

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE & ORKNEY

10-20TH SEPTEMBER 2011

Guides: Chrissie Nicholson & Craig Round

Guests: Mary & David Milsom, Anne McGregor, Valerie Sargent, Sandra Clements, Jose Passmore & Terry Gray, Katy Williams, Patricia Strugnell, Barbara & Mike Shaw

Day 1 As everyone arrives at The Steading the wind is blowing and it is drizzling, the warm welcome of tea, coffee and shortbread soon get people settled in and while some head to the hide in the woods, others unwind and unpack ready for the holiday ahead. After a sumptuous dinner we go to the lounge for tea and coffee. Chrissie and Craig run through the holiday events that will be included, exciting times ahead.

Day 2 Our first day out shows signs that the seasons are changing and a skein of Pink-footed Geese are flying high above a local estate. On our way up the valley Craig spots a Woodcock which flies up in front of his van, the second van misses that sight, but does see a Buzzard flying overhead. In among the shelter of the trees along the road a late Willow Warbler is feeding and Mistle Thrush are gathering in feeding parties too. We have a gusting wind today making standing still a wee bit hard, but still we are not disappointed as a Golden Eagle flies across the hillside behind where we have parked but is soon gone over the ridge.

A walk across the valley is challenging, but with the ever changing sky is still spectacular, no Mountain Hares are showing today but there is a rabbit, which gets a lot more attention than normal!! As Chrissie is driving along the road a huge Salmon jumps out of the river making a big splash, but as no one else sees it, we have our first 'dodgy leader tick'. Everyone in her van is not convinced that is what she saw, but it is quite amusing nonetheless!!

Driving back along the valley Craig stops and everyone in his van jumps out and looks up, yes, the second van misses a Red Kite flying over the road and away. We call in at Insh Marshes and spot Roe Deer in the marshes, with

Mallard and Teal the only birds at this time. We head home for dinner, and then out again afterwards.

Our drive to the Wildlife Watching Hide is not long and once we are settled in for our nights entertainment, our first visitor is a Badger staying at a distance and sniffing the air before disappearing again. While watching the Wood Mouse at the front, Chrissie spots a Palmate Newt crawling along the rock under the lights! A new one for the list.... As it gets darker we are soon accompanied by five Badgers all feeding both at the back then the front, they manage to eat all the peanuts before a hind Red Deer appears with her calf, but there is nothing left for them to eat. The Pine Marten is elusive tonight, but we still all return home happy and ready for a sleep.

Day 3

After breakfast we drive to the Black Isle, stopping at Chanonry point for coffee. It is another windy day, so when we arrive at the point we all shelter behind the wall. There is lots of activity with diving Gannets, a flock of Knot and Arctic Skua also fly by which are mobbed by Sandwich Terns with food... Swallows are flying by, some starting their migration, it is such an exciting time. Leaving the point we travel to a nearby bay, it is raining now so we shelter in the hide, with Black-tailed/Bar-tailed Godwits, Redshank, Knot and many other waders and Wigeon showing well feeding in the muddy inlet. As we start to get in the vans to go, a shout comes out "Osprey", everyone piles out to watch an Osprey flying over the estuary, this may be our only one of the week, as most have gone now.

We return to Chanonry Point just in case the Dolphins appear and are greeted with a feeding frenzy of tiny fish leaping out of the water, an amazing sight for all, where are the Dolphins? Red-throated Divers are spotted by Chrissie and Craig, separate birds, and both shout in different directions at the same time, quite confusing and comical!! The weather has changed completely and is calm and dry, what a difference from earlier in the day. Another skein of Pink-footed Geese are spotted in the distance and then drop down out of sight into a field. It is not too long though before the rain returns and with that we come back home for another warm welcome and dinner.

Day 4

Off we go again, for another day. We start off on moorland and as we drive slowly over the count of Red Grouse increases and by the end of the road we have a final count of 30+ different birds, not a bad start to the day. A Kestrel hovers over the hillside showing its manoeuvring skills in the wind.

The woodlands provide a sheltered spot for coffee and a wee walk. We do not see a Capercaillie but Chrissie spots a dust bath and some feathers which must have been used quite recently, definite evidence they are here somewhere. Even more evidence is seen on the way back down the track with Capercaillie droppings and also Pine Marten scat, but alas not a bird or Marten to be seen.

