

Shetland's Wildlife

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Overnight ferry Aberdeen to Lerwick
- Day 2/4** Mainland Shetland
- Day 5** Transfer Mainland to Unst
- Day 6-7** Unst and Fetlar
- Day 8/9** Transfer to Lerwick and overnight ferry to Aberdeen

Departs

May & June

Focus

Birds and mammals

Grading

B – expect to cross over stiles, uneven ground and some steep hills may have to be walked.

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR24)

Highlights

- Vast seabird colonies on Noss, Mainland and Unst
- Intimate views of Great and Arctic Skuas, Red-throated Divers and Arctic Terns
- Grey & Common Seals and Otters
- Red-necked Phalaropes and 'drumming' Snipe on Fetlar.
- Edmonston's Chickweed, Moonwort and Frog Orchid on Unst (*Cerastium nigrescens*)
- Ancient settlements of Jarlshof & the Great Broch of Mousa
- Breeding specialties such as Whimbrel on Fetlar



From top: Arctic Tern, Puffin & Mousa Broch (images courtesy of Shutterstock & A Steel)



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

The Shetland archipelago consists of about 100 islands which lie to the north-east of Orkney and 280 km from the Faroes. These remote and starkly beautiful islands, situated between the Atlantic and the North Sea, are one of Britain's most exciting wildlife destinations, and in midsummer offer a feast of special breeding birds. Only 15 of the islands are inhabited and the capital, Lerwick, is situated on the largest island, known as 'Mainland'. This 2-centre holiday (based on Mainland and on Unst) is carefully timed so that we may have the best views of the many birds which breed in Shetland, in addition to the wealth of other exciting wildlife, whether it'll be flora or fauna, which inhabit these islands.

We begin the holiday by taking the overnight ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick, a trip which itself offers some potentially exciting sea-watching for cetaceans and seabirds. Among the breeding species, we hope to see will be Red-throated Diver, Eider, Gannet, Storm Petrel, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Whimbrel, Great and Arctic Skuas, Kittiwake, Arctic Tern, Puffin, Black Guillemot, Rock Dove and Twite. Offshore, Grey and Common Seals, plus Otter, are among the mammals we'll be looking for. Orcas are being seen with more frequency and we hope to see these majestic animals, although they are very tricky to catch up with. Our interest is not confined to wildlife, however, with fascinating historical sites of interest such as Jarlshof and the Great Broch of Mousa. Weather permitting; we may visit the latter after dark to experience European Storm-petrels arriving at their nesting burrows in the Broch walls.



Next, we transfer to the Island of Unst, the most northerly inhabited isle in Great Britain, for the remainder of our stay. Boasting deep blue sea, high cliffs and unspoilt beaches, Unst is home to Red-throated Diver on its lochans, and the botanical curiosity *Cerastium nigrescens* (Shetland Mouse-ear Chickweed). On the neighbouring island of Fetlar we'll look for such breeding specialities as Whimbrel and Red-necked Phalarope, as well as Great and Arctic Skuas – among the real highlights of a visit to Shetland for the southern birdwatcher! Fetlar is also renowned as one of the best places in Britain to see Otters and, though sightings can never be guaranteed, we have a very good chance of seeing them here. Shetland is a magical place and the experience of simply being in this remote, northerly outreach of the British Isles, among its rugged landscapes, huge skies and scattered reminders of ancient settlements, is hard to beat.

Itinerary

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.

Day 1

Overnight ferry (Aberdeen to Lerwick)

We assemble at the ferry terminal at Aberdeen docks for the overnight journey aboard a ferry operated by NorthLink to Shetland. A large, comfortable and well-appointed vessel, on which there are lounges, along with a cafeteria and a restaurant; most people manage to divide their time up happily between these facilities and some sea-watching from the deck. As we exit the harbour, Bottlenose Dolphins can, at times, be seen breaching, while Goosanders, Shags and a number of other common seabirds, including Fulmar and Kittiwake, are with us most of the way. As we head out into deeper waters, Manx Shearwater and Arctic Skuas may start to be seen.

