# Northumberland & the Farne Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

6th to 11th June 2023





Guillemots

Grey Seal





Puffin Yellowhammer

Report and images by Tim Dean



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Tour participants: Tim Dean (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

#### Day 1

# **Tuesday 6th June**

All the group were picked up at Newcastle Station and we were soon travelling north to Druridge Pools and our main stop before moving on to Bamburgh. This long-standing Northumberland Wildlife Trust reserve is an attractive proposition for waders and wildfowl as a flooded wetland. In excellent condition this year, there was plenty to admire. There was a wide range of wildfowl from the south facing hide with a few Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeon & Teal to sort through plus a surprise Ruddy Shelduck which was a new species for the Northumberland tour with Naturetrek. Waders also were interesting with three Avocet prospecting, twelve Black-tailed Godwit and a late migrant Greenshank. This was another new species for the Northumberland tour as Greenshanks have normally passed through to northern breeding grounds by early June.

The north facing hide over the deep pool gave us a courting pair of Great Crested Grebes and our only Pochard of the week. Finally the 'Budge screen' hide was visited and revealed close views of a Snipe which tend to be shy in the breeding season With a wide range of common species it was a fine introduction. We had a quick stop at Widdrington Moor Lake on the way out to the A1 but no sign of a Red-necked Grebe that has been summering this year. Up to Bamburgh and an easy check in at the Victoria Hotel. We had a 7:15 dinner slot at the hotel so we ran through the checklist and plans for the next day before eating and an early night after a long travelling day.

#### Day 2

# Wednesday 7th June

An early morning walk was organised for those wishing to partake departing at 06:30. A short drive to Spindlestone Woods and a quiet walk along the path by a stream. Two Tree Sparrows were watched here by a picturesque cottage. A species that is struggling further south in UK but still in good numbers here mainly due to some successful breeding schemes using many nest boxes at Big Waters near Wideopen and also at Hauxley. Early June is a peak for bird song and many commoner species were picked out and identified. Even a Tawny Owl called which they can do well into the morning and a Sparrowhawk flew through. There was also time to scan Budle Bay and a Little Egret was seen nonchalantly feeding by the edge. These are now well settled this far north although Cattle Egret is yet to arrive in any numbers. An Eider brood was also close to the road and everyone was soon surprised to hear that these would have hatched on the Farne Islands and been taken across to the bay by the female. Quite a journey for small paddling feet.

After breakfast we departed for Holy Island with the favourable tide meaning a relaxed morning without any need for a hasty departure. We walked along the Crooked Lonnen to get to Holy Island lough. The lough provided views of Little Grebe and Reed Warblers. We walked back via Lindisfarne Castle with fine views to the mainland. This circular walk does show the island off well and gives an idea of the long habitation there, going back to St Aidan. Interestingly there were several flocks of Common Scoter moving south with nearly 100 counted. Long lines of very black shapes are always worth following up and scope views revealed them in more detail. Viewing from the castle revealed a summering flock of 35 Goosander all being females and immatures.

Back in the village we split up for lunch and Julie joined me for an al fresco lunch up by the watch tower where extensive views are possible out towards the mainland. A Grey Plover was scoped which was also very late in leaving for Arctic breeding grounds but the real surprise was a flock of around 400 Bar-tailed Godwits. These were

seen flying in to land on the mainland in one big group. Very unusual to get so many in early June though they winter in the area in substantial numbers. After lunch we departed at 2pm for High Newton. Once parked we walked north to the Long Nanny Estuary. It's always a treat to witness the flower filled dunes with masses of Northern Marsh Orchids and other specialities such as Burnet Rose & Purple Milk Vetch. Up onto the coastal path and our first views of this important Arctic Tern colony. Around 2,500 present with many gathering on the edge of the estuary. This is a marked increase over recent years and is possibly a result of birds from the Farne Islands relocating. Little Terns were also in increased numbers with apparently 40 pairs present according to the wardens. Unfortunately, they are quite distant preferring a particular area of the beach for nesting but scope views were fine for identification. Annoyingly we just missed a flypast of the American Black Tern which has returned for its third year here. This subspecies is extremely rare in the UK with few previous records. A happy group though made the return journey back through the dunes. A windless and clear day made the whole experience a true joy and a marvellous opportunity to view Northumberland's only mainland tern colony. Back in good time for another excellent meal followed by the checklist and Tim outlining plans for the all important trip to the Farne Islands tomorrow.

#### Day 3

# **Thursday 8th June**

An early morning optional stroll was organised at nearby Shoreston. We first stopped at Monk's House Pool with a real surprise in a brood of Gadwall. These normally breed in Northumberland further south and this may well be the first breeding success for the site. Two Avocet flew in which also is a sign of the species now spreading away from the Druridge Bay area. Moving on to Shoreston Hall we had a quiet walk around the village and adjacent farmland. Scope views of a close Whitethroat in song were appreciated and more Tree Sparrows were also present here. Brown Hares were much in evidence in the fields.

