

Go Slow on Alderney

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Alderney and transfer to hotel

Day 2 – 7 Daily programme of natural history walks and excursions around Alderney

Day 8 Fly Southampton

Departs

May – July

Focus

Birds and general natural history

Grading

A/B. All walking will be at a slow pace, with some uphill walking on narrow coastal paths.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR56)

Highlights:

- An ideal holiday for the keen all-round naturalist.
- Enjoy spectacular Gannet and Puffin colonies.
- Bird-ringing demonstration at the islands Bird Observatory.
- 'Blonde' Hedgehogs.
- Learn about the islands history visiting fascinating historical sites.
- Butterflies, moths and flora in abundance.
- Exciting migratory species possible.
- Stay at the island's premier hotel.



From Top: Braye Beach Hotel, Glanville Fritillary, 'Blonde' Hedgehog © M. Batt



Introduction

Alderney is the most northerly of the Channel Islands and, despite lying just eight miles off Normandy's Cotentin Peninsula, it is strangely the least accessible. No scheduled ferry service links the island with either the mainland of France or England, or with any other island, and herein lies its charm – it being a peaceful backwater where the pace of life is slow, visitors are sparse and the locals most welcoming.

Just over three-and-a-half miles long and a mile-and-a-half wide, it is possible to walk around Alderney in a day. However, for the naturalist, the island's rich tapestry of habitats is deserving of much more time. In spring, given favourable weather, migrant birds (perhaps including a rarity or two!) will be encountered whilst moths, butterflies and fine displays of flora enrich the island's natural history.

On this holiday we will explore Alderney on foot, supported by the local island minibus. Our leisurely walks will each cover 2-3 miles and will enable us to explore the island's patchwork of grazing pastures, wooded valleys, flower-filled grasslands and dunes, small ponds, marshes and heaths, often from cliff-top paths accessing spectacular coastal scenery. From the latter we should see Peregrines, Buzzards, Ravens and seabirds, including the spectacular Gannet colonies on Les Etacs and Ortac (between them hosting over 8,000 pairs – 2% of the world's population). If the weather is good, an optional boat trip out to enjoy at least one of these colonies – as well as other seabirds and marine-life – will be a highlight of this holiday. In addition, we will visit the recently established Alderney Bird Observatory for a ringing demonstration and the warden will explain the importance of Alderney's geographical position on the migration highway. Using local experts we will also offer you the chance to enjoy moth-trapping, and sightings of some of Alderney's thriving population of Hedgehogs, many of which are leucistic (or 'Blonde' Hedgehogs).

We will be based in the splendid Braye Beach Hotel, a sparkling 4-star hotel commanding fabulous views over the bay and its idyllic white sandy beach. For those wishing for a little time off from our programme, the hotel's bar, terrace and superior rooms offer perfect spots in which to relax and absorb the views!

Braye Beach Hotel



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & 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

Fly Alderney

Unlike the other Channel Islands, Alderney cannot be reached by means of a scheduled ferry service, either from the UK or France or from the other islands. Herein lies much of its charm, since the island remains quiet and undeveloped. It is most easily accessed using Aurigny's scheduled flights from Southampton Airport each day. For this itinerary, we plan to fly the group together on an afternoon flight to Alderney – the timings are subject to availability however, due to the small capacity of the planes. The flight is a short one, just 40 minutes, and when the weather is clear it can afford wonderful views over the South Downs, New Forest, Hampshire ports and estuaries, the Solent, the Isle of Wight (including the Needles) and the Dorset coast.

On arrival at Alderney's quaint and tiny airport, you will be met by your tour leaders. From here a mini-coach will transfer you to the Braye Beach Hotel just a mile away. Once there, after you have settled into your rooms, they will introduce you to Alderney and the programme for the forthcoming days.



Traditionally, we have all dined as a group at the Braye Beach Hotel on the first night, allowing everybody to get to know each other and the guides, in an informal setting and often again on the last night for a farewell dinner. Dinners are not included in the cost of this holiday, to allow you a little independence should you wish, and the chance to sample some of the island's excellent restaurants. The Braye Beach Hotel itself offers an excellent menu and choice for those not wishing to venture out, though the service and wholesome dinners served in the less formal 'The First and Last' restaurant or the 'Cantina No. 6' tapas restaurant are close by and both thoroughly recommended. For those with the energy to walk uphill for 20 minutes into the pretty little town of St. Anne (no more than a large village), the Georgian House is amongst several good restaurants.