Pods are included in the price of the tour. ***If you would like to upgrade to a cabin for that little bit of extra comfort and privacy on this overnight journey, contact us and we will check availability and cost for you.***

Day 2

Mainland, Shetland

For those of you up early this morning, some sea-watching on deck is likely to be rewarded with more seabirds. Arrival at Lerwick, capital of Shetland, is usually at about 0700 hours. In the harbour, as the ship is docking, we can expect to see our first Black Guillemot and we will most likely have been seeing Great Skua since our first sight of land.



Once we have disembarked and collected our transport we will then head to our hotel. Having deposited our luggage, we will set off to explore Shetland Mainland. We may make a visit to the Walls peninsula

in the far west of the island where the spectacular scenery of moorland, lochans and voes provides a home to such birds Red Grouse, Snipe and Red-breasted Merganser, as well as seabirds and Grey and Common Seals. On a clear day the western horizon is dominated by the island of Foula, the remotest inhabited island in the UK. Alternatively, we may head east to the equally spectacular Nesting and Lunna Ness coast. In either case we will be keeping a sharp eye out for Otters, which are always a possibility in these locations.

Day 3

Noss, Shetland

Today, we will board a vessel and explore the seabird cliffs on the islands of Noss. In past years, we have walked the island, however, viewing of the cliffs has been limited compared to other sites we will visit on the tour, therefore, we will be able to get exceptional views of the cliffs and the breeding birds from our stable vessel below, giving memorable views of the seabirds as they launch themselves off the vast cliffs.

Being able to observe Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins, Gannets and Shags launching themselves off the cliffs and down towards the boat will be an incredible visual display! Grey Seals will no doubt be a feature of the trip, as they come and inspect the vessel, but it will be the unknown that will surely be the highlight of our already action-packed holiday. This boat trips last around three hours, but is weather dependent.

Day 4

We will travel to the south of the Mainland to visit Sumburgh. Here we find the remarkable antiquity of Jarlshof where the remains of at least five civilisations from Bronze Age to Medieval times are found. Above this site – on Sumburgh Head – there are seabird cliffs, and there are often good views of Gannets flying past at eye-level, as well as very approachable Puffins. Great and Arctic Skuas also cause havoc here and will give superb views! Sumburgh Head is also an exceptional site for searching for cetaceans. If the weather is fine, there are also good views of Fair Isle to the south and Noss to the north.

If time permits, we may cross the largest tombolo (sand bar joining two islands) in Britain to visit St. Ninian's Isle and inspect the many lochs of South Mainland. Loch of Spiggie usually attracts Whooper Swans and is a great location for other wildfowl, as well as our few chances to see Moorhen.

In bad weather, we may also spend a few hours in the town of Lerwick where we may wish to visit the museum, amongst other attractions, and we will be sure to check the harbour for any interesting birds which might be about.



Sumburgh Head

Day 5

Mainland & Unst, Shetland

This morning, we head north towards our second base on Unst. We may go for a walk through the Kergord woods – not a great forest but the largest in Shetland, and it should mean we can add Rook to our checklist! We'll check the Loch of Tingwall for waterfowl and Red-throated Diver, and everywhere we go we will be watching out for Merlin and Peregrine, or head out onto the Lunna Peninsula for yet more spectacular views and increase our chances of finding an Otter.



Red-throated Diver

In the afternoon, we'll leave the Mainland, crossing first to Yell and then on to the island of Unst. Unst is dominated by peat, but in the lochans here Red-throated Diver are regularly seen.

Our accommodation in Unst locates us conveniently for the next 3 nights, as it is located a short walk from the sheltered voe of Baltasound, an exceptional site for Otter, and with very plentiful daylight up here, a gentle stroll after dinner or before breakfast each day will increase our possibility of a sightings.

