

## Calf of Man

The season started when Nathan Wilkie and I arrived at South Harbour during the late afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup> March. Unseasonably warm weather over the next couple of days allowed the opening up process and checking of how things had held up during the winter to progress well. We had been accompanied by a couple of local volunteers, Paul Corrin and Mike Prior, who set about helping with many different tasks, from emptying the cess pit, installing donated kitchen units in the old store room, which was to be converted into a new warden's kitchen, and completing redecoration of the warden's lounge and 'office' which was to become a new Volunteer Warden's bedroom.

The first signs of spring migration arrived on the 16<sup>th</sup> with a **Chiffchaff**, followed by a **Wheatear** on 17<sup>th</sup> when the islet's 4<sup>th</sup> ever spring record of **Long-tailed Tit** was recorded. However, the cold conditions that had been experienced over-winter returned with vengeance and we woke up to the rare sight of a dusting of snow laying over the Calf on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Freezing conditions and strong north-easterly winds over the next few days created the phenomenon of an



ice-field above the Cletts, as water from a stream was blown back off the cliff edge and froze in mid-air creating amazing icicles on fronds of Bracken and other vegetation. The weather improved sufficiently that the supply boat could run on the 20<sup>th</sup>, which allowed Oscar Adedeji to arrive and take up his role as volunteer fieldworker for the spring and summer seasons.

A change to more migration-conducive weather conditions during the last week of the month produced a number of early arrivals, with a **Ring Ousel** and the observatories earliest ever **Common Sandpiper** (by 26 days) on 24<sup>th</sup>, a **Firecrest** and a **White Wagtail** on 29<sup>th</sup>. However, bird of the month was a juvenile **Knot**, first seen on rocks at the mouth of South Harbour during the afternoon of 25<sup>th</sup> and

later that evening unexpectedly trapped at the Dubh and becoming the 163<sup>rd</sup> species ringed on the Calf.



The first monitoring trip to Kitterland was made at the end of March, to assess the impact that baiting has had on the numbers of Brown Rat (Long-tails) that were present in 2017, and it is pleasing to report that this and subsequent visits during the summer of 2018 found no further evidence of infestation. Unfortunately, evidence of "bait take" was found on the Calf itself and during the season a total of seven sightings of Long-tails were captured by camera trap around the Observatory, at Cow Harbour and the Millpond. This is the largest number of sightings in any one season since the Manx Shearwater Recovery Project was instigated and the baiting and annual monitoring was initiated in 2012. This worrying increase in activity illustrates the importance of maintaining the on-going monitoring programme, as failure to keep on top of the situation could rapidly lead to re-infestation and a quick turn-around in the fortunes of the breeding success of species such as the **Manx Shearwater** and **Atlantic Puffin**.

During autumn 2017, Storm Ophelia had caused wind-blown damage to one of the conifers at the end of the trapping area and ABC Tree Surgery were the first contractors to come out this season to make safe and remove the part-fallen tree. This also allowed some much needed 'topping-out' work to also be carried out in the Plantation, with the additional removal of several of the largest conifers. It is planned that replacement trees, that will have greater benefit for feeding and migratory birds and insects, will be planted in this area.

At the end of March, Kirsty Franklin and Steven Vickers, two volunteer ringers arrived to help out with spring migration. During their stay, as well as assisting with the daily census and ringing work, they helped with the building and initial siting of **Manx Shearwater** nest boxes. The materials for which had

been purchased with funds raised by a Facebook funding page set up over winter by long-term Calf supporter Mark Fitzpatrick. We are particularly thankful to Mark and to those that gave so generously to the project, which has allowed an initial 12 boxes to be sited among the shearwater colonies at South Harbour and Kione ny Halby.

The cold weather continued well into April and restricted migration somewhat, although a couple of small 'falls' occurred with light easterlies on the 4<sup>th</sup> bringing 100 **Goldcrest**, 30 each of **Willow Warbler** and **Chiffchaff** along with 10 **Blackcap** and two **Yellowhammer**, whilst on the 9<sup>th</sup> favourable winds produced a further 100 **Goldcrest**, a male **Firecrest**, 50 **Chiffchaff**, 30 **Willow Warbler**, seven **Blackcap**, 22 **Wheatear** and a male **Black Redstart**.

