

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

ORKNEY ODYSSEY

21-20 SEPTEMBER 2024

Guides: Craig Round & Ailie Brown

Guests: William & Susan Gill, David & Gillian Smith, Linda & Andrew Scott, Joyce Hoy, Katherine Williams

Day 1 After meeting the night before for dinner and introductions, we meet at the minibuses sharp and manage to get the luggage to fit.

It's a nice morning and we head north over the Kessock Bridge. We drive through Caithness and Sutherland, seeing hundreds of Pink-footed Geese in the fields. There are Buzzards en route and Ailie's minibus has a flash of a Sparrowhawk. We stop at Golspie for a comfort break and stretch our legs. We chat about windfarms as we drive past a field of them. We stop in Tesco in Thurso and fill the trolley with sandwiches and nice biscuits for lunch. Onwards we head for the ferry.

Soon enough, we depart on the NorthLink ferry and make ourselves comfortable in the lounge with coffees and pastries. Moving outside at the back of the ferry, Craig points out Guillemots, Razorbills and Fulmars. We all admire the Old Man of Hoy as we pass by, there is a low cloud hanging over the islands. Arriving at Stromness, we all gather into the minibuses and Craig discusses with everyone the plan for lunch.

We drive through the narrow streets of Stromness and Ailie comments on how beautiful the buildings are. Soon we wind down a country road to a small carpark at Warsaw Beach. As we enjoy our lunch, a herd of cows come and join us, Ailie and Sue encourage the cows at the amusement of the group. Craig shouts 'Hen Harrier' and we all get on it. Excellent, a great start. Curlews, a flock of Dunlin, Ringer Plover, Redshank, Oystercatchers, Turnstones, a Grey Heron and Cormorants are all seen feeding and taking advantage of the calm weather.

We head towards the hotel but take a detour on the way. We stop at an amazing 5,000 year old Neolithic chambered tomb at the edge of Loch Stenness. It's an incredible introduction to the archaeology of Orkney. Onto the hotel after a long day, we check in with a warm welcome from the staff and settle in as we are here for the duration of our stay on Orkney.

Day 2 The day is bright and fresh, and we pick up our pack lunches and gather into the minibuses. We drive up over moorland and stop at the top of a hill. We pull into a layby and scan over the heather. Joyce calls out 'Stoat' and we all get our binos onto it. As it jumps through the heather, we discuss the eradication programme on the stoats here, from the information board next to the layby. Craig spots a Hen Harrier, and it flies by and around us, hunting over the moors. We all enjoy it for a few minutes before it flies out of sight. We move on, and head for the coast, spotting stonechats on the way.

As we drive along the coast, we skirt round a quaint bay, where there is a large number of waders. Gulls are on the wing, and we pause to scan. A small group of Snipe are seen feeding alongside a group of Lapwings and Ringed Plovers.

We arrive at the well-preserved Iron Age Broch of Gurness. The Broch dates to around 500 BC and Craig takes a tour round the remains of numerous Iron Age stone dwellings, yards and sheds. Looking over the Eynhallow Sound, Ailie and David spot Eiders, a Red-throated Diver and seals. We spend some time wandering around exploring the site while Craig tells us about its long history. We see Wheatear in the grounds.

Onto the Tingwall ferry port to Rousay where we stop and have our lunch in the harbour, we take advantage of a community shed where there is tea and coffee, Joyce, Katy and Ailie have a great view of a Kittiwake through the scope while enjoying our sandwiches. We get back on the ferry for Egilsay. The ferry is pleasant, and we have great views of Black Guillemots, Gannets and Red-throated Divers. We arrive on Egilsay and within the first few minutes a Merlin flies over. We drive over the island to the Community centre and head down to the beach. The weather has turned, and the rain and wind are picking up. A few of us decide to continue down to the beach and enjoy the wild waves while the others head back to the community centre. After our walk, we all dry off in the community centre and chat to one of the residents of the island about the dynamics of living somewhere so remote. We get restless and decide to brave the weather, along the road we jump out of the minibuses and explore the inside of St Magnus Church. We use the minibuses as moveable hides and drive along the length of the island, not seeing much but enjoying the warmth of the vehicles. We eventually head back to the mainland and then the hotel.

