Isles of Scilly

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 18 May 2016





Atlantic Puffin

Rib Trip







Iceland Gull

Report and images by Andrew Cleave



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Tour Report Isles of Scilly

Tour participants: Andrew Cleave (leader) plus six Naturetrek clients

Summary

Our tour began in Penzance where we met up as we boarded Scillonian III for the crossing to the islands. Foggy conditions reduced the visibility, and we were to experience more fog at times during the week, although we also had plenty of pleasant sunny weather on some days. Sea conditions were good for the crossing and for our other boat trips during the week, and we managed to visit all of the inhabited islands, and explore much of St Mary's as well. We were treated to wonderful displays of the Scilly flora, both native and exotic, and the birds did not disappoint either. We enjoyed close views of seabirds, including Puffins, on the trip to the outer rocks with Island Sea Safaris, and Storm Petrels on an evening pelagic. On the islands we found a good variety of resident and migrant birds, with a few surprises such as Iceland Gull, Red-rumped Swallow, Eastern Sub-alpine Warbler and Turtle Dove. We also managed to sample several of the cafes and restaurants on the islands and get a real flavour of life on the Isles of Scilly.

Day 1

Wednesday 11th May

Weather conditions: foggy at first, clearing later; 12°C

Our trip started in Penzance as we boarded Scillonian III for the 2hr 45min crossing to the islands. The sea was calm and we had good views of the coastline as we headed west, with sightings of several gull species, cormorants, gannets, and just beyond Land's End, over 30 Manx Shearwaters. Amongst the gulls following the boat was one adult Yellow-legged Gull which provided some very close views. Nearer to the islands we spotted a few auks, some close enough to be identified. There were also a few distant sightings of Common Dolphins. We arrived at St Mary's at around mid-day and made our way to the Santa Maria Guest House which was to be our home for the week. Having settled in, we dispersed to find lunch and then gathered for an afternoon walk around the Garrison. This scenic route follows the Tudor fortifications and gives wonderful views of the islands. We soon noticed the colourful flora, including many exotic species spilling over from people's gardens. House Sparrows, Starlings and Collared Doves were the common bird species here, but most noticeable were the Song Thrushes which were incredibly confiding, allowing the photographers to get plenty of shots. The Garrison headland was also a good area for Stonechats which we saw in several spots, and overhead there were plenty of Swallows and House Martins. On the rocks below us a single Turnstone was spotted whilst on the water there were good numbers of fishing Shags. A solitary Whimbrel and a few Oystercatchers were also seen on the rocks, and on the grassland above us there were numerous rabbits, with several being completely black. This pleasant circular walk was a good introduction to the islands and the wildlife we would be watching during our visit.

We returned to Santa Maria for a break and then visited the Pilot's Gig restaurant for our evening meal where we completed our checklists and went through the plans for the week ahead.

Day 2 Thursday 12th May

Weather conditions: foggy at first, with low cloud for most of day; 12°C

We spent the day on St Mary's, exploring the coastline and some of the tracks and trails in the interior of the island. From the guest house we took the route along Porthcressa to the prominent headland of Peninnis, where we found more Stonechats, Meadow Pipits and a few Wheatears. The flora here was more typical of exposed

headlands with Thrift, Small-flowered Catchfly and Sea Campion adding splashes of colour. We followed the coastal path around to Old Town Bay where there were a few Oystercatchers feeding and a solitary Grey Heron was spotted.

After a coffee break at the Old Town Cafe we took the trail through the Lower Moors Nature Reserve and checked the various hides and viewing points. Typical water birds were found here, including Moorhens, Mallard, Gadwall and Reed Warbler, although this proved much harder to see. The reed beds and willow scrub here provided a great contrast to the exposed rocky headland we had walked around earlier in the morning. There were a few Chiffchaffs calling in the thick cover and a Blackcap was watched in one clearing. We took the steep track up Rocky Hill, where Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and Robins were most frequent, and then visited the Sage House Cafe for a well-earned rest – the Apple Strudel was very well received.

