Wildflowers & Gardens of the Isles of Scilly

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1  Meet Penzance; sail to St Mary’s
Day 2/7  Natural History excursions on St Mary’s, St Agnes, Bryher, Tresco & St Martin’s
Day 8  Morning excursion; afternoon sailing to Penzance

Departs
April or May

Focus
Plants and general natural history

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 botanising pace and does not entail any steep climbs.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code GBR23)

Highlights:
- Stunning island scenery
- Outstanding flora, including many rare species
- Leisurely paced tour visiting all 5 inhabited islands by boat
- World famous Tresco Abbey Gardens
- Grey seals
- Abundant bir life with chance of rare migrants
- Unique Scillonian way of life
- Led by expert naturalist guide

From top: St Mary’s Harbour, Dwarf Pansy & Whistling Jacks. Images by Andrew Cleave & Dawn Nelson
Introduction

Imagine an island paradise with sparkling turquoise seas and deserted white sandy beaches lapped by gentle tides under a cloudless sky. The sun rises and sets over the sea all year round, making for many good photographic opportunities. Everywhere is within walking distance or just a short boat ride away. Small fields with high hedges are awash with wildflowers and even the stone walls are colonised by an abundance of interesting plants. The Isles of Scilly – never the Scilly Isles for obvious reasons - are situated just 28 miles off the south-western most tip of England; visible on a clear day from Land’s End, but a world apart. Within hours, if not minutes, of your arrival all stresses and cares seem to drop away; life here is led at a different pace and you slip into it imperceptibly but immediately.

Legends abound, and some believe that Scilly is the remains of the lost drowned land of Lyonnesse and King Arthur’s last destination. There is some historic and scientific evidence to support the theory of a drowned landscape, implying that the sea levels have altered many times, submerged field boundaries are visible even today at low tides. Certainly there has been a long history of human habitation on the Islands as is evident from vast numbers of prehistoric tombs found here. Rising sea levels and sinking land have continued in Scilly until relatively recent times; about 1000 years ago most of the islands apart from St Agnes were probably still joined at low water. It is thought that perhaps the main islands were only separated as little as 500 years ago.

The famous exotic flora of the islands owes much to the Tresco Abbey Garden, the once flourishing cut flower industry, and their escapees, as well as the benign climate and the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. However the Isles of Scilly have a unique flora in their own right with plants of a Lusitanian and Mediterranean origin. Due possibly to an ancient land link with Europe, a similarly strange and unique flora can be found in parts of western Ireland. Species found here such as, Orange Bird’s-foot (Ornithopus pinnatus), Least Adder’s-tongue Fern (Ophioglossum lusitanicum) and Dwarf Pansy (Viola kitaibeliana) do not occur on mainland Britain. Others such as Small-flowered Catchfly (Silene gallica), Four-leaved Allseed (Polycarpon tetraphyllum), and Small-flowered Tree-mallow (Lavatera cretica) are found elsewhere but are never as abundant as they are in Scilly. However, due to its isolation and unique climate, not only does it have a diverse flora of exotics that could not survive in colder conditions on the mainland, but many plants that are common to mainland Britain are
strangely absent or rare here such as Lords-and-Ladies (*Arum maculatum*), Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*), Betony (*Stachys officinalis*), and even White Dead-nettle (*Lamium album*).

The climate here is oceanic, with mild winters and mild summers; snow and frosts are uncommon, but there are rarely very high temperatures. The wind off the sea is a moderating factor. It is easy to forget that the deep waters surrounding the archipelago are treacherous and the winds can be violent. Bishop Rock Lighthouse towering some 55m above high water was and is a necessary warning to all shipping approaching the English Channel. The Western Rocks experience some of the wildest maritime conditions anywhere in Europe. The Islands rely on tourism today as the flower industry which saved them from poverty over 170 years ago has mostly now superseded by flown in foreign imports. The permanent population of 2000 people swells to about 4000 in the height of the holiday season, although it never seems crowded.

