

# **FAIR ISLE, May 2012**

**By Kevin Kelly**



From the first moment I stepped foot on Fair Isle in May 2011 the island gripped me and I knew I would be back time and time again! So the moment we returned I began booking for May 2012.

My alarm sounded on my phone on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May to jolt me into life an early start and a day of travel and anticipation were lying in wait.

After a taxi ride from home to Manchester Airport I checked my bag in which would be checked all the way through to Sumburgh Airport at the southern tip of Shetland mainland. So after my first flight from Manchester to Aberdeen, I continued northwards bound on my connecting flight from Aberdeen to Sumburgh. After two smooth flights I landed on mainland Shetland and after collecting my bag the excitement and anticipation began to stir inside.

The next leg of the journey would be to head northwards to Lerwick before getting a taxi to Tingwall Airport for my charter flight to Fair Isle. But with some time to kill before that leg of the journey I could begin birding! Before I'd left the airport at Sumburgh my



binoculars and camera were out round my neck, bag on my back and ready to go. Following the road out of the airport, it skirts the bay before leading to Grutness, so my first taste of Shetland birding was back

underway as two *Arctic Terns* flew over low calling and began fishing in the bay giving superb views as they danced past. The bay itself held feeding *Dunlin* and a few *Wheatears* showed well along the shore line.

Walking onwards to the bus stop outside the entrance to the Sumburgh hotel a *Great Skua* flew over low and a couple of *Twite* were feeding with *House Sparrows* and the Shetland form of *Starlings* on the grass verges. After catching my bus to Lerwick and having a chippy lunch I called a taxi to take me to Tingwall airstrip for much anticipated onwards charter flight to Fair Isle.

Near the airstrip I passed by a *Common Crane* that had been present for a few days although only brief views it was nice to see one in the dramatic setting of Shetland.

I was quite early for my flight so had a bit of a wait at the airstrip where *Hooded Crows* swooped by. Finally after a fantastic flight with superb views we landed on the airstrip at Fair Isle. I opted to walk down to my accommodation at South Lighthouse so I could get reacquainted with the island and begin my Fair Isle birding for 2012.

*Wheatears* were in typical large numbers and every bird on route was either a *Wheatear* or *Meadow pipit*. I soon felt I was back on Fair Isle though when the sight and sound of both *Arctic and Great Skuas* filled the air. The winds were due to move to the east for the morning so signs were looking good. I headed to Pund on my way down to the south as earlier in the day a *Spotted Crake* had been seen and photographed by one of the Assistant Wardens, Jason. After extensive searching I dipped on this bird with no sign around Pund and the general area.

After a typical warm welcome at my accommodation at South Light by Josie and Dave and again reunited with the amazing food they serve up, I was keen to get back out and about again. Heading north I stopped off at Plantation ( a selection of small trees and plants at the entrance to a Heligoland trap), I sat myself on the grass verge to observe what was there and a half an hour stake out produced *Brambling*, *Chaffinch*, *Chiffchaff*, *Willow Warbler*, *Reed Bunting* and best of the bunch, two *Lapland Buntings* which showed briefly before flying high to the west, calling on route. I decided to head to the bird observatory in the evening to the bird log which occurs at 9pm every night (an account of all bird sightings from the day's census and additions from other birders). The pick of the birds seen were the *Spotted Crake* the two *Lapland Buntings* and a *Wryneck*!

After the log I enquired on where the *Wryneck* had been seen as this would be a confirmed lifer for me and I was informed that by the obs garden was the best place. Well that was my morning planned then. An early alarm at 5am to head up the island in pursuit of the *Wryneck* before joining the morning trap round at 7am.

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> May

After enjoying views of *Shag*, *Fulmar*, and *Black Guillemot* in and around North Haven I sat on the slope overlooking the obs garden. Within minutes a bird flew behind me and began feeding on the grass behind on the rocky slope. Binoculars raised and there it was; brilliant, my first lifer of the trip, a *WRYNECK*! What a bird and one I have dipped a couple of times before, most recently at the Horwich Moors. It showed better than hoped and after a couple of okay photos it settled on one of the garden fence posts to enjoy the sun.



