

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

ORKNEY & NORTH RONALDSAY

8th-18th SEPTEMBER 2019

Guide: Tim Drew

Guests: Roger and Elizabeth Ackroyd, Catriona Smart, Charles Gordon, Dr Alison Pattinson, Katherine Williams

Day 1 We all make it to Inverness and meet up at the Premier Inn. Some have been in town overnight already and others have just arrived. We find our rooms, freshen up and reconvene in the bar for a drink before a very pleasant meal. We then discuss the coming trip and arrangements for tomorrow, hand out checklists, notebooks and pens and head for bed. The weather forecast for the week ahead is storm force winds, but we are all excited about the full itinerary for the next 10 days.

Day 2 We have quite a day's travel today so we stock up during breakfast. The bags are packed into the minibus and we are off!

A fine drizzle welcomes us to start the day as we make our way northwards. Our first stop is at North Kessock to see if we can spot any Otters by the road bridge. We see two fine Wheatears and a male Blackcap, but unfortunately no Otters. Our next important stop is at Alness to purchase something to eat for lunch, so we head to the local supermarket and get our sandwiches, drinks, snacks, etc. and then head out onto the open road.

We travel on up north along the A9, towards the town of Tain, where we take a minor road to the RSPB reserve of Nigg. The relatively new hide keeps us out of the drizzle that has descended upon us. We take drink facilities with us so we can warm up. Out in front of us there are groups of birds: - Redshank, Oystercatcher and Curlew for starters, and a small flock of Bar-tailed Godwit on the water's edge. We also see some Knot dancing on the wing. There are some distant Greylag and Canada Geese and then a couple of the first returning Pinkfeet wheel as they arrive and land amongst them. To top it all off, a fine Osprey circles over the estuary and then flies over the hide!

We now head into the historical town of Tain, to use the facilities, cross the Dornoch Firth and stop in at Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve at The Mound. The rain is just about holding off as we eat our lunch. We quickly spot an Osprey giving amazing views as it flies back and forth over the minibus! Distant Red Kites wheel above the hills, but are soon lost in the

clouds. Out on the water we find Mallard and Red-breasted Mergansers. Whilst looking out onto the seaward side we spot Eiders and a Little Grebe. Long-tailed Tits and a Great-spotted Woodpecker join us briefly with our lunch but quickly move away. We see an old Osprey nest and a (Ronald) Raven flies over, honking to mark its presence.

We use the facilities in Brora, now deep into Sutherland. There are some birds here, so it is worth a look; Cormorants and Shag are obvious and there are some Kittiwakes flying around. Gannets (Janets') are offshore and a small group of Eider attract our attention. Some Redshank and (Terry) Turnstone emerge as if by magic from the river's edge. A lone Siskin flies in calling and is soon away again.

At Helmsdale we have a sudden change of plan and head up to Forsinard. This is a beautiful route and we slowly make our way northwards, picking up (Gordon) Goldcrest and Coal Tit as we go. The moorland opens up, and, with it, a couple of Stonechat along with (Ronald) Raven and several (Buzbys) Buzzards which are sitting contently on the telegraph poles. We arrive into the port of Scrabster with plenty of time before our ferry departs. We stretch our legs and look around the harbour, seeing Black Guillemot (or Tystie) and then a male Peregrine dashes overhead to surprise us all. The *Hamnavoe* arrives pretty much in time to pick us up.

Once on board we get our seats sorted and quickly get our evening meal so as to make the most of the fading light. As we cross the Pentland Firth we start to encounter lots of Gannets and (Frank) Fulmar. Small numbers of Kittiwakes appear. The Old Man of Hoy is just visible in the gloom and then we are passing the cliffs of Hoy. Not long before we dock at Stromness we disturb a group of at least 250 Great Skua (Bonxie) from the water.

We have landed on Mainland Orkney! We drive the short distance to our hotel where we are greeted warmly. We take our bags up to our rooms where we relax and sleep ready and excited about the day ahead.

