

Holiday Highlights

Shetland and Orkney

4 – 13 July 2021

Leaders: Craig Round & Tim Drew

Guests: Karen Bolton and Paul Holtam, Lisa and Chris Hayes, Fiona and Tim Ward, Sue and Mike Jenkins, Liz England, Marie Luke

Day 1: After all meeting at Aberdeen Airport and after a flight delay of several hours we finally board our flight to Shetland. We get good views as we fly past Fair Isle and also glimpse the island of Foula in the distance, before we come in to land at Sumburgh. After picking up our luggage and hire vehicles at the airport we drive North to our hotel.

Day 2: Our first full day on the islands starts with early mist clearing to some beautiful and sunny weather and breath-taking Shetland scenery, as we drive North for the island of Fetlar. On the drive to catch the ferry we see Snipe, Oystercatcher and Great Skuas as well as a Red Throated Diver on a roadside loch.

We arrive at Toft at the north end of Mainland Shetland, to be greeted by close Arctic Terns, Black Guillemots, Guillemots and Razorbills around the ferry terminal. On the crossing to Yell we see a smart Dark morph Arctic Skua before we land on Yell and drive North to meet our next ferry over to Fetlar. Driving across Yell we see numerous Wheatear, Skylark and Curlew and also another Arctic Skua.

On the ferry crossing to Fetlar, again more seabirds are encountered including Puffin, Arctic Terns and Gannets flying past through the sound. We drive across Fetlar, past fields thick with vivid yellow Buttercups and shocking pink of Ragged Robin, as numerous Wheatears flit off the walls and fence posts alongside the road and get great views of both Curlew and Golden Plover with chicks, as well as seeing Great Skuas, Ravens and Hooded Crows.

At Loch of Funzie we make a stop for lunch overlooking the loch and whilst here get stunning views of a pair of Red-throated Divers on a small lochan, as well as flocks of Redshank Oystercatcher, Lapwing and a few Dunlin. After lunch we take a walk around to the hide overlooking the Mires of Funzie, Arctic Terns and a single Common Tern are roosting along the loch shore and we also see Ringed Plover and several Dunlin. As we take in the views Skylarks are singing from the fields all around, as well as many 'drumming' displaying Common Snipe right overhead, a great sight and sound!

On the path down to the hide overlooking the 'Mires of Funzie' we pass a nest full of well grown Hooded Crow chicks in the stunted willows here and only a few feet off the ground! But other than more Snipe from the hide it's very quiet bird wise here, so we head back and drive up onto some higher moorland on the island. The views are stunning up here and the birding isn't bad either with good views of several Whimbrel flying over as well as summer plumaged Golden Plover calling and displaying, three Arctic Skuas, Great Skuas, Ringed Plover and Dunlin. With time getting on and as the fog starts to roll in we head back to catch our ferry off the island and back to Yell.

After our dinner at the hotel and a little down time we are soon heading out again for our night visit to the island of Mousa to see Storm Petrels. It's a foggy old night as we cross on the boat to the island and walk around the coast towards the Broch. As the light begins to fail we here our first Storm Petrels beginning their bizarre 'purring' calls from the stone walls next to the path and at the incredible 2000 year old Iron Age broch. The walls of the broch slowly come alive to the calls of more Storm Petrels, as more and more birds arrive and swirl like bats around the tower. It's simply a magical experience and we spend a magic few hours here, before making our way back to catch the boat back. What a night!

Day 3: Today is fine and bright after last night's fog and our first stop this morning is a little way up the road at Gott. Here after a little searching we get fantastic views of a vagrant Rosy Starling which is mixed in with the local Shetland Starlings. Though quite what the local Starlings make of this exotic looking pink visitor is another thing! We also get good views of Shetland Wren here, as well as a female Red-breasted Merganser and Mute Swan with cygnets on the loch.

Moving on down to Loch Tingwall we get views of three Whooper Swans on the far side of the loch, along with a Swallow and large post breeding flock of Curlew in the newly cut fields behind us.

We have a quick stop in Scalloway harbour before we head further south through some increasingly foggy weather and stop at high point overlooking the coast and the island of Mousa, where we were last night, or was it this morning! Here there are large rafts of Shags and Black Guillemots on the sea and also three Twite on the hillside nearby, before we decide to head across to the west side of mainland to try and get away from the pesky fog!

It proves to be an inspired move, as we arrive for lunch overlooking the beautiful St Ninians Isle in warm sunshine! It really is idyllic here whilst having lunch and taking in the stunning views out across the Tombolo and we see plenty of birds including Arctic and Common Terns, a Red-throated Diver, Eiders with chicks, Curlew, Ringed Plover, Oystercatchers, Puffins and a single Grey Heron flying in off the sea!

