

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 6 June 2015



Scottish Primrose



Northern Fulmar



Common Eider



Northern Gannet

Report & Image compiled by David W McAllister



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Tour Participants: David W McAllister Naturetrek leader
With seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Monday 1st June

David met four of the group in the St.Magnus Lounge of the Orkney Hotel at 5.30pm. We had an introductory talk over some tea and Orkney shortbread and then went for a walk around Kirkwall. We went through The Street, which changes its name a number of times, stopping at the Market Cross and at the Big Tree, the harbour and the Peerie Sea. As it was very breezy there were not too many birds about in the bay.

After dinner David collected the remaining three group members from the ferry in Stromness and brought them back to the hotel for a late dinner.

Day 2

Tuesday 2nd June

Weather: am: showery, windy; pm: sunny spells, cloudy and windy later

Some of the group joined David at 6.30 am for a pre-breakfast outing in the bus. We drove along the north shore of Scapa Flow to Waulkmill Bay, a secluded sandy inlet, with waders on the beach and Fulmars breeding along the rocky cliffs. Our early start was rewarded with views of Brown Hares in the fields and a good, but brief, view of a male Hen Harrier, as we drove over Hobbister Hill.

After breakfast, we set off to explore the islands to the south of Mainland, accessed over the WW2 Churchill Barriers. At the south end of Barrier 1, we stopped on Lamb Holm at the tiny, atmospheric Italian Chapel, built from two converted Nissen Huts by Italian POWs, using scrap materials. After half an hour examining the intricate work, we headed on across the remaining Churchill Barriers to South Ronaldsay, the most southerly of the inhabited islands. Here we went to the old Pier at Bur Wick, a small natural harbour at the very south of the island which looks across the Pentland Firth to John o'Groats and Duncansby Head. As some of the group had seen "Springwatch", we were discussing the Orcas which had been there one week earlier, and, just as David was saying he hadn't heard of the pod for a couple of days, he exclaimed "Orca!". We all jumped out of the bus, despite the rain and watched a male, with a large triangular fin and at least two females, with more dolphin-like fins, fishing in the very rough tide race of the south of the island. The Orcas slowly drifted off towards the Pentland Skerries and were lost from our view.

We then explored the rocky beach at Bur Wick where there was lots of *Mertensia maritima* (Oysterplant). With its blue-grey leaves and tiny blue flowers it is a very distinctive plant. Among the Oysterplant, there were lots of plants of *Ligusticum scoticum* (Scots Lovage), another northern seashore specialist. Returning back north we stopped at the Burray Fossil Museum for lunch, then travelled on through Kirkwall to Maeshowe in the centre of the west mainland. We were shown around the magnificent Neolithic tomb by the Historic Scotland guide who told us of its possible origins and of the Viking graffiti on the stones. Following this, we moved on to the Stones of Stenness standing between the Loch of Stenness and the Loch of Harray. Beside these is the Neolithic Barnhouse Settlement and also the Barnhouse bird hide.

As the weather had improved, we decided to devote the rest of the afternoon to natural history and headed for the west coast cliffs at Yesnaby. Here, after some searching, we found the tiny Scottish Primrose (*Primula scotica*)

on the very exposed grassland on the clifftops. Before leaving we explored the cliffs to the north, where David showed us horse-tooth stromatolites, the fossils of primitive oxygen-producing cyanobacteria which sat in a shallow sea 400 million years ago. We returned to Kirkwall via Scorradale and Hobbister but didn't find another Hen Harrier.

After dinner David took the minibus north to the The Loons, and Marwick areas in hopes of hearing corncrakes, however as the wind had increased again and it had clouded over it was not good conditions for them "singing".

Day 3

Wednesday 3rd June

Weather: Sunny, cold wind, some heavy showers.

After breakfast we again headed for West Mainland. The first stop was at Waulkmill Bay so that those who had missed it yesterday could see the bay. We moved on north through a valley called Tuskerbister, in the hopes of seeing owls and harriers. No luck for those species, but we saw lots of Greylag Geese with young, Lapwing, Oystercatchers and Ravens. After a brief stop at the Loch of Harray, we went on to the magnificent Ring of Brodgar, an enormous circle of 27 standing stones, the remnants of a ring of 60 stones. Unfortunately, it was so wet underfoot that the wardens recommended that we walk outside the ring rather than in beside the stones. We moved on to Skara Brae for lunch, and spent some time exploring the wonderfully preserved Neolithic village with its houses with "dressers", fire pits and fish boxes. From there we went north to The Loons, an area of loch and reedbeds frequented by water birds. From the RSPB hide we had excellent views of Shoveler, Tufted Duck and yet more Greylag families.

Next we cut across the north Mainland on small roads through the moorland. As we passed the Loch of Hundland, Marie & Chris both realised a Short-eared Owl had taken off from beside the road. David stopped the bus and we all got out while he found a turning place. The owl settled in the heather and we had excellent views of it sitting in its habitat. Going on across the Birsay Moors, we saw another Short-eared Owl but couldn't find where this one settled. On the moorland, among a group of great wind turbines, we stopped at Burger Hill and visited the hide at Lowries Water. When we arrived a Red-throated Diver was sitting on the loch, but flew off a few minutes later. On the far side of the loch, there were lots of "Bonxies" or Great Skuas, while there were some Greylag families as well.

Heading south we called in at the house of a friend of David's and looked for Orkney voles below corrugated iron sheets he had put down. Unfortunately the voles were not in residence today.

Day 4

Thursday 4th June

Weather: Sunny, cool. Strong wind.