Day 3

It is a fantastic calm (please note that word as it will not be repeated) and sunny morning. Some of us have been out around the grounds watching Willow Warblers, Wrens and Mute Swans on the loch. We fortify ourselves with a fine breakfast. The minibus then gets reloaded, lunches are collected and off we go to Kirkwall. We soon arrive and are seemingly first in line for North Ronaldsay. However there are lots cattle trailers and supplies shortly after awaiting the arrival of the *Earl Thorfinn*, the loading of which delays us by half an hour but it is fun watching the commotion of it all.

The ferry arrives and we drive on board. Our minibus alarm starts and the crew take keys, open the windows slightly and return, and the alarm has miraculously stopped. They must be used to this scenario! We are now on a mission to find the sheltered side of the ship, and, after finding it, we settle in for the sailing. Leaving Kirkwall behind, we head north, passing Wyre, Rousay, Egilsay (where Magnus was martyred in the 12th Century), Eday and finally on to our destination, North Ronaldsay. On our way there are a number of Gannets, Fulmar, Razorbills and a few Bonxie. We spot a couple of Red-throated Diver on the water. The crossing is smooth (another word that may not be used again in this report!) and very enjoyable, especially with a hot chocolate in hand.

On our approach to the island we are welcomed by Common Seals and spot the famous seaweed-eating sheep on the shoreline. We watch as cars are craned off the ferry onto the pier and suddenly realise that we too will be craned off! There are a couple of Arctic Terns feeding in the bay amongst this whole commotion. Once the minibus is on terra firma we drive round the corner to the Bird Observatory, our base for the next few days.

Alison shows us to our rooms and there is tea/coffee and homemade tray bake awaiting us. There had been a lot of bird movement earlier today on the island and we decide to try our luck and get out there. We walk back towards the southernmost vegetation where a Common Rosefinch had been spotted earlier. We see it perched in the vegetation but it soon drops to the ground and is lost to view. We persevere in our search, but to no avail. The winds are now picking up to a steady Force 6, making observations a little harder, but with news of a Red-backed Shrike at a croft near Holland House, we venture forward undaunted. We walk along the road, searching left and right. Simon, the warden, is putting the mist nets up in haste before the imminent biblical storm which is forecast. Plenty of Wheatears are sitting proud on the fence posts or running along the road. A Yellow Wagtail flies over the road and frustratingly lands out of view. There is no sign of the Shrike, so we head towards Dennis Head, where there is an old and new(er) Lighthouse.

This ruined lighthouse is now a scheduled monument and the earliest surviving purpose-built lighthouse tower in Scotland. It was built for the Commissioners of Northern Lighthouses in 1788/9 by Thomas Smith, engineer, and the wonderfully named Ezekiel Walker, lighthouse designer, and was first lit on 10 October 1789. Materials and workmen were brought from Leith, and the masons were John White and James Sinclair. The total cost was 199.12s.6d. It is the last remaining beacon in the UK.

Using the minibus as a hide at this old landmark, we watch several Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Dunlin feeding on the short grass here. We then head back to the observatory to warm up before dinner.

Day 4

It was a touch windy overnight! And the wind continues to howl during breakfast, whistling through the windows. We are thankful for the heating in the dining room whilst we enjoy the tasty food.

We head out onto the island and get a great sense of remoteness as we explore. It really doesn't feel part of Scotland, hardly part of Orkney for that matter. We walk to the harbour, where some of the group had seen Purple Sandpiper first thing this morning, as well as a Little Bunting which had been re-located in a crop field there. We carefully check each Linnet, but there is no success on the Bunting front, so we move onto the coast to look for the Purple Sandpipers. We scan all the rocks and soon find half a dozen of these unassuming small waders feeding on the rocks with Turnstones. Some Knot and Redshank are nearby too, providing a handy comparison for size and shape. Along the harbour wall some Kittiwake are sitting at close quarters to allow brilliant views of these truly maritime gulls. We spot a Sanderling making its way like clockwork along the sands. Arriving back at the Obs we climb into the minibus and head to Bewan at the north-eastern most point of the island where a Shore Lark has been seen. We spot several Knot, including a fine bird just moulting out of its red breeding plumage, Dunlin and Ringed Plover, but, sadly, no sign of the Lark. Whilst heading back we spot a wee Willow Warbler hopping along the sheltered side of the wall, far from any shrub - only on these islands do you see this. We head back to the Obs for our lunch and see around 300 Golden Plovers feeding in a field alongside the road, allowing superb views from our minibus!.

