needed to continue Path and Habitat Management on CBO

New volunteers are needed to provide access and continue habitat restoration on the Observatory. If this work is not done, bracken will take over the whole island, and visitors won't be able to walk from the jetties to the house between May and November. After 19 years of work, I have decided to hang up my steel toe capped boots but still hope to provide advice remotely from Scotland whenever possible. A "Mowing Manual" has been written to show new volunteers how to use the machines safely and efficiently. This is now available to download from the CBO website.



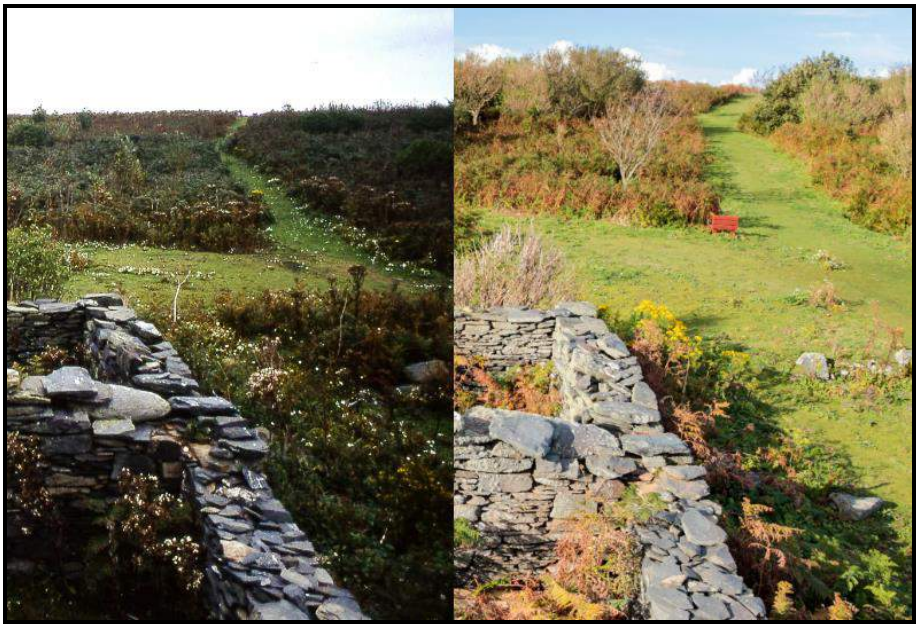
Ian McKee mowing on Old Lighthouse Island

We have learnt an important lesson: Cutting vegetation using strimmers or scythes (without raking the cuttings away) is extremely damaging to paths and habitats. Nutrients were recycled, so the very plant species that we want to encourage are smothered and killed, and the rank species we don't want – spread and grow faster and faster.

This was bad news for rabbits, shearwaters, and visitors to the island (both those with feathers and those with binoculars!).

Mowing, which means cutting and removing the cuttings, has had the opposite effect.

The work on the island since 1996 has been a great success. Valuable habitats have been restored by constant and sensitive management. Most of the main paths have been mown at least 3, sometimes 4 times a year (every year!) since 2000.



South Path - left in 1994 (photo: Sandy McWilliams) and right in 2012

Cricket pitch 1994 (photo: Sandy McWilliams) showing bracken three years before restoration began

Cricket pitch 2015

As a result of removing the cuttings over so many years, the soil nutrients have been depleted, suppressing the rank species, and encouraging the valuable short sward grassland habitats that can only survive in low fertility soils. This has had several benefits for us:

1. The time required to maintain the paths and restoration areas has never been less.
2. The burrows are less likely to collapse when visitors and ringers walk over them. This is because the grasses (and Sea Campion) have dense fibrous roots which bind the soil together, improving stability.
3. There is a greater area of foraging habitat for rabbits on the island, thought to be important for the long term condition of the Shearwater colony.

Please help by recruiting new volunteers, and promoting the Mowing Manual. The Manual is available on the CBO website (**Conservation** menu ⇨ **Habitat Management**). Did I say that already? Oops!

The 2015 mowing programme by numbers:

- 128.25 hours spent using the lawnmowers
- 24.5 hours spent assisting with wheel-barrows
- 4 separate weeks worked
- 19853m^3 of estimated area treated each time.