What a start to the first full day, a lifer already! Before the trap round I continued to scan the garden and surrounding area which produced a very smart *Blue-headed Wagtail*, a *Fair Isle Wren*, more *Willow Warblers* and a *Siskin*. The trap round didn't produce too

much; a *Robin* and a *Blackbird* were the only things caught. After a jaunt down to the south and hearty breakfast I was back out again to scan the south of the Island aside from a selection of *Common Gulls* and some *Turnstone*. South harbour also held plenty of *Eider* whilst *Gannets* whizzed past and a couple of *Common Terns* were new for my island list.

Just before midday I bumped into Jason who informed me that Will (another Assistant Warden, both excellent at finding stuff) had come across a *SHORE LARK* at Kennaby. After filling the van to the brim with birders we headed down to the crop strip at Kennaby where Will had found the *Shore Lark*.

After a good search it finally flew in calling and showed well in the crop strip. As the others staying at the obs had to be back for lunch I had the bird to myself and was able to enjoy my second lifer of the trip.



What a cracking bird! After enjoying it for a while I headed onwards, catching David (Head Warden) just coming for a view of the lark. We walked back northwards where a very smart almost immaculate *Snow Bunting* flew from in front of us and landed on the roof of one of the houses, then dropped down onto one of the stone walls.



Not the best of photos to do it justice really but the best I could manage.

What a start though, two lifers on my first day! The *Shore Lark* was a good hint of new arrivals and Fair Isle has uncanny knack of producing falls in the afternoon rather than overnight so it really is a case of anything can turn up at any time.

The rest of the day was spent photographing the fantastic *Puffins* and the islands *skuas*.





The day also produced a female *Redstart*, *Spotted Flycatcher* and at least five *Tree Pipits*.

Highlight of the rest was two *Whinchats* and meeting a birder who was staying at the obs called Andy Close who would become a good friend during the trip.

### Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May.

The day started with another 5am alarm but with the easterly winds continuing, in truth I was up long before my alarm. A wander up to the obs for the trap round produced *Lesser Whitethroat* and more *Spotted Flycatchers*. A *Short-eared Owl* flying high over the observatory was great to see as well. Pick of the bunch prior to the trap round though was *Ring Ouzel* flying in the direction of Gully so my hopes were high for the trap round; were we were not disappointed! David the Head Warden led the round and after hanging back whilst he retrieved the quarry from the Gully trap we got the signal to come over. David was smiling and indicated he had a *NIGHTINGALE* species, only obtaining brief views before it went in the bag he called it as a Nightingale sp.

Also trapped on the round were a young male *Sparrowhawk* and a stunning male *Redstart*.

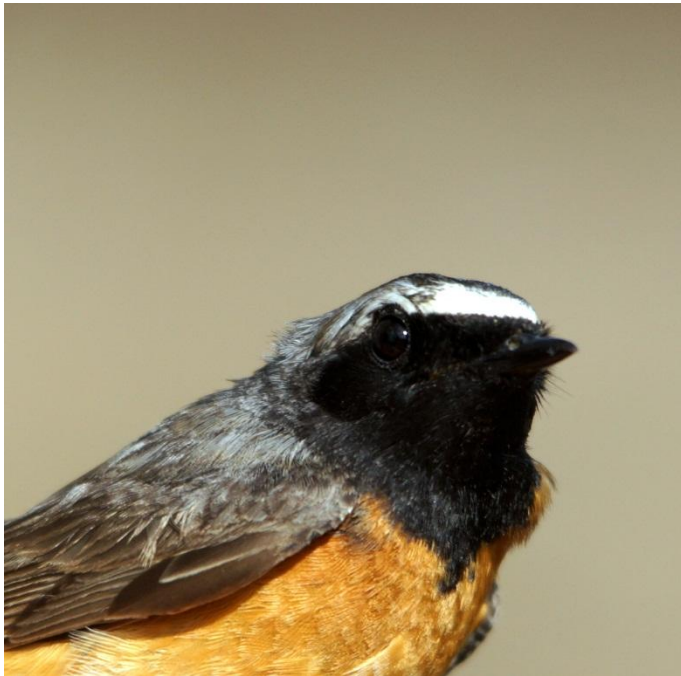
The Nightingale was examined and measurements etc. taken before being ringed and confirmed as my third lifer; a ***THRUSH NIGHTINGALE!***



Excellent start to the day. New arrivals fresh in; easterly winds continuing; and my third lifer notched up already! The weather was fantastic and the sun rarely failed to shine.