After a well enjoyed lunch at the Obs, especially their yummy flapjack, we head out to look for the Red-backed Shrike which has been spotted again. This time we find it almost immediately and excitedly observe it through the telescope so everyone can have a good look at this rare bird. It perches like a Wheatear on top of fence posts before dropping to feed and returning to another post. It is fantastic to see this rare bird which has come all the way from Southern and Eastern Europe to this remote isle.

We travel a little further down the road to the end of the road and stop at The Links golf course. We are not too sure how long ago a round of golf has been played on here, but, if birders could play golf, this is where you would play. We immediately spot some waders on the short grass, and, through the telescope, see Bar-tailed Godwits, Redshank, Ringed Plover and Dunlin feeding. It is a good opportunity to see these waders side by side and to observe and compare their different feeding habits.

We then make our way to the coast and immediately see a large diver out to sea. Once the scope is set up, we realise we are watching a fine Great Northern Diver which is relentlessly being harassed by a Herring Gull. The wind is strong, making observations hard in this windswept place but it adds

a touch of remoteness and drama to this magical isle. We return along the tall stone wall which is used to keep the sheep on the beach; apparently their mutton is enhanced by their enforced seaweed diet! Here we see a few Wheatear before a Merlin whizzes over our heads and vanishes as quickly as it arrives.

We then drive back up to the northern end of the island, using the minibus for shelter against the strengthening wind to see if any new waders have arrived. A few Terries, Ringed Plover and Dunlin are all that we can see, so we drive back to the Obs to relax for a while before having a welcoming meal. The bird log is then taken as we hear the whistling wind and await the offerings of the next day.

Day 5

The early risers amongst us spot a Pied Flycatcher in the garden first thing, so, after our hearty breakfast, we all venture out to have a look. It is still there! Showing brilliantly as it feeds and perches in the open. A good start, and a good omen for the day ahead. The warden tells us that the Little Bunting we didn't see yesterday is still down in the tall vegetation near the harbour. We quickly march down, full of anticipation, but, despite looking, we dip on it again.

We return to the Obs and collect our packed lunches and flasks and drive towards Westness. The squalls have settled in and, just as we arrive, another comes and we are forced to stay in the minibus until it clears. On doing so, a Lapland Bunting flies along the adjacent field and up past the minibus where we lose sight of it in the misted-up minibus. Once the rain has stopped (for the moment), we don our weather gear and decide to spread out, cowboy style, across the stubble field where the bunting was. In this fashion, we slowly walk down the field, in one long line, hoping to see it. (Samantha) Skylark and some Knot are in the field, but no Lapland Bunt. Where has it gone? How has it managed to elude us? We then decide to spread out a little in the grasses and iris to try our luck at flushing something out, but alas! Nowt!

We then head towards the beach and stop there, trying to use the wall as shelter from the strong winds. Grey and Common Seals are sunning themselves in the bay as 'Terry' Turnstones constantly feed amongst the seaweed. Hey! Terry! That's the sheep's food! We get back into the minibus and head up towards the lighthouse where we have our lunch in the shelter of the wooden sea-watching hide. It is a little damp and not much seems to be moving, other than the ubiquitous and faithful Gannets and Fulmars.