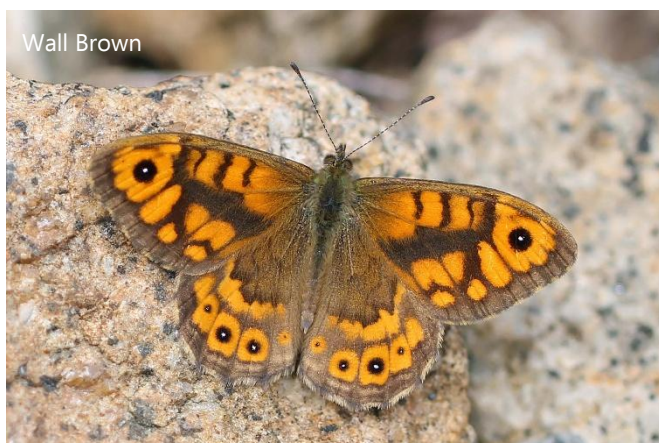
Days 2 - 7

Excursions from Braye Beach Hotel

We should quickly adapt to the easy-going pace of life on the island but each day there will be short, guided walks (as outlined below) in the morning and afternoon with minibuss transfers to the start and finish, if required. Lunch, which is not included in the tour cost, will generally be in cafes around the island or at Braye Beach. For afternoon excursions we will be back at the hotel with plenty of time to relax, perhaps with a cup of tea, before getting ready for dinner. All the excursions are, of course, optional.

Generally, each day will start at 9am, after breakfast, on some days with a look at one of the moth traps run by David Wedd, the island's expert lepidopterist.

It is likely that they will then take you on a slow stroll through the Giffoine, the largest area of heathland on Alderney, this afternoon. This lies at the western end of the island and is home to resident Dartford Warblers, Stonechats, Peregrines and Ravens. It also provides wonderful views of the Gannet colony (12,000 birds) on the islets of Les Etacs, just offshore, that is occupied and busy right up until October when both young and adult birds depart for a winter at sea. Razorbills, Guillemots, Shags, Fulmars and Herring Gulls also breed here.



The Giffoine, like so many of the island's headlands, is also a good place for migrant birds at this time of year, amongst them Wheatears, Whinchats, redstarts, pipits and warblers. If the weather is good we may encounter Glanville Fritillaries, a species now extremely rare in mainland Britain but abundant here, while resident 'browns', including Wall Brown (which is still common here, unlike on the mainland), should be on the wing.

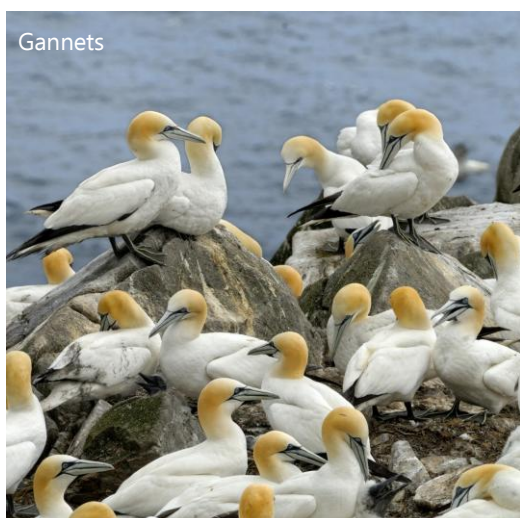
First, we will explore Longis Common, an area of scrub and open ground favoured by northbound Wheatears, Whinchats, warblers and pipits. Then we'll focus on the Mannez Ponds, the new Longis bird hide enabling us to get good views of large collections of hirundines, 'reed' warblers, waterfowl, resident Little Grebes and perhaps a Water Rail. The wetlands here are also perfect for dragonflies: all resident species on the island can be found here, including Red-veined Darter, as well as migrant and vagrant species.

Our walk will also take us through the Mannez-Garenne heathlands, where Dartford Warblers may sometimes be seen, as well as such birds of prey as Hobby, Peregrine, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk. It's an area good for wildflowers (with Green-winged Orchid possible in May), butterflies and migrant birds too, as is the coastal path that we follow to complete our circuit. From here it is also sometimes possible to see a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins feeding amongst the turbulent waters

generated by very strong intertidal currents. Such is the mix of habitats in this small area that it is inevitably one of the best places for avian variety and the chance of a rarity or two! We will no doubt make at least one return visit to this productive area.

On completing our walk, the pleasant 'Old Barn Restaurant' at Longis Bay makes the perfect spot for a break, refreshments and a light lunch. There will also be the opportunity to view 'the Nunnery'. This was originally a Roman coastal fort of the 3rd-4th Century AD and is one of the most historically important buildings in the Channel Islands. It was probably built as a signal station; alterations were then made in the 15th and 16th centuries, and in the 1790s a barracks was added before German WW2 defences were additionally built into the structure!