The whole programme since 1996:

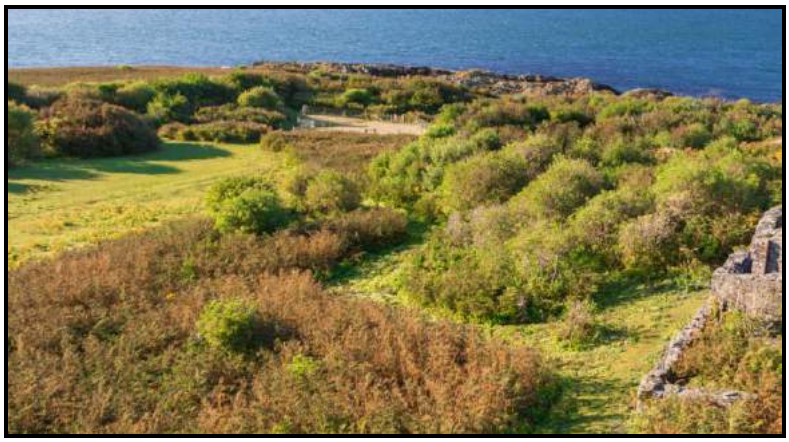
- 900 hours of mowing estimated between 1996 and 2004
- 1685 hours recorded mowing from 2005 to 2015.

Ian McKee

The CBO e-News would like to thank and acknowledge Ian's contribution to this newsletter over the last couple of years. His regular and informative articles on Habitat Management have been greatly appreciated.

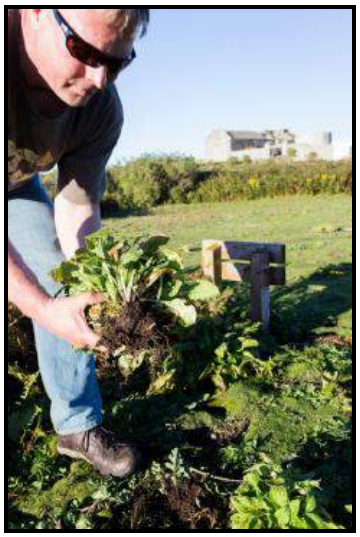
Answers to Identification Test on Page 2:
(a) *Pied Wagtail* **(b)** *Rock Pipit* **(c)** *House Sparrow*
(d) *Wheatear (Female) & Common Sandpiper*
(e) *Wheatear (Male)* **(f)** *Grey Wagtail*
(g) *Herring Gull* **(h)** *Redwing*

North Garden 1990 (photo: Sandy McWilliams) showing bracken 6 years before restoration began



North Garden 2015 – note restored short sward on the left

Ian McKee - A Dedicated CBO Volunteer



Ian working on CBO

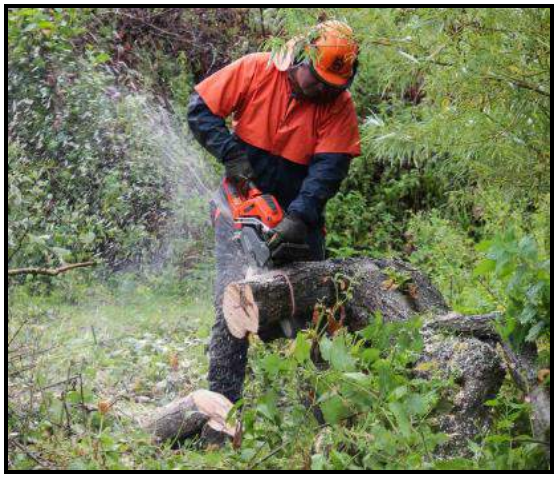
As the call goes out (again!) from Ian McKee for new volunteers (see above) to continue the implementation of the Habitat Management Plan on the island, this is a timely opportunity to recognize the contribution which Ian has made personally to this vital area of the Observatory's continued development and success.