Day 3

It's a chilly and drizzly morning, and we get organised outside the minibuses. Our first stop is Scapa Flow. We park and make our way into the memorial to the Royal Oak. It's a very interesting place and feels quite emotional. We chat about the Scapa Flow outside; Craig gives us a history of the area. The water is very calm, and we have a lovely view of Bar-tailed Godwits. There are Ringed Plovers on the shore and Gannets feeding in the distance. We move on. We cross the first of the famous Churchill Barriers, built from some 66,000 concrete blocks each weighing some 5-10 tonnes during World War 2. This was in an attempt to restrict enemy submarines and ships access into Scapa Flow. Crossing onto Lamb Holm we make a stop at the incredible Italian Chapel, built out of two war time Nissen huts by Italian prisoners of war who were working on the Churchill Barriers. We go inside and have a look around. The wind has picked up so we can't see much in the bay next to the chapel. We bundle back into the minibuses and head off.

From here we cross the other Churchill Barriers before crossing onto Burray where we drive down to the coast. From the cemetery here we have a good view along the coast and out to Copinsay. Bill and Ailie spot a Kestrel hovering at eye level to the cemetery wall, soon everyone is on it. There are several Meadow Pipits flitting in the long grass next to the cemetery. We have a look at the small brush for blown in migrants, but no such luck. We move on to South Ronaldsay for lunch, driving down a narrow country road, watching skeins of geese on the way. We park at another cemetery and decide to have lunch here. Everyone is slightly dubious of having lunch outside as the wind is very cold, but Craig leads us down to the beach and we are out of the wind. The water is flat calm in the sheltered bay.

We watch Ringed Plover and Turnstone feeding in front of us. There are a few Eiders. We enjoy our sandwiches and take a walk along the coast. There is a huge flock of Curlews on the rocks below. Craig looks through the small brush and walks off the path looking at more little birds.

Our next stop is Kirkwall, we enjoy a scenic drive, parking up in town. We chat about our options in town and what time to meet back. Everyone moves off in small groups. There is an exhibition on at the museum on the dig at Stenness. The Cathedral is stunning and has an audio guide that leads you round. Back at the minibuses, David and Gill inform us of Shelduck in the bay and we all have a look as we drive past.

Another successful day, very immersive in the history of Orkney.

Day 4

Today is a big day and we start early. We drive to Kirkwall to catch the ferry. It's bright and the sun is rising as we wait, it's a lovely calm morning, a change from yesterday. On the ferry, we get some breakfast and some of us stand out on deck, there are Gannets and Guillemots. Landing on Westray we drop in at a large freshwater loch where there are hundreds of wildfowl feeding including Teal, Wigeon, Geese and various waders. There is a garden ahead and we get the scope on some of the garden birds seeking shelter in a corner. There is Sparrows, a couple Blackbirds and Craig picks out a Chiffchaff. We make our way round the road to a very beautiful beach, where we take a wander along the beach looking for shells and enjoy the sunshine. There are a flock of Gulls here and a nice group of Oystercatchers. We drive along the coast and then back on the main road to Pierowall. At Pierowall we visit the Museum and Heritage centre and then head into the hotel for a lovely lunch.

After lunch we drive up towards Noup Head and we stop at Notland Castle enroute. This is a beautiful ruin of an unfinished castle. We now take a long rough track leading up to the lighthouse. Along the track a male Hen Harrier flies past and we pass flocks of Linnet. The scenery is spectacular. From the lighthouse we take in the stunning scenery and views out to sea where we watch a huge number of bathing seals, before taking a walk out along the clifftop, seeing lots of Fulmars on the cliff ledges as well as Gannets. From a high point we get great views to the main Gannet ledges where there are a few fluffy ones still! The visibility is great today and from here we can see right out to North Ronaldsay.