After a rest we walked downhill to a spot where a Wood Warbler had been reported and were lucky enough to get very good views of it in a hedgerow tree. A Red-rumped Swallow was another lucky find giving good views to some of the party. We took a detour to the Golf Course, following reports of an unusual gull, and managed to get close views of an Iceland Gull standing on one of the greens amongst a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls. From here it was a pleasant walk back to Hugh Town via Porthloo Beach.

We met at the Mermaid in the evening for our get-together and then some of the group ventured out on a boat trip with Will Wagstaff and Fraser Hicks. The fog had not cleared, but in the rather eerie conditions we had superb close views of six Great Northern Divers, some of them giving their haunting call. On one of the navigation buoys there were about 15 Common Terns roosting and, drifting in and out of the fog, the occasional Razorbill and Guillemot came into view.

Day 3 Friday 13th May

Weather conditions: bright and sunny all day with a stiff breeze at sea; 16°C

We spent the morning on an exciting RIB trip with Island Sea Safaris. Mark and Susie Groves gave us a tour of the outer rocks and reefs, telling us about shipwrecks, the names of some of the isolated rocks, and getting us close to the seabirds that breed on these inaccessible sites. We had some close views of Fulmars, and also some large concentrations of Shags and flocks of Oystercatchers. We saw Puffins, Razorbills and Guillemots at close quarters and had a few sightings of Peregrine overhead, although the Grey Seals proved a bit more difficult at times. A local fisherman proudly displayed some fine lobsters as we drew alongside his boat.

We returned to St Mary's Quay at lunch time and then met up again later for a taxi ride to Higher Moors and Porth Hellick. We followed the trail through the nature reserve, checking out the hides, and added a few new waterbirds to our list, including Pochard, Redshank and Little Egret. The splendid Royal Fern (Osmunda regalis) was uncurling its large fronds amongst the huge clumps of Greater Tussock Sedge (Carex paniculata) on either side of the trail, and there were more Reed Warblers and Chiffchaffs calling nearby. There were colourful displays of native Bluebells (Hyacinthoides non-scripta) and Yellow Iris (Iris pseudacorus) along the trail. Blue-tailed Damselflies were seen on the margins of the pool and by the stream running towards the shore. We paused for a while to check out the beach at Porth Hellick, which was rather deserted apart from a few Oystercatchers feeding on the shore; small groups of Linnets and Goldfinches were spotted in the shrubby areas on the margins and there were many Meadow Pipits foraging on the strand line. We retraced our steps to the road and then

took the path through Holy Vale, enjoying the unfamiliar experience of walking under lofty Elm trees – all in good condition and unaffected by disease. There was plenty of bird song here, but spotting things was difficult in this leafy environment. Blackcaps, Great Tit and Blue Tit seemed to be the most common. The trail opened out in the sheltered settlement at Holy Vale where Palms and *Daturas* flourished in the gardens. We noticed several of the Scillonian form of the Speckled Wood butterfly with its richer colouration than the mainland form. We took the narrow footpath from here to Longstones, passing under more Elms and some magnificent Monterey Pines, and arrived at Carreg Dhu Garden – another peaceful and sheltered area. Apart from the resident Song Thrushes and Blackbirds it was rather quiet here but there were plenty of butterflies on the wing, including Red Admiral and Holly Blue. After a rest here we followed the trail back towards Old Town, and were pleased to see a Turtle Dove in one of the bulb fields on the way.

In the evening we visited the Bishop and Wolf pub for our meal and went over the checklists.

Day 4 Saturday 14th May

Weather conditions: grey skies at first, but brighter by the afternoon; 15°C

Today we visited Tresco, taking the morning boat from the Quay and landing at New Grimsby. On the way a few Common Terns were spotted, as well as the Royal Navy Border Patrol vessel, HMS Vigilant. We walked, via the shop and ice creams, towards the gardens, pausing several times to check out the Great Pool and the woodlands on the way. Common Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge were new birds for the trip, although both were introduced here for shooting. Around and on the water we noted Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Shelduck, Tufted Duck, Pochard and Coot, and a few Swifts were seen overhead amongst the Swallows and House Martins. Both Reed and Sedge Warblers were singing in the reed beds, but proved to be tricky to see, while several Goldcrests were spotted in the massive conifers along the roadside. At the gardens we split up to explore, but not before enjoying a lunch break accompanied by Red Squirrels, a relatively recent introduction to Tresco.