Loch Garten is blowy but a pleasant place for lunch, after which we all join Craig in his search for Neolithic flint pieces on the shore line, a few folk find some, well done, they are minute!! We head for a wee walk to another nearby loch as the rain starts, but in amongst the trees a feeding party of Tits are located and included in the flock are Crested, Blue, Great and Coal Tits, along with Treecreepers and Goldcrests, all calling, as soon as they appear they disappear, what a fabulous sight and sound. As we approach the side of the loch, the wind is blowing strongly towards us, but undeterred Chrissie gets to the shore and sets up her scope as Craig decides it's too windy and wet. With a bit of persuasion from Chrissie he joins the group and walks across a huge mound full of pine cones all eaten by Crossbills, shame the birds are not still around. On the far shore Wigeon, Lapwing and with them are three waders, so when identified Craig is rather excited, they are Ruff a very rare sighting for this inland lochan, what a find!! He is pleased that he had come to the loch edge! After that excitement and being soaked we head home, to dry out and have dinner and fill in checklists.

Day 5

Today we drive to the West Coast, the weather is windy but bright, which gives the mountains a fantastic glow and magic, driving through the never disappointing scenery. At our first stop the coffee is welcome along with the shortbread.... Scanning the area, Ravens and Hooded Crows are seen. Then the bird we are really hoping for flies into view and then comes straight towards us, a juvenile White-tailed Sea Eagle, with cameras clicking it flies right overhead, just as the first bird disappears an adult White-tailed Sea Eagle follows in the same route right above our heads, wow, Craig at this time is well excited and has never seen these birds so close on the mainland, absolutely fabulous!!

Onwards for a sea watch, the wind is good and we are lucky and find a nice sheltered spot to have lunch and then start scanning. It is not long before groups of Kittiwakes are flying by, Fulmar, Scaup, Gannets of all ages, and then flying inland three Whooper Swans are spotted, maybe the first for Scotland? A great sight though, visible migration is happening now. Great Skuas, Black Guillemot and Diver sp. are watched flying by, together with

plenty of Oystercatchers and then the best bird comes by, a Pomarine Skua, what a great time on our sea watch. We leave the spot and head back to The Steading for our dinner and pack for our next destination!!

Day 6

Our last breakfast at the Steading is welcome as usual, cases packed and ready to go, we pack the vans and set off for Orkney. The day is set fair for our travelling, having a ferry to catch does not give us much time to stop and explore elsewhere on our way, but at Scrabster we have a wee bit time for a quick cuppa, then on board we go.

The journey across is spent outside scanning the sea and sky, Gannets are popular, with Great and Arctic Skuas flying past very close enabling photo opportunities. Although one guest leaves his camera in the van, much to his disappointment. The crossing is calm and sunny, amazing, a flock of Manx Shearwaters starts streaming by, what a fabulous sight as they fly, black then white underneath, skimming the surface of the water with great ease. It takes a while before we spot Fulmar's but once we do they are everywhere, odd groups of Razorbill scoot under water as the ferry gets too close.

It does not seem long when we are arriving at Stromness Terminal, and are back in the vans for our first encounters on Orkney. There has been a bird seen nearby, so without telling the group we drive straight there, just in case... Coffee and tea are welcome after our journey; the views are amazing, the tide races by with Cormorants and Shags fishing in its wake. We also watch Redshank on the shore and Seals in the bay, then a very excited Craig shouts 'Lapland Bunting' and that is it, with all vans locked, off we walk along the shore to see this amazing wee bird in amongst Pied Wagtails feeding in the shelter of the rocky shoreline. It is quite an amazing bird to see, a lifer for a lot of guests, it is a very friendly bird as folk are getting amazingly close for photographs, even on small digital cameras. Locals walking by get good views also, one lady has been coming for three days and has not seen it, so she is very pleased at getting such a great view.

We eventually pull ourselves away to get settled into the hotel and organised for our evening meal and the checklist has a special write in. What a start for our trip on Orkney....

