

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SHETLAND

2 - 9 July 2016

Leader: Craig Round

Guests: Melanie & John Parker, Michael & Christine Oates, Janet & Peter Mann,
Jean Oates

Day 1 After all meeting at Inverness Airport we are soon boarding our flight to Shetland and land at Sumburgh Airport to some lovely warm and sunny Shetland weather! Summer has arrived in Shetland it seems! Picking up our luggage and hire vehicle at the airport we drive North to our hotel for the next few days on Unst. The first Great Skuas (or Bonxies as they are called in Shetland) and Arctic Terns fly past as we drive north and we see our first Shetland Ponies in the roadside fields. After a brief stop and a trolley dash at Tesco's supermarket in Lerwick (thanks Peter) to pick up some lunch we press on to Toft to catch our first ferry across to Yell.

At the ferry terminal at Toft we see a very close Razorbill and Common Seal just out from the breakwater and Arctic Terns are flying overhead and a flock of Red-breasted Merganser are just offshore. During the short ferry crossing more Great Skua's are seen along with our first Puffins, Gannets, Shags and Black Guillemots. We drive across Yell passing three Whooper Swans on some lochs near the road as we press on north, before boarding the next ferry at Gutcher across to Unst.

At our first stop on Unst, Craig finds a superb summer plumaged Great Northern Diver offshore, and there is also a Ringed Plover on the beach here and a Red Admiral butterfly that flies past. Nearby a pair of Ringed Plover with two recently fledged chicks are by the road before we make another stop alongside a roadside pool. It is alive with birds here, with at least 80 Arctic Terns circling over the nesting colony on the moor behind the pool. We also see a pair of Dunlin with a chick here, along with a single Whimbrel, Redshank, four Curlew and a little further up the road we get nice views of a Golden Plover near the road. Moving on again we find a pair of stunning Red-throated Divers with their single chick on another roadside loch, and see one of the Red-throated Divers attempt to feed the chick an enormous fish it is carrying in its bill! What a great start to our Shetland trip!

From here we drive to Saxa Vord and check in at the hotel with the calls of Curlews coming from the surrounding fields, Bonxies flying over and the grass banks around the hotel smothered in Northern Marsh Orchids.

Day 2

Dawns sunny with a light breeze as we head out from the hotel. Our first stop is along the coast at Haroldswick beach where we see a female Eider with ducklings in the bay along with a sub adult Gannet, and a Swallow that is hawking insects over the beach. Curlew are displaying and calling over the meadows which are full of colour from masses of Marsh Orchids, Buttercups and Ragged Robin. There are also Arctic Terns and Gannets feeding just offshore here along with a few Shags and Razorbills as Snipe display overhead and a couple of Common Seals are hauled out on the rocks, before we head up to Hermaness NNR and the shore station at Burrafirth. Here we take a look in the visitor centre and get great views of two Shetland Wrens in the walled garden along with a Blackbird, Meadow Pipits and two juvenile Wheatears.

It's a lovely Shetland day of blue skies and sun with light winds, and with numerous Bonxies already circling overhead as we begin our walk out to the seabird cliffs of Hermaness on the boardwalk that crosses the open moorland. The walk takes us through the Great Skua colony and the sky is full of calling and displaying Bonxies. In fact, there are Great Skua's just everywhere! The more you look the more Skuas you can begin to see, dotted around on their nests on the moorland, and we get close views of a pair of Bonxies with a chick next to the boardwalk, and see the adult bird regurgitate up some food to feed to the chick. Nice! Skylarks are singing overhead and the odd Snipe flies over displaying as we continue our walk out to the cliffs, and get amazing close views of another Great Skua sat in the middle of the path and only a few feet away, and displaying as two more Great Skuas fly overhead.

We continue on to the cliffs where the views are stunning to Muckle Flugga Lighthouse, numerous sea birds sweep past, around and below us. The sun is out and it is quite warm and calm so we take our lunch on the cliff top taking in the views, with the azure blue sea below us and a sky full of seabirds, it really is an incredible spot! At one point during lunch a Puffin flies in carrying a beakful of Sandeels and disappears down it's nest burrow only a few feet from Craig's foot! It really is an amazing place here surrounded by the sounds of the sea and waves crashing below us and with 'cackling' calls of Fulmars and 'growling' calls of Guillemots all around us as Fulmars, Gannets and Bonxies glide past us at eye level in the sunshine. Shetland at it's best!

