

Fair Isle: Simmer Dim 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 GBR357) or brochure

Highlights

- The privilege of a week in Britain's premier birding hotspot
- Staying at the legendary Fair Isle Bird Observatory
- Epic seabird colonies at their peak including Puffins, Skuas, Gannets, Fulmars and Kittiwakes
- Storm Petrel ringing at the Observatory
- Summering eastern passerines possible
- Chance of Orca and other cetaceans
- The long days of the 'Simmer Dim'
- Experience island life and culture



Arctic Tern, Puffin (© Ian Andrews), Great Skua



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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

Upon arrival in Lerwick, we travel south to Grutness Quay for the 2½-hour ferry crossing to Fair Isle. The voyage itself is a highlight, offering a chance to watch the seabird spectacle unfold at sea. Calm conditions may reveal Puffins bobbing on the waves, Gannets slicing the surface, Arctic Terns plunging for fish, and Arctic or Great Skuas patrolling for opportunities. With luck, cetaceans may also appear, from Harbour Porpoise to Minke Whale, and occasionally even pods of White-beaked Dolphins or Orca. On arrival, we transfer to the famous Fair Isle Bird Observatory. After settling in, we'll take a gentle afternoon walk to familiarise ourselves with the island, enjoying the long northern evenings and our first close encounters with the seabirds of Fair Isle's cliffs.



Orca

Days 3–8

Exploring Fair Isle



Arctic Skua (Alex Penn)

Fair Isle in midsummer is dominated by its bustling seabird colonies. Each day we'll set out from the Observatory on foot, exploring different corners of the island at an easy pace. Mornings will be spent visiting seabird cliffs or scanning offshore waters, returning to the Observatory for lunch before heading out again in the afternoon to a different part of the island. Days will be relaxed and there will be plenty of time to take in the spectacle. Photographic opportunities will be outstanding in dramatic landscapes with birds in number and often quite close. At this time the Observatory will be carrying out survey work on the seabird colonies and there might be opportunities to see some

species in the hand. The days are very long indeed at these latitudes at this time of year and are known as the 'Simmer Dim'. It is well named, as it never gets darker than twilight, and it is an evocative privilege to sit on the clifftops at midnight gazing north at the light sky on the horizon.

Southern Crofts & Village Gardens

The croftlands and gardens are alive with Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Twite in song, while Arctic Terns nest close to the shore. The iris beds, lush in midsummer, may hold warblers or chats while open fields will host pipits and Twite. The crofts also sometimes host a surprise in midsummer, as records of eastern passerines such as Marsh Warbler, Great Reed Warbler or Common Rosefinch are not unknown here, adding a welcome hint of rarity.



Black Guillemot (Steve Arlow)

Buness & the Northern Headlands

The cliffs here are the beating heart of the island in summer. Thousands of Guillemots crowd the ledges, Razorbills and Puffins wheel overhead, and Kittiwakes cry from their nests. Both Arctic and Great Skuas are a constant presence, harrying birds as they return from fishing trips. Close in, we will see Black Guillemots with their distinctive white wing patches and scarlet legs sharing their coastal realm with glossy green Shags in full breeding splendour. Offshore we will scan for Minke Whales, Harbour Porpoise and White-beaked Dolphins, while Orca are a real possibility in late summer, sometimes passing dramatically close to shore. Basking Sharks summer in these waters and with luck and patience we may be rewarded with sightings of these impressive beasts. We'll keep an eye out for feeding frenzies, which will be given away by squadrons of

diving gannets, as these are our best chance to locate whales and dolphins.

Moorland & Lochs

Fair Isle's open moorland and lochs are home to breeding Arctic and Great Skuas, whose dive-bombing displays are unforgettable! We will keep a respectful distance from these aerial pirates, as they are fiercely defensive of their territories. Golden Plover and Snipe may still be displaying, while Red-throated Divers sometimes drop in to the lochs. Lapwings are also a feature of this landscape, their tumbling flight and evocative calls providing a soundtrack to summer days. Dunlin may be breeding in this open landscape and we will keep an eye out, as we seldom see this familiar coastal wader in its breeding habitat. The moorlands double as excellent vantage points for seawatching, where Manx Shearwaters, Fulmars and the occasional Storm Petrel can be picked out. Resident gulls will be loafing around the lochs with the sinister Great Black-backed



Razorbill (FIBO)

Gulls dominating the gathering. Attention should be paid, though, as there will always be the chance of a scarcity being amongst them.

North Lighthouse & Geos

The narrow inlets, or geos, provide superb viewpoints for seabirds and marine-life. Here, Atlantic Grey Seals haul out on the rocks, while Puffins loaf on grassy clifftops above. The Fair Isle Wren is reliably encountered here, given away by its unique emphatic song, while the backdrop of seabird colonies makes this one of the island's most atmospheric locations. The views across the sea to Mainland Shetland and the dramatic outline of Foula to the north are spectacular, as are the breaking Atlantic waves if there is a swell.

Revisiting Hotspots & Evening Activities

In midsummer, no two visits to the same spot are alike. A ledge packed with Puffins in the morning may be deserted in the evening as the birds switch between land and sea, while calm conditions often bring cetaceans closer inshore. The long daylight hours allow plenty of time for exploration, with after-dinner strolls often rewarded with unforgettable encounters, from auks rafting offshore to the sudden appearance of a whale's fin slicing the still waters.



Ringing Storm Petrels (D Parnaby)

For the restless, evenings at the Observatory may also include the chance to watch Storm Petrel ringing, a fascinating activity in which these tiny, nocturnal seabirds are trapped, weighed and ringed before being released back into the night to continue their mysterious lives. The ringing occasionally produces surprises, with Leach's Petrel trapped most years, and even Swinhoe's Storm Petrel has graced Fair Isle nets in the recent past.

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

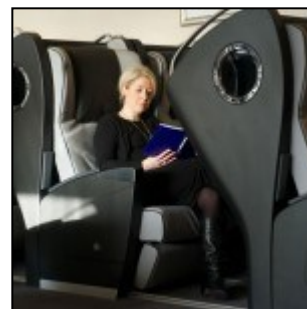
We arrive in Aberdeen early morning and after a magical time in the northern isles, we will go our separate ways.



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).

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 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 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 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.

