

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

THE FARNE ISLANDS

8-15 July 2023

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Heather Graham, David & Gillian Smith

Day 1 Julian meets up with Heather at Newcastle train station having already driven up from Yorkshire on this grey, wet day. Soon we are heading out of the city and north along the initially busy A1, and just over an hour later we arrive at our lovely hotel at Bamburgh where we are staying for the week. At the car park we meet David, seeing him and Gill later in reception. The check-in is soon dealt with and we head to our rooms for a freshen up and relax before meeting at 7pm. The time goes by quickly with some of us going outside for a short local walk, seeing the resident Jackdaws, Swallows, House Martins, and Fulmars which are nesting around the gorgeous Bamburgh Castle. At 7pm we all meet up and try to find a quiet corner, which isn't easy as the hotel is full. Once ready Julian hands out our notebooks, pens and checklists, then goes through the plan for the next few days. When he has finished, we go to the restaurant for our first evening meal, which is excellent, setting the standard for the rest of our stay. After dinner Julian walks down to the Bamburgh Castle green where he does well with a Fulmar flying round, plus lots of Swallows and House Martins, a few Common Swifts and Kestrel. However just before he leaves, he sees a shape in one of the crevices and there is a very young Barn Owlet staring back at him – superb. Our guide decides to leave now and returns to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

Day 2 After a lovely breakfast we get ourselves ready and meet at the minibus for 9am, heading away from Bamburgh towards the A1. As we drive round Budle Bay, David spots a couple of Little Egrets roosting on the rocks. We continue through to the main road and head south towards Newcastle. As we drive, we see a field with lots of Curlew, along with a Common Buzzard circling over roadside trees. After about an hour we turn off the A1 and make our way through the old mining village of Wide Open to a nature reserve on its outskirts. We park and set off on a walk around to the far end where the viewing platform and main hide is. The track follows the edge of a field where we find a pair of stunning Roe Deer, moving through the deep foliage. Julian now spots a Short-tailed Vole cross the track and warm sunshine is bringing out the butterflies with Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Red Admiral and Large Skipper being seen. Eventually we reach the viewing platform, and, in the reeds, we see a handsome Reed Bunting and moving through the phragmites are several Reed

Warblers. Out in the lake there are lots of Mallard, with fewer Gadwall, a pair of Great Crested Grebes, Cormorant and a Common Tern sat with the Black-headed Gulls.

We are here a while before continuing along the boardwalk track down to a large metal hide. It's locked but Julian knocks on the door and we are let in by one of the two birders inside. Initially we sit and watch over the bird feeding station but there's not much seed out (apparently the guy who keeps it stocked is on holiday!). However, there are a few birds coming and going including a few Chiffchaffs, Tree Sparrow, Robin, Blue and Great Tits. After a while we move and join the other birders looking out over the lake and extensive reedbed. We see much the same species but also there is a female Wigeon, female Shoveler with young, a couple of Common Pochard and a few Eurasian Teal with the commoner wildfowl. There is a close Little Grebe, which Heather really enjoys and on the muddy shoreline there's a Common Sandpiper and Gill spots a few Oystercatchers flying in. After about half an hour Julian decides to check the feeders again and sees another Tree Sparrow, which brings David back round too. We are thinking of leaving again when a young Willow Tit appears, much to David's delight as it's one of his target species this week. We stay for a while longer but it's heading towards midday and Julian wants to have lunch at the next site. We leave the hide and walk slowly back to the minibus, adding a few more of the commoner species to our list. We are back at the van and driving away.

We arrive at Gosforth and make our way to the local nature reserve, heading initially to the visitor centre to pay the entry fee. This is a new site to our guide and armed with an interesting map we head off along the narrow track. We soon reach a junction near the lake and head through the reeds to a large hide, where we unpack our lunches. We keep a check on the water as we are eating finding a few more Common Pochard along with both Great Crested and Little Grebes. There are plenty of Reed Warblers here too and we get some good looks as they move through the phragmites. Once we are finished and ready, we leave this hide and continue along the circular track. Along the way we meet another lady who informs us that a Purple Heron has been showing well from the next hide, so we walk quickly on. At this hide we are informed that the heron has flown out of sight, which is slightly disappointing. We wait and keep scanning the area, with Julian spotting a Water Rail, which we all get a brief view of.

After about 30 minutes here with thoughts of moving on, David says "it's there!" - as this gorgeous immature Purple Heron flies right past the hide, circles round a couple of times and drops out of view. What a result! We are absolutely elated with this as we got such a good view in tremendous light.

