

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

ORKNEY

4-11 SEPTEMBER 2016

Leaders: Simon Pawsey & Duncan Macdonald

Guests: Audrey Adams, Hazel & Andrew Fardell, Gill & Steve Longhurst, Sheila Saunders, Helen & Mark Duncan, Kim Roberts, Penny & Keith Chantler, Janette Foster

Day 1 After meeting the previous evening in the Premier Inn at Inverness we set off towards the north coast of Scotland and the wonderfully named port of Scrabster. But with a late ferry crossing to Orkney we have the full day ahead of us and plenty of time to take in some other locations and do some birding en route. First stop though is Tesco's (other supermarkets are available) for provisions to get us through the day.

The weather is fine and warm as we make our way onto the Black Isle, north east of Inverness. We stop at Bennet's Field to look for some farmland species in the hedgerows and ploughed fields. There are good numbers of passerines around and we see Linnets, Yellowhammers, Greenfinches, Goldfinches and some very clean looking Meadow Pipits. At least three Red Kites are soaring over nearby woodland and a Common Buzzard allows good scoped views as it sits on a telegraph pole.

We drop down to Avoch (pronounced OCH!) and cast our eyes across the Moray Firth. The tide is low and the mud flats are full of birds, including a dozen Gooseanders, Herring, Greater Black-backed, Black Headed and Common Gulls, Turnstones, Oystercatchers, Redshanks, Curlews, Wigeon and our first 'clean' Hooded Crows of the trip. Common Terns are coming and going and perch just offshore on the artificial rafts provided for them for breeding.

We drive a short distance along the Firth towards Chanonry Point to look for Dolphins. Chanonry is the best place in the UK to watch Bottle Nosed Dolphins from the land and we are not disappointed. Duncan calls a possible Sabine's Gull out in the Firth, but it is distant and we are not available to relocate it. One has been seen at this location a few days previously, so possibly the same bird.

Sandwich Terns are flying and calling overhead and Ringed Plovers are flying up and down the Firth. We watch as a local tour boat motors across the

bay with a purpose and sure enough they have spotted some Dolphins, which over the next half an hour comes closer and closer towards us, giving fantastic views. There are two pods with young calves in tow. It is just fantastic to see these wonderful mammals so close to land. Always a special day when you see Dolphins !

We enjoy lunch and coffee at Chanonry before joining the A9 and heading north up the east coast. Time is still in our favour and we stop at 'The Mound' a small inland lagoon close to Loch Fleet. We spent a very productive hour here with lots of raptors over the hills behind the lagoon, testing our flying raptor identification skills. There are numerous Buzzards, Red Kites, Peregrine, Sparrowhawks, Osprey, our first Ravens and a large flock of Curlews in the lagoon.

The clock is ticking now and we have a ferry to catch, so we continue up the east coast, with lovely views over the north sea and the edge of the flow country of Sutherland and eventually into the port of Scrabster. There are Common Seals in the harbour, which we are unable to turn into Otters despite our best efforts.

Once on board the ferry we have a lovely meal in the restaurant and then it is out onto the deck at the stern of the boat for some sea watching. It is a glorious warm evening with great visibility and there is a sense of excitement about what we might see. Gannets are everywhere and riding the thermals behind the boat. As we approach the island of Hoy we get tantalising glimpses of a small pod of Bottle Nosed Dolphins and a single Rizzo's Dolphin, it's distinctive dorsal fin visible as it breaches the surface. There are rafts of Bonxies on the sea and we watch 'clepto parasitism' in action as they chase down Gannets forcing them onto the waters surface and holding them under until they release the contents of their gullet! Three Manx Shearwaters bank across the waves, but are difficult to get onto as they travel south at speed. Fulmars are everywhere shearing across the waves all around the boat and circling above the cliffs of Hoy.

The Old Man of Hoy looks spectacular in the evening light as we cruise alongside the highest sea cliffs in the UK. As we come into Stromness the sunset behind the town is glorious and it is an image that will long stay in our minds. A wonderful way to arrive on Orkney.

