

Isles of Scilly

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th Sept – 2nd October 2021



Woodchat Shrike



Tresco



Buff-breasted Sandpiper



Glossy Ibis

Report and images by Neil Glenn



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Tour Participants: Neil Glenn (Leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Summary

The weather was very changeable and even disrupted some of the group's travel plans. Despite this, our Naturetrek group managed to see a wide array of birds, some of which were rare or scarce on the Isles of Scilly.

Highlights included some American wading birds, some scarce European migrants and a host of common species migrating from their northern breeding grounds to southern Europe and Africa to overwinter. It was an interesting mix of birds on the move, with nine species of butterflies thrown in for good measure. And all set in the stunning scenery that make up The Isles of Scilly: 'The Fortunate Isles'.

Day 1

Saturday 25th September

The Scillonian III sailed on time from Penzance in fairly thick fog on Saturday morning. The boat was full because so many flights had been cancelled over the last few days due to the persistent poor visibility. In such circumstances, people are offered the option of taking the ferry to the islands.

The sailing was undertaken in mild conditions, so the Naturetrek group met on deck for introductions and to watch for birds and cetaceans on the journey. We were joined by Neil McMahon, another leader, whose Naturetrek group didn't arrive until the following Monday. It was he who picked out the first decent bird of the trip: a fairly distant Mediterranean Gull flying on the horizon through the murk. During the journey, most of the group managed to see Short-beaked Common Dolphins, while birds included Kittiwakes, Gannets, Guillemots and good numbers of Manx Shearwaters. The best sightings were of a Sooty Shearwater, picked out from a large flock of feeding Manxies, and a bruiser of a Great Skua that bullied its way through.

We docked at around midday and walked the short distance to our guesthouse overlooking the harbour. After settling in, we strolled to the green overlooking the bay where we ate a picnic lunch in the now warm/hot sunshine!

After lunch, it was time to introduce the group to the island of St. Mary's and to try and find some birds. First stop was Porthcressa Bay, just a very short walk from Town Beach and the harbour. Curiously, the star bird here was Scilly's 28th Great Crested Grebe. This bird has caused great excitement with local birdwatchers! Also in the bay were some Sandwich Terns, Shags and a mixture of common gull species.

We next made our way to the beautiful Old Town Churchyard, where some paused to take photos of Sir Harold Wilson's grave. It really was quite a hot afternoon, so small bird activity was at a minimum. The path opened out onto Old Town Bay: a stunning location. Oystercatchers, a Greenshank and a Common Sandpiper were all seen but we couldn't locate the regular Kingfisher in its usual spot.

We ambled into Lower Moors, where the shade of the Willows and Elms was a welcome relief from the sun. However, the trail and hides overlooking a pool were very quiet: not even a Chiffchaff or a Common Snipe to keep us company. A few Swallows drifted over, which were nice to see. It won't be long until they've left our shores until the spring.

We ended the day in lazy fashion by sitting overlooking Portloo Beach, scanning the shoreline for waders. Turnstones and Oystercatchers were the most numerous waders present but a careful scan of the rocks revealed a couple of roosting Bar-tailed Godwits.

It had been a lovely introduction to Scilly birding, rounded off with a tasty dinner at The Mermaid in the evening. Unfortunately, Carole couldn't join us because she was still stuck in Exeter because of the continuing weather conditions.

Day 2

Sunday 26th September

After breakfast in the guesthouse, we made our way towards Hugh Town to catch the Community Bus to the top of the St. Mary's. It soon became obvious that the bus wasn't running, so we set off for a gentle walk instead. We took a winding route along leafy lanes and small bulb fields to reach Porth Hellick: yet another stunning bay in the middle of the island. Unfortunately, our route produced very few birds, but at least it was warm and sunny!

A scan of Porth Hellick Bay revealed roosting Ringed Plovers, Turnstones, Greenshank and one or two Curlews. We next made our way onto the Higher Moors Nature Trail and entered one of the small hides. At the back of the pool, on a muddy spit, we managed to get very good telescope views of a delightful Pectoral Sandpiper: a small dunlin-esque wader from America (or maybe Siberia). We watched as it fed on the muddy margins, taking time to appreciate the bird's beautiful markings.

