

The Flora and Fauna of Westray, Orkney

PART ONE Breeding Birds

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LITTLE GREBE

(*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

Though not proven every year this species is probably a regular breeder on the Burness Loch. Recently, in April most years there are sightings of adults on the loch. This is before the emergent vegetation grows and obscures the fringes of the water body and provides seclusion for this very shy bird. On 31st August 1996, six were seen here and this could well represent family parties of the year.

In 1999, two pairs were recorded breeding on the Burness Loch and one pair at Swartmill Loch. Probably less than 20 pairs of this secretive water bird breed in Orkney

1999 found 4252 apparently occupied sites. Fulmars also nest at lower densities on the cliffs all the way from Weatherness to the Noup and on inland crags and in old quarries. Even low banks have been occupied and inland sites at ground level.

Fulmars are one of the longest lived of all birds with one ringed individual on Eynhallow retrapped 44 years after first being marked. They breed first at 6-10 years old and lay only one egg which they uniquely defend by spitting their oily stomach contents; accurate up to 8 feet range!

Birds are present in and around the breeding areas for most of the year but numbers often dip in late autumn. First eggs are laid around mid-May with young appearing after a 7 week incubation in late July. Chicks fledge at the end of August or in early September.

FULMAR

(*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Local name: Maaliemac

The Fulmar was a rare bird in Orkney in the 19th Century and was said to have only been found deep at sea or occasionally inshore after storms. The first breeding in Orkney was on Hoy in 1900, followed the next year on Westray by a breeding attempt at the Noup. These two attempts heralded one of the most spectacular colonisations by any bird in recent times. By 1943, Lack stated that it had increased rapidly and by 1968, Balfour believed that it was now widespread around almost all the coasts. The massive seabird survey 'Operation Seafarer' in 1969-70 revealed 47304 pairs and this had further increased to 88560 apparently occupied nests (AON) in Orkney in 1985-87. Westray's stake in this has been significant and a sea based count of the RSPB Noup Cliffs reserve found 1620 AONs. A land based count of this site in 1994 appeared to show a decrease to 1129 AONs. A full count of the entire west cliffs from the Noup to Inganess in summer

CORMORANT

(*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Local name: Skarf, Scarfie, Hiblin

There are no breeding records but the presence of up to 22 birds on the Holm of Aikerness during summer 1999 invited some suspicion of breeding. If proven this would be a new Orkney colony. Other colonies in Orkney are declining in number e.g. Seal Skerry off North Ronaldsay which saw an 80% reduction in AONs between 1985 and 2001.

A winter gathering of 16 birds was found in the Bay of Tuquoy on 22nd March 1994, (pers obs).

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SHAG

(*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

Local name: *Skarf, Skarfie*

This common coastal species is found all year around Westray and a survey of the entire west cliffs found 89 apparently occupied nests in June 1999. Due to this species somewhat secretive breeding habits, this figure can be taken as a minimum. In any case an unknown number also nest on the cliffs in the south east of the island and possibly also around the Aikerness headland.

Outwith the breeding season an unknown number remain around the island, for example 120 in Rapness Sound on 25th August 1998

MUTE SWAN

(*Cygnus olor*)

Each of the freshwater lochs hold one-three pairs each year with a maximum of five pairs breeding in 1991, single pairs on Swartmill and Burness Lochs and three pairs on Saintear Loch. In recent years a pair has settled at the Ayre of Roadmire and these reared three young in 1999. Otters have been suspected of predating this brood. Records show that it is not uncommon for some of these pairs to rear broods of up to six young. Small numbers of adults and immatures frequent the Pierowall waterfront but are not thought to breed there. The maximum count recorded was 17 adults on Swartmill Loch on 17th August 1998.

WHOOPER SWAN

(*Cygnus cygnus*)

There are no breeding records but in recent years one-four adults, which are normally winter visitors, have spent the summer months on the freshwater lochs, Saintear in particular.

SHELDUCK

(*Tadorna tadorna*)

Local name: *Links Goose*

A common breeder, often nesting on old rabbit burrows in sandy links. The Ouse and the Bay of Tuquoy were found to hold 16-30 birds each in 1986, with records of 1-5 at two other sites. The island population was estimated at 20 pairs in 1998; a significant proportion of the estimated Orkney population of 80 pairs, (Eggeling, 1983). A nest has been found in deep heather in the White Moss.

Adult Shelduck leave the Orkney breeding grounds in late summer for their moulting areas on the German North Sea coast. Almost all have gone by the end of August and occasional sightings in September almost always referring to juveniles. The first returning birds are back in Orkney by mid-December and numbers build steadily through the rest of the winter period. A count of 41 in the Bay of Tuquoy on 22nd March 1994 must reflect the bulk of the islands breeding population. Interestingly numbers decrease in April and this is probably because they are more secretive when prospecting breeding sites. Broods of young emerge in late May and it is not unusual to find large 'crèches' of 20+ young in summer.

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WIGEON

(*Anas penelope*)

Noted by Booth et al (1984) as having bred on Westray between 1974-83 but no further details are given. One pair was recorded in suitable breeding habitat at Saintear Loch in 1987 with three pairs there in 1993. A single pair was also recorded at Swartmill Loch in these years and six birds were here on 13th June 1997. This species probably breeds in very small numbers on Westray most years. It is of course much better known as a winter visitor with probably in excess of 1000 birds present. The highest recent count was of 525 birds on the south Westray coastline (Inganess to Rapness) in January 1994.

