

# Orkney

## Naturetrek Itinerary

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### Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Arrive Kirkwall  
**Day 2** Westray  
**Day 3/5** Orkney Mainland  
**Day 6** Depart Kirkwall

### Departs

June

### Focus

General natural history and culture

### Grading

A.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR25) or brochure

### Highlights:

- Look for Hen Harrier, Short-eared Owl & Red-throated Divers
- Enjoy remote moorlands & their wildlife
- Stone circles & ancient settlements on Orkney Mainland
- Spectacular seabird cliffs at Noup Head on Westray
- Grey & Common Seals, Otter & Orkney Vole all possible
- Rare plant specialities
- 5-night stay in a comfortable Kirkwall hotel



Common Seal (Paul Marshall)



Arctic Skua (Paul Marshall)



Stones of Stenness (David McAllister)



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## Introduction

Lying six miles off the northern tip of Scotland and consisting of 70 islands, Orkney offers a land of spectacular landscapes and dramatic lighting effects. Orkney probably means 'seal islands' in Old Norse and the islands only became Scottish in 1472 as part of a dowry when Princess Margaret of Norway married James III. The largest island is called 'Mainland' and has a landscape of rolling, fertile farmland ending abruptly in sheer cliffs with sandy beaches below. Orkney has the greatest concentration of archaeological sites in Europe with the Heart of Neolithic Orkney being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. We will visit Skara Brae, the best-preserved Neolithic village in Europe and several stone circles. As well as taking time to enjoy Orkney's famous antiquities, we will be focusing on its wildlife. There is a great deal to interest the naturalist. The islands' birds include Eider as well as such specialities as Red-throated Diver. There are many species of seabirds to enjoy here, including Great and Arctic Skuas, Arctic Tern, Black Guillemot, Gannet and Puffin. As we travel slowly around the quiet roads away from the coast we will also be hoping to see raptors such as Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Merlin and Short-eared Owl. We'll enjoy the drumming of Snipe on stretches of moorland, and possibly the rasping call of the Corncrake in the long summer evenings. Other northern specialities such as Rock Dove and Twite are found in farmland and on the coast. Grey and Common Seals, the endemic Orkney Vole and an occasional Otter are among the mammalian highlights. We'll also be hoping to see plants such as the Scottish Primrose, *Primula scotica*, and Oyster Plant, *Mertensia maritima*.

**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.**

## Itinerary

### Day 1

### Kirkwall

Our tour starts in Kirkwall at the group hotel, The Orkney Hotel, where we spend the next five nights. From either Kirkwall airport or the appropriate ferry terminal, please take a taxi to the hotel. For those able to arrive early, there will be an afternoon excursion to the Neolithic cairn of Maeshowe. Please meet in hotel reception at 3pm for this. Those arriving later in the day will meet the group at dinner where your leader will give details of the planned excursions of the following days.

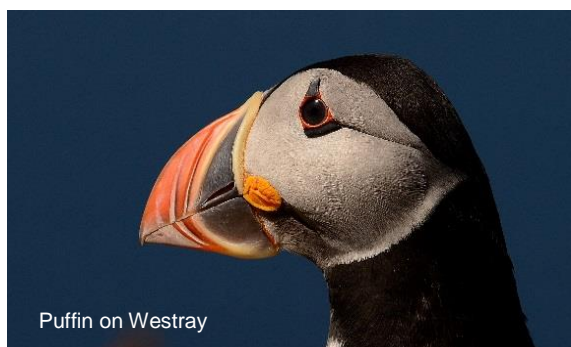
### Day 2

### Seabirds of Westray & Noup Head

Today, we will have a fairly early start so that we can travel by the 9.40 a.m. ferry to the island of Westray, where Britain's largest cliff-nesting seabird colony is to be found on the cliffs of Noup Head, as well as Orkney's most accessible Puffins at Castle O'Burrian. On the spectacular bird cliffs, among the nesting Guillemots, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Fulmars and Puffins there are now more than 600 pairs of Gannets, having increased from the original three in 2003. On the cliffs, numerous narrow inlets provide excellent

views, and we may be only a few feet away from the birds as they try to land despite the sometimes blustery wind.

There are many coastal plants here, including an endemic primrose, *Primula scotica*, found only in the northern regions of Scotland, though we will be fortunate to find it in bloom at this season. On our travels around the island we will see the 16<sup>th</sup> century Noltland Castle, one of the medieval churches and possibly the "Westray Wife", a tiny figurine sometimes called the "Orkney Venus".



