

Fair Isle: Autumn Migration on the Magical Isle

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Overnight ferry Aberdeen to Lerwick
Day 2	Ferry to Fair Isle
Days 3-8	Birding Fair Isle
Day 9	Return via Shetland to Aberdeen
Day 10	Arrive Aberdeen

Departs

September

Focus

Birds and cetaceans – **Please note this tour is designed for the keen birder as we explore the island for unlikely species, as well as spells of twitching. There will be the chance of cetaceans offshore**

Grading

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

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR355) or brochure

Highlights

- The privilege of a week in Britain's premier rarity hotspot
- Highly sought-after eastern and western vagrants are possible
- The chance of finding a truly rare bird and common migrants in numbers
- Staying at the legendary Fair Isle Bird Observatory
- Chance of Orca and other cetaceans
- Aurora Borealis is often seen
- Experience island life



Siberian Rubythroat, Fair Isle Bird Observatory (© Alex Penn),
Little Bunting



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Fair Isle



© Laurence McGowan

Introduction

Lying midway between Shetland and Orkney, Fair Isle is a tiny, remote island in the North Atlantic, renowned among birders as one of the finest migration watchpoints in the Western Palearctic. Just 3 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, its isolation and strategic location on major migratory flyways make it a magnet for rare and unusual birds, particularly in spring and autumn. This windswept island, owned by the National Trust for Scotland, combines dramatic sea cliffs, heather moorland, crofted pastures, and stony beaches, offering superb birding in a stunningly rugged landscape.

At the heart of the island's ornithological life is the Fair Isle Bird Observatory (FIBO). First established in 1948 and recently rebuilt to modern standards, the Observatory offers both accommodation and a hub of scientific research. Staying at FIBO places guests in the very epicentre of the action, where bird ringing, migration monitoring, and daily sightings are all part of the experience. Resident wardens and staff are always on hand to share news of recent discoveries and to show guests birds that have wandered into the mist nets. Over 380 species have been recorded here, and during migration periods it is not uncommon to find rare eastern vagrants such as Lanceolated Warbler, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler or even a Pechora Pipit, while American passerines also occasionally make landfall.

Fair Isle has recorded 35 'firsts' for Britain and the list of extreme rarities is very long indeed. Some of those seen over the years include: Rufous-tailed Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Chestnut-eared Bunting, Pallas's Reed Bunting, Black-faced Bunting, Savannah Sparrow, Magnolia Warbler, Sandhill Crane, Acadian Flycatcher, Thick-billed Warbler, Song Sparrow, Bimaculated Lark, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Blackburnian Warbler and many, many more.

Birding on Fair Isle is both intimate and exhilarating. The scale of the island means that a day's walk can cover all key sites — from the towering cliffs of Sheep Rock and Bunness, alive with seabirds in summer, to the sheltered geos and dykes around the croft lands where warblers and chats flit through the iris beds. Spring visits offer skuas, divers, and the chance of something unusual arriving with favourable winds, while autumn brings the thrill of drift migration and the electric possibility of finding something truly rare. During the summer, Fair Isle's seabird colonies are of global significance — including European Storm Petrel, Kittiwake, Puffin, Gannet, Fulmar, and both Great and Arctic Skuas.

Beyond birds, Fair Isle offers a peaceful and timeless atmosphere, shaped by the sea and the weather. A clear night might reveal the ethereal glow of the Aurora Borealis, a regular sight at these latitudes. With welcoming islanders, a rich cultural heritage, and the ever-present sound of wind and waves, this is an unforgettable destination for any keen naturalist and an essential pilgrimage for the dedicated birder.

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 tour, though this will always be done to make the 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 bar, a cafeteria and a restaurant; most people manage to divide up their time happily between these facilities.