Day 7

Today we travel to the island of Rousay but our first stop is The Stones of Stenness, one of the many Standing stone circles on Orkney. It is very windy today, we watch Greylag Geese on the loch opposite the stones

before we leave, Common Seals are also hauled out on the rocks in their famous banana shapes, they do look uncomfortable, but must be ok!!

Travelling to the port, the ferry is on its way across the sound and the water is quite choppy today, but we are ready for it. This is a good challenge for Chrissie and Craig as this ferry requires the vehicles to be reversed on, Craig has done this many a time but Chrissie has not, concentrating well, she does ok, especially knowing that all the guests are on top deck watching. We stay in the vehicles during the crossing ready to drive off and park up, coffee is calling before we go to explore this island.

We set off and travel along the coast spotting a Peregrine flying low along the cliffs below our vans, a great sight. Our lunch time is spent in a lovely bay where we are informed that we have missed an Otter along the coast, but we watch very close Twite feeding on the shoreline. Grey Seals are keeping an eye on us from the water while we enjoy our lunches. Also along the shore we see Turnstone, Redshank and Lapwing, out to sea are Gannets diving for their fish.

After lunch we head to 'Mid Howe' burial chambers and broch, which is situated right on the shore, down quite a steep grassy hill. We all gather at the bottom of the hill, the chambers are inside a very well made shelter, very much in keeping with the atmosphere and area. It is light and airy inside, with metal viewing platforms, it is quite an amazing privilege to get an insight to life so long ago. The structures are just incredible how they were built and preserved. Craig has such an enthusiasm in the subject so talks a wee bit about the chambers and then the Broch.

Outside, walking a wee bit further along the shore we walk into the Broch through the double walls. It is really well sheltered inside, the different sections are visible with remnants of stone work. How these were built leaves the mind quite amazed, and in awe.

We have another chamber to visit before getting on the ferry, 'Taversoe Tuike', this is entered through a gate, once we are all inside there is a short ladder down even further into the chambers below. A few brave folk climb down and take photographs of another amazing structure open to the public. Once we are finished taking photos, we drive to the ferry where Chrissie is less daunted by reversing the van onto the ferry as before, although could not actually see the guy who was giving instructions, so that was a bit concerning to her and the guests watching from above!!!

The weather has stayed fine all day and we are ready to go back and have another lovely dinner back at the hotel.

Day 8

The weather has changed today and its pouring and windy, but undeterred we set off to have a look over the loch, seeing Teal, Wigeon and Mute Swans. We wander down to the Barnhouse Village to see some of the homes, with a hearth in the centre of the houses and sections which could have been beds and living quarters, we get a wee bit wet and drive to the shop for coffee at Maeshowe Information Centre before walking along to the magnificent chamber.

Walking along the track and meeting the guide at the entrance, we get the feel of place before we go in and are told not to lift our heads until the guide tells us to or we would bang our head on the stone entrance. This place is amazing, with huge slabs of Orkney shore rock lining the entrance way. Once inside you are greeted by a huge area with plenty of standing room, with separate chambers going in on each wall. Just looking at the massive free standing stones inside the room is awesome. This room holds some ancient graffiti, which is pointed out by the guide with torch light as she tells the tales of the scribes. This is one place not to miss when visiting Orkney.

After our time at Maeshowe we travel around to the RSPB reserve, on the way we spot Black-tailed Godwit feeding on a pool edge and about five or six Snipe, which takes some finding for some, but once the eye is on the bird, it seems easy to see them... Curlew also feed in the pools. Further along a flock of seven Ruffs are seen before flying off, Golden Plover and Lapwing are feeding in the fields. We move along to the hide for lunch and tuck in, sheltered in the dry. Our first male Hen Harrier is spotted quartering over the reed bed, we are all able to get really good views of this fantastic bird. In the distant fields Curlew and Golden Plover run around, then above them. A male and juvenile Hen Harrier are watched flying along the fields and then over the brow of the hill and back again, great views for all. On the pools we watch Teal, Wigeon and Mallard as they weave in and out of the reed edge.