If the weather is at its best, we will take a boat trip to the off-shore islands to look for seabirds and other marine-life. Alderney's 'West Coast and Burhou Island Ramsar Site' protects a coastline, waters, islands and islets that support many seabirds; this is an extremely spectacular coastline best viewed by boat. First, we'll head to Burhou Island Bird Sanctuary, less than a mile offshore. Burhou supports the largest population of Puffins to be found in the English Channel, and the only colony of Storm Petrels, as well as Razorbills and Guillemots which breed in small colonies on islets around the western end of Alderney. However, on the large islets of Les Etacs and Ortac, Alderney's two large breeding colonies of Gannets (jointly hosting 8,000 pairs) will be busy and active. We'll take the boat as close as we can to at least one of these bustling colonies and enjoy being amongst these elegant and enterprising birds. Shags and Fulmars are also likely to be within the vicinity of their breeding cliffs, as indeed are resident Peregrines. Bottlenose and Common Dolphins, and Atlantic Grey Seals, may also occasionally be seen.



Gannets



Bottlenose Dolphin

Please note that this trip is tide and weather dependent. It is therefore possible that a prolonged spell of bad weather could rule it out during our stay. For this reason its cost, around £35 per person, is not included in the cost of our holiday and must be paid directly to the skipper working for the Alderney Wildlife Trust. Conversely, if the weather is very good, it is possible both to see the offshore islands as well as to circumnavigate Alderney itself. Please also note that we will assess the weather forecast and aim to do this boat trip at the very best time, rescheduling the tour itinerary accordingly.

On one evening those that are interested may choose to go out with a local expert in search of Alderney's thriving population of Hedgehogs, many of which are leucistic (or 'Blonde' Hedgehogs).

We will visit the Observatory building, situated on the south cliffs, close to Essex Castle. The Bird Observatory, since opening on Alderney in March 2016, has proved a great success, providing valuable information on the routes taken by migrant birds travelling between Europe and Africa. Indeed, the number of birds ringed here in the first six months surpassed that of any other UK bird observatory. Here we will be treated to a bird-ringing demonstration which is sure to be one of the highlights of the tour. The Observatory is also set amongst prime Dartford Warbler territory, from which we will have commanding views across to the nearby French coast.



Dartford Warbler



Leucistic (Blonde) Hedgehog

On another day we will take a walk from St. Anne (the main 'town') down to, and then along, the spectacular coastline of the south-west of the island. The scenery from these southern cliffs is breath-taking, France's Cotentin Peninsula and the distant Channel Islands of Sark, Brecqhou, Herm and Guernsey can be seen on the horizon. In the cliff-top fields, hedgerows and heaths, and in the sheltered little wooded valleys through which the footpath passes, we'll look for passing northbound migrant birds, wayside flora and butterflies. As we follow the coastal path we will see carpets of pink-flowered Thrift, dog-violets, Bluebells and the spikes of Greater Broomrape may be found here. This area is also home to the Alderney Sea-lavender, a plant found only here and on Jersey within the United Kingdom. We'll also look to sea for seabirds and cetaceans, and overhead for Ravens, Buzzards, Peregrines and perhaps a passing Hen or Marsh Harrier. The fields and heaths around Telegraph Bay and Vallée des Trois Vaux, have particular potential. We might take a light lunch and refreshments back in St. Anne, or we might return to our hotel and enjoy a break on the bay-side terrace!

St. Anne offers a number of other attractions. Victoria Street, its main cobbled thoroughfare was named in honour of the Queen's visit with Prince Albert in 1836. It has a small but fascinating museum which documents particularly well the history of the island during WW2, which is such a unique aspect of the island's history as evidenced by the numerous bunkers and other fortifications still present around the island. Meanwhile, the library has on display, a tapestry made by islanders depicting the 'unfinished' section of the famous Bayeux Tapestry. It is a little-known fact that the Bayeux Tapestry is incomplete. The famous embroidery tracks, in 58 scenes, the events of the Norman Conquest leading up to the Battle of Hastings but runs out before this period of history reaches its conclusion: the coronation of William the Conqueror in London on Christmas Day in 1066. It is now believed that the final piece went missing so the islanders have produced a 3-metre-long section to complete the story! It has been so well-received that it was taken to Bayeux and displayed alongside the original in 2013. The town also houses a good range of shops and restaurants, including the shop of the Alderney Wildlife Trust. St. Anne's church is also worth a visit and the churchyard trees offer a haven for bats and migrant birds!