Day 2

Today dawns warm and clear with a strengthening wind. During breakfast at our hotel we get our first glimpse of the Ring of Brodgar from across Loch Harray behind the hotel. After a good breakfast we are off and out for our first full day on The Mainland of Orkney.

We drive a short distance straight to the Standing Stones of Stenness. As the wind blew around the stones the place has an uncanny and mysterious feel to it. Standing at a height of six metres, the sheer scale of the stones make the monument visible for miles around. Only four of the ring's stones remain and they are considerably larger than those found at the nearby Ring of Brodgar. Radiocarbon dates from the excavation show that the site dates from at least 3100 BC, making the Standing Stones one of the earliest stone circles in Britain.

From the stones we walk about 150 metres to the Barnhouse Settlement. This Stone Age settlement was found in 1984 and consists of 15 small dwellings in varying stages of development. Each building in the settlement was thought to have been deliberately demolished at the end of its life. One theory for this is that the settlement was created to house individuals who were instrumental in the construction of the stone ring, and once the stone ring was completed the creators moved on and demolished the buildings.

We then walk the short distance to a birdhide overlooking Loch Harray where we see Mute Swans and a Reed Bunting in the reeds around the hide as well as flocks of Greylag Geese in the fields opposite.

From here we drive a short distance along the road which runs between Lochs Harray and Stenness towards the Ring of Brodgar. Quite suddenly a stunning male Hen Harrier appears right in front of Duncan's van and floats like a grey ghost along the shoreline of Loch Harray, over the loch and off into the distance. What a bird and our first Hen Harrier of the trip.

The wind is really starting to pick up now as we walk up towards the Ring of Brodgar which is classed as the finest known truly circular late Neolithic or early Bronze Age stone ring. It's an iconic site and represents Orkney's ancient heritage. It is assumed to have been erected between 2500BC and 2000BC. The stone ring was built in a true circle, almost 104 metres wide. It is thought to have originally contained 60 megaliths, but today only 27 stones remain.

The stone circle is located in the centre of a massive natural cauldron formed by the hills of the surrounding landscape, but what were the stones for? Lots of theories exist but it's unlikely that the stones had a single particular purpose. Just as churches today are used for various ceremonies, weddings, burials, meeting places etc., it's likely that the stone circle served a number of roles around religion and ritual. It's a mysterious and evocative place and captures the imagination about what life was like thousands of years ago and why so much effort was put into creating the Ring.

After coffee we head towards the capital of Orkney, Kirkwall. On the way we stop at Finstown where Common Seals are in the harbour. We go our separate ways at Kirkwall for a couple of hours to take in the local history and do some shopping and then we are off to the east of Mainland to the ancient settlement at Skara Brae at Sandwick.

In the winter of 1850 a great storm battered Orkney. The combination of wind and extremely high tides stripped the grass from a large mound to reveal the ancient Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae. Radiocarbon dating shows that the settlement dates from the late Neolithic period and was inhabited for around 600 years between 3200BC and 2200BC. Today Skara Brae consists of eight dwellings linked together by a series of low passageways. Each house shares the same basic design - a large square room with a central fireplace, a bed on either side and a shelved dresser on the wall opposite the doorway.

Through its lifetime Skara Brae became embedded in its own refuse and this, together with the encroaching sand dunes, meant the village was gradually abandoned. The settlement was then gradually covered by drifting sand that hid it from sight for over 40 centuries.

The settlement is located above the lovely Bay of Skail. Sanderling are running along the edge of the tide and just coming into their winter plumage. There are small flocks of Dunlin and Ringed Plover on the rocks and at sea, Gannets, Fulmars and the ever present menace of Bonxies brave the strong winds. There is a flock of Eiders riding the waves and Grey Seals are in the bay sheltering from the rough seas. A dead Smooth Hound is on the beach in the bay, a small member of the shark family.

