

Northumberland & the Farne Islands

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Newcastle to Bamburgh

Day 2 Holy Island

Day 3 Coquet Island; Long Nanny

Day 4 Farne Islands

Day 5 Cheviot Hills

Day 6 Newcastle

Departs

June

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR13) or brochure

Grading

A. Easy day walks

Focus

Birds, plus other wildlife

Highlights

- Large Puffin colonies on Coquet Island & the Farne Islands
- Nesting Arctic, Roseate & Little Terns
- Huge seabird colonies of Shags, Fulmars, Guillemots, Razorbills & Kittiwakes
- Numerous Grey Seals
- Enjoy the ancient ruins on Lindisfarne (Holy Island)
- Find upland birds such as Dipper & Red Grouse in the Cheviot Hills
- Learn from Naturetrek's expert local leaders



Images from top: Puffins, Arctic Tern and Grey Seals (Images by Peter Dunn)



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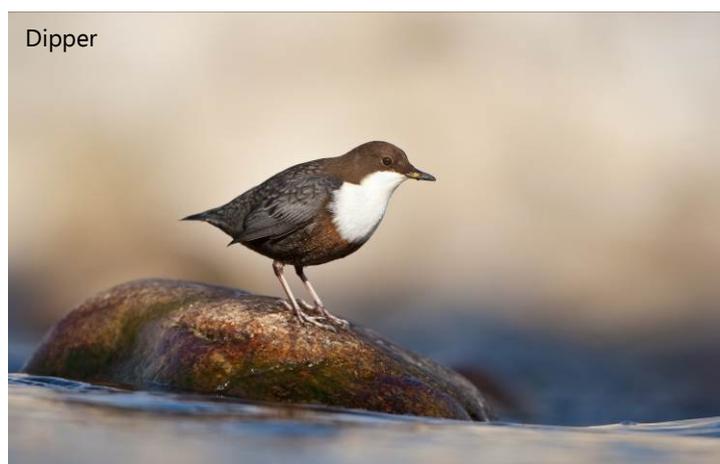
Introduction

Northumberland is one of the most delightful English counties boasting a superb coastline regarded by many as the finest in the country, and splendid examples of upland habitats in the Cheviot Hills. Both features will be explored in full during our new six day tour which also includes a full day spent exploring the world renowned Farne Islands.

The tour begins in Newcastle and from here we transfer north to a comfortable hotel which will be our base for five nights. During the following days, islands will be something of a theme as we visit Lindisfarne (or Holy Island), sail around Coquet Island, where over 70 pairs of Roseate Terns and thousands of Puffins nest, then finally visit the Farne Islands. The twin islands of Staple and Inner Farne provide one of the greatest seabird spectacles in Britain and draw visitors from all over the world. Colonies of Arctic and Sandwich Terns are scenes of constant activity and noise, Guillemots, Shags and Kittiwakes line cliff ledges whilst the ever popular Puffins play their role as court jesters. A day on the Farne Islands is a truly magical experience and as well as the principal performers there is also an impressive supporting cast including rafts of handsome Eiders and large numbers of Atlantic Grey Seals. Elsewhere along the Northumberland coast we visit a colony of Little Terns and check for late migrant passerines and waders at various locations.



Northern Gannet



Dipper

Before returning to Newcastle at the conclusion of our exciting few days in Northumberland we see another facet of the county as we visit the dramatic fells and valleys of the Cheviot Hills, home to a variety of upland birds including Red Grouse, Dipper, Grey Wagtail and Raven. We hope we will have demonstrated during the preceding days that picturesque Northumberland is an ideal destination for a late spring

break and there is no finer place in England to witness large numbers of seabirds at the peak of their nesting season.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather, tides & 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. In particular, we may change the sequence of visits in order to pick the best possible day for the Farne Islands excursion

Day 1

Bamburgh

The meeting place to begin the tour will be Newcastle Railway Station at 1400 but precise details for the meeting arrangements will be contained in the tour joining instructions which will be sent approximately three weeks before the tour. Once the tour mini-bus has been loaded we leave the city of Newcastle behind and drive north along the picturesque Northumberland coast, stopping along the way to admire the coastal scenery and to look for birds at various locations. Late spring/early summer is an exciting time to be birdwatching in Northumberland. The majority of summer visitors are back in their breeding areas along with the resident nesting birds whilst there is always the possibility of encountering one or two more unusual migrants, particularly Arctic



