

Holiday Highlights

Orkney

3 – 10 September 2017

Guides: Duncan Macdonald, Simon Pawsey and Jack Ward

Guests: Adrienne and Robin Mace, Clare and Rob Ballinger, Sue Whibley, Stella Bignold, Liz England and Philip Bath, Didge and Chris Brookings, John Duerden

Day 1: We all meet up at the restaurant at the Premier Inn in Inverness for pre-dinner drinks and introductions. We sit down and eat a very pleasant meal. Sue finally persuades Virgin Trains that she needs to be in Inverness and her train arrives. All present and correct.

Day 2: After breakfast we load the vans with our luggage and head to Tesco to purchase some lunch, before heading north on the A9. We decide to go no real distance, just to the north side of the Kessock Bridge to try and find Otter. There is a constant rumble from the traffic overhead as we scan from beneath the bridge. There our first Goosander on the far side as well as Cormorants. Jack is onto an Otter very quickly! We train our optics in the direction he is pointing and, yes, there are two Otters! We get great views as they play and hunt around one of the stanchions of the bridge. One climbs out onto a chain but then falls off! What a start.

We take a detour off the A9, into the Black Isle and visit Chanonry Point where we stand a good chance of finding Bottlenose Dolphin. The tide is just reaching high point as we arrive, but the whole place is quiet. There are a couple of Common Seals with their heads out of the water, but hardly a bird to be seen. We give it some time but there are no dolphins to be seen, so we head on.

Up near Tain there is an RSPB Reserve at Nigg and we call in to the hide here for a look and lunch. While we are scoffing we are also scanning and we soon clock up Canada Goose, Greylag Goose, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Redshank and we get a flight flock of Golden Plover.

Just north of the Dornoch Firth we stop at The Mound within Loch Fleet NNR. There are lots of Greylags on the water and some Curlew and Oystercatcher flying around. Robin, scanning the far shore finds a lone Pink-footed Goose, so we get a great opportunity for a comparison with Greylag. There are a couple of Ravens perched on an old Osprey nest and Simon finds us a pair of Red Kite circling towards the far hills. There are feeders in a garden adjacent and here we find Coal and Great Tit, Siskin, Goldfinch and Chaffinch. Liz spots a little group of ducks around some rocks that turn out to be Red-breasted Mergansers. Good stuff.

We decide to put some distance behind us and with only a small stop at Golspie we wind our way northwards through eastern Sutherland and Caithness arriving in Scrabster in plenty of time, so we stretch our legs and look at Eider and Black Guillemots while we await the arrival of the Hamnavoe, our ferry to Orkney.

On board we all decide to eat first and then go out on deck. Duly done we head outside to enjoy a pretty flat crossing. Simon and Duncan are out first and Simon picks up on a dark shearwater not far off the starboard side. It is a Sooty Shearwater! The silvery underwing is clear in contrast to the all brown body, but boy are they quick! There are no guests out to enjoy this and before long it has gone. There are plenty of Gannets and Fulmars to see and enjoy and we clock up Great Skua (Bonxie), Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin. The sun is setting majestically as we pull into Scrabster Harbour, what an arrival with the setting sun casting an orange glow over everything and leaving a wonderful sky as we drive off in the dark and head to our hotel.

Day 3: We enjoy a delightful breakfast with views onto the Loch of Stenness and it is lovely to see familiar staff again. The day has dawned dry but a little overcast. We drive only a short distance to the impressive Stones of Stenness that we can see from our hotel. These huge standing stones are the remains of what would have been a very impressive henge monument. As we explore more and more people arrive, coachloads of them as well as minibuses and cars. We discover that a cruise liner (the Caribbean Princess) is docked at Kirkwall. Time to leave and we will avoid the archaeology today!! Simon has managed to find four Slavonian Grebes out on the Loch of Harray while we are looking at the stones. We load up and drive just a short distance up the road to get a better look at these stunning grebes. One of them is still sporting some of its summer plumage. It is delightfully warm and sunny and so the group decide they would like to walk so we drive to Brodgar where we reconvene.