Another exotic species seen here was Golden Pheasant which seems to be quite at home in the gardens and, once again, the very tame Song Thrushes often came too close for photographs. After a pleasant few hours exploring the gardens we took the shorter walk back to Carn Near Quay for the boat back to St Mary's. We bumped into another group of naturalists who were looking at a colony of Small Adder's-tongue Fern (Ophioglossum azoricum) in a hollow in the dunes, and here we also watched more Stonechats, plus Wheatear and Rock Pipit nearer to the shore.

We met up again for our evening meal at the Atlantic Hotel and then went to the very informative slide show given by local naturalist Will Wagstaff.

Day 5 Sunday 15th May

Weather conditions: grey skies at first, but warm and sunny later; 17°C

Today we visited St Agnes and were greeted by the calls of Kittiwakes as we arrived at the Quay in Porth Conger. The small colony of nesting Kittiwakes, now a rarity on Scilly, with a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls close by, is easily seen from the track and we spent some time here before heading for Barnaby's Lane and Wingletang. We could hear at least one Cuckoo calling much of the time but it proved to be very tricky to see.

Out on the exposed moorland there were more sightings of Stonechat and Wheatear, and we enjoyed the amazing views of the western rocks and the distant Bishop Rock lighthouse. We followed the coastal path around to St Warna's Cove with its Holy Well and added a few more coastal plants to our list.

We had a pleasant lunch break at the Coastguard Cafe overlooking the sea and then, following a tip-off from some other birdwatchers, checked out a small garden nearby where we had brief views of a Subalpine Warbler. We continued our gentle walk around the island, stopping to sample the local ice cream at Troy Town Farm, and found a small flock of Whimbrel at Periglis, some of them calling loudly, plus a few Shelduck. On the shore line at Porth Killier there were more Whimbrel, feeding quietly, and several Rock Pipits and Pied Wagtails feeding on the strand line. On the return boat journey a few Common Terns flew close to the boat, and we spotted some large rafts of Shags, maybe numbering hundreds of birds. Shags greatly outnumber Cormorants on Scilly and on most days we only saw one or two of the latter.

We met at the Mermaid Inn for our evening meal and were treated to good views of the harbour from the upstairs dining room.

Day 6 Monday 16th May

Weather conditions: pleasant sunny conditions for most of the day; 17°C

Our destination today was Bryher, so we collected picnic supplies before meeting at the boat on the Quay for the trip to the smallest of the inhabited islands. We were struck by the clarity of the water and the beautiful colours of the seaweeds as we neared the jetty on Bryher. We followed the shore line south towards the Church and then took a detour via Veronica Farm to a sunny picnic spot overlooking the sea. An unusual sighting here was a Hooded Crow, and on the shore were several Oystercatchers and a few Whimbrel, and a distant Little Egret. The beach was a good source of empty shells and we soon found the three species of Limpets common on Scilly, plus several more species of Top Shells and multi-coloured Flat Periwinkles. After a relaxing picnic we followed the coastline around to Rushy Bay and with some careful searching on hands and knees we found a few of the diminutive Dwarf Pansies (*Viola kitaibeliana*) growing at their only UK location. The most common butterfly here was the Small Copper, but we saw more of the Scillonian form of Speckled Wood as well. Further round the coast we came to Hell Bay, and on the freshwater pool there were a few Mallards with some Swallows and House Martins dipping low over the water. This brackish pool supports a population of Grey Mullet and a few could be seen cruising by in the shallows.

Some of the party took the early boat back to St Mary's in order to get ready for an evening pelagic seabird trip with local boatman and bird-photographer, Joe Pender. We set off from St Mary's at 5pm and headed southwest, passing close to some of the western rocks where we spotted Purple Sandpiper, and a few Turnstone in summer plumage. Throwing bread scraps over the stern as we travelled out attracted large numbers of gulls, and amongst them we found a Great Skua which lingered near the boat for a while. As we got further out to sea we started seeing a few more seabirds, including Fulmar, Gannet, Puffin and Razorbill. Eventually the skipper cut engines and we drifted for a while, and some oily fish-based "chum" was used to attract in more seabirds. This did the trick and we soon had Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters in view, some coming very close to the boat. Eventually the light started failing and we set off for the return journey, arriving back at St Mary's Quay at about 10pm after a very exciting few hours on the open sea.