After our good bird watch we drive to Skara Brae, a pretty exposed and exciting village to walk around, the showers are less frequent now although the wind has not dropped. We first listen and watch the film of how Skara Brae came to be found and excavated over the years, then walk down to the shore to have a good look around, again Craig is happy to explain all he knew, a great personal approach to this site. The shoreline has been

protected to keep the site safe from the weather. On the road on our way out a Ring-tailed Hen Harrier is spotted in a near field, we follow it along the field over a loch and off into the distance, a great view, whilst watching that someone else spots a Peregrine heading in towards a farm and upsetting all the Starlings, not all are able to catch sight of the fast flight, but do see the Starlings.... Again we head back to the hotel after a factual and bird filled day.

Day 9

After breakfast and with the vans packed with lunch, flasks etc., off we go to South Orkney today. We have a fine and calm day, which is very welcome after yesterday. We visit Scarpa Bay, where we watch Twite, Bar-tailed Godwits, Knot, Oystercatchers, Sanderling and Wigeon, a busy place. Guests also head into the information centre about this area.

We head to a headland looking for migrant birds and coffee, we find a pair of Blackcap, Willow Warblers, Pied Wagtail and Greenfinch in a wee hedgerow walking down to the beach. We drive across the Churchill Barriers down to the Tomb of the Eagles, a special family run site. On arrival we are given an entertaining familiarisation talk by a member of the family, then off we walk down to the tomb itself, all the objects are in the information centre but all had come from the tomb. It is an incredible place, getting into the tomb was fun, as some crawled in and some used the trolley!! Most of us made it inside and Craig gave information about the contents and layout, not a big space, so folk swap places from one end to the other. Outside we see the split rock on the shore and see how it may have been easy to create the slabs used inside some of these tombs, although how they got them from the shore to inland is still a mystery.

It is a long drive back, but we stop for photo shoots along the barriers. We then head back to the hotel after another great day out and about on Orkney. Not enough time though as we head back tomorrow.

Day 10

We are greeted with a very misty atmospheric morning, some places are clear but on the water the mist hangs, a spectacular sight with the hills of Hoy peering out through the mist. Our last morning is spent at the Ring of Brodgar the most famous of the standing stone rings. Some of these stones were quarried locally but some were brought some seven miles!! Incredible!

We travel to the ferry terminal and drive straight on the ferry, what great timing. The sea is so calm it is beautiful. Just as we set off Common Seals are spotted hauled out on the shore off a nearby island and Black Guillemots float in the harbour. What a day, sunshine, warmth and flat calm sea, not many birds today on the crossing but we do have our share of excitement. Chrissie has her eyes on the flat water when fins are seen and then identified as Risso's Dolphin and Harbour Porpoise groups, so exciting, we see at least three or four Risso Dolphins and a distant Minke Whale is also spotted by Chrissie. What a crossing, a few folk stand in the middle of the deck looking up, everyone else runs over to make sure they are not missing anything special and find they are having a Tornado moment, yes, they are watching planes!! With everyone really happy that was not a bad thing....

Our journey back to Speyside is uneventful, but what could follow the day we just had, so as happy folk we settle into our hotel for our last night together. Our meal is fantastic and is followed by a birthday cake for Jose, we all join in with Happy Birthday and Jose is well impressed. Although the cake is too big for all of us to eat, she is happy to be travelling by car to take the rest home to enjoy with her family. A great end to yet another great Speyside holiday.

Day 11 We enjoy breakfast and all say our goodbyes till the next time, safe journey to all.

SPECIES OF TRIP: Hen Harrier and Lapland Bunting

PLACE OF TRIP: The whole of Orkney

MAGIC MOMENT: Watching the White-tailed Sea Eagle overhead/
Whoopers Swans migrating

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Eider
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
Red Kite
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Kestrel
Peregrine
Pheasant
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Snipe
Woodcock
Black-tailed Godwit

Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl
Short-eared Owl
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Northern Wheatear
Swallow
House Martin
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit

Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite
Redpoll
Common Crossbill (H)
Bullfinch (H)
Reed Bunting
Arctic Skua
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Osprey
Ruff
Pomarine Skua
Great Skua
Manx shearwater
Lapland Bunting
Willow Warbler
Blackcap
Total: 108

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Stoat
Badger
Pipistrelle Bat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Bottle-nose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Hedgehog
Risso's Dolphin
Mink Whale
Total: 17

Total Species: 125