

Pembrokeshire in Early Summer

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 13 June 2011



2011 Naturetrek Group



Red-billed Choughs



Northern Gannets



Common Dolphin

Report and images compiled by Matt Hobbs



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader: Matt Hobbs

Participants: Ann Ruby
Lewis Ruby
Derek Fisher
Valerie Fisher
Joan Bratley
Alison Cronin
Jean Battle
John Lane

Day 1

Friday 10th June

After travelling to Pembrokeshire by various means the group met up in the lounge of the hotel before dinner. After deliberating over the options for Saturday's itinerary, with the prospect of Grassholm and dolphins narrowly favoured over Skomer's puffins, we enjoyed an excellent three course dinner and a glass of wine or two.

After dinner most of the group took up the option of a sunset stroll around St. David's Cathedral. After a showery day, the evening was fine and still although rather crisp for June. We admired the architecture against the setting sun and watched the swifts tearing around the cathedral before heading down to the river to look for bats. There was quite a bit of activity over the river which gradually increased until darkness fell. Matt brought a couple of bat detectors and gave a lesson in how to distinguish between some of the species based on their echolocation calls and how to recognise the distinctive feeding 'buzzes' of bats over the river. While this was going on a badger decided to cross the road just metres from us and quickened its pace when it saw us on the bridge! Although it was difficult to distinguish between the bats at the time, it was possible to look at the recordings from the bat detector later and deduce that there were actually three species of bats feeding over the river; Soprano and Common Pipistrelle and a Myotis species of bat, which were probably Daubenton's bats based on their preference for feeding low over water.

Day 2

Saturday 11th June

The day began with very light winds and high broken cloud which soon lifted to bright blue skies. We headed down to the dock after breakfast, donned lifejackets and headed out on to the water for our offshore adventure. Within a few minutes we were enjoying good views of around 4 Harbour Porpoises in Ramsey Sound and a couple of Grey Seals. After rounding the turbulent waters close to the island we headed 20 miles offshore to the distant island of Grassholm and enjoyed an invigorating ride in our fast but very stable RHIB. En route we took in another couple of porpoises and numerous seabirds including small groups of Puffins, Razorbills and Guillemots, Kittiwakes, Manx Shearwaters, Gannets and Fulmar.

Our first view of Grassholm was breathtaking, with tens of thousands of raucous Gannets covering every inch of available space with a blanket of white feathers (and guano!) providing a stunning contrast against the deep blue sea and cerulean sky. Many thousands more wheeled in formation over the rock while others commuted back and forth. We viewed the world's third largest Northern Gannet colony from the water and from each side of the rock in turn. The least favourite side by common consent was the downwind side, although one discerning and seasoned traveller (Derek) declared it was not as foul as he had feared, while the rest of us wondered where he had been to develop such tastes! Scattered on the lower ledges were small bunches of nesting Guillemots and the odd Shag and we found some nice mixed groups of auks on the water which included some close Puffins.

Moving away from Grassholm we entered the deeper waters of the Celtic Smalls and quickly found a small group of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, who were clearly interested in us and came to investigate the boat on numerous occasions for around fifteen minutes before we moved off. Everyone shared excellent views of the dolphins while they satisfied their curiosity.

After the boat trip we arrived back at St. Justinians and steadied ourselves back on land again before making our way back to St. Davids for lunch. We had lunch in the beer garden of a local pub and relished the warm sunshine before driving north-east to Strumble Head for the afternoon. At Strumble we wandered along the coastal path and looked for flowers. Although the coastal cliffs at this time of year are usually covered in flowers it had clearly been an exceptionally dry spring and there was little on show. However we did find a few Heath Spotted Orchids, Sheeps-bit, Sea Campion, Wild Thyme and Burnet Rose.

After watching a pair of Whitethroats visiting a nest buried deep in a Gorse bush sharp-eyed Jean managed to spot a couple of Grey Seals in the bay opposite and a Compass Jellyfish hanging just below the surface. Following our walk we headed to the sea-watching shelter and sat in the sun for a lovely while watching for porpoises in the huge tidal rip just offshore. It was a quiet afternoon with a light breeze playing with the vocal descents of Rock Pipits and flurries of auks skimming by. Despite the good conditions it was quiet with no cetaceans at all, so we amused ourselves by playing 'Name that Gull'. Despite everyone's best attempts it was novice Val's rapid appreciation of the subtleties of shades of grey that elevated her efforts above the average. We dragged ourselves away and drove back to the hotel with plenty of time before dinner to relax and ready ourselves for the evening.

After dinner, an adventurous four drove south in search of bats and stopped at Pembrokeshire Mill Pond in the hope of Otters coming out to play in the evening. With no luck in that department we pushed on to Stackpole and arrived in time for the emergence of some very special bats. Under the clock tower, a swarm of Greater Horseshoe Bats were light-sampling in the darkness and waiting for their moment to skim out along the wall and into the woodland. Their calls, a very high frequency tone, were amplified and made audible by the heterodyne bat detector tuned into the one of Europe's rarest bats. At the same time, we could watch a number of the marginally commoner, closely related and much smaller Lesser Horseshoe Bat shooting vertically down the walls of the building after leaving their roost in the loft of the same building.

We also had excellent views of Britain's largest bat, the Noctule, feeding around the gardens and listened to its characteristic two-part low frequency call. We got back to the hotel late but excited to have shared in this rather wonderful and unusual twilight spectacle.

