

Summer on Shetland – Seabirds & Cetaceans

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

June or July

Focus

Birds and cetaceans.

Grading

A/B – A few moderate-length walks, uneven ground and some steep hills may also have to be walked.

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR304)

Highlights

- Intimate views of seabird colonies
- Breeding skuas and terns
- A possibility of encountering Orcas in UK waters
- Boat trip for cetaceans & other wildlife
- Mammals include Grey and Common Seals and Otter
- Exploring scenic coastal paths
- A relaxed version of your spring tours
- Led by an expert naturalist



Puffin, Orcas, and Sumburgh Head (all photos in Shetland, courtesy of Shutterstock)



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Introduction

The Shetland archipelago consists of approximately 100 islands situated between the Atlantic and the North Sea, 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 during the summer months, a variety of cetaceans can be seen from the many headlands here. Summer, between the end of May and August, is one of the best times to find cetaceans as the waters here are rich in food. Orcas (Killer Whales) are a real possibility and we have timed this tour to maximise our chances of finding a pod, although setting eyes on these majestic animals will still be a matter of well-timed luck.

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 Sumburgh in south Mainland) is timed to coincide with larger cetacean numbers. We will also have at least one boat trip to try and lure in a pod of bow-riding dolphins and if there are large whales in the area, this will enable us to approach them at a safe distance to obtain better views. Humpback Whales are relatively frequent in their occurrence, but as always, their numbers fluctuate year on year. Many other species are possible here.

We begin the holiday by taking the overnight ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick. Upon arrival into Lerwick Harbour the following morning, we will pick-up a 9-seater minibus and enjoy our first day on Mainland as we settle into our surroundings in south Mainland, and our wonderful hotel based near the bustling seabird colony of Sumburgh Head.

Although this tour is primarily bird and cetacean 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, while Grey and Harbour Seals are particularly common along pristine sandy beaches.



Risso's Dolphins Shetland

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 harbour 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.

On the outbound journey, there is often a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins as the vessel departs the harbour entrance. As we head into deeper waters, Manx Shearwaters, Arctic Skuas, Kittiwakes and many auks will be spotted.

Reclining seats or sleeping pods (depending on availability) 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.**

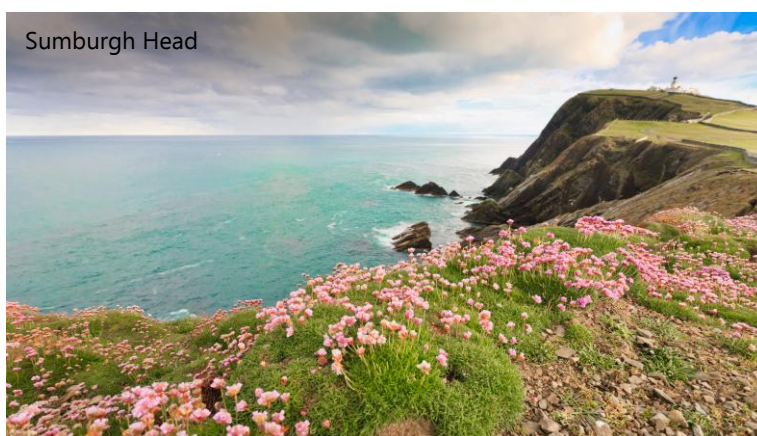
Day 2

South Mainland, Shetland

To get the most of the ferry journey, it is worth getting up early to admire the tranquility as we sail past Sumburgh Head. Puffins and other auks will start to be seen, as will Arctic Skuas and Great Skuas (Bonxie in local dialect) and hopefully a cetacean or two.

We will arrive in Lerwick around 0730 hours. We will collect our 9-seater minibus and drive south to Sumburgh to drop our bags off at our accommodation – the Sumburgh Hotel. After refreshing ourselves we will drive the short distance to Sumburgh Head – one of Shetland's most famous headlands.

Here, we will be greeted by thousands of seabirds, including Puffins and Arctic Skuas, as we arrive at the height of the breeding season. We will spend plenty of time here to enjoy the sight, sound and smell of this colony. The views from the headland are superb in all directions; out to sea we will try to locate any pods of cetaceans that may be passing, whilst looking north we can admire the views of the many voes and hilltops of south Mainland. There is a conveniently placed café here too and we will almost certainly take advantage of this.



After a toilet stop and lunch, we will investigate other locations on south Mainland, namely Loch of Spiggie and Quendale – the latter offering a short walk up an iris-bedded valley. By this point, it will have been a long day so we will endeavour to arrive back at the hotel in good time, before dinner.