Day 7

Tuesday 17th May

Weather conditions: hazy sun for most of the day, with a light breeze; 16°C

Today was to be our last full day on the islands so we planned to visit St Martin's and take a picnic with us. The boat dropped us at Lower Town, next to the island hotel where we had a brief coffee break, and we then followed the spectacular coastal path around the north-west of the island, getting views of Round Island, Tean and St Helen's. The Gorse (*Ulex europea*) was in full bloom, providing a colourful foreground to the coastline below. In the more open areas we were able to watch Meadow Pipits feeding, and Stonechats were also active here.

We had our picnic overlooking Great Bay, with its stretch of white sand almost deserted for much of the time. A bull Grey Seal entertained us for a while and a single Great Northern Diver came in quite close. We checked out the bulb fields at Churchtown Farm in the hope of finding the St Martin's Buttercup but were unlucky this time, but the gardens and roadsides in this part of the island were extremely colourful with a mixture of native wild flowers and exotic escapes. An ominous-looking sky encouraged us to head for Higher Town Quay for the earlier boat back to St Mary's and we were lucky enough to get there before the rain started.

We met at Dibble and Grub for our final evening meal.

Day 8

Wednesday 18th May

Weather conditions: a bright sunny day with a stiff breeze at sea; 17°C

For our final day on the islands we had a morning walk around Hugh Town and the local beaches, plus some free time for shopping and coffee breaks, before a lunch-time get-together at Dibble and Grub. There was then time for a brief trip back to the Higher Moors trail where the Reed and Sedge Warblers continued to sing but not show themselves very well. The flowers here were very colourful and this made a relaxing break before starting on the return journey.

We met on the Quay in time for the afternoon sailing back to Penzance and enjoyed a pleasant crossing with lovely views of the islands as we left, and a few sightings of seabirds on the open sea during the crossing. Scillonian III arrived back in Penzance on time and we said our farewells here after a very full week of wildlife watching on the Isles of Scilly.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at <u>www.facebook.com</u> is quick, free and easy. The <u>Naturetrek Facebook page</u> is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

			May								
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
1	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer	1	6					1		
2	Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	1	1	✓		✓	✓		✓	
3	Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus	30+	4						30+	
4	European Storm Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus						10			
5	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	5	4				✓			
6	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	1		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	3	2							
9	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			1			4			
10	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor				2		4			
11	Canada Goose	Branta canadensis				20					
12	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna				2	4	✓			
13	Gadwall	Anas strepera		5		✓		✓			
14	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			4						
16	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		1						1	
17	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	1		2						
18	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa				20+					
19	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		Н	1	✓		Н	Н		
20	Golden Pheasant	Chrysolophus pictus				✓					
21	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus		Н							
22	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		5	1	7					
23	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra				20					
24	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓	√	
25	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus	1				6	3	3	1	
26	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	•		1						
27	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	1					1			
28	Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima	<u>'</u>					1			
29	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua						2			
30	Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla					20+	1			
31	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	√	✓	1	✓	✓	· ·	✓	✓	
32	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	1	-	-	,		, ,		-	
33	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	· ·	✓	✓	·	✓ ·	✓	· /	✓ ·	
35	Iceland Gull	Larus glaucoides		1	_	<u> </u>	•	•	_	•	
36	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo		15		✓	✓	✓			
37	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge	2	4	✓	, 	•	· ·			
38	Razorbill	Alca torda	20+	4	✓	✓	2	▼	✓	✓	
	Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica	20+		✓	,		✓	_	•	
39			✓	✓	V ✓		√	,		✓	
40	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia 'feral'	V ✓	∨	∨	/	∨	✓	✓	∨	
41	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	∨	∨	✓	∨	∨	∨	✓	
42	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		_		'	'	'	-		
43	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur			1						
44	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus				-	Н				
45	Common Swift	Apus apus				3					
46	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	
47	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		1	1						

