

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

FAIR ISLE

3-9 SEPTEMBER 2011

Leader: Craig Round

Guests: Sasha Foreman, Wendy & Sue Ripley, Mick McMahon, Shirley Newbold, Charles Gordon.

Day 1 After all meeting up at the airport at Inverness we catch our flight bound for Shetland and after a short stop off at Kirkwall on Orkney we are soon descending through the low cloud and landing on Shetland.

Sadly on arrival at the airport we find out that our onward connecting flight to Fair Isle has had to be cancelled due to the low cloud and bad weather, and that the earliest we can probably fly onto the island is Monday!

Craig manages to re-schedule things somewhat and gets us booked in to stay at the nearby Sumburgh Hotel on Shetland until we can next get over to the isle, and quickly rustles up two taxis to take us and our luggage around to the Hotel. After checking into our rooms at the Hotel we all meet up and head out to look for birds. Shetland is not a bad place to be stranded for a few days after all! We start off by having a look in the hotels famous birding site the 'walled garden'. The only real cover here is a small patch of wind ravaged and stunted Sycamore trees but seeing as it is one of the few places with any tree cover at all in the area, the garden has played host to many a rare and unusual bird over the years. Within minutes the garden fully lives up to it's reputation as a top birding spot, as virtually the first bird Craig spots here is a rare Greenish Warbler! We spend some time watching the 'wing barred sprite', though it proves pretty skulking at times due to the windy conditions, but finally we all get reasonable, if brief views, and we also see a Pied Flycatcher in the same garden. From here we walk the short distance over to the coast at Grutness where Craig finds a superb selection of Waders in the bay here, including two superb Little Stints amongst the many Sanderling along the beach and also Turnstone with some still in fine summer plumage. Walking on towards Grutness harbour a single House Martin and several Swallows are hawking insects overhead and numerous Northern Wheatears dot the dry

stone walls, as well as two White Wagtails in the fields nearby. We walk out onto the nearby headland seeing Black Guillemots (Tysties), Great Skuas (Bonxies) and a distant Red-breasted Merganser, whilst lines of Gannets pass offshore. We also see a good sized flock of Ringed Plover as well as Meadow Pipits, Wheatears and several Shetland race Wrens flitting amongst the boulders here. Walking back we have a look in the garden at Grutness and find two migrant Goldcrests in the Sycamores here whilst back at the Sumburgh Hotel garden we get much better views of the Greenish Warbler now the wind has dropped a little.

Day 2

Today the weather is beautiful with clear skies, light winds and sun, but with no flights to Fair Isle on Sundays it's sadly another day birding on Shetland for us! After breakfast we check the hotel garden for birds once again and get stunning views of the Greenish Warbler fly catching, and even calling and singing in the garden encouraged by the warm sun and calmer conditions! The Pied Flycatcher is also still present in and around the garden and 22 Swallows are obvious new arrivals lined up on the roof of the hotel.

From here we walk down to the shore at Grutness Voe where Craig finds a superb Curlew Sandpiper on the beach along with a single Bar-tailed Godwit, amongst the many smart juvenile Sanderling and Ringed Plovers also here. Walking on to the gardens nearby a single Goldcrest is still here and Charles picks out a newly arrived Willow Warbler, hovering and fly catching from the Sycamore trees and also hopping around on the lawn! We walk back to the hotel, where Craig heads off to pick up a hire car from the airport

With a shiny new hired set of wheels we drive up towards Sumburgh Head, stopping to check some of the quarries for birds on the way, we get great views of a small flock of Twite that drop in onto the fence line right in front of us, and Charles comes up trumps again with a smart juvenile Whinchat, our first of the trip.

At Sumburgh Head we take lunch in the sun watching the seabirds and looking out from the cliffs, it really is stunning here with Fulmars cruising right past us at eye level along with Gannets and the occasional Great Skua using the up draughts from the cliffs. After lunch we take a walk up to the lighthouse where we see lots more Twite including some very close views as well as numerous Wheatears dotting the dry stone walls, whilst a check of the Rosa

bushes below the lighthouse reveals a smart Lesser Whitethroat though it proves very skulking at times. However, the star bird here proves to be a stunning Merlin that flies right past us at eye level and around the cliffs out of sight!