Further new arrivals included Sylwia Zbijewska to take up a seasonal field assistant position, Dan Woollard as Volunteer Warden for the season and 10 Chickens, donated by a local farm, and which became a popular



attraction to visitors, guests and wardens alike.

A strong south-westerly wind on 17<sup>th</sup> didn't hold out much hope of an improvement however persistence paid off when a fine male **Pied Flycatcher** was found



behind the back garden wall, representing the earliest Calf spring record by one day. Whilst warbler numbers were low, the recent trend of increasing passage of **Goldfinch** was very much a feature of late April, accompanied by a better than average spring passage of both **Lesser Redpoll** and **Siskin**, with all three species being ringed in record numbers.

Towards the end of the month spring finally made an appearance and a flurry of commoner migrants pushed through, with some scarcities including the 3<sup>rd</sup> **Firecrest** of the spring, a **Long-eared Owl** and on the 25<sup>th</sup> the Calf's second ever **Iberian Chiffchaff**.



Light easterly winds on 29<sup>th</sup> produced an excellent array of spring migrants with no fewer than six new species for the year with a **Jack Snipe** in the Glen, a **Cuckoo** in the Front Field, three each of **Whinchat** and **Redstart** and single **Grasshopper Warbler** and **Lesser Whitethroat**.

Spring passage was still rather poor and at times almost non-existent during the first half of May, with the exception of a small hirundine passage. Occasional new species for the year arrived, with **Garden Warbler** on 10<sup>th</sup> and **Greenshank** on 15<sup>th</sup> whilst a fourth **Firecrest** of the spring and a second **Pied Flycatcher** put in an appearance on 17<sup>th</sup>. A cracking male **Black Redstart** was present on 19<sup>th</sup> and was a forerunner to an exciting last week of the month which produced an adult male **Red-breasted Flycatcher** (23<sup>rd</sup>), 70 **Spotted Flycatcher** (26<sup>th</sup>), two **Reed Warblers** and a **Lesser Whitethroat** trapped on 29<sup>th</sup> and an 'Eastern' **Subalpine Warbler** on 30<sup>th</sup>.



June continued where May had left off, with another **Reed Warbler** trapped on 3<sup>rd</sup>; this was the start of an

unprecedented series of records which was to produce a total of seven individuals during the spring. A **Turtle Dove** spent much of the 4<sup>th</sup> around the Observatory and was the first record for 10 years. Equally unexpected was a sub-adult **Sabine's Gull** which put in a brief appearance in the Calf Sound on 9<sup>th</sup> and a second **Red-breasted Flycatcher** trapped on 10<sup>th</sup>, with a third individual on 24<sup>th</sup>.



Habitat management around the Observatory and in the Glen is an on-going task and we were fortunate to have several working parties of volunteers that made great progress with coppicing at the Top Withy and in the northern section of Willows at the Millpond, as well as continuing with the removal of invasive Horse-tail from the pond throughout this season.

The first staying guests arrived on the Calf at the beginning of May and heralded the start of a very busy season. With excellent weather conditions throughout most of the summer months, the numbers of day visitors coming to the Calf were probably the highest in Calf history. Over the past couple of seasons advertising by local boat crews and an increased profile of the Calf on social media has created considerable interest in the islet, both locally and abroad and this is undoubtedly contributing to the increase in visitors. Another first for the Calf occurred in mid-May when the cruise ship 'Ocean Adventurer' moored off South Harbour and their fleet



of 'zodiacs' brought 111 guests and crew ashore. Various guided walks were provided and feedback on their time ashore was fantastic - it is hoped that this may become an annual event in their itinerary.

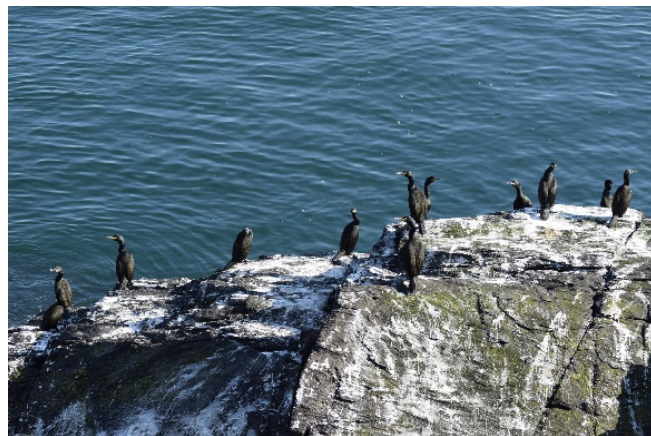
With such numbers of visitors coming to the islet, it is important that the harbours are well maintained and



during May and July a team organised through Manx National Heritage worked on repairing and improving the Cow Harbour slipway as well as carrying out some routine maintenance tasks at the Lighthouses and around the Observatory.