**Thrush Nightingale**



After Breakfast and a good scan around the south of the island on my way northwards I bumped into Will finishing his census on the south west of the island.

He asked whether I had heard the news. He informed me that a *HOPOE* had been found at Dronger (right up on the north west of the island over Ward Hill). He said it was flighty though and he had just found two *Wrynecks* and an *ICTERINE WARBLER* where I was heading, down near South Light at the end of the wall from Utra.

Decisions, decisions! I opted to go for the *Icterine Warbler* and *Wrynecks* as I was nearly there. I exchanged numbers with Will so he would keep me informed on the *Hoopoe* and whether it would be worth the sizeable trek up there considering its flightiness.

After a good hour search for the *Icterine Warbler* on the cliff edge I drew a blank. Frustrated at dipping the Icterine I headed back towards the wall where a *Chiffchaff* was feeding on flies along the hill slope. On my descent towards the wall a *Wryneck* flew up onto the wall, quickly joined by a second, then a THIRD! Then, from the near bank, a

**FOURTH!** Wow, I hadn't seen a Wryneck prior to the trip and now I was looking at **FOUR** in the same binocular view. Amazing!

Feeling revitalised after my frustrating dipping of the Icterine I headed back up the centre of the island to inform the others of the four *Wrynecks*.

A spring in my step after a clear arrival of new birds, my mind switched back to the *Hoopoe* and whether it would still be around or even move to a more convenient place to trek to. After some good views of common migrants such as *Tree and Meadow Pipits*, *Redstarts* and *Spotted Flycatcher* as well as the sizeable numbers of *Wheatear*, I approached the Old Quarry after Plantation and a bird caught my attention. It kept low in the dyke along the wall and skipped in and out of the stone wall feeding. My first thought was female *Redstart* as I noted the rusty tail but this seemed different; thinner and more *Robinesque* in its movements. After a few minutes waiting for it to show again Andy arrived around the corner ahead of me and I indicated to him I had found something. Then out it popped and turned to face me; a female **BLUETHROAT!** I signalled to Andy that it was a *Bluethroat* and after brief views he gathered a couple more birders who were heading up the road. Right on cue Jason arrived in the obs van and pulled over. I told him of my find and it was quickly relocated on the other side of the wall and enjoyed by all. My **FOURTH** lifer and even better self-found!



What a trip already. Jason informed me he was going to drive up to Ward Hill and then walk over to Dronger if I fancied tagging along. Of Course I went.

After a drive up to the Mast, still buzzing from my self-found *Bluethroat*, I received a text from Will to say that unfortunately no van was heading up to the mast and that everyone had dipped the *Hoopoe* who had braved the journey. A quick text back to say it was okay and I was on route there. Upon arriving at the mast we instantly got onto a male *Pied Flycatcher* on the perimeter fence; another freshly arrived bird?



Upon the approach to the out buildings at the base of the hill, Jason spotted a bird hopping about feeding; male *BLUETHROAT*! Wow, what a bird. We watched it feeding for a while then reluctantly left it to head up and over the hill and out towards Dronger.



After finally arriving at Dronger (a little out of breath), my adrenaline pumping, we searched for the elusive *Hoopoe*. Whilst doing so, a small group of *Snow Buntings* were noted feeding on the grass.



Almost at the furthest westerly point we could reach, binoculars raised simultaneously, we both yelled “there it is”. It flew out to the right then stooped back down to the left seemingly down the cliff side, albeit brief but good binocular views of a very elusive, FIFTH lifer; a *HOOPOE*!

