

Isles of Scilly

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Meet at Penzance; sail to St Mary's
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- Day 2/7** Natural history excursions on St Mary's, St Agnes, Tresco and St Martin's
-
- Day 8** Morning Excursion before afternoon return to Penzance
-

Departs

May and September

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR02) or brochure

Grading

A/B. There will be a reasonable amount of walking on this holiday covering between two and ten miles per day but this will be at a slow birdwatching pace and does not entail any steep climbs.

Focus

Birds and natural history

Highlights

- Scenic boat journey from Penzance along Cornish coast
- Enjoy Scilly's white sandy beaches, turquoise seas & amazing granite forms
- An extraordinary flora includes many species rarely seen on mainland
- Exciting birdwatching includes residents, migrants & regular rarities
- Grey Seals & seabird colonies (in spring)
- Plenty of inter-island boat trips
- A chance to observe the unique Scillonian way of life
- Natural history walks, each day exploring a new area or island
- Expertly escorted by Naturetrek's Paul Dukes – a Scilly regular for 50 years!



Images from top: Viola kitaibeliana, Bryher (Dawn Nelson), Razorbills (Colin Brown) and ruins on the Isles of Scilly.



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

The fabulous Isles of Scilly are just 28 miles from Lands End, easily visible from the mainland on a clear day, and yet all the stresses of daily life seem to vanish within hours of reaching the islands. They are a supremely relaxing place to spend a holiday with decision making reduced to choosing which island to visit or which cafe to patronise. The Scillonian population of approximately 2,000 is mostly concentrated on the largest island St. Mary's but small communities are also found on Tresco, St. Martin's, Bryher and St. Agnes. Flower farming is still a major source of income for the islanders but decreasing in importance as the traditional advantage of being able to supply early spring flowers to the market is negated by the mass import of blooms by air from places like Israel. As the flower industry diminishes, tourism is booming and the very high level of repeat bookings from one year to the next is evidence that few visitors are ever disappointed! It might even be advisable to issue a warning to all first time visitors stating that the islands are highly addictive and likely to feature in your holiday plans for many years in the future! Your leader for these tours was unaware of the risk when he first stayed on St. Agnes in 1966 and has been compelled to return at regular intervals ever since!

A passenger ferry, Scillonian III, sails from Penzance to St. Mary's each morning Monday-Saturday, returning later in the day. The cruise takes about 2½ hours and provides superb views of the West Cornwall coast from Newlyn to Land's End. It should be stated however that the stretch of sea between the islands and the mainland is where Atlantic swells meet the currents of the English Channel and the resulting turbulence can make the cruise an uncomfortable experience for poor sailors, particularly after recent gales. Fortunately alternatives exist with regular fixed wing Skybus flights from St. Just near Land's End. This option is more expensive than the boat but the journey time is reduced to 20 minutes. Limited Skybus services also operate from Exeter and Newquay. The holiday price is calculated on the basis of travelling by sea but we will gladly book air travel at a supplementary cost of approximately £55-£95 per person. (Fares are subject to annual increases- we charge the difference between Scillonian III fare and the relevant air fare)

Like most island groups, the Scillies have relatively few resident birds and the selection of nesting passerines is generally unremarkable although an abundance of confiding Song Thrushes is an exception to their national decline and some familiar mainland birds such as Dunnock and Blackbird exhibit a few island differences in the brightness of their plumage or in the case of the latter, tone of bill colour. The colonies of seabirds around the archipelago are however of national importance and include Shag, Storm Petrel, Manx Shearwater, Puffin and Kittiwake.