We wandered through Holy Vale – an enchanted forest-type trail through high Elm trees. The plan was to eat lunch at Longstones Café but we found it closed. Staff shortages and supply issues meant opening times of eating establishments were constantly changing, which was annoying to say the least! Anyhow, everyone had supplies with them, so we ate at the café's outdoor picnic tables with Swallows swooping around us.

After lunch, two of the group decided to turn back towards town, while the rest trudged on another mile in search of another long-staying waif, this time visiting from southern Europe. We eventually found the allotted viewpoint, being careful not to upset the landholder. I was just explaining that the target bird could be mobile and elusive and we may have to wait a while for it to show when I noticed a bright blob on a sunny Hawthorn hedge a few hundred yards away. The blob turned out to be our mobile and elusive Woodchat Shrike! We stayed to admire the Woodchat, identified as the Balearic race, *balearicus*. This was an excellent bird to see, not just because it was a very handsome male but because it is a potential future split: Balearic Shrike.

Record, digiscoped shot of the Balearic Shrike, Helvear, by Neil Glenn

We next strolled into town, making our way passed Newford Duckpond (quiet, apart from the 'Heinz Variety Ducks' looking to be fed) and Porthloo beach. We paused at the latter to scan the shoreline, as we did yesterday. There were now three Bar-tailed Godwits roosting on the rocks, as well as the usual Oystercatchers and Turnstones.

On the walk back to the guesthouse, we finally met up with Carole who had made it onto the islands from Exeter at last! The group then convened in the garden of the guesthouse for a relaxing drink and chat while

scanning Town Bay for birds. There was plenty of time to freshen up before dinner in The Atlantic at 8pm, followed by a dash back to the guesthouse in the rain. It was nice to have the whole group together at last.

Day 3

Monday 27th September

After a filling breakfast in the guesthouse, we ambled across to Porthcressa Beach for another scan of the bay. We managed to pick out a Mediterranean Gull from the Black-headed and Herrings and a curious Atlantic Grey Seal came to have a look at us. We caught the 10.15am boat to Tresco.

After quite a 'bumpy' crossing, we shook ourselves off and made our way to the Great Pool. This is the largest expanse of fresh water on the islands and is usually a reliable site for waders and wildfowl.

From the large hide, we managed to pick out a few Greenshank and Redshank, a lovely flock of 11 Dunlin and the current star bird on Tresco: the locally rare Spotted Redshank. While watching the Spotted Redshank through the telescope, a small bird crept out of the reeds in the background: a juvenile Spotted Crake! A few of the group managed to see the skulking bird before it was spooked back into the depth of the reeds. Despite waiting, the elusive crake didn't reappear.

By now, it was raining heavily, so we took shelter in the café of the world-famous Tresco Abbey Gardens for lunch. Most of us managed to find a seat indoors (no thanks to several people who were hogging the seats and showing no sign of shifting or getting any refreshments!) while some of us braved the rain and persistent 'attack-sparrows' outdoors. A Red Squirrel scampering across the lawn was some compensation for the hardy few.

The rest of our time on Tresco was spent in the amazing Abbey Gardens. Heavy showers sent us scampering for cover in various gazebos and thick bamboo corridors at regular intervals. As well as the exotic plants, we saw Red Squirrels, gaudy Golden Pheasants (not 'tickable', unfortunately) and quite a few butterflies. These included the endemic Scilly race (*insula*) of Speckled Wood, Small Copper and a 'flutter' (my own collective noun for a gathering of Lepidoptera!) of male Commas homing in on a female wafting pheromones into the air.

We caught the 4.45pm boat back to St. Mary's and strolled back to our guesthouse. We ate a very tasty dinner in-house in the evening, followed by the day's wildlife log in the lounge.

Day 4

Tuesday 28th September

After another filling breakfast at Mincarlo Guesthouse, we set off for a walk during a break in the rain. We got as far as Peninnis Head when the heavens opened once more. The nasty squall tested our waterproofs to the limit!