We scanned the area but couldn’t relocate it so we skirted the cliff edge and made our way back up the hillside. Noted on route were the first *Swift* of the year for the island and two *Ring Ouzel*.

The *Bluethroat* was still showing well at the mast buildings, occasionally being chased by a *Robin*. Delighted by the days birding I made my way back down the island, still in disbelief at the five lifers I had notched up. With winds still to the east and the sun still shining, does life get any better? Well, heading back down the island news of a female *RED-BACKED SHRIKE* at pund increased the speed of my walk down the island. Although I have seen *Red-backed shrike* before, it is years since my last one. Andy and I quickly located the female shrike feeding from fence posts in the baking sun. I waited to see if it would come close enough for photos but unfortunately not, so I departed back down south after losing it from view after a while.

Another quick look for the *Icterine Warbler* before tea proved fruitless but what a day it had been.

**Monday 21<sup>st</sup> May**

My trek up the island for the trap round produced a couple of *Carrion Crows*, a few *White Wagtails* and plenty of *Spotted Flycatcher*, as well as the odd *Whitethroat* and both male and female *Redstarts*. The trap round produced a young male *Pied Flycatcher* and we had good views of a singing *Ring Ouzel*.



After breakfast I opted to stay in the south of the island and try and connect with my SIXTH lifer, the *ICTERINE WARBLER* and within minutes of searching there it was!





What a start to the day and what a cracking looking bird. After lazing around the south, trying to recoup some energy, I noticed I had an answer phone message from Andy,

I quickly listened to the message informing me that a *COMMON NIGHTINGALE* had been trapped at plantation and was going to be released by the ringing hut. Josie thankfully gave me a lift up to the location where a host of newly arrived birders were enjoying views of this little beauty. Unbelievably, my SEVENTH lifer of the trip and a good bird for the island which amazingly gets similar numbers of Thrush Nightingale as they do Common Nightingale!



Common Nightingale

So much for a quiet day in the south of the island! No sooner had Andy and I set off down to the south of the island again when a text from Will came through; ***SHORT-TOED LARK*** over on the west near to Ward Hill! We both looked at each other knowing full well we were going to hike over there.

An extensive walk over to the west produced plenty of *Skylarks* and then next to a *Skylark* there it was. It remained distant for a decent photo but showed well enough to view through the binoculars and to compare with the *Skylark* it was following around.



My EIGHTH lifer of an incredible week and still plenty of birding left to be done.

Again, it was a good indication of new arrivals which there certainly seemed to be, for as we approached the mast buildings on the way back down, Andy picked out a *Black Redstart* by the mast, another good bird for the trip and clearly fresh in.

There was an arrival of *Swallows* on the island and amongst them were a single *Sand Martin* and a few *House Martins* too.

Another wander down to the crofts in the south produced plenty of commoner migrants, such as *Garden Warbler* and brief views of a smart *Wood Warbler* too. The south also held one *Golden Plover* and a count of at least 14 *Purple Sandpipers* down in the South Harbour. Other new birds in the south were *Rock Pipit*, *Sedge Warbler*, *Mealy Redpoll*, the odd *Blackcap* and singles of *Whimbrel*, *Collared Dove* and *Woodpigeon*.

After another tiring but superb day of birding I headed down the west of the island taking in the incredible views and watching a selection of common migrants feeding in the geos.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket; a text from Will. *ROSEFINCH* at Burkle! A few frantic moments looking at my island map on the phone and I was soon on my way over to the crofts to Burkle.

Extensive searching but no sign. I strolled down to Auld Haa to check the garden there and there she was, a female type *COMMON ROSEFINCH*. Amazingly by NINTH lifer!



What an end to the day. Another epic day of birding on Fair Isle and more easterly winds to come.

### Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Another early start and after the trap round and breakfast I headed back to Auld Haa to see the Rosefinch again. Upon arriving at the garden I was greeted by *Siskin*, *Blackcaps* and *House Sparrows*. Then on the feeder this absolute stunner turned to face me!