After lunch we drive down towards the south end of mainland and Sumburgh and call in at the tidal Pool of Virkie. We see a good selection of waders here, including four+ Bar-tailed Godwit and a single Knot, as well as Redshank, Curlew, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and a few Shelduck.

Our last stop of the day is alongside a large freshwater loch. Snipe display overhead and there are many Skylarks singing and as we scan out across the loch we pick out some bathing Arctic Terns, as well as several Great Skuas and three Red-throated Divers. However, the best is yet to come, as after a patient stake out a stunning adult Long-tailed Skua is seen in flight with three Arctic Skuas for company! We get simply spell binding views of this incredible bird as it circles right overhead, before dropping in to bathe at the edge of the loch! A great way to finish the day and what a stunning bird!

Day 4: Our first stop this morning is over on the east side of mainland to have a look around the coastline for Otter. Our first scan out over one of the bays here sees a pair of Red-throated Divers calling and flying around as well as Razorbill, Red-breasted Mergansers and Ringed Plovers. After some more patient scanning we come up trumps when we find a dog Otter feeding just out from the shore and get some great views through the scopes, as it clambers out to feed on top of some marker buoys floating out in the bay.

From here we head to the NW mainland to explore the wild rugged beauty of Northmavine and Eshaness. We make a stop enroute at Mavis Grind, a narrow isthmus joining the Northmavine peninsula to the rest of Shetland mainland with the Atlantic on one side and the North Sea on the other only separated by 33 meters of land! Whilst here a Red-throated Diver flies over, as well as Gannets and Cormorants and we also see more Twite and a Shetland Wren.

Moving on again we enjoy some fantastic carpets of the rare Oysterplant on a shingle beach along the coast, before stopping for a hot drink overlooking the dramatic sea stacks of 'The Drongs'.

From here we drive through some beautiful rugged moorland and wild scenery, seeing more Curlew, Whimbrel Golden Plover and Redshank. As well as more great views of five Red-throated Divers on lochans near the road, including several with chicks and passing the impressive 'drinking horse' of 'Dore Holm' stack, before we arrive at Eshaness Lighthouse.

After lunch, we take a walk out around the clifftops, taking in the stunning views and scenery here. Gannets, Fulmars and Great Skuas fly past offshore as we walk and we also get lovely views of Puffins, Razorbill and Fulmars nesting around the cliffs, as well as Wheatears and several Red Admiral butterflies. Incredibly we also spot an Otter from the top of the cliffs and get some lovely views from above of the

Otter swimming through the crystal clear water and diving down among the kelp forest at the base of the cliffs!

Day 5: Today we head to the far north and the island of Unst. We catch the ferry at Toft on mainland, again seeing lots of close Arctic Terns around the terminal, before crossing onto Yell, then cross Yell to catch our next ferry onto Unst.

It's lovely warm and sunny on Unst as we make a stop at Norwick beach and here we get great views of a vagrant 2nd year Bonaparte's Gull which is roosting on the beach amongst some Black-headed Gulls. We also get lovely views of the Arctic Terns that are nesting this year at the top of the beach and also see Ringed Plovers and Eiders, as well as another Otter which is seen feeding just offshore.

From Norwick we drive over to the shore station at Burrafirth, passing a mass of Great Skua bathing on the loch nearby, before beginning our walk out to the seabird cliffs of Hermaness, on the boardwalk that crosses the open moorland. Skylarks and Meadow Pipits sing overhead and the walk takes us through the Great Skua colony with the sky full of calling and displaying Bonxies. In fact there are Great Skua's just everywhere! The more you look the more skuas you can begin to see, dotted around on their nests on the moorland and as we approach the end of the boardwalk and the first cliffs we get incredibly close views of several confiding Bonxies some with chicks only a few feet away!

At the cliffs we have lunch, whilst taking in the stunning views out to Muckle Flugga the most northerly point in the British Isles. As numerous sea birds sweep past, around and below us, Puffins potter around the cliff edges, with the azure blue sea below us and a sky full of seabirds it really is an incredible spot!