At this time of year, it is light for most of the time, so those who are keen may venture off to the nearby beach or one of the voes to search for a 'nocturnal' Otter.

Day 3 South Mainland/Evening Visit to Mousa's Storm-Petrels

Today we will focus on the land as we aim to cover the west side of south Mainland, with walks of various lengths interspersed throughout the day, mainly along crisp white sandy beaches. We will walk the length of St Ninian's Tombolo onto the uninhabited St Ninians Isle and admire the Arctic Terns fishing in the shallows and the Eiders diving just offshore. Grey Seals will also be inspecting us as we make our way across the sandy beach and upwards to St Ninian's chapel where we will spend some time.

A walk to the beach at Rerwick will allow us to observe the seal colony here. The walk down is fairly straight forward and we will watch from a position where we can view the seals at a safe distance.

The afternoon may involve a cultural visit to Scalloway and the museum here, plus a possible visit to one of the town's many cafes. If time allows, we will also visit the broch on the outskirts of the island's capital of Lerwick – the area around this impressive structure is littered in orchids, with Northern Marsh, Heath Spotted, and hybrids of these two dominating the grounds.



We will then venture back to the hotel for an earlier dinner, as tonight, we will board a small vessel for a short hop across the water to the uninhabited island of Mousa. Here, another broch stands tall, dominating the landscape and is the nesting sites of hundreds, if not thousands, of European Storm-Petrels. This delicate seabird spends its day out at sea away from potential predators (gulls and skuas)

and arrive back onto the island under the cover of darkness. To listen, and then see, this seabird is a memory that can last a lifetime.

We will arrive back at the hotel in the early morning, we anticipate no later than 0200 hours. (**NB** – this is an optional excursion)

Day 4

Esha Ness

After a lie-in, we will enjoy a slightly later breakfast before we head to the north-west corner of the island to visit the impressive cliff system at Esha Ness. Once here, after a toilet stop and having purchased lunch, we will intend to spend most of the day here, admiring the views, but also, walking along this impressive clifftop where we can scour through the thousands of seabirds that nest here.

As always, we will keep an eye offshore for any cetacean activity, which can be numerous here due to the upwelling offshore.

Along the way to Esha Ness, the moors usually hold breeding Curlew and Golden Plover, while Red Grouse are typically more elusive, though can always give away their presence with their strange calls. The abundance of birds here can attract one of the breeding Merlins in the area, and Mountain Hare is another possibility here.

After a lovely day wandering around this unique site, we will venture back, maybe stopping off at Kergord plantation briefly to observe the only Rookery on the island. This peculiar habitat on Shetland always holds avian interest, with some years producing a good number of Common Crossbills, which have post-breeding irruptions from their Scandinavian breeding grounds.



Golden Plover

Day 5

Cetacean Boat Trip

After a hearty breakfast, and maybe a gentle wander around the bay at Grutness nearby, we will then drive to the harbour and board a vessel for a boat trip to search for marine wildlife in the area. We can always keep everything crossed for a cetacean sighting, and our skipper will be kept well informed of any nearby animals (if there are indeed any about the archipelago during this period) which are within striking distance. Our exact route will vary, depending on the weather conditions. The boat trip will take around 3 – 4 hours, either in the morning or the afternoon, with the remainder of the day available to explore other parts of Mainland.

The boat trip will be memorable for the sheer abundance of seabirds, either flying past the vessel, or settled on the water – either way, the views should be spectacular of Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Arctic Skuas and much more.

If we are lucky, we may chance upon a pod of Harbour Porpoise or Short-beaked Common Dolphins, which are the most likely cetacean we could encounter, but Shetland in recent years has been the place

to see a whole diversity of others dolphins, with White-beaked and potentially Atlantic White-sided Dolphins occurring with some regularity, and of course, the incredible Orca – Shetland now being the likely place in the UK to observe this apex predator. Whales can also feature, but a sense of realism must play a part and we would have to count ourselves as very lucky if we were to chance upon a Humpback or Minke Whale.

After the boat trip, we will slowly drive back to Sumburgh, maybe stopping off at a few lochs to observe Red-throated Divers, before arriving back at our accommodation and relaxing for the remainder of the day.

Day 6

Boat Trip to Noss

Today we have a second boat trip lined up. We set sail from Lerwick for a journey to the island of Noss to view a seabird colony from below. This is a unique opportunity to see one of the largest UK seabird colonies from below and the spectacle is overwhelming! Gannets dominate the cliffs and of constantly heading back and forth from their nesting ledges, while smaller numbers of Guillemots do the same, and even smaller numbers of Puffins and Razorbills also follow this pattern. Grey Seals often haul themselves up on the rocks too.



