

Report: seabird-ringing on Foula, Shetland, 25th June - 5th July 2017

British Birds generously funded my travel to and from Foula, Shetland, one of the UK's most isolated permanently inhabited islands, where I aided Professor Bob Furness in ringing seabirds and attaching geolocators to Guillemots and Razorbills. Travelling on progressively smaller planes, I flew from Heathrow to Aberdeen, from Aberdeen to Sumburgh on mainland Shetland, and from Tingwall airport to Foula.

The name "Foula" derives from the Old Norse "Fuglaey", meaning "island of birds", and this description held very true. I've never been anywhere so rich and abundant in birdlife. It was a pleasure to be woken up every day by the songs of Snipe and Skylark! Many of the species I saw were life firsts, including Great Skua (a.k.a. Bonxie), Red-throated Diver, Red-necked Phalarope and Marsh Warbler, a pair of which were nesting at Ham.

However, the main focus of the trip was bird-ringing and geocator-tagging. The Foula study is one branch of a major research project attaching geolocators to breeding Guillemots and Razorbills at a variety of colonies around the UK, funded by Vattenfall. The project's aim is to compare the migration routes and wintering areas of Guillemots and Razorbills from different breeding sites, and particularly to assess to what degree their distributions overlap with offshore wind farms, which might pose a danger to these birds.

Geolocators are small devices that attach to a standard leg ring by a cable tie. To obtain the required data, we need to deploy the devices on a sample of breeding adults, then re-catch the same individuals one or two years later to recover the devices and download the data. The loggers store light intensity, sea surface temperature and whether the device is wet so is in the water (bird swimming) or dry so in the air (bird flying).

Birds such as Guillemots and Razorbills were caught using a noose pole; Fulmars with a net; and we set up a mist-net in the garden of our house on Foula to catch passerines. We eventually fitted around 40 geolocators (roughly meeting Bob's target), mainly to Guillemots, as Bob had already successfully attached many geolocators to Razorbills on Fair Isle. I was able to further my training for a C ringing permit by becoming familiar with a range of new ring types, plus ringing and handling birds larger than thrushes (the largest birds I'd handled before this!). In particular, I learnt the knack of attaching Guillemot and Razorbill 'special' rings, which require a more complex plier technique. Overall, my ringing totals were as follows (birds adult unless otherwise stated):

Bonxie chicks: 18
Guillemot: 16
Shag: chicks 4, adults 1
Fulmar: 22
Razorbill: 1
Starling: juveniles 3, adults 1
Blackbird: 1
Eider: 1
Greater Black-backed Gull chicks: 1
Herring Gull chicks: 1

I also learnt a great deal about seabird ecology and physiology from Bob, particularly regarding seabird diets, including how to find otoliths in Bonxie pellets for fish identification and why the seabirds have experienced poor breeding seasons in recent years. But my experiences weren't limited to birds: after acquiring a book on the "Flora of Foula" by Sheila Gear, a Foula resident, I became

familiar with a host of specialised bog and coastal plants, particularly sedges, rushes and grasses. The island's bryological and lichen diversity also fascinated me, and reinforced my desire to become more adept at identifying these taxa. There are some interesting links between Foula's flora and seabirds: for example, Bonxie excrement has been shown to promote a unique community of mosses.

Bob aims to return to Foula in May next year to recover geolocators. I am proud to know that my efforts have contributed to gathering data on seabird movements, with important conservation implications. Thanks to British Birds I am now a more well-rounded bird-ringer, ornithologist and ecologist, and for that I am very grateful.

Sam Buckton