

## **Birds of the Farnes. Talk by John Walton Assistant Warden for National Trust.**

Our indoor programme got off to a splendid start with a talk by John Walton, Manager of the the Farne Islands for the National Trust.

Mr Walton explained that at high tide there are 15 islands and at low tide there are 28. Many of us visit the islands thinking of them primarily as a place to see seabirds, unaware that although this is undoubtedly so, they are also a major pupping area for grey seals. In addition to the seabirds, there are regular "visits" from rarities such as a red-spotted bluethroat, probably blown off course on migration. Some of our more common "little" birds are also found: 5 or 6 pairs of pied wagtails have nested; 28 pairs of rock pipit; in 2007 red-breasted mergansers bred for the first time and this year wrens bred, also for the first time.

Wardens live on the islands from March till September, a somewhat Spartan existence since there is no fresh water and calor gas provides all the energy. They have many and varied tasks: painting stones (to mark nests), guiding visitors, but above all counting. Groups of birds are monitored in various ways; the number of eggs, the number of hatchlings and the number of fledglings are all carefully noted and compared with previous years' records. All cliff nesting birds are counted at dawn on 10 mornings in June, when they hope for calm weather.

Figures for 2008 are interesting, if depressing. 42,000 guillemots nested, shag numbers were down by 1300 pairs since 1970, there were 2,500 pairs of arctic terns and 600 or 700 pairs of common terns. The roseate tern has been extinct as a breeding bird on the islands since 2002, but 75 pairs did nest on Coquet Island, approximately 98% of the UK population. Puffin numbers are well down, mirroring the decrease on the Isle of May. This coincides with a reduction in the numbers of sand-eels, which provide good nutrition for the "pufflings" and an increase in the numbers of pipe-fish, which do not.

Yet another example of how painstaking fieldwork is demonstrating the urgent need for conservation.

Molly, Oct 2008