Over the years, it has been far too easy for the rest of us (Ian's team of trained mowers excluded) to take for granted the massive impact which his Habitat Management Plan has had on so many aspects of our operations on the island. The pairs of photographs on the previous page show, with vivid clarity, the enormous changes which the vegetation cover has undergone since the start of the programme in 1996 – to the benefit not only of the birds, but also of all of us who monitor, trap and ring them on a regular basis. In short, without the following regular inputs, the Observatory would have been unable to function in any meaningful way –

- maintenance of the network of paths which has ensured not only ease of movement around the island, but also access to the Manx Shearwater sub-colonies for ringing, especially of chicks each year, and re-trapping of adults.
- maintenance of the integrity of those sub-colonies by strengthening the correct vegetation coverage and soils to prevent burrow collapse.
- preservation of major areas of short-sward grassland, which are particularly attractive to ground feeding migrants, such as pipits, wagtails and Wheatears. (For example, the North Garden, the Cricket Pitch and the area in front of the Gully Trap).
- management of net-site vegetation to ensure optimum effectiveness in capturing migrant passerines.

Ian has inculcated in many of us a clearer understanding and, therefore, appreciation of the mechanics and importance of correct habitat management on our island.

It is interesting that, after a long, hard day's effort going round the nets and traps, the ringers would call it a day and head in to cook an evening meal and relax by the fire, often passing the still working Ian on their way in! No one could forget the elaborate meals which Ian prepared - once he was satisfied with his day's work – as much for his relaxation and pleasure as for the sustenance they provided.



Ian cutting a blown down Willow

As Ian prepares to settle into the domesticated routines of parenthood with Philippa, the task of ensuring that his programme continues looms large. Ian's quiet and consistent contribution – not least the very long hours and sheer hard work he put into planning, managing, mowing and barrowing over the last 20 years - ensures that he will be a very hard act to follow!

While extending our deep gratitude and all good wishes to Ian and Philippa for the arrival of their first-born, we all hope that – once their nestling becomes a juvenile – the family will return to the island for many enjoyable visits in the years to come.

Chris Acheson

Updating Contact Details

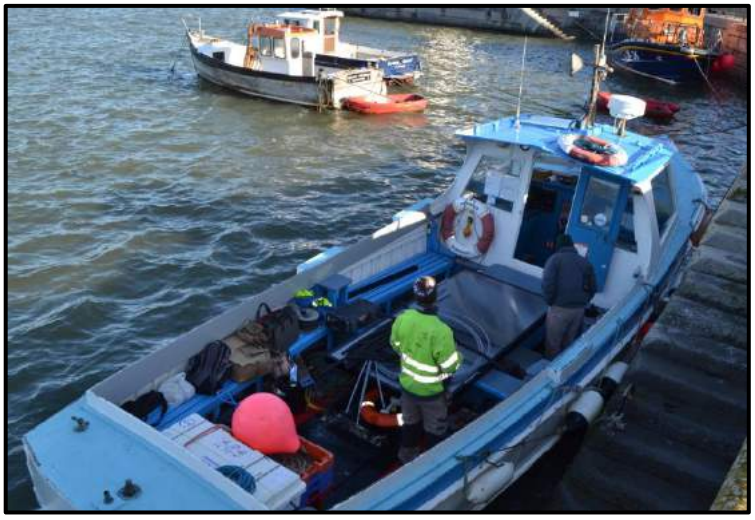
Please contact the Membership Secretary if your contact details change (e.g. new email address).

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

New Solar Hot Water System

In 2015, the old solar hot water system on the CBO was decommissioned during the installation of the new roof. The system was originally installed in 2006 and over the years it helped to reduce gas bills by pre-heating water for cooking and washing. On Tuesday 5th April, a new solar hot water system was installed on the island. The installation was carried out by Graham and Chris from the Green Energy Store. Larry Donnelly and Niall Waterman from the CBO went out to help with the installation.

The new system is called *Solartwin*. It produces both solar hot water and solar electricity for the pump and hot water controller, i.e. zero carbon system. It delivers hot water directly into the hot water cylinder and does not require a heat exchanger. The innovative freeze-tolerant technology also requires no anti-freeze.