We don't stay too much longer before moving on and keep going round the lake, but it's now pretty quiet. We do find several spikes of Northern Marsh and Common Spotted Orchids, before getting back round to the visitor centre.

We have one more site to visit in this area and get back to the A1 continuing south before taking the exit to Rolands Gill. Here we drive through the valley keeping an eye on the ridge and get brief views of a Red Kite circling over the houses. We keep going and head up to the watchpoint where Heather finds another Red Kite, being much closer and showing much better. It is a fabulous, warm afternoon and we have a nice time, as it's so peaceful, with Julian showing us a gorgeous male Yellowhammer in the telescope. It is now nearly 4pm and we have to head away, driving back along the valley and then the motorway north. We turn off for Seahouses and drive the minor roads to the coast when we continue north through this harbour town, stopping at a roadside pool to see what's there. We find a couple of Common Terns with the gulls, plus three Common Sandpipers, Common Snipe, Lapwing and a Pied Wagtail. Then a couple more terns fly in, which are Arctics and it's great to get a comparison with Common Terns nearby, making for a very good end to our first full day in Northumberland.

We now carry on the hotel, where we have plenty of time to freshen up before dinner at 7:30pm. However, our day is not done as after dinner we all go down to the castle to see the Barn Owls. This is great as both an adult and one young is in the nest hole and above us at least 50 Common Swifts are flying round – the biggest number any of us have seen this year.

Day 3

It is another decent start to the day as we go for breakfast at 8am. The hotel staff are really efficient here and we are ready to leave around an hour later, as we drive south away from Bamburgh. Julian decides to stop off at the pool we visited the previous evening, scanning the water and muddy edges from the road side. We are finding the usual common species such as Common Sandpipers, Common Snipe and Common Tern but also a few Tufted Duck, Herring, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls plus a few Kittiwakes. On the far side there is a juvenile Yellow Wagtail and a Common Redshank, which is also new to our list.

Around 09:30 we set off and continue south down to Seahouses for our first boat trip of the tour, which is departing at 10am. We stop at the harbour car park with plenty of time before our departure and after sorting the parking fee, we walk down to the entrance to the harbour where we check-in with the company. We have spare time now, so go and stand by the sea wall scanning out towards the Farne Islands, which are clearly visible on this fine morning. There is plenty around with small flocks of auks flying past along with Shag and

Kittiwake. Nearer inshore there is a small group of Goosander, with more flying in, along with a couple of Eurasian Teal, Eider, Shag and Oystercatchers on the nearby rocks.

At the allotted time we board our vessel and set off, first heading up the coast and then across to the inner Farne Islands. For the next 90 minutes we cruise slowly towards the outer Farne Islands with our skipper giving us a running commentary on the species we are seeing and the history of these iconic islands, especially around the famous Grace Darling rescue in the 1800's. It is a lovely morning and we are all thoroughly loving the sight, sound and smell of this incredible seabird colony. We also get a lot nearer today and our views of Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Shag and Grey Seals with their respective young is astonishing. As we are cruising round the outer islands Julian does very well to spot a group of Turnstones on an exposed sea-weedy rock, not any easy bird at this time of year. We also manage to find a couple of Rock Pipits, and there are a few Gannets and Fulmars passing the islands.

Our 'Puffin Cruise' gets back into Seahouses harbour around midday, and we now walk back to the minibus after making full use of the local facilities. Once ready we set off back north, passing Bamburgh and stopping at a bay just beyond. The tide is now out with lots of exposed mud and small channels. There are 100's of Shelduck here along with Curlew, Oystercatchers and Common Redshank. We also find Little Egrets fishing in the small pools and channels, with David finding a Kittiwake amongst the other gulls. As we are eating our lunch we keep searching for new species as things come and go all the time. A Greenshank is feeding actively in the main channel, and Julian picks out a Whimbrel feeding alongside a couple of Eurasian Curlew – just showing how much smaller they are! The rain clouds threaten but we have no rain as keep looking and just before we are due to leave our guide again scores with a 2nd Summer Mediterranean Gull, again amongst the commoner Black-heads and large gulls, which include our first Greater Black-backs. We are soon now packing up and driving off from this excellent and productive lunch stop.

We head north on this much cooler, cloudier afternoon, driving up the busy A1 towards Lindisfarn. Eventually we reach the minor road to the coast and the causeway over to the island. As we cross David spots another Little Egret followed by a Bar-tailed Godwit, another early returning bird from the northern tundra. We reach Holy Island, and soon after we turn off into the small car park, where we ready ourselves for a walk in the interesting dune slack. The orchids here are noticeable immediately with lots of Common Spotted Orchids, both in flower and 'gone over'. As we walk slowly along the sandy track, Julian spots our first Northern Marsh Orchid, followed by Heather finding one of our targets – the gorgeous Marsh Hellaborine. We find some lovely

examples of this very attractive flower along with other specialties of this area. Despite being cloudy, there are now butterflies around with plenty of Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Red Admiral and Small White.