There are five inhabited islands 40 smaller islands with vegetation and approximately 150 named rocks plus numerous rocky outcrops often under water at high tide. The natural riches of the archipelago are preserved by 26 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a Conservation Area, a Heritage Coast, a European Area of Special Conservation and a Ramsar site, due to internationally important wetland habitats. At 16 square km the Isles of Scilly are the smallest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the country, and have been a Voluntary Marine Park since 1987. Although the focus of the trip is plants, the islands are renowned for vagrant bird sightings especially in spring and autumn, so bring your binoculars. A variety of other fauna such as the Scilly Shrew and the Scilly Bee, an uncommon form of the Moss Carder Bee, are also found here. Marine life including Dolphins, Harbour Porpoise, Sunfish and Seals, who often seem as interested in us as we are in them, may be seen. The islands hold a wealth of invertebrates and lower life forms both on land and in the shallow seas between the islands.

St Mary’s is the largest of the islands approximately 4km x 3km with a population of about 1500 and is where the airport and the capital Hugh Town are situated. It is where most of the inter-island boats collect their passengers. Although small, it has all the necessary requirements: hotels, guesthouses, pubs, banks, Post office, Museum etc and many interesting shops and eateries to sustain and entertain. It will be our base for the holiday.

The 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 a regular helicopter service and the fixed wing Skybus flights from St. Just near Land’s End. Both these options are 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 £95-£245 per person. (Fares are subject to annual increases- we charge the difference between Scillonian III fare and the relevant air carrier)

Although the focus of this tour will be plants, Scilly can boast many other natural history attractions for visitors. Birds are of great interest and invertebrates such as Migrant Butterflies and Moths, such as Clouded Yellow and Hummingbird Hawk Moths, all flourish. 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. The itinerary for the tour will be 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 botanising pace and punctuated by regular stops. Included in the tour price are five full day visits to 'off-islands' which will entail catching the 10.15 tripper launch from St. Mary’s returning 16.00-17.00. 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.

The Isles of Scilly provide the exotic, the rare and their own extraordinary beauty. Join us to experience this special place.

**Itinerary**

*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.*

**Day 1**

*Depart Penzance, sail to St Mary’s*

On arrival at St. Mary’s, if travelling on the Scillonian III, there is much activity around the quay as crates are unloaded and passengers for the 'off-islands' assigned to the correct launches but you can avoid having to wait for your bags by using the island transportation service which ensures the delivery of correctly labelled luggage to the respective guest house. Free of this burden you 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 (hopefully!) we can be re-united with our bags and check-in to the rooms. After settling in we will meet up to explore The Garrison, the high headland to the west of Hugh Town, which affords spectacular views of Tresco, Bryher and St Agnes. The first fortifications were built here in 1593 and were added to over the next 200 years. We will be looking for local specialities such as Western Clover (**Trifolium occidentale**), Wild Madder (**Rubia peregrina**), Rock Sea Spurrey (**Spergula rupicola**), the coastal variety of Wild Carrot (**Daucus carota subsp gummifer**), Thrift (**Armeria maritima**), Sea Spleenwort (**Asplenium marinum**), the coastal variety of Wild Carrot (**Daucus carota subsp gummifer**), Thrift (**Armeria maritima**), Sea Spleenwort (**Asplenium marinum**), and also Small flowered Catchfly (**Silene gallica**) on the tops of the walls. Interesting aliens might include Giant Herb-robert (**Geranium maderense**), Cineraria (**Pericallis hybrida**), and Wire Plant (**Muelenbecki complexa**).

### Day 2  
**St Agnes**

Each of the islands has its own identity that differs in many ways form the others, but St Agnes being separated by a deep water channel seems even more set apart. It has a compact inhabited area and in contrast a wild windswept down to the south; both of which we will be exploring.

Today we will see another source of the alien species that thrive here; the many small bulb fields created for the protection of the produce of the cut-flower industry.

At Higher Town we hope to see Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil (**Lotus subiflorus**), Hairy Buttercup (**Ranunculus sarduus**) and other bulb field weeds such as Smaller Tree-mallow (**Malva pseudolavatera**) and Corn Marigold (**Glebionis segetum**). From here we will move on to the northern part of the island finding Honey Spurge (**Euphorbia mellifera**) and German Ivy (**Delaira odorata**) on the way. Big Pool is home to Saltmarsh Rush (**Juncus gerardii**) and Marsh Pennywort (**Hydrocotyle vulgaris**). In the damp grassland around it we hope to find Suffocated Clover (**Trifolium suffocatum**), Chamomile (**Chamaemelum nobile**), and Early meadow-grass (**Poa infirma**). We will lunch at the Coastguard’s Café, then the afternoon will be spent exploring Wingletang Down to the south of the Island, notable for the rare Adder’s-tongue ferns (**Ophioglossum lisitanicum and**
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Ophioglossum azoricum. We are also likely to find Lousewort (Pedicularis sylvatica), Early Forget-me-not (Myosotis ramosissima) and Heath-grass (Danthonia decumbens). For those who enjoy beachcombing, we will pass Beady pool where you can still find beads that are the relics of a 17th Century shipwreck.