After lunch we walk on further around to the dramatic 'Saito' cliffs. The views are staggering and we are greeted by the sights sounds and smells of a 'blizzard' of thousands of Gannets wheeling around and below us. There are literally thousands of birds nesting on the sheer cliffs and birds are seemingly filling every available ledge below us, some with chicks, and we take some time here taking in this incredible seabird spectacle before making our way back.

Day 3

Today we head for the island of Fetlar in the hope of catching up with one of Shetland's real avian stars, the Red-necked Phalarope. On the way out from the hotel we make the now traditional stop for photos at the world famous Bobby's Bus Shelter, which has the theme of 'Maps' this year along with the usual enormous puffin and sandeels sculpture outside! After the obligatory photos and signing of the visitor book at the bus stop, our next stop is around the coast near Baltasound where we find some Fulmars resting on the pier as Arctic Terns fish just offshore. We stop at the roadside pools again and apart from masses of Arctic Terns again we also get great views of a Snipe perched on a fence post here, and find at least five smart Dunlin in summer plumage along with more Curlew and Ringed Plover before we head to catch the ferry from Belmont.

During the ferry crossing to Fetlar through Bluemull Sound more seabirds are seen including Razorbill, Guillemot, Black Guillemots, Puffins and Gannets, before we land on the island and drive across Fetlar to Loch of Funzie.

Parking alongside the loch we manage to dodge some pretty hefty rain showers which sweep through by sitting them out inside the comfort of the minibus, and scan out over the loch. There are Whimbrel calling and numerous Arctic Terns and Bonxies overhead as we watch, as well as two Arctic Skua's that fly over with a superb dark phase Arctic Skua dropping to bathe on the loch giving us some great views through the scopes. There are also at least six Dunlin feeding around the edge of the loch and frustratingly a single Red-necked Phalarope flies over calling briefly but sadly doesn't stop off at the loch!

We take our lunch here which proves to be a good move, as our patient stake out of the loch is finally rewarded when a stunning male Red-necked Phalarope drops out of the sky and onto the loch right in front of us and only a few feet away! We manage to get some incredible views of this dainty arctic wader as it picks flies off the sedges and grasses at the edge of the loch and at one point almost walks over Craig's outstretched legs! Before it finally flies off high into the distance back to it's nest site. What a bird!

After the excitement of the Phalarope we take a walk down to the Mires of Funzie hide. Lots of juvenile Wheatears dot the fence posts and there are masses of Snipe 'drumming' in display overhead in fact at times the sky seems to be full of Snipe! From the hide we also get some good views of more Snipe on the ground, before heading up onto a higher part of the island.

Up here the views are stunning out across the island and we get some great views of both Whimbrel and Golden Plover along with two pairs of Arctic Skuas with one of the Skua pairs repeatedly mobbing and dive-bombing

a sheep and its lamb that stray too close to their nest! We also pick out a couple of Red-throated Divers on a distant loch before we drop back down to the coast and head for the ferry back to Unst.

Day 4

Today we leave Unst to head south down onto mainland Shetland for the second half of the trip. We have some time before heading south, however, so after loading up all the luggage at the hotel we drive down to Haroldswick where we see a Redshank alongside the road along with a single Common Tern perched on a post by the pool here, a new bird for the trip. Offshore there are Common Seals again along with Oystercatchers and Shags.

Our next stop is along the coast near Baltasound where we find two Red-throated Divers just out from the shore including one close in the harbour. We drive around to try and get a closer look at the diver but in the process Craig spots a superb Otter very close into the shore! We get some great views as the Otter clambers out onto the rocks of the pier wall for some time before it slips back into the water, and promptly gives us the slip!

From here we drive over to the incredible lunar landscape of the Keen of Hamar to take in some of the rare plants to be found there. After a brief search we soon find the first dainty flowers of Edmonstons Chickweed followed by several more patches of this incredibly rare endemic plant, a plant that grows nowhere else in the world other than here on Unst! We also come across some flowering spikes of the tiny Frog Orchid, along with flowering Spring Squill, Sea Plantain and Hoary Whitlow Grass.

At Norwick beach, we take a walk out along the beach with Arctic Terns overhead before driving up over the moorland and seeing more Great Skuas before we arrive at the next beach at Skaw, and the most northerly beach in Britain! We take our lunch here in this idyllic spot looking out to sea and with Arctic Terns flying over and more Bonxies patrolling overhead, and Craig and some other hardy folk can't resist going for a paddle at Britain's most northerly beach, much to the amusement of everyone else! Two Red-throated Divers are also seen just offshore.