It is 2 pm and time for our scheduled tour of the tallest land-based lighthouse in the UK (139ft). We gather at a wee room below the lighthouse for a brief introduction by the guides – a former lighthouse keeper and his wife. Once all the health and safety rules have been dutifully delivered and

the keeper is in place at the top of the light, we are given the go ahead to enter the lighthouse. However, no sooner have we entered, than a very loud fire alarm goes off! We are summoned outside by the wife and then witness a little 'comic' moment of husband and wife yelling at each other over the phones, but not hearing anything above the loud alarm whilst the keeper points and gestures from above. Apparently, there is a 'magic' key that is needed to get into a box to turn off the alarm, but what key? And where was the problem? After 20 minutes or so, it is finally resolved and we are spiraling upwards to the top of the light. The views are breathtaking - you can easily see the whole island and beyond, even in the wild weather. Billy, the keeper, explains what the places and rocks are called. He speaks with pride of his life as a keeper and tells stories of shipwrecks on the shores of this remote island.

Once we are back at the lighthouse meeting room he tells us more about the light. A certain call from the office reveals a change of plan. The weather is closing in even more and the planned boat we are getting on tomorrow with the minibus is cancelled and is not planning to go out again till Tuesday - in four days' time! With several pre-arranged plans, it is decided that we would get on the plane, but, given the short notice and with some flight places already pre-booked, there isn't enough room for everyone on the one flight. This means that the only way now is for the group to split up, with some going on the early morning flight and the rest on the late afternoon one. With lots of brain power working on this conundrum, it is decided that Liz and Roger would catch the later flight and the rest would be on the earlier one. This all means that we would have to leave the minibus behind and hire another one at Kirkwall until our bus could be shipped across when the wild weather abated and the boat could sail again.

Whilst this plan is thus gradually re-formulating in our brains, we walk over to the old light on Dennis Head. Sheltering there, we spot several Shag, Gannets and Fulmar effortlessly flying by. Heading back to the Obs, the warden Simon tells us about the Little Bunting and we return to look, on the basis that surely it would be a case of third time lucky! It was! Not before long, we see it fly up and then land amidst the tall vegetation. We watch it again as it does the same; it is just fleeting flight views, but we hear the characteristic 'ticking' call before it again lands in the vegetation. It does this several times, so all the group manage to see it - OK, so not the best views in the world - more like a small dark blob for most, but we are nevertheless pleased to see this very rare bunting from Eastern Europe.

Day 6

Breakfast is at 7am. Five of us are booked onto the 8am flight from North Ronaldsay. As if to bid us farewell, a Pied Flycatcher is spotted in the Obs' garden just before we leave for the island's airport. We take all of our gear to the island's airport and board the plane. Due to luggage constraints,

the famous crate has to be left for the next flight as there is no room. Farewell wet and windy North Ronaldsay! And farewell Liz and Roger for the time being. Don't see anything too rare whilst we are away!

At Kirkwall we pick up the red hire minibus and load our gear. We drive to Tankerness, where we see at least 100 Golden Plover. On the Loch at Tankerness we see some Mute Swans. We then go to see what we can see at Skail Plantation - answer: nothing. Next stop is St Peter's Pool which again turns up nothing. Onwards we go to Mull Head and the Gloup, a collapsed cave, where we see a House Martin hawking insects. Nearby, at the information centre we see a Whinchat and a spectacular Hen Harrier hunting low over ground, so things are looking up!

We head south towards the Churchill Barriers and go to the Fossil Museum, where we enjoy a lovely lunch. We continue our route south, across the Churchill Barriers, all the way to South Ronaldsay, which means we have been to both North and South Ronaldsay in the same day.

On our return journey we pull off at a lay-by and see Red-throated Diver on the sea and a Whooper Swan on Echna Loch. Further north, we visit the village of St Mary's. There is a loch here where we see Gadwall and a flock of Wigeons.