At times of spring and autumn migration Scilly is host to an astonishing diversity of birds seeking temporary rest and food on the islands. Few of these travellers make landfall intentionally but like the Shetlands in the north, Scilly appears to be in exactly the right place to provide succour for disoriented migrants carried over the ocean by unfriendly weather systems. The global movements of migrant birds are still imperfectly understood but it exercises the imagination to understand how individuals from North America, Siberia and Southern Europe can arrive on Scilly in the same week as so often seems to happen in the autumn! In the spring the rarities tend to be of Mediterranean origin such as Bee-Eaters, Golden Orioles or rare herons but even then surprises are frequent and

recent occurrences at this season have included Terek Sandpiper, Tree Swallow and Calandra Lark! The regular arrival of unexpected vagrants has boosted the Scilly bird list to nearly 400 species, an astonishing total considering the size of the islands and the paucity of resident birds. Thanks to lectures by the late Scilly 'birdman' David Hunt, and articles in the birdwatching press, the islands have become firmly established in the birdwatching calendar as the place to be in October attracting crowds of up to 900 birdwatchers when a new bird for Europe is discovered. The prospect of such gatherings may dissuade potential visitors but fortunately the crowds tend to be concentrated into the middle two weeks of October and at the time of our autumn tour the majority of visitors will be non-birders. Paradoxically, September is often a more interesting month than October because common migrants are usually much more numerous, and the chances of unusual waders or seabirds somewhat greater. Some of the rarest vagrants from North America have also appeared in September such as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Waterthrush, Nighthawk and Magnolia Warbler.

Although the focus of these tours will be birds, Scilly can boast many other natural history attractions for visitors. The flora is of great interest and includes many rare species which flourish in the largely frost free climate. Because of these mild conditions it has been possible to fill the famous Abbey Gardens on Tresco with delicate exotic plants from all over the world creating a collection that could not survive in colder climes. The White-toothed or Scilly Shrew is found nowhere else in Britain and whilst mainland mammals such as Fox and Badger are absent from the islands, the population of Grey or Atlantic Seals is of international significance. Migrant moths and butterflies visit Scilly in much the same way that birds do and a period of light southerly winds can often bring scores of Clouded Yellow butterflies or Hummingbird Hawk Moths to the islands. Much rarer vagrants also occur and the same fast-moving Atlantic fronts which deposit Neotropical landbirds on Scilly can also carry over spectacular Monarch butterflies.

The itinerary for our two tours will be broadly similar and completely flexible to allow for weather conditions and local reports. There will be a reasonable amount of walking each day but this will be at birdwatching pace and punctuated by regular stops. Included in the tour price are four full day visits to 'off-islands' which will entail catching the 1015 tripper launch from St. Mary's returning 1600-1700. These vessels carry about 70 passengers and fully conform to EC safety regulations. The journey time from St. Mary's is about 20-25 minutes.

Day 1

Saturday

St. Mary's

We will meet at Penzance harbour approximately 0830 and board Scillonian III for the sailing to St. Mary's (we will be glad to provide details of overnight accommodation or car parking in Penzance if required). The 2½ hour journey will take us along the coastline of West Cornwall past features such as the Minnack Theatre, Porthcurno and Porthgwarra valley before heading out to sea for the 28 mile crossing from Land's End. Recently re-furbished, the Scillonian offers comfortable seating and refreshment facilities but as mentioned earlier, the sea can be rough on occasions and poor sailors are recommended to consider flying to the islands. The best way of avoiding sea-sickness is to keep occupied and fortunately for birdwatchers there is usually something of interest to look at. Gannets, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Shags are common to both seasons but there are differences in the range of birds likely to be seen during crossings in April and September. Summer plumaged Razorbills, Guillemots and possibly a few Puffins, are likely to enliven a spring trip and it will be worth looking out for Basking Sharks which have become increasingly numerous in Cornish waters. Seabirds are generally more frequent in September when observations could include passing Arctic and Great Skuas, plus a reasonable chance of Sooty Shearwater. If conditions are

suitable the list of possibilities might also include Great & Balearic Shearwaters, Sabine's Gull, Grey Phalarope, Pomarine & Long-tailed Skuas but it would be extremely optimistic to expect such birds during an average crossing!