After breakfast we departed for the short drive to Seahouses and our trip out to the Farne Islands. Unfortunately, the National Trust has decided not to allow landings on the islands this year due to the perceived risk of spreading Avian Flu. Watching the wardens in full white 'Hazmat' gear was something to behold and we all felt sorry for them having to work in these suits. Avian Flu was devastating last year badly affecting the auk colonies and the terns. Already three cases of the disease have been found by the Farne Islands wardens this year. Hence, we had a morning trip sailing around the islands where it is still possible to get very close to the nesting colonies. The sheer mass of Guillemots nesting close together always proves a spectacle. It will be enlightening to see if the normal 25,000 pairs are in lower numbers when the wardens complete their full count. In amongst them were a few Bridled Guillemots which is a rare phase of the species with a white eye-ring and line back from the eye. Razorbills are in much lower numbers but of course the main stars of the show are the Puffins which provide endless entertainment. Just watching them hop up the steps by the landing quay somehow seemed quite comical. Again, everyone is awaiting the counts this year to see if the normal 40,000 pairs have decreased in number.

Back onto the boat and a return to Seahouses harbour and a group lunch at a convivial local cafe before departing in the afternoon for another boat trip around the islands. Julie again joined me for a short walk north from the harbour and we got excellent scope views of nesting Fulmars in amongst the Kittiwake colony. Angela, Marilyn & Sue investigated the RNLI museum & the National Trust shop though avoided the Amusement arcade! On the Glad Tidings boat again and we got out to the main Grey Seal loafing grounds where the children on board were suitably impressed by the close views. Also, the well known story of Grace Darling's rescue of the shipwrecked sailors was told whilst gazing out at the very rocks and trying to take in the enormity of what she achieved. Sad

that she died so young of tuberculosis but still much remembered in these parts. Tim attempted to control his Puffin photos this year but one cannot help just one more! Gazing out at thousands of auks both on the sea and on the island is a timeless joy and one to be treasured. We were soon though back to Seahouses harbour with a male Red-breasted Merganser seen well in the harbour. This is a very sparse breeder in the county with only one or two pairs. An excellent day in ideal conditions.

Day 4 Friday 9th June

An early morning walk out to 'Stag Rocks' just north of the village was appreciated as a leisurely chance to admire common species with scope views of Whitethroat & Yellowhammer. The name comes from a white stag that has been painted on the rocks near the lighthouse and legend has it that this was due to a white stag jumping into the sea to avoid hunters. Back for breakfast at 8am.

Today there was a change in habitat with a chance to see the contrast in Northumberland with a drive into the uplands. Often visitors to the county just see the area around the A1 and never discover the coast or the hills - a crying shame. Heading inland, we made our way to the Harthope Valley. This entails heading west via Belford through Chatton and into Wooler, where we drove up to Middleton and the start of the uphill stretch to the valley. Once over the crest of the hill, the valley opens out and this prime stretch of upland could be appreciated. We parked at Langleeford and were soon into upland species, with Red Grouse calling on the hillside and a Cuckoo singing heartily. This year we did very well for Cuckoo with two seen and maybe four heard on our walk. The species is increasingly only found in the uplands in Northumberland now. Another species which is struggling in the UK is Spotted Flycatcher and we were lucky in seeing two well on our walk here. A Peregrine flew over but was so quick that only Julie and myself managed views. Tim's wife Janet joined us today and her botanical knowledge was appreciated. She also had success in showing everyone a Mountain Bumblebee at one of its few Northumberland sites. We all managed to get almost to Langleeford Hope with views up the valley and below The Cheviot itself - at 800 metres the high point of the county though Tim & Janet do not envisage repeating their ascent in 2005 any time soon!

Back to the van and a couple of brief stops before leaving the valley. We stopped at the Carey Burn and a chance to hear a Garden Warbler. Its vigorous song is almost akin to a Nightingale at times. Regretfully having to leave this upland valley we drove down to Ingram for lunch at the Ingram Cafe. Its old name of 'Cafe in the Woods' sums up its location and we had a chance to enjoy the garden whilst eating some excellent home baked food. Walking back through the trail we arrived at the main bridge and good views of a Grey Wagtail but only Angela managed views of a Dipper. Unfortunately, it did not hang around for the rest of us to admire. An excellent find though having strangely missed them in the Harthope Valley.

Our final birding stop was at Branton GP where two broods of Goldeneye were admired. These are the only breeding Goldeneye in England with the majority of the UK population in Scotland. A gentle walk around the pits here was well received and again just a delight to be out in the sun which had just come out after a few cloudier days. This also made a big difference this year with a marked lack of Butterflies. Two Little Egrets were seen with the species seemingly trying to breed now. Blue-tailed, Common Blue & Large Red damselflies were on the wing. Time to get back & a final stop at Beanley where excellent views of the whole range of the Cheviots are possible. After this photo stop it was back to Bamburgh for another fine meal at the hotel.