In Kirkwall, Orkney's largest town, there is a shopping opportunity for those who want it; Charles and I - ever the optimists - opt for a trip to Inganess Bay to see what we can see - alas, nothing. We return to Kirkwall to collect the shoppers and then drive on to our hotel. Once at Lynnfield Hotel we check in and find our rooms. These are on a completely different level to those at the Obs. We have loved the accommodation and food there, but we are now living in luxury. Each room is unique with individual stunning features and wonderfully comfortable.

Later, I return to Kirkwall airport to collect Liz and Roger and the crate. We are successfully regrouped. The weather has done its best to thwart and dispirit us, but we have made the most of a sudden change in plan and are glad to be together. We are all ready for our 7.30 pm delicious meal with the anticipated bird log.

Day 7

Breakfast, like dinner, is a sumptuous affair and it is with a little reluctance that we don our outdoor kit and head out for our first day on Mainland Orkney. The weather is not the best, but equally it could be worse, albeit not much worse but we are not defeated!

Our first port of call was Orphir to see John Rae's house. Rae was an Orcadian surgeon and pioneer explorer who explored vast tracts of northern Canada. He designed his own snowshoes, which facilitated his

walking across the snow and allowed him to walk great distances. In 1854 he was responsible for discovering the sad fate of Franklin's expedition to the north-west passage six years before, acquiring relics from that expedition and hearing stories from the local Inuit tribes. He also discovered the last link in the first navigable Northwest Passage, although he was never credited with that discovery during his lifetime, probably due to his having stumbled upon the evidence of cannibalism amongst Franklin's ill-fated expedition.

John Rae died, knightless and largely unrecognized, from an aneurysm in Kensington on 22 July 1893. A week later his body arrived in Orkney. He was buried at St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall.

Historians have since studied Rae's expeditions and his roles in finding the Northwest Passage and learning the fate of Franklin's crew. Rae was willing to adopt and learn the ways of indigenous Arctic peoples, which made him stand out as the foremost specialist of his time in cold climate survival and travel. Rae also respected Inuit customs, traditions, and skills, which went against the beliefs of many 19th-century Europeans, that most native peoples were too primitive to offer anything of educational value.

After a conference in September 2013 in Stromness, Orkney to celebrate the 200th anniversary of John Rae's birth, a statue was erected to Rae at the pierhead. In December 2013, The John Rae Society was formed in Orkney to promote Rae's achievements.

We have an 11am booking for a tour of the ancient monument of Maes Howe, a Neolithic chambered cairn and one of the largest tombs in Orkney. The mound encasing the tomb is 115 feet (35m) in diameter and rises to a height of 24 feet (7.3m). The grass mound hides a complex of passages and chambers built of carefully crafted slabs of flagstone weighing up to 30 tons. It is aligned so that the rear wall of its central chamber held up by a bracketed wall, is illuminated on the winter solstice, providing the sun shines of course, which it certainly is not doing today!

After our tour we drive to Yesnaby on mainland Orkney's west coast to see the famous Old Red Sandstone sea cliffs. The coastal scenery here is stunning, with its plethora of sea stacks, blowholes and geos. In Force 7/8 winds, we spot a brave hare. It is a good day for watching the fury of the Atlantic as it crashes dramatically against this ancient sandstone.

We take the road that crosses the moors of the northern part of the island. This is barren, windswept country. There is evidence everywhere of old peat cutting. We make our way to the Loons and Loch of Banks RSPB bird reserve and sit in the hide for a while, gazing out at the reedbeds through the grey, wet mirk. We see Moorhen and Snipe here.

Sadly, upon our arrival at the World Heritage site, Skara Brae, we learn that, for safety reasons in the gale force winds, the archaeological site is temporarily closed. We look round the Visitor Centre instead and then go to look at Skail House, a historic manor house, built by Bishop George Graham in the 1620s and extended over the centuries. Whilst admiring this impressive historic building, we spot folk through the window walking around the ancient site meaning that Skara Brae has been reopened. Yippee! Thankfully, we do not have far to retrace our steps back to the ancient village.