Making our way back from here, we drop in at the large tidal bay at Tuquoy where there are masses of Golden Plover, Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, Godwit and Curlew. Finally with time getting on we head for the ferry to sail back to the mainland.

Day 5

It's a drizzly morning and we take a quick stop at Loch Harray just next to the hotel where we have a great view of a close Whooper Swan. There is a few Tufted Ducks and Greylag Geese. We head for our first stop at the Stones of Stenness on the shore of the Loch of Stenness, stopping to admire the most incredible double rainbow. We wait for a tour bus to bundle back into their coach and then have the place to ourselves. Craig gives us a tour and information on this fantastic henge monument, and we all marvel and wonder how they were moved.

Next, we drive along to visit Skara Brae. This superb prehistoric settlement at Skara Brae must be one of the most interesting prehistoric monuments in Britain, a complete 5,000-year-old

prehistoric village, preserved under the sand with some of the neolithic houses even still complete with stone dressers and beds! We have a good look around, and the view of the bay is stunning. The sun is shining now, and we are thinking about lunch. We drive a short distance around the Bay of Skail for some lunch overlooking the shore, and Ailie spots a Stoat in the long grass next to the shore. Groups of Eider sit in the bay, various waders including Sanderling, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Curlew and Redshank. There are a couple of Ravens investigating where Ailie saw the stoat. As we leave to move onto Maes Howe, Craig stops the minibus and points out a Goldeneye on a small body of water, then a Sparrowhawk swoops in front of the minibus and catches a Blackbird. Wow!

We visit the neolithic chambered tomb at Maes Howe where we have a very nice tour guide. This incredible tomb dates to sometime before 2,700 BC and is surrounded by a bank and ditch of a neolithic Henge monument. He shows us the inside and writings on the walls. It gives us a lot to think about as we leave. You can see over to where we were this morning and how they are all connected. We have one more stop of our Archaeology tour today.

Lastly, we stop at the Ring of Brodgar, which is a standing stone circle. It is especially quiet, and we have it pretty much all to ourselves. We see a rainbow which was almost the first thing we saw today as well. We quietly make our way back to the minibuses and reflect on our day.

Day 6

We have an early start this morning as we are heading to the island of Hoy, and we arrive at the ferry terminal at Houton. It's a choppy crossing to Hoy and very cold outside, so we take shelter in the waiting area and have breakfast. Landing on Hoy we drive up to a high viewpoint on the island with stunning views in all directions. Ailie shifts the minibus to create a wind break and we enjoy the view. We can hear Goldcrest singing and Ravens cawing. Although breezy, the view is incredible, and the sun is trying to come through.

Driving back down we head towards Rackwick and take a minute in a layby. We see a Peregrine swoop past then flies past again, giving us a great view. Onto a narrow country road, we see Stonechat on either side of us and lots of flitting of smaller birds. We park up in a valley and go for a walk. The weather has cleared, and it's sheltered here, as we walk out across the moor to the incredible Dwarfie Stone, a rock cut Neolithic tomb that was hollowed out by hand 5,000 years ago, we scan the ridges for Eagles. We drive onto Rackwick, a beautiful bay, taking our time en route to check all the little bushes for small birds. We have lunch out the back of the minibuses before taking a walk down to the beautiful bay and beach nearby. Highland Cows greet us on the walk and make nice photo opportunities. We dive into the bothy, and all take a seat while a shower passes.

Heading back to the ferry terminal, we have a good amount of time before we leave and head into the wonderful Scapa Flow Museum which has recently reopened and tells the fascinating story of Scapa Flow and Orkneys Naval importance during the Wars. We have a coffee and cake before making our way round. We make our way back to the hotel from the ferry and enjoy dinner, chatting about our week and looking forward to our last full day on Orkney tomorrow.

