

Calf of Man – Aron Sapsford

We eventually arrived on the Calf on the 15th March during a brief weather window, our arrival having been delayed a couple of days due to strong winds. I was joined for this season by Nathan Wilkie, as Estate Warden, who was very used to island-life having previously worked on the Inner Farnes and on Mingulay. I had been a warden here previously (1988-90), but this was Nathan's first time on the Calf and so much of the first couple of weeks was spent reacquainting and familiarising with the island and enjoying the start of a good early spring passage of birds.

Goldcrests were already moving through when we arrived and continued in good numbers through until mid-April with higher numbers than have been recorded for over 25 years. A very steady Willow Warbler passage also saw above average numbers recorded, which was true for the majority of the spring warbler migration. High totals were achieved for several common species such as Blackcap, Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler, the latter two achieving the best annual ringing totals for 47 years. Less common species were also recorded in above average numbers with a record breaking seven Lesser Whitethroats and two Reed Warblers, including a Channel-islands control.



Efforts to eradicate rats (long-tails) from the islet are on-going and monitoring continued throughout the season; unfortunately their presence was detected on several occasions and contingency measures were deployed to swiftly deal with these encounters. Despite these few sightings, the breeding population of Manx Shearwaters appears to be gradually increasing, with approximately 400 pairs now present whilst numbers of other ground nesting species, such as Wheatear also appear to be flourishing.



A project to try and entice Puffins to return as a breeding species, using decoys and playback lure was continued and numbers of birds seen around the Calf during the summer were encouraging, with breeding suspected on nearby cliffs on the Isle of Man.

Light easterly winds for much of May continued the good run of common migrants with above average showings for Redstart, Pied Flycatcher and Garden Warbler, whilst a run of rarities during the month brought a stunning adult male Red-footed Falcon (2nd Calf record), a group of three fly-over Spoonbill (1st Calf record) and towards the end of the month a female Red-breasted Flycatcher, Subalpine Warbler and to round the month off the first of two Greenish Warblers.



At the start of June we were whisked away from the Calf for a VIP trip to watch the UEFA Cup Final between Real Madrid and Juventus in Cardiff, courtesy of Heineken Plc, but returned just in time to find a second Greenish Warbler for the spring, singing in the Observatory garden.



We participated in an Isle of Man seabird breeding survey during 2017 and results confirmed a continuing downward trend for both Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull which were further hit by several storms in June that severely reduced productivity. Shag productivity was also low however both Razorbill and Guillemot appeared to have a successful year. Mid-summer produced the start of an excellent run of Risso's Dolphin records, with regular sightings continuing throughout July and into the first half of August and sometimes involving several pods of animals. Basking Sharks were also recorded in greater numbers than for many years.

In early July, the first of our long-term volunteers arrived, with Mike Haigh, Stuart

Cowper, Alex Dodds, Bethan Pugh, Pippa Barlin and Olivia Pargeter helping out at various times through the autumn. The presence of several ringers on the islet for most of the autumn meant that ringing totals achieved the second highest, of 7946 birds of 82 species, in the Observatories 59 year history. Having several extra pairs of hands around also allowed a number of management tasks to be undertaken, which included the digging of a scrape in the Lighthouse fields, much needed coppicing work at the Withy and the complete rebuilding of one of the Heligoland traps.



It is hoped to continue this level of volunteer involvement in the Calf and during 2018 we plan to have long-term placements to assist with migration ringing and monitoring in both, spring and autumn plus a seabird & breeding bird assistant. Plans for monitoring in 2018 include maintaining the current Manx Shearwater survey and expanding coverage to include two other key sites; a survey to try and prove breeding of Storm Petrel; productivity monitoring for Shag, Great Black-backed Gull & Guillemot and a BBS-style survey of common passerines.

Traditionally August should be when autumn migration starts to pick up again, however the weather had other ideas and with what seemed like a constant procession of gales and storms, it wasn't until the end of month that any numbers of passerines began moving

through; the only real highlights of the month being three Reed Warblers and an early Olive-backed Pipit seen on 21st. An attempt at wader mist-netting was also successful, with seven Redshanks trapped during one session - quite an achievement given that there had previously only ever been 21 ringed on the Calf.



September continued with prolonged periods of windy & wet conditions followed by just a day or two of calm weather. During these, lulls in between storms, we were often inundated by birds and it was all-hands to the ringing pliers, with large numbers of Robins moving through and tape-luring of Meadow Pipits also proving very successful. Despite some promisingly strong NW winds seawatching didn't produce the hoped for species or numbers that one might expect, despite everywhere south of us seeming to have large numbers of Leach's Petrels & Sabine's Gulls. Several large arrivals of Goldcrests occurred towards the end of the month and a single Yellow-browed Warbler was trapped on the 26th.



October also saw a series of storms heading our way with Hurricane Ophelia mid-month, followed shortly afterwards by Storm Brian. Thankfully, neither storm did too much structural damage however Ophelia caused considerable loss of life to the seal pups that were in their nursery areas along the south-west coast of the Calf, with an estimated 20% missing after the storm. Seawatching finally stepped up a gear with 2845 Kittiwake on 17th along with 357 Gannet, an adult Pomarine Skua, six Arctic Skua, 13 Great Skua, 59 Great Black-backed Gulls, five Black Guillemots and 812 "Auk spp" moving south. During the second half of the month we enjoyed an excellent passage of Song Thrushes, along with some excellent visual migration of finches and an Olive-backed Pipit was trapped in the back garden on 23rd. This was our second record of the year but the first to be ringed on the Calf.



A Great Spotted Woodpecker was around the Observatory on 26th when the first nine Long-tailed Tits, of an invasion that continued into early November and brought 51 new birds and a control.

November saw the continuation of some good visual migration, with good numbers of Brambling, whilst a good run of Woodcock records and several flocks of Whooper Swans were recorded.



The season closed on the 15th.

Owing to its isolated position life on the Calf could be lonely one; however during 2017 the islet had a real “buzz” that was created by the fantastic volunteers and guests that have made such a huge contribution to success of the season. We have had a great many laughs along the way and there were many memorable experiences, in what was a truly remarkable year. If you are interested in being part of the team for 2018 then please contact the Ornithological Warden at calfoman@manx.net