

Isles of Scilly

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 20th April 2022



Hoopoe by Kris Webb



Crag Martin by Kris Webb



Dwarf Pansy on Bryher by Lucy McRobert

Tour report by Neil Glenn



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Neil Glenn (Leader) with 10 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The weather stayed sunny and warm for most of the tour, with brief, light showers, showing off the Scilly Isles to their best. As is the norm on the islands, there were periods of slow bird migration interspersed with some exciting scarcities and rarities turning up. We visited all inhabited islands and also took an invigorating boat ride out to Bishop Rock Lighthouse and surrounding seabird islands. As well as birds, we were lucky to see some extremely range-restricted wildflowers of Scilly. The fact we could partake in the famous ‘party under the sea’ – when the tide is so low, you can walk between Tresco and Bryher, complete with food and drink on offer – was a firm highlight with the group.

Day 1

Wednesday 13th April

The tour began in Penzance for all but one of the group (he was already enjoying himself on Scilly, having flown out a few days earlier!). We all positioned ourselves on the outside lower deck in order to do some birdwatching and cetacean watching from the Scillonian ferry on the crossing. One or two Sandwich Terns and Rock Pipits around Penzance bay was a good start to the trip. We had only just set off when quite a large pod of Common Dolphins showed well in the relatively calm water. One or two Harbour Porpoise also surfaced. Manx Shearwaters, Razorbills and Guillemots swelled in number as we sailed along the Cornish coast and three Great Northern Divers were seen. Best of all was a very brief surfacing of a Minke Whale: unfortunately, only two of the group managed to be standing in the right place at the right time! As we passed the Minack Theatre, thick fog rolled in, and the temperature dropped dramatically. Manx Shearwaters sometimes came close but apart from that, seeing anything out at sea was difficult. Thankfully, as we neared the Isles of Scilly, the fog cleared, and we docked at St. Mary’s quay in bright sunshine.

We walked the short distance to the hotel and introduced ourselves to the very friendly staff. We then had lunch in the main town – Hugh Town - before heading out to do our first birdwatching on the islands. Our first stop was Porthcressa Beach, where an interesting Yellow Wagtail had just turned up. The bird showed very well and looked for all the world like the Iberian race: *iberiae*. Whatever it was, it was a very handsome bird! The rest of the afternoon was spent walking round The Garrison. Birding was quiet but views around the islands were spectacular. A few Shags perched on rocks, many Wrens and a handful of Stonechats kept us on our toes until we got back to the hotel to prepare for dinner. Those lucky enough to have sea view rooms at the Schooners Hotel could watch Turnstones on the beach from their windows!

Dinner was taken at the hotel in the evening, where the group gelled perfectly. I could tell we were in for some entertaining evenings! Everyone agreed that the food was superb and the staff were extremely friendly and helpful.

Day 2

Thursday 14th April

After a delicious breakfast in the hotel, we all met up again to walk to the quay at 10.15am. This morning’s excursion was a wildlife trip out to the Bishop Rock Lighthouse and around the outer islands to look for breeding seabirds. It was an overcast but bright day with calm sea conditions. We first sailed round Annet: the

main breeding island for seabirds. Puffins were seen very well much to the delight of Caroline who had never seen this iconic species before! The rest of the boat trip produced one or two Harbour Porpoises, numerous Atlantic Grey Seals, a flock of Purple Sandpipers, plenty of Razorbills, Guillemots and Shags, and an unexpected Chiffchaff feeding on insects snatched from the wall of the lighthouse!

The boat landed on St. Agnes before heading back to St. Mary's, so everyone decided to hop off and explore this beautiful island. We tried unsuccessfully to find the elusive Garganey on the small pool before heading to a cafe for lunch with a view. We also had a Troycetown ice cream by way of dessert, while scanning the bays and rocky islands. On the way back to the quay for the boat back to St. Mary's, we made our way to the pool again. This time, the female Garganey showed well for us. Many Oystercatchers and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were roosting on rocks near the quay. One or two people headed for The Turk's Head for a pint in the most south-westerly pub in Britain before catching the return boat.

Back on Mary's, although weary, a few of the group joined me in the long uphill walk to The Garrison to look for the reported Firecrest. We met the guy who had found it and had literally just been watching it a few yards up ahead but a thorough search of the trees and bushes failed to relocate the little gem. It was very frustrating! I decided to walk back to The Schooners via Porthcressa Bay where the Iberian Wagtail (now confirmed by sound recordings and just the sixth confirmed record for Britain!) was still strutting his stuff on the rocks. Everyone was back in the hotel by 5.30pm in plenty of time to relax and get ready for dinner.