What is special about this boat trip is an opportunity to view the underworld, weather permitting. Depending on which boat we're on, special cameras may enable us to view the wildlife under the waves and will provide an interesting insight into a range of species rarely encountered on other Naturetrek holidays!

The boat trip will take around 3 hours, either in the morning or the afternoon, with the remainder of the day available to further explore Mainland.

Both boat trips are dependent on the weather conditions and may ultimately follow similar routes as the wildlife will dictate where we go.

Day 7

Unst

Today will be an earlier start as we aim to head to the UK's most northerly habited island – Unst. The journey may take up to two hours and involves two different ferries, but when we arrive, it will truly be worth it as this remote island is home to one of the largest seabird colonies in the UK. Hermaness National Nature Reserve is an hour's walk from the car park to the Muckle Flugga viewpoint, atop the impressive cliff system.

Once we arrive at the top, we will be able to admire the delightful Puffins that live life on the edge, plus, thousands of Gannets swirling below us. However, on the walk, we can expect a Great Skua or two to be eyeing us up as we pass within a limited range of their nesting sites. The passing of people here doesn't



Puffin, Hermaness NNR

bother the skuas, but if someone should head off the path, then expect to be reprimanded by a skua!

After the walk to and from Hermaness, we will head to Skaw beach for lunch, before visiting various other sites on the island, ensuring we make the most of our day here. Halligarth plantation can hold an interesting bird or two (Hawfinch is surprisingly frequent here) and the sheltered voe nearby is an excellent location for potentially finding an Otter.

We will start to meander our way back to Mainland, possibly stopping off on Yell. It will be a long journey back, but with plenty of daylight to play with, we have time to ensure a series of leg stretches.

Day 8

Mainland; Overnight ferry (Lerwick to Aberdeen)

We will enjoy a final day on Mainland today, before departing from Lerwick on the evening ferry. Lunna peninsula on the east side of Mainland has many vantage points to scan for cetaceans and we will try to increase our chances of a sighting or two by scanning at every opportunity. The peninsula itself is beautiful, and we will hope for a clear and calm day.

Although we would have encountered these on multiple occasions, Twite in their fine summer plumage are always a treat to see. With this being our last full day on Shetland, we will certainly aim to admire those species rarely encountered in England, such as Black Guillemot, Common Eider and breeding-plumaged Turnstone, to name a few.

In the late afternoon, we will make our way back to Lerwick and set sail through the Lerwick Sound, down past Sumburgh and out into the open ocean. If we are lucky, we will sail past Fair Isle on our return journey.

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, or a bus can take up to the airport, a journey of around 40-minutes. train and bus stations are a short walk away.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Focus

The main focus for the tour will be seabirds, cetaceans and other marine life. As there is a great abundance of birds this will be what much of our time will focus on, although we will also be keeping an eye on the sea for any marine mammals, as well as taking a boat trip to look for marine life. These are seen fairly regularly around Shetland, however we will need to be in the right place at the right time to see these, and cetacean sightings can never be guaranteed.

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.



Sleeping pod

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, *you will need to bring with you 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 where meals are at additional cost. We will have the rest of our stay at The Sumburgh Hotel, and 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 breakfasts and dinners are included from evening meal on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 8.

Please note: ***lunches are not included in the tour cost.*** More and more cafes are available now on Shetland, and to contribute to the local economy, we will endeavour to shop here rather than any chain stores. Please aim to minimize purchasing plastic covered items where all possible and limit the use of single use plastic bags when on tour.

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.

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

Clothing & Equipment

Shetland can be exposed, wet and windy and your clothing should reflect this. Wind chill can make the day feel significantly colder. Sturdy footwear is essential for the several walks involved. Warm and waterproof clothing is essential for the boat trips, and a thermos flask or thermal mug is recommended for coffee stops. Layers of clothing are more useful than just one heavy coat or jacket. We will of course hope for sunny and calm weather too, so you should also be prepared with sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat in case these are required. It can be easy to get burnt during the boat trips due to reflection off the water and any breeze can make it feel cooler.

A telescope will be useful, but is not essential, for this holiday. Binoculars will be essential to get the most out of the tour and a camera could prove worthwhile.

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.

Tour Grading

Grade A/B. Mainly easy walks, but with some uneven and steeper ground along coastal paths. A reasonable level of fitness is useful. This tour is far slower-paced than our 'Shetland's Wildlife' holiday, with a greater emphasis on watching for cetaceans, as there is less walking and more time observing from one spot or out on the open ocean.

Extra Expenses

Lunches and expenditure of a personal nature such as drinks and laundry. Breakfast and evening meals on the outbound/inbound ferry journey should also be budgeted for.

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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