From here we drive down to make a stop at the Pool of Virkie a large tidal bay, where we get views of a good selection of waders including three Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot, and Redshank as well as some newly arrived wildfowl, with three Wigeon and two Teal seen. Last stop of the day is at the large freshwater loch the Loch of Spiggie, passing a field full of Rock Doves en route! Here we see two Whooper Swans amongst the many Mute Swans that are on the loch, as well as a few bathing Bonxies and also some Tufted Duck before we finally head back to the Hotel.

Day 3

With low cloud and rain today there are still no flights to Fair Isle so it's another day birding on Shetland. We start off by driving around to Grutness Voe, where it's pretty quiet other than a handful of Sanderling along the beach here, but Craig has a hunch there may be more Waders nearby so moves on. Next stop is nearby at Pool of Virkie which proves inspired as it's heaving with Waders!

The highlight is undoubtedly four superb Curlew Sandpipers which are feeding only a short distance away from us allowing some stunning views through the scopes. One of the Curlew Sandpipers is seen to have a badly damaged leg which is dangling limply, but it seems to be managing to feed with just one useable leg! Tough things birds! As we drive the road alongside the shore in the worsening weather the birding just gets better. Six plus Common Snipe are feeding right out in the open out on the estuary, something Craig has certainly never seen before and are amongst the other waders which include many Redshank, Dunlin and Sanderling and a flock of 70+ Knot which drop in onto the estuary to feed briefly. There are also several Bar-tailed Godwit here but with the weather closing in and getting 'damper' by the second to say the least, we decide to drive North to have lunch and a look around Shetlands capital, Lerwick.

Whilst in Lerwick Craig get's some good news, the ferry boat to Fair Isle the 'Good Shepherd', is making an extra evening sailing and there are just enough spaces free on the boat for us to make the crossing to the island this evening!!

After lunch here and buoyed up by the good news we drive back south to the hotel to get our luggage packed and transported around to the ferry terminal at Grutness to await the boat. Finally, we are going to Fair Isle!!

We are soon on board the boat and as the forecast is for some swell on the crossing we get safely ensconced in the comfy seats down below for the two and half hour crossing to the island, which turns out to be a fairly calm crossing in the end according to Craig, much to everyone's relief! We arrive into Fair Isle in the dark to be met on the pier by David and Susannah from the Observatory. After sorting out our rooms at the Obs and a warming meal, Susannah gives us a brief run through about the island and the working of the bird observatory before we settle down for the bird 'log call' to see what birds have been seen on the island today and to await tomorrow with high hopes! After log call some of the group get involved with some after dark nocturnal activities! The wardens are catching and ringing Storm Petrels down in the havens, which gives folk the chance to see these fantastic tiny ocean seabirds up close in the hand and even the chance to release one or two back into the darkness! Superb!

Day 4

Our first full day on the 'magic isle' dawns dry at least, so some of the group opt to go out on early morning pre-breakfast trap rounds, checking the heligoland traps for newly arrived birds. Heading out with Jason the assistant Warden at the Obs we walk out to the famous gully, double dyke and plantation traps. The weather, however soon takes a turn for the worse with the false dry start soon replaced by rain! The trap round is not a complete waste of time, however as we do manage to catch a single Meadow Pipit! The bird is brought back to the observatory ringing room where we get to see it up close in the hand as Jason briefly explains about the process of ringing whilst measuring, ageing and sexing the bird, etc. before releasing the bird complete with its new shiny leg ring outside.