Consisting of eight clustered houses, Skara Brae was occupied from roughly 3180BC to about 2500BC and is Europe's most complete Neolithic village. A severe storm hit Britain in 1850 and revealed the outline of the small, roofless, village. Sadly, professional excavation was not undertaken until 1927, by which time the site had been ravished and important artefacts had already been plundered. We have a look round the Neolithic village and see a Stoat here.

We stop at a couple of lay-bys on the way to Finstown, Orkney's fourth largest settlement and return, windswept and wet to base at 5.45pm with time to freshen up for our evening meal and bird log at 7 pm.

Day 8

Yet another day of gale force winds dawns; if anything, stronger than yesterday, having increased to Gale Force 9/10. Refusing to be daunted, we drive to Scapa Bay, where we see Tystie and Sandwich Tern. We drive on the A965 Finstown road to see if there is anything brave enough to weather the storms. Turning onto the A966 we see lots of Curlews on The Ouse. We drive to Cottarscarth RSPB reserve, but it is too far for us to walk up the track to the hide so we drive on from there to Tingwall Pier. This is the ferry point for the island of Rousay and has plenty of 'Otter' potential, so we have a look in the drizzle and blast of the wind. Sadly, all we see are Eider Duck and Rock Pipits. Our hearts are gladdened though when we hear of a lovely wildlife café near here where we can sit to warm up with hands cupped round a mug of hot chocolate.

Our next stop is the Broch of Gurness, an iron-age broch village, dating from sometime between 500 and 200BC. It is thought that the centre tower reached 10 metres high in its day. It is a fabulous example of a structure that is uniquely Scottish. We all explore its avenues in the gale force winds. There is a couple of Red-throated Diver out in the sound along with the usual suspects and another Bonxie wings past. Grey Seals pop their heads up to say hello. We admire their tenacity as we huddle to keep warm in the Orkney 'breeze'.

We eat our packed lunch in the RSPB hide at Birsay Moors and have spectacular views of a curious Stoat here, some Wigeon and lots

of Swallows. Our next stop is the uninhabited tidal island of the Brough of Birsay. We park to look around the Earl's Palace and St Magnus Church. Before Kirkwall became the centre of power in the 12th Century, Birsay was the seat of the rulers of Orkney and it was once thought that the main residence of Jarl Thorfinn the Mighty (1014-1065) was located on the Brough of Birsay. It is now thought to be nearby on Orkney Mainland.

We then park near the causeway, with a good view of the island, and watch the fantastic waves crashing onto the shore and cliffs. From here we can see the monument at Mar Wick. It was off the headland here that, in 1916, *HMS Hampshire* struck a mine and sank with all hands, including Lord Kitchener (of *Your Country Needs You* fame). This proves to be a good birdwatching site as we spot Sooty Shearwater, Manx Shearwater, Sanderling and a distant blob of a Grey Phalarope.

We drive round to Ring of Brodgar, one of Orkney's finest archaeological sites. The monument's actual age remains uncertain. However, it is generally assumed to have been erected between 2500BC and 2000BC. The stone ring was built in a true circle, almost 104 metres wide. Although it is thought to have originally contained 60 megaliths, this figure is not based on archaeological evidence. Today, only 27 stones remain and, apparently to further protect its remaining integrity, visitors are now permitted to circumnavigate the site only from a safe distance. This 'safety measure' has been introduced only this year and is a sad sign of the effect of increasing tourism to these islands and its perceived threats.

Not far from this iconic site are the smaller Stenness Stones, another Neolithic monument dating from around 3,100 BC and situated on the south-eastern shore of Loch of Stenness. There are only four of the original 12 stones still standing, but they dominate the landscape, the largest is about 20 feet tall! We wander around them and imagine how they got here and how different the landscape must have looked all those millennia ago

After our time travelling trip, courtesy of the red hired minibus, we return to the 21st Century and drive back to base for welcome warmth, a hot meal and the daily bird log.