Common Eider

waders and seabirds. Bird song is at a peak and with the onset of summer, the emerging flora once again paints the countryside with splashes of colour. On this first afternoon we will be making the acquaintance of many birds that we will be seeing regularly over the following days. Stiff-winged Fulmars and delicate Kittiwakes pass-by offshore, Gannets fish these waters from their more northerly colonies and excited flocks of tern gather

to plunge on shoals of small fish such as sand-eels. Oystercatchers proclaim their noisy presence on many shorelines and we may also come upon Ringed Plovers anxiously trying to prevent their beautifully concealed eggs being predated. Rafts of Common Eider are a familiar sight and here and there we may encounter a pair of Shelducks maintaining a vigilant guard on their newly hatched ducklings. Further out to sea there is even more activity but we will be getting closer views of these seabirds during our island visits.

Our hotel is in the historical village of Bamburgh, famous for its impressive castle, Grace Darling Museum, and stunning beaches.

Day 2

Holy Island

We spend today investigating Holy Island (Lindisfarne) and the surrounding National Nature Reserve. Separated from the mainland by a paved causeway which is covered twice daily at high

At low tide, the island is steeped in history and a place of pilgrimage for many. The first monastery on the island was established by Saint Aiden who arrived with 12 monks from Iona in 635 and with assistance from King Oswald at Bamburgh began his mission of education and ministrations for the local population. Another famous resident was Saint Cuthbert who supervised the monastery for ten years before retiring to a hermitage on the rather inhospitable location of Inner Farne. The first wooden constructed monastery was eventually destroyed by the elements but a second stone building was occupied by Benedictine monks in 1066 and survived until the dissolution of the nation's monasteries by Henry 8th in 1536. Today, the Parish church of St Mary the Virgin stands in the site of the



Lindisfarne

second monastery and is the focal point of religious activity on the island. An impressive 16th century castle dominates the landscape on Lindisfarne and along with Bamburgh just across the water is part of a chain of defenses that once stretched along the north east coast.

Our visit to Lindisfarne will have to be tailored to the tide movements but as we cross over to the island we will scan the miles of exposed mudflats to check whether any non-breeding shorebirds such as Curlew or a late Whimbrel might be present. We may see Grey Seals or the occasional Common Seal hauled out on the mud near the water's edge but the views at low tide will be



Black-headed Gull

somewhat distant! After paying due attention to the historic aspects of the island we will visit the nearby Lough where a large colony of Black-headed Gulls fill the air with their raucous calls. Handsome Stonechats may be collecting insects for their nestlings from the margins and we may see a Common Buzzard soaring over the remaining patches of forest. Just 160 people live on Lindisfarne and it remains a unique

community, utterly exposed to the winter savagery of the North Sea yet still maintaining a slender umbilical link with the mainland.

It is also an excellent place to look for orchids, with a number of those growing here having a very restricted range. During the early summer some areas of the island have a multi-hued carpet of flowers, creating a beautiful vista and making it a lovely place to spend some time on a sunny day. These attract insects such as moths and butterflies and we may find Six-spot Burnet Moths, Dark Green Fritillary or Small Heath Butterflies.

Depending upon the times of access to Holy Island, we will fit in visits to other local birdwatching locations such as Budle Bay where in winter large flocks of wildfowl gather but at this season interest will more likely be focused on any waders frequenting the mudflats. At the end of a varied and interesting day we will have had a great introduction to the delights of the Northumberland coast and a taste of what is to follow.