We walk on searching for the next target – Lindisfarne Hellaborine, which can be tricky, but with perseverance Julian tracks a couple of spikes down. We all look at this incredibly rare orchid only found in this tiny area of the world – just fantastic! We are very pleased now as we continue to walk round the narrow sandy tracks to the cottages where we see our first beautiful Dark Green Fritillary, followed by a surprise Grayling, which our guide has never seen here before. We walk on to an area literally carpeted with orchids, being mainly Pyramidal, Common Spotted and Northern Marsh, which is stunning. We keep going on and eventually get back to the main track where we now find a lovely pair of Stonechats and good flick of Linnets – what a successful start to our afternoon!

It is quite windy now but there's still no rain as we drive to the main car park on the island, where we pay the extortionate fee and walk into the village for an ice cream. This is great and following this we go to use the excellent facilities followed by a walk down to the bay which overlooks the stunning Lindisfarne Castle. On the rock, sand and seaweed beach, David immediately spots a couple of summer-plumage Dunlin, along with more Redshank, Oystercatchers and another Rock Pipit. Out in the bay there are a few Eider plus a couple of Goosander, but in the distance Julian sees what he thinks is a Little Tern, but it's a long way off. We now walk round the bay to the jetty and search again, finding a tern colony on a (still) distant beach. However through the scope we can see there are Little Terns, with the larger, longer tailed, Arctic Terns, which is brilliant. While we have been looking at these Gillian has been enjoying some rock pooling and has found a couple of crabs and some pretty nifty shrimps, which is also superb. It is now time to leave and we make our way back to the minibus and head off back to our hotel in Bamburgh.

Day 4 We are in for breakfast 15 minutes early as we need to be at Seahouses harbour for 9am, which we just about manage. It is another lovely start to the day but the forecast is for rain later, but you never know! We quickly get ready and at the harbour check-in for our private tour down to Coquet Island. We are initially sent to the harbour wall but have to wait a little while for another boat to move from the collection point. We are aboard by 09:30 and making our way out of Seahouses and initially straight out to sea with the usual Farne Island birds flying past, along with lots more Gannets than the previous day. The wind is moderate making the sea choppy and as we now head south the boat is rolling somewhat. It is not long though before we head back towards land and into Beadnell Bay. It is much calmer here as we slowly make our way towards the tern colony on the Long Nanny beach. We are seeing lots

of Arctic Terns as expected along with a few Common and Sandwich Terns coming and going with sand eels for their young. However there is another tern species we are keen to see here – the diminutive Little Tern. We are checking everything but initially there are no sightings, although our skipper, who's lived here all his life keeps hearing them occasionally. Julian says "got one" and describes where it is and where it's heading. Gillian manages to see it briefly but it all too quickly disappears behind the sand dunes. However it's minutes later when our skipper points out a couple flying past the boat, which we all finally see and much better than the Holy Island birds yesterday. We start to get our 'eye in' and are picking them up on our own, either over the beach and dunes or heading out to sea. We are just about to leave when our boatman spots another pair of Little Tern 'dip-feeding' over the waves and we now get some cracking views. Pleased with this start to the cruise we head out of the bay and continue south along the coastline as there is less swell.

We are constantly watching and Julian shouts "scoter" pointing at a small flock of black-looking ducks speeding past. We all manage to see them but they are past us flying north very quickly, it's not a great view. We now also start to see Fulmars as we leave behind the Puffins and Guillemots of the Farnes. Up ahead the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle are getting nearer and the dramatic cloud formations give it an imposing look. We are now cruising towards the cliffs this castle sits on, which is another seabird city but not a big one. As we draw nearer we can easily see, hear and smell the Kittiwakes dotted around the ledges, along with quite a few pairs of Razorbill and a few pairs of Fulmars. It is magnificent to be on this boat, alone in this situation, seeing this wonderful sight, with the castle rising up above us – it is very special. We cruise around for about 15 minutes making sure we have seen what there is, before again heading out into open water. It now gets cool on the boat as the sun keeps disappearing and the southwest wind is strengthening, causing some splashing to the starboard side (as Gillian finds out!). There are Common Swifts streaming past us as they are ahead of the weather, which looks grim to the north – it is strange to see these birds flying low over the water. We now pass Craster, Longhoughton, and Alnmouth, with now Coquet Island in our sights.

