

Holiday Highlights

Shetland

1 – 8 July 2017

Leader: Craig Round

Guests: Roger Shorrocks, Liz and Keith Barton, Marion Noy, Hazel Pickering, Janette Foster, Roger Rooke

Day 1: After all meeting at Inverness Airport we are soon boarding our flight to Shetland, there is good visibility during the flight and we get some great views of the Orkney Isles and Fair Isle as we fly north.

As we come in to land at Sumburgh Airport on Shetland, Craig gets a phone call that there are some Killer Whales a short distance away right now! So after picking up our luggage and hire vehicle at the airport we dash around the coast and walk out onto the headland at Scatness where the Killer Whales were last spotted. As we arrive, sadly the whales are already some way off the headland and heading further out all the time, but Roger gets a brief view through a scope of one of the whales surfacing and blowing before they disappear out to sea heading west.

There are lots of birds out on the headland and we get some great views of the Arctic Terns that are nesting out here as well as our first Great Skuas flying past. Offshore there are Gannets, Shags, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Fulmar and we also see Wheatears, Rock Pipits, Ringed Plover, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Raven and Hooded Crows.

Next stop is around at the Sumburgh Hotel for a welcome hot drink and whilst here Craig finds a Chiffchaff in the hotel garden, before we drive north to catch our first ferry at Toft across to Yell. However we have only just pulled up at the ferry terminal when an Otter is spotted just out from the breakwater and the waiting ferry, incredibly the Otter then swims in alongside the pier right alongside the waiting cars! What a start! There is also a Common Seal just out in the bay here and Arctic Terns are flying overhead, welcome to Shetland!

Landing on Yell we drive north across the island to board the next ferry across to Unst and during the crossing a good selection of seabirds are seen including a smart dark morph Arctic Skua, more Gannets, Great Skuas and several Puffins.

As we drive north to our hotel on Unst at Saxa Vord for the next few days, we pass two Whooper Swans on a loch near the road and a little further on come across a pair of stunning Red-necked Phalaropes on a tiny pool right beside the road! The views of these dainty arctic waders are just incredible and

we watch the birds feeding and preening unconcerned only a few feet away as Snipe drum in display overhead and Curlew and Golden Plover fly overhead. What an incredible start to our Shetland adventure!

Day 2:

Today dawns grey and rainy with gales, hmmm, welcome to some proper Shetland weather! Our first stop is a short distance down the road at Norwick beach, where we see a smart dark Arctic Skua that flies through, as well as several Great Skuas in flight being mobbed by a pair of Curlew. There are Redshank and Ringed Plover on the beach, as well as a lovely pale Arctic Skua resting on the beach, which takes off to chase an Arctic Tern. The views of the Arctic Terns here are brilliant and we watch them hovering in the strong wind only a few feet overhead and plunging for small fish in the shallow water of the bay. Offshore, Gannets are also plunge diving for fish and we also see Shag, Razorbills and a close female Eider here.

From Norwick we drive over towards Skaw and get fantastic views of a pair of Arctic Skuas on the moor beside the road, before heading down to a headland nearby where we find some shelter from the gale force wind behind some of the old wartime buildings. From here we see masses of Gannets passing close to the headland, plunging for fish and being harried by passing Great Skuas as well as more Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags and numerous young Wheatears.

Our next stop is around at the beach at Skaw, the most northerly beach in Britain! The sun is out and it's sheltered from the wind here and as we take our lunch in this idyllic and beautiful spot, Arctic Terns to and fro overhead and there are more Gannets diving for fish in the bay and Great Skuas flying over.

During lunch Craig finds a Shetland Wrens nest well hidden on the cliff above the beach and we get some amazing views as the adult birds come in to feed the hungry chicks and some folk even go in for a paddle at Britain's most northerly beach, spurred on by their intrepid leader! And much to the amusement of everyone else!

After a stop to take in the fantastic recreated Viking longship and longhouse at Haroldswick, we drive over to the incredible lunar landscape of the Keen of Hamar to take in some of the rare plants to be found there. After a brief search we soon find the first dainty flowers of Edmonstons Chickweed followed by several more patches of this incredibly rare endemic plant, a plant that grows nowhere else in the world other than here on Unst! We also come across some spikes of the tiny Frog Orchid, along with flowering Spring Squill, and Moss Campion.

From the Keen o Hamar we drive up to the high point of Saxa Vord and on the way up to the old radar station have to rescue a huge Hedgehog that

is wandering down the middle of the road! Up here we get some fantastic views across Unst, looking down across to Burrafirth and Hermaness below us and stunning views out to Muckle Flugga, the lighthouse and Out Stack, the most northerly point of Britain! Great Skuas fill the air overhead calling and displaying and a Peregrine suddenly appears overhead and slices through the sky full of Skuas and heads out to sea!