Day 9

The wind has abated by two points on the Beaufort Scale. It is now nearly tropical at only Gale Force 7.

Breakfast is at 8am. We are due to explore South Ronaldsay today, visiting the Churchill Barriers and the famous Italian Chapel. We are getting used to dragging ourselves away from the warmth and comfort of our hotel out into the worst weather that Orkney can offer!

Our first port of call is Kirkwall where this time we visit St Magnus' Cathedral. The Cathedral, the most northerly in the UK, is known as the 'Light in the North' and was founded in 1137 by the Viking, Earl Rognvald, in honour of his uncle St Magnus who was martyred on the island of Egilsay. We pay our respects to the explorer John Rae who was buried here in 1893. His memorial is inside the huge sandstone Cathedral, a recumbent figure carved in stone. Wearing his Arctic travelling clothes, Rae sleeps with his gun by his side, and a blanket, or sleeping bag, thrown over his body. Rae's grave is in the form of a simple cross and is located within the graveyard.

We leave John Rae to continue sleeping in peace and drive southwards. At St. Mary's we stop and have a look at the collection of birds on the water adjacent to the road. There are Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Red-breasted Mergansers. We then approach Churchill Barrier Number 1 and cross it to the little island of Lamb Holm.

At the start of the Second World War the channels between the southern isles were protected by sunken block ships, chains and gun emplacements onshore. This was in an effort to prevent enemy boats from entering Orcadian territories. In 1939, however, the U-boat U47 managed to navigate its way through the channel between Lamb Holm and Mainland on the surface, under cover of darkness. The submarine commander was expecting to find the fleet at anchor but they were out on manoeuvres. The *Royal Oak* (battleship), a cruiser and one other vessel were there to provide air defense for Kirkwall. The U-boat fired on the *Royal Oak*, sinking her with the loss of over 800 men. As a result of this disaster First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill ordered the barriers built, to block the eastern access to Scapa Flow. The barriers were built from massive concrete blocks by Italian prisoners of war and now serve as links between the southern islands. There were a number of prison camps on the islands and one was on Lamb Holm. Here the Italian work men left a remarkable legacy - The Italian Chapel.

Gone are the carefree days when access to this remarkable chapel was free and unrestricted. Another price imposed upon us by the result of increasing tourism to these islands, mostly in the form of huge cruise ships. We buy our tickets and have a look. The chapel is built from two Nissen huts placed end to end and the facade is made from concrete, but it is the inside that takes one's breath away. The interior painting is exquisite and extraordinary, utterly beautiful, most of it done by Domenico 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.

Such was his dedication to this cause that, when his fellow prisoners were released shortly before the end of the war, Chiocchetti remained on the island to finish decorating the newly consecrated chapel.

This site really is a highlight and very moving. The prisoners of war that built this little chapel gifted it to the people of Orkney in thanks for the warmth, welcome and kindness with which these men were received. It is a remarkable story of faith, endurance, dedication and love.

In 1958, the Chapel Preservation Committee was set up by a group of Orcadians. In 1960, Chiocchetti returned to assist in the restoration. He returned again in 1964, with Mrs Maria Chiocchetti, but was too ill to travel when some of the other prisoners returned in 1992 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of their arrival on the island. He died in 1999. In 2014, a special mass was held at the chapel to mark its 70th Anniversary. Angela Chiocchetti, the daughter of Domenico Chiocchetti, sang *Panis angelicus* as part of the celebration of the mass.

We head across the other barriers, stopping for lunch at the spectacular bay of Windwick, and then drive on to Burwick, a small village and harbour on South Ronaldsay. Then it is onto Kirkhouse Cemetery where we are lucky to spot two Little Gulls resting on the rocks. It is then on to Echna Loch and Burray. At Echna Loch lay-by we scan across Echnaloch Bay and we are excited to see Slavonian Grebes and Eider Duck. Our best spot here, however, is the fine drake Velvet Scoter, such a smart bird, which is an unusual bird here. We then make our way back across the barriers passing St Mary's and onto the warmth of our hotel.