Out at sea, while we tried to gain shelter amongst the huge granite boulders on the Head, Gannets handled the weather with ease. It was actually great to experience the 'darker side' of Scilly weather; it sort of brought home what some of our migrant birds have to go through while trying to survive the journey to wintering grounds (and again when they return in spring).

We reached the hide at Lower Moors via Old Town Bay. A showy Water Rail was the star but apart from a few Swallows flying over it was quiet. We returned to town for lunch while sheltering from the heavy showers.

In the afternoon, some opted to relax at the guesthouse, while others followed me onto The Garrison. We were still experiencing showers but there was plenty of cover up there. A circuit produced very few birds, though we did find Autumn Lady's Tresses. Unfortunately, all the heads of this delicate orchid had gone over.

We walked through Porthcressa on the way back to our accommodation, noting Mediterranean Gulls and Sandwich Terns in the bay again. The evening meal was taken at The Mermaid before we compiled the day's sightings back at Mincarlo. It was a fairly riotous evening! We all felt we had made the best of a foul-weather day.

Day 5

Wednesday 29th September

The weather was predicted to be better today, but you never can tell on Scilly. Sometimes, conditions differ vastly from those forecast! However, on this occasion it proved to be hot and sunny but there was still a stiff breeze. We opted to visit another island today: Bryher. Maria, an interloper from another Naturetrek group, joined us on the inter-island boat. Neil McMahon was taking the rest of his group on a pelagic trip to try and find some seabirds. Maria didn't fancy it, so she asked if we would mind her tagging along. Welcome aboard!

After landing on the delightful island of Bryher, we walked straight to the 'Big Pool'. After a quick scan of the muddy edges, we soon found the juvenile American Golden Plover with its Ringed Plover friend, which had been found a couple of days ago. Everyone had very good views of this attractive wader as it scuttled across the mud. It even took flight a couple of times, revealing its diagnostic dusky underwings and giving its mournful call. It did this a few times but always returned to its favourite area of mud.

We next walked the short distance to Stinking Porth, (rather inappropriately named: it is a beautiful, pristine beach), where a Baird's Sandpiper had taken up residency. Unfortunately, despite a thorough search of this, and adjacent bays, there was no sign of the American wader today: you win some, you lose some.

After lunch in the sunshine in a garden of a café, we yomped up Shipman Head. The dramatic scenery of Hell Bay is a fitting backdrop to an extensive tract of Maritime Heath. It was on this heath that our next target species had been in residence for nearly a week now. Fortunately, several birders were already watching the bird as we arrived, so we quietly joined them.

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper – yet *another* American wader – walked up and down in front of patient birdwatchers, giving superb views. Buff-breasts are grassland waders and this delightful juvenile had chosen to feed on short grass paths on the headland. What a little star!

We strolled down to the quay for the return boat via Popplestone Bay. There was just time for one or two of us to walk to Veronica Farm to buy some of their famous fudge and to try and find some birds in the fields and hedgerows along the way. Apart from Stonechats and a Wheatear (and the two American waders, of course!) Bryher had been very quiet.

The evening meal was in-house at Mincarlo again, followed by the bird log from Bryher in the lounge. The weather had been in stark contrast to yesterday but it certainly didn't look promising for tomorrow with more travel disruption predicted for the weekend.

Day 6

Thursday 30th September

Unfortunately, the weather forecast was spot on: sweeping rain! After breakfast, everyone wandered down to the quay but only three of us opted to take the small boat to St. Martin's. Others stayed on St. Mary's to have a wander round or relax.

On St. Martin's, we first went to the cricket pitch area; a famous hotspot for turning up common, rare and scarce birds. A few Goldfinches and Linnets were hopping in and out of a weedy field (note: three weeks later I found a Little Bunting in this very same field!) and there was a Wheatear on the cricket pitch itself. A short walk to Little Arthur Farm – another migrant magnet – produced nothing more than a couple of showy Stonechats. As the rain swept in, we opted for a warm drink in a café.