Day 3

Coquet Island/Long Nanny

Coquet Island, lying one mile off the coast from the village of Amble, is a very important seabird breeding island which is today protected as a reserve by the RSPB. Wardens from the Society are the only human residents but there is history of occupation going back to the 7th century although this tiny island must always have been a lonely and exposed place to exist. Landing is not permitted in order to safeguard the precious seabird colonies but it is possible to sail around Coquet and we will



Coquet Island

join one of the morning sailings from Amble Harbour. It is estimated that over 40 thousand seabirds nest on the island and despite the landing restrictions we will see spectacular numbers during the cruise. Many thousands of Puffin inhabit the main part of Coquet and the constant traffic of birds to and from the sea will doubtless bring many close to the boat. Also present around the periphery are large colonies of Sandwich, Arctic and Common Terns but the rarest of the family is also represented by approximately 130 pairs of Roseate Tern. This delicate and beautiful tern has experienced a massive decline as a British breeding species and it is thought that the Colony on Coquet now represents 90% of the national population. At first the sheer number of terns might make it difficult to pick out the Roseates but even by tern standards these



Roseate Terns

are exquisitely graceful birds with exceptionally long tail streamers, dark bills and superficially almost totally white plumage although closer views reveal very pale grey upperparts and a variable pink suffusion to the underparts. Roseates also have a distinctive grating call although it might be hard to hear individuals amid the general hubbub of the island. Some 600 Grey Seals also inhabit the waters around Coquet and many pairs of Eider nest there.

After the seabird frenzy of Coquet Island we plan a more subdued afternoon visit to 'Long Nanny' at Newton Links. Here we have the chance of a pleasant walk for about a mile following the coastal footpath to a sandy spit where there is a wardened nesting colony of terns containing some 700 pairs of Arctic and 40+ pairs of Little Terns. Watching from a discreet distance we can

enjoy all the activity of the colony and after seeing the rarest British tern in the morning we can now admire the smallest as the diminutive Little Terns dash in and out of the rows of incubating birds, bringing fish back for their partners. At the end of another wonderful day we return to our hotel for a welcome evening meal and our thoughts will no doubt turn to the Farne Islands trip still to come.

NB – please note that the exact itinerary for this day will remain flexible as the timing of our Coquet Island boat trip will vary depending on the tides.

Day 4

Farne Islands



Farne Islands

Inner Farne and Staple Island comprise one of the major sanctuaries in the UK for breeding seabirds. Millions of TV viewers have been enthralled by the coverage given to the islands on the 'Springwatch' series and today will be our opportunity to witness the amazing spectacle for ourselves. Our embarkation point for a full day touring the islands will be Seahouses

and while we wait to board the boat we are likely to be entertained by the antics of Eiders in the harbour. The islands are only a few miles offshore and our programme will allow a landing on Inner Farne for an hour to explore the island.

The bald figures of the seabird numbers give an idea of the importance of the Farnes without conveying the impact on the senses as odours and noise combine with the colour and movements to create a truly astonishing natural history phenomenon. Over 490 pairs of Shag breed on Inner Farne and Staple, 470 pairs of Eider, 2,500 Kittiwakes, 1,350 Sandwich Terns, 1,060 Arctic Terns, more than 14 and a half thousand Guillemots, Razorbills and an astonishing 38,000 pairs of Puffin. The huge number of Puffins is somewhat disguised by their underground nesting habits but we are certain to see many hundreds of these most popular of auks and there will be plenty of photographic chances.



Guillemot colony

Although in some parts of the British Isles Puffins numbers have declined in recent years, Northumberland seems to have been a beneficiary and the Farnes colony continues to thrive, perhaps because of the plentiful supply of small fish in the North Sea. There still seems to be plenty of larger fish too as evidenced by the growing Grey Seal population which now numbers

many hundreds of animals around the islands. Our progress will be watched by these inquisitive



Puffin

creatures bobbing in the sea, whilst others will be hauled up on the rocks, snorting and snuffling as the boats pass by. Despite their name, Atlantic Grey Seals occur in a wide variety of colours with the darkest shades appearing almost black. The degree of blotching and spotting also varies widely but once the new pup has shed its initial white coat it retains the new pattern and colouration for the rest of its life.

A day spent around the Farnes is the highlight of our short tour and as we return to Seahouses we will treasure some enduring memories of the marine world we have been so privileged to observe.