TEAL

(*Anas crecca*)

Breeds annually in small numbers around most wetlands but, as with most wildfowl, the actual population level is difficult to assess accurately. A wetland survey in 1993-94 produced records of five pairs on the island. I would suggest that a realistic estimate of breeding birds would be in the order of 10-20 pairs. A pair has been seen in most recent years at Roadmire. A common winter visitor from northern Europe and Iceland, and most wetlands will hold a few dozen birds at least. The only quantifiable winter counts were in the winter on 1993-94 when a maximum of 176 were found between Inganess and Rapness in January 1994.

MALLARD

(*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Local name Stocker

This is the commonest breeding freshwater wildfowl species in Orkney and this holds true for Westray as well. All freshwater lochs and marshes visited in the survey of 1993-94 held breeding birds and undoubtedly many pairs were missed. That survey revealed a minimum of 36 pairs throughout the island with a site maximum of 10 pairs at the Burness Loch in 1993. An estimated population of 50-100 pairs would seem reasonable for Westray. As with other members of the dabbling duck family, the secretive habits of brooding females means that they are virtually impossible to census. The accepted survey technique is to count the 'off-duty' males as representing the breeding population for that site. As with the previous two species, the Mallard is a common winter visitor and several hundred spend this season in Westray. A count of 166 from Inganess to Rapness in January 1994 represents a fraction of the total island number at this time.

SHOVELER

(*Anas clypeata*)

An uncommon breeding species with only four pairs located in the wetland survey of 1993-94. This probably slightly under-represents the actual breeding population which may be in the region of five-ten pairs. A pair have been seen at Roadmire in the last few springs.

Though Shoveler are uncommon breeders throughout Orkney, they winter almost exclusively in the north isles. The only recent count from Westray in this period is of six on the Swartmill Loch on 26th January 1994.



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TUFTED DUCK

(*Aythya fuligula*)

Breeds on each of the main freshwater bodies on the island with a record from 1994 of five broods of young on the Burness Loch and six pairs there in 1987. Six pairs were recorded on the island in 1999.

This species is more abundant in winter on the Saintear, Burness and Swartmill Lochs with small numbers also present on Loch of the Stack and Ayre of Roadmire at least.

COMMON KESTREL

(*Falco tinnunculus*)

Local name: Moosie haak

Several traditional sites are known on Westray, at Rackwick, Rapness Cliffs, Noltland Castle, Vins Hamar and Sheepy Kirk. The first of these is on a low sea cliff in an abandoned nest of Hooded Crow. These sites are often successful and that on the Rapness Cliffs reared five young in 1991 though the very public Noltland Castle site failed in 1996 when the castle was undergoing extensive repairs. The Sheepy Kirk site has been used for at least 80 years!

COMMON EIDER

(*Somateria mollissima*)

Local name: Dunter



This is a common breeding species but one for which very little data exists in the literature. Broods of young are a common sight around the shoreline in May-July but there are no estimates of a breeding population or their distribution. On the Aikerness Hill, three incubating females were found in summer 1994.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER

(*Mergus serrator*)

There are no confirmed breeding records but the wetland survey of 1987 found single pairs on Saintear and Swartmill Lochs. There is little information on any migrant or wintering population levels but the species is regularly encountered in sheltered bays along the east coast and is bound to be commoner than the above information suggests. It is frequently seen near Gill Pier in groups of four-six.

PEREGRINE

(*Falco peregrinus*)

Two sites are known, both on sea cliffs. Both these regularly show signs of occupation (bird kills along the cliff top within the territory) in the pre-breeding season and sometimes in summer but evidence of a successful breeding effort remains elusive. This species is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1984 and an intentional visit to an occupied territory demands an appropriate license.

WATER RAIL

(*Rallus aquaticus*)

There are no firm breeding records but the presence of at least one bird calling throughout summer 1993 in the reed bed at Ayre of Roadmire invited suspicion that a breeding attempt may have taken place in what is very suitable habitat. This is an extremely elusive species and probably breeds more widely; much suitable habitat exists around the lochs of Burness and Saintear.

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CORNCRAKE

(*Crex crex*)

Formerly a common summer visitor to hayfields and areas of iris or nettle this species has declined within living memory from near pest status to virtual extinction. Balfour (1968) stated that it had declined considerably and in 1972 he found it to be most common in the north isles. A complete survey in 1979 found 102-104 calling males throughout Orkney; 11-12 were in Westray. A mere eight years later in 1987 this had declined to three calling males. Years when no birds are recorded have become the norm recently but three males called all summer in the Westside in 2001. Despite this ray of hope, it still seems quite possible that this distinctive part of the former Orcadian environment will slip away for good in the near future.

MOORHEN

(*Gallinula chloropus*)

Local name: Waterhen

A fairly common breeder in wetland habitat. A survey in 1993-94 found three pairs at the Ayre of Roadmire; five pairs at Burness Loch and a further two pairs elsewhere in the island. This will almost certainly be an under-estimate of the island population which may be nearer 20 pairs.

Moorhens breed in dense cover, often in reeds or iris, where they lay a clutch of up to 12 eggs. On hatching the tiny young are jet black and are able to leave the nest almost immediately, following the parents into nearby vegetation.

It seems likely that the local population is augmented in winter by birds fleeing the cold continental winter. Small groups of Moorhens can be seen in the vicinity of wetlands feeding at field edges at this time of year. This is a very shy species but the breeding birds at

Roadmire give excellent views if watched (with patience) from a car.

