

Shetland: Autumn Bird Migration

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Overnight ferry Aberdeen to Lerwick

Day 2/7 Mainland Shetland and outer islands

Day 8/9 Lerwick; overnight ferry to Aberdeen

Departs

September or October

Focus

Birds and mammals – **Please note this tour is designed for the more seasoned birder as we explore the islands for unlikely species, as well as spells of twitching.**

Grading

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

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR275) or brochure

Highlights

- Rare and scarce passerines amongst many common species
- Mammals include Grey and Common Seals and Otter
- Passing cetaceans
- Exploring small copses and geos for vagrant birds
- Enjoy the wonderful scenery of the Shetland Islands.



From top Arctic Warbler, Sumburgh Head & Lanceolated Warbler



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Introduction

The Shetland archipelago consists of approximately 100 islands situated between the Atlantic and the North Sea, located to the north-east of Orkney and 280 km from the Faroe Islands. These remote and starkly beautiful islands are one of Britain's most exciting wildlife destinations, and in autumn offer a feast of very special vagrant birds. Only 15 of the islands are inhabited and the capital, Lerwick, is situated on the largest of these, which is known as 'Mainland'. This single-centre holiday (based in Lerwick) is carefully timed to coincide with the autumn bird migration – one of the ornithological highlights of the birding calendar.

We begin the holiday by taking the overnight ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick. Upon arrival into Lerwick Harbour the following morning, we will collect our minibus and enjoy our first

day on Mainland as we settle into our surroundings. The first full day on Shetland will involve 'cleaning up' on what is around; we won't be going over the top, but still targeting any rarities which are present in case they aren't present the following day.

Based in or near Lerwick, we are perfectly positioned to head in all directions with limited driving to even the furthest sites. We will also aim to take a few small ferry journeys to other islands, including Bressay, Yell, and Unst, or possibly even Foula or Out Skerries if we are feeling particularly adventurous. Understanding the journeys that these migrant passerines undertake will develop our deep sense of appreciation for each and every bird we see; even more so as the majority will have crossed the North Sea within the past few days.

Although this tour is primarily bird-focused, we will also spend time searching for the beautiful mammals for which the Shetlands are so famed. Otters can be seen in sheltered voes and harbours, and

Red-eyed Vireo



Shetland Wren



Grey and Harbour Seals are particularly common along pristine sandy beaches. However, the birds will of course take centre stage and, as we search far and wide at a relaxed pace, we will hope to set eyes upon the more scarce and rare species. The last week of September and first week of October are known as the best weeks to visit the Shetlands, with 2021 offering such delights as Red-eyed Vireo, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll, Radde's Warbler, Olive-backed Pipits, Bluethroats, Barred Warblers amongst others. Commoner passage birds including

Yellow-browed Warblers, Red-breasted Flycatchers, hundreds of thrushes and pipits and, of course, the resident Shetland birds, including the much-wanted Wren, are also present. Our fingers will be firmly

crossed, too, for cetacean sightings, and our guide will be kept up to date on the whereabouts of any animals that may be in our vicinity.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 to make our overnight journey aboard a NorthLink ferry to Shetland. This is a large, comfortable and well-appointed vessel, and includes lounges, a cafeteria and a restaurant; most people manage to divide up their time happily between these facilities.

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

Days 2 - 7

Shetland

Over the course of the following days, we will visit many areas of mainland Shetland in search of a variety of birds and other wildlife. We will pay close attention to local birding news, which may guide where we venture to maximise our chances of some superb sightings; therefore, **please accept that the itinerary may change at short notice.**

Key locations we aim to visit include:

Esha Ness Cliffs – Situated on West Mainland, these dramatic cliffs are stunning geological features, and good views of the coastline (and the island of Foula) are very much worth seeing. The shallow pools along the approach road can harbour a number of Nearctic vagrants which will have recently crossed the North Atlantic; Buff-breasted Sandpiper and American Golden Plover are two species that may well seek shelter here, while rarer species might include Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers.



Little Bunting

Sumburgh Head – No doubt one of the favoured sites on Mainland for migrant birds, the headland at Sumburgh at the southernmost tip of mainland Shetland is, of itself, dramatic. This is a terrific vantage point to scan for cetaceans on calmer days, whilst the geos and stone walls offer welcome shelter for numerous passerines after they've bravely crossed the North Sea.

Quendale Mill – The small hamlet of Quendale is a superb place to visit. The extensive iris beds hidden away in the valley, as well as the surrounding bushes by the mill, have been excellent for vagrants in recent years, with Bluethroats, Blyth's Reed Warblers and Little Buntings often recorded. On a still day, there are few better places on Shetland.

Loch of Spiggie – The largest freshwater loch on Shetland should provide us with excellent views of many freshwater species such as Whooper Swans, alongside a variety of ducks arriving from their breeding grounds within the Arctic Circle. Scaup and Tufted Ducks are usually present, and the loch often holds a small number of Slavonian Grebes. In terms of vagrants, Ring-necked Duck would be the most likely.



Scaup

Kergord – The largest woodland on Shetland is always exciting at this time of year. Yellow-browed Warblers are almost daily occurrences in September and October, whilst the nearby small plantations may harbour such delights as Red-backed Shrike. This is also the only reliable site on the islands to find Rook!

We will also hope to venture onto nearby islands. The beautiful island of Yell is often overlooked, but plentiful optimal habitat and discrete sandy beaches here may well turn up something very special. Regardless, this is a tranquil island with perfect white sandy beaches and isolated valleys, offering one a sense of true wilderness!

Unst - the UK's most northerly island - is another migrant hotspot, offering isolated plantations and many croft gardens to explore. This is another beautifully remote island, and scenic walks will ensure that we will enjoy another wonderful day. We will visit areas including Norwick and Skaw beach as well as Burravoe. The ferries across can provide some cetacean encounters and of course many seabirds.

We may even be lucky enough to venture to other remote islands across the archipelago, including possible trips to Fetlar, Foula or Out Skerries, although these are not guaranteed!

Day 8

Overnight ferry (Lerwick to Aberdeen)

We will enjoy a final day on Mainland today, before departure from Lerwick in the early evening.

Day 9

Arrive Aberdeen

Our tour ends this morning, upon our arrival into Aberdeen harbour. We recommend pre-booking a taxi from here if you require one.

Additional Information

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, especially any rarer migratory visitors. Other wildlife and the scenery will not be ignored.

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 lie-flat seat (from £10 per seat) or cabin (all subject to availability).



Interior cabin (no windows):

From £115 each way



Outer cabin (with port-hole windows):

From £130 each way

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

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

Accommodation & Meals

The first and last nights of the tour will be spent onboard the overnight ferry from/to Aberdeen. We will have the rest of our stay in a comfortable hotel in or near Lerwick. All hotel rooms are en-suite.

Breakfast and evening meals are included in the tour price from the time of arrival in the Shetlands 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 and other items.

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

Shetland can be exposed, wet and windy and your clothing should reflect this. Sturdy footwear is essential for the several walks involved. Warm clothing that can be layered is essential, and walking poles are advised for those less able. If you would like a hot drink during the day, please bring a thermos flask with you.

Warm, waterproof clothing will no doubt be needed on board the ferry, too, for those who hope to wildlife spot 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 £5 - £10 per person per day), and expenditure of a personal nature, such as drinks and laundry, are not included in the cost of this tour.

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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