We are now seeing more and more terns passing the boat along with Puffins in big numbers and as we reach the island there are lots of Grey Seals in the water. We make our way round to the west side of the island where the huge tern colony is situated. Arctic Terns again dominate, but there is also a healthy number of Sandwich Tern pairs here. There are a few pairs of Commons but it's the Roseate Terns, which we are primarily here for. We are checking the rocks and vegetated rocks but struggling to find any, until Julian again says "got one". We have to make another pass and he points out this lone, resting bird amongst a group of Arctics. We all can see it and it's diagnostic black bill but it's not the best look at one of these rare UK breeders. David now spots another but that's not in a great position either but we now find a couple of pairs by the

warden's hut and this is much better. We bob around in front of this place with fabulous views of many Grey Seals, hauled out on the flat, exposed rocks. Then just next to the boat is a Roseate Tern fishing and this is superb as we watch it dropping to the surface of the water and back up. Julian is elated as this happens a few times in quick succession letting him get some decent video, which he has never done before. Our skipper is also enjoying this as it's quite a while since he was at Coquet Island, but does now suggest it's time to leave as we are due to finish at 1pm and it's already 1:15!!! The journey back is much quicker than going down, with us bathed in sunshine and rain showers everywhere else. Julian spots another small flock of Common Scoter and this time we see them much better, which is great. We eventually reach Seahouses harbour for just after 2pm and thank our skipper very much for what has been a fabulous tour. We walk back up towards the minibus in the car park, first making full use of the facilities before having our picnic lunch.

It is just after 3pm when we leave Seahouses and drive south down the coast to a coastal village, stopping again in another expensive car park. Julian informs us we are going for a walk as we head down to the village and look out into the bay. The tide is now fully out but it's still beautiful here, in the warm sunshine, checking the rocks and water in front of us. It's quiet but we do see a couple of Little Terns fishing in the bay and a couple of Common Redshank on the seaweed-covered rocks. We walk now slowly round to the scrape, which is alive with Avocets and their chicks, which is superb, there is also a few Common Sandpipers and Shelduck, plus Greylag Geese and a cracking adult Little Ringed Plover, which are new to our growing bird list. As we are watching Julian sees a Common Shrew almost run over David's shoe as it crossed the track.

We spend a bit of time here but the strong wind is in our faces, making it slightly difficult to use the telescopes. On we walk round to the pool hide, stopping for a singing Sedge Warbler in a small Hawthorn bush. We soon reach the hide and settle down, checking the water and reedbeds, initially finding lots of Mallard, Coot, Moorhen and a few Eurasian Teal. Heather asks about a small shape in the water and through the scope we confirm it's a Little Grebes nest with a grown youngster and both parents in attendance – gorgeous, and Heather who loves grebes is thrilled to see them so well. A Kestrel flies through and Julian finds a female Shoveler feeding on the far side but not much else so we pack up and leave. We have some time so we continue along the track seeing a Common Hawker, several butterflies and David picks up a Common Toad-let. There are Yellowhammers and Greater Whitethroat as we reach the viewpoint over Embleton Bay, which we check. It is gorgeous here but fairly quiet apart from another Little Tern.

It is now time to leave and return the same way stopping at the scrape for one final look. David now spots a different wader and Julian quickly identifies

it as a Wood Sandpiper, which is just superb. We can only watch it a while before having to make our way back to the minibus as our parking ticket will expire. We get there in time and leave, heading back to our hotel and a welcome relax before the evening meal.

Day 5

Julian meets us at breakfast to the news that David and Gillian had, had an amazing experience the previous evening after dinner. They had walked down to the beach and as they got there, a large dark bird is heading in, off the sea. David cannot believe his eyes as it's a Great Bittern, which just keeps going inland. They then look out to sea and are treated to the sight of Bottlenose Dolphins off-shore, lots of dolphins, possibly over 100! They watch them for a while before starting back and on the way see an adult Barn Owl and it's two half-grown chicks – what an evening! This is the topic of conversation but we need to be quick as we have another 9am boat trip this morning. Once we've finished and quickly got ready we are driving through to Seahouses, where we park in the usual spot near the harbour. We grab our things and walk down to the ticket office and check-in for our exciting Holy Island cruise, on this lovely but cool morning. We have some time before boarding the boat so go to check the rocks and sea off the harbour wall, seeing a Common Sandpiper, Eider and a few distant Bottlenose Dolphins.