COOT

(*Fulica atra*)

The Burness Loch is undoubtedly the centre of population for this species in Westray as the wetland survey of 1993 found an impressive 12 pairs nesting. Only four pairs were recorded as breeding there in 1987. Otherwise, Coot seems to breed also at the Swartmill Loch (single pairs in 1987 and 1993 but 12 pairs in 1998) and sporadically at Saintear Loch. In 1994 two pairs bred at the Ayre of Roadmire. A flock of 60 were on Burness Loch in August 1991.

Coot are present all year on Westray and as with the previous species, it is possible that winter numbers (for which there is no documentation) include some continental visitors. As a winter visitor, this species has increased dramatically in Orkney in recent years with mainland counts in 1999 of 625 from Loch of Bosquoy in October and 922 on Loch of Harrow in November.

OYSTERCATCHER

(*Himantopus ostralegus*)

Local name: Chaldo, Scottie, Scotto

A very common breeding species though most of this population leaves Orkney in winter. Six

randomly selected 1km² were chosen from the OS grid on Westray in 1993 for an RSPB survey of lowland breeding waders. This 6km² sample of agricultural land revealed 120 breeding pairs of Oystercatcher, equivalent to one pair per 5 ha². There was no follow up survey to determine the percentage of successful pairs but these breeding densities were among the highest



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recorded in that survey (67 1km² grids were sampled) anywhere in Orkney. Also, on the Aikerness maritime heath, 23 pairs were found in 1994.

Considering that Oystercatchers are found nesting in a variety of habitats on Westray, e.g. coastlines, agricultural land, maritime heath and grassland, it seems possible that as many as 2000 pairs nest here.

Winter numbers are much lower and ringing recoveries indicate that many Orkney birds winter in northern France, Ireland and western England and as far north as the Moray Firth. Three counts of the south Westray coast in 1993-94 demonstrate the low numbers of wintering Oystercatchers (56 in November 1993) followed by an increased figure as birds gravitate north (278 in January 1994) and finally an indication of full spring passage (446 in March 1994). A count of 300 at Noup Head on 3rd April 1994 also indicates passage.

Traditional territories can be occupied by early February with courtship display evident from early March. The usual clutch is of three eggs, though occasionally two-four are recorded.

Incubation begins in the second half of April and the earliest chicks are out in mid-May.

RINGED PLOVER

(Charadrius hiaticula)

Local name: Sandlo



A survey of breeding Ringed Plovers in 1984 covered most of the coastline except the Bay of Tuquoy and most of the maritime heath along the west cliffs. Care was taken to exclude from the counts the numbers of passage birds moving through the island up to early June.

A total of 34 pairs were located with 31 of these on the coastal strip. The remaining three pairs were found

inland. Some prime habitat was not surveyed i.e. the Ayre of Roadmire (where 5 pairs bred in 1994), so a realistic population estimate could be said to be around 40 pairs. There is no new information on the breeding population of the island. A count of 59 at the Ouse on 8th May 1998 was probably of migrants heading north. This is a common wintering shorebird and this population most likely comprises a mix of local birds and those wintering here having migrated from high arctic breeding grounds. A survey of the coastline from Inganess to Rapness on 22nd March 1994 found 274 birds.

Breeding territories can be occupied by the end of February and the earliest date for a full clutch of eggs is 9th April (Booth, Cuthbert & Reynolds, 1984). The clutch is usually of 4 eggs and these are extremely well camouflaged, usually in a shallow scrape on shingle. Along with other shorebirds, Ringed Plovers will feed in flooded fields around high water.

LAPWING

(Vanellus vanellus)

Local name: Teewhuppo

This is a common and widespread breeding species, favouring grassland with damp areas. A survey of breeding waders on lowland areas of Orkney in 1993 found 1-14 Lapwing territories in six randomly selected 1km² on Westray. The highest value was at HY4942 near Moa and was the third highest breeding density recorded in Orkney in that survey. Another survey in 1993 found important densities of breeding Lapwing around Swartmill Loch and White Moss (25 pairs), Loch of Garth (14 pairs), and Burness Loch (11 pairs). It is clear that Westray still holds important numbers of breeding Lapwing and an estimate of 500-1000 pairs on the island would be realistic.

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Breeding grounds can be occupied by late February and the clutch of up to 4 eggs can be completed by the end of March. After an incubation of about a month the first chicks are in sight in early May and on the wing about five weeks later. The availability of damp areas seems important for the chicks to forage in, as does enough vegetation cover to hide in from predators.



Large flocks remain on the island through winter, mainly feeding in wet fields. These can be moved on by frosty weather with large flocks resorting first to the beaches before leaving en masse if the ground remains frozen for more than a few days. Recoveries of ringed birds from elsewhere in Orkney show that these cold weather movements take many birds to the milder climates of Ireland and France.

DUNLIN

(*Calidris alpina*)

Small numbers of Dunlin breed on the west coast maritime heath and a single pair was found in 1987 and 1993 near the Aikerness Lochs. They also breed at the Links o' Langskail. There are no documented population estimates but it would probably be safe to guess that up to 20 pairs nest annually on Westray.