After lunch and as a brief rain shower comes in we drive up to the derelict radar station at Saxa Vord. Up here we get some fantastic views down across to Burrafirth and Hermaness below us and stunning views out to Muckle Flugga and Out Stack, the most northerly point of Britain! Great Skuas fill the air overhead calling and displaying, and we enjoy the spectacular view for a while here at the very end of Britain, before we drive back to catch our ferry over to Yell and onwards back to mainland and our new base for the rest of the trip at Brae.

Day 5

Dawns sunny and breezy. After breakfast we drive south this morning seeing a pair of Common Sandpipers crossing the road near Weisdale before making our first stop along the shore of Loch Tingwall. Here we get views of two adult Whooper Swans on the far side of the loch along with flocks of Tufted Ducks and a Cormorant. A large flock of Curlew, Rooks, Common Gulls, Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed Gulls are seen following the tractors and feeding in the newly cut fields behind us.

We have a quick stop in Scalloway Harbour, where we visit the memorial to the 'Shetland Bus' commemorating the Shetland based boat operation to and from Norway that took place during the Second World War, using local fishing boats for the extremely hazardous boat trips between Shetland and Norway, to assist the Norwegian resistance movement.

From Scalloway we head further south with blue skies and some stunning Shetland weather following us south down to St Ninians Isle, where we take a walk out across the Tombolo onto the isle. It's just stunning here with a beautiful azure sea and golden sand beach, Arctic Terns fish just offshore and a pair of Terns chase a Raven overhead. Offshore we see a Red-throated Diver and witness a Bonxie chasing and then knocking a Rock Dove out of the air and into the sea where it drowns and then eats it! Incredible stuff! We also see a female Eider with a single chick along with both Ringed Plover and a single Dunlin. We have a look at the ruins of the Chapel on the island before we walk back and drive south down to Sumburgh. At Grutness we take lunch watching the large flocks of Arctic Terns at the colony here, some with well grown chicks and also watch the Terns dropping in to bathe on a small pool nearby before we head up to Sumburgh Head and walk up to the lighthouse.

It's a seabird city here and we enjoy superb close views of the many Puffins on the cliff ledges as well as Kittiwake, Shags, Guillemots, Razorbill and Fulmars. Arctic Skuas, Bonxies and Great Black-backed Gulls cruise past us patrolling the cliffs and chasing and intercepting the seabirds at sea as they come back in to the cliff top colony. We get good views of two Twite around the Lighthouse as well as Shetland Wrens, Rock Pipits and Wheatears before we slowly make our way back down and begin the drive back to the hotel.

After our dinner at the hotel and a little down time we are soon heading out again for our night visit to the island of Mousa to see Storm Petrels. We cross on the boat to the island in the 'simmer dim' and the stunning fiery afterglow of stunning Shetland night, and even though its gone 11 o'clock at night it's still pretty light this far North. Landing on Mousa we walk around the coast towards the Broch and as the light begins to fail we hear our first Storm Petrels beginning their bizarre 'purring' calls from the stone walls next to the path. At the incredible 2000 year old Iron Age

broch, the walls of the broch slowly come alive to the calls of more Storm Petrels and more and more birds arrive and swirl like bats around the tower. Craig even manages to find a Storm Petrel that is visible inside the wall of the broch and we manage to get a great view. It's simply a magical experience and we spend a magic few hours here before making our way back to catch the boat back. What a night!

Day 6

Last night's rain thankfully clears earlier than forecast and today dawns breezy with sunny spells as we head out from the hotel, to head to the far NW of mainland Shetland and Eshaness. Our first stop of the day is at Mavis Grind, a narrow isthmus joining the Northmavine peninsula to the rest of Shetland mainland with the Atlantic on one side and the North Sea on the other only separated by 33 metres of land!

We make a stop at Urafirth where we enjoy some fantastic carpets of the rare Oysterplant on the shingle beach before stopping for a hot drink overlooking the dramatic sea stacks of 'The Drongs'.

From here we drive through some beautiful rugged and wild scenery up to Eshaness Lighthouse, and take a walk out around the clifftops and take in the stunning views and scenery here. Rock Pipits are common around the cliffs and we also see a flock of 15 Ringed Plovers. Nesting Gulliemots and Fulmars are on the cliff ledges some still incubating eggs whilst others have chicks, along with a colony of some 30+ pairs of Kittiwakes and a single Puffin. Squadrons of Gannets and Bonxies pass by offshore and a pair of Red-throated Divers are on the small loch near the lighthouse. We just about have time to do our walk out around the cliffs and are on the walk back as the sky begins to cloud over as more weather approaches.