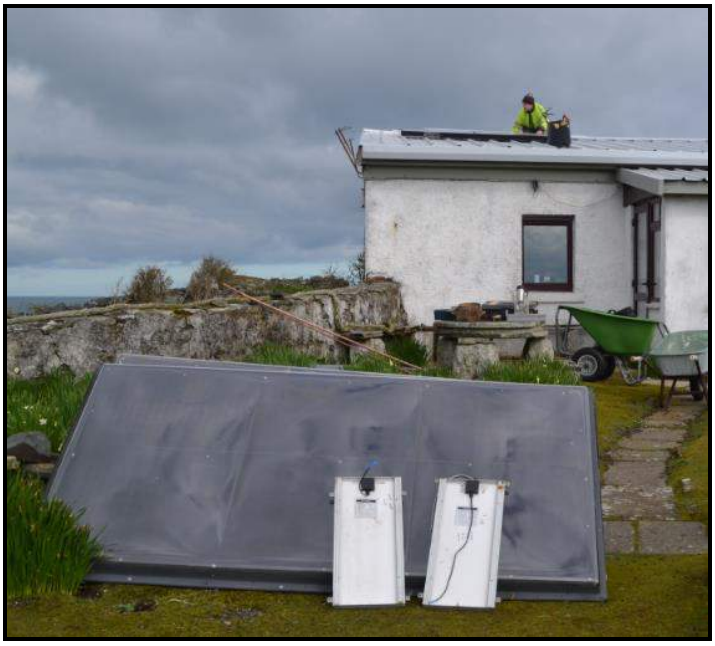
New solar panel loaded on the 'Mermaid' boat

The system consists of the following main parts:

- Solar hot water roof panel with temperature sensor
- Variable speed solar electric pump
- Solar hot water controller
- Photovoltaic (PV) panel to power both the pump and hot water controller
- Top and bottom sensors for the hot water cylinder
- Flexible silicone rubber piping which is both corrosion resistant and freeze tolerant.

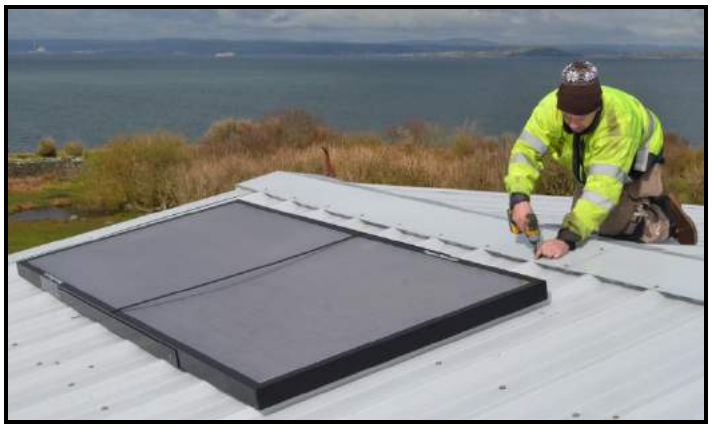
Unlike the old hot water system, the new system remains permanently switched on. The solar hot water roof panel uses the energy from the sun to heat the water up. During this heating process, the solar controller monitors three temperatures; the solar panel, the top of the hot water cylinder and the bottom of the cylinder. When the water in the roof panel is hot enough to collect, the solar controller switches on the pump. The heated water is then pumped into the top of the hot water cylinder and the colder water from the bottom of the cylinder is pumped into the solar panel on the roof. The speed of the pump varies with the solar power available. On a dull day, the water will remain in the panel longer, giving it more time to heat up.

The following photographs show the new solar hot water system being installed.