It is in winter that Dunlin becomes really abundant on the Westray coastline as large numbers of immigrants arrive from northern Europe and the Arctic. A partial survey of the shore in 1983 found 250 birds. This survey was repeated in winter 1993-94 and revealed a maximum of 667 Dunlin between Inganess and Rapness in January 1994, most of which were found on the sandy flats of

the Bay of Tuquoy. At high tide many of these were seen feeding or roosting on wet coastal fields. Though not surveyed, it is very likely that many of these will stay to moult into summer plumage before returning to the breeding grounds in April and May; i.e. a count of 385 at the Ouse on 2nd April 1994. These can be as distant as northern Russia, Greenland and possibly even the Canadian arctic.

SNIPE

(*Gallinago gallinago*)

Local name *Horse Gowk*

Snipe breed in wet rough grazing, iris beds and around 'soft' loch edges. Westray has a lot of these sorts of habitats and Snipe are found throughout the island, even at the back of the hills. However this is a notoriously difficult species to survey and the only reliable census technique is to count displaying birds in the three hours after dawn. Using this method, 10 territories were located in 6km² of lowland in 1993. Elsewhere that year nine pairs were located at Swartmill Loch and White Moss. Snipe are extremely secretive when breeding and their nests are rarely seen



Large numbers of migrant Snipe from Europe and Iceland are often evident in autumn, especially in October. Whilst many of these move on, a large population, presumably a mix of local and immigrant birds, stays for the winter. Between Inganess and Rapness in January 1994, some 70 birds were found on the coastline.

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CURLEW

(*Numenius arquata*)

Local name: Whaap



This very characteristic species is well distributed throughout Westray with a particular concentration at Swartmill Loch and White Moss, where 18 pairs were found in 1993. Though it will nest even in intensively farmed grassland, Curlews prefer lush, rank, grassland with plenty of cover; especially Cocksfoot, Dock,

Meadowsweet and Iris. Some 26 pairs were found in 6km² of lowland grassland in 1993. Curlew were rare nesters in the 1940's and '50s. Newly cut silage fields prove attractive to large numbers of Curlew, both adults and young, with records of several flocks of 75-100 birds during late summer in recent years. At the Ouse there were 200 birds on 31st August 1996.

The coastal survey of 1993-94 found a maximum of 139 Curlew in January 1994 between Inganess and Rapness. Certainly many birds would have been missed on this survey which did not take into account any birds present on inland fields. As with other wader species, numbers of Curlew spending the winter in Westray will be swollen by immigrants, most probably from northern Europe.

REDSHANK

(*Tringa totanus*)

Breeding commonly throughout the island, the Redshank is one of the most familiar breeding waders in the summer months. In the lowland survey of 1993, the maximum density recorded in Orkney was 11 pairs/km² at HY4348, behind Pierowall village.

Elsewhere they were recorded breeding in every wetland visited with an impressive concentration at Swartmill Loch and White Moss of 18 pairs in 1993. A further five pairs were around the Burness Loch. Post breeding accumulations of 108 at the Ouse on 21st July 1994 and 110, Bay of Tuquoy on July 27th 1991.

A common coastal species in winter, a total of 376 were found between Inganess and Rapness in January 1994. Many of these are likely to be immigrants from Iceland and northern Europe.

ARCTIC SKUA

(*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Local name: Skootie Allen

The first adults of this summer resident species arrive back on the breeding grounds in the third week of April. The main breeding areas are at Aikerness and on the west Westray maritime heath with a few pairs elsewhere on the island (examples). Territories are established by mid-May and the clutch of usually two eggs are laid in an unlined scrape in the ground. Incubation takes about four weeks and the first fledged young have been seen on 12th July 1986 (Booth and Cuthbert, 1987). The adults famously defend their eggs and young by diving on any intruder in their territory; often striking with their feet. Chick diet is mostly small fish stolen (kleptoparasitism) by the parents from other seabirds in spectacular aerial pursuit. Eggs and chicks of other birds supplement the diet. The first breeding in Westray occurred in 1941 (Lack, 1943). A rapid increase followed the original colonisation and 64 pairs were found in the Operation Seafarer survey of 1969 (Cramp et al, 1974); with a further population growth indicated by Booth, 1974, who found 93 pairs in that year. Full surveys

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of breeding Skuas in Orkney in 1982 and 1992 found 45 and 98 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT) respectively in Westray. The maximum population level recorded was in 1993 with 100 AOT's found in the island. This figure indicates that Westray is home to approx. 10% of the Orkney population. Monitoring surveys have been carried out on Westray since 1991 by the RSPB. This has shown that the population here is quite successful. Factors given as being responsible for depressing breeding performance include predation by Common Gulls and trampling by sheep. Most birds have gone by mid-September on their way to the wintering areas off west Africa. This is illustrated by Westray ringed chicks being found as juveniles in France (Sept.) and Angola, West Africa (mid-Nov.).

GREAT SKUA (*Catharacta skua*) *Local name: Bonxie*

This now common species only bred for the first time in Orkney in 1914 on Hoy. The first breeding on Westray was recorded in 1958 though the locality is not known. Two pairs were recorded as breeding in 1969 and again in 1974 but this had increased to 6 pairs in 1982 and up to 10 pairs in 1992. In the same year the whole of Orkney was surveyed and this revealed a total of 2018 apparently occupied territories, with 1900 of these on Hoy. Between 1982 and 1992, Bonxie populations had doubled on both Rousay and Stronsay. Bonxies breed on the maritime heath above the west cliffs, around the Hill of Noup and also at Aikerness. The first birds arrive back on the breeding grounds from their tropical wintering quarters at the end of March. The clutch of usually two eggs are laid in an unlined scrape in mid-May. These

take about four weeks to hatch and it is a further 5 weeks before the chicks fledge. During the entire brood rearing period, both parents vigorously defend their investment and will occasionally strike an intruder. Some birds are bolder and more aggressive than others.