As we leave Skara Brae a flock of at least 100 Twite are restlessly flitting around a field. It is great to see Twite in such large numbers, they are hardy little birds. We drive back towards Brodgar and come across our first large flock of Golden Plover in a field, a fitting end to a great first day on Orkney.

Day 3

Today dawns fine and overcast with little wind and it is a 06.30 start for Operation Otter, which apart from two German tourists sleeping in the bird hide at Loch Harray is uneventful.

After breakfast we head towards Tingwall to catch the ferry to Rousay. A quick stop at Finsport, (apparently named after an Irishman who founded a pub in the town) reveals a large flock of Greylag Geese on the sea. At Tingwall we have a short wait for the ferry which is put to good use by scanning the shoreline. Simon finds a distant Otter which is feeding in the sea behind some rocks. Not great views unfortunately, but an Otter nonetheless and we all manage to see it. Black Guillemots are in the bay, coming out of summer plumage along with Eider and a large flock

of Cormorants. A flock of five Barnacle Geese fly over, a good find for Orkney, which unfortunately is missed by the guides who are indoors getting the ferry tickets.

As we board the ferry two Peregrines fly over the harbour, obviously hunting. The ferry crossing is calm as we head towards the Isle of Rousay across the Wyre Sound. Two dark phase Arctic Skuas give great views as they pass close to the ferry, a smaller and more elegant species of Skua when compared to the ever present Bonxies.

Once on Rousay we climb to a viewpoint overlooking the Isle of Egilsay where we stop for a coffee break. Suddenly a shout of "Hen Harrier" went up and a stunning female 'Ring Tailed' Hen Harrier drifts past us very close. We lose her temporarily before she re-appears quartering the moor behind us giving great views. You can never see too many Hen Harriers!

In the bay below us is a single Red-throated Diver which proves elusive as it actively fishes as well as a dark phase Arctic Skua on the sea. Seals are hauled out on the rocks and a flock of Golden Plover fly over.

We drive around Rousay with stunning open ocean views and even manage to pick up some biscuits at the local Waitrose, which the proprietor opens specially for us, now that's service! Lunch is taken at a cemetery (where else?) overlooking Loch of Wasbister. On the loch are Moorhen, a number of Snipe, Redshank and a flock of Greylag Geese with a Lesser Black-backed Gull in a nearby field.

After lunch we drive to Midhowe Broch, which is known as the most impressive of all of Orkney's brochs. Looking across the churning waters of Eynhallow Sound towards The Mainland, this massive structure must have been an awe inspiring sight to early travellers. Constructed and used between 200BC and 200AD the Midhowe Broch appears to have been built with defence in mind. During excavation a number of artefacts were recovered, including normal domestic items such as tools and whetstones. Among the items recovered were a bronze ladle and some shards of pottery - items that had a definite Roman origin. Because Orkney was well away from the areas of Roman control, they must have been acquired as gifts or through trading or raiding excursions further south. Whilst at the Broch another female Hen Harrier is hunting on the ridge above, once again giving us great views as it rose and fell along the ridge.

Keeping an eye on the time we motor back to the ferry port and catch the ferry, stopping at the Isle of Wyre, before crossing the Sound back to Tingwall. We have excellent views of two Red-throated Divers close to the ferry on the way back as well as a large flock of at least 100 plus Shags on some rocks.

Back on Mainland we head towards Birsay Moor where we take the High Moor Road, which unfortunately is clagged in mist. However, we persevere and manage to find two Short Eared Owls, the only ones we would see on the trip. We get great views as one of them flies over Duncan's van and then quarters the moor in front of us. They are known locally as 'Cattie Faces' and are very special birds. We are all thrilled to see them.

A handsome male Stonechat also gives us good views as he sat on a wire fence. It is a fitting end to what has been a full and very enjoyable day.

Day 4

Today is mild but misty and very overcast. We are heading towards South Ronaldsay and drive via Kirkwall and past the Highland Park Distillery. It is windows down time in both vans and the smell of whisky in the air is fabulous (if you like whisky - and I do) as we drive past. We stop on the shoreline of Scapa Bay, but visibility is very poor and down to about 100 metres. We do manage to find a group of five Bar Tailed Godwits feeding on the shoreline and coming out of their summer plumage, very elegant waders.