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

Day 6: Today it's an early start, as we head for the island of Noss on our boat charter from Sandwick. It's very calm this morning as we board the boat and cruise out to sea, heading first to the cliffs around Bressay. As we round Bressay we see increasing numbers of seabirds, both on the cliffs and passing the boat and we cruise right into a sea cave, seeing Shags nesting on dark ledges at the back of the cave, as well as Kittiwakes nesting just outside the entrance to the cave. From here we cruise further around the cliffs of Bressay, before heading over to the 'Noup of Noss', where we are greeted by the incredible noise and spectacle of this vast seabird colony. The dominant birds are Gannets, along with countless Auks also crammed in

on the cliff ledges and the sky is full of wheeling birds overhead with some birds collecting nest material off the sea under the towering cliffs. As we look up to the immense sea cliffs above us, it really is a breath-taking seabird spectacle! We spend some time taking in the views of this amazing sea bird city before the boat heads back out and we are soon surrounded by hundreds of Gannets following the boat for a handout of fish. The views are simply incredible as the Gannets plunge dive right next to the boat and flocks of Bonxies harass the many seabirds. What an awesome trip!

After the boat trip the fog starts to roll back in as we head south towards Sumburgh. As we head south we stop alongside a loch, seeing Great Skua's bathing, as well as a flock of Dunlin and Turnstone along the shore nearby.

Next stop is further South at Grutness and during lunch we get great views of the noisy Arctic Tern colony here, with many birds flying to and fro overhead. A lovely summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwit is also seen, along with a flock of four Knot around the edge of the small pool here, as well as Ringed Plover and Redshank.

After lunch we drive up to Sumburgh Head and walk up towards the lighthouse on top of the headland. It's a seabird city and we enjoy superb close views of the many Puffins on the cliff ledges, as well as Shags, Guillemots, Razorbill and Fulmars. All the time we get stunning views as Arctic Skua's and Bonxie's as well as Great Black-backed Gulls cruise past us patrolling the cliffs and chasing and intercepting the seabirds at sea as they come back in to the cliff top colony. Several Twite fly over and around the lighthouse and a few Shetland Wren and during a scan out from the cliffs two Harbour Porpoise are seen surfacing briefly.

From here we drive north, arriving in Lerwick in time for a look around before we board our evening ferry over to Orkney. During the crossing we see a good mix of seabirds and pass close to Fair Isle as we head south, before passing North Ronaldsay, Sanday, Stronsay and Shapinsay and finally arriving into Kirkwall on Orkney.

Day 7: Our first full day on Orkney dawns cloudy but dry. First stop this morning is only a short distance from our hotel at the impressive Stones of Stenness on the shore of the Loch of Stenness, a fantastic henge monument and standing stone setting, thought to have been constructed early in the 3rd millennium B.C and also the neolithic settlement at Barnhouse. Whilst here there are Common Seals hauled out on the rocks around the edge of the loch, we also pick out a Slavonian Grebe out on Loch Harray and a ring tail Hen Harrier flying over the far side of the loch and flushing a large flock of Oystercatcher into the air. We also see both Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting singing near the loch.

With some warm sunshine breaking through the cloud we drive over to The Loons RSPB Wetland Reserve for lunch. From the hide here overlooking a reed bed and some freshwater pools on the Reserve, we see two Great Skua in flight in the distance, as well as both Coot, Moorhen and a young Shoveler that swims out of the reeds. A small flock of Swallows drop in to drink and bathe over the pools and we also hear a Water Rail 'squealing' from the reeds as Curlew and Oystercatcher fly over.

Our next stop of the day is on top of some dramatic high cliffs nearby and seeing an Oystercatcher on seemingly every other fence post we pass! We stop near the top of the cliffs, with stunning views right down to the Old man of Hoy, before we take a short walk to a site nearby which is carpeted in the very rare Scottish Primrose (*Primula scotica*). This tiny but stunning flower grows in only a few spots in the far north of Scotland and is still flowering at the moment. There are also some great views offshore to be had from the cliff top here, with many Auks, Gannets and a few Great Skua passing by, as well as Fulmars nesting on the cliff ledges and also whilst here we spot a group of seven Risso's Dolphins as they pass by offshore.

Our final stop of the day is around at the evocative standing stone circle the 'Ring of Brodgar. The henge monument here was originally almost 3m deep and cut into solid bed rock, whilst the standing stone circle contains only 36 of the original 60 standing stones, but it is still a very impressive and special site.

Day 8: Today we drive north to catch our ferry to the island of Rousay. Enroute we drive up onto a high section of moorland passing lots of Curlew and Oystercatcher as we go, and a little further on a superb male Hen Harrier flying over the hillside in the distance. We watch the male Harrier for a short while before driving further up the road in the hope of catching the male Harrier up again. We stop again as sure enough the male Harrier appears right overhead and we are lucky to be just in time to see the female Hen Harrier fly up to meet the male who has dropped the prey to the female in mid air! What cracking views of these lovely raptors!