The diet of the Bonxie is more varied than that of the Arctic Skua with fish (especially Sand Eels), trawler discards and adults and young of other seabirds figuring highly among prey remains. They will also take birds eggs and have been seen feeding on carrion (pers obs). Their very visible and ruthless hunting techniques coupled with a highly aggressive nest defence have made the Bonxie one of the islands less welcome visitors.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Larus ridibundus*) *Local name: Blackheed*

Several large colonies exist on Westray with the wetland survey of 1993-94 finding the following totals at various sites: Loch of Tuquoy, 100 birds; Burness Loch, 415 birds; Swartmill Loch, 85 birds and Tatfend, 70 birds. In 1999, 65 pairs were recorded at Burness Loch, 27 pairs at Swartmill Loch and 18 pairs at the Ayre of Roadmire. Small numbers probably breed elsewhere on the island. In the breeding season a Black-headed Gull colony is a noisy, busy place. The nests are built above water level from local vegetation and the clutch of three, rarely four eggs is completed in late April. The young leave the nest soon after hatching and the first are on the wing in mid June.

The vast majority of the island breeding population leaves in winter. The small number still present (i.e. 57 in January 1983) may well be immigrants from Europe or Iceland. An obvious return

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takes place in March and the breeding areas are occupied soon after

weeks after hatching. Almost all the Orkney population has left the islands by the end of September.

COMMON GULL

(*Larus canus*)

Local name: *Whitefool, Whitemaa*

Several large colonies exist on the maritime heath at the back of the hills with 165 pairs recorded in three colonies in 1999. Another significant colony, numbering 88 birds, was at Aikerness in 1993 with a further 49 adults breeding at Loch of Garth in the same year. Elsewhere on the island smaller numbers nest and each of the larger lochs holds a few pairs. The Seabird Colony Register survey in 1985-87 found approximately 7406 pairs of Common Gulls in Orkney

Large numbers of Common Gulls winter on the island, feeding either in fields or along the shore. Some of the Orkney winter population are known from ringing recoveries to originate in Russia, Scandinavia and Iceland



LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

(*Larus fuscus*)

Local name: *Baakie, Scorie*
(immatures only)

This summer visitor is the least numerous of Orkney's breeding gull species. On Westray it breeds only on the west coast maritime heath, and at the back of Fitty Hill. There is no data on colony size and all recent estimates talk of "a few pairs".

The first birds arrive back from distant wintering grounds as far away as North Africa in early March. Birds become territorial in April and the clutch of up to three eggs is started towards the end of that month. Incubation takes about a month and chicks fledge about five

HERRING GULL

(*Larus argentatus*)

Local name: *Scorie*

Seen year round in Westray, the breeding population has not been well documented with the only recent data being 66 apparently occupied nests along the west cliffs in 1999. However it is a common breeder on the west coast maritime heath, on the cliffs south of Noup Head and possibly in small numbers elsewhere.

Summer roosts of up to 200 birds around Pierowall have been noted in several recent years. Mixed roosts of this and other large Gull species have also been observed in summer at Noup Hill and Aikerness (pers obs). The overall Orkney breeding population was surveyed in 1985-87 and was estimated to be around 2700 pairs.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

(*Larus marinus*)

Local name: *Baakie*

Again, there is a lack of documentation on colony sizes but this species is well known as a common breeder on the west coast maritime heath and in the Noup Hill area. Small numbers or isolated pairs probably breed elsewhere. The first eggs are laid at the end of April and fledged young can be seen from mid-July. This species can be very aggressive in its defence of nest or young. In summer there are several records of large roosts with 1000+ at Noup in summer 1999 and 500+ at Aikerness at the same time. In the 1980's huge numbers used to feed on the crab shells spread on the land to add calcium to otherwise acidic land,

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i.e. at Noup Hill

This is a common winter visitor and a partial survey of the Westray coast in January 1983 found 330 birds. Similar numbers were found on the shore from Inganess to Rapness in 1993-94. As with other localities in Orkney i.e. North Ronaldsay, rough weather in winter will drive large numbers ashore to await better conditions

monitored but the colony on nearby Papay reared 1.13 young per nest from a study plot of 158 nests in 1999.

Several factors can influence productivity; not the least of these is the availability of their staple diet of Sand Eels. Other limiting factors include weather and extent of predation by other seabirds, notably Bonxies, which has been found to be a serious influence on the Shetland breeding population.

KITTIWAKE

(*Rissa tridactyla*)

Local name: Waiko

From April to the end of July the western cliffs of Westray ring to the cries of tens of thousands of breeding Kittiwakes. Operation Seafarer found 60 000-70 000 pairs breeding here in 1968-70. By 1985-87 the accepted recording unit had changed to apparently occupied nests (AONs) and using this method some 30 980 aon's were recorded here during the Seabird Colony Register survey. The same stretch of cliffs held 34 864 AONs in 1999. Half of this total was found on the Noup Cliffs RSPB reserve. There would appear to have been a huge decline since 'Operation Seafarer' but the change in use of recording unit itself brings a discrepancy and difficulties in interpretation. Much smaller numbers nest on the Rapness cliffs.