We stop to look at the first of the Churchill Barriers linking Mainland with Lambs Holm. The barriers consist of four causeways with a total length of 1.5 miles. Now they serve as road links between the islands.

On 14 October 1939, the Royal Navy battleship HMS Royal Oak was sunk at her moorings within the natural harbour of Scapa Flow in a night time attack by the German U Boat - U47 under the command of Gunther Prien. Shortly before midnight on the 13 October the *U-47* had entered Scapa Flow through Kirk Sound between Lamb Holm and the Orkney Mainland. Although the shallow eastern passages had been secured with measures including sunken block ships booms and anti-submarine nets Prien was able to navigate the *U-47* around the obstructions at high tide, an incredible piece of seamanship and navigation. He then launched a surprise torpedo attack on the unsuspecting Royal Navy battleship while it was at anchor in Scapa Flow. The *U-47* then escaped seaward using the same channel by navigating between the block ships.

In response, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill ordered the construction of several permanent barriers to prevent any further attacks. Work began in May 1940 and was completed by September 1944. However the barriers were not officially opened until 12 May 1945, four days after the end of World War II in Europe.

We cross the first barrier and onto the island of Lambs Holm where we visit the Italian Chapel, which is just remarkable. The Italian Chapel is a highly ornate Catholic chapel and it was built during World War II by Italian prisoners of war, who were housed on the previously uninhabited island

while they constructed the Churchill Barriers. Only the concrete foundations of the other buildings of the prisoner-of-war camp survive. It was not completed until after the end of the war, and was restored in the 1960s and again in the 1990s. It is now category A Listed building. 550 Italian prisoners of war, captured in North Africa during World War 2, were brought to Orkney in 1942. Two hundred men were based at Camp 60 on Lamb Holm. In 1943, Major Thomas Pyres Buckland, Camp 60's new commandant, and Father Gioacchino Giacobazzi, the camp's padre, agreed that a place of worship was required.

The chapel was constructed from limited materials by the prisoners. Two Nissen Huts were joined end-to-end. The corrugated interior was then covered with plasterboard and the altar and altar rail were constructed from concrete left over from work on the barriers. Most of the interior decoration was done by Dominico Chiocchetti, a prisoner from Moena. He painted the sanctuary end of the chapel and fellow-prisoners decorated the entire interior. They created a facade out of concrete, concealing the shape of the hut and making the building look like a church. The light holders were made out of corned beef tins. The baptismal font was made from the inside of a car exhaust covered in a layer of concrete. Chiocchetti remained on the island to finish decorating the newly consecrated chapel, even when his fellow prisoners were released shortly before the end of the war. We all agreed it was an incredible achievement under difficult conditions.

From the chapel we cross Churchill Barrier number 2 onto the island of Glimps Holm and the barrier number 3 onto the island of Burray, where we head towards the cemetery (where else) following a report of a Buff Breasted Sandpiper, an American wader which had been seen in a field a few days previously.

We find a recently cut field with a large flock of Golden Plover and Lapwings mixed together. There must have been at least 500 plus birds and so begin the business of scoping each individual bird to try and find the Sandpiper. The bird proves elusive and we start to think that it might have moved on. The whole flock is then disturbed by something which causes them to take off and then re-settle and suddenly there it was, right in front of us, and we all get great scoped views of this lovely American Wader, which should probably have been on the east coast of the USA, but somehow found itself in a field on the Isle of Burray. A proper twitch !

Our destination for the afternoon is the Tomb of the Eagles on South Ronaldsay, so we head south, but stop first for lunch at Kirkhouse Point where we watch Snipe, Teal, Redshank, Ringed Plovers, Dunlin and Moorhen. It is starting to rain heavily as we arrive at Isbister and the Tomb of the Eagles visitor centre. We are warmly greeted by Freda, who gives a lively presentation about the history of the period and definitely took a shine

(I think?) to Simon with a steady stream of sarcasm aimed in his direction, but it is all in good humour and we laugh our way through the presentation. By the end we are itching to get out into the pouring rain and walk the mile long cliff top path to the tomb itself, so it is on with the supplied wellies and waterproofs, and led by a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic Springer Spaniel, we set off.