			May							
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
48	Common House Martin	Delichon urbica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis							2	
50	Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus	1					1		
51	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii	1	✓	✓					1
52	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Dunnock	Prunella modularis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Eurasian Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
57	European Stonechat	Saxicola torquatus	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
58	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		✓		✓		✓		
59	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus				1		1		
60	Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus				Н				
61	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus		3	4	Н				
62	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochillus					4			
63	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
64	Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix		1						
65	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis				1				
66	Eastern Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia cantillans albistriata						1		
67	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓		✓		✓	
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus			✓				✓	
69	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix						1		
71	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
74	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus			✓			✓	✓
2	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris				5			
4	Pipistrelle Bat	Pipistrellus pipistrellus	3	1					
5	Hedgehog - droppings	Erinaceus europaeus	✓	✓					

Butterflies

1	Small White	Pieris rapae	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
2	Large White	Pieris brassicae			✓	✓			
3	Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria insula		✓				✓	
5	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta	✓						
6	Comma	Polygonia c-album		✓		✓			
7	Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus	✓	✓	✓	✓			
8	Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas				✓	✓		
9	Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus			✓	✓			

			May							
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Otl	Other invertebrates:									

Plants

Sea Spleenwort, Asplenium marinum

Lanceolate Spleenwort, Asplenium obovatum

Lady Fern, Athyrium filix-femina

Common Polypody, Polypodium vulgare

Small Adder's-tongue Fern, Ophioglossum azoricum

Small-flowered Catchfly, Silene gallica

Sea Campion , $\it Silene uniflora$

White Campion, Silene latifolia

Sea Sandwort, Honkenya peploides

Sea Beet, Beta maritima

Musk Storksbill, *Erodium moschatum*Western Clover , *Trifolium occidentale*

Yellow Horned Poppy, Glaucium flavum

Bithynian Vetch, Vicia bithynica

Dwarf Pansy, Viola kitaibeliana Lousewort, Pedicularis sylvatica

Rock Samphire, Crithmum maritimum

Corn Marigold, Chrysanthemum segetum

Wild Leek, Allium ampeloprasum

Bluebell, Hyacinthoides non-scripta

Three-cornered Leek, Allium triquetrum

Yellow Iris, Iris pseudacorus

Naturalised garden escapes,

Bermuda Buttercup, Oxalis pes-caprae

Red Corn-lily, Ixia campanulata

Deltoid-leaved Dewplant, Oscularia deltoides

Fleshy Yellow Sorrel, Oxalis megalorrhiza

New Zealand Flax, Phormium tenax

Grasses, sedges and rushes,

Greater Tussock Sedge, Carex paniculata

Good Friday Grass, Luzula campestris

Sweet Vernal Grass, Anthoxanthum odoratum

Black Spleenwort, A. adiantum-nigrum

Royal Fern, Osmunda regalis

Broad Buckler Fern, Dryopteris dilatata

Hart's-tongue Fern, Phyllitis scolopendrium

Bracken, Pteridium aquilinum

Small-flowered Catchfly - form, subsp guinguevulnera

Red Campion, Silene dioica

Rock Sea-spurrey, Spergularia rupicola

Four-leaved Allseed, Polycarpon tetraphyllum

Fiddle Dock, Rumex pulcher

Sea Storksbill, Erodium maritimum

Western Ramping Fumitory, Fumaria occidentalis

Wall Pennywort, Umbilicus rupestris

Thrift, Armeria maritima

Balm-leaved Figwort, Scophularia scorodonia

Common Broomrape, Orobanche minor maritima

Fennel, Foeniculum vulgare

Large Arum, Arum italicum

Spring Squill, Scilla verna

Spanish Bluebell, Hyacinthoides hispanica

Rose Garlic, Allium roseum

Primrose Peerless, Narcissus biflorus

Chilean Iris, Libertia formosa

Madeiran Cranesbill, Geranium maderense

Karo, Pittosporum crassifolium

Shrub Goldilocks, Chrysocoma coma-aurea

Marram Grass, Ammophila arenaria

Quaking Grass, Briza media

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