A little further on a Stoat is seen running alongside the road briefly, before we drop down off the moors and drive around to the ferry terminal. While waiting for the ferry we pick out a smart summer plumaged Great Northern Diver just offshore, as well as seeing a dark morph Arctic Skua fly over.

We cross on the ferry over to Rousay through Eynhallow Sound and past the island of Wyre, seeing Gannets, Guillemots, Razorbill and Black Guillemots before we land on Rousay. Some mixed woodland near the harbour on Rousay holds Goldcrest, Chaffinch and a Willow Warbler before we move on and drive around the island following the coast. Alongside the beautiful coastal scenery with stunning seascapes and dramatic cliffs and views right over to the islands we also see Stonechats and Wheatears.

We make a stop for lunch at a sheltered bay by the coast and whilst here we get great views of both Common Seal and Grey Seal hauled out on the rocks, as well as Ringed Plovers, Oystercatcher, Redshank and Pied Wagtails on the beach, as well as some Swallows and a few Sand Martins overhead.

After lunch we continue our circuit around the island and see a pair of Arctic Skua displaying over the moorland, before making a stop to look at the impressive Neolithic chambered tomb at Midhowe and the amazing Iron Age Broch right next to it. As we walk downhill to the coast alongside the tomb we manage to spot a Peregrine soaring over the ridge above us, along with a Kestrel and two Great Skua, before having a look around the Tomb and Broch.

On our ferry crossing back over to the mainland, a female Hen Harrier is seen flying past the ferry and heading in and over the beach on the island of Wyre, but as we land back on mainland Orkney the fog rolls in, so we head back down to the coast where at least the visibility is still ok. Here we manage to pick out an Arctic Skua harassing some Sandwich Terns over the beach, as well as a Red Throated Diver that flies over and several Brown Hares in the fields nearby.

With time getting on we drive back via the high moorland road again, seeing another male Hen Harrier and also getting very close views of a hunting Short-eared Owl before we arrive back at the hotel.

Day 9: This morning we head to the eastern side of Mainland Orkney and out to Deerness, but our first stop is down at Scapa Bay. It is very calm out in the bay and we see some Common Terns here, as well as a lovely dark morph Arctic Skua which flies into the bay to chase the Terns.

Moving on again we skirt around Kirkwall and out onto Deerness, stopping at a lovely secluded beach on the coast, where we find a pair of Ringed Plover as well as flocks of Lapwing and Oystercatchers and we also get great views nearby of a Curlew chick in a meadow right by the road.

We take a walk out to The Gloup where there are some great views to be had looking out to sea, with many Guillemots, Razorbills, Black Guillemots, Shags and Kittiwakes offshore. We also get some good views of Shags and also Fulmars nesting on the cliffs here including some with chicks.

From Deerness we head to Kirkwall for some lunch and to take in the sights of Orkney's capital, before we drive around to the Bay of Skail for an exploration of the superb prehistoric settlement at Skara Brae. Skara Brae has to be one of the most remarkable prehistoric monuments in Britain, a complete 5,000 year old prehistoric village, preserved under the sand with some of the neolithic houses even still complete with stone dressers and beds!

Day 10: Sadly today we have to leave Orkney, though before we do a Whooper Swan is seen on the loch with two cygnets near the hotel and also a Red-breasted Merganser with three young. Then it's around to the airport to catch our flight back to Aberdeen at the end of a fantastic trip!

Species of the trip:

Long-tailed Skua, Short-eared Owl, Gannet, Rosy Starling, Risso's Dolphin, Golden Plover chick

Place of the trip:

Noss cliffs, St Ninians, Hermaness cliffs, Ring of Brodgar, Skara Brae

Magic Moment:

Mousa & Stormies, Norwick beach, Eshaness & The Drongs, Gannets diving, Long-tailed Skua, Otter from the cliffs of Eshaness, Stones of Stenness & Brodgar

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Black Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Tufted Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Fulmar
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Merlin
Water Rail
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone
Dunlin
Knot
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Common Snipe

Great Skua
Arctic Skua
Long-tailed Skua
Black-headed Gull
Bonaparte's Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Arctic Tern
Common Tern
Sandwich Tern
Puffin
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Short-eared Owl
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Wheatear
Stonechat
Blackbird
Sedge Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Wren
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling

Rosy Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Twite
Goldfinch
Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Otter
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Harbour Porpoise
Risso's Dolphin
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Hedgehog (Deceased!)
Orkney Vole
Stoat

Butterflies/Moths/Odonata & addenda

Large White
Green-veined White
Meadow Brown
Common Blue
Red Admiral
Peacock

Map-winged Swift
Magpie Moth
Buff Ermine

Common Blue Damselfly

Shetland Bee