

Pembrokeshire in Early Summer

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 13 June 2012



Southern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*



Gannets



Razorbill

Report and images compiled by Barry Oxley



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Summary

This tour was designed to explore both the offshore islands and coastal flora and fauna found on the beautiful Pembrokeshire coast. The weather always dictates the success or otherwise of pelagic trips but we were fortunate in finding a weather window which allowed our island visits to run as scheduled. The Gannet colony on Grassholm and the Auks on Skomer were particularly enjoyed, and our trips to Bosherton and Dowrog Common were fruitful, finding birds and interesting plants in abundance. Forays to Woolpack Point and Stackpole Quay allowed us great vistas of the wonderful coast, and opportunities to find Choughs and Northern Wheatears among many other species.

Day 1

Sunday 10th June

After travelling to Pembrokeshire, we all checked in at the Old Cross Hotel and met at the bar at 6 p.m. to become acquainted and discuss the next few days itinerary. The weather was on all our minds, as countrywide we were experiencing a very wet month, it was however a pleasant evening and after an enjoyable meal we walked down to the magnificent St. David's Cathedral to explore the surrounding local flora and fauna.

The ancient stone walls were draped with Red Valerian *Centranthus ruber*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis* and Pellitory of the Wall *Parietaria judaica*, and we noticed both the Valerian and Ivy-leaved Toadflax had produced white forms. Red Campion *Silene dioica* and the poisonous Hemlock Water-dropwort *Oenanthe crocata* clothed the river banks. Whitethroats, Song Thrushes, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs sang, competing with the clacking Jackdaws which were squabbling over their evening roosts.

As the evening progressed Fran and David produced an electronic bat detector which enabled us to identify 3 species of bat which were emerging as the light faded. Those of us who had not yet encountered this modern piece of equipment were impressed with the technology which opened doors for the identification of these declining small mammals. Returning to our hotel we retired full of anticipation for our exploration of the area over the next few days.

Day 2

Monday 11th June

Our first boat trip was scheduled for today and as we surfaced we were delighted and relieved to see sunny skies, a phone call confirmed the weather was set fair and the seas were calm, and so after a quick breakfast we left at 8.30 a.m. to catch the 9 a.m. boat at St Justinians lifeboat station, two or three miles down the road from St. Davids.

We were soon leaving the shelter of the harbour and out into the open sea but slowed to watch a pod of Harbour Porpoises going about the serious business of feeding. It seemed mackerel were probably on the menu for them this morning and they seemed totally unfazed by us watching them gambolling and chasing their prey. Moving further out we spotted a Manx Shearwater wheeling and soaring some way off, reminding us of their homes on Skomer, but it seemed most were either in their burrows or fishing much further out as we only saw two during the trip.

Our first destination was the island of Grassholm, and as we approached we noticed one side of the island was white with birds and guano, but as we slowed down our attention was diverted to the seas around us which were alive with feeding auks. Puffins, Razorbills and Guillemots bobbed on the waves or dived to escape our approach as we wondered at the spectacle of 40,000 pairs of nesting Gannets going about their business; a visual feast accompanied by raucous sounds and a pungent aroma, overwhelming all our senses. The 6 foot wing span became apparent as they flew past our boat. Some were carrying nest building material, including old fishing nets and other flotsam while others were flying out to sea to fish. Small bunches of Guillemots and the odd Shag perched on the lower levels, but these were totally overwhelmed by the third largest breeding colony of Gannets in the world.

We circled the island watching and wondering at the antics of these magnificent birds and found we were being investigated by young Grey Seals, before noticing a lone wader perched on a rock.. The bobbing and rocking of the boat made identification somewhat difficult but after some deliberation it was decided it was a Purple Sandpiper. These birds overwinter around our coasts but this individual should have gone north to breed by now, so we surmised it was either injured or maybe sick.

We left Grassholm to the birds and sailed on towards some emergent low rocks called The Smalls which supported a lighthouse. Our guide told us this was often a good place to find cetaceans but after a short wait it was decided not perhaps today. We had travelled some seventeen miles offshore which made for a long but exhilarating return to the lifeboat station, we were glad we had wrapped up well as we skipped over the waves at speed. We disembarked, thanked the crew and returned to our vehicle and began our return to St. Davids, stopping after a few minutes to admire and photograph some magnificent Southern Marsh Orchids *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* growing at the side of the road.

After lunching at St. Davids we made for the nearby bog of Dowrog Common, managed by the West Wales Trust for Nature Conservation and fed by the diminutive River Arun. Following a very wet start to June there was some concern whether we were going to be able to access the common to any extent; however our fears were unfounded as we crossed quite comfortably apart from a few wet spots.