Reclining sleeping pods 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

Ferry to Fair Isle



Yellow-browed Warbler

After an early arrival in Lerwick, we will transfer to Grutness in the south of the mainland to catch our onward ferry to Fair Isle. We may have time to do a little birding in the area around Grutness, which is an excellent place to find our first migrants and we may encounter the endemic Shetland Wren. The crossing to Fair Isle takes 2 ½ hours and might be rough but we may see a few seabirds on the journey. Upon arrival on Fair Isle, we will transfer to the legendary Fair Isle Bird Observatory and check in. Later, we will take a short walk to familiarise ourselves with the island. Flocks of Redwings and Fieldfares often dominate at this time of year, with Yellow-browed

Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Goldcrests in any piece of cover. Already we may find Brambling feeding in the croft fields or a Barred Warbler lingering in a garden.

Days 3-8

Birding Fair Isle

There is no fixed itinerary for our stay on Fair Isle. Each day will be spent walking out from the Observatory, exploring the island and experiencing the thrill of migration. Efforts will be made to see any rarity that is found.

Southern Crofts & Village Gardens

We explore the crofted fields, iris beds and gardens in the island's southern half, classic areas for late-season migrants. Yellow-browed Warblers are usually present, while a Red-breasted Flycatcher or Red-backed Shrike might add colour to the hedges and walls. Buntings are a feature of autumn here, with Little and Rustic Buntings sometimes amongst flocks of Twite and Redpoll. Scarcer species such as Dusky Warbler do turn up, but much of the pleasure comes from sifting through common migrants in the hope of a surprise. On such an open island, it will soon become apparent that even the tiniest patch of cover will be utilised by tired migrants.



Olive-backed Pipit

Buness & Northern Headlands

We head to the island's northern cliffs for a sea-watch, scanning for late Sooty Shearwaters and skuas powering past offshore amongst the throng of Gannets, Fulmars and Kittiwakes. Orca and White-beaked Dolphin are eminently possible offshore, with an outside chance of a larger whale. The headlands often hold Snow Buntings, while Turnstones and Purple Sandpipers forage along the shoreline. A walk through the lighthouse gardens might reveal a Bluethroat or even an Olive-backed Pipit, neither guaranteed, but always possible in the right conditions.

Moorland & Lochs



Syke's Warbler © Ian Cowgill

We spend time exploring the island's heather moorland and freshwater lochs. Merlin are regular autumn hunters, and Whooper Swans, Barnacle Geese or Pink-footed Geese may drop onto the pools. Among the pipits, we'll look for something different: Citrine Wagtail or Richard's Pipit might be present amongst the throng of Meadow and Rock Pipits but finding one will require plenty of patience and careful observation. September is the prime time to find a Great Snipe and these chunky waders have been flushed from the heather on Fair Isle by many a lucky birder in the past. The challenge will be to identify one amongst numerous Common Snipe, while the diminutive Jack Snipe will be less of a conundrum. Other waders will need to be carefully checked, as Golden Plover flocks may hold an American Golden Plover, or a rare sandpiper may feed unobtrusively amongst the more familiar Dunlin and Redshanks.

North Lighthouse & Geos

We circuit the northern lighthouse and geos, where Twite are ever present and Snow Buntings might flutter over the clifftops, or Lapland Buntings might feed unobtrusively among them. With easterly winds, late warblers remain possible, and the sheltered geos are great places to look for them. The geos often hold flocks of finches, and thrushes regularly drop in to rest. The geos are also the best places to find the endemic Fair Isle Wren.



Lanceolated Warbler

Revisiting Hotspots

Fair Isle rewards persistence. A garden that was quiet early in the week may now hold a Red-flanked Bluetail or simply a fresh arrival of Robins, Goldcrests and Chiffchaffs. This constant turnover is what makes the island so addictive and every day feels new, even when the species are familiar. Like any migration hotspot, much depends on the weather. Any wind from north-east to south-east with a light shower might result in a memorable fall of migrants, while a persistent north-westerly or a clear day may see migrant habitat eerily quiet. However, Fair Isle might produce something special even in seemingly unfavourable conditions, as overshooting American passerines have been recorded on numerous occasions.