We decide to head west and follow a little road that leads to the cliffs of Yesnaby. This road follows a valley, where we find Stonechats and Wheatears on the fence lines. The wonderful thing about Orkney is that the sky is always full of birds; Starlings, Greylag Geese, Rooks and Jackdaws in impressive numbers. From the cliffs of Yesnaby we get impressive views out over the north Atlantic where Kittiwakes, Gannets and Fulmars wheel. There is a single Bonxie also. It is nice to see so many juvenile Kittiwakes. Even here it is busy with people so we decide to head elsewhere.

The Bay of Skail is famous for the Neolithic village of Skara Brae, which is part of the overall UNESCO World Heritage landscape. It is full of coaches this morning so we will come back here on another day. There are loos at the bay so we park up to make use. The views into the bay from here are worth a proper look. On the sand in front of us are Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Redshank, Oystercatcher and sparkling Sanderling. There are Eider, Shag and Black-headed Gulls on the water and a field of Curlew behind us. We decide to have lunch here as it is so pleasant. A Bonxie flies past spooking the gulls and then we pick

up on a raptor that is flying quickly north and out beyond the bay. It is large and pale and as we lock on it becomes clear that this is a falcon. A large, pale falcon? It can only be a Gyr Falcon. It quickly disappears behind the headland so we pack up and give chase.

We pull in at Mar Wick, where we hope that the bird might pitch up or at least give us another look. No chance! It has got away and enroute to Iceland by now. Only Duncan and Simon saw it though. There are Turnstone, Dunlin and the usual waders here and more Rock Pipits flitting amongst the multitude of Starlings feeding on the strand line.

At the Loons RSPB Reserve there is a hide and as there is just a hint of precipitation we decide to use it. The view is quite limited of the pools that make up the Reserve and we find that the majority of birds seen are either Greylag or Mallard. We do find a Wigeon and a Moorhen. There is a flight of teal out in front of us when Simon comes up trumps with a "Ringtail" Harrier. We watch this beauty as it quarters the ground ahead of us and joins a second bird that starts to soar. Wonderful views.

Our journey takes us through the wonderfully named village of Twatt towards the Birsay Moors. We cross these moors hopeful of more harriers or an owl, but the moors seem to be empty. At the village of Evie we spot a WC sign so follow it down to the shore where there are loos. Jack spots a couple of Red-throated Divers out in the bay as we get out to use the facilities. We are all instantly flapping and slapping as we find the air thick with midges. Those that can wait dart back into the vans whilst others run for the loos as fast as they can.

We drive around to the other side of the bay, to the Broch of Gurness. Here the midges are still out but nowhere near as bad, so we scan around and have some coffee. We can hear Sandwich Tern but cannot locate the bird. The views of the Red-throated Divers are more distant and there are the usual Shags, Cormorants and Eider. Simon spots a vole run across the track, but where is Clare? Nowhere to be seen. There are both Grey and Common (Harbour) Seals out in the bay. We have a look around this impressive Iron Age village with the broch tower at its centre and wonder why they were built. Obviously a defensive structure, who were they defending the land from? Romans, Norse, other local tribes? The remains don't tell us, but what a beautiful location and once the wind picks up there are no midges!

After dinner some of us take a look outside to see if there is an Aurora glow. There isn't but there is an incredibly close Otter in the water in front of us. We can see its eyes reflecting the light from the hotel before it gives an angry splash and vanishes.

Day 4: The day has dawned misty and wet. We find it difficult to see the stones across the Loch of Stenness from our breakfast window. The smoked salmon and scrambled eggs makes up for it though. Today we are heading north to the island

of Rousay, so once we are all loaded in the vans we set off. We make a brief detour into a new RSPB Reserve at Cottascarth. There is a smart car park so we step out and have a scan about. There is heaps of superb habitat here and in the spring/summer it must be quite something. Chris finds us a perched Buzzard but that is all we get.

At Tingwall we await the ferry to Rousay. There is a Sandwich tern here and some more distant Red-throated Divers. The group walk onto the ferry as the minibuses have to be reversed on. Once all together we try and shelter from the weather as best we can while still scanning for wildlife. Jack finds some more Red-throated Divers and they are much closer. There are Black Guillemots, Shags and Eider before we land on Rousay. Rousay is a hilly island with a road that circumnavigates it. The RSPB own most of the interior. The weather looks like it might improve but, before it does we get a few drenchings. We stop at a point overlooking the island of Wyre as well as the southern end of Egilsay. We have some coffee and break out the biscuits. There are some salmon cages in the sound and the sea around them is alive with Eider Duck. The rain sends us scurrying back to the vans but the blue sky is looking extensive just to our north. Just where we are heading.

We are cruising up the road when Simon's van spots a female Hen Harrier. The lead vehicle reverses and we all get great views, looking down, onto this beautiful raptor. The road climbs and the second van stops at Marion's shop to stock up on milk. At the top of the hill is a spectacular view north to the island of Westray. Down at the Loch of Wasbister there are lots of Greylag Geese on the water. Just adjacent to the loch is a little picnic spot at the wonderfully named Nousty sand. We have lunch here under pretty much, clear, blue skies. There is a big Grey Seal bottling out in front of us and a small group of Harbour Seals on the rocks to the right. Redshank and Pied Wagtail flit along the shore. Lunch is pleasant and we add Gannet, Fulmar, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Sand Martin, Swallow, House Sparrow, Twite and Linnet while having our lunch.

To the south west the road climbs again to an area of rough moorland. We stop here to try again for Short-eared Owl, but to no avail. Further on, above Midhowe Broch the view south over the island of Eynhallow to Mainland Orkney is staggering and we can clearly see why sailors avoid Eynhallow Sound. The currents and tides, sunken skerries and rocks looks makes the sound look like there is some great sea monster beneath the waves lashing around.

Before long we are boarding the ferry back to Mainland. Our crossing is brighter and smoother and the birdlife the same as the first crossing. We head straight back to the hotel for an early dinner.

After dinner we load up again and head around to the Ring of Brodgar. We missed this out yesterday because of the cruise liner, tonight we have it to ourselves. This site is simply huge and it is hard to imagine how people over 5,000 years ago managed to excavate a ditch three metres deep and nine metres

wide; digging into solid bedrock. It is a staggering achievement and one of many staggering achievements on Orkney that date from the Neolithic period. It is getting dark quite quickly but Jack still manages to find us a Peregrine perched on a fence post. On our drive back the full moon is rising behind some cloud; the icing on the cake.

Day 5: Our day dawns cloudy and a bit wet but there is no such thing as bad weather just inappropriate clothing! So with this in mind we head out west to Skara Brae.

On our way there we pass a little flooded area in a field where there are four Black-tailed Godwits. At the Loch of Skail we find a Long-tailed Duck with a Tufted Duck and at the entrance to Skara Brae there is a field absolutely covered in Golden Plover and Lapwing. We get out, gently, to go through them thoroughly. What a sight! As we pack up the scopes we can't help make a little more noise and the whole lot lift, wow! The swirl of birds is amazing to watch, and thankfully they resetttle back in the field.

Skara Brae is a Neolithic village site, on the shore of the Bay of Skail. No one knew it existed until a great storm in 1850 lifted some of the sand under which it had lain secret for thousands of years. What was then discovered was a village of inter-connected houses surrounded by a thickness of midden. The houses contain beds, hearths, dressers and other nooks and cupboards that are all recognisable and all built from stone. It is a breathtaking place.

There is Sanderling on the beach and out in the bay we get a little excited as a dark shape is spotted amongst the waves. On inspection it is a surfer enjoying the waves, not the cetacean we had hoped. Simon waves frantically at us and points to his scope. We rush to him and he tells us that he has a male Hen Harrier on the ground in his scope. We get on it quickly and enjoy the views. Stella is the one who gets the bonus as it takes off. We track it as it contours the hill and disappears from view. What a bird.

We turn back and head back past Brodgar for our appointment with Maes Howe. The rain is pelting down as we disembark from the bus and start to walk across the field to the tomb. From the outside it is just a low-lying grassy mound, the real experience is inside at the end of a low tunnel that we have to stoop through. Once we have all stood up and our eyes have adjusted to the dark we gasp at the sheer size of this tomb. We all fit in with space to spare and can stand with plenty of room above our heads. Some of us have spotted already but our guide points out a Swallow's nest on the inside wall opposite the entrance and it has a second brood of chicks. Right on cue three little fluffy heads poke up and then drop back. Mum barges past those of us at the entrance and flies up to the nest. It is totally amazing.

Our guide does very well to give us the history of the site and in particular the period where it was used as shelter by some Norse warriors and who left their mark in the stones. Here, in Maes Howe, is a remarkable collection of Norse

Runes. Most of the inscriptions are similar to modern graffiti, some mention treasure, there is a Christian cross and an intricately carved animal. This, the Maes Howe Dragon, is sublime in its creation and a real highlight.

We drive into Kirkwall for lunch. The rain is beginning to ease so perhaps we will have a better day this afternoon. Some of us head off into town for a chance of shopping. Some head to the wonderful Cathedral of St. Magnus and some head for the museum on the high street.

We head out of Kirkwall to Scapa Bay (home to fine whisky) and pull up where there are some waders on the shore. We find Bar-tailed Godwit here along with Redshank and Turnstone and it is great to go through the differences between Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits having now seen both species today. We drive a little further and have another scan where we find a Sandwich Tern amongst the many Black-headed Gulls and a fabulous adult Great Northern Diver close to shore.

We drive the road along the southern coast of mainland, through the Reserve of Hobbister to Waulkmill Bay. Here we have some coffee and shortbread and find Red-breasted Mergansers and Red-throated Diver out at sea. Jack finds another female Hen Harrier over the far side of the bay and Simon spots a Peregrine that lifts and tails away from us. A Kestrel makes a brief appearance as does a Bonxie. A pair of Ravens play around the point.

Our return journey takes us through the valley of Tuskerbister, where there is a lot of great looking owl habitat, but as with everywhere else we have looked there are none to be found.

Day 6: Our target for today is to reach South Ronaldsay and the Tomb of the Eagles, so we pack up and head out.

We drive back through Tuskerbister, under blue skies, looking for owls again. Again there is nothing. At Scapa Bay the Great Northern Diver is still in close and the water is inky calm so we get out and creep closer to get quite astonishing views of this beautiful bird just beginning to moult into winter plumage.

Close to Barrier Number 1 there is a freshwater loch and we pull over here for some coffee and a look. There are mainly Mallard and Wigeon as well as three Moorhen. We also find a Sedge warbler which is a nice addition to the list. A small group of Snipe prove difficult to view.

At the beginning of the Second World War U47 snuck into Scapa Flow on a high tide to find the Royal Oak at anchor. The existing defences were inadequate and the Royal Oak was sunk with the loss of 833 lives. As a result the decision was taken to seal the eastern entrances to Scapa Flow permanently. The Churchill Barriers were started and their construction lasted the duration of the war. The work was undertaken by prisoners of war, mainly Italian, housed

in camps on the islands of Lamb Holm and Burray. There is little to be seen of these camps now except for the remarkable little chapel known as the Italian Chapel on Lambs Holm. We have a look at this and all agree that it is an inspirational place with a spectacular view.

