

# Fair Isle: Spring on the Magical Isle

## Naturetrek Itinerary

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### Outline Itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Overnight ferry Aberdeen to Lerwick
<b>Day 2</b>	Ferry to Fair Isle
<b>Days 3-8</b>	Birding Fair Isle
<b>Day 9</b>	Return via Shetland to Aberdeen
<b>Day 10</b>	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 GBR356) or brochure

### Highlights

- The privilege of a week in Britain's premier rarity hotspot
- Highly sought-after eastern and southern 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 and culture



Red-backed Shrike, Fair Isle Bird Observatory (© Alex Penn),  
Puffin



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# Fair Isle



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## 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 390 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

## Mainland Shetland to Fair Isle



Western Subalpine Warbler

Upon arrival in Lerwick, we travel south to Grutness Quay for our 2½-hour ferry crossing to Fair Isle. The voyage can be lively if there's a swell, but calm days offer a delightful passage through seas rich in wildlife. Manx Shearwaters, Arctic Skuas, Gannets, Puffins and Kittiwakes may pass close, and the occasional cetacean is possible. On arrival, we transfer to the world-famous Fair Isle Bird Observatory and after checking in, we'll take a gentle walk to familiarise ourselves with the island. In spring, croft fields and garden shelterbelts may hold warblers, flycatchers and finches freshly arrived from the continent, while waders, terns and gulls gather on the lochs and shorelines. Fair Isle is small enough to explore entirely on foot, yet rich enough that

every day will feel different. Bird ringing is a constant activity at the Observatory, offering guests the chance to see many bird species in the hand as they are weighed and recorded before being released to continue their epic journeys. Meals will be in the communal dining room, which is a social affair with other guests and Observatory staff sharing details of the day's sightings. The evenings are long with the possibility of evening walks for the restless.

## Days 3-8

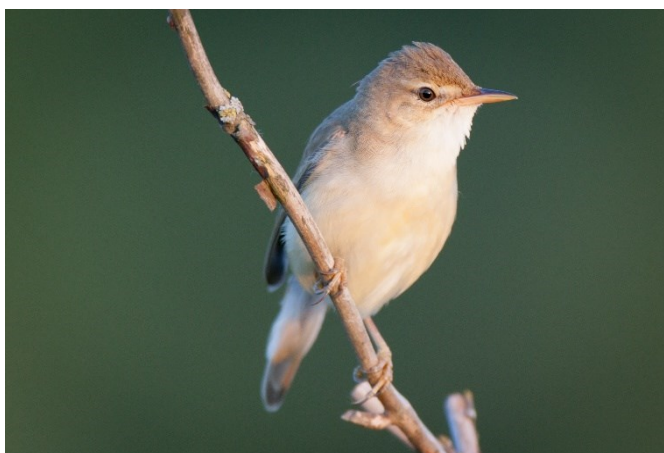
## Birding Fair Isle

There is no rigid itinerary here. Fair Isle is at its best when explored in tune with the weather, migration and local sightings. Each day we'll head out from the Observatory to different parts of the island, visiting crofts, gardens, moorlands, lochs and headlands. Days will typically consist of a morning walk followed by lunch at the Observatory and an afternoon walk exploring a different part of the island. The variety of habitats will each hold a different range of species and with plenty of time on our hands, the pace will generally be relaxed. If a rare bird is found anywhere on the island news spreads fast and we will do our very best to see it.



Fair Isle Wren

## Southern Crofts & Village Gardens



Marsh Warbler

We'll wander through crofted fields, iris beds and sheltered gardens, where wind-blown overshoots from southern and eastern Europe can appear. These might include Subalpine Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Marsh Warbler or a Great Reed Warbler. Colourful possibilities include Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike or maybe even a European Bee-eater. Wheatears and Whinchats perch on walls, while Twite and Skylarks sing above the meadows. Iris beds are productive on Fair Isle and we will pay special attention to these, as they may hold a rare warbler or maybe a Bluethroat. Abundant Meadow Pipits should be carefully scanned in case an ultra-rare Red-throated Pipit

might be lurking amongst them, and the wagtails here may well be White Wagtails on their way to Iceland. The pleasure here lies as much in the anticipation as in the sightings, as on Fair Isle even a modest nettle bed or dry-stone wall can conceal a surprise.