The flora did not disappoint here as we investigated many unique plants adapted to the acid boggy conditions. Marsh Cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*, Heath Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*, Bog Asphodel *Narthesium ossifragum*, Marsh Bedstraw *Galium palustre*, Bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix* and Bog Pimpernel *Anagallis tenella* were in flower and on the western side a haze of white materialised into a fine stand of Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium*. Small Heath butterflies seemed to be everywhere and Cuckoos were much in evidence, calling and chasing each other around the willows and scrub looking for nests of Meadow Pipits or the like to lay their eggs. Stonechats, Willow Warblers and Whitethroats vied for our attention and singing Linnets perched atop the gorse bushes as we returned across this unique habitat to our vehicle. We finally made for St. Davids to relax before dinner after a fulfilling day.

Day 3

Tuesday 12th June

Our plan today was to make for Skomer but awoke to a dense sea mist, however there were glimpses of blue which suggested a nice day to come which turned out to be so. We had arranged for breakfast items to be left out for us at the hotel, as we wanted to be away at 7.30 a.m. The mist persisted as we made our way lifting from time to time and arrived at Marloes N.T. car park to buy our admission tickets to the island. The forecast was good and as we were to board the 11 a.m. sailing we opted for a short walk around Woolpack Point.

The mist impaired our vision somewhat but we still managed to see Northern Wheatears, Linnets and Meadow Pipits. The local Wrens were also in full voice, belting out their challenge to any interlopers. It was a beautiful spot and the wildflowers again attracted our attention, so much so that we nearly missed 20 or so Choughs as they swooped by, luckily their distinctive calls alerted us to their presence. These athletic members of the crow family eventually landed and we watched them grub for insects and beetles on the short sward. Rabbits played their part in creating this special habitat and Sea Campion *Silene uniflora*, Thyme *Thymus serpyllum* and Thrift *Armeria maritima* reminded us that we were indeed on the coast. As our time to board the ferry approached the mist began to lift and then disappeared to leave us with a fine day, opportune timing we thought.

The uneventful 30 minute sailing to Skomer was completed and after disembarking we scaled the steps from the boat landing point to be met by the warden who gave us a few pointers on where to find the wildlife etc. He warned us about the holes and burrows, home to the 12,000 Puffins and 100,000 pairs of Manx Shearwaters nesting on the island, the largest breeding colony in the world. As we approached the centre we were surprised to hear and see Sedge Warblers in a small area of wet vegetation, it seemed rather incongruous to find these birds here. We chose to head for the information centre in the middle of the island to consume our packed lunch which we had purchased the evening before. Although there were lots of people on the island and many seemed to be around the centre we managed to find a comfortable spot among the rocks to lighten our rucksacks and restore our energy levels before heading off to Skomer Point. As we walked the well trodden paths we noticed vast areas of Red Campion *Silene dioica* created a pink haze over the Island, these delightful floral displays seemed to be favoured by the ever present gulls as nesting areas. Numerous Meadow Pipits were in full voice as were Linnets, and Barn Swallows took full advantage of the flies and insects attracted to these breeding areas.

The Puffins were as always the main focus of attention on the island, their endearing comical faces and inquisitive nature captivated everyone, cameras clicked and videos whirred as we watched them pop in and out of their burrows. It seemed there was plenty of food for them around Skomer as we saw them bringing back beaks full of small fish, quickly diving below ground before a marauding gull swooped down for a share. Guillemots were abundant and we noticed one of the resident wardens monitoring the population with a 'scope, a rather monotonous but essential part of their job, Razorbills were also present in numbers, this auk is normally the most scarce, but not so on Skomer it seems.

Finally, returning for our 4.30 p.m. return on the ferry, Fran and David pointed out a Little Owl sitting on a wall near the information centre, a rather splendid way to end our exploration of Skomer we thought. We returned to St. Davids content, and grateful for good weather and the opportunity to explore this lovely island and its wonderful bird colonies.

Day 4

Wednesday 13th June

We had sacrificed our cooked breakfasts in previous mornings because of early starts, this was remedied this morning and we set off replete and at a relaxed pace towards the freshwater Bosherton Pools. We hoped we could surprise the Otters which had reportedly been showing intermittently during previous days. We said our goodbyes to Alison who had other plans for her day and departed the hotel accompanied by some early rain, but this soon passed and we enjoyed nice weather for the remainder of our last day.

Although we dipped on the Otters we nonetheless enjoyed this amazing place, finding a family of Long-tailed Tits predictably playing follow the leader. A Reed Warbler reeled and climbed a stem to allow all a good look and Blackcaps and an assortment of small birds sang and held our attention. The White Water Lily *Nymphaea alba* was in full flower which attracted insects and dragonflies including the Beautiful Demoiselle, Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, Common Hawker and a Four-spotted Chaser. An Otter haul-out point was discovered near the weir together with copious spraint, and it was here we discovered an emergence of thousands of small frog-lets, hopping merrily through the grass, it was difficult not to tread on them, and the nearby water was black with tadpoles and more emerging frog-lets. We were somewhat reluctant to leave this lovely place but returned to the N.T. car park for lunch, and found a convenient picnic bench in the car park before our final foray on the wonderful Pembrokeshire coast.

