

Holiday Highlights
Isles of Scilly
7 – 14 October 2017

Leaders: Duncan Macdonald and Simon Eaves

Guests: Christine Parkin and Sue Bradshaw, Barbara and Tony Keville, Jill and Rob Martin, Charles Gordon, Sandy and Jim Elder, Liz and Roger Ackroyd, Maureen and Ted Cawley

Day 1: We all meet up in the early morning on a mizzly, drizzly Penzance quay to board the Scillonian III. There are introductions and reunions as we tag our luggage and have it stowed in the container that is going on the ship. There is a little bit of concern that Charles is going to make it, but just in the nick of time he arrives and we can all relax.

The ship is busy as there are a number of 'mega' birds on the islands and the plane from Lands End is not flying due to the weather. Plenty of sharp eyes aboard though! We are quickly into good numbers of birds as we head out to sea. We are on the edge of a weather front and this is where the birds are. There are good numbers of Gannet, when Simon finds a small group of shearwaters. They are brownish and washed-out looking and therefore Balearic Shearwater. We get good views of these as well as a few Razorbills and Guillemots. There is also a distant view of the tail-end of a Puffin! Simon finds two Arctic Skuas, both pale phased birds, that are chasing and harrying Kittiwakes. We also get a Bonxie flying past a little later.

The journey quickly passes, though not quickly enough for some and are soon docking at Hugh Town on the island of St. Mary's. As we are docking Barbara spots some little "dodgers" that on inspection turn out to be Oystercatchers and a few Redshank. We walk up through the town to our hotel where our rooms and lunch await us. Our luggage will arrive later. We sit down to lunch and most pleasant it is too.

We don our binoculars and head out into the damp and grey for the rest of the afternoon. We walk up and over the hill to Old Town. There are Starlings and House Sparrows everywhere. We walk down a lane towards the Old Town church. Here we find our first Blackbirds and the Scilly form of Song Thrush (darker and most confiding). Harold Wilson had a long association with these islands and we find his grave. Goldcrests are flitting in the trees above our heads and both House Martin and Swallows go winging past. At Old Town Bay we find a Greenshank and Jim

wonders if there is movement amongst the seaweed and rocks on the shore. There is and they prove to be a small troop of Ringed Plover. Maureen spots a flock of flighty sparrows on the far side of the bay when a raptor appears among them and quickly vanishes. Not much later Charles spots a raptor dashing across the bay. It is a Merlin! We get great views as it zips away from us and is gone.

We walk on to the small nature reserve of Lower Moors, one of the places to keep an eye on while we are on the Scillies. At the first hide we all squeeze in and are treated to views of about a dozen Common Snipe, a single Teal and Mallard. A little further on there is a screen overlooking a scrape in the reeds, but the only bird visible is a Grey Wagtail.

As we walk further on we hear the distinctive call of a Yellow-browed Warbler, so we try and track it down. It only gives us the briefest of views, however, so we head on. Some other birders are on the boardwalk here as this is where a Spotted Crake has been seen over recent days. We give it some time here and get some Goldfinches flying over and a Water Rail calling but no crake.

We are soon back in Hugh Town and the hotel. Some call it a day here while the rest of us stomp up to the Garrison, where a Wryneck has been reported. We find more Goldcrests, Chaffinch and Great Tit before we also head back to the hotel for a sumptuous meal and a discussion about the coming days.

Day 2: St. Agnes

Liz and Roger are the lucky ones this morning, spotting Blackcap from their balcony window before breakfast. Breakfast is superb and because we are on island time there is no rush.

Today we are heading "off island" more specifically to St. Agnes. We walk back through Hugh Town to the pier, where we board the "Osprey". The weather is warm, close and foggy as we take our seats on a rather busy boat. There are lots of other birders heading to St. Agnes looking for the American "mega" that is there and where we also are heading for.

St. Agnes is a beautiful little island, full of little hedged lanes that are full of sparrows, Collared Doves and Starlings. The Song Thrushes are again incredibly obliging as we pick our way towards the twitch point. There is a cafe at the path junction. Here we get brief views of both Yellow-browed Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher before we start to head down the muddy path. Ted and Maureen decide to stay back at the café, so we agree to pick them up on our return.

The muddy path leads us down to Warna's Cove, where we find a lot more birders and photographers. We try and muscle our way in and set up alongside. We gather that the bird was in view as we arrived but not now, seconds later! We watch and wait. There is movement in the tree that the Waxwing was seen in but all movement proves to be either Song Thrush or Blackbird. We lose a few to the cafe as the waiting and the running commentary from another group leader starts to take its toll. Duncan is not convinced that we are looking in the right place and neither is Simon so they walk further up hill to a wider view point. There are a scattering of other birders up here but all still focused on that one single tree. It doesn't take long. Simon finds the waxwing in a bush some distance from where everyone was looking. Our group joins us and we are soon looking at this bonnie bird through the scopes. It is a little elusive and skulking at times but we all see the dark mask and the yellow tip to the tail. What a stunner and only the 7th record for the UK!! It flies back towards the original tree and we lose it.

We decide to have lunch here on the cove and Barbara finds some Porpoises out beyond the cove. There are Wrens poking around the rocks on the beach while we are eating our sandwiches. Back at the cafe we all reconvene and find that some kind soul had scoped the waxwing from the cafe so Ted and Maureen had seen it! We walk down to the campsite at Troytown, where the views are stunning and we get a Willow Warbler and a Hawfinch that calls and flies past.

Back at the Parsonage we have a scan about. This area can be good for migrants and it is no different today. There are more Goldcrests in a line of trees and on closer inspection there is a Yellow-browed Warbler with them. It is flighty but we get some good views of this cracking little warbler from the east. There is a Spotted Flycatcher here also and again, with a little perseverance, we all get some sort of view.

There have been reports of a Hawfinch showing well down Barnaby's Lane and we all decide we should give it a go. The lane is very muddy but the birders by the gate show us that the Hawfinch is in view when we arrive and give us directions. Wow! We get incredible views of this huge-billed finch as it delicately separates the flesh from the seeds of the berries it is eating on the Whitebeam tree. It even drops onto the ground at one point. It eventually gets spooked and flies off to the left and we lose it. Brilliant bird!

We make our way back towards the pier, stopping for Red-legged Partridge on the way and for a drink at the Turks Head pub. The ferry takes us away from St. Agnes and deposits us back at Hugh Town, where some of us decide to carry on up to the airfield where an Isabelline Wheatear has been reported. The others make their way back to the hotel. Up at the airfield the cloud has come down and it is slightly misty

but we quickly locate the wheatear close to a Northern Wheatear for a handy comparison. Wow, two "megas" in one day!

Day 3: After breakfast we head out towards Old Town, as we are staying on St. Mary's today. We get redirected almost immediately, however, as a Rosy Starling has been reported from up by the Buzza Tower, just a short step from the hotel. It would be rude not to!

There are lots of other birders up at the tower and it is also a fabulous view point. Under blue skies we take directions towards where the bird was seen and very quickly it appears on the top of a bush. It is a first winter bird so looks pale grey with a yellow bill and it shows off beautifully before flying off. But we needn't worry because it is favouring this bush, so is soon back again. Simon spots some Porpoise out in the bay that we all get on to. Duncan spots some ducks out there also and these are Common Scoter! We get the scopes on them and direct the other birders who want them for their list. Simon gets his scope onto a distant Spoonbill that is on a small rocky island off Sansom!

In Old Town bay it is quiet with only Shag, Ringed Plover and Rock Pipits to see, so we carry on up to the airfield so that the whole group can get the wheatear. As we walk up the hill, avoiding being run over by the traffic, the front part of the group gets a low flying Sparrowhawk that dashes and twists and reappears with prey in its talons. Let's hope it isn't a wheatear! Those of us at the back get a second Sparrowhawk that is soaring above us with attendant Starlings. The airport is busy with flights coming and going, but the Isabelline Wheatear is quite content on the grass just ducking down every time a plane taxis past. There is a northern Wheatear again for comparison.

Back down at Old Town we stop in at the cafe for some celebratory coffee that we share with the throng of sparrows. We then walk south to Tolman Point, amongst the rocks, to have some lunch. It is a glorious spot to dine and we even find a Grey Seal bottling out in the bay. Jim finds a Kingfisher sitting on one of the large off shore rocks. As we follow his directions it takes off and flies up and over the rock never to be seen again!

We part company with Ted and Maureen here as they head back to Old Town. We are taking the rough coastal path around the headland to Porth Hellick. We walk through coastal heath with stands of gorse where we find Stonechats, Meadow Pipits and a fabulously obliging Northern Wheatear. The path takes us past the end of the airfield's runway. As we approach a loud claxon goes off and an aircraft comes in to land, pretty much over head.

The tide is out in Porth Hellick as we drop down to the bay. We have a scan about. There are at least eight Greenshank in the furthest pool along with a Heron. We bump into some other birders who kindly inform us that the American Golden Plover (the reason we are here) is visible over on the other side of the bay. We head around the bay and past the wonderfully named Loaded Camel Rock, where we find some other birders. Simon very quickly gets onto the bird and we follow his directions. It is on the opposite rocks from us alongside a large group of Ringed Plover. Through the scopes we get stunning views of this smart, spangly plover that has crossed the Atlantic to be with us here. There are more Greenshank as well. We enjoy the views of the plover for quite a while as it is such a beautiful bird, but eventually we have to move on.

We take the path through Higher Moors and past Porth Hellick pool, where we scope a few Snipe. Further on through the moors we find a nice Reed Warbler high in a Willow tree of all places. Simon's radio cranks into life and we get a report of a Wood Warbler showing well just ahead, so we march on to the road where there are a lot of birders. The warbler is a little distant but superb through the scopes as it suns itself, even closing it's eyes showing the yellow throat and white belly. What a stunning little bird.

We hike up and over to lower moors, where we hear that the Spotted Crake is showing, so in we head. We have just missed it! It is obviously a flighty bird. There is a birder who says he can see it down an over-grown, shallow channel, but on inspection a Water Rail is visible. No Joy. A Jack Snipe gives us obscured but reasonable views from the main hide, along with Teal and Mallard and Common Snipe. We head back to the hotel for a well earned, delightful meal tired and content.

Day 4: Tresco

It is a duller and windier day today, but with an improving forecast as we finish breakfast, collect our lunches and make our way down to the pier for another day off island. Our destination is the island of Tresco and we all jump aboard the "Meridian" to take us there.

The skipper makes for New Grimsby, the northern of the two piers, as it is high water. Ted and Maureen get a group of Little Egrets on a rock before we dock. We land and have a quick scan about. Barbara finds a little group of Turnstones and out on the skerries we find the Little Egrets. They fly over to the other side of the channel and as we get them in the scope we realise that one of the gulls that they have landed by is not the same as the others. It is in fact a first winter Mediterranean

Gull, very nice but slightly tricky at this distance. It flies off and lands amongst a much larger group where we find an equally distant adult Med. Gull.

We walk down the manicured lanes of Tresco, part of the Duchy of Cornwall and head towards the Great Pool. At a junction there are large hedges on either side of the track and we can hear "crests". Duncan is convinced that there is Firecrest in amongst the numerous Goldcrests, so tries a bit of call to try and lure it out. Bingo, there it is, right in front of us. As is their nature it doesn't sit still, so it is a challenge for all the group to get onto it, but eventually we all manage some view or other.

There is a hide at the Great Pool and it is big enough to get us all in, so we set up camp in there for a while. There are lots of birds visible, so we start to go through them. We find good numbers of Gadwall and Coot and there is a pair of Mute Swans on the far side. Moorhens poke about the reedy margins dinking around the Mallard. At the right hand end there is a group of waders. Here we find Redshank, Greenshank Snipe and a lone Teal.

Further on along the track we discover some interesting fungi on a cut stump. There is a near constant sound of Goldcrest as we walk with fly pasts of Woodpigeon. Simon points out a Sparrowhawk as it wings in front of some trees. There is a little group of Linnet in the top of a dead tree and then we are out into some open heath and make our way down to Pentle Bay for lunch. This is gorgeous here. White sand and blue water, with stunning views out to the Eastern Isles (all uninhabited). There are lots of Oystercatcher on a sandbar out in the bay and a young Heron with a Curlew on the tip of Great Pentle Rock. A group of small waders flies in and lands on the beach in front of us. They are mainly Ringed Plover but there are four Sanderling and a Dunlin with them. Our peace and tranquillity is then destroyed as Simon tells us that he has found a very distant Great Northern Diver and boy is it distant! Nearly in Cornwall. Some of us try and succeed and some try and try again but are still not convinced. Those who see it can tell, however that it is a dark bird obviously showing some adult plumage!

We walk around to the Abbey and have a look in the Abbey Pool as we go. There are more Gadwall and Mallard as well as three Lesser Black-backed Gulls among the Great Black-backed Gulls. Simon finds a female Wigeon here so we get that in the scopes as well.

Round at the Abbey we have some tea and coffee in the cafe where a Red Squirrel comes bounding inside and straight for the kitchen. One of the waiters and a little girl hand feed the creature. We split from here as some would like to visit the famous Abbey gardens, while the rest of us carry on birding. Once we have agreed

a meeting time we head our separate ways with those visiting the gardens getting great views of four Golden Pheasants. The rest of us head back to the Abbey Pool where Maureen strikes gold with a drake Pintail. What a stunning bird it is too and fabulous through the scopes. Another Red Squirrel bounds across the track. We head back down Penzance Road where we try for Yellow-browed Warbler but only manage to find Goldcrest.

We all meet up at the allotted place and make our way to Cam Near Quay, where the boat picks us up and takes us back to St. Mary's. Simon gets us onto the adult Med. Gull that flies right over the boat.

Dinner is extraordinarily good again and afterwards Simon, Duncan, Rob, Tony and Charles head around to the Scillonian Club for the evening bird log. This is most entertaining and we also get a look at a Smooth Stick Insect that has been brought in for people to look at. There are two species on the island. More of this later.

Day 5: We have another great breakfast. The weather forecast is for it to get worse as the day goes on, so we plan to give the group some time to themselves this afternoon.

We start on Porthcressa Beach, just near the hotel, where Simon has seen a Redstart yesterday evening. We don't find the Redstart but what we do find is much more impressive. The high winds and swell has brought a lot of jellyfish onto the beach and with them are a few Portuguese Man of War. These are spectacular, like pinky/blue balloons washed up on the beach. One of them is on clear sand so we can see the mass of turquoise tentacles on the underside of the balloon. These remarkable things are not real jellyfish but siphonophores. These are communities of identical zooids that co-operate to provide all the functions of a single organism. Remarkable and they have crossed the Atlantic.

There is a large flock of Turnstone on Town Beach and we walk along the coast to Porth Mellon, where we get to compare Meadow and Rock Pipits as well as notice the difference between British Pied and continental White Wagtails. The path takes us as far as Porthloo where we lose some into the arty shops. We find two Brent Geese here that have been reported and Simon scopes some Canada Geese that are on the beach on the island of Sansom!

We walk back southwest, past Porthloo Pool where there is a myriad of mixed parentage ducks. We go through the little park of Harry's Walls to get back to Lower Moors. Here we get frustrated by a very vocal but invisible Yellow-browed Warbler and there is no luck again with the Spotted Crane.

We get to Old Town Church, where we are informed that there are a couple of Prickly Stick Insects visible on some of the brambles. We find them and camera shutters fire as we admire these ridiculous insects that are so superbly camouflaged. Back at the hotel we all go our separate ways for the rest of the afternoon, with some shopping, some heading back to the Spotted Crake, some heading for the Jack Snipe and some chllaxing at the hotel.

Day 6: St. Martin's

Breakfast is as relaxed as it has been every morning. We then gather and walk down to the pier to get on our boat to the island of St. Martin's. The weather is absolutely stunning with clear, blue sky and glorious sunshine. "Golden Spray" takes us out over the clear water to St Martin's, considered by many to be the jewel of the islands.

We are dropped at Higher Town Quay and we walk up through Higher Town, realising as we go that this is a beautiful island indeed. We walk up past the fire station to the village hall, where we cut off on a rough track towards the coast. We get nice views of Stonechats and a few Goldcrests in a line of trees. Charles counts 12 in total! There is a stand of large parasol mushrooms that delays us for photographs before we head down to Great Bay. We walk the short distance to Little Bay, where we drop down onto the sand to have lunch. It is absolutely beautiful here and absolutely Scillonian; blue sea, blue sky and white sand. Liz has her shoes off and feet in the water as soon as we arrive. We count 128 Oystercatchers on a rock offshore and we play hide and seek with a pod of Common Dolphin out in the bay. They are quite active to begin with but become increasingly more difficult to see as time goes on.

We walk around the headland of Pernagie, with stunning views out to Round Island, St. Helen's and Tean. We find a path that takes us down a lovely sunken, hidden trail to the strategically placed Seven Stones Inn. Here we decide to have a rest and a tea/coffee/beer and share our biscuits with the local Sparrows, 28 of them according to Charles. Duncan has them on his hand and head! Simon scopes another distant Great Northern Diver that proves just as tricky to see as the first. Which pink buoy are we looking for?

The "Golden Spray" takes us back to Hugh Town and we wander back towards the hotel, taking in Porthcressa once more where we find the Common Redstart on the boulders along with a pair of Stonechat. The group drift off as the redstart becomes elusive and so miss the Peregrine that floats overhead and out to the point.

After dinner the Scillonian Club beckons again so that Charles can get his Sparrow count suitably recognised! The other highlight being the Spitting Spider that

a gentleman had found on a white wall and being the first record of this species for a very long time. Jill did a very good impersonation of how it fires out the venom/silk liquid in a Zorro type fashion!

Day 7: Duncan and Rob brave the dark and head out to Lower Moors before breakfast, cameras at the ready, to get a look at the elusive Spotted Crake. However, the crake was obviously having a lie-in and we trudge back to the hotel despondent. We are gladdened though by the glorious breakfast at the hotel.

Today we head into St Mary's and aim for the lovely gardens of Carreg Dhu. It is a bit of a tramp to get there but definitely worth it. There is quite an arboretum here and with blue sky and bright sunshine it is a lovely place to be. There is an elusive Yellow-browed Warbler at the entrance and we don't even manage brief views. There is the sound of "crests" from all over the gardens, so we explore some of these sounds. Up at the top of the gardens we strike lucky when we are sure we are hearing Firecrest. A little bit of tape does the trick and two of these fabulous little birds emerge from the dense foliage of a conifer. By flaring their crests they make sure we certainly know whose territory we are on and they generally look a bit miffed. Great views.

Just up the road from here is Longstone Café, so we head in there for a warming brew. There is even a little cake to go with it while Goldcrests and Wren provide some entertainment. We get another flyty Yellow-browed Warbler and a Firecrest also makes an appearance.

Our route onwards takes us down through the glorious little reserve of Holy Vale. The path is narrow and gnarly but has a Tolkeinesque feel to it. The large Elms are covered in Ivy and the channels are green with pondweed. A beautiful, if quiet meander.

Our walk takes us back through Higher Moors to Porth Hellick, where we stop and have lunch on the beach. Some of the group have lunch in the comfort of one of the hides. The American Golden Plover is showing quite nicely over on the other side of the bay so we carefully wander round the bay to get a closer look. Once we have settled against a building the views are quite spectacular. A Ringed Plover joins it and we get a lovely comparison. The dark eye stands out against the pale head and emphasised by the pale supercilium. It really is a very handsome bird.

We have a scan for the supposed Wilson's Snipe but it is hiding, while we are looking although there are some Common Snipe to make up for it. We carry on back through Lower Moors where people are still waiting in lonely vigil for

a fleeting glimpse of a Spotted Crake. We don't linger but head back to Old Town where we have a look for Stick Insects in the graveyard before heading up the road towards the hotel. Some of us take a detour out to Peninnis Head for a look. It is quite cold here but we do get the obligatory Gannets and a handful of auks moving past.

After dinner, seeing as it is our last night, we go through the voting for the week's experiences.

Species of the Trip: Firecrest takes this with Gannet, Hawfinch and American Golden Plover all getting a couple of votes.

Place of the trip: St. Martin's wins with a landslide.

Magic Moment: The Firecrest flashing its crest gets the most votes, with Spotted Crake coming in second!

Day 8: Our luggage is packed and we leave it at the hotel to be picked up and delivered to the Scillonian. We finish our breakfast and wander up to the Garrison for one last chance at something new. It is quiet up here but the views back over Hugh Town make up for the lack of birds. There are lots of Goldcrests and we get lovely views of Stonechats in the open, bracken covered hillsides.

Back down in town we have our lunch and have some time to visit more shops if we want before meeting up and boarding our ship to take us away from these beautiful islands. The journey is less eventful than the way over, though there is a close pod of Common Dolphin briefly and we pass Portuguese Man of War floating on the surface. We get Bonxies, Gannets and some Balearic Shearwaters to round our trip off.

We say our farewells on Penzance Quay. Thanks to you all for a lot of fun and laughter.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Balearic Shearwater
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Canada Goose
Pale-bellied Brent Goose
Pintail
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Eider
Common Scoter
Spoonbill
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Golden Pheasant
Water Rail
Spotted Crake
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
American Golden Plover
Sanderling
Dunlin
Jack Snipe
Common Snipe
Wilson's Snipe

Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank
Turnstone
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Guillemot
Razorbill
Puffin
Woodpigeon
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove
Collared Dove
Kingfisher
Swallow
House Martin
Cedar Waxwing
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Pied/White Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Stonechat
Wheatear
Isabelline Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Reed Warbler
Yellow-browed Warbler
Balckcap
Chiffchaff

Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Firecrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
Rosy Starling
House Sparrow
Hawfinch
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Wood Warbler

MAMMALS

Common Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Rabbit
Red Squirrel
Brown Rat

BUTTERFLIES

Speckled Wood
Large White
Green-veined White
Peacock
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Small Copper
Hummingbird Hawkmoth

OTHERS

Prickly Stick Insect
Smooth Stick Insect
Spitting Spider
Portuguese Man of War
Moon Jellyfish