A crew member from our tour says it's time to board and we head off to where the boats moored. It is busy with people, but we are all safely seated and set off away from Seahouses harbour. We now set off north towards Holy Island passing the beautiful and historic Bamburgh Castle on the way. We see a few Gannets passing north (back to Bass Rock) as we get further into open water along with lots more of the usual seabirds. Julian and David stand at the bow of the boat and scan for birds and dolphins, seeing a large flock of Common Scoter on the water. They return and we sit together chatting and searching the sea and sky as we head north, with Julian spotting a Red-throated Diver flying south overhead. As we reach Holy Island our skipper makes a detour to a nearby beach where 100's of Atlantic Grey Seals are hauled out. This is tremendous to see so many 'giant slugs' (according to David) together on land and in the water. While we are here we see Arctic and Sandwich Terns flying past with our guide pointing out a Little Tern too. We now continue to the island and disembark on to the jetty, with instructions to be back on board two hours later.

We are in need of the facilities so head straight to the village and the public conveniences, stopping before we reach them as Julian can see a huge flock of birds in the distance, which he says are Golden Plover (and who would argue!). We reach the toilet block and once finished go and check the 'dry' pool where we see a couple of Grey Herons and our first Common Gulls of the tour. Julian decides we should try and find the Plover flock and head off down Straight Lonnan, but they cannot be seen as the grasses are too high in the

visible fields. Although we do see a few Lapwing, lots of Curlew, Meadow Pipits, Skylark and Linnets. We reach the end and our guide realises we have enough time to do the full circular walk back to the boat – so off we go. As we walk on we stop to look at some lovely male Reed Buntings, a pair of Stonechats and Pied Wagtails. We soon reach the pool, where we stop for a while seeing the expected Mallard, Mute Swan, Coot and Moorhen plus a single Wigeon and several pairs of Little Grebe, which delights Heather.

After a while we set off again and soon the track is overlooking the sea to the west of the island. We find the usual, auks, Eider, Shag, etc but on a small set of exposed rocks there's a couple of Golden Plover, Turnstone and Redshank together. We are now nearing the Lindisfarne Castle and take the track round it to the bay, where we can see our boat, still moored in the same place. We keep walking but it has got quite hot as the sun has decided to come out, so we sort our attire accordingly by stripping a layer or two. We follow the bay round, checking the beach and rocks as we go with Julian finding a Ringed Plover at the far corner, adding another bird species to the list. We are slightly early getting back but as we slowly walk towards the boat, Julian shouts "diver" pointing at a bird flying past. It is another summer plumage Red-throat and this time we get cracking views as it's illuminated in the sunlight. We now get back to the boat and get seated for our journey back via the Farne Islands.

A little later than scheduled we set off from Holy Island, with dark, threatening clouds all around but we are still bathed in sunshine! The journey to the islands takes about 45 minutes and as we get closer we start to see lots of auks in the water, which are mainly Puffins and Guillemots, along with smaller numbers of Razorbill and Shag. We eventually reach Longstone Island, with its lighthouse, and the skipper relays facts and figures about the breeding birds and of course Grace Darling, the 17th century heroine, who with her father rescued nine people from a wreck here. We continue to cruise slowly round these fascinating islands, seeing much the same as our visit on Monday. We spend almost an hour here travelling round with lots of Grey Seals in the water and hauled out on the seaweed covered rocks. There are literally 1000's of seabirds nesting here, with auks, Fulmar, terns and gulls covering most of the islands. We make our way down to Inner Farne, where the second lighthouse is along with a large tern colony and again gives us a fantastic commentary on this island too.

Around 1:30pm we say "goodbye" to the Farnes and head back to Seahouses, where we thank the captain and crew for their hard work and make our way back to the minibus. We are ready for lunch but agree that it's best now to wait until we reach our afternoon destination and have it then in more pleasant surroundings.

The drive takes about 30 minutes and we soon pull into a (free) beach car park and enjoy our lunch while looking out to sea. The weather looks quite threatening but is still holding off as we now set out through the tiny village and out along the coastal track. There are some waders in the bay as the tide is now out and we see the expected Common Redshank, Oystercatchers and Curlew, plus a winter-plumage Bar-tailed Godwit.

On we walk out, crossing the causeway to Holy Island. We keep walking north on to some grassland where Julian spots a juvenile Northern Wheatear, with Heather seeing it's (assumed) sibling in the same area. Pleased with our finds so far we now make our way towards the gull roost where we set up our telescopes and start checking them. We are looking for an immature Yellow-legged Gull and after a few minutes Julian is confident he's found it amongst the Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Greater Black-backed Gulls – what a bonus.