Day 10

It is a very early start to get to the 6.30am ferry at Stromness. We park the red hire minibus in the long stay car park and gather our belongings to walk to the ferry, book in and join the queue, but we don't have to wait that long before we are on board and making our way to the dining area for some breakfast.

The passage across the Pentland Firth is very rough and unpleasant - for some more than others. We pass plenty of Gannets and Fulmars, Guillemots and the occasional Bonxie. Glad to reach Thurso, we check the harbour for any avian stragglers and then drive on to Dunnet Head and Bay and St John's Hide where the only thing we see is Moorhen.

At Mey Castle we pause for a regal cake and coffee, and at Forsinard railway station we enjoy a spot of lunch watching the single train go by, here we see Bullfinch, Treecreeper and Redpoll!. We then drive to our final stop of the holiday at the Premier Inn, Inverness. After dinner we go through the formalities and decide on our species, favourite places and magic moments.

It is a great, fun way to remind ourselves of the adventures we have had and the range of species we have encountered.

Species of the Trip: Red-backed Shrike on the fence posts on North Ron. The fine adult drake Velvet Scoter off Echnaloch Bay. The superb views of Osprey overhead at The Fleet. Purple Sandpipers on the rocks by the harbour on North Ron. Watching the first returning Pinkfeet at Nigg Hide.

Place of the Trip: North Ronaldsay came on top with six votes, followed by the Brough of Birsay.

Magic Moments: A huge array of experiences as to be expected. The Lynnfield Hotel, and a walk along the beach on North Ronaldsay. A couple of mentions of the Merlin experience over the minibus. The Lighthouse and the alarm experience on North Ronaldsay. Watching the waves and Shearwaters by the Brough of Birsay and the seals sunning themselves on North Ronaldsay.

It was a fantastic trip made extra special by the fun and warmth of you all. Thank you everyone (and to the crate) for making it a special trip to remember. Keep your eyes open, for you just never know what is out there! and would be good to see you somewhere else down the road.

BIRDS

Mute Swan	Purple Sandpiper
Whooper Swan	Turnstone
Pink-footed Goose	Dunlin
Greylag Goose	Redshank
Canada Goose	Black-tailed Godwit
Mallard	Bar-tailed Godwit
Gadwall	Curlew
Wigeon	Whimbrel
Teal	Snipe
Shoveler	Ruff
Tufted Duck	Grey Phalarope
Eider	Great Skua
Velvet Scoter	Black-headed Gull
Goldeneye	Common Gull
Goosander	Herring Gull
Red-breasted Merganser	Great Black-backed Gull
Pheasant	Kittiwake
Red-legged Partridge	Little Gull
Red-throated Diver	Sandwich Tern
Great Northern Diver	Arctic Tern
Slavonian Grebe	Black Guillemot
Little Grebe	Guillemot
Fulmar	Razorbill
Manx Shearwater	Rock Dove
Sooty Shearwater	Woodpigeon
Gannet	Collared Dove
Cormorant	Skylark
Shag	Sand Martin
Grey Heron	Swallow
Osprey	House Martin
Red Kite	Rock Pipit
Hen Harrier	Meadow Pipit
Common Buzzard	Pied Wagtail
Sparrowhawk	Robin
Kestrel	Wheatear
Peregrine	Stonechat
Merlin	Whinchat
Moorhen	Song Thrush
Coot	Mistle Thrush
Oystercatcher	Blackbird
Ringed Plover	Willow Warbler
Golden Plover	Blackcap
Lapwing	Goldcrest
Knot	Blue Tit
Sanderling	Great Tit

Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Trecreeper
Great-spotted Woodpecker
Wren
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Common Rosefinch
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Reed Bunting
Lapland Bunting
Little Bunting

Total Birds: 113

MAMMALS

Harbour Porpoise
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Red Deer
Brown Hare
Rabbit
Stoat

Total Species: 120