

## Calf of Man – 2020 season

The season began when Dan Woollard (Estate Warden) and I arrived at South Harbour at 10am on 6<sup>th</sup> March, we were accompanied by Rob Fisher who joined us as Assistant Volunteer Warden for the season and my wife, Karen. We quickly settled into the process of opening the Observatory after its winter hibernation and beginning the array of tasks that lay ahead for us during 2020. The first



couple of weeks were dominated by a series of storms, as Ciara, Dennis and Ellen swept across the Irish Sea and one of our first tasks was clearing the track to Cow Harbour, of two large conifers that had been blown down during the winter. Despite the challenging weather, there were several good birds seen during the first few days, with two Canada Geese (16<sup>th</sup> Calf record) at the Dubh on 7<sup>th</sup> and a Black Redstart at the Lighthouses which stayed to the 8<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps because of the strong winds, there were large numbers of Gannets offshore with 250 feeding in the Sound on 12<sup>th</sup>, when the

first Manx Shearwater and Great Skua of the year were seen. Weather conditions improved from mid-month and the first summer migrants began to arrive with Chiffchaff on 17<sup>th</sup> and Wheatear on 20<sup>th</sup>. A Blue Tit at the Observatory on 19<sup>th</sup> was the first spring record since 2016 and was the forerunner of a movement of tits recorded across the west coast this spring, which included further Calf records of a Long-tailed Tit on 23<sup>rd</sup> and another Blue Tit on 26<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately, we were not able to fully record what happened at the Calf this spring, as after just 20 days on the Calf we were required to leave again, owing to the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic and movement restrictions that were being enforced on the main-Island.

Not knowing if we would be able to return for any of the remainder of the season we were collected and transported back to the main Island, following a couple of hectic days of re-packing and dismantling everything we had done over the past few weeks. Before we left, more summer migrants were recorded with two Sand Martin on 25<sup>th</sup> and a male Ring Ousel at the Observatory on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> March.

Once off the Calf, Dan Woollard made his way back to his family home in Essex, whilst Rob Fisher along with myself and Karen remained on the Isle of Man. Rob was able to stay with his in-laws in Laxey, whilst Karen and I were very kindly offered a property to live in in Castletown for the time that we were in 'lockdown'.

Frustratingly, we then experienced one of the best periods of spring weather in recent years, just at a time when we could not really get out and enjoy it – other than sitting in the back garden.

However, we were able to use this period of confinement constructively and I set about creating a photographic copy of the Observatories historical ringing schedules. Once this task of taking 6516 photographs was achieved and having recruited and trained a small team of volunteers, we set about adding these records into our dataset. By the end of June, we had achieved the input of over 35,000 individual records covering some 85 species. There is still a long way to go before we can upload all the data into the BTO database, but at least the possibility of losing the data has now been avoided.

Species	Date	Time	Observer	Count	Notes
Blue Tit	19/03	10:00	DW	1	First record since 2016
Canada Goose	07/03	14:00	DW	2	16th Calf record
Black Redstart	08/03	10:00	DW	1	At the Lighthouses
Manx Shearwater	12/03	08:00	DW	1	First of the year
Great Skua	12/03	09:00	DW	1	First of the year
Chiffchaff	17/03	10:00	DW	1	First summer migrant
Wheatear	20/03	10:00	DW	1	First summer migrant
Sand Martin	25/03	10:00	DW	2	Summer migrants
Ring Ousel	26/03	08:00	DW	1	Male

Although Coronavirus had already reached the Isle of Man in March, the strict lockdown procedures and closure of borders instigated by the Manx Government meant that the situation was brought

under control relatively quickly and by the end of May, life on the Isle of Man was beginning to return to some form of normality. In early June we were allowed to make the first of several day trips to undertake seabird breeding counts around the Calf coastline, as well as making a start on monitoring some of the Shag and Razorbill nests at our two main colonies, Kione ny Halby and Gibdale. Finally, on the 18<sup>th</sup> June both Rob Fisher and I returned to the Calf to re-start the season. Unfortunately, due to on-going border restrictions, it was not possible for Dan Woollard to return with us: however, Rob Fisher stepped up and took on the Estate Warden duties until Dan was able to re-join us on 13<sup>th</sup> August.