A male *COMMON ROSEFINCH*! No offence to the female bird but this was an absolute stunner and another self-found bird. It turned out though, that Auld Haas owner Tommy had been watching it whilst eating his breakfast, but it was still self-found in my eyes.

Another stunning bird and of course a definite sign of new birds arriving. It was clear there were increased numbers of *Spotted Flycatchers* and *Blackcaps*, as well as nearly double figures of *Lesser Whitethroat*.

Viewing the birds around the observatory on route produced another *Wryneck* and a second *Icterine Warbler* which had been trapped and ringed too. The *Thrush Nightingale* continued to skulk in the obs garden.

As I approached the shop in the centre of the island, for some reason I decided to poke my head over the wall opposite and noticed a bird skirt the wall and out of view. My senses tuned and identification skills improving (at least 12 hours of non-stop birding a day will do that), I thought from brief views I had found another *Bluethroat*. Then thankfully it popped up on the wall before quickly disappearing again.



A small birding tour group came over to try and relocate the bird and a few scoffed “are you sure it was a Bluethroat”? So I had great pleasure in showing them this picture!

Despite their best efforts I was the only person to record a *Bluethroat* at the log that night.

After a good day of birding around some new areas, I stumbled across a female *Red-backed Shrike* and had better views then previously.



After a good afternoon I was just set to head up to the north when a text came through to say a *RED-RUMPED SWALLOW* had been found down in the south at Utra. After a hasty walk, Andy and I arrived to find Will and the birding group scanning the fields. They informed us that it would be back in a minute as it had adopted a circular feeding routine and should return. I waited for what seemed like an age then finally it glided in over the fields and swooped close. Now, I have tried photographing *Swallows* in the past and had no joy at all, so to say I was pleased with this was an understatement of epic proportions.



Another lifer! Incredibly number TEN for the week. The bird was enjoyed by a host of observers before vanishing for the remainder of the day.

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> May

This was my last full day birding on Fair Isle and again the weather was excellent and the wind perfect too. There was a clear arrival of birds and it seemed like every suitable spot held a different bird. South Harbour held a *Common Scoter*, although it drifted quite distant and a *Knot* was added too. Pick of the bunch were two male *Red-backed Shrikes* hanging around Plantation.



Another was found feeding along the fence posts too.



Arriving up at the obs garden it was clear that *Red-backed Shrikes* had certainly arrived, with numbers totalling NINE at log that night; they were topped only by the incredible TEN *Icterine Warblers* though, of which I managed to see EIGHT.



**A good selection were trapped and ringed too, including these below.**





Icterine Warblers

The quality and quantity of birds during the day had very noticeably increased and the log was brilliant with the number of all the birds tallied up. *Spotted Flycatchers* topped of SIXTY!

A couple of new birds for the island list obliged too and I eventually caught up with them; two very smart *Dotterel*.



A *Quail* was also recorded at the log by the warden too.

What a day and what an incredible week.

#### Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> May

Where did the Mist come from? The island was shrouded in mist so my departure seemed well timed. There was just enough time and visibility in the morning before my voyage to the mainland on the Good Shepherd ferry, to notch up a *Grey-headed Wagtail* and another male *Rosefinch*, the latter of which seemed to literally drop out of the sky into the obs garden and began singing as if to bid me fair well.



**Grey Headed Wagtail**

The crossing was as smooth as I could have hoped for but with limited visibility, sea watching was difficult and no new birds were noted. Upon arrival at Grutness in south mainland Shetland I was able to connect with *Great Northern Diver* as well as *Common Sandpiper*, *Sanderling* and *Shelduck*.

After a jaunt up to Sumburgh Head RSPB, the only birds noted in the clearing fog were *Spotted Flycatcher* and plenty of the usual sea birds including *Puffin*, *Guillemot* and *Razorbill* as well as both *Arctic* and *Great Skua*. There were smaller numbers of *Kittiwake*, *Fulmar* and *Gannets* too.

I opted to head back down to the hotel from the head via the fields that skirt the wall and I'm glad I did. With seemingly little around in terms of migrants, a song resounded in my ears that I had never heard before and then there he was perched on the wall.