The pouring rain seems to add something to the experience and once we arrive at the tomb itself we are in good spirits, especially when we see the method of entry into the tomb, which is a small trolley on wheels (the trolley of death). After a thorough risk assessment and detailed health and safety brief by the guides (I don't think this actually happened, but probably should have) it was deemed safe to lie back onto the trolley and pull yourself along a rope and into the tomb - what could possibly go wrong?

It all went according to the plan and we all made it into the tomb, some more elegantly than others and it was all done with great humour. Audrey's announcement of "Here I come boys!" as she lay back on the sled and pulled herself through had us reduced to stitches, and was a moment that will long be remembered (certainly by me - nice one Audrey !)

Now for the history bit - The Tomb of the Eagles, or Isbister Chambered Cairn, is a Neolithic chambered tomb located on a cliff edge at Isbister. First explored by Ronald Simison, a farmer, when digging flagstones in 1958, he conducted his own excavations at the site in 1976. Alerted by Simison, archaeologist John Hedges then mounted a full study, prepared a technical report and wrote a popular book that cemented the tomb's name.

16,000 human bones were found at the site, as well as 725 from birds. These were identified as predominantly belonging to the White-tailed Sea Eagle and represented between 8 and 20 individuals. These reveal that the eagles died c. 2450–2050 BCE, up to 1,000 years after the building of the tomb and that the eagles were somehow significant to the people who built the tomb.

From Isbister we drive back towards Mainland and the weather starts to clear, revealing a beautiful double rainbow at Finstown with a flock of 300 Greylags on the sea, which for some is the magic moment of the trip. A fitting end to another great day, despite the weather.

Day 5

Today is another overcast day with rain and a drop in temperature. 'Operation Otter' is commenced again, to try and get better views of everyone's favourite furry friend. So with this in mind we head towards the east of Mainland to scan the coastline and also try to pick up any migrants which may have been blown in on the increasing south easterly winds.

Our first stop is the Bay of Suckquoy where we see a flock of Knot in winter plumage and a selection of the usual waders that we have been seeing through the course of the week. From here we head towards Deerness and Northquoy Point which is looking very 'Ottery'. An immature Cuckoo coming in off the sea is a surprising find and possibly a migrating bird from Scandinavia on passage. The Cuckoo shows itself on two separate occasions, giving good views.

Stonechats are also showing well perched on top of some bushes and we get some good 'intel' from a local farmer about a particular 'Ottery' spot which is quite close. So we drive down a farm track towards the sea and stop in a strategic position overlooking Deer Sound. Mark puts up a shout of 'Hen Harrier' whilst we are having lunch and we get some great views of a female quartering the ground in front of us. A possible male bird is seen as well, but it proves elusive. A great morning, but unfortunately no Otters !

After lunch we head back towards Stenness and our last historical site visit of the trip at Maeshowe. Our guide is a great narrator and very enthusiastic about the tomb and this made Maeshowe particularly enjoyable. What we all found really interesting was that Vikings had entered the tomb and left runic 'graffiti' on the inner walls. The 30 inscriptions found in Maeshowe, make it one of the largest, and most famous, collections of runes known in Europe.

According to Orkneyinga Saga, over 800 years previously, in the darkness of an Orkney winter, a group of viking warriors had sought shelter from a terrible snowstorm. Leading the men was Earl Harald, who, at Christmas, 1153, was making his way from Stromness to the parish of Firth. The Earl's party took refuge in an already ancient structure – the mound they knew as Orkahaugr. Inside, while waiting for the storm to abate, they carved graffiti into the stone walls. What drew these Norsemen to the tomb? Was it the legends of a great treasure that lay within?