After breakfast we all head out from the Obs, thankfully the earlier rain has cleared to bright sunshine, and it's just stunning! We first check out the Havens, the shoreline below the Observatory where we see plenty of passage waders

including Turnstone, Sanderling, Dunlin, Redshank and Knot. We get great close views of the birds here with Waders on the beach, grass and even walking around on the road just in front of us! From here we walk out onto the headland of Bunes, seeing more Ringed Plover and also Wheatears as we go. The weather and the islands scenery is simply stunning from up on the headland with great views to the imposing wedge of Sheep Rock and across to the new Observatory, before Craig gets a call about a Common Rosefinch that has been seen nearby at the Plantation so we decide to head up that way to try and catch up with the Rosefinch. En route we stop to have a quick look down into the gully trap and manage to pick out a few migrant Warblers sheltering in the narrow defile, a Willow Warbler and a Blackcap, but best of all a female Merlin flies right past us and chases a Wagtail down into the gully before disappearing as quickly as it arrived! Superb! Well probably not for the Wagtail!

More Wheatears flit ahead of us along the tops of the dry stone walls as we head towards the plantation, and Craig tells us that many of them have probably just made the flight over the sea from Shetland where we were seeing good numbers a few days ago. Sadly arriving at the plantation it proves to be a 'Rosefinch free zone' with no sign of the bird, so we continue our walk towards the crofts at Barkland and the Chalet further south. We find four Willow Warblers in the gardens here but Wendy comes up trumps and spots a late Common Swift that flies over before we make our way back to the Observatory for lunch.

After lunch we walk south down the isle scanning along the fence lines and dry stone walls and also checking the gardens and crops around the crofts for birds as we go. Three Golden Plover, three Curlew and a nice flock of 10 Wigeon are seen flying over and we also see more Willow Warblers, Blackcap, and Wheatears. Two Whinchat are seen near Upper Leogh and a check of the garden at the Haa gets us brief views of a Spotted Flycatcher and a single Goldcrest. With time getting on we begin to walk back north towards the Observatory and Craig stops to check the Rosa bushes in the garden at Schoolton Croft, finding a Common Rosefinch! In fact there's not just one Rosefinch in the garden, but we get views of at least three here! This more than makes up for missing the Rosefinch at the plantation this morning! Also on the walk back a single Ruff is seen flying over, our first of the trip, before we arrive back at the Observatory.

Just before we are due to eat dinner at the Observatory, the news comes back that a scarce American wader, a Pectoral Sandpiper, has been found up in the north of the island! The Observatory minibus is called into action and gives us all a lift up north to where the bird has been found, and we are soon enjoying views as this scarce wader feeds around the shallow edges of Easter Lother Water. Nice! The day's excitement is not quite over though as amazingly a Citrine Wagtail is trapped along with a Common Rosefinch and a stunning adult male Redstart in the plantation outside the Observatory in the evening! We all get to see the birds up close in the hand as they are ringed, amongst the many smiling faces of visitors and Observatory staff in the ringing room! The magic of Fair Isle, and what an exciting end to the day!

Day 5

This morning we head out from the Obs, and make the most of the beautiful fine sunny weather by taking a walk up onto Ward Hill the highest point on the island at just over 700ft high. Near the Gully a single migrant Grey Heron flies over, and also a late Common Swift that flies right past us before heading off over towards Sheep Rock, the black sickle shaped bird providing a both bizarre and incredible sight against the dramatic backdrop of sea and rugged cliffs. Two Greylag Geese also pass high over Sheep Rock heading South and a Willow Warbler gives us nice close views as it searches for insects in the sun at the edge of the Plantation. As we start to make our way up towards the airstrip 11 Golden Plover are seen flying over as well as eight Wigeon.

Arriving at the communications mast we get great views looking towards the North Lighthouse where some of the group have a breather and take in the views, whilst the rest of us continue upwards to the top of Ward Hill. It's incredibly windy on the top in fact it's hard to stand up! But the views are simply stunning with a 360 degree panorama of the whole island spread out below us. Simply breathtaking! From here we make our way back down off the hill and head back towards the Obs timing it nicely to meet Susannah in the Obs van who is passing the Plantation, and who gives us a welcome lift the rest of the way back in plenty of time for lunch at the Observatory. Result!