Day 6

Fetlar & Unst, Shetland

Crossing by inter-island ferry to Fetlar, we'll spend the whole day on this fabulous island in the hope of seeing a feast of waders. Brought to fame by Bobby Tulloch's discovery of Britain's only record of breeding Snowy Owls (which last bred here in 1975), Fetlar has the greatest breeding number of Whimbrel in Britain; its larger cousin, the Curlew, is also found here, enabling us to make a direct comparison. The other wader we particularly hope for here is the engaging Red-necked Phalarope – all while 'drumming' Snipes are overhead!



Whimbrel

While these two rarities will be top of our list, we should also see breeding Redshank, Golden and Ringed Plovers, Dunlin, Lapwing, Oystercatcher and Snipe. Most of these waders have young at this time of year and this makes some usually skulking species – notably the Snipe – much easier to observe. We'll look for Otter as well as Great and Arctic Skuas during our visit to the island as well. Fetlar is

another site for viewing cetaceans, and previously have seen both Risso's Dolphins and Minke Whale from the lookouts here.

Day 7

Unst, Shetland

Today we explore the most northerly inhabited island of the United Kingdom. Here we will look for *Cerastium nigrescens*, Edmondston's Chickweed, a botanical curiosity and a "Native. Only on serpentine debris at 50ft on Unst, Shetland", as Clapham, Tutin & Warburg state tersely in their (pre-metric) 'Flora of the British Isles'.

After inspecting the chickweed, we continue to Hermaness National Nature Reserve. We will spend several hours walking here, taking in views of Muckle Flugga, the most northerly point of Shetland. Gannet breed here in great numbers, along with Puffin, Guillemot, Razorbill, Kittiwake, Fulmar, Shag, and other seabirds. The walk to the cliffs passes through one of the largest colonies of Great Skua in Britain and is an experience not to be missed.

Please note the walk is roughly an hour one way, but mostly on a boardwalk, therefore, it should be relatively easy going. Once at the cliffs, we will spend plenty of time observing the seabirds.



Edmondston's Chickweed

Day 8

Overnight ferry (Lerwick to Aberdeen)

On our final morning, we will scout around Unst for any species we may have missed, before taking the two inter-island ferries back to Mainland.

Any available time will be spent wisely. In the afternoon, there is also the chance to wander around the harbour of Lerwick, where Black Guillemots give excellent views, before we board the ferry again for the return overnight journey to Aberdeen.

Day 9

Arrive Aberdeen

Our tour ends this morning, on our arrival in Aberdeen harbour. We recommend pre-booking a taxi if you require one, or there is a bus which can take anyone back to the airport.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Northlink ferries

Additional Information

Ferry Crossing

For our two nights on NorthLink ferry, pods (similar to airline seats) are included in the price (subject to availability). They are semi-enclosed seats that partially recline, with a light and a table. They are located in separate lounges, where it's quieter and darker, although please note that tall people may find these to be a bit snug. If pods are unavailable for crossings, a reclining seat will be booked instead.

Please let us know if you wish to be upgraded at additional cost to a cabin (subject to availability).



Upgrades:



Interior cabin (no windows):

From £115 each way



Outer cabin (with port-hole windows):

From £130 each way

Although they are large vessels, designed to sail these North Sea waters the weather can be unpredictable and therefore you should be prepared that this may be a rough crossing. You may like to pack some travel-sickness tablets/remedies just in case it gets a bit choppy.

Please note: ***Please don't forget to bring with you photo ID (driving license or passport) to travel on the NorthLink ferry.***

Tour Grading

Grade B. Generally straightforward, but with some moderately strenuous walking in places, climbing stiles, some potentially long days too. Walking distances are fairly low (a few miles each day), but the terrain can be hard going at times.

Focus

This tour will mainly focus on birds as well as mammals, including sea mammals and cetaceans. Other wildlife and the scenery will not be ignored.

Accommodation & meals

We will split our stay between comfortable hotels on Mainland (3 nights) and Unst (3 nights), where all rooms are en-suite. We stay at the only hotel on Unst and the rooms are a little more simple in nature. The first and last night will be spent onboard the overnight ferry from/to Aberdeen.

Breakfast and evening meals are included in the tour price from the time of arrival in the Shetlands up until departure on Day 8. In practice, this means that meals are included from evening meal on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 8.