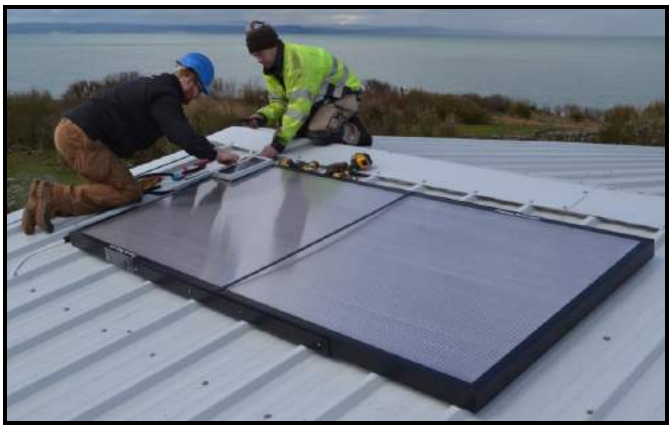


Old solar hot water & PV panels removed from roof

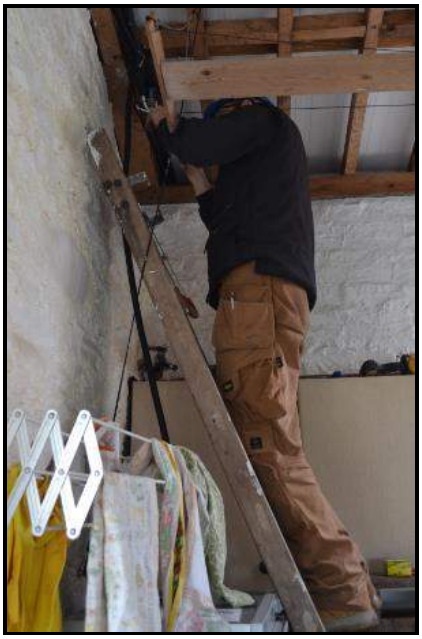
Larry dismantling old hot water system



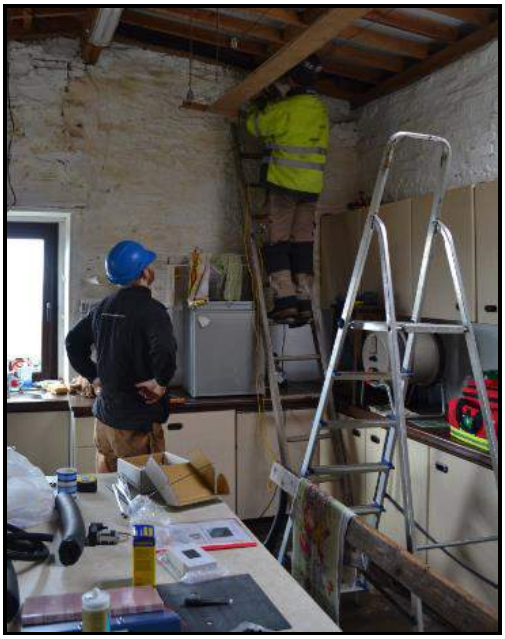
Chris working on roof



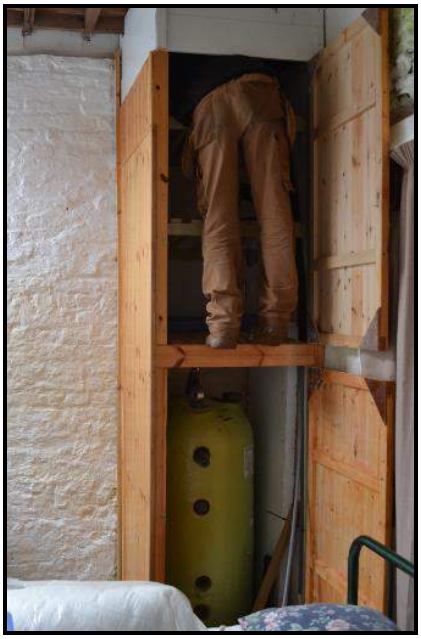
Graham and Chris working on roof



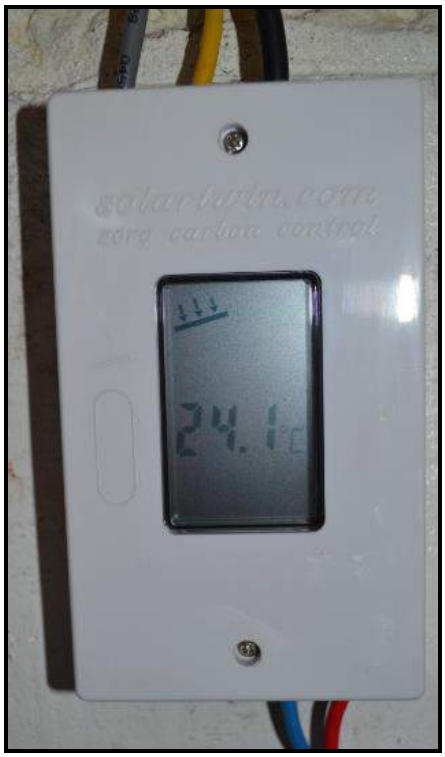
Pump being installed



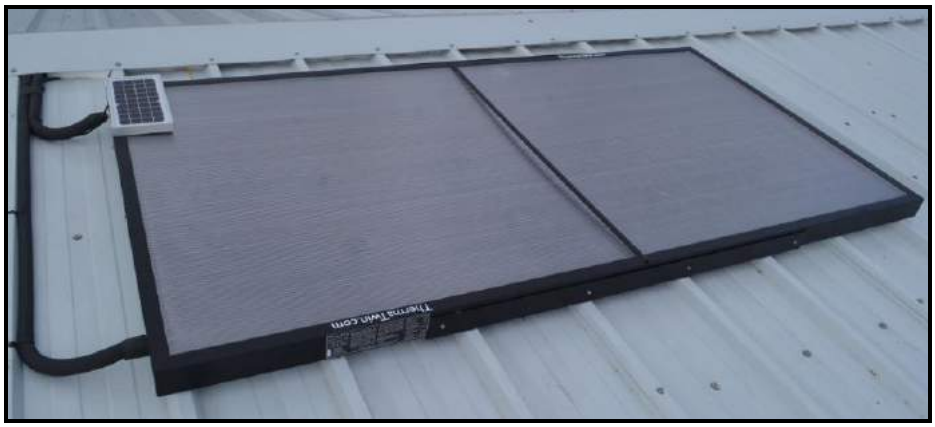
New pipework fitted



Graham working in cabinet



Solar controller



Solar hot water and PV panel installed on roof

The CBO would like to acknowledge and thank the anonymous donor who paid for the new hot water system. This generous gift will allow visitors to the island to enjoy hot water for many years to come and will also lower gas bills.

Thank also to Jenny, Graham and Chris from the Green Energy Store for their friendly and professional service during the administration and installation of the new hot water system.

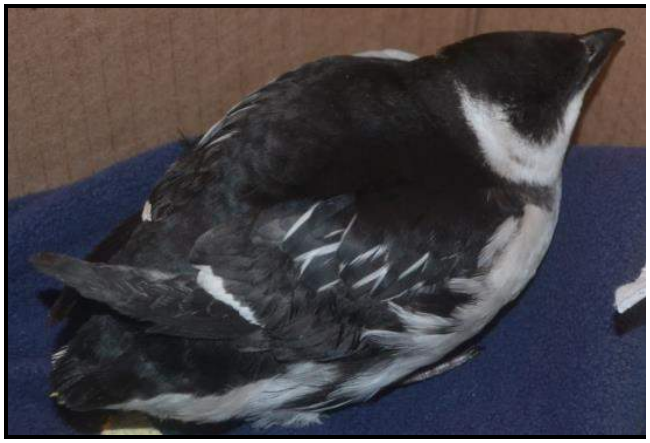
The 2016 Season so far on the Observatory

There has been a really interesting beginning to the 2016 season on the island. For the first time in many years, manning began in mid-March and we managed to cover 2 weekends before poor weather claimed the next two! Each weekend from (and including) 8th April has also been covered.

The early season has been characterized by winds which have been unfavourable for Spring migration – mainly from the Northern sector and often quite strong. Numbers of migrants which have been trapped, therefore, are low, but the variety of species handled has been good. Small numbers of departing winter thrushes (Robin, Redwing, Blackbird and Song Thrush) and finches (Goldfinch, Linnet, Twite and Lesser Redpoll) have been ringed. Goldcrests have passed through in significant numbers, continuing their recovery from those harsh winters a few years ago. Warblers have been scarce due to the Northerly winds - best catch was 24 Willow Warblers on 1st May, along with a few Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps. We really just didn't connect with the main movements which have been greatly disrupted and delayed by the weather. Even Greenland Wheatears have been scarce, with 2 ringed so far.