Our return was just in time to be able to assess some of the breeding seabird populations, but unfortunately much of the spring had been lost and with-it valuable data on migration and breeding



numbers for many species. One consolation was the capture of a Red-breasted Flycatcher on 19<sup>th</sup> June – just the second bird caught after putting the mist nets back up around the Observatory. For the fourth consecutive year the islet hosted a summering Great Skua, however this year there was more than one. At least two un-ringed birds were regularly seen together, often harassing the gulls breeding on Caigher and along the East Coast. Additionally, birds were often seen visiting Kitterland, one of which was a colour-ringed bird, photographed on 16<sup>th</sup> June, which had been ringed as a nestling on the Isle of Canna in July 2015. The species is gradually expanding its breeding range southwards from its stronghold in the north of Scotland and colonised several uninhabited islands off the west coast of Ireland in the

early 1990's. More recently the species has bred, since 2010, on Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland and it would seem possible that the Calf may be the next place for them to colonise.

As recently as 2015, the Common Buzzard was classed as a scarce vagrant to the Calf, however since the species' colonisation of the main island it has increased in its frequency of occurrence on the Calf. Following a group of five seen around the Withy in March, there were odd records of singles seen soaring over the Calf during lockdown and on our return in June, it became evident that at least three birds were likely to have been present through the spring. Although no breeding attempt was found this year, it would seem likely that this species is also a contender to breed in future years.

Autumn migration was evident from 1<sup>st</sup> July with the first Blackcaps of autumn being recorded along with marauding flocks of juvenile Starlings and a light passage of dispersing Grey Wagtails. A, probable female, Rosy Starling was found near to the Observatory just before dusk on 6<sup>th</sup> July and was watched briefly before it flew off west – just the 4<sup>th</sup> Calf record. Small numbers of juvenile Willow Warblers began moving through from 8<sup>th</sup>, with passage becoming more constant from mid-month. A record-breaking year for Treecreepers began with juveniles trapped on 12<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>, whilst Tree Pipit and Garden Warbler were added to the year list on 19<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> July respectively.



Overall, seabirds appeared to be having a relatively successful breeding season with Shag numbers remaining stable following several years of decline and Razorbill and Guillemot numbers rising slightly. However, productivity of the three large gulls was particularly low, with the prolonged periods of warm and dry weather during lockdown thought to have caused high mortality rates in small chicks. This was particularly evident in coastal colonies, where there is little shade compared to the inland colonies where chicks could find shade amongst vegetation. We are particularly grateful to the skippers and crew of Scraayl and Vagabond for their assistance in undertaking boat-based seabird surveys and landing us safely on Kitterland.

Our annual monitoring of the Manx Shearwater breeding numbers was another casualty of the coronavirus restrictions, however night-time visits to the colonies during the summer months would seem to indicate that the population is continuing to thrive. Good numbers of adults were trapped during summer nights and this was bolstered by one of the best years for ringing chicks, resulting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest ringing total for the species ever.

A number of accommodation improvements to the farmhouse had been planned to start before lockdown interrupted our schedule and as these included essential improvements to the fire safety standards, the opening of the guest accommodation was delayed until late July, allowing work to be carried out once we had returned to the Calf. Several weeks of complete upheaval ensued as a new bathroom suite was fitted, gas pipes and electrical systems were removed and replaced, whilst numerous ceilings and walls were reboarded and skimmed. Whilst the schedule was quite tight, all was achieved thanks to the hard work of those involved and we were back to normal in time for us to welcome the Bowers family, as our first guests of the 2020 season and for their 22<sup>nd</sup> consecutive year of staying with us on the Calf.



On our return, it was noted that the invasive Horsetail in the Millpond had taken advantage of our absence and had completely overtaken the surface water. A huge effort was needed to remove the Horsetail and on 15<sup>th</sup> August, a team of six volunteers from local company, JTC, helped kickstart this project. Throughout August and September, we gradually continued to clear the offending vegetation from the pond by digging out the roots/rhizomes of the plant and dumping it away from the pond. Hopefully by digging out the roots, next year should see a reduction in the density and numbers of these plants. We also attempted to dig out some of the silt that has accreted over the years and reduced the size of the water area since it was last dug out in 1989. Although a good start was made this will require either a huge team of volunteers or machinery capable of moving tonnes of material if we are to return the pond to its former size.



We quickly settled into the routine of hosting different groups staying at the Observatory and August proved to be a busy month as many islanders chose to visit the Calf, given that travel further afield was not permitted.

Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters are very much a feature of summer nights on the Calf and numbers of the former gradually increased through July into August resulting in one of the best ringing totals in recent years. It is a particular pleasure to be able to share the nocturnal activities of these two enigmatic species with those guest's hardy enough to venture out with us during the wee small hours.