## Buness & Northern Headlands

The northern cliffs are alive with breeding seabirds. Thousands of Guillemots crowd the ledges, Puffins bob at sea, and Arctic Terns patrol overhead. The resident Great and Arctic Skuas will be harrying incoming seabirds for their precious catch while Kittiwakes and Razorbills cling to precipitous ledges. We'll scan offshore for passing skuas, shearwaters and divers, and keep watch for marine mammals such as Minke Whale, Orca or White-beaked Dolphins. Migrants sometimes skulk in the lighthouse gardens, while the clifftops are favoured by Lapland Buntings or lingering Snow Buntings. Open moorlands might hold chats heading further north and this should include the world's longest migrating passerine, Northern Wheatears, on their last stop before heading for Iceland and Greenland.



Northern Gannet

## Moorland & Lochs

The island's open moorland and freshwater lochs offer a contrast to the coast. Here we may see Arctic Skuas chasing terns or watch Golden Plovers in display. Great and Arctic Skuas breed here and are often territorial, dive-bombing the unwary who stray too close to their territories. Wildfowl drop in on passage, and among the commoner species there's always the hope of something unusual. Hirundines may be skimming low over fresh water, hydrating themselves before their journey continues northwards and Snipe may be drumming overhead.

The evocative call of the Lapwings will provide the soundtrack as we explore these open environs for something special. Patience and careful scanning are often rewarded and the open nature of the island means birds can appear anywhere.

### North Lighthouse & Geos

The deep, narrow inlets, or geos, provide sheltered oases for tired migrants. Finches, pipits, chats and warblers often congregate here, feeding on the insects that shelter in the lush vegetation on damp walls. The geos are also the best place to see the endemic Fair Isle Wren as they sing from deep in the gulleys or aggressively see off a trespassing flycatcher. This is a globally rare subspecies and there have never been more than 52 pairs of taxa recorded. The population has been as low as 10 pairs! These headlands also give excellent views of seabird cliffs, where the constant swirl of activity is one of the island's great spring spectacles, while Atlantic Grey Seals might loaf in a rocky cove below.



Great Skua

### Revisiting Hotspots

Fair Isle rewards persistence. A garden that was quiet early in the week may now hold a Common Rosefinch or simply a fresh arrival of Willow Warblers, Robins 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 westerly or 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 in spring on numerous occasions.

## Day 9

### Ferry to Mainland Shetland and on to Aberdeen

We take the early ferry back to Mainland Shetland, watching for seabirds and marine mammals en route. We will then transfer to Lerwick, where we will have time to explore Shetland's capital or surrounding bird sites on foot before boarding our evening ferry to Aberdeen.

## Day 10

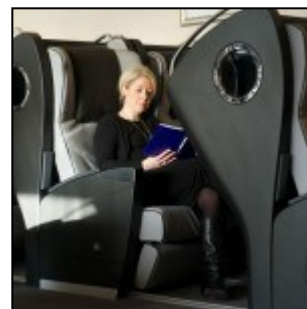
### Arrival in Aberdeen and the end of the tour

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 upgrade (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](http://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](http://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](http://www.loganair.co.uk) operates flights from major Scottish cities to Sumburgh Airport on South Mainland. If you choose this option, the quay for the Fair Isle ferry is very close to the airport. 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 between Lerwick Ferry Port and Grutness Pier for the Fair Isle ferry 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.**

### 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.

## Accommodation & Meals

The first and last nights of the tour will be spent onboard the overnight ferry from/to Aberdeen. There will then be seven nights at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory before we travel back on overnight ferry to Aberdeen on Day 9. All rooms are comfortable with en-suite facilities. 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.



The Good Shepherd - The Fair Isle Ferry



Airtask flight to Fair Isle



## 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. 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](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 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.