David now starts to check the area and finds a nice flock of Golden Plover, along with a few Turnstones and Dunlin. There are also a couple of Sandwich Terns with Black-headed Gulls on the seaweed-covered rocks. It has been a successful walk and as the first drops of rain start, we head back towards the minibus. Just before the car park, Julian again checks the bay and finds a handsome adult summer Mediterranean Gull, followed by another couple of Bar-tailed Godwits, one of which is still quite orangey from its breeding plumage. While Gillian and Heather are looking at this through Julian's scope, David finds another wader at the end of the beach – and it's tiny. Suspecting Little Stint, he calls over Julian to look through his scope and Julian confirms it's a Stint but is surprised how bright it is.

Our guide now returns to his own telescope and is astonished by it's 'brick red' features around the head and neck. Sadly, we are too far for a photograph but Julian thinks this has credentials for a rare, Red-necked Stint. For a few minutes he talks through its identification and now phones a birding colleague, but a walker strides out to where it is and flushes it! Julian is distraught as would have liked to get a photo, but it's gone, and we don't have time to keep looking. He puts the news out to the local group of it possibly being a rare stint, but it is not seen again by anyone. We now head to the hotel with this being the main topic of conversation for the night and probably the week.

Day 6 Julian and David meet at the minibus at 07:15 and drive the short distance along the narrow roads towards Newham Bog, seeing a short-tailed Vole cross the road and a large Brown Hare in an adjacent field. We are hoping to hear Quail as one has recently been reported and we make several stops to listen around this area, sadly without success. We now return to Bamburgh where we meet up with Gillian and Heather for our breakfast, which is again delicious. After breakfast we set off around 9am, going out to the AI, then south and just

beyond Alnwick back east towards the coast. We now make our first stop at a large man-made lake where we park at the east end and walk to look out over the water. It's a bit choppy in the moderate westerly wind but at least the sun is shining. It's not easy to see as the vegetation has grown up but our guide sees a small group of grebes, which is what we are looking for. He now says "I've got it" with David replying "Got what?" and Heather says "Red-necked Grebe" as these are one of her favourite families of birds.

We all get good views of this lovely grebe, which is still in summer plumage as it swims alongside a couple of equally majestic Great Crested Grebes. We stay for a while longer scanning the huge lake and finding lots of Tufted Duck, Greylag and Canada Geese, Mute Swans and lots of hirundines hawking insects over the water. After a while we make our way back to the bus and drive away to our next site.

This is the Druridge Bay Area and there are a network of water bodies that all need visiting. We arrive at the first of these and as we are getting ready to walk to the hide a small group of Avocet fly past. We set off and soon arrive at the hide where we now join a few other people watching the lake in front of us. Just below us we see a large gathering of waders, which are predominantly Lapwing but with careful searching we also find a couple more Avocets, a Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank, Dunlin and a couple of Ruff – one of which is still in partial summer plumage. There are ducks on the open water, which are mostly Mallard but also Eurasian Teal, Shoveler and Shelduck along with Coot, Moorhen, more swans and geese. Things are getting a little agitated and we look up to see our first Marsh Harriers of the tour, flying out over the reedbed. We continue to find new species with Common Gull, Common Tern, and Ringed Plover being seen and a huge Emperor Dragonfly flies past.

It is now late morning as we get back to the minibus and back to the main road. We are near some public conveniences and not one to pass up an opportunity Julian heads there, which is most welcome. We make full use of these facilities and as we set off again we stop opposite a bird feeding station but most of the feeders have been removed – hence no birds around! We now head back to the main road again stopping for a vocal Coal Tit in some nearby conifers.

We now drive towards the coast and Heather exclaims she has caught a lovely spider, so she holds on to it while we are driving. We soon pull off on to a minor road where we park, where she jumps out and releases it after showing us all and it is stunning. As it turns out this handsome arachnid is a Cucumber Spider – you learn something new every day!

We now set off and head down a narrow track through the trees and bushes. We grab our gear and walk along, stopping for a Green-veined White before continuing to the small metal hide. It's not easy to get the scopes in position but mostly it's not necessary as the bulk of the waders are just in front of us. Here they are mostly Black-tailed Godwits of varying plumages ranging from summer to winter and look magnificent. There are also a few Redshank, Dunlin and Common Sandpipers too but there's another interesting wader asleep in the middle of the godwits. It's either a Spotted Redshank or Greenshank and we hope it's the former. The legs are difficult to see but after a while it lifts its head and reveals a long thin beak with a red base – booyar, it's a Spotted Red. We continue to look around with a few Yellow Wagtails being seen, plus a pair of Shoveler and Common Sandpiper. It is now well past noon and Julian suggests we go for lunch in the next hide, which is usually quieter.