Day 9

Ferry to Mainland Shetland and on to Aberdeen

We will say goodbye to the Fair Isle Bird Observatory and embark on our early ferry departure back to Mainland Shetland, where we will transfer to Lerwick. We will have the afternoon free to bird sites close to Lerwick or take the opportunity to explore Shetland's capital. We will reassemble on the quay to catch our early evening ferry back to Aberdeen.

Day 10

Arrival in Aberdeen and the end of the tour

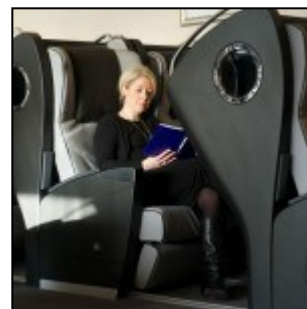
We arrive in Aberdeen early morning and after a magical time in the northern isles, we will go our separate ways.



Additional Information

Aberdeen – Lerwick Ferry Crossing

For our two nights on the NorthLink ferry, semi-reclining sleeping pods (like airline seats) in a darkened room are included in the price of this tour. Please let us know if you wish to be upgraded (at additional cost and subject to availability) to a cabin.



Sleeping Pod

Upgrades:



Interior cabin (no windows):



Outer cabin (with port-hole windows)

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 little choppy.

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

Joining the Trip

ABERDEEN FERRY TERMINAL

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

Long-stay parking in Aberdeen is quite expensive but is available at NCP Ship Row (01224 594257). There is also a slightly cheaper option to leave your car at Aberdeen Airport. From the airport, take the 727 Jet Bus to the ferry terminal, which costs approximately £2.70 and is a distance of 7 miles.

Please ensure you allow plenty of time for 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.

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

Group sizes will be limited to seven.

Flights to Shetland

For anyone wishing to fly direct to Shetland, Loganair www.loganair.co.uk operates flights from major Scottish cities to Sumburgh Airport on South Mainland. If you choose this option, the airport is very close to the departure quay for the Fair Isle ferry. For this option, the joining and leaving point will be Sumburgh and you should book on a 'land only' basis. For prices refer to the tour on the website.

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

Transport

Transport to and from Shetland Mainland is included in the price of this tour, as well as the return overnight ferry between Aberdeen and Lerwick (based on a sleeping pod for the night). There is no transport on Fair Isle as all days will be spent walking. **The ferry crossing to and from Fair Isle can be rough and if you are susceptible to motion sickness, please take appropriate precautions.**



The Good Shepherd - The Fair Isle Ferry

FLIGHTS TO FAIR ISLE

For anybody wishing to travel from Mainland Shetland to Fair Isle by air, this can be arranged subject to availability and a flight surcharge. Please enquire when booking.



Airtask flight to Fair Isle

Accommodation & Meals

The first and last nights of the tour will be spent onboard the overnight ferry from/to Aberdeen. There will be seven nights at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory in comfortable rooms with en-suite facilities and all meals on Fair Isle including lunch are included. Meals on the ferry and lunches on Mainland Shetland are not included.

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 is essential, as is a hot water flask for coffee stops and walking poles are advised for those less able. Warm, waterproof clothing will no doubt be needed on board the ferry, too, for those who hope to spot wildlife from the deck.

Tour Grading

Grade B. Generally easy but with some moderately strenuous walking.

Extra Expenses

Lunches on Mainland Shetland (allow approximately £8 per day), meals on the ferry and expenditure of a personal nature such as drinks and snacks, are not included in the cost of this tour.

Important Considerations – Weather & Travel

Fair Isle is a remote and isolated island in the high North Atlantic which can present challenges with travel. During periods of fog or high winds and rough seas, ferry crossings and flights can be delayed for protracted periods. With this tour, there is a chance that the itinerary might change at short notice due to factors beyond our control. We may be delayed travelling to Fair Isle, which will mean more time birding on Mainland Shetland and equally, we may be delayed coming off Fair Isle, resulting in more time there. Also, if you have a Fair Isle flight booked, you may have to transfer to the ferry. We will have contingencies in place should these eventualities transpire but please bear this in mind as it might affect onward travel plans.

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 or ferry supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please do 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.