In April and May huge numbers of Kittiwakes can be seen gathering nest material from lochs, grassy cliff tops and the coast. As the breeding season progresses a great many birds use the lochs for bathing. The clutch of up to three eggs is laid in May. These hatch after about a month and fledging takes place in July. By early August the breeding cliffs are virtually deserted.

Breeding success varies somewhat between colonies and from year to year. None of the Westray colonies are

SANDWICH TERN

(*Sterna sandvicensis*)

Local name: Big Tern

Three small colonies are occupied most years in Westray. In 1998 40 pairs bred at Tuquoy, rearing 35 young and in the same year a single pair bred at Twinness, rearing one chick. The latter colony was larger in 1995-97 when up 22 pairs to bred here. It is possible that this is one mobile colony nesting at either site in different years; something which is well known in this species. There is also a small colony at the Ouse and nine pairs nested here in 1994. The first birds arrive back from the West African wintering grounds in early April and soon begin their noisy territorial display flights in around the colony. Up to two eggs are laid in early May and fledging takes place in July. Most birds have left again by September on the long trek south. Sandwich Terns are notoriously 'skittish' as a breeding bird and the least disturbance at the stage when they are establishing the colony can put them off. Orkney is the most northerly extent of this species breeding range in the world.

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COMMON TERN

(*Sterna hirundo*)

An uncommon breeding summer visitor with a similar timing to the much more numerous Arctic Tern. In 1994, colonies of 40 and 35 birds were located at the Ouse and Ayre of Roadmire respectively. Attempted to breed at Twinness in 1995 and 1996. This is a tricky species to differentiate from Arctic Tern. Common has an orange-red bill with a black tip whereas that of Arctic is entirely blood-red.

ARCTIC TERN

(*Sterna paradisaea*)

Local name: Pickie terno

Most of the breeding population of this charismatic little bird arrive back in the north isles in the first week of May each year. This is after a migration journey of over 20 000 miles to Antarctica and back; a marvellous achievement completed with incredible timing.

They quickly settle into the routine of courtship and establishing territory. The clutch of 2-3 eggs are laid in a small scrape in the last week of May and these take about 3 weeks to hatch. Adults co-operate to defend the colony with aggression and vigour. Many an innocent intruder has been sent fleeing, blood streaming by these determined attacks. Chick diet is almost exclusively Sand Eels and the ability of the adults to find the appropriate size of fish for their chicks is crucial for the success of any breeding attempt. Also vital is the weather at the chick stage and recent cool, wet summers have adversely affected breeding performance in Westray and throughout Orkney. Young fledge from early July and continue to be fed by both parents until they depart on their marathon migration in August.

Recent surveys have found 22-36 colonies in Westray with the largest at Aikerness, Gallo Hill and Knucker Hill. Operation Seafarer (Cramp et al, 1974) found approx. 3760 pairs on Westray in 1969. A decline was indicated by Bullock and Gomersall, 1981, who found 3218 adults (equating to 2282 pairs) in 22 Westray colonies in 1980; though the situation seemed to have improved by 1989 when 4447 adults were found in 27 colonies. However by 1994, though the total number of colonies had increased to 36, numbers of adults present was found to have dropped to 1517. Overall, the large Aikerness colony seems to do somewhat better in terms of chick production than those elsewhere on the island. The most recent data is from 1999 when 770 pairs in five monitored colonies fledged 142 chicks, giving a productivity of 0.18 chicks fledged per pair. The Westray population declined by 53% in 1980-94 whereas that in Orkney as a whole had declined by 62% in the same period.

There is no doubt that this striking visitor, so much a part of a North Isles summer, is struggling to maintain its presence.

GUILLEMOT

(*Uria aalge*)

Local name: Aak

Vast breeding numbers and a previous reliance on the species for food has made the Guillemot something of an island emblem. The annual summer harvest of adults and eggs has dwindled out now.

The entire west cliffs were surveyed between 1968-70 and found to contain 60 000 - 70 000 individuals, roughly 10% of the British and Irish population. A repeat survey in 1985-87 found 60 670 on these cliffs, equating to 32% of

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the Orkney population, approximately 5% of the British and Irish total. A further survey in 1999 found 54 718 birds on these cliffs. There is no information on numbers using the Rapness cliffs but these will number not more than a few thousand individuals.

The cliffs are re-occupied in March and April though small numbers of birds may come ashore during fine weather in winter. The first eggs are laid in late April and chicks can be seen from mid June. Only one egg is laid. The flightless chicks leave the bare breeding ledge after about three weeks and swim away with the male parent. Orkney Guillemots mostly winter in the North Sea and along the Norwegian coast. In 1981, of 1318 adult Guillemots at Noup Head, 140 (10.6%) were of the 'bridled' variety.

In early April 1994, over 8000 birds per hour were seen heading west past Noup Head; presumably west coast breeders returning from pelagic wintering areas.

RAZORBILL

Alca torda

Local name: Aak

There is little data for this breeding species in Westray. This is undoubtedly partly due to its low density colonies and somewhat secretive breeding habits; nesting in inaccessible cracks, crevices and boulder scree.

Operation Seafarer (Cramp et al,1974) found 3000-4000 birds on Westray 1968-70. The Seabird Colony Register surveys of 1985-87 found 1971 birds on Westray, and a total of 9363 birds in Orkney (Westray held 21% of the Orkney population). In 1988, 870 were counted at Noup Head and 1576 were here in mid-June 1994.