Summer is relatively short-lived on the Calf and with most breeding birds now giving way to autumn migration, we began to see an increase in the numbers and variety of returning migrants, including a stunning Wood Warbler and a juvenile Long-eared Owl during the first week of August. However, the wind then settled in the north-east and suppressed movement somewhat, although a light passage of Willow Warbler and Tree Pipits continued, two more Treecreepers were trapped, and an above average autumn passage of Spotted Flycatcher and Crossbill began.

At this time, we also learnt of the passing of Juan Clague, skipper of the Calf's supply boat 'Scaayl'. Juan was a stalwart supporter of the Calf, bringing supplies, guests, and day visitors to the Calf for over 40 years. He was often the only contact with the outside world for many wardens and will be greatly missed by many.



A brief period of seawatching weather on 22<sup>nd</sup> August brought Dunlin and the first two Arctic Skua of the year and passage of White Wagtails began with 30 on 23<sup>rd</sup>, increasing quickly to 85 on 24<sup>th</sup>. Despite a near gale force easterly wind and heavy rain for much of the day on 25<sup>th</sup> two new species were added to the year list with Cow Harbour hosting a Green Sandpiper and two Ringed Plover, along with 29 Oystercatcher, two Common Sandpiper and three Teal that flew south towards Gibdale.



Wagtails were again on the move on 27<sup>th</sup>, with 24 Grey, 90 White, 13 Pied and 11 Alba's. However, bird of the day was an Osprey seen flying south off the Lighthouses.

Each year the Calf's Loaghtan flock are gathered and this year most animals were brought into the fields during mid-July. This took several attempts, owing to some very stubborn ewes and a group of ten sheep which frequent the west cliffs evaded all attempts at gathering. Owing to several external events it was not possible for the shepherd to get back out until 21<sup>st</sup> September to complete shearing and sorting, with 56 lambs and ewes taken off on 23<sup>rd</sup>, leaving around 70 animals on for the winter.

Early September saw the continuation of wagtail passage, as well as several days of reasonable hirundine passage and the arrival of the Manx Wildlife Trust seal volunteers, Mollie Kirk and Breeshey Harkin. They worked tirelessly over the next couple of months checking out all the coves around the islet, often requiring commando-style belly crawling through the bracken and heather, to record an excellent 61 pups and identify almost 50 adults.

We were also joined by Christa Worth, as a long-term volunteer for the autumn and with her assistance, along with shorter terms of help from Sandra Kaighin and Di Swayne, we were able to tackle a large number of tasks, including extensive drainage ditching and track repairs, with quantities of stone transported from South Harbour and used to reinstate and improve vehicle tracks through the Glen and at the Triangle. Bracken control and Heather management was ongoing with further work undertaken to clear the Twin Fields, as well as several new firebreaks being created from the Quarry to the Central Wall and from the corner junction down to the Cletts, with another track leading towards Big Head to aid access to the north-east coast in the event of an emergency. These and other existing paths were flailed often throughout the summer to keep vegetation down. Flailing of Bracken was also carried out along the East Coast to clear areas that might then be colonised by Manx Shearwaters. The cutting of Bracken in these areas, helps to

remove the dense layers of Bracken litter that have accumulated over many years, and which is thought may be a deterrent to birds nesting in these areas. A mosaic pattern of cutting was used to clear areas but also leave patches of Bracken that are known to be favoured habitat for Eiders to nest.

One hundred Robin on 10<sup>th</sup> September saw the first 'fall' of the autumn, whilst diurnal migration saw Meadow Pipit numbers increase to over 500 moving west. An increase in wind strength meant that seawatching was most fruitful on 11<sup>th</sup>, with a sea watch from Culbery producing seven 'Pale-bellied' Brent Geese, two Arctic Skua and a Great Skua. A Whinchat at the Smithy was a rather late addition to the year list on 15<sup>th</sup>, whilst continuing light easterly winds brought further birds our way on 16<sup>th</sup> with a flock of 50 Pink-footed Geese flying south and a Black-tailed Godwit which circled the Puddle being the highlights. Other observations included 167 Skylark heading west, 77 Robin and a female Redstart at the Triangle. More Pink-footed Geese were recorded on 23<sup>rd</sup> with flocks of 10 & 26 and two Great Northern Diver flew south past Burroo. A small arrival of 25 Goldcrest occurred on 24<sup>th</sup> and as has become more expected in recent years, the first Yellow-browed Warbler of autumn was trapped at the Observatory, remaining until 25<sup>th</sup>, with additional birds on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> September.



