

St. Ninian's Report - February 2014

Making themselves conspicuous just now are *Blackbirds*, many of which will be seeking out suitable nesting sites. In addition there are migrant *Blackbirds* travelling back through Orkney to their breeding grounds in Northern Europe. Accompanying these may be *Redwings* and *Fieldfares* also heading back east. Just today in the front field at Sunnybank I spied 6 *Blackbirds*, 2 *Redwings* and a solitary *Fieldfare*. They have been around for a day or two so obviously finding something tasty to eat before their long journey.

Another species I have noticed in quite large flocks are *Rock Doves* (the pigeon with a white rump) perhaps searching for rich pickings from flooded fields.

There are still plenty of *Greylag Geese* around as the time is not yet right for their departure from our isles. Earlier in the month a flock of around 150 was hanging around Stave for a day or two. On the 14th a huge gathering of several hundred rose in spectacular fashion from land behind Gritley.

On the 5th I was alerted to a large bird hunting in the back garden here at Sunnybank and, sure enough, it was a *Hen Harrier* doing the rounds but leaving empty-clawed!

Keith Hague regularly watches for birds in Deerness and he recently reported as follows: a *Pale-bellied Brent Goose (1stwinter)*, Keigar, Deerness, 3rd Feb; 4 *adult Little Gulls* together, 1km SW of Halley, on 4th Feb.

I was at Newark on the 14th doing a Beached Birds Survey and it was good to hear the sounds of *Rock Pipits* as they explored the enormous piles of tangles stretching right across the beach.

Looking out to sea I was rewarded with a nice array of birds - 2 *Goldeneye*, 1 *Great Northern Diver*, 4 *Long-tailed Ducks* in their smart plumage and 6 *Eiders*. On the shore it was nice to see that *Oystercatchers* have returned with 2 searching for food. In the distance I spotted *Fulmars* soaring just off the cliffs - these birds always seem to be the first seabird to find a nesting site and are the last to leave at the end of the breeding season.

(I found two dead *Shags* showing no apparent cause for their demise; more fatalities of this species have been found in other areas around the Orkney shores).

Finally, a more unusual sight this month. James and Netta Wylie contacted RSPB Orkney to say an unusual bird had been hanging around Thorden for a day or two. I was lucky that the bird was still there when I went along and it turned out to be a *Blackbird* with lots of white markings as my photo shows. This was leucistic which is a result of variations in pigmentation affecting the coloration of the feathers. Nice to see something a little different! **(Photo of Blackbird by Pauline Wilson)**