This is a difficult species to survey and the above totals should be interpreted liberally.

Razorbills can be found in the vicinity of colonies from February onwards, and in fine weather sometimes on the cliffs at this time. Eggs are laid in May in the seclusion of a dark chamber. Chicks are rarely seen and they fledge in July. Young leave the breeding area immediately, and may not return to attempt breeding for another 3 years.

A good place to view Razorbills is along the cliffs just south east of the Castle o'Burrian.

BLACK GUILLEMOT

(Cepphus grylle)

Local name: Tystie

This charming little seabird breeds at very low densities along the west cliffs, the Rapness cliffs and especially along the boulder beach at Aikerness where there is a very accessible colony.



This colony held 67 adults on 21st July 1994. The island population was surveyed in April 1994 and a total of 918 birds were found around the coast.

Tysties return to the breeding colonies in March and begin prospecting among large stones for a dark cavity in which they lay 2 eggs in May. These hatch after about 30 days and are fed a variety of inshore fish, notably Butterfish *Pholis gunnellis*, by both

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parents. The prey is invariably delivered one item at a time. The chicks leave the nest at 38-45 days to begin their independent life. Orkney Tysties seem not to move very far and most of the Westray population probably winters near the island.

The adults are very striking birds with velvety black and pure white plumage. Their legs, feet and inside the mouth are bright red. If approached patiently they are typically very confiding.

PUFFIN

(*Fratercula arctica*)

Local name: Tammie Norie

This ever popular seabird is locally common on Westray. All summer small numbers can be found at the Noup but these are not always close and can require a good head for heights to view them.

A survey of the entire western cliffs in 1999 found only 278 birds so they breed at very low densities. A different situation exists along the Rapness cliffs with birds breeding along much of their length. A colony of perhaps 50 burrows is easy to view at Githigeo but the best and most accessible site by far is the Castle o' Burrian. Here perhaps 200-300 birds nest in the soil on top of the stack. They are easily viewed from the cliff top in safety, with no risk of disturbance to the colony. A few pairs even frequent the island cliffs adjacent to the stack giving really close views.

Even in this excellent site, Puffins are only present in numbers from late April to mid August. For seeing good numbers, July is the best month but even then the birds display a tendency to be largely absent from the colony at some times of day but present in large numbers at others. This variation (diurnal rhythm) has been linked to weather, tidal influences, availability of

and distance to prey source and the presence of predators i.e. Arctic Skuas.

Puffins lay a single white egg at the end of a short burrow in the soil. These burrows can be dug by the birds themselves or can be abandoned rabbit holes. Chicks hatch after just over a month of incubation and after a further 5-6 weeks the abandoned chick leaves the burrow at night.

ROCK DOVE

(*Columba livia*)

Local name: Doo

Common breeding species with the following counts recorded in 1999: up to 50 pairs on the western cliffs, 17 pairs on the Rapness cliffs. As a sea cliff breeder this species is unobtrusive, and usually nests well out of sight in caves. It is therefore likely that these counts will considerably underestimate the coastal breeding population. As elsewhere in Orkney this species will also nest in derelict buildings and there is no estimate of breeding numbers in this habitat on Westray.

Rock Doves have an extremely long breeding season which lasts from April to October. There are never more than two eggs laid.

There are several counts of 70+ on stubble in August but the largest flock recorded was 248 on 17th August 1994 at Tuquoy. Larger flocks are quite probably present in winter.

Stray racing pigeons will sometimes breed with Rock Doves, giving rise to some odd-looking plumage variations.



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WOODPIGEON

(*Columba palumbus*)

The gardens at Fribo seem to be the centre for the island population of this scarce breeder. There have been numerous records of this species here, including eight on 15th June 1994 and six on 27th August 1995. On 10th May 1994, 15 were found here. Also in that year a nest with two eggs was found in a derelict building near the Ayre of Roadmire. As well as the breeding population, small numbers of migrants probably pass through in autumn and especially in spring.

SKYLARK

(*Alauda arvensis*)

The fact that all recent documentation describes the Skylark as a common breeder is not surprising as there are ample areas of suitable breeding habitat scattered throughout the island. There is no information on distribution or population estimates. Many of the local birds leave for the winter. A flock of 150 at Bow Head on 3rd April 1994 were certainly on migration – either returning breeders or birds passing through towards more northern breeding areas.

BARN SWALLOW

(*Hirundo rustica*)

Very little is known about the breeding numbers and distribution of Swallows in Westray, though two pairs bred in the wheel house at Trenabie Mill in summer 2000; possibly raising a second brood with fledged juveniles seen in September.

A survey in 1987 found only one pair, and two pairs were found in 1994. The Orkney population can be as high

as 100 pairs in a good year and the Westray proportion of this is surprisingly low.

As elsewhere in the county nests are built indoors, often though not always, in derelict buildings. Territories can become established by late April, shortly after the birds arrive back from spending the winter in southern Africa. Very successful pairs in Orkney have been recorded rearing two broods in a year though this delays the fledging of the second brood until late September.

HOUSE MARTIN

(*Delichon urbica*)

Single pairs were recorded breeding in Pierowall in 1977 and 1994; and two pairs were found breeding there in 1986. This summer visitor to Orkney breeds in small numbers in the county each year but there is no established centre of population. Small numbers are also recorded on migration, especially in May-June.