Day 3: Today dawns much less windy thankfully as we head for the island of Fetlar. Waiting at the ferry terminal two Red-throated Divers fly right overhead calling and during the ferry crossing to Fetlar through Bluemull Sound a Great Skua is seen trying to drown a Gannet sat on the water!

Landing on Fetlar we drive across the island towards Loch of Funzie and get close views of at least five Common Snipe as well as a flock of some 15+ Golden Plover gathered on the moorland beside the road. At Loch of Funzie we get some fantastic close views of a stunning Red Throated Diver out on the loch and also see a male Long-tailed Duck in summer plumage. We have some lunch in the warm sunshine beside the loch, with Skylarks singing overhead and Snipe drumming in display and a Great Skua drops in to bathe and is mobbed by the Arctic Terns roosting around the loch shore. A pair of Whimbrel are calling and displaying nearby and we see them chase off a Great Black-backed Gull and later a Great Skua that flies over and there are several Dunlin and Ringed Plover around the loch. Best of all three Red-necked Phalaropes fly right over us at one point, but sadly don't come in onto the loch.

After lunch we take a walk down to the hide overlooking the Mires of Funzie, it's fairly quiet here, though we do see more Snipe from the hide, before we drop in at the heritage centre at Houbie to take a look around. From Houbie we head up onto a higher part of the island. Up here the views are stunning out across the island and down to the Lighthouse on Out Skerries and we also get some great views of three Golden Plover including one with a chick, as well as Curlew, more Great Skuas and a close view of a dark phase Arctic Skua. On the way back to the ferry terminal we drive up onto another high point on the island where we get some fantastic views looking back across to Yell and Unst and see lots more Great Skuas and a Dunlin displaying before we drop back down to head for the ferry back to Unst.

On the crossing back to Unst we see more seabirds, including Puffins and Gannets and as we drive back across Unst towards the hotel, we see a stunning male Red-necked Phalarope on the same roadside pool we passed a few days ago! What a great end to the day!

Day 4: The weather is fine, warm and sunny this morning as we head out from the hotel up to Hermaness NNR, with a totally balmy temperature of 17°C! As we drive up towards to the shore station at Burrafirth, Craig finds another

pair of Red-necked Phalaropes roosting on a small wet flash beside the road! What an incredible week we're having for seeing phalaropes on Shetland!

At Burrafirth we take a look inside the Hermaness Visitor Centre in the old lighthouse shore station as Shetland Wrens sing from the drystone walls and we find another Chiffchaff in the small walled garden here, with numerous Bonxies already circling overhead, before we begin our walk out to the seabird cliffs on the boardwalk that crosses the open moorland. The walk takes us through the Great Skua colony and the sky is full of calling and displaying Bonxies. In fact there are Great Skuas 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 two confiding Bonxies down to only a few feet! From the cliffs the views are stunning to Muckle Flugga, the most Northerly point in the British Isles, as numerous sea birds sweep past, around and below us. The sun is out so we take our lunch on the cliff top taking in the views, with the azure blue sea below us and a sky full of seabirds and a Dunlin displaying high overhead 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. From Burrafirth we drive back to Saxa Vord to pick up Janette, then drive south to catch our ferry over to Yell and onwards back to mainland and our new base for the rest of the trip near Brae.

Day 5:

After breakfast we drive south this morning and make our first stop along the shore of Loch Tingwall. Here we get lovely views of two adult Whooper Swans with a cygnet on the far side of the loch, as well as a Red-throated Diver. We also see Curlew, Oystercatcher, Tufted Ducks and three female Red Breasted Mergansers including one with chicks. We see our first two Moorhen of the trip here and there is plenty of noise coming from the large Black Headed Gull colony nearby and we get great views of the Arctic Terns flying over the loch hawking insects over the water.

We have a quick stop in Scalloway, where we take a look at the memorial to the 'Shetland Bus' a wartime resistance movement that used local fishing boats to take wireless operators, armaments and combatants into Nazi occupied Norway, returning with refugees and resistance operatives during World War II.

From Scalloway we head further south and stop for some lunch in the warm sunshine overlooking the stunning sand Tombolo linking the mainland to St Ninians Isle. Four Red-throated Divers are just offshore as well as Razorbill, Puffin, Black Guillemot and Arctic Terns. After lunch we take a walk out across the Tombolo onto the isle and have a look at the ruins of the 12C Chapel on the island before we drive to Sumburgh Head. It's a seabird city here and we enjoy superb close views of the many Puffins on the cliff ledges, as well as Shags, Guillemots, Razorbill and Fulmars. Arctic Skuas, Bonxies and 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 and we spend some time here taking in the fantastic views of the birds and the stunning views south to Fair Isle and northwards up to Noss, before we slowly make our way back down and begin the drive back to the hotel.