Day 3

Bryher

Bryher has differing aspects depending on the weather; it can seem storm-washed and dangerous, which a visit to Hell Bay at the north western end of the island can confirm, or gentle and sun kissed towards the south on a calm day. We will explore the southern end! Here we will be concentrating on the maritime grassland where we hope to find Dwarf Pansy (Viola kitaibeliana), and are likely to see Common Scurvy-grass (Cochlearia officinalis), Sea Sandwort (Honkenya peploides) and Sea Holly (Eryngium maritimum). We shall also visit the only saline lagoon in Scilly which is separated from the sea by a narrow stony beach known as Popplestone Bank. Here we should find Lesser Sea-spurrey (Spergularia marina) and Sea Milkweed (Glaux maritima). In the surrounding grassland we may find Spring squill (Scilla verna) and a dark-leaved, pink flowered form of White clover (Trifolium repens var townsendii) that is common on Bryher. A search along the base of the hedgerows should enable us to find several established exotic species.

We can choose to treat ourselves and indulge with lunch at the luxurious Hell Bay Hotel or take a picnic, and we should have time for tea at the café before catching the boat for our return to St Mary’s.

Day 4

Tresco

Tresco is the second largest island and possibly the most famous due to the Abbey Garden and the patronage of the Dorien-Smith family that dates back to 1834 when Augustus Smith took on the lease of Scilly from the Duchy of Cornwall. He built his home close to the ruins of the twelfth century abbey, which he incorporated into his garden. He set about introducing new industries to the impoverished islanders and is credited with establishing new agricultural policies and introducing the flower industry and even tourism to the islands, thus revitalising the island economy.
Tresco offers many contrasts: from the wild grandeur of the western cliffs, wind pruned heather headland and Cromwell’s Castle in of the north of the island; to the exotic subtropical gardens, sheltered bays, dunes and sandy beaches at the southern end. Inland is the Great Pool and a maze of bulb fields, a hotel, a pub and a thriving time-share complex of cottages both traditional and new; all this in an island that measures just over 3km long x1.7km wide!

We will land at either Carn Near or New Grimsby depending on the tides and probably return from a different quay. We will make our way noting a few of the interesting plants along the way of which there will be many, mostly escapes from the garden; but we will save an extensive search for our second visit to the island. Our focus today will be the Tresco Abbey Garden and all it has to offer, which includes over 20,000 exotic plants from 80 countries, set out in a series of terraces with carefully created vistas and adorned with some exquisite artworks. We will explore and experience these tranquil surroundings enjoying the atmosphere and the stunning plantings in this unique garden. The collection comprises species from such diverse locations as Mexico, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the Canaries. The tallest Norfolk Island Pine in Britain, a specimen Cordyline, Silver Trees and a spectacular New Zealand Christmas Tree are just a few of the highlights. Within the gardens as well as the magnificent plantings there are also a large number of naturalised species such as Goldenfleece (*Urospermum dalechampii*) and Aichryson (*Aichryson laxum*) to spot. There is also the splendid Valhalla collection of ships figureheads from the golden age of sail. We can take our time and either enjoy lunch at the adjoining Café or take a picnic in the gardens. Having familiarised ourselves with some of the exotic flora introduced to Tresco Abbey, and from there to other gardens on the islands, we will gain an understanding of part of the unique alien flora to be found in Scilly.
Day 5

St Martin’s

St Martin’s is a favourite for many regulars to Scilly. It has some of the most spectacular views of all the islands and a variety of ‘towns’ each with its own character.

Today we will visit a flower farm to see the eponymous buttercup (*Ranunculus marginatus var trachycarpus*) and other bulb field weeds such as Shepherds needle (*Scandix pecten-verneris*). Along the lane we will spot many established exotics such as Bermuda Buttercup (*Oxalis pes-caprae*). We will have lunch overlooking The Plains partly for the spectacular views but also to explore the interesting maritime grassland flora such as Common Bird’s-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*) and Orange Bird’s-foot (*Ornithopus pinnatus*), as well as more exotics.