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#### Day 5

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### Saturday 10th June

The early morning walk saw us walking around Bamburgh Castle with a Stock Dove giving scope views next to a Woodpigeon plus close views of some Long-tailed Tits. It is astonishing that this castle was eventually breached as looks so formidable from just below. After breakfast we drove down to Amble for our boat trip out to Coquet Island. Puffin Cruises are the only boat company providing trips out to the island to see the breeding seabirds and especially the Roseate Terns. This hour trip is always a real highlight. Although the island can be seen from the mainland there is no idea of the sheer density of bird life until you get out there on a boat. We were soon sifting through the Arctic & Sandwich Terns to look for Roseates.

These always glow white next to the greyer Arctic Terns and with full black bills at this time of year. One Roseate Tern handily stood next to a Sandwich Tern when the size difference could really be seen. Others were perched on top of their protected nesting sites but the best views are always along the beach edge with several picked out for everyone. This is the only English breeding colony and was badly hit by Avian Flu last year with the 140 pairs last year now down to only 70 pairs this year. It is hoped that numbers can recover again and thankfully so far there have been no confirmed Avian Flu cases on the island this year. Julie was particularly enthralled to see the Roseate Terns at close quarters having always wanted to see this species. The Puffins antics here were again appreciated though mostly there appeared to be loafing males awaiting their chicks to hatch. Some with sand eels in their bills showed though that the first pufflings had arrived. Hopefully the 25,000 pairs breeding on the island will not be affected by Avain Flu this year.

Onwards again and down to the Northumberland Wildlife Trust reserve at Hauxley nearby. The cafe here is a big draw and a chance to eat and look out at the reserve. We first though had a walk around to the hides and encountered a Lesser Whitethroat in full song. Our only encounter of the trip and always the rarest of the regular warblers here. The feeders at the reserve are always useful as close views of the Tree Sparrows plus a fine male Bullfinch were appreciated. After eating we moved down to the East Chevington NWT reserve just to the south. This large reserve is often noted as the premier reserve of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust. A mix of two large pools, an extensive reedbed and easy walking make this a particularly notable area. On getting out of the vans we were immediately blasted by a burst of Cetti's Warbler song. This warbler has a phenomenally loud song which is easily learnt. They have only recently expanded this far north. On the north pool water levels had dropped due to the long dry spell and six first-summer Little Gulls were scoped close to the hide. Driving down to the end car park we walked along the coastal path and were soon admiring orchids, particularly the colony of Lesser Butterfly Orchid. Also a walk into the dunes saw a slack with a profusion of orchids including mainly Northern Marsh but with some Common Twayblades.

Our final birding of the day was an unscheduled stop at Druridge Pools again as a rare north American wader had just been found. The Pectoral Sandpiper was located but scope views were hampered by the heat haze. Rare in spring and normally encountered on autumn passage. Another first for the Northumberland Naturetrek tour. Also here we saw the Ruddy Shelduck again but with much better views and with bonuses of a summering Whooper Swan and four Barnacle Geese, the latter our fourth new species for this particular Naturetrek tour. A busy day but with plenty of interest. Another convivial dinner at the hotel and our final checklist together. For me it is always rewarding if sightings and venues are greeted with wide eyed wonder and a chance for people to see why Northumberland is something of a hidden gem

#### Day 6

# Sunday 11th June

Another early morning optional trip to Spindlestone Woods was organised as not everyone was able to come on the first morning. A gentle walk again and another chance to brush up on bird song. Greenfinches are much in decline in Northumberland as indeed they are throughout the UK but we did manage views of a few here though telling that this was the only locality during the week.

We were back for our 8am breakfast and thanked the staff at the Victoria Hotel for a very pleasant stay. There was time this morning to fit in a last spell of birding as after breakfast we drove down to Low Newton. In the bay there were a few late departing arctic breeding waders with eight Turnstone, some resplendent in full summer garb and also a summer plumaged Sanderling. We continued our walk round to Newton scrape close to the village. This man-made wetland is unique in the county. One lone birding resident decided to try and make a difference and managed to install a sluice to prevent water draining out of the field. Whereas before his efforts the water level could never build up, now a shallow wetland has been created. It is in Tim's view the best habitat for wading birds in the county with a long list now of rarities including Stilt Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Baird's Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper and many others. He even recently managed to find a Grey-headed Lapwing here on the early May Bank Holiday which once accepted will be the first UK record. It also gives refuge to a variety of wildfowl and now has breeding Avocets. This year saw high numbers again with fifteen present and several on nests. There was some tense action today when all fifteen Avocets ganged up on a Grey Heron to scare it away from the nests. It was quite an event with all of us willing the Avocets on. Their tenacity paid off and the heron departed. It is sometimes not appreciated that Grey Heron can be an avid predator of nests and young. We walked out to a viewing point on the dunes where views of the ruins of Dunstanburgh castle were enjoyed together with yet more Northern Marsh Orchids.

Then the drive down to Newcastle Station where everyone was safely disembarked at 12:45. However this was only just achieved as a driver had left their Porsche on double yellow lines almost blocking the entrance road to the station. With some help from the group we managed to just squeeze through. A tour without any rain was a nice surprise and everyone seemed to thoroughly enjoy their stay, with a chance to see uplands, wetlands and the renowned coastline. A fine six days in Northumberland and a chance to appreciate why Tim has been happy to retire here!

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# **Species lists**

## Birds

6 ✓ 3 8 1 3M 2M 3M ✓ 2M M 22	7 ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	3M 3	9	10 4 ✓ 1 ✓ 1 7 2 M	11 ✓
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I = Introduced			_	June 2			
Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos				2	1	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	1	1			3	2
Greenshank	Tringa nebularia	1					
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla		1	1000		✓	
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus					6	
Common Gull	Larus canus	2					
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus		6	8	3	2	✓
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus		3	20	7		✓
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		2		1	✓	2
Little Tern	Sternula albifrons		10				
Roseate Tern	Sterna dougallii					6	
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	1				✓	
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea		2500	500		<b>✓</b>	
Common Guillemot	Uria aalge		1	3000	3	5	10
Razorbill	Alca torda		<u>'</u>	30		2	.5
Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica			400		∠ ✓	
Rock Dove	Columba livia	<b>/</b>		<b>4</b> 00 ✓	<b>√</b>	✓ ·	<b>✓</b>
Stock Dove	Columba oenas			Н	<u> </u>	1	•
		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>		<b>✓</b>		<b>✓</b>
Common Wood Pigeon  Eurasian Collared Dove	Columba palumbus	<b>✓</b>	<b>▼</b>	<b>V</b>		<b>▼</b>	<b>∨</b>
	Streptopelia decaocto	•	<b>V</b>	•		<b>V</b>	•
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus				2		
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		Н				
Common Swift	Apus apus	3			2	6	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major				Н		
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		М	F	1	1	2
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus				1		
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	Corvus frugilegus		Н	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		Н				
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		Н	1	2	1	2
Great Tit	Parus major				1	1	2
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	Н	<b>✓</b>	5	Н	✓	✓
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓		✓
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti					Н	
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus				3	1	1
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	Н			3	Н	Н
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	Н	1	Н	3	Н	Н
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus	H	· ·	1	H	1	Н
Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	- ''	5	•	•••	H	1
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		Н	Н	Н	H	H
Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin		11	''	H	- ' '	- ' '
Lesser Whitethroat	Curruca curruca				11	Н	
			U	1	2	√	<b>✓</b>
Colderast	Curruca communis		Н	1		<b>Y</b>	
Goldcrest Eurasian Wren	Regulus regulus Troglodytes troglodytes	Н	H	Н	H 3	<b>✓</b>	H ✓

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I = Introduced		June 2023						
Common name	6	7	8	9	10	11		
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris				LO			
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		✓	✓	3	✓	✓	
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		1		2	1	1	
Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata				2			
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola				М	✓	2	
White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus				1			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus		2	5	1	10	2	
Dunnock	Prunella modularis	Н	Н	1	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea				2			
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus			3	1			
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		1	1	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula					М		
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris						2	
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		3		5	✓	✓	
Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret				10			
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus						Н	
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella			Н	3		✓	
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	M	✓		2	✓	✓	
LO – Leader Only								
H – Heard								
M- Male								
F – Female								

#### Mammals

Grey Seal Rabbit Brown Hare

**Butterflies** 

Red Admiral Small White Peacock

Insects

Mountain Bumblebee Common Carder Bee Early Bumblebee

Green Tiger Beetle

Dragonflies

Common Blue Damselfly Blue-tailed Damselfly Large Red Damselfly

#### Notable Flowers

Lesser Butterfly Orchid Northern Marsh Orchid Common Spotted Orchid

Twayblade Pyramidal Orchid Great Bittercress

Bladder Campion Sea Milkwort Crosswort

Bush VetchClimbing CorydalisCommon ValerianThriftWild ThymeHeath SpeedwellMarsh MarigoldSilverweedBloody CranesbillRough ChervilHemlock Water DropwortWater Avens

Ragged Robin Hound's-tongue Pirri pirri Bur

Burnet Rose Lousewort Purple Milk Vetch
Viper's Bugloss Yellow Flag Dyer's Greenweed

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