From Eshaness we drive down to Sandness beach for lunch, and have a hunt for Agates on the beach but it soon starts to rain, so we start to drive back as the weather gets worse. On the way back we pass a close Arctic Tern perched next to the road and also several Curlew on the moors. We also see another Red-throated Diver with a chick on a small loch as well as an Oystercatcher with two chicks alongside the road. Bizarrely one of the Oystercatcher chicks try to eat a flake of dried paint on the ground mistaking it for food!

Day 7

Today we head for the island of Noss on our boat charter the MV Ruby May from Lerwick. The boat cruises out of Lerwick Harbour past the island of Bressay and it's impressive lighthouse. The sky is full of Fulmars wheeling over the cliffs of Bressay as we sail through rafts of Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins resting on the sea.

As we round Bressay we see increasing numbers of seabirds both on the cliffs and passing the boat and two superb dark phase Arctic Skuas are seen

chasing the many Auks and we pass Kittiwakes nesting inside the sea caves before we head over to the 'Noup of Noss' where we are greeted by the incredible noise and spectacle of this vast seabird colony. The dominant birds are Gannets and the sky is full of wheeling birds overhead with some birds collecting nest material off the sea under the towering cliffs. As we look up to the immense sea cliffs above us, it really is a breathtaking seabird spectacle! Whilst here we also find out that Bonxies are quite partial to ginger biscuits as four Great Skuas circle the boat for biscuit handouts from the skipper! We spend some time taking in the views of this immense sea bird city before the boat cruises into the relative shelter of Noss sound where we see a few Black Guillemots as well as Arctic Terns and Shags on the rocks along the shore.

As we head back in towards Bressay, Craig spots an Otter feeding close into the shore briefly and we pass a colony of Common Seals hauled out on the rocks some with small pups.

Near the Shetland Catch we get some great views of three+ Grey Seals which come around the boat to be fed some fish caught by the boats crew earlier, before we arrive back into Lerwick. After the boat trip we take our lunch in Lerwick and get some great views of the Black Guillemots, Arctic and Common Terns around the harbour here and also have some time to explore and do some sightseeing whilst everyone gets their land legs back. After Lunch we drive back North and have a look at one of the largest bits of woodland on Shetland at Kergord. A walk through the woodland gives us some new birds for the trip including two Chaffinch and six+ Siskin feeding in the trees here.

Day 8

Today we sadly have to leave Shetland but first this morning we drive South down to Sumburgh. The sea is very calm this morning and we make a stop looking out to Mousa, with great views out to the island and the Broch. Here we see a Harbour Porpoise surface several times just offshore, a Red-throated Diver flies over calling and another two Red-throated Divers are on the sea below it until they are chased off by a winter plumaged Great Northern Diver! Looking further out to sea we also see a scattering of Guillemot, Razorbills and Shags from our high viewpoint.

Driving further south our next stop is overlooking the tidal bay at Pool of Virkie, where there are signs that autumn wader passage is just getting going with a large flock of Redshank roosting in the bay, along with Oystercatcher and Eider.

We then head around to Sumburgh where some folk take in the sights of Jarlshof and more waders are seen with a flock of 18 Curlew, a Whimbrel and a single summer plumaged Bar-tailed Godwit flying over heading south towards Fair Isle. Autumn is here!

A single Sanderling is seen on the beach at Grutness as we head back up to the seabird cliffs of Sumburgh Head nearby for lunch and spend some more time enjoying the masses of seabirds on the cliffs. Again we get some superb close Arctic Skua's and Bonxies cruising over the cliffs whilst Fulmars ride the up draughts and many Puffins are on the cliffs today in the fine warm and sunny weather, with some coming back in with beaks full of Sandeels. Shetland Wrens, Wheatears and Twite are again around the Lighthouse before all too soon it seems it's time sadly to head to the airport to catch our flight back to Inverness at the end of a great trip!

Species Of The Trip: Red-necked Phalarope, Arctic Skua, Puffin, Fulmar

Place Of The Trip: Hermaness, Sumburgh, Noup of Noss, Shetland cliffs

Magic Moment: Storm Petrels at Mousa Broch, Red-necked Phalaropes at Fetlar, Phalarope arrival, Noss boat trip, 'Drumming' Snipe

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Fulmar
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Common Snipe
Bar-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Curlew
Redshank
Common Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Puffin
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Skylark
Swallow
Swift

Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Wheatear
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Siskin
Twite

MAMMALS

Otter
Harbour Porpoise
Rabbit
Common Seal
Grey Seal

Amphibians

Common Frog

Butterflies

White sp
Red Admiral

Moths

Diamond-back moth
Map-winged Swift

Plants

Edmonstons Chickweed
Oysterplant

