

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

ORKNEY

1-8 SEPTEMBER 2019

Guide: Jack Ward & Craig Round

Guests: Robert Gerwin & Ruth Assal, Robert & Geraldine Johnson, Mary Darke, Shelley Price, Charles Ritchie, Julia Bevan

Day 1 The group meets up at the Premier Inn in Inverness where we introduce ourselves and enjoy a meal together - then have a chat about the coming trip and head to bed excited about what the coming week may bring.

Day 2 After breakfast, we pack all luggage into the vans and set off aiming for the 13:00 ferry. Working our way north we make a stop at Golspie for a coffee and are able to see our first few species, including several corvids and some different waders such as Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew and others on the shores of the Cromarty Firth. We continue north as it is a long way to Scrabster – where we check in and scan the water where we get to grips with eclipse Eider Ducks and Black Guillemots. We board the ferry and gather in the Magnus Lounge where we have lunch before heading out onto the deck where we spend the rest of the crossing scanning for seabirds such as Gannets and Fulmars, Guillemots and Razorbills.

When we reach Orkney we decide to head straight to Maes Howe to get our first experience of Orkney's archaeology. The 5000-year-old chamber tomb doesn't look much from the outside but inside is quite amazing as well as providing a great shelter from the passing showers. The group are met in the visitor centre and taken by bus, and then guided along to the chamber. On entering you need to bend your backs into a small passageway for several metres before straightening back again into a surprisingly large chamber. The guide explains its history and mystery and explains the construction also shining a torch upon several Viking Runes written along its walls by the early vandals, including a drawing of a dragon.

Well impressed and with time passing quickly we head from here to the Lynnfield Hotel where we unpack before meeting for drinks and enjoy a chat about the day and our first run through the checklist - followed by a discussion of the coming days on Orkney before we head in for dinner.

Day 3

After breakfast we make our way south through lovely scenery to the most southerly point on Orkney, onto South Ronaldsay. On the way, we see a Sparrowhawk and several dabbling ducks.

We make our way over several island bridges to the Tomb of the Eagles, where we are given the fascinating background to the tomb and its discovery before walking about a mile along a short and relatively flat pleasant track which leads us to the coast and out to the cliff tops where the tomb is situated. Here we have to lay down and pull ourselves along a trolley system one at a time, then into the narrow entrance to the tomb. Once inside, you can stand upright and marvel at the building skills of our ancient ancestry. There are original bones of the dead inside which are intermingled amongst several White-tailed Eagles skeletons, some of which are of obvious importance to their people. Whilst some crawl or roll into the tomb, others sea watch and spy out Great Skuas, Gannets and Common seals.

After walking back to the vehicles, we drive just round to the next bay at Wind Wick where we have lunch and watch the Turnstones and Redshanks.

We head north across the Churchill Barriers. At the start of the second World War a submarine managed to sneak through one of these islands at a high spring tide and managed to torpedo and sink the Royal Oak which was anchored there and tragically 833 men lost their lives. Because of this a decision was made to permanently block the eastern entrance into Scapa Flow which we call The Churchill Barriers. We arrive at the island of Burray, where we see a bevy of Whooper Swans on the way to the Italian Chapel. We take in the amazing façade of the outside before heading inside to see the beautiful artwork that the prisoners had done. From here we make our way back to the hotel for the evening.

Day 4

Today we travel to the island of Rousay. We have time in the morning to sweep along the south coast of mainland, driving over the Hobbister road where we get our first views of Hen Harrier! A pair of juveniles fly close to the vehicles, passing the road in front of us before floating over the heather in the wind to our right.

After great views of the harriers we continue up to Tingwall where we get the ferry across to Rousay. From the boat we manage to glimpse our first Red-throated Diver. Once on the island, we travel along to Midhowe where we walk down to the coastline to see the enormous chambered cairn and iron age broch. Whilst walking down to the cairn, we are treated to incredible views of a Peregrine mobbing a female Hen Harrier, whilst seals lounge about on the rocks below us.

We take plenty of time to explore Midhowe's archeology before dodging a shower and having lunch. We continue to make our way around the island, seeing yet another Sparrowhawk.

The ferry crossing back is exciting due to the weather which had dramatically escalated, but a few hardier guests stuck it out on the rear deck to spy for windswept birds!

Day 5

Today some of us start early, heading out before breakfast to do a spot of birding. We are treated to great views of a flock of Goldcrests, a Sparrowhawk narrowly missing a Chaffinch, and huge numbers of Greylag Geese leaving the roost. We also get great views of several Brown Hare before heading back for breakfast.