The evening meal was even more boisterous than last night! And equally as tasty. Afterwards, we compiled the group checklist in the lounge at the very top of the hotel. I arrived after everyone else and spurred on by my rant about pointless cushions on hotel beds, the group had piled my seat with every cushion in the lounge: brilliant! After we had all stopped laughing, we reflected on an excellent day's wildlife watching on these beautiful isles.

Day 3

Friday 15th May

After another filling breakfast in the hotel, we again convened for a stroll around St. Mary's. We first called in on our Spanish Yellow Wagtail friend on Porthcressa beach. This bird always drew a few admirers whenever we walked by and this morning was no different. We next walked along the road up to Peninnis Head. We were checking for birds all the way, with only a few Swallows to show for our efforts. Halfway along the track, I received a phone call from a good friend of mine saying she was watching a Basking Shark just off the headland where we were. Try as we might we just couldn't locate it on the flat-calm sea! We made for the point, stopping to scan along the way. When we reached Peninnis lighthouse, we saw a man peering out to sea. He had been watching the shark just a couple of minutes ago before it was spooked by a boat. After about 10 minutes of tense scanning, a very large fin appeared above the water. It was very distant but with perseverance, everyone managed to see what there was to see through my telescope: the beast was hardly visible through binoculars! The Basking Shark's fin (and sometimes its tail and nose) appeared at random intervals before the animal disappeared altogether. Yes, everyone had seen a Basking Shark but the views could hardly be described as fantastic. All in all, it was a rather frustrating morning.

We continued our walk, passing through Old Town and Lower Moors nature trail. The walk produced very few birds but a gorgeous Snipe close to the hide was much appreciated. We then made our way up to Longstone's cafe for lunch (and to shelter from the drizzle).

After lunch (the coffee and walnut cake was very much up to the usual standard), we walked through Holy Vale: an Elm-covered nature trail, which looks more like an Enchanted Forest than a footpath in Britain. Further along, we checked out the hides at Porth Hellick pool, seeing the first Willow Warbler of the trip. It was good to note some migration taking place. We returned to town via the coastal path, where three Wheatears were the star birds, including two stunning males: more migration in action. A weary band of birders (various tracking apps put our walk at about seven miles today!) returned to the hotel in time for a welcome sit down and a shower before dinner in the hotel at 7pm. Despite it being a lively evening, there was a distinct lack of cushions on my chair for the day's checklist session!

Day 4

Saturday 16th April

We were now firmly into a routine of eating a lovely breakfast in the hotel before gathering together at 9.30am for the day's walk. Today, we had chosen Tresco as our destination so we wandered to the quay to catch one of the inter-island boats at 10.15am. The weather was clear, calm and sunny!

Over on Tresco, six people opted to visit the famous Tresco Abbey Gardens, while the other five followed me to the Great Pool. We checked the trees and bushes thoroughly for migrant birds but it was a pretty quiet walk. Peeking through a gap in the trees, we noticed three white blobs in a cow field in the distance. On closer inspection, through telescopes, we could see that these were three Cattle Egrets feeding in the field. Further along the path, the view opened out across the lake. In the field closest to us – Simpson's Field - we saw the long-staying Glossy Ibis along with a lost-looking Barnacle Goose. We also picked out Pintail, Shelduck, Gadwall, Wigeon and Pochard on the Great Pool. Many Swallows and Sand Martins were hawking insects over the water joined by one or two House Martins. Each hirundine was checked carefully, as there had been several Red-Rumped Swallows seen around Britain in recent days. We failed to find one!

With the weather being so warm and sunny, the group with me decided to buy some provisions from the Tresco store and eat them overlooking the lake. I walked back to the gardens to pick up the rest of the group. The Abbey contingent decided to eat in the cafe at the gardens while looking out for Red Squirrels and Golden Pheasants. We all joined up by the Great Pool for a scan from the hides and a stroll along the track bordered by Sallows: a great place for migrants to drop into. Again, the bushes and trees were fairly quiet (though we did hear a Willow Warbler). Even the Cattle Egrets and Glossy Ibis had disappeared.

By mid afternoon, the weather was cooling down and it was becoming misty. By the time we caught the 4.30pm boat back to Mary's, it was decidedly chilly and foggy! It was a good lesson in how conditions can change on these islands. Back on terra firma a few of the group accompanied me to Porthcressa to see the lovely 'Spanish' Yellow Wagtail. On this visit, our Iberian visitor was having an altercation with a fine-looking Black Redstart on the Garrison walls. Everyone was back at the hotel by 5.30pm to get ready for dinner at 7pm.