However, it is an ill wind (literally) that blows nobody any good. As use of mist nets has often been restricted over the opening weeks of the season, so the big traps have come into their own, contributing very significantly to the variety of species caught. Several infrequently handled species have already been ringed this season – the Gully Trap has produced 3 Mallard (13-15th ever ringed on the island), several crows and a Skylark (24th). Meanwhile, the re-furbished Crow Trap caught 2 Carrion (only 2nd and 3rd ever) and 10 Hooded Crows on 16th May. The South Trap caught most of the Redwings, while the smaller Potter Traps have produced 3 Rock Pipits (rare in recent years) and one of the Wheatears. A ringing event on 5th January – although off the island – was highly significant, as a stranded Little Auk was only the second to appear on the Observatory's ringing list. It was found under a skip in Dundonald and was released safely the same evening at Whitehead.

Skylark (photo: Philip Galbraith)



Little Auk ready for release

Although numbers of new birds being caught have been relatively low, it is great to report that among the catches have been 4 controlled birds – that is, birds which have been ringed elsewhere and caught by us on the journeys between their wintering and breeding grounds. These were 3 Goldfinches and a single Goldcrest – it is unusual to record so many controls in such a short time and it will be fascinating to find out where they were ringed.

During an Eider ringing visit to Mew Island on Saturday, 14th May, 23 new birds were ringed and 28 re-traps – total 51. Three Mallard nests were also found and a singing Whitethroat was present.

There have also been several exciting sightings on the island since the beginning of March. A female Hen Harrier has been present almost every weekend, often affording very close views. The pair of Ravens seems to have reduced to a single regular bird following the apparent failure of their breeding attempt. The first Puffin was recorded in the Sound on 10th April, increasing to double figures on 1st May (with 4 birds ashore among the decoys). By 15th May, 24 birds were present, with several in the breeding area, including 2 birds visiting burrows.