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. We cross on the boat to the island in the 'simmer dim' and afterglow of stunning Shetland night and even though its gone 11 o'clock at night it's still pretty light this far north. Landing on Mousa we walk around the coast hearing the 'chipping' calls and drumming display of displaying Common Snipe all around, and 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. Soon the nearby boulder beach is alive with the calls of 'Stormies' as more petrels are seen arriving in off the sea. At the incredible 2000 year old Iron Age broch, the walls of the broch slowly come alive to the calls of more Storm Petrels and 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 as the moon rises over the sea and Sumburgh Lighthouse flashes to the south before making our way back to catch the boat back. What a night!

Day 6: This morning we head to the NW mainland to explore the wild rugged beauty of Northmavine and Eshaness.

Our first stop of the day is at Mavis Grind, a narrow isthmus joining the Northmavine peninsula to the rest of the Shetland mainland, with the Atlantic on one side and the North Sea on the other only separated by 33 meters of land! At Urafirth we enjoy some fantastic carpets of the rare Oysterplant on the shingle beach, before stopping for a hot drink overlooking the dramatic sea stacks of 'The Drongs'.

From here we drive through some beautiful rugged and wild scenery and get great views of three Whimbrel on the moorland beside the road and pass the impressive 'drinking horse' of 'Dore Holm' stack, before we arrive at Eshaness Lighthouse. Here we take a walk out around the clifftops and take in the stunning views and scenery. Gannets, Fulmars and Great Skuas fly past offshore

as we walk and we also see two passage Whimbrel by the lighthouse before they fly off south and out to sea, as well as a flock of Ringed Plovers, Oystercatchers, Dunlin and several Wheatears. From Eshaness we drive to Lerwick to do some sightseeing and on the way back we pass another passage flock of eight Whimbrel on the moorland by the road, sings of autumn wader passage already!

Day 7: Today starts bright with sunny spells as we head off down to Lerwick to meet our boat charter the 'Ruby May' for a trip out to Noss. The boat cruises out of Lerwick harbour past the island of Bressay and its impressive lighthouse and we pass small rafts of Puffins, Razorbill and Guillemots resting on the sea.

As we come around under the cliffs of Bressay we see increasing numbers of seabirds, both on the cliffs and passing the boat and several Great Skuas even fly over the back of the boat to be hand fed a ginger nut biscuit or two by the skipper! As we cruise in under the 'Noup of Noss' we are greeted by the incredible noise and spectacle of this vast seabird colony. The dominant birds are Gannets and the sky is full of wheeling birds overhead as we look up to the towering sea cliffs above us it really is a breathtaking spectacle! The sea is calm under the cliffs so we spend some time taking in the views of this immense sea bird city, with the cliff ledges crammed with thousands of seabirds and a cacophony of noise all around. What an incredible place!

From the Noup we head around into the Sound of Noss, where we see large groups of Shags on the rocks as Arctic Terns fly overhead, before we round Bressay and pass a small skerry with some 20+ Common Seals hauled out on the rocks, including some seal pups. As we pass the Shetland Catch fish factory, two or three Grey Seals gather around the boat and the skipper feeds them some fish he has caught and one Grey Seal even hitches a ride on the back of the boat for some way, as we head back in to Lerwick!

After the boat trip we take our lunch in Lerwick and have some time to explore whilst everyone gets their land legs back, before we drive south to take a look at the fascinating prehistoric and Norse archaeological site at Jarlshof.

Day 8: Its an early start this morning, as today we sadly have to leave Shetland, so after loading up all the luggage we head down to the airport to catch our flight back to Inverness at the end of a great trip!

Species Of The Trip: Red-necked Phalarope, Puffin, Storm Petrel, Great Skua, Gannet, Arctic Tern.

Place Of The Trip: Hermaness Cliffs, Noss, Skaw beach, Mousa.

Magic Moment: Unst puddle Phalarope, Shetland Wren feeding chicks, Great Skua v Gannet, Great Skua snatching a biscuit, Storm Petrels around the broch, Grey Seal hitching a lift on the boat, Simmer Dim on the pier.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Fulmar
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Red-breasted Merganser
Peregrine
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Knot
Common Snipe
Bar-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Curlew
Redshank
Red-necked Phalarope
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Black Guillemot
Gulliemot
Razorbill
Puffin

Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Skylark
Swallow
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Wren
Wheatear
Blackbird
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Twite

MAMMALS

Otter
Orca
Rabbit
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Hedgehog

AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog

BUTTERFLIES

Large White
Red Admiral

ADDENDA

Shetland Bee

Oysterplant

Moss Campion

Spring Squill

Northern Marsh Orchid

Heath Spotted Orchid

Ragged Robin

Lady's Smock

Edmonstons Chickweed

Frog Orchid

Red Campion

Silverweed