Please note: ***Lunches are not included in the tour cost***. We usually stop at a nearby convenience store/bakery each morning where you can purchase sandwiches, etc.

Joining the trip

ABERDEEN FERRY TERMINAL

Aberdeen can be reached by air or rail (www.nationalrail.co.uk).

Please ensure you allow plenty of time to travel to Aberdeen Ferry Terminal, to ensure you meet up with the group in time (preferably 2 hours prior to the departure time). If you miss the ferry, you will need to make your own way to Shetland to meet up with the group. The Northlink ferry departs at either 1700 or 1900 hours, depending on whether or not the ferry calls into Kirkwall on that crossing. On the return journey, the ferry normally arrives into Aberdeen at approximately 0700 hours. The times can be confirmed once the ferry timetables for the year are published.

There are plenty of accommodation options in and around Aberdeen and www.tripadvisor.com can be a good place to research hotels.

If flying to Aberdeen, we would advise arriving a day early in case of any cancelled/re-directed flights. Although ferry sailings rarely get cancelled due to adverse weather conditions, flights can be cancelled more frequently in windy or stormy conditions, so to avoid disappointment this is what we advise.

Long-stay parking in Aberdeen is quite expensive but is available at NCP Ship Row (01224 594257). There is also the option to leave your car at Aberdeen airport which is cheaper and then take the 727 Jet Bus from the airport to the ferry terminal and the distance is 7 miles.

LERWICK /SUMBURGH

You can also fly to Shetland, however it can be exceedingly windy on Shetland and flights to and from here are more prone to being cancelled, so arriving a day or two early would be well advised. If departing Shetland by plane, you should also allow for delays with the return journey.

For anyone wishing to fly direct to Shetland, Loganair www.loganair.co.uk operate flights from major Scottish cities to Sumburgh airport on south Mainland. If taking this option you would need to arrange to meet the group either at Lerwick ferry terminal at 07.30 hours on Day 2 or at the Sumburgh Hotel when the group arrives there to deposit their bags around 0900 the same morning. At the end of the tour you will return to Lerwick in the early afternoon of Day 8 so you will need to arrange your own transport back to Sumburgh airport and ensure you book a late afternoon or early evening flight. The distance from Lerwick to Sumburgh is about 25 miles.

Please contact the Naturetrek office if you would like further information on flights.

Clothing

We will, of course, hope for settled, warmer weather, however Shetland can be exposed, wet and windy and your clothing should reflect this. Sturdy, waterproof footwear is essential for several of the walks involved. Warm clothing layers may well be required on the boat trip to Noss. Warm, waterproof clothing will no doubt be needed on board the ferry, too, for those who wish to look for wildlife from the deck.

Transport

Transport by private minibus and the cost of all internal ferries within Shetland are included in our price. Also included is the return overnight ferry between Aberdeen and Lerwick, based on a pod or reclining seat for the night. Transport on Shetland is by 9-seater minibus(es). The exact model will vary depending on what the local rental company has available.

Extra expenses

Lunches (allow around £10 per day), and expenditure of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry etc.

Accommodation in Aberdeen

If you arrive the night before the trip, or want to stay the night at the end of your trip, then you may like to consider the following accommodation options in Aberdeen:

Convenient for Aberdeen Station and Harbour (5 – 10 min walk away):

Jury's Inn Aberdeen

Union Square, Guild Street, Aberdeen, AB11 5RG

01224 381 200

<https://www.jurysinns.com/hotels/aberdeen>

Lochnagar Guesthouse

11 Affleck St, Aberdeen, AB11 6JH

01224 575 964

<http://lochnagarguesthouse.com-scotland.info/>

Marischal Apartments

23 Marischal St, Aberdeen, AB11 5AD

01224 581616

www.marischalapartments.co.uk

Alternatively, take a look at options on www.tripadvisor.co.uk or www.booking.com

Extensions

Please let us know if you would like to spend some additional days in Shetland, either before or after the tour. We can also arrange a stay at Fair Isle Bird Observatory, subject to room availability.

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.

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