**A stunning male *RUSTIC BUNTING*!**



**Lifer number ELEVEN for the trip and what a self-find!**

I quickly reported the sighting to one of the RSPB staff and they duly put the news out. A mini twitch ensued and seemed to be growing as I was leaving. The bird had vanished but thankfully later that evening it was re-found and enjoyed by a host of birders including a mini bus full on a bird tour. The words cherry on the cake spring to mind.

The mainland didn't produce much else but that was good enough for me, things seemed to be going too well and of course there was one minor hiccup. After a long delay my flight to Aberdeen was cancelled due to the fog so I had to ring and cancel my hotel in Aberdeen that I was due to be staying at that night. Flybe it has to be said were excellent and booked me on the overnight ferry from Lerwick to Aberdeen, to arrive in Aberdeen at 7am the next morning. My meals were provided and a cabin bed was arranged too. If it wasn't for the fog I would have enjoyed outstanding sea watching on-board but I can't be greedy!

On arriving in Aberdeen I caught the bus up to Newburgh to the Ythan Estuary, to try and locate the *KING EIDER* that had been present but after five hours of no sign in the baking sun I was about to leave and catch a bus back to Aberdeen, until an *Osprey* came in and began fishing in front of me!





Amazingly, whilst watching the *Osprey* a quick scan through the *Eider* revealed what I had searched all day for. ***KING EIDER***; lifer number TWELVE!





**What an incredible week! I can't wait to return, maybe during autumn next time as I doubt that this spring can be topped.**

**Special thanks to David and the Observatory staff, namely Jason and Will, my birding partner in crime Andy and of course Dave and Josie for their incredible hospitality and amazing food again.**

**Sightings list for the whole trip was 120 species: -**

Arctic Skua	Common Gull	Great Black-backed Gull
Arctic Tern	Common Rosefinch	Great Northern Diver
Bar-tailed Godwit	Common Sandpiper	Great Skua
Black Guillemot	Common Scoter	Great Tit
Black Redstart	Common Tern	Grey Heron
Blackbird	Cormorant	Greylag Goose
Blackcap	Curlew	Guillemot
Black-headed Gull	Curlew Sandpiper	Herring Gull
Blue Tit	Dotterel	Hooded Crow
Bluethroat	Dunlin	Hoopoe
Brambling	Duncock	House Martin
Buzzard	Eider	House Sparrow
Canada Goose	Fulmar	Icterine Warbler
Carrion Crow	Gannet	Jackdaw
Chaffinch	Garden Warbler	Kestrel
Chiffchaff	Golden Plover	King Eider
Collared Dove	Goldfinch	Kittiwake
Common Crane	Goosander	Knot
Lapland Bunting	Raven	Sedge Warbler

Lapwing  
Lesser Black- backed Gull  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Linnet  
Little Gull  
Mallard  
Meadow Pipit  
Mealy Redpoll  
Mute Swan  
Nightingale  
Osprey  
Oystercatcher  
Peregrine  
Pied Flycatcher  
Pied Wagtail  
Puffin  
Purple Sandpiper

Razorbill  
Red-backed Shrike  
Red-rumped Swallow  
Redshank  
Redstart  
Redwing  
Reed Bunting  
Ring Ouzel  
Ringed Plover  
Robin  
Rock dove  
Rock Pipit  
Rook  
Rustic Bunting  
Sand Martin  
Sanderling  
Sandwich Tern

Shag  
Shelduck  
Shore Lark  
Short-eared owl  
Short-toed Lark  
Siskin  
Skylark  
Snipe  
Snow Bunting  
Sparrowhawk  
Spotted flycatcher  
Starling  
Swallow  
Swift  
Thrush Nightingale  
Tree Pipit  
Turnstone

Twite  
Wheatear  
Whimbrel  
Whinchat  
Whitethroat  
Willow Warbler  
Wood Warbler  
Woodpigeon  
Wren  
Wryneck  
Yellow Wagtail

More images of this trip are available on request.

**Kevin Kelly, June 2012**