Calm conditions on 27<sup>th</sup> September brought a large arrival of birds around the Observatory with four Coal Tit being the start of an autumn invasion, the last Willow Warbler of the year and a female House Sparrow being the highlights. Three Whooper Swan on the sea near Chicken Rock were also new for the year.

Non-toxic bait monitoring is one of the major tasks undertaken throughout the season with approximately 300 bait points, located around the island, being checked every month for evidence of Brown Rats. Maintenance was required throughout the season, replacing plastic tubes that have been lost due to weather as well as putting out new marker canes. A trip to Kitterland in September was made to monitor the bait points there and for a second season, no evidence of 'Longtails', as they are known on the island, were found. We were feeling hopeful that we would be able to go a whole season without signs of any Longtails when one was recorded by the compost camera trap on 25<sup>th</sup> October. Efforts to trap the animal before we left were unsuccessful, so this will be a high priority to deal with when we return next spring.

October started where September left off - with three more Yellow-browed Warblers and a good passage of diurnal migrants. Autumn thrushes began to arrive from 7<sup>th</sup> and the beginnings of a large Chaffinch movement began with 650 on 8<sup>th</sup>. Another 518 Chaffinch flew through on 11<sup>th</sup> when the

first two Brambling of autumn were recorded. A moderate to light northerly wind on 13<sup>th</sup> encouraged more visible migration with 180 Jackdaw and 46 Rook making the trip across the water, whilst the 'tit invasion' gathered pace with 30 Coal Tit, four Blue Tit and 45 Great Tit arriving at the Observatory along with 230 Chaffinch, the only record of Tree Sparrow for the year and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Calf record of Great White Egret that was photographed by the local boatman as it flew north towards the Isle of Man.



A 6<sup>th</sup> Treecreeper for the season was the highlight at the Observatory on 14<sup>th</sup> amongst an arrival of 100 Blackbird, 110 Redwing, 47 Song Thrush, 26 Mistle Thrush and 447 Chaffinch, with similar numbers of thrushes present again on 15<sup>th</sup>. Strong southerly winds curtailed things a bit until 22<sup>n</sup> with another four Coal Tit arrived at the Observatory, along with a Reed Warbler trapped in the front hedge nets. Despite a strengthening northwest wind on 22<sup>nd</sup> a Black Redstart was at the Observatory and two Coal Tits of the Irish subspecies '*hibernicus*' were trapped in the back garden, one of which remained until 7<sup>th</sup> November.



Classic autumn seawatching conditions finally arrived on 26<sup>th</sup> October with the southwest gale quickly switching northwest during the early hours of the morning and producing 13 Red-throated Diver, two Black-throated Diver, three Great Northern Diver, a late Manx Shearwater, 400 Kittiwake and an immature Little Gull. The wind had backed south-west the following day and torrential rain hampered most attempts at birdwatching but a slight change to the west on 28<sup>th</sup> brought another two each of Red-throated and Great Northern Divers whilst passerines clearly decided that despite the strong winds that they needed to move and visual migration included four Swallow, 252 Starling, 375 Chaffinch, three Brambling and six Crossbill. A significant reduction in wind strength on 30<sup>th</sup> saw diurnal movements of 87 Skylark, nine Swallow, 1435 Starling, 450 Chaffinch, 107 Linnets, a Crossbill and 204 Goldfinch. Despite horrendous weather conditions again on 31<sup>st</sup>, a further 375 Starling flew west and a male Firecrest was a surprise capture at the Observatory.

Strong winds and often rainy conditions largely suppressed migration during the first couple of days of November, although the '*hibernicus*' Coal Tit and male Firecrest remained to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively. Conditions improved on 3<sup>rd</sup> and allowed 808 Starling, 253 Chaffinch, three Brambling & 91 Goldfinch to move through. Most surprising however, was a 'redhead' Goosander initially seen flying over the back field, which then flew low over the courtyard before heading west over the Twinfields – just the 9<sup>th</sup> Calf record.

Chaffinch dominated the 4<sup>th</sup> with an impressive 976 birds recorded mostly moving west, as well as another four Swallow, 1941 Starling, two Brambling and 133 Goldfinch. Thrushes were again in evidence with an arrival of 35 Blackbird, 36 Fieldfare, six Redwing, 35 Song Thrush and 37 Mistle Thrush around the Observatory – the latter being the 4<sup>th</sup> highest count for the Calf.