Off we go back along the track and stop at the bus to pick up our picnic lunches before walking on to another vegetated track. This is lovely in the sunshine with Ragged Robin, Vipers Bugloss and Kidney Vetch adding a bit of colour. Eventually we reach the hide, which is empty and we settle down to enjoy our butties and see what's about. There are lots of the usual geese here and also a few more Black-tailed Godwits, but they are difficult to see. There are Connick Ponies feeding on the marsh grass and a pair of Common Buzzards are flying over a nearby wood. As we are eating we find a few more waders, which include Lapwing, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper and a Common Snipe. Once we have finished we decide to leave and walk back to the van. The sun is still shining and there's lots of Ringlet and Meadow Brown, but we get excited about finding our first Small Skippers of the tour plus Heather gets to see her first Goldfinch, something she'd missed on previous days. We again reach the minibus and set off.

We go south for a short way and park again, walking out to another hide overlooking another large scrape, where sadly we see lots of dead birds (mainly Black-headed Gulls) scattered about. Across the water is a large flock of Curlew, with a single Black-tailed Godwit and a couple of Dunlin amongst them. There are lots of Little Egrets here, with at least eight counted plus we also see a couple of Stock Doves and a Kestrel. We don't stay long and as we return to the bus, Julian spots an adult Common Cuckoo, which lands in full view for a minute before flying off – superb. We reach the van and now drive into the village, where we make use of their facilities before standing looking out to sea with a very tasty ice cream.

There is a large flock of Common Scoter on the water and lots of Sandwich and Arctic Terns are flying past in either direction. Further out Gillian and David spot some splashes and there is a small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins moving north towards Coquet Island, which is superb. This really rounds off our

Druridge Bay experience as now we are heading back north towards Bamburgh. Julian decides we should return to Bamburgh along the very scenic 'coastal route', which takes us up and through some very quaint and historic towns and villages, such as Warkworth (with its beautiful castle), past Alnmouth and through Embleton. It is a lovely drive and well worth the extra time getting to our next destination.

Just beyond Seahouses we stop again to check the pool but it's quiet with the expected species seen previously here. We go further north and in Bamburgh turn off to the coast, parking the van overlooking the rocks and sea with the Farnes in the distance. Again we are seeing all the expected species of seabird with another flock of Common Scoter, Gannets and gulls, auks and terns. We don't stay long as it's actually cold stood here, as there are dark clouds above which threaten rain. We decide on one more place and a little further north we stop again to check the Budle Bay mudflats as the tide is right out. We see the expected Curlew, Redshank, Shelduck and gulls in big numbers and a few Little Egrets. David now spots a trio of 'sawbills' with the unusual combination of a single female Goosander, a single female Red-breasted Merganser and its chick, swimming together down one of the water channels. When these have disappeared into a muddy trough we now leave and soon reach the hotel. After a break, we meet back up to do the checklist and following this we enjoy another excellent evening meal in this fabulous accommodation.

Day 7

Breakfast is at the usual time of 8am and again we are heading away from Bamburgh just before 9am. David has again been out already for an early morning walk and seen a Barn Owl, plus Yellowhammers, Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler. We drive south down the A1 turning off near Alnwick and out on to the open moorland with the Cheviots rising up ahead of us. It is a beautiful drive as we reach Rothbury and beyond now stopping at a bridge over the River Coquet. Julian parks the bus and we now make our way on to the bridge looking for Dipper. Initially it is quiet, but Gillian and Heather go to sample the delicious raspberries growing nearby. We keep scanning and Julian says "got one" pointing it out to David. We join our guide and Heather now finds another, which is brilliant as they are both young birds. We watch for a while enjoying their antics in the river before heading off with our first Sparrowhawk seen just before we go. We keep driving towards Elsdon stopping again at some crags in the hope of a Raven – sadly they are not around today but we do see a few Common Buzzards along the ridge line. We continue our drive and eventually reach the village where we visit their extremely nice local facilities.