Day 7

Our last day on Orkney, we are staying on the mainland. We head towards the Northwest coast. We pull over and almost get blown away. This place is called Yesnaby Cliffs. They are very dramatic and without getting too close, we walk along, scanning and taking in the crashing

waves and scenery. We have a little bit of a drive to our next location so decide to stop into the Skara Brae Café and have a comfort stop. We let some bad weather pass and then we are on the go again.

From here we drive east and out onto Deerness. The scenery is lovely here and we make our way to Sandside beach for lunch. It's lovely and calm on the beach; the beach is sheltered. We enjoy our lunch and decide to take a walk. We bump into a bird watcher who points us in the direction of some bushes where he thinks he saw a Shrike. So, we all investigate, catching glimpses of a Reed Bunting and a lovely flock of Linnets but no Shrike. Onto our next stop we head up to the wonderfully named 'Gloup', a dramatic collapsed sea cave which is separated by a land bridge before it drops down sheer around 80ft to the sea below.

There are also great views out to sea, and we see a few Shags and Gannets feeding offshore. A huge male Seal pops up in front of us and swims past, spying us. Before heading back to the hotel, we go to the Visitor Centre for a quick look. As we take turns into the visitor centre, we see a Short-Eared Owl quartering the field, hunting. It is fantastic and we watch in awe for a good ten minutes and then a second Owl appears. What a way to end the day.

Day 8

We have an early start to catch our ferry from Stromness. We make our way there and once on board, we grab a nice hot breakfast in the lounge and make our way outside. Fulmars, and Gannets, usual Guillemots and Gulls can be seen from the deck.

Once in Scrabster, we drive along the coast to Dunnet head, Britain's most northerly point on the mainland. It is a beautiful day, and we watch the ferry head back to Orkney. We see a few seals and some Shags along the coast. Then, Criag point's out a Meadow Pipit and Rock Pipit feeding. They have just landed and are very hungry. We head south through some country roads. It's very scenic and different from Orkney with the presence of trees. We stop at Dunbeath for lunch, a little road that ends at a peaceful harbour. We check the river for Dipper and cliffs for birds of prey. A Heron gives us a show.

We have planned to stop again but there is a lot of traffic on the road. Unfortunately, we don't seem to have the time but have a nice chat on the road down, enjoying the scenery of the coast. Once at the hotel, we all take a couple hours to relax then we meet for our final dinner.

Species of the Trip

Linda	Short-eared Owl
Gill	Short-eared Owl
Craig	Short-eared Owl
Andrew	Short-eared Owl
Sue	Gannets
Joyce	Short-eared Owl
David	Short-eared Owl
Katy	Short-eared Owl
Bill	Rock Pipit, Meadow Pipit and Short-eared Owl
Ailie	Male Hen Harrier

Place of the Trip

Linda	Hoy, Radwick Beach
Gill	Scapa Flow Museum
Craig	Ring of Brodgar
Andrew	Stones of Stenness
Sue	Dwarfie Stane
Joyce	Hoy
David	Hoy, the bothy, museum
Katy	Radwick Bay
Bill	Skara Brae and Dwarfie Stane
Ailie	Broch of Gurness

Magic Moment

Linda	V shape rainbow
Gill	Evening skies after dinner out of the hotel
Craig	The cat at the harbour
Andrew	Two Short-eared Owls and rainbows
Sue	Seeing Geese in front of a rainbow
Joyce	All the rainbows
David	All the rainbows
Katy	Seeing Short-eared Owl sitting on a fence post
Bill	Regaining glasses, getting hat, Bay of Skail
Ailie	Noup head, the sky

BIRDS

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

Sandwich Tern
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Skylark
Swallow
House Martin
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied/White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Chiffchaff
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Linnet
Goldfinch
Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Common Seal
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Stoat