Chris Acheson

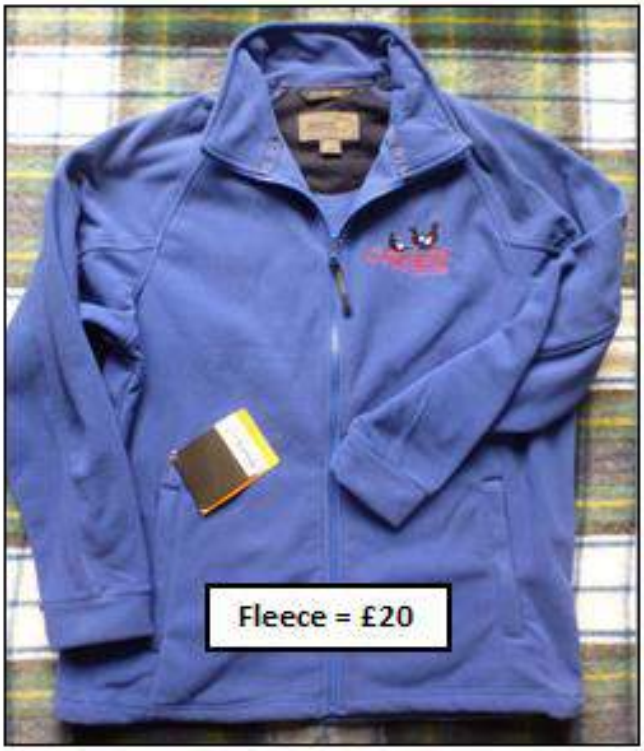
Eider ringing on Mew Island

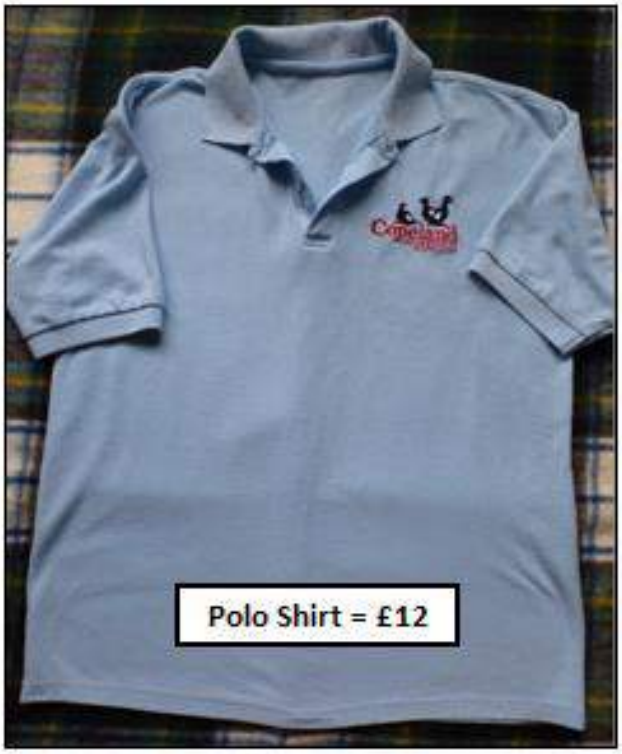
CBO Merchandise

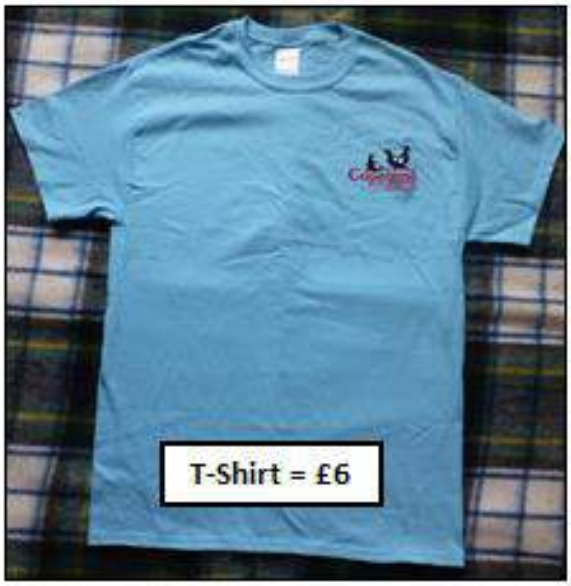
CBO merchandise (e.g. blue T-shirt/polo shirt, royal blue fleece and royal blue/black beanie) is now available to order. Please contact Brenda Campbell for more details.

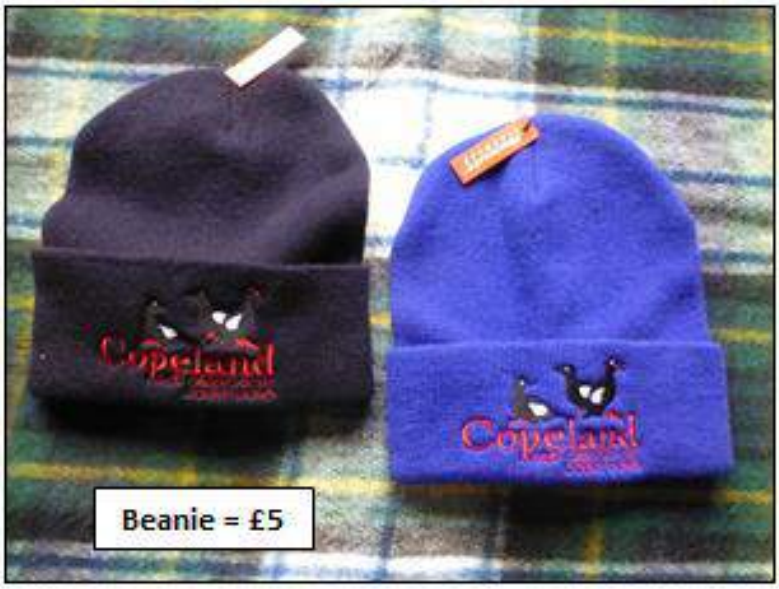
Tel: 07708205593

Email: brendacampbell@supanet.com









CBO is supported by the following: