

Northumberland & The Farne Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 12th June 2022

Tour report by Steve Gater



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Summary

Northumberland is a broad county, from the high Cheviots in the west to the North Sea in the east. It is a place of varied, contrasting and spectacular landscapes that support a myriad of wonderful wildlife. While we enjoyed seeing so many birds, mammals, butterflies and invertebrates as well as varied plants, our week ended with still much left to explore and see. All clients had a fabulous week and left with their own favourite memories, had discovered new things about birds and other wildlife. They had enjoyed convivial company, great food and accommodation, as well as a challenging quiz. An excellent week in so many ways.

Day 1

Tuesday 7th June

Clients were collected in Newcastle and driven to Druridge Pools where others had arrived at directly and our wildlife watching began. It was cloudy, with light wind and mild. Two hides were used to oversee birds on the pools and mud edge.

A most obliging Spoonbill was the star bird and a Yellow Wagtail was not conclusive as the reported channel form. Common Shelduck, Gadwall and Tufted Duck were on the water. A pair of Great-crested Grebe and Little Grebe too. Pied Avocet is always a joy and a single bird was seen. Several Bar-tailed Godwit were taking a rest, along with Common Redshank, Lapwing, Curlew, Coot and Moorhen. Several gull species were in flight, with Swallow, Sand Martin and Swift. Reed and Sedge Warblers were singing but not showing. The pools are separated from an adjacent road by a line of low trees/bushes (mostly Alder, Hawthorn, Willow spp) which sheltered Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackcap and tits. A spankily coloured male Stonechat, more dour Meadow Pipit and brighter Common Reed Bunting were on the sand dunes.

A single Roe Deer was spotted in the field behind the pools. A good range of butterflies was seen – Wall, Small White, Large White, Green-veined White, Orange-tip, Peacock and Small Skipper. We noted plants to record again in days to come. Some showy flowering plants were admired – Vipers' Bugloss, Houndstongue, Kidney Vetch, Alexanders, Weld and a single distant Northern Marsh Orchid. A first damselfly was spotted on a grass stem – a Blue-tip.

On reaching our hotel in Bamburgh we quickly settled into our rooms, ran through our first checklist and enjoyed a delicious meal selected from a wide menu. Meals and service throughout the week were excellent.

What a great start and introduction to Northumberland this was, and great expectations were laid for the varied itinerary to come.

Day 2

Wednesday 8th June

A wet day and a good one! A pre-breakfast walk from Harkness Rocks along a long wynding (lane) back into Bamburgh, produced Eider, Guillemot, Shag, Stonechat, Meadow Pipit and numerous singing Skylark. It was cold so we were ready to warm up with our first breakfast. What a revelation it was, a wide choice of cold buffet

followed by very generous cooked options including kipper from nearby Craster Smoke-house. So we were well satisfied and ready to start with a short drive to Long Nanny to see the long-established wardened tern colony. Viewing conditions were not ideal

Even in poor viewing conditions, this place was amazing - full of Arctic Tern in flight, on on the nest, just below the viewing platform. Several Little Tern were seen further along, nesting on a sandbank, with Common Gull, Herring Gull and the odd Lesser Black-backed Gull. A few clients saw the rare American Black Tern that had been hanging about the area for some time.

Cold and wet conditions were not conducive to invertebrate activity. But interesting plants included Purple Milk Vetch, Burnet Rose, lots of Northern Marsh Orchid in vibrant purple bloom and Quaking Grass with its delicate flower spikes. The aptly named Bloody Geranium was flowering well, as was the bright lemon flowered Mouse-ear Hawkweed. Marram Grass held the sand dunes together, Alexanders was in bud, the small flowers of Dwarf Mallow and Sea Centaury provided a colourful carpet in places.

We took to the Ship Inn for cover and coffee, then drove to Lindisfarne (Holy Island). A Little Egret and Eider greeted us at the start of the causeway crossing. There is much to see in the one village here, and wildlife to search for along grassed linnens (lanes) with easy walking. It's a magical place.

Lots of Skylark serenaded our delightful walk, Oystercatcher were more raucous and good number of Meadow Pipit in flight. On Lindisfarne Lough Northern Shoveler had young, and so too a friendly female Eider Duck. A female Garganey was identified, as well as Great-Crested and Little Grebe. A Reed Warbler showed long enough on reeds to allow all to see, but Sedge Warbler was heard only. Swallow, Sand and House Martin were seen during the afternoon.

Three Roe Deer showed well in the open, but conditions were still not good for viewing other fauna. More Northern Orchid, Common Spotted Orchid and Common Twayblade were in good flower. Marsh Arrowgrass was less conspicuous in bloom and a good find. Less welcome were the balls of small white flowers of Peri-peri Bur. Some had 'gone over' into fruit which in weeks to come, will accidentally be picked up by walkers and dogs. This plant is a highly effective invasive alien and very frequent on the island.

It started to brighten up as we left Holy Island, well satisfied with our visit and headed back for more great hospitality in Bamburgh.

Day 3

Thursday 9th June

An early breakfast gave us time for the short drive south to Seahouses to board our first Billy Shiels boat to the Farne Islands, with expectation of a feast of seabird watching from sea and on-land at Staple Island. The rocky island is tricky to land on and walk around, but well worth the effort for close views of nesting birds. And we were in for a treat.

Eider were on the sea as we waited for our boat tickets and National Trust wristbands. The Chris noticed a bird most unusual at this time of year – Glaucous Gull. So we were well chuffed with this start and soon the sea was alive with birds. The first trip was to Staple Island, provided close-up views of hundreds of Common Guillemot,

incubating their single egg cheek-by-jowl with their neighbours, continuously chattering, bickering and watching. This collective behaviour fends off the opportunist predators (Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull) for most of the time – but a gull with egg in beak is a natural sight. As are Puffins with mouths stuffed with Sandeel.

Back onboard, the skipper slowly coursed his way around the separate islands, pointing out Shag with young, Razorbill and more numerous Common Guillemot. We had close views of Atlantic Grey Seals in the sea and a few hauled up onto the rocks, bulls, cows and juveniles. The odd Gannet was on the water and in flight, then some managed to watch a Manx Shearwater fly by. The trip took us back to the harbour, where we disembarked and had time for lunch and to explore Seahouses before trip two.

This time were embarked for Inner Farne, the largest of the 30+ islands and home to nesting Arctic, Common and Sandwich Tern. The first is a lovely bird but very aggressive in defending its nest (and rightly so!) One leader was attacked four times, the latter one really hurting, but no blood thanks to a protective hat. Close views of Puffin, Northern Fulmar, Kittiwake and Common Guillemot were enjoyed once more. Eider eggs were marked by the National Trust wardens for their surveys and to alert the visitor – only inches away from the paths.

Painted Lady, Red Admiral and Peacock butterflies were seen on the islands and Marmalade Hoverfly was abundant on the vessels. The island flora is limited, Fiddleneck, Sea Campion, Common Dock and Orache were noted.

The second skipper explained the significance of the Farne Islands for wildlife as breeding grounds, refuge, shelter and feeding. He added their importance for marine navigation, explaining the history the lighthouses and the dramatic rescue by Grace Darling and her father in 1838. We later had chance to see her grave in Bamburgh churchyard and museum dedicated to her memory. This was a full and successful day in so many ways, one to be repeated no doubt.

A short drive back to the hotel gave chance for an early meal, followed by checklist.

Day 4

Friday 10th June

Another chance to go to sea, this time a one hour boat trip around Coquet Island. But before that, on our drive to the port of Amble, we enjoyed a short, slow amble in Low Newton to look at a specially flooded farmer's field that holds breeding Avocet. We had great views. More Tufted Duck, Mallard, Gadwall and Common Shelduck were on the water, here and in the neighbouring Nature Reserve. Great Crested Grebe, Heron, Common Redshank, Lapwing and Curlew were noted. Common Swift, Swallow, Sand Martin and House Martin were hawking for food.

Small White, Red Admiral and Small Skipper butterflies were seen along with Common Carder Bumblebee. Burnet rose was abundant and very colourful, Common Spotted Orchid and Northern Marsh Orchid were growing in the sandy soils. Yellow Flag was in flower and Meadowsweet in bud – both in the damp area with Pendulous Sedge

After a short drive we arrived for lunch in Amble and then embarked on a small boat, one tour at a time, in search of Roseate Tern. The sea was relatively calm, but spotting the terns was a bit of a challenge, happily one that was successful and well worth the effort.

The afternoon was spent at east Chevington Nature reserve, looking at more ducks and gulls on the water, Arctic Tern, Heron, hearing Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler. We were surprised not to see Marsh Harrier here and over the week and did not see many raptors at all which is most unusual.

A flush on the sand dunes held more orchids, as seen earlier but specimens of Common Twablade that were more advanced in flower. A guarded patch of grassland next to a hide was awash with Lesser Butterfly Orchid and the path was lined with Dyer's Greenweed, just coming into yellow flower. Blue-tipped damselflies were in the air on on leaf stalks, Green-veined White, Speckled Wood and Peacock butterflies added interest.