We braved the continuing heavy rain to walk to Great Bay: a deserted sandy beach about half a mile in length. Everywhere was devoid of birds (and people!). As we got to the quay for the return boat, the Wheatear was still present on the short turf along with a White Wagtail. Four Sanderlings were a welcome addition to the day's sightings.

We all sat under the eaves of the boat for the return sailing. Late arrivals had to sit at the back where they were soaked by sea spray on the choppy crossing. Back at Mincarlo, we all dried off and I helped sort out Carole's travel arrangements for an early journey home due to the approaching storm!

Later, we walked the short distance into Hugh Town for dinner at The Atlantic Inn. Remarkably, by the time we ambled back again the sky had cleared and we were able to clearly see the Milky Way over our heads, threading through thousands (millions!) of stars.

Day 7

Friday 1st October

We waved off Carole who was flying home early to beat Saturday's predicted storm. Four of us chose to catch the boat to St. Agnes, while Alex remained on St. Mary's to fully savour her last full day of the trip.

We landed on 'Aggie' at 10.45am and headed straight for Gugh, the small island connected to St. Agnes by a sand bar, which can be covered at high tide. A small, bramble-filled dell produced two gorgeous Whinchats and a couple of Stonechats. This was a good start and meant birds had dropped in overnight.

Back over the Gugh Bar, on Aggie, we walked up to Cove Vean where we found many butterflies (including a Painted Lady) nectaring on ivy bushes. We strolled down leafy Barnaby Lane and onto Wingletang Down. Birds were few and far between until we walked round the coast, where we came upon a mixed flock of Meadow and Rock Pipits, a few perky Wheatears and a mobile flock of Linnets. We scanned through the flocks for anything scarcer or rarer but drew a blank. However, it was nice to have a decent number of birds to sift through at last!

Lunch at Coastguards' Café – an eatery with a stunning view if ever there was one – was followed by dessert at the Troy Town ice cream shop (surely the best ice cream in the world?). There may have been a lack of birds but the scenery out to the Western Rocks and the Bishop Rock Lighthouse was magnificent.

We next strolled round the coast, noting a few Atlantic Grey Seals and Gannets along the way. A Common Rosefinch had been seen a few times at Browarth but it proved as elusive for us as it had for many birdwatchers searching for it. The best we could muster were roosting Curlews, Oystercatchers, Turnstones and a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls amongst the large *larid* flock on the rocks (a good name for a cocktail?).

Back on St. Mary's, one or two of us stopped to examine a Portuguese Man-O-War stranded on Town Beach before heading back to the guesthouse for a rest.

Day 8

Saturday 2nd October

Today, the group had to leave the islands. Despite the short time on Scilly, I could tell it would be a wrench for some of the participants! Unfortunately, the weather was not kind for our last walk: torrential rain. We decided to let the bus take the strain and hopped on in town to head for the middle of St. Mary's.

We alighted at Carn Friars and made our soggy way to the hides at Porth Hellick Pool. At least we could find shelter while looking for birds. As soon as we stepped into Seaward Hide, we could see two very soggy Pectoral Sandpipers a few feet from the window. We spent quite a time watching them busily feed on the mud, almost within touching distance.

We made our way along the new boardwalk to the next hide. There were some birdwatchers already in there looking for the reported Glossy Ibis. No one had seen it this morning, by all accounts. Neil peeked out of the window to see if any Common or Jack Snipes were on the close mud under the hide but drew a blank. However, sat huddled in the reeds was the very wet, miserable-looking Glossy Ibis: no one had checked that close to the hide!! After watching this Scilly rarity for quite some time (it didn't move an inch in the rain!), we left the hide: it was time to head back. The rain had now stopped, so the decision was made to walk back to town via the coastal path. The views were stunning, as we headed out to Giant's Castle, across the southern end of the runway and down into Porthminnick. This route brought us back into beautiful Old Town Bay one last time.

Some of us had lunch and a hot drink in town and attempted to dry out before the boat journey back to Cornwall. Neil waved us off as we steamed out of St. Mary's harbour. The lucky blighter was staying on the islands for a while longer, hoping for more birding adventures on 'The Fortunate Isles'.

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