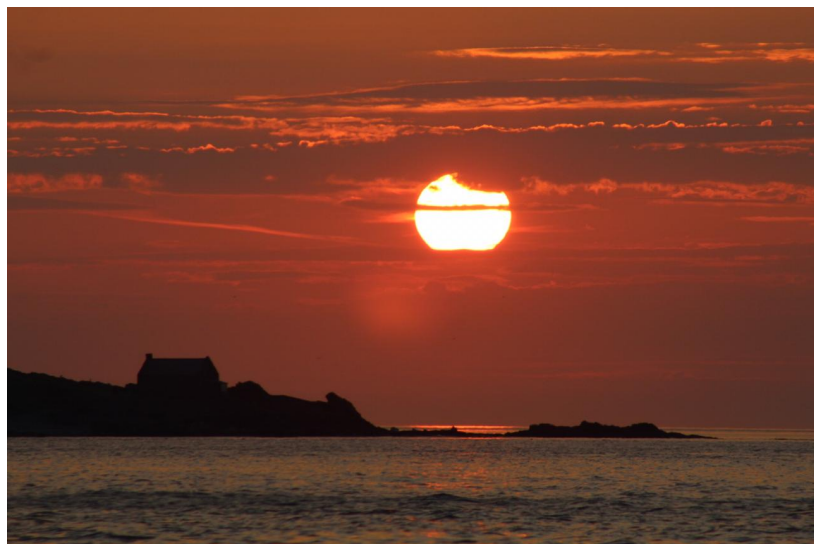
More Starling were on the move on 5<sup>th</sup> with a season high count of 3543 heading west, whilst a 'tristis' Chiffchaff was trapped at the Observatory and thrushes were again present in good numbers, with 47 Blackbird, 57 Fieldfare, 50 Song Thrush and 22 Mistle Thrush. Light easterly winds on 6<sup>th</sup> with light drizzle before dawn brought a large arrival of thrushes, with 120 Blackbird, 71 Fieldfare, 45 Redwing, 26 Song Thrush and six Mistle Thrush plus eight Blackcap, 280 Chaffinch and 55 Goldfinch. Two Lapwing were calling from the Front Field just before dawn and the only Woodcock of the autumn was trapped in the back-field mist nets. Elsewhere, two adult Lesser Black-backed Gulls were at Cow Harbour and a male Teal was caught on the trail camera at the Dubh. Thrush numbers decreased on 7<sup>th</sup> with just 55 Blackbird, 56 Fieldfare, 21 Redwing and 22 Song Thrush, although a new 'nominate' race Coal Tit arrived at the Observatory and small passage of Dunnock & Robins were noted along with 66 Woodpigeon and a further 129 Chaffinch and a female Brambling. Periods of fog and rain over the last couple of days meant passage was relatively quiet, however a



lone Long-tailed Tit arrived at the Observatory on 8<sup>th</sup> when four Blackcap were recorded, whilst five were present on the 9<sup>th</sup> when the season drew to a close.

There are many people involved in making life on the Calf as enjoyable as it is. The amazing volunteers and visitors make the Calf a great place to work and without them we would not be able achieve as much as we have. 2020 has been a particularly challenging year and the turmoil created by Covid-19 brought about many challenges, not least the need for somewhere to stay during lockdown. Both Karen and I are extremely grateful to Tim Earl and Liz Charter who stepped up and allowed us to stay at 'Whitburn' during our exile from the Calf.

As ever we are indebted to Steve Clague who has continued in his father's footsteps of delivering our weekly supplies on 'Scaayl', as well as safely transporting various contractors, visitors, and sheep to and from the islet. The need for support and essential provisions is a must on the Calf and as such, we are particularly grateful to Lara Howe (MWT) and Shaun Murphy (MNH) for doing their utmost to ensure we have everything we require.



Aron Sapsford  
Ornithological Warden

Photo Credits:

Fallen trees	-	Rob Fisher
Data sheet	-	Aron Sapsford
Red-breasted Flycatcher	-	Rob Fisher
Rosy Starling	-	Rob Fisher
Re-decoration	-	Dan Woollard
Family with Manxie	-	Rob Fisher
“Scaayl” & Juan Clague	-	Mike Radcliffe
Osprey	-	Dan Woollard
Yellow-browed Warblers	-	Rob Fisher
Great White Egret	-	Steve Clague
‘hibernicus’ Coal Tit	-	Rob Fisher
‘tristis’ Chiffchaff	-	Rob Fisher
Sunset over Cow Harbour	-	Steve Clague