Day 5

Sunday 17th April

A relaxing day was planned exploring St. Mary's to see what birds we could find. The wagtail had finally departed from Porthcressa when we took a peek after breakfast. The whole area was pretty quiet except for a few Rock Pipits and House Sparrows. We strolled out of town checking everything that moved. As we reached the school,

news broke of a Crag Martin on Bryher. Tides were problematic to get across to that island but a boat had been quickly arranged for this First-for-Scilly (and just the 16th for Britain). We had a decision to make: stay on Mary's or go to Bryher for a Mega-bird.

After a brief heads together, it was decided to stick with plan and continue looking for our own birds on the main island. Hirundines quite often have a habit of turning up at Porth Hellick Pool on St. Mary's, so I made sure that was included in the itinerary on our walk! And as boats were added later in the day, we could still make the decision to hop on one to see the star bird.

Lower Moors Nature Trail and Porthloo beach were very quiet as far as birds went. We made our way to Juliet's Garden for lunch overlooking the harbour. We could just about see Bryher from our position! While waiting for our lunch to arrive, a Great Northern Diver was found.

We next walked along the coastal path to the ancient burial chambers at Bant's Carn and Halagay Down. Unfortunately, the rain set in and we quickly had to don waterproofs. Our long route back to town took us via Newford Duck Pond, Holy Vale and Porth Hellick. A few Swallows were found over the pool but the Crag Martin wasn't with them. A weary group returned to the hotel at 5pm to dry out and relax before walking to The Atlantic Inn for dinner.

Day 6

Monday 18th April

It was another beautiful sunny morning as we made our way to the quay to catch the 9.45am boat to Bryher. As we neared Bryher, one or two birders thought they saw the Crag Martin over the far crag. After disembarking, we stood on the beach, scanning the crag. One or two Swallows were circling round before a duller hirundine soared into view: CRAG MARTIN!! Over the course of the next half an hour, the whole group managed decent views of the rarity, swooping and gliding with the Swallows. It even landed on a distant rock at one point, though views were hampered by a fierce heat haze. The atmosphere among the gathered birders was one of jubilation and relief; it was a case of hugs all round!

While people were visiting the facilities, good friends of mine – Lucy and Rob – had scooted on ahead and relocated the Hoopoe! With fresh directions from our 'scouts', we headed off to Veronica Farm and were soon watching this iconic species feeding in a paddock. Everyone had superb views of the Hoopoe before it flew over a hedge and out of sight, flashing its black and white wings as it went. What a fantastic bird! By now Lucy and Rob had walked a few hundred yards in front of us and were now signalling that they had located one of Britain's rarest wildflowers: the Dwarf Pansy.

The Dwarf Pansy can only be found on Bryher and only in one tiny cluster near Rushy Bay. One needs to know where they are, or they could easily be overlooked. When we arrived, it was a case of everyone on hands and knees, such is the tiny size of these exquisite wildflowers. Alternatively, brilliant views could be had by setting up telescopes and pointing them at the ground!

Our luck was certainly in now: as we were marvelling at the pansies, a resident wildflower expert told us she knew where Orange Bird's-foot flowers were out very close by. She kindly showed us: another tiny flower but this time an orange colour instead of the pansy's purple-lilac colour. It was another exquisite and range-restricted

flower. A couple of flighty Skylarks added to the scene, one of which was a very pale individual that was thoroughly studied to make sure it wasn't a Short-toed Lark!

By now, time was pushing on. The tide was on its way out, so we made our way back to the quay. We could see hundreds of people on the sandbank between Bryher and Tresco: the 'Party Under the Sea'. We walked across the sand, noting several rock pool creatures along the way.

FOOTNOTE: I later posted a picture of a Sea Slug on the Scilly Wildlife page for identification, which caused a huge amount of discussion! Many experts gave their considered opinions before the picture was sent to the NE Atlantic Nudibranch Facebook page (who knew there was such a thing!!). The answer came back that it was *Aeolidiella filomena*. Brilliant!

When we reached the throng, the party was in full swing. Islanders drive tractors onto the sand and sell a range of food and drink at this event. There was even a singer using the back of a tractor trailer as a stage. It was a truly unique occasion much-appreciated by the whole group. When the islanders started packing up, we knew it was time to head for Tresco. The tide was coming in quite fast now and by the time we reached the beach at Tresco, it was almost a case of paddling the last few yards. When we reached the rocks, the whole group were buzzing with excitement at being part of such an unusual party.

On Tresco, we headed for the main hide where the Glossy Ibis was feeding in Simpson's Field again. News then broke that a Woodchat Shrike had been found very close to where we had made landfall after our stroll across the sandbank. We returned the way we had come and soon enough, we were watching yet another (if almost expected) scarce visitor from southern Europe. The Woodchat was moving up and down the hedge-line, no doubt looking for bees and other tasty insects to pounce upon. Although not as rare as the Crag Martin, it was undoubtedly the better looking bird of the two.