We moved to the nearby Stackpole Quay, parked our vehicle and made for the path to the south, climbing a series of steps before arriving on top of the cliffs, the geology was interesting here as we looked north across the bay to the differing rock formations. Time did not allow too much of an exploration but we nevertheless enjoyed some magnificent clumps of Vipers Bugloss *Echium vulgare* and also some Broomrapes, one of which was growing on Ivy and probably was *Orobancha hederacae*.

Jill had opted out of the steps up to the cliff tops, but we had arranged to meet again at the Stackpole Quay Café for a last cuppa before making our separate ways homewards.

We had been blessed with reasonable weather, a small window in a somewhat wet and unpleasant June. The coast of Pembrokeshire is undoubtedly one of the treasures of our sceptred isles and so it was a great pleasure to share it with fellow naturalists. Sharing experiences and knowledge is part of the fun of these trips and to share it with you all was a privilege, and so I sincerely hope we meet again in the not too distant future.

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Atlantic Puffin

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			10	11	12	13
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		6	30	4
2	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		2		
3	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		10000	50	
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2		
5	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		6	2	
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>				6
7	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			7	
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				2
9	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		10		
10	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	2	1
11	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	
12	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				1
13	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula colchicus</i>				2
14	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		2	35	3
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		1		
16	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		1	1	
17	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			6	
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1	20	
20	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		100's	100's	
21	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		100's	100's	
22	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		100's	100's	
23	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		50	100's	
24	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	
26	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		4		
27	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1	
28	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	6			4
29	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2	2	1
30	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	10	10	30	15
31	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>				2
32	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		20	50	6
33	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			1	2
34	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1	6	4
35	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		h	2	3
36	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2h	h		2
37	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			12	

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			10	11	12	13
38	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2	2	
39	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓			✓
40	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus merula</i>	h			1
41	Turdus philomelos	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				
42	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1	2	1	
43	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			2	
44	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				2
45	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	4			2
46	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		5	2	
47	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	3h			4h
48	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1		2
49	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2	6		2
50	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				6
51	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				2
53	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Chough	<i>Pyrhacorax pyrrhacorax</i>			22	
55	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1	3	
58	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			3	
59	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓			4
61	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		4	15	4
62	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		6	6	4
63	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		2		
64	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		2		
65	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			2	

Mammals

1	Daubenton's bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	1			
2	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	4			
3	Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	6			
4	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		6	4	
5	Rabbit				✓	✓
6	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		6	3	

Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>		1		
2	Large White	<i>Oieris brassicae</i>		2		

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			10	11	12	13
3	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>			1	
4	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			1	1
5	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		1		
6	Small Heath	<i>Ceononympha pamphilus</i>		15		
7	Speckled Wood	<i>Parare aegeria aegeria</i>		1		4
8	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>		1		

Dragonflies

110	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		6		
111	Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>		4		
112	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		6		6
113	Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura pumilio</i>				2
114	Common Hawker	<i>Aeshna juncea</i>				4

Notable plants seen at St. Davids

Red Valerian *Centranthus ruber*

Hemlock Water-dropwort. *Conium maculatum*

Pellitory of the Wall *Parietaria judaica*

Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis*

Cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*

Hemp Agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum*

Plants of Dowrog Common

Bog Asphodel *Narthesium ossifragum*

Marsh Bedstraw *Gallium palustre*

Ragged Robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*

Southern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*

Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*

Various-leaved Pondweed *Potamogeton gramineus*

Lesser Spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*

Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*

Bog Pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*

Marsh Cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*

Heath Milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*

Bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*

Heath Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*

Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium*

English Stonecrop *Sedum anglicum*

Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*

Lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*

Plants noticed on the islands and clifftops

Sheepsbit Scabious *Jasione montana*

Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*

Thyme *Thymus polytrichus*

Sea Campion *Silene uniflora*

Thrift *Armeria maritima*

Seaside Centaury *Centaureum littorale*

Ivy Broomrape *Orobanche hederaceae* ??

Field madder *Sherardia arvensis*

Red Campion *Silene dioica*

Cut-leaved Cranesbill *Geranium dissectum*

Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

Scarlet Pimpernell *Anagallis arvensis*

Sea Plantain *Plantago maritima*

Mayweed sp *Tripleurospermum* sp

Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*

Broomrape sp. *Orobanche* sp.

Black Medick *Medicago lupulina*

White Campion