The day’s list will hopefully also include Brackish Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus boudotii*), more of the unusual native Fumitories and Clovers and some Eyebright (*Euphrasia*) species. Amongst the grasses we should see Rescue Brome (*Ceratlocha cathartica*). Also *Aeoniums* growing in the dry stone walls, Babbington’s Leek (*Allium ampeoloprasum var babingtonii*), Rosy Garlic (*Allium roseum*), Common Star-of-Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum angustifolium*), and Lesser New Zealand flax (*Phormium cookianum*) are likely to be added to our finds.

St Martin’s, like Tresco, is another island where, due to the tides, we often land at one quay and depart from another, so the route we take will be dictated by this. We will take a picnic lunch and should have time for tea at the hotel or a café before catching the boat back to St Mary’s.

Day 6

St Mary’s

Today, without the restrictions of the boat times, we will be free to make an earlier start. We will purchase a picnic lunch from Hugh Town and take the Island Community Bus to our starting point. We will make our way through Holy Vale and Higher Moors Nature Reserve to Porth Hellick Bay where we will enjoy our picnic lunch overlooking the dramatic rocky outcrops. One of the first notable plants we are likely to spot is the white flowered form of Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis forma alba*) among a variety of garden escapes such as Karo (*Pittosporum crassifolium*), Silver-bush Everlasting-flower (*Helichrysum petiolare*) and Giant Viper’s-bugloss (*Echium pininana*).
We will also see Lady Fern (*Athyrium felix-femina*), Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), the impressive towers of Greater Tussock-sedge (*Carex paniculata*) and mature elms, an unusual sight these days; the species in Scilly are under investigation at present but Cornish Elm (*Ulmus minor subsp angustifolia*) and Jersey Elm (*Ulmus minor subsp sarniensis*) have both been recorded from Higher Moors. After leaving the nature reserve we will take a short detour to see Chilean Hard-fern (*Blechnum cordatum*) and Western Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria occidentalis*). Least Adder’s Tongue (*Ophioglossum azoricum*), Chilean Iris (*Libertia formosa*), Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and House Holly-fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*) may also be seen.

The area round Porth Hellick and Salakee Down will afford us a good example of the wind pruned ‘waved heath’ so called because the plants of Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell heather (*Erica cineraria*) and often Western gorse (*Ulex gallica*), which comprise the ‘heath’ are rolled over by the wind exposing their stems, roots and often bare soil on the windward side and causing a concentration of leaves and flowers on the sheltered side giving a visual effect of rolling waves.

Before we stop for tea we should find many established exotics e.g. Shrubby Orache (*Atriplex halimus*), Pale Dewplant (*Drosanthemum floribundum*) and rare natives such as Sea Pea (*Lathyrus japonicus subsp maritimus*) and Toothed medick (*Medicago polymorpha*). We may also see the delightful and unusual coloured form of Small-flowered Catchfly (*Silene gallica var quinquevulnera*) with a crimson spot on each petal; it is now sadly extinct in the wild on Scilly; but it occasionally escapes from gardens on St Mary’s where it has been conserved. Then we will proceed through Lower Moors Nature Reserve, adding to our list a variety of Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus var atlanticus*) that only occurs in Scilly, and Bog Pondweed (*Potomogeton polygonifolius*), as well as the distinctive leaves of a recent alien find, Toothed Fireweed (*Senecio minimus*). No doubt more species will be noted on our route back to Hugh Town along the lane.

Day 7

Today we return to Tresco to explore other areas for interesting native species and established escapees from the gardens. We will make our way from the quay to start the day exploring the Abbey drive. This consists of many interesting natives such as the rare Four-leaved Allseed (*Polycarpon tetraphyllum*) and the locally abundant Balm-leaved Figwort (*Scrophularia scorondonia*), as well as established plants that have escaped from the garden, such as African...
Hemp (*Spargmannia africana*), Giant Rhubarb (*Gunnera tinctoria*), Fleshy Yellow-sorrel (*Oxalis megalorrhiza*) and Tresco Rhodostachys (*Ochagavia carnea*).