On arrival at St. Mary's there is much activity around the quay as crates are unloaded and passengers for the 'off-islands' assigned to the correct launches but we can avoid having to wait for our bags by using the island transportation service which ensures the delivery of correctly labelled luggage to the respective guest house. Free of this burden we can stroll around the harbour edge into Hugh Town where there is a choice of pubs and cafes in which to purchase lunch and sit back to absorb your first taste of that special Scillonian atmosphere! Although the largest of the islands, distances are not great on St. Mary's and after eating it will not be more than a few minutes walk to our accommodation where we can be re-united with our bags and check-in to the rooms. Later a birdwatching walk will provide a further introduction to the islands and a chance to see what migrants are about. The Garrison walk which originates behind Hugh Town is ideal for this purpose affording splendid views of Tresco, St. Agnes and the scatter of uninhabited islands known as the Western Rocks which bear the full onslaught of the Atlantic breakers. Another easy trail from the town follows the coastline south to the rocky promontory of Peninnis Head which can be attractive to migrants at either season.

Days 2-7

Sunday - Friday

We will deliberately keep a flexible programme in order to make best use of the prevailing weather conditions and to maximise our chances of seeing migrant birds. There are many permutations of walks on St. Mary's and when necessary we can utilize the island bus service or taxis to reach the more distant locations. During our week we plan four full day excursions to 'off-islands' and spend the rest of our time on St Mary's. The islands can be summarised as follows;

St. Mary's

The largest island and administrative centre is approximately 2½ miles long by two miles wide. The harbour in the capital Hugh Town is too shallow to provide anchorage for large vessels but is used by a small fleet of fishing boats in addition to many yachts and the various launches which convey holidaymakers between islands. The airport on the south-east corner of the island is served by regular fixed-wing Skybus aircraft which shuttle backwards and forwards from the mainland each day except Sunday. Add to these the growing traffic in private light aircraft and it is easy to appreciate that the airfield is no longer the sleepy grass strip that it once was and a smart new airport terminal and surfaced runway are evidence of the growth in business.

The interior of the island is a patchwork of flower farms with high shelter hedges of pittosporum dividing the fields but in the Holy Vale area there is a pleasing abundance of elm trees which have thus far managed to avoid the ravages of Dutch-elm disease. Tracts of ancient conifers are a feature of the northern side of the island and around the Garrison. These were also planted to provide a shelter for the farms but many are now clearly in poor condition and re-planting work is being undertaken. Evidence of even earlier Scillonian history is apparent at the megalithic burial chambers which are to be found at several places on St. Mary's, a reminder of the enormous wealth of material that Archaeologists have unearthed on these ancient islands. Porth Hellick Nature Reserve north of the airfield embraces a large freshwater pool surrounded by reeds and a damp boggy valley which leads inland to the abundant bushes and trees of Holy Vale. The sandy and rocky bay at Porth Hellick is commemorated as the spot where Sir Cloudesley Shovell was washed ashore after the worst disaster in British Naval history when a fleet of

ships led by the Association foundered during a storm but for birdwatchers it is best known as a great place to see rare waders the most recent being a Terek Sandpiper in April 1999! Porth Hellick pool has been visited by a great many rare birds over the years and several hides overlooking the water enable observation without disturbing the birds. In spring Reed Warblers sing from the reeds and visitors from southern Europe regularly include Purple Heron, Night Heron and Little Bittern. Somewhat less expected was the North American Tree Swallow which occurred in June 1990 and spent several days feeding with hirundines over the pool. In autumn the muddy edges of the reeds are worth checking for Spotted Crakes and constitute one of the best places on the island to see passage waders. It is a reasonable bet that if a bird with a preference for wetland habitats occurs on Scilly it will eventually turn up at Porth Hellick and there is often interchange between here and the large pools on Tresco.

Migrant birds can, and do, appear almost anywhere on St. Mary's but certain habitats and areas are always worth checking. Porth Hellick is one, the golf course another. Although inevitably disturbed at frequent intervals, (how inconsiderate of golfers to use the course to play golf!) the short grass of the golf course is a valuable habitat for birds and always popular with wheatears, larks, pipits and waders such as Golden Plover and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Over 100 of the latter have appeared on Scilly during the last thirty years with an astonishing fifteen together in September 1977. It has often been said that it is easier to see this pretty little wader on Scilly than it is in many parts of its native North America and the golf course is the ideal place to find one tamely chasing after crane flies on the fairway. The airfield offers a similar habitat but in recent years the grass has been allowed to grow longer to discourage birds for safety reasons and as a consequence it is not quite so suitable although Dotterel still regularly occur and a good few American Golden Plover have frequented the quieter corners away from the busy runway.