After lunch we walk South again heading towards the ruined croft at Pund. A nice selection of Waders are feeding in the fields here including a flock of 13 Lapwing and also three Ruff, which give us fantastic views when the whole wader flock takes off and circles right overhead in beautiful light before settling back down in the fields. We also find three Common Snipe in the more

marshy areas and a Garden Warbler skulking in a patch of nettles here. We cut across to check the crofts around Barkland and find at least six Willow Warblers in the gardens as well as a very skulking 'acro' that Craig finds, on the brief views that Craig gets of the bird it's probably either a Reed or Marsh Warbler. Sadly the Warbler gives us the run around and fails to show well enough to be sure of the i.d one way or the other! Definitely the one that got away!

Day 6

This morning some folk head out on the pre-breakfast trap round with the Warden which proves an inspired option as they manage to catch a Common Rosefinch, two Wheatears and a Blackcap! A nice start to the day!

After breakfast we walk out towards the Southeast coastal cliffs at South Ramnigio and check the moorland nearby, an area Craig thinks we might be able to find Lapland Bunting if there are any about. We walk slowly stopping frequently to look at and check through the many flocks of Meadow Pipit feeding here along with a few Wheatears, when suddenly Craig picks out the flight call of Lapland Buntings as two fly high overhead! We lose one of the birds in flight but the other drops down onto the moorland nearby so we make our way over to where the bird seems to land. With some patient slow approach we are soon getting stunning views as we find the Bunting feeding completely unconcerned on grass seed heads only a few feet away! The birds plumage matches the ground very well and combined with it's crouching and slow creeping feeding action is very camouflaged and cryptic, what a star bird! As we make our way back, towards the road and the Plantation Craig comes across a freshly dead adult Great Skua, the bird is carrying a leg ring and proves to be four years old having been ringed as a chick on the island back in July 2007!

In the afternoon we get a lift in the Obs van down to the South end of the island, where we take the opportunity to have a sea watch from the South lighthouse seeing Great Skuas, Gannets, Fulmars, Shag, and Eiders offshore as well as some Waders around the lighthouse including Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Turnstone. On the walk back north from here we see at least three Whinchats in the fields around the crofts and a flock of 13 Common Gulls near the School before finally getting back to the Observatory after another great day in the field.

Day 7

Sadly this morning we have to catch our flight back to Shetland. Definitely one day we are hoping the plane would not fly! Craig manages to see a flock of five Barnacle Geese coming in off the sea and over Sheep Rock, the first 'Barnies' of the autumn, before we load up the luggage in the Obs van for the trip up to the airstrip. All too soon it's time sadly to leave, though the flight gives us a great view of the island as we fly over the South end of the isle before turning North and past the West Cliffs and North Lighthouse, and sadly leaving Fair Isle behind.

We land at Tingwall on Shetland and then get a taxi down to Sumburgh airport where we have time for a walk from the airport across and along the beach at Grutness Voe, before we catch our connecting flight back to Inverness at the end of a great trip!

Bird of the Trip:- Lapland Bunting, Citrine Wagtail, Curlew Sandpiper, Lesser Whitethroat.

Place Of The Trip:- Fair Isle! The South Light/Fair Isle!

Magic Moment:- Storm Petrel in the hand!, Two Peregrines over Sheep Rock, Greenish Warbler from the bedroom!, A real snapshot of migration.

MAMMALS

Fair Isle Field Mouse
Rabbit
Common Seal
Grey Seal

AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog

BUTTERFLIES/MOTHS

Red Admiral
Angle Shades

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Merlin
Peregrine
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Golden Plover
Dunlin
Common Snipe

Bar-tailed Godwit
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Common Redshank
Turnstone
Knot
Sanderling
Little Stint
Pectoral Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Great Skua
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Collared Dove
Common Swift
Hooded Crow
Raven
Skylark
House Martin
Swallow
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Willow Warbler
Blackcap
Garden Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Greenish Warbler

Goldcrest Wren
Starling
Blackbird
Redstart
Whinchat
Northern Wheatear
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
House Sparrow
Citrine Wagtail

Pied/Alba Wagtail
Twite
Common Rosefinch
Lapland Bunting

Total Birds: 74

Total Species: 81