We will picnic overlooking the sea, or if the weather is inclement we can visit the café. We may search for Moonwort, (*Botrychium lunaria*) in its last known location in the islands. Then make our way to the dunes at Apple Tree Banks which are famous for their many exotics such as African Lily (*Agapanthus praecox subsp orientalis*), Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*), Annual Buttonweed (*Cotula australis*) and Bugle-lily (*Watsonia borbonica*). Native plants we should see here include Portland Spurge (*Euphorbia portlandica*) and Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*).

Then we will follow the path between arable fields and Great Pool to explore both habitats and add more species to our list such as the blue form of Scarlet Pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis subsp. arvensis f. azurea*) and Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*) respectively.

**Day 8**

St Mary’s, sail to Penzance

Today will see our return home. However the Scillonian III sails in the afternoon and the island carrier service will arrange our luggage again for a small fee, so once packed and breakfasted we will be free to have a last foray to parts of St Mary’s as yet unexplored. These include Buzza Hill, where we may find Lesser Sea-fig (*Erepsia heteropetala*), and Rough Dog's-tail (*Cynosorus echinatus*), and also the sheltered community garden at Carreg Dhu. Lunch will be enjoyed in one of St Mary’s many establishments that we have not yet sampled, with no doubt another amazing view. Along the way back we should find the eponymous Scilly Pigmyweed (*Crassula decumbens*), Field Marigold (*Calendula arvensis*) and a Hugh Town speciality, if not already seen, Rough-fruited Buttercup (*Ranunculus muricatus*).

**Tour grading**

Grade 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 botanising pace and does not entail any very steep climbs.
Focus

This is primarily a botanical holiday, aimed at the keen amateur botanist, and focusing on the plant life of the Isles of Scilly. There will be time to look at the other wildlife of the islands as well, but much of the itinerary is designed to allow for botanical exploration.

Weather

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.

Food & accommodation

We use comfortable hotels or guesthouses where all rooms have private facilities.

Breakfasts are included with the tour cost, however lunches and dinners are not. The tour leader will arrange a group meal in the evening for those who wish, but you are also welcome to make your own arrangements.

Joining Information

For those members of the group travelling by ferry, the Scillonian III normally departs from Penzance around 0900 hours, and you will need to check-in at least 1 hour prior to departure. Naturetrek has a list of accommodation found around Penzance, so please do contact us if a copy of this would be helpful for you (email info@naturetrek.co.uk or call 01962 733051).

The return ferry at the end of the tour will get back to Penzance for approximately 1915 hours.

If anyone would prefer to fly then Naturetrek can arrange this for you if you wish. There will be a supplementary cost for the flights of the difference between the airfare and the ferry ticket cost. Flights can be arranged from St Just’s (Land’s End as well as Newquay or Exeter, and are subject to availability. From St Just’s there is also the possibility of helicopter flights.

You are welcome to extend your stay on the Isles of Scilly, either before or after the tour. If required, Naturetrek can help to arrange additional nights for you and book the ferry for the appropriate days.

Inclusions / Exclusions

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

- Accommodation on a bed and breakfast basis
- Return ferry tickets from Penzance
- All guiding
- Five day excursions to ‘off-islands’- usually Tresco, St Agnes, Bryher and St Martin’s,
• One entrance ticket to Tresco Abbey Gardens

The following costs are not included and should be budgeted for:
• Lunches & evening meals - allow approximately £35-£40 per day depending upon appetite!
• Drinks
• Portage fees
• Discretionary tipping
• Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs

Reading List

This list is a general guide to those books we consider to be most interesting and informative. It is by no means an exhaustive list so if you find a book that merits inclusion please let us know so that we can add it to our list. Some of these are now out of print, but are available second hand. We would recommend Subbuteo Natural History Books Ltd as one of Britain’s best natural history mail-order book services. There are a huge number of publications on the Isles of Scilly from Guide books to scientific papers. A range of maps, books and booklets are generally on sale in Scilly.


*The Wild Flower Key - How to identify wild plants, trees and shrubs in Britain and Ireland.* F. Rose. (Warne 2006, revised edition).

*Collins Flower Guide* Streeter et al. (Collins, 2016).


*Wildflowers of Britain & Ireland.* Blamey, Fritter & Fritter. (A&C Black 2003). (Includes a small section on Scilly specialities)


**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](http://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.

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