Day 3

Sunday 12th June

After such a beautiful day and evening it was hard to believe that weather was on its way. It arrived during the night with heavy rain and strong winds and didn't really stop until the middle of the afternoon! We all agreed that we would give it a go and try to go out and see some wildlife in the morning. We headed south again to a delightful area of dune systems and beaches at Broomhill Burrows. Although the weather was verging on horrible we kept smiling and ventured out of the bus and on a pleasant circular walk through the dunes and along the beach. This area has diverse dune slack vegetation including Pyramidal Orchids, Lady's Bedstraw, Common Restharrow, Common Stork's Bill, Birds Foot Trefoil, Sea Plantain, Biting Stonecrop, Squinancywort and Sea Carrot (*D. carota* ssp. *Gummifer*). In a damp hollow we found an impressive aggregation of Southern Marsh Orchids. Along the beach strandline vegetation included a wide range of interesting salt loving plants or, as I explained to the group, almost any species of plant preceded by the word 'Sea'; for example Sea Sandwort, Sea Holly, Sea Spurge and Sea Beet as well as Spear-leaved and Frosted Orache.

After wringing ourselves out we had an extended comfort break at the lovely tea rooms at Stackpole Quay with bowls of butternut squash soup and Welsh lamb stew hitting the spot in a way they wouldn't on a sunny day. The group gradually reached a consensus that they had enjoyed enough of the great Welsh summer that morning and all volunteered for a relaxed afternoon back at the hotel in St. Davids rather than a damp walk around Bosherton Lily ponds and Stackpole.

An afternoon at the cathedral, the gift shop and in a nice warm bath suited everyone and reminded everyone that a holiday should always include some time to kick back. In the evening we met in the bar to look at some photos from the previous day and some sonograms of bat calls on Matt's laptop followed by another excellent dinner.

Day 4

Monday 13th June

Although landing at Skomer is not possible on a Monday, an improved weather forecast meant that we could still take a boat around the southern side of the island from St. Martin's Haven and enjoy the spectacle from the sea. This was an excellent option for those keen to get even better views of Puffins than we'd had on the first day. Groups of auks flew past with large aggregations on the water all around the boat as we neared the cliffs. These included several groups of close Puffins as well as a number of Grey Seals with more sat on the rocks. Following the boat trip we walked up on to the cliffs at Wooltack Point to enjoy the superb views and also to find Choughs at one of the most reliable locations in Wales. We had an anxious wait of less than five minutes until a family party flew down onto the cliffs just in front of us and the busy parents fed their three almost full grown fledglings. We enjoyed some really special views of a special bird and one you cannot leave Pembrokeshire without seeing.

Along the cliffs we also found a number of Common Blue and Wall Brown butterflies as well as a typically fast and brief Dark Green Fritillary and watched a male Stonechat carrying food to a nest in the Gorse. As we walked back to the bus an excited couple beckoned us over to the edge of a small stream where a small group of Linnets were bathing, affording us really lovely views at very close range.

We stopped in Marloes for a nice pub lunch, particularly the crab sandwiches, and then drove north again to Dowrog Common near St. Davids for an afternoon stroll. This is an interesting area of wet and dry heath which has been more dry than wet this year. However, yesterday's rain had helped to add some moisture to the landscape. Dowrog has a very interesting flora with a number of plants typical of acid bogs and mires including Greater and Lesser Spearwort, Marsh St. John's Wort, Ragged Robin, Bogbean, Common Cottongrass and Three-lobed Crowfoot. The spikes of the yellow-flowered Bog Asphodel were particularly admired as were abundant Heath Spotted and Southern Marsh Orchids dotted around. Although dragonflies were in very short supply for such an excellent site, with just Four-spotted Chaser seen, we did have close views of two Grasshopper Warblers in the clumps of Grey Willow. After our pleasant amble around the bog in the sun we headed back to St. David's where we said our goodbyes.

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.

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 www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			11	12	13	14
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		2		
3	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		15		20
4	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		150		
6	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		40000		1
7	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				2
8	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		20		10
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1			
11	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		15		
13	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		20		
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		5		
18	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
19	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1		
20	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	1	
23	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓
27	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓
34	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓
38	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		
39	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓
40	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓
41	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		4		8
42	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		50		10
45	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		100		800
46	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓		✓
47	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		30		100
49	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓
50	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		5	✓	✓
51	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		1		1
52	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1		
56	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1
60	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓
62	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓
63	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓	✓	✓
64	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓		✓
65	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓
67	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓
70	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			11	12	13	14
71	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1	✓	✓
72	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓
74	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				1
76	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				5
79	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓
82	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		✓	✓	✓
83	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>				3
84	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>				2
86	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				2
88	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H		
91	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓
93	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓
99	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓
101	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓
102	Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				5
103	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓
104	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓
105	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1		
106	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓
107	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓
108	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
109	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓
111	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
112	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓
114	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				1
116	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		H	✓	H

Mammals

1	Greater horseshoe bat	<i>Rhinolophus ferrumequinum</i>			100+	
2	Lesser horseshoe bat	<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>			20+	
3	Daubenton's bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	3+			
4	Noctule	<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>			1	
5	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	3+		✓	
6	Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	5+		✓	
7	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	1			
8	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	20		15	
9	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	10			
10	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	6+			

Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>		✓		✓
2	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		6		10

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			11	12	13	14
3	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglias urticae</i>		1		2
4	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Argynnis aglaja</i>				1
5	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓		✓
6	Small Heath	<i>Ceononympha pamphilus</i>		✓		✓
7	Speckled Wood	<i>Parare aegeria aegeria</i>		✓		✓
8	Wall Brown	<i>Lassiomata megera</i>		✓		✓

Dragonflies

1	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>				5
---	---------------------	---------------------------------	--	--	--	---