An early start for all! We left the hotel at 6.45 and drove down to the pier where we boarded the M.V. Earl Thorfinn, the Westray ferry. On the cool but calm journey north, we had our first views of many of the birds we were to see on Westray. On some of the skerries we had views of large groups of Arctic Terns, and one group of Little Terns.

After disembarking at Rapness, on the south tip of Westray, we headed straight to Rack Wick where we were able to follow a coastal path to the Castle o' Burrian, a large stack which is one of the best places to see Puffins in Orkney. There was a constant flow of the birds coming and going from nest holes but, as it was very windy and rather cold, they were not sitting around at the burrow entrances, so the number visible at one time was quite low.

We moved on north through the island and set off along a long rough road leading to the lighthouse at Noup Head. On the way we had good views of Common Gull, Herring Gull, and Greater and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and were able to compare them with Bonxies and a pair of Arctic Skuas. We left the bus at the lighthouse and walked along the top of the 250ft (76m) sheer cliffs. We were immediately able to add another gull as there were lots of nesting Kittiwakes, but the highlight of the cliffs is the large Gannet colony, giving wonderful opportunities to observe these magnificent birds of the deep sea.

For lunch, we headed back to the south of the island and picnicked at Letto Sands, on the edge of the Bay of Tuquoy. As there was an Arctic Tern colony on the beach, we had our picnic on the edge of the car park. While sitting there a Corncrake began calling in the marsh between us and the beach. Then it was back to the Earl Thorfinn for the journey back to Kirkwall, where we had some time to explore the town before dinner.

Day 5

Friday 5th June

Weather: Cloudy, showers. Very windy

David took some of the group for a pre-breakfast outing at 7 am, this time heading for the eastern side of Mainland. We stopped first at the narrow neck of sand which joins Mainland to the Deerness peninsula. Here there are two very different bays: to the north, Sandisand (which is mainly muddy) and, to the south, the dune system of Taracliff Bay. We had a Whimbrel calling to us in the bay, and a Redpoll sat on the bushes beside the minibus, so that we all could get a good view before getting back in the bus. We then moved to the 1st Churchill Barrier, passing the reed-lined loch of Graemeshall. As we got out to look at the ducks on the loch, a Red-throated Diver took off and flew out along Holm Sound.

After a leisurely breakfast, we left a little later than usual again heading to North-west Mainland. We again stopped at The Loons hide to watch the ducks and geese, then went on to Marwick Bay and Marwick Head. A very windy climb onto the head took us to the Kitchener Memorial, where we realised we were there 99 years to the day since the sinking of HMS Hampshire. The cliffs hold more than 20,000 seabirds but as it was extremely windy, and blowing off-shore, we couldn't venture too close to the cliff edge for the best views. We did find lots of vole runs but no Orkney voles were showing themselves.

We headed south for lunch in Stromness. After lunch, David drove us along the street to the old part of the town, Hamnavoe, home of the poet George Mackay Brown. We looked at a number of the historic sites including Logan's Well, used to supply water ships heading for the arctic in the 18th and 19th centuries. This well supplied Hudson Bay Company ships, Sir John Franklin's ill fated expedition and Captain Cook's ships before they headed off into the North Atlantic.

We then returned to Kirkwall where we had some time for shopping or to explore the historic monuments. Dinner that evening was our last meal together, as Isabel was leaving before breakfast!

Day 6

Saturday 6th June

Weather: Cloudy. Very windy.

After a leisurely breakfast we said good-byes and separated for our journey home.

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Ring of Brodgar

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			2	3	4	5
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓		
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓		
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓		✓
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	✓			
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓			
10	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		✓		
12	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
14	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	
16	Hen (Northern) Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓			
17	Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>			✓	
18	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	
19	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
22	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓		
23	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓			✓
24	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓			
27	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓	
28	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓	
29	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		✓	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓
35	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	✓			
36	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			✓	
37	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓			
38	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			✓	✓
41	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓	✓
42	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	
43	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			✓	
44	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓	
45	Common Pigeon (Rock Dove)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			2	3	4	5
48	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		✓		
49	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓
53	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓		
55	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓
57	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	
58	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓			
61	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓			
63	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓			
65	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓
66	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	
68	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				✓
69	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓			

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	✓	✓		
3	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓		✓	
4	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓		
5	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	3			

Invertebrates

1	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓	✓	
2	Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>		✓		✓
4	Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>				✓

Notable Plants

1	Marsh Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	✓	✓	✓	
3	Orache	<i>Atriplex sp.</i>	✓		✓	
4	Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>			✓	
5	Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	✓			
6	Ragged-Robin	<i>Silene (Lychnis) flos-cuculi</i>	✓	✓	✓	
7	Sea Campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>			✓	✓
8	Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>		✓	✓	✓
10	Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Osier	<i>Salix viminalis</i>	✓			
12	Eared Willow	<i>Salix aurita</i>		✓	✓	
13	Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
14	Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			2	3	4	5
15	Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>		✓		✓
18	Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>	✓			
19	Scots Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>	✓			
20	Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	
21	Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>		✓	✓	✓
22	Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>		✓		
23	Kidney Vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	✓			
24	Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	✓		✓	✓
25	Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	✓	✓		
26	Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>		✓		✓
27	Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>	✓			
28	Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>	✓		✓	✓
29	Greater Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>	✓			✓
30	Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia officinalis agg.</i>	✓			
31	Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>		✓	✓	
32	Devil's-bit Scabious	<i>Succisa pratensis</i>				✓
33	Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Magellan Ragwort	<i>Senecio smithii</i>	✓			
35	Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	✓	✓		
36	Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Pondweed	<i>Potamogeton sp.</i>			✓	