We caught the 4.30pm boat back to St. Mary's after an exhilarating day on Bryher and Tresco. Thanks must go to everyone who helped us connect with so many wonderful birds and plants, especially Lucy, Rob and their delightful daughter Georgina, who took it upon themselves to be our scouts for the day. And that's Scilly in a nutshell: the camaraderie; the willingness to help everyone see all they want to see; the uniqueness of a party on a sandbank in between two islands; the banter. Scilly: you simply cannot beat it in my opinion!

Day 7

Tuesday 19th April

After yesterday's excitement, we opted for a gentler day around the island of St. Martin's today. We caught the 10am boat from St. Mary's. It seemed like the whole of Scilly's tourist population had chosen to go off-island today, being as the weather was so nice. The quay was packed with people but the boatmen were certainly not complaining.

On St. Martin's, while allowing the boatload to disperse, we had a thorough search of the weedy fields by the cricket pitch near the quay. These fields are a hotspot for resident finches, which attract scarce and rare birds to join them. We found House Sparrows, Goldfinches and Linnets but nothing much else.

We walked along the path, eventually reaching the Daymark perched atop a hill covered by Maritime Heath: a very scarce habitat in Britain. There were no birds, though, apart from a few Gannets and Shags passing by at sea. It was perfect weather for the rare Red-barbed Ants to be out and about but we failed in our attempt to locate them (we found another ant species instead: *Lasius flavus*).

After lunch in a cafe, we strolled to Great Bay. Again, there were very few birds to be found in the bracken-covered hillsides – just a few Stonechats, Wrens and Dunnocks - but we did find a Great Northern Diver and a Peregrine for our efforts. There was no sign of yesterday's reported Black-throated Diver. We caught the 4.30pm boat back to Mary's, where one or two people had a leisurely scan off Porthcressa Beach. We had dinner in the hotel at 7pm: the last one of the trip!

Day 8

Wednesday 20th April

After breakfast, the group decided to split up. Some opted for a leisurely stroll around town, while others followed me up to Peninnis Head to see if we could eke out one or two good birds before we caught the boat back to Cornwall in the afternoon. The fields along King Edward's Drive were very quiet. However, we managed to find a Wheatear and a Black Redstart up by Peninnis lighthouse. We walked back into town and split up for lunch.

We boarded The Scillonian at 3.30pm and settled into some good seats for the journey back to the mainland. The sailing back produced many Manx Shearwaters, one or two Great Skuas, quite a few auks (including one or two Puffins) but no cetaceans this time.

Back in Penzance, we said our sad farewells and either headed for various hotels and B&Bs or set off on the long journey home. It had been a highly enjoyable trip with a great group (lots of laughs along the way!) and many wildlife highlights to look back on.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, * = Introduced)

Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
*(Red-legged Partridge)	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
*(Common Pheasant)	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
*(Golden Pheasant)	<i>Chrysolophus pictus</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalassius sandvicensis</i>
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove (H)	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>

Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Cetti's Warbler (H)	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sternus vulgaris</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rebecca</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
White (Pied) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>

Butterflies

Red Admiral
 (Scilly) Speckled Wood
 Peacock
 Small White
 Large White
 Small Copper
 Holly Blue

Mammals

Atlantic Grey Seal
 European Rabbit
 Brown Rat
 European Hedgehog
 Minke Whale
 Short-beaked Common Dolphin
 Harbour Porpoise

Others

Basking Shark
Cliff Mining Bee
Honey Bee
Black Oil Beetle
Green Tiger Beetle
Green Shieldbug
Lasius flavus (ant species on St. Martins by the Daymark)
Nurseweb Spider
Common Frog Tadpole
Aeolidiella filomena (Sea Slug)
Seven-armed Sea-Star
Oak Eggar Moth caterpillar

Notable plants

Dwarf Pansy
Orange Bird's-foot
Black Spleenwort
Lanceolate Spleenwort
Sea Spleenwort
Common Stork's-bill
Sea Campion
Sea Rocket
Bur Clover
Western Clover
Crimson Clover
Cuckoo Flower
Crimson Bromeliad
Three-cornered Leek
Common Vetch
Alexanders
Hottentot Fig
Common Bird's-foot Trefoil
Sea Thrift
Danish Scurvy-grass
Pink Sorrel
Wood Sorrel
Tree Mallow
Weather Prophet (Scarlet Pimpernel)
Red Campion
German Ivy
Lady's-smock
Yellow Flag Iris
Giant Herb Robert
Musky Stork's-bill
Ice Plant
Tormentil
Lesser Celandine