Common features to all the islands are tremendous clarity of the surrounding sea and the quality of the coastline. There are many delightful stretches of beach around St. Mary's but perhaps none finer than along the northern coast which is also comparatively underwatched by birdwatchers.

Other worthwhile birdwatching haunts include the Lower Moors Nature Trail, where thickets of bushes and reeds lead to a secluded muddy pool overlooked by hides, and the trees of nearby Old Town Churchyard which is a nice sheltered spot for small passerines to feed.

St. Agnes

The most south-westerly inhabited island, St. Agnes is barely one mile long but it is very much a working island where flower farming, fishing and tourism provide a living for the 80 or so residents. It is an extremely picturesque island from which superb views of the western rocks can be obtained forming the foreground for memorable sunsets. Jumbled outcrops of granite are a feature of the coastline particularly on the south and west of the island where the formations assume strange shapes eroded by the action of wind and rain over the centuries. Tiny bulb fields sheltered by evergreen hedges and thickets of Tamarisk are visible from the single surfaced road which leads from the quay to the quaintly named Higher Town, Middle Town, Lower Town and Troy Town, each settlement no more than a scatter of buildings! An old disused lighthouse dominates the island from high ground in the centre and the nearby Parsonage garden contains the largest copse of trees on the island. A small freshwater pool in a grassy area near the interesting old church is also the only habitat of this kind on St. Agnes and much used by the resident gulls for their daily wash and preen! An area of open gorse thickets and moorland to the south of the island is known as Wingletang and here the profusion of granite boulders reach a chaotic finale around the headland of Horse Point. This rocky landscape is mirrored on the adjacent smaller island of Gugh which is joined to St. Agnes

by a narrow isthmus of sand at low tide. Abandoned bulb fields on Gugh are worth checking for migrants and many pairs of gulls nest on the open areas.

The presence of a Bird Observatory on St. Agnes forty years ago made it the focus of birdwatching interest and although the observatory has long since closed the island is still recognised as one of the best places to observe bird migration in the British Isles. Recently the efforts of two islanders, Mike Hicks and John Hale, demonstrated that St. Agnes is also a remarkable place for migrant moths and the results of their studies have revised former opinion about the status of many species. (John has now re-located to Spain!)

St. Agnes is an ideal size for a day visit and all the best locations for birds can easily be visited during the 6-7 hours at our disposal. The Turks Head pub near the quay serves excellent food and a little further along the road is Covean Cottage a fine cafe and guest house, the gardens of which have been visited by Parula and Blackpoll Warblers! The Post Office in the centre of the island is a good place to obtain the latest bird news as the owner is a keen birder!

The uninhabited island of Annet a few miles west of St. Agnes is a very important breeding site for seabirds supporting populations of Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters. Landings are not permitted during the summer months but on calm days boat trips are arranged from St. Mary's which cruise around the Western Rocks allowing close views of Grey Seals and seabirds. Similar trips visit the Eastern Isles near St. Martin's.

Tresco

The second largest island in the group, Tresco is privately owned by the Dorrien Smith family and is very different in character to the other islands. The farm estate is well maintained but tourism is an important source of income today and the island has achieved a reputation as an up-market holiday destination. Compared to the rest of Scilly, Tresco has an abundance of trees, particularly around the Great Pool, a large reed-fringed lake which is surrounded by a thick belt of trees. The old Abbey building to the south of the pool is the home of the Dorrien-Smith family and marks the entrance to the famous Abbey Gardens where a tremendous collection of tropical plants has been cultivated. A smaller pool is situated in front of the Abbey and the muddy shoreline has attracted many rare waders. The coast around Tresco includes long stretches of pristine sandy beach and at various places affords wonderful views of the Eastern Isles, St. Martins and the entire archipelago. The wilder northern end of the island is largely moorland but of particular interest to visitors here is Cromwell's Castle built in the 16th. Century to defend the narrow channel between Tresco and Bryher.