Day 5

Cheviot Hills

Anywhere else on the coast would seem tame after the Farne Islands so we turn inland for the last day of the tour and enjoy some upland birding in the Cheviot Hills. Extending from Scotland along the English border, the Cheviots are a range of rolling, mostly fairly low, hills embracing a range of habitats including upland sheep pasture, moorland and wooded valleys. It is a region of great beauty and the section of hills in Northumberland is protected within the Northumberland National Park. As we spend the day exploring the Cheviots we will be searching for the characteristic birds in their favoured areas. Clear, fast flowing streams are the places to look for Dippers, Common Sandpipers and Grey Wagtails, heather moorland for Red Grouse, rocky fells for Ring Ouzel, Wheatear and Whinchat whilst Ravens and Buzzards might be encountered anywhere as they soar around looking for a meal. We hope to find Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts in the woodlands and perhaps a few other denizens of the forests such as Tree Pipit, Wood Warbler or maybe a few Crossbills in the pines. In recent years a small population of Black Grouse has gradually increased in number and whilst by no means a guarantee, we will hope to enrich our morning by a sighting of these impressive grouse.



Ring Ouzel

There are many delightful and picturesque places to visit within the National Park and our time here will complement the previous days on the coast.

Day 6

Newcastle

After perhaps a final stroll on the beach we will gradually make our way back to Newcastle where the tour will end at the Railway Station approximately 1300 hours. During the preceding days we hope we will have amply demonstrated why a summer visit to the magnificent Northumberland is very definitely a birdwatching experience not to be missed!

Images courtesy of Peter Dunn, Mike Hodgson, Alison Steel & Shutterstock.

Tour grading

Grade A. We will undertake some gentle wildlife walks during the course of the holiday (with any more demanding walks always being optional). Some of our activities will be weather dependant – particularly the boat tours – so we will need to be prepared to be flexible with the itinerary to make the most of the best weather.

Focus

The main focus for the tour is birds, however we will also take time to look at some of the other wildlife in the area including mammals, insects and plants.

Weather

Weather in Northumberland is as unpredictable as anywhere else in Britain. We hope for settled warm conditions with little rain, but if a northerly air stream is established it can be much colder and it would be best to check the weather forecasts immediately before the holiday and dress accordingly. Regardless of the prevailing conditions it will feel cooler during the sea trips and warmer clothing will be needed for these. Waterproof garments are recommended as rain is always possible, and good, waterproof footwear is also recommended.

Arrival / departure details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will arrive into Newcastle Central Station and so this will be our first meeting point. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour final joining instructions, but are likely to be as follows: 1400 hours at Newcastle Central Station and 1445 hours at the first afternoon stop (usually near Amble). At the end of the tour we expect to return to Newcastle Central Station by 1300 hours. Those departing by rail from Newcastle should arrange trains to depart after these times. As train timings do vary from year to year, we would ask you to contact the Naturetrek office before booking travel arrangements that are unlikely to fit in with the timings mentioned above.

By Train

We meet you at Newcastle Central Station at 1400 hours at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour) Do not worry if our bus is a few

minutes late, parking is difficult in the station and it is easier for us if we are sure everyone is together. At the end of the trip, we normally have you back at the station by 1300hrs.

By Car

If you come by car, you may drive directly to the hotel in Bamburgh and meet the group at the end of the afternoon. Alternatively you can meet them at the afternoon stop; details of time and meeting location will be provided in the final joining instructions for the tour.

Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in a comfortable tourist hotel with private facilities in each room. The holiday cost is calculated on the basis of sharing a twin-room but a limited number of single rooms may be available at a supplementary cost. It is in an excellent location for our daily excursions.

Breakfast and evening meals are included in the tour price but LUNCHES ARE NOT INCLUDED. Wherever possible, the leader will try to arrange the programme so that tour members will be able to choose whether to have a cooked meal or a picnic lunch, and anyone preferring the latter option will be able to obtain a packed lunch from the hotel or visit the shop near the hotel. Please note however that there are no restaurant facilities on the Farne Islands and a packed lunch will be needed on the day we visit the islands.

Inclusions/ Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- Accommodation in comfortable hotels on a half board basis
- Transport from Newcastle
- All guiding
- Boat tours

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Lunches
- Drinks
- Discretionary tipping
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs

Please bring a water bottle with you that can be re-filled every day. We would recommend having a bottle of around 1 litre in capacity.

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.