One morning we will walk from the hotel along Crabby Bay and the beach of Platte Saline, the only beaches on the island still holding breeding Ringed Plovers as well as being of interest to the botanist on account of their shore-line flora. Occasionally, Bee Orchids are found nearby. We'll then pass the imposing Fort Tourgis, built by the Victorians, along with Braye Harbour's breakwater and many other fortifications, as a defence against the French in the mid-19th century. As so often on Alderney, built alongside such Victorian (or even Roman) fortifications are German bunkers and artillery positions.

We next walk a stretch of coastline beneath scrub-covered cliffs that not only has potential for sheltering migrant birds, especially warblers and flycatchers, but also offers fine views out to the Burhou Island. Indeed we are now within the 'West Coast and Burhou Island Ramsar Site' and able to enjoy fine coastal scenery that includes the distant white pinnacle of Ortac, an offshore stack hosting a colony of 4,000 Gannets. The bay here, Clonque Bay, is the largest intertidal area on Alderney, its fabulous rock pools, which are exposed and accessible at low tide, hosting 160 species of seaweed and a wealth of other fascinating shore creatures, including the Ormer, a prized shellfish.



Gannet colony

Another spectacular Victorian fortress, Fort Clonque, sits on a headland looking out onto the Gannet colony of Les Etacs. From here, we'll be taken back to Braye Beach or St. Anne for our lunch break.

Another popular walk is a stroll from the airport through Rose Farm and the adjacent Bon Terre woodland to its thirteenth century watermill, which is currently being restored by volunteers. Nearby, we can explore the Victorian-built Fort Tourgis which has recently undergone extensive clearance and conservation work by volunteers of the Living Islands project team to reveal how the Victorian batteries were adapted for use by the occupying German forces in World War II.

In the far north-east of the island there are beautiful sandy beaches at Corblets and Saye Bays. The cropped grass of the islands campground (usually almost deserted by September) can attract visiting waders and pipits as well as resident Stonechats. A walk along the coast here will bring us

to the impressive Fort Albert providing us with superb views across Braye Bay to our hotel. The fort is surrounded by a deep and wide dry moat, an elaborate defensive construction which was fortunately never put to the test!

If the sun is shining, a drink on the hotel terrace or in the glass-fronted bar, both overlooking the long white sandy beach of Braye Bay and its pretty harbour, is the perfect way to complete the day.

Day 8 Excursion from Braye Beach Hotel and Fly Southampton

Depending on our flight times to Southampton we hope to have chance for a final excursion in the morning, perhaps exploring the coastal heath and wooded valley around Essex Castle before lunch.



Tour Grading

Whilst we will use a local mini-coach, or other vehicles, to transport us from and to the airport, and to ferry us to some of the starting points of our walks, and back again, most of this holiday will be enjoyed on foot. Generally we will aim to do a walk of about 3 miles, at a slow birding/botanising pace, between 9am and lunchtime each day (though on some of these there is an option to take a shorter route). After a leisurely lunchbreak, a more gentle birding/natural history stroll will be offered each afternoon between 2pm and 5pm approximately. All excursions are optional and, due to the small size of the island, some flexibility can be accommodated on occasions and within reason.

What's Included

We use the 4-star Braye Beach Hotel, by far the best hotel on Alderney. Recently renovated, and decorated and furnished to the highest of modern standards, the hotel overlooks the long white sandy beach of Braye Bay and the colourful Braye Harbour. Half of the hotel's rooms overlook the bay and greet the rising sun; the others overlook a quiet street at the back of the hotel. All rooms are en-suite and equipped to a high spec, but the sea-view rooms are particularly recommended (a supplement is required, and these rooms are subject to availability). The restaurant, bar and terrace of the hotel all overlook Braye Bay.



Braye Beach Hotel

Bed and breakfast only is included in the cost of this holiday. The cost of lunches and dinners is not included since each day's itinerary is planned to enable group members to take a break either at the Braye Beach Hotel, or at one of Alderney's many pubs or restaurants where a choice of lunch, snacks and drinks will be available to suit individual preferences. Dinners are not included in the cost of this holiday in order to allow you a little independence, as well as the chance to explore and sample some of the island's excellent restaurants, should you wish to. The Braye Beach Hotel itself offers an excellent menu and choice for those not wishing to venture out. There are other restaurants in Braye village and a good selection in St. Anne offering a range of cuisine including French, English, Indian and seafood amongst others, for those happy to wander a little further.

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.

To travel to the Channel Islands from the UK, all passengers are required to provide photographic ID (Passport, Photographic Driving Licence, National ID card, Citizen card, etc) at the check-in desk.

Please note that for flights departing from the Channel Islands, UK (EU) 261/2004 which covers delays caused by things like extreme weather, air traffic control or airport employee strikes or other 'extraordinary circumstances' is not applicable and not eligible for compensation.