Another great day concluded with dinner, evening checklist and a great quiz (thank you again Bob). Then, for some, a night trip along narrow, empty country lanes to find owls, bats and anything else in the twilight and bats. A full and most enjoyable day.

Day 5

Saturday 11th June

A pre-breakfast walk took us to nearby Shoreston Hall where Blue Tit, Robin, Dunnock, Goldfinch were seen. Common Whitethroat, Yellowhammer, Linnet, Chaffinch, Goldfinch were along the narrow country lane. An adjacent field held cereal crop to about ten inches, along with eight Brown Hare, giving great photographic opportunity that was not missed. A brief stop at Monk Pool on the way back to the hotel picked up Little Gull.

Today our main focus was on upland habitats towards the Cheviot Hill, starting in Harthope Valley. We were looking for Dipper and soon found our quarry, 'dipping' on rocks, diving into the water to collect larvae and flying rapidly and low over the water. We enjoyed several sightings in different locations along the river. Chaffinch was hopping along the rocks, Grey and Pied Wagtail were also seen as well as Common Sandpiper.

Careful searching along the bracken and low Hawthorn on the hillside was rewarded by sightings of Red Grouse, quite far away but good views through the scope. Meadow Pipit were seen and Whinchat heard.

Brown Hare and Rabbit were running across the open country and a dead Slow Worm was on the path edge. Painted Lady and Small Copper butterflies were flying along with White-tailed and Buff-tailed Bumblebees. Heath Bedstraw, Mat Grass, Pale Corydalis, Thyme-leaved Speedwell and Crosswort were very evident. Peri-peri Bur was an unwelcome find, possibly transported unwittingly from Lindisfarne where it grows profusely. Lesser Redpoll flew over and a pair of Siskin was seen. Oystercatcher were calling loudly, a Sparrowhawk was mobbed by corvids.

A great morning was capped by a great lunch at Ingram Café but a look in the churchyard and adjacent copse was pointless, as grasscutting was making a tremendous racket. So we took a short drive south took us to flooded gravel pits at Powburn. Here there were more ducks, some more interesting than others, and all worth seeing.

Some ducks with young were on display, including Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard and Pochard. Greylag and Canada Goose had young, as did Common Coot and Moorhen. Grey Heron was on the bankside and Mute Swan were present. A couple of Common Blue Damselfly were on the water's edge where Ragged Robin, Yellow Rattle and King Cup were growing well.

On return to the hotel, we visited a site for possible viewing of Nightjar but it was not clear enough where best to go so we recorded what we could see before returning.

The day had been a great contrast to those by the sea, with beautiful upland scenery on the drive and wild habitats below the Cheviots. The tranquility and mountain terrain were much appreciated. A late meal was followed by a brief checklist and bed.

Day 6

Sunday 12th June

A final breakfast and last chance to enjoy the local delicacy – smoked kippers from nearby Craster.

Two hours were left to enjoy Northumberland wildlife before heading back to Newcastle or for clients to depart elsewhere. The choice was to return to Long Nanny in better weather to see and photograph the Arctic Tern and perhaps the American Black Tern – not on this occasion though! However we were thrilled to see a party of five Spoonbill fly over. Our plan was to have a coffee before heading back to Newcastle, but a 50-seater bus pipped us to the post - well the Ship Inn that is, and that determined an earlier start back than expected. Several of our party had driven on this holiday so we bade them farewell and thanked them for their excellent company. Chris and two clients spent more time at Long Nanny before heading off for the airport.

With some 127 bird species, 24 other animal species and well over 80 plants identified, this was a special trip that all will remember fondly for some time to come. The weather had been excellent throughout. We reached Newcastle in good time and good spirit.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced)

		June 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	•
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	•
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	•
Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>		✓				
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓			✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			✓	✓	•
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓				
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>					✓	
Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					✓	
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	•
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			✓			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓			✓		
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓		✓		
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	•
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓			✓		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓		✓	•	•
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓					
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓					
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoleus minutus</i>		✓	•	✓	•	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓		
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</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>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			✓	✓		
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		✓				✓

		June 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			✓			
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
American Black Tern	<i>Chilidonias niger surinamensis</i>		✓				.
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓	✓		
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	✓		
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				✓		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓		
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	.		H	✓	.
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H			H	✓	H
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	H		H	✓	H
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	H	✓		H		
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	H	✓		H		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H	H		H	H	
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>					H	
Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	H	✓		✓	H	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H			✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	.
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				✓		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓			✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>					H	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓		✓		
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		✓			.	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓			
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓				✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>					✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	.	✓	✓	✓
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	H	✓		✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