It is as we are leaving that we realise that the lunches are still sitting at our hotel and NOT in our vans!! Oops! There is not enough time to head back and therefore we keep our fingers crossed that St. Margarets Hope on South Ronaldsay has a shop! Thankfully it does and not only that but they will make up sandwiches to order! We (guides) breathe a sigh of relief and once all is paid for we head around to the eastern coast to the lovely Wind Wick for lunch. We get views up to Copinsay and again the sea is flat calm. There are the usual suspects out there but we do find a distant pod of dolphins but they are unidentifiable at this range.

At Isbister we pull up at the visitor centre for the Tomb of the Eagles. Freda and Kathleen give us a warm welcome and whisk the guests into the Neolithic room! The two guides do a bit of birding outside in the wonderfully warm sun. Simon finds an interesting looking wader down on the muddy fringe of a pool in a field. We wonder why it isn't a Ruff and talk our selves into it looking good for a Pectoral sandpiper. We get the guests out to have a look and then head down in the vans for a closer look. From our closer location it is quite obviously a Ruff, but it is still a good bird to find. A very smartly plumaged female.

Once the guests have finished with their inside interpretation we head out along the coast, for a mile or so, to the tomb itself. The entrance tunnel into the tomb is so low that to get in one has to either crawl or pull themselves in on a trolley. We all opt for the latter. Like Maes Howe, once we are inside we can all stand up and marvel at the building skill of our ancestors. This site was found by the farmer of the land (father of Freda and Kathleen) and the bones of the dead inside where intermingled with the remains of numerous White-tailed Sea eagles. These birds obviously held some importance to the people of the time and must have also been numerous.

Before long we are saying our farewells and heading back. We haven't gone far when the lead vehicle is called back by the other. Simon has spotted a white gull in a field. It is an Iceland Gull. Fantastic and we get great views as it lifts and glides to another field full of cattle. Superb! Our journey takes in Tuskerbister one last time and still no owls, oh well.

Day 7: It is wet again this morning as we load up the vans having had breakfast, paid our bills and said our farewells.

We head straight to Stromness and get in the queue for the ferry. Most people opt for a quick look around this quaint little town while the guides do a bit of birding from the pier.

Once on board it dries up and the sun even tries to pop out. The journey back to the mainland is brightened by the superb views of Hoy, flocks of Fulmars, two Sooty Shearwaters and for some lucky people the dolphins that appeared on the starboard side.

Back on the mainland we head east to Dunnet Head, the most northerly point on the UK mainland. We have lunch here and watch the Gannets and Fulmars wing by at head height. We have a long way to go so after loos at Dunnet Bay and filling up in Thurso we head back down the A9 to Brora, where we stop for a stretch and a quick look at the river mouth there. The tide is right in and so very little to look at so we hit the road again and wind the final miles back to Inverness and our Premier Inn for our final night. After dinner we go through the usual checklist and voting. Thank you to all for such great fun and fond memories of those magical isles off the north coast.

Species of the Trip: Unanimously Great Northern Diver with two votes apiece for Hen Harrier and Sooty Shearwater.

Place of the Trip: A two-way tie between Ring of Brodgar and Maes Howe.

Magic Moment: Usually lots of individual voting but the nesting Swallow in Maes Howe was a run-away winner.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Sooty Shearwater
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Black Swan (on Orkney since 1995)
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Goosander
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Gyr Falcon !
Pheasant
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Sanderling
Dunlin
Ruff
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank
Turnstone
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Iceland Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Puffin
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Swift
Dipper
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Sedge Warbler
Willow Warbler
Blue Tit
Coal Tit
Great Tit

Jackdaw
Carrion Crow
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite

MAMMALS

Otter
Porpoise
Dolphin sp.
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Brown Hare
Stoat
Rabbit
Orkney Vole
Red Deer
Brown Rat

BUTTERFLIES

Common Tortoiseshell
Red Admiral
Green Veined White