Maintenance at the Observatory is a never-ending task and with the new kitchen being created, required some electrical and gas work which was completed most efficiently by the team from A to Z Plumbing, who were also able to provide an upgrade to the battery bank which provides the electricity supply to the farmhouse. During this process they were able to 'tidy up' some of the pipework at the back of the Observatory and this then allowed the rear of the farmhouse to be lime-washed and some new covers to be built and fitted along the rear trench.

The summer months were somewhat 'mixed' in terms of breeding success for the many species of bird that



breed on the Calf; a continuing rise in the numbers of **Manx Shearwater** recorded is encouraging, however despite increases in breeding numbers of the three 'large' gull species, their productivity was significantly impacted by a period of strong winds and heavy rain.

The continuing downward trend in breeding numbers of **Shag** is of particular concern, whilst the presence of a group of 'summering' **Cormorant** in a suitable breeding location suggests that the species may, perhaps, re-colonise the Calf once more. Encouraging signs of breeding were shown by both **Atlantic Puffin** and **Black Guillemot**, however the lack of regular access to a boat to undertake surveys of their potential breeding locations meant that disappointingly nothing was proven.

It is disappointing that there were no successful breeding raptors this season with the cold, wet spring considered to have caused the failure of any breeding attempts. **Ravens** were also affected with just one of the two pairs being successful. The cold winter had clearly had a significant impact on the survival of small insectivorous birds and both **Wren** and **Stonechat** numbers were considerably reduced, however other resident species such as **Meadow Pipit**, **Rock Pipit** and **Blackbird** seem to have been unaffected. Summer migrants appear to have benefited from the warm dry summer with a record number of 40 pairs of **Wheatear**, whilst one or two pairs of **Swallow**, **Whitethroat** and **Chiffchaff** were all successful. Breeding numbers of **Chough** remain relatively stable but productivity was thought to be very low this season, with the dry summer causing low survival rates among recently fledged young.



Since it bred on the Calf for the first time in 1992, the fortunes of the **Eider** have gone from strength to strength and whilst the secretive nature of this species makes it difficult to survey, a considerable amount of time and effort in finding nests during this season gave an all-time high estimate of 70 pairs on the islet. Other success' during this season was the first breeding record of **Woodpigeon** for 10 years and the first ever breeding record of **Pheasant**, bringing the total number of species recorded as having bred on the Calf to 65.

Summer time is also the period when we carry out repairs to the various traps that are used to catch migrants moving through the Calf and following the



successful replacement of Heligoland One during last season, it was the turn of the Crow Trap and Heligoland Two to receive transformations. Both of these were fairly major jobs and many volunteers assisted with various parts of the projects. As part of the process of dismantling HG2 it was necessary to undertake the removal of a considerable amount of Fuchsia from along the front wall.

Having experienced a relatively 'poor' spring migration, it was hoped that the breeding season would be productive and we could look forward to a bumper autumn. Early signs were positive and numbers of juvenile **Willow Warblers** moving south through the Calf were above average on recent years. Several large 'falls' occurred and ringing interest was provided by three **Wood Warbler**, four **Pied Flycatcher** and a **Melodious Warbler** being trapped during the first half of the month.



Seawatching was the focus of volunteer birdwatcher, Ed O'Connor when the weather was suitable and his efforts were well rewarded with a series of unusual records including both **Balearic** and **Sooty Shearwaters**, a **Common Tern**, a nice run of **Sandwich Tern** and **Arctic Skua** records as well as a host of waders passing by the islet, including the largest flock of **Black-tailed Godwit** ever recorded on the Calf.

Visible migration can be spectacular on the Calf during autumn, with large numbers of pipits, wagtails and



finches passing overhead. The creation of an 'outside' ringing room to help monitor these movements was made possible with the conversion of a temporary unit in the open section of the tractor shed. It is hoped that funding for a more permanent solution can be found some time soon, but this initiative proved particularly successful on several counts. Firstly, being outside, rather than inside the farmhouse when ringing, meant that we are more aware of the volume of birds passing over and autumn 2018 subsequently turned out to be the best year on record for **Tree Pipit** for nearly 50 years.