Once we are ready, we again set off out of the village and over more open moorland with large conifer plantations dotted around, stopping at the layby next to the very ominous Winter's Gibbet. This is a fully formed hangman's

gibbet and quite morbidly fascinating being in full view of the surrounding area. We go for a closer look seeing a couple of Stonechats and a few Meadow Pipits along the short track – it is a very eerie start to the day but a great detour. Julian and David have stayed by the van, and in the distance, there is a large flock of Golden Plover wheeling round. We also spot a couple of Common Buzzards above the plantations and as we are about to leave, we see (and hear) a Common Crossbill fly out of the conifers. It is now late morning as we drive back and up through Redesdale to the Kielder Forest Drive, a metaled toll road that leads to Kielder village. We start to drive slowly stopping occasionally for look and listen, seeing a couple of Spotted Flycatchers, Lesser Redpoll, Coal Tit, Stonechat and Meadow Pipits. It is now lunchtime and Julian decides to stop and have our picnics overlooking an area of meadow and forest in the hope of a raptor or two.

We do see plenty of buzzards and another Sparrowhawk, but not much else but the weather now is getting worse (as forecast). When we are ready, we keep driving slowly down to the castle, where we use their facilities and continue to the village. Here we go to the bridge and check the river, with another Dipper being seen and David spots a Goosander but no Grey Wagtails, which is unusual. The rain is still light as we start to drive alongside Kielder Water, turning off for the nature reserve, to use the hide.

We park the van and walk through the forest with Goldcrests singing and seeing both Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. We reach the large hide just as the rain starts to get worse and settle down to see what's about. It is busy here, with lots of Mallard, Tufted Duck, single Cormorant and Grey Heron plus a few Little Grebes, some with chicks. Julian has seen Kingfisher previously here and checks every potential branch, before finding one near the hide. We get some great views of this gorgeous electric blue and orange waterbird as it catches a fish and flashes between perches. Out amongst the Mallard we now see another duck swimming about and it's a Mandarin, which is a huge surprise to Julian, not having seen one before on this tour – in fact there are eight of them!

Eventually the rain eases and we make our way back to the bus stopping in the car park to look at another new bird for the trip - Long-tailed Tit (#130). It is later than our guide has realised, and we need now to set off back towards Bamburgh, thankfully it is raining again so we don't need to stop. We do however need to refuel in Bellingham, which also prompts an ice cream stop, celebrating another great week in Northumberland. We now head back on the difficult, wet roads arriving at the hotel with some time to freshen up before our last dinner.

Day 8 After our final breakfast, Julian and Heather say “goodbye and bon voyage” to Gillian and David as they are driving to North Yorkshire for a few days.

A little later we leave for Newcastle getting there without incident, where Heather says 'thank you' to Julian for all his hard work on what has been a terrific and very productive week in Northumberland.

Species of the Trip

Heather Barn Owl and owlets

David Barn Owl and owlets

Gillian Puffins

Julian Purple Heron

Place of the Trip

Heather Holy Island

David Holy Island

Gillian Bamburgh village

Julian Longhoughton Steel

Magic Moment

Heather On a boat watching the Gannets and Puffins

David Seeing the Bittern flying in off the sea

Gillian Eventually the owlets in their hole

Julian Boat tour to Coquet Island and seeing the Roseate Terns so well

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Canada Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Tufted Duck
Common Pochard
Mandarin Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Common Scoter
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Great Bittern
Red Kite
Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Water Rail
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone
Dunlin
Stint (sp)
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Common Snipe
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Herring Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Little Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Roseate Tern
Puffin
Guillemot
Razorbill
Feral Pigeon
Stock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Barn Owl
Common Cuckoo
Common Kingfisher
Common Swift
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Rock Pipit

Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Dipper
Duncock
Robin
Northern Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap (heard only)
Whitethroat
Sedge Warbler
Eurasian Reed Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Willow Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Bullfinch
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Common Crossbill
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Bank Vole
Common Shrew
Roe Deer
Grey Squirrel
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Bottlenose Dolphin

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog
Common Toad

BUTTERFLIES & INSECTS

Small White
Large White
Green-veined White
Brimstone
Small Tortoiseshell
Dark Green Fritillary
Speckled Wood
Ringlet
Meadow Brown
Grayling
Red Admiral
Large Skipper
Small Skipper

Common Blue Damsel
Blue-tailed Damsel
Broad-bodied Chaser
Common Hawker
Emperor
Common Goldenring

Yellow Underwing moth
6-spot Burnet
Cinnabar Moth
Silver Y moth
Cucumber Spider
White-tailed Bumblebee
Common Carder Bee

NOTABLE PLANTS

Common Spotted Orchid

Northern Marsh Orchid

Pyramidal Orchid

Marsh Hellaborine

Lindisfarne Hellaborine

Purple Loosestrife

Poppy

Weld

Red Campion

Ragged Robin

Bloody Crane's-bill

Harebell

Sea Thrift

Ragwort

Knapweed

Deadly Webcap