MEADOW PIPIT

(*Anthus pratensis*)

A summer visitor staying from March to October and breeding in good numbers on Westray. Unfortunately there is no data on the breeding population except for scattered pairs found during the wetland survey of 1993-94.

Migrants also occur, sometimes in large numbers at both ends of their season. These originate in either Scandinavia or Iceland.

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ROCK PIPIT

(*Anthus spinoletta*)

Local name: Banks Spurro

This is a well distributed coastal breeding species on Westray but firm information on numbers is lacking. Unlike the previous species, the Rock Pipit winters in good numbers on Westray, as shown by a count of 78 between Inganess and Rapness in November 1993.

YELLOW WAGTAIL

(*Motacilla flava*)

A very agitated pair, which were carrying food, were seen on 11th June 1980. Though no nest or young were found, this certainly denotes that a breeding attempt was taking place.

PIED WAGTAIL

(*Motacilla alba*)

A common breeding summer visitor. Birds arrive in March and settle into breeding in the next month. Successful pairs can attempt a second brood. The entire population leaves in autumn and records after October are scarce in Orkney. A roost of 50+ birds was noted at Burness Loch in July 1999.

WREN

(*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

Noted in recent years as being a common breeder around buildings (most houses have a pair) and perhaps surprisingly, not on the cliffs. Pairs nested at Trenabie Mill in 2000 and nearby at Grindley in 2001. Presumably a year round resident though perhaps reinforced in autumn and winter by continental immigrants.

WHEATEAR

(*Oenanthe oenanthe*)

Local name: Chuckie, Chackie

A common migrant breeder arriving in early April, with singing males on territory just days later. The nest is well concealed, often among stones and the chicks emerge in mid June. The last birds are seen in October. This is a strong migrant and especially in May, small numbers of Greenland breeders pass through on their way north from southern Africa. At this time, Noup Head is an especially good spot to view this spectacular and distinctive variety.



ROBIN

(*Erithacus rubecula*)

The only documented breeding record is of a pair at Sangar in 1998, successfully rearing three young.

BLACKBIRD

(*Turdus merula*)

A common breeder, though without much specific documentation. A pair nested and reared a brood in the Trenabie Mill in 1999. Of note is the habit of some Westray Blackbirds to nest in deep roadside ditches (Sam Harcus pers comm). I am unaware of this choice of nest site being used elsewhere in Orkney. Otherwise recorded as a spring and autumn migrant.

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FIELDFARE

(*Turdus pilaris*)

The only record is of a pair feeding two young on Westray in mid June 1974.

SONG THRUSH

(*Turdus philomelos*)

Records indicate that this species may not be an annual breeder. It is possible that this may better reflect a lack of coverage than the true status. The only recent record is of a pair which raised two broods in the Pierowall Hotel garden in 1995. At least there will almost certainly be a passage of migrants in spring and autumn i.e. 700 on 21-23rd October 2000 during a strong daytime passage.

SEDGE WARBLER

(*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*)

A scarce migrant breeder with several recent records of three pairs at Burness Loch in 1987, two pairs at Ayre of Roadmire in 1994 and a singing bird in Pierowall on 7th June 1999. Also regularly sings at Fribo dam. This species is probably under-recorded; it seems likely that there may be annual breeding attempts at Burness and Saintear lochs at least.

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER

(*Muscicapa striata*)

A probable breeding record was of an adult seen carrying food near Rendalls haulage yard on 22nd June 1999 and on several subsequent dates. Though highly suggestive of a breeding attempt no pair were seen and no young recorded.

JACKDAW

(*Corvus monedula*)

Small numbers continue to breed in Westray despite an overall decline in Orkney. In 1999, three pairs bred at the Noup and three pairs at Rapness Cliffs

HOODED CROW

(*Corvus corone cornix*)

Quite common breeding species on the cliffs and in trees i.e. Fribo and Heatherbank. There is no further data on numbers, distribution or productivity.

RAVEN

(*Corvus corax*)

An annual breeder with a recorded maximum of around eight pairs nesting in 1991. All of these were at cliff sites at Aikerness, western cliffs and Rapness cliffs. A nest at this last site was taken over by a Fulmar in 1995. Ramni Geo at Aikerness and Ramna Geo at the Noup are evidently ancient nesting sites for Ravens and are still occupied most years.

STARLING

(*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Local name: Stirlin

A very common breeder on the island. Nests were formerly found in stone strainer pillars and in stack steethes. The modernisation of agriculture has largely done away with these nesting habitats; though nesting in dykes is still very common. Some may also nest in natural crevices on the cliffs.

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HOUSE SPARROW

(*Passer domesticus*)

Local name: *Spurro*

A very common breeding bird, especially around human habitation. The only count is of c.25 around the Mill and Gallo Hill in 2001, with similar numbers in the barn roof of the Floss at the same time.

LINNET

(*Carduelis cannabina*)

A breeding record from Quoybirst in 2001 may well be the first for the island.

TWITE

(*Carduelis flavirostris*)

Recently reported to be a common breeder around the island; though specific detail is lacking. It seems slightly odd that the closely related Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) appears to be absent from the island breeding list.

REED BUNTING

(*Emberiza schoeniclus*)

Around each of the larger lochs one-three pairs breed in the marginal vegetation. In 1994 three pairs were found in the mire at Fribo and two pairs at Ayre of Roadmire. Otherwise the status of this species in Westray is largely un-documented.