Secondly, ringing in this more open environment also means that visitors to the Calf are able to observe our work more easily and this helps to engage those that perhaps wouldn't otherwise be aware of the work we do.



September began a significant period of change, with the long-term volunteers departing having finished their time on the Calf and the Estate Warden, Nathan Wilkie, moving on to take up a permanent position as Warden on Skomer Island. Dan Woollard stepped up to take on the role of Estate Warden for the remainder of the season.

The weather during the first week of the month was relatively settled and good numbers of migrants moved through with the eighth **Reed Warbler** of the year being trapped on 4<sup>th</sup> and a **Long-eared Owl** on 5<sup>th</sup>.



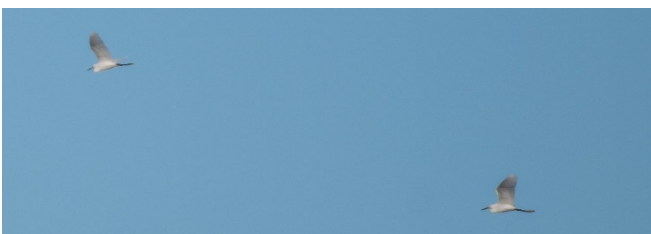
The weather deteriorated for much of the remainder of the month, with a procession of strong to gale force winds from either the southerly or westerly quarters which restricted migration significantly. Whilst taking

shelter from one of the storms, I was involved in a fall which resulted in being air-lifted off the Calf and a four week stay in hospital. Fortunately Olivia Pargeter, along with Mike Haigh and Alex Dodds stepped in to ensure that the daily ringing and recording was maintained, through to the end of the season, during my absence. Occasional calmer days produced some good visual migration, in particular for **Meadow Pipits** and some accompanying birds of prey.



October proved to be an exciting month with a number of good arrivals and included highlights of four **Yellow-browed Warbler** and only the sixth **Great Spotted Woodpecker** to be trapped at the Observatory. A classic autumn migration day on 6<sup>th</sup> produced particularly large numbers of birds passing over with an immense 1000 **Chaffinch**, 150 **Skylark**, 40 **Swallow**, 13 **Starling**, 100 **Dunnock**, 200 'alba' **Wagtail**, 456 **Meadow Pipit**, 80 **Linnet**, 250 **Goldfinch**, 21 **Siskin** and six **Tree Sparrow**.

The largest number of **Great Tits** ever recorded on the Calf were very much a feature of the month and these were accompanied by a well-above average 'invasion' of **Coal Tits**, which produced 602 and 80 bird-days respectively.



Perhaps 'birds of the month' were two **Little Egrets** flying over the Island on 20<sup>th</sup>, only the fourth Calf record.

A number of calm days during the latter third of the month produced some good 'local' movements of corvids with up to 700 **Jackdaw** and 60 **Crows** making day-trips over to the islet. These calm days also sometimes feature **Long-tailed Tits** and continuing the 'tit' invasion theme several small parties made it to the Calf with a total of 27 on 28<sup>th</sup> and five on 30<sup>th</sup>.

November proved to be a challenging month with more inclement weather making completion of the final tasks of the season more difficult. However, as throughout the season we enjoyed considerable support from a number of volunteers which ensured as many of the habitat management and maintenance tasks as possible were achieved. Ditching work to channel water away from the track leading down to Cow Harbour was carried out during the last few weeks, as was coppicing in the main Withy and an increase in Long-tail bait monitoring following recent sightings. Notable bird observations were fairly few with a single **Goosander** on 5<sup>th</sup> and two **Red-breasted Merganser** on 18<sup>th</sup> being most of note.

Owing to its isolated position, life on the Calf could be a lonely one; however during 2018 the islet once again had a real "buzz" that was created by the fantastic volunteers and guests that have made such a huge contribution to this year's success. We have had a great many laughs along the way and there were many memorable experiences, in what was a truly another remarkable and record breaking year. If you are interested in visiting the Calf during 2019 or perhaps even joining our growing team of volunteers then please contact the Ornithological Warden at [calfoman@manx.net](mailto:calfoman@manx.net)

Aron Sapsford  
Ornithological Warden