After breakfast we head west, stopping first at the Stones of Stennes and the Barnhouse settlement. This is to set the tone for the day, and from here we take in the Ring of Brodgar. Classed as the finest known circular late Neolithic Stone Circle it was erected around 2500BC. It is an iconic site with an impressive vista overlooking Loch Harray and Loch of Stennes. It is a mysterious and evocative place that captures the imagination of what life was like back then and how so much effort was put into constructing it. Once at the stones we look out for Viking runes which are written among one or two of the stones. Next we travel up to the Sands of Evie where we have lunch and get wonderful views of two Red-throated Divers fishing on the sound of Eynhallow.

Hunger satisfied we carry on to an RSPB hide overlooking The Loons. This lovely reserve is a mix of wetlands and grassland and we scan to find a variety of birds including great views of Snipe, Moorhen, many geese and a brief Sedge Warbler.

To round our day off we travel to Skara Brae. This is a Neolithic village which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Landscape. It was discovered after a storm in 1850 which uncovered a village that had been hidden for thousands of years beneath the sand. The village is almost intact with some houses complete with fireplaces, bed areas, seating and even shelves where things were surely stored or put on display. Looking at them from above it is easy to imagine what life might have been like living here and the visitor centre is also very informative. We spend plenty of time here to fully appreciate the site – it is truly exceptional, before moving on to the rather lovely Skail Bay which also provides us with views of Sanderling.

We head back to the hotel for drinks and dinner.

Day 6

Another early start today for some; this time we head back to the Stones of Stenness so we can get some sunrise photos of the stones looking very majestic. It is a wonderful start to the day but eventually the bitter wind had its effect and we head back for breakfast and nice hot coffee!

When everyone is ready we head down into Kirkwall to take in St. Magnus Cathedral. We explore this impressive 11th century cathedral for a while before everyone heads their separate ways to explore the rest of the town. It is a lovely town with plenty of interesting shops and a nice harbour. By midday, we meet up and head out east, to the Gloop! We take our lunch out to the headland where we sit and sea watch. The Gloop is an impressive collapsed cave which on a stormy day produces great sea spouts which power up from below. Scanning from here provides us with brilliant views of a young Peregrine and at the other extreme we find several butterflies then, as we are about to leave, we are treated to great views of another Hen Harrier - we have done remarkably well for this species on this trip.

Our next stop is at Newark Bay, which looks good for Otters but sadly doesn't produce one. Some go for a walk along the coast to spot several waders, whilst others stay close to the vehicles and are rewarded with yet another Harrier! This time, an adult female that quarters across the adjacent field, passing so close to us that we could see all of the detail of her plumage. A great view!

From Newark, we move round to St. Peter's Pool, often an excellent place for waders and there are a few here today but better still, as we arrive, we get views of a speeding Merlin, - what a great day for raptors this has been. Heading over the dunes we find several Arctic Terns and more Sanderling before we return to the hotel for our last dinner on Orkney.

Day 7

Our last morning on Orkney, we head straight to Stromness from where our ferry is due to depart. We have just enough time to explore Stromness before boarding the ferry and heading back to mainland Scotland. On the way, we get brief glimpses of Harbour Porpoise and even a fleeting Minke Whale.

Once on the mainland we head south, enjoying some beautiful scenery as we go, and making a stop at Dunbeath Harbour for lunch, where we have lovely views of Goldfinches feeding. We have enough time to take in part of the Black Isle to look for Kites and we are not disappointed as we get incredible views of initially one kite, which soon develops into up to eight kites, and a couple of Buzzards for good measure! We return to the Premier Inn for our last dinner together as a group and chat about what a wonderful trip it has been. It is also the chance to reminisce by discussing what people

have chosen as 'Species of the Trip', Place of the Trip and what their 'Magic Moment' might be... and it is lovely to hear what people have chosen as we go round the group.

Day 8

After breakfast we say our fond farewells and head our separate ways.

Species of the Trip

Hen Harriers, Kites, Sparrowhawk, Merlin and Goldcrest all featured

Place of the Trip

Skara Brae featured heavily, together with the Gloup, and the Tomb of the Eagles.

Highlight of the Trip

Included views of the Merlin, the Peregrine at the Gloup and Skara Brae.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Wigeon
Teal
Tufted Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Peregrine
Merlin
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Turnstone
Dunlin
Redshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Snipe
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake

Sandwich Tern
Arctic Tern
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Swallow
House Martin
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Song Thrush
Blackbird
Sedge Warbler
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Twite
Goldfinch
Water Rail
Ruff

Total Birds: 82

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Common Seal
Porpoise
Minke Whale
Brown Hare
Rabbit

Total Species: 88