Puffin on Westray



Scottish Primrose (*Primula scotica*)

## Day 3

## The Heart of Neolithic Orkney & southern coasts

We will start the day in "The Heart of Neolithic Orkney" visiting the Stones of Stenness, the Barnhouse Settlement and the majestic Ring of Brodgar. Natural history will not be forgotten with a visit to the Barnhouse Hide where we have a chance to see some of the waterbirds of the central lochs. From here we will move on to Skara Brae, the best-preserved Stone Age village in Western Europe.

After lunch we will go to Yesnaby on the west coast where we can see the interaction of Atlantic storms and the Old Red Sandstone. This will also give us another opportunity to find *Primula scotica* in the cliff top maritime grassland. Following this we will explore the southern islands of the mainland group, Burray & South Ronaldsay which are reached



Italian Chapel Lamb Holm



Oyster Plant (*Mertensia maritima*)

across the Churchill barriers. On Burray we will visit the famous Italian Chapel constructed by the Italian prisoners of war during the Second World War. On the shores near the barriers we hope to find Oyster Plant *Mertensia maritima* which grows on the unstable sand and shingle banks. On South Ronaldsay we may also visit the Tomb of the Eagles (entrance fee is at an additional cost of between £5 and £10).

## Day 4

## Kirkwall and the western cliffs

In the morning there will be time to explore the museum and shops of Kirkwall with the possibility of visiting St. Magnus Cathedral, the Earl's Palace and the Bishop's Palace.

We will then visit Marwick Head enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of the enormous seabird colonies. On top of the headland stands the Kitchener Memorial, 87m (285 feet) above the site where HMS Hampshire was sunk on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1916. We will return along the quiet roads of north-western Mainland, concentrating on raptors, freshwater birds and sea-duck and visit a number of little-known RSPB reserves with well-positioned hides from which we may have excellent views of Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl on the moor and Red-throated Divers on the lochans.



Marwick Head

## Day 5

## Scapa Flow, south-central Mainland and north-east Mainland

We will start along the south coast of west Mainland with its views over Scapa Flow. A stop at Waulkmill



Eider, Scapa Flow

Bay lets us see the duck of these sheltered waters and Common Seals which frequent the sandy bay. On the surrounding moors of Hobbister, Hen Harriers, Short-eared Owls and Whimbrel are frequently seen. Moving north we will go to Birsay where there are exposed rocky shores providing opportunities to find different shore birds from the sandy beaches of the east coast.

We may visit the small tidal island, the

Brough of Birsay, a Pictish and Norse settlement, which was the main seat of power in Orkney for several centuries. We will return to Kirkwall via the north-east Mainland taking time to visit several more ornithological sites including Binscarth Woods, the only large area of woodland on the islands.

## Day 6

## Kirkwall

Our tour ends after breakfast this morning as group members make individual arrangements for their journeys southwards.



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## Additional Information

### Accommodation & meals

Comfortable hotel in Kirkwall - all rooms are en-suite. Breakfasts and evening meals are included in the price, from evening meal on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 6. Please note: **lunches, snacks and drinks (apart from at breakfast) are not included in the price of the tour.**

For those clients wanting to extend their stay on Orkney, a wide choice of optional activities is available. A day-trip may be made to Papa Westray, or you might like to take a walk on Shapinsay, where a remarkable RSPB reserve contains one of the highest breeding densities of Pintail and Shoveler to be found in Britain.

### Getting to Orkney

Flybe ([www.flybe.com](http://www.flybe.com)) operate flights to and from Kirkwall.

NorthLink Ferries (0845 6000 449) <http://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/> run a service from Scrabster (north of Thurso) to Stromness departing 1200 and arriving in Orkney at 1330. Thurso can be reached from Inverness by rail or bus and then it is a short taxi ride to the ferry terminal at Scrabster. On arrival in Orkney, there is a bus service from Stromness to Kirkwall (it may be possible for the tour leader to meet the ferry and transfer you in the tour vehicle). Long-stay parking is available at Scrabster Ferry Terminal.

John O'Groats Ferries [www.jogferry.co.uk](http://www.jogferry.co.uk) operate a passenger service between John O'Groats and Burwick (Orkney) departing daily at 0900 and 1030 each morning and the crossing takes 40 minutes. There is a connecting bus service from Burwick to Kirkwall.

### Grading

A. This is a straightforward natural history tour with no strenuous walking.

### Focus

The history, archaeology and natural history of Orkney.

### 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.