With so much vegetation, fresh water and coastline Tresco is a superb place for birds and the most likely place in the islands to see numbers of wildfowl, waterbirds and woodland species. It is too large to permit a thorough exploration in one day but we will content ourselves with a slow walk around the Great Pool followed by a visit to the gardens or perhaps a stroll across Castle Downs in the north. In the summer there is a ternery on the downs and in autumn it is popular with waders and wheatears. Boat services from St. Mary's land passengers at the southern quay of Carn Near at low tide but at high water they are obliged to use the northern harbour of New Grimsby, thus it is not uncommon to be dropped at one place and collected from the other!

The small neighbouring island of Bryher is somewhat overshadowed by Tresco but has a rugged charm that appeals to many visitors. Once again the views from the coastal walks are absolutely stunning particularly from the western

shore. The bulb fields are rather more neglected on Bryher than the other islands providing good cover for birds. There are some common features with similar sized St. Agnes including a small freshwater pool and an old church near the quay but the modern Hell Bay hotel on Bryher is a scale of development that St. Agnes has fortunately avoided

St. Martin's

The long, northern island of St. Martin's boasts tremendous sandy beaches and a varied landscape of heathland and enclosed bulb fields. The water depth between islands in the group is very shallow in places and particularly so off St. Martin's preventing boat access at very low tides. A modern hotel is discreetly tucked away on the south shore but it is essentially an unspoilt place with yet more fantastic views and clear turquoise seas that rival anywhere in the Mediterranean. Many rare birds have been recorded on St. Martin's over the years but even on quiet days it is a relaxing and enjoyable place to spend a few hours. Visits to St Martin's are usually combined with a one-hour cruise around the Eastern Isles which will provide close-up views of up to 50 Grey Seals on the rocks and in spring, nesting Fulmars, Cormorants, Shags and Razorbills. A pair of Peregrines is often to be seen around these uninhabited isles, and probably nests most years.

Day 8

Saturday

The Scillonian III leaves for Penzance at approximately 1630 allowing most of the day for a final look around St. Mary's or even a morning visit to another island if desired. The return sailing to the mainland in May should produce numbers of Manx Shearwaters as we near the coast and perhaps a few Storm Petrels too. In September rarer seabirds might appear including large shearwaters if conditions are suitable. It is always worth looking out for cetacea during the crossings, particularly Bottle-nosed Dolphins, and other less predictable ocean wanderers reported regularly from South-Western waters include Leatherback Turtles and Sun-fish. We dock at Penzance approximately 1900 at the conclusion of a memorable week on the magical Isles of Scilly. The number of migrant birds on the islands is always dependant upon the prevailing weather conditions but regardless of ornithological success we can be sure of a relaxing and pleasurable stay amid the most scenic of surroundings.

Grading

A/B. There will be a reasonable amount of walking on this holiday covering between two and ten miles per day but this will be at a slow birdwatching pace and does not entail any steep climbs except one hill on Bryher.

Food & accommodation included in the cost

Breakfasts are included in the holiday cost. Accommodation will be in a comfortable guest house in twin rooms with private facilities. LUNCHES & EVENING MEALS are not included in the tour cost. Allow approximately £40 per day depending upon appetite!

Included in tour cost

The holiday cost includes the return fare on the Scillonian 111, accommodation and breakfasts at the Guest House and services of tour leader. Also included are FOUR day excursions to 'off-islands', usually Tresco, St Agnes, Bryher and St Martins but on occasions there may be good ornithological reasons to re-visit an island and if so, one of the four will have to be omitted. Please note that the entrance fee to Tresco Abbey Gardens is **NOT** included in the holiday cost.

Climate

Scilly enjoys a warmer climate than mainland Britain but it is subject to the same vagaries of weather and periods of rain and wind are just as likely as prolonged sunshine. Waterproof clothing is recommended and warm garments are necessary for the sea crossing. The clear air increases the risk of sunburn.

How to book your place!

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.