The translations for Maeshowe's runic inscriptions are:

- "Ingebjork the fair widow - many a woman has walked stooping in here a very showy person" signed by "Erlingr"
- "Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women" (carved beside a rough drawing of a slaving dog)
- "This mound was raised before Ragnarr Lothbrocks her sons were brave smooth-hide men though they were"

A number of the other inscriptions are simply ancient graffiti:

- "Ofram the son of Sigurd carved these runes"
- "Haermund Hardaxe carved these runes"

- "These runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes in the western ocean"
- "Tholfir Kolbeinsson carved these runes high up"
- "This howe Vermundr carved"
- "Ottarfila carved these runes"
- "Benedikt made this cross"
- "Arnfithr Matr carved these runes with this axe owned by Gauk Trandilsson in the South land"
- "Tryggr carved these runes"
- "Arnfithr the son of Stein carved these runes"
- "Thorir"
- "Orkis' son says in the runes he carves"
- "futhorkhnias trmly"

Other runes explain the Viking's purpose:

- "Crusaders broke into Maeshowe. Lif the earl's cook carved these runes. To the north-west is a great treasure hidden. It was long ago that a great treasure was hidden here. Happy is he that might find that great treasure. Hakon alone bore treasure from this mound" signed "Simon Sirith"
- "It is surely true what I say than treasure was taken away. Treasure was carried off in three nights before those." "Is to me said that treasure is here hidden very well. Say few as Oddr"
- "He is a viking...come here under the barrow"

It was fascinating stuff and amazing to think that we were stood in the very tomb where Viking raiders had sought shelter.

Once we had finished at Maeshowe we agree that another Short Eared Owl would round the trip off very nicely, so with this in mind we head back over towards the moors of Mainland in the area of Birsay. The owls are elusive, but we get great views of another ring tailed Hen Harrier quartering the moor whilst we stop for coffee. From here we drive towards The Loons RSPB reserve and some wonderful habitat, stopping on the way to look at Greylags and other common birds.

We pass through the hamlet of Twatt, which for reasons beyond me causes much hilarity amongst the group. Anyway, photos are taken and we giggle away to ourselves before heading back to our hotel past the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness one last time.

Day 6

Today dawns clear, windy and mild for our ferry crossing back to mainland Scotland. We drive to Stromness and spend an hour or so wandering through the streets before boarding the ferry. It is a rough crossing and the ferry is pitching in the rolling sea, but we all have our sea legs by now and none of us feel any the worse for it. Other than Bonxies, Fulmars

and Gannets the crossing is uneventful, but the scenery is wonderful and it is a bright and clear day.

From Scrabster we head east towards the most northerly point of mainland UK, Dunnet Head for lunch and then with an eye on the time we make our way south, back the way we came on the first day of our trip. We stop in Helmsdale for a well earned ice cream and again at 'The Mound' where we watch Buzzards, Red Kite, Grey Heron and Teal. From here we coast into Inverness for our final evening meal of the holiday at the Premier Inn and the serious business of deciding species of the trip, place of the trip and the magic moment. It is a tough choice because it has been a wonderful week in so many different ways.

SPECIES OF THE TRIP : Short-Eared Owl

PLACE OF THE TRIP : Maeshowe

MAGIC MOMENT: Arrival by ferry into Stromness and the setting sun.

Other magic moments are: Double rainbow at Finstown; Simon being a naughty boy and getting told off by Freda; Short-Eared Owls; riding the trolley of death into the Tomb of the Eagles; sunrise at Stenness over the stones.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Fulmar
Manx Shearwater
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Barnacle Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Gooseander
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Pheasant
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Dunlin
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Snipe
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Turnstone
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Greater Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Puffin
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Short-eared Owl
Skylark
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Robin
Winchat
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet

Twite
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

Total Birds: 91

MAMMALS

Otter
Bottlenose Dolphin
Risso's Dolphin

Common Seal
Grey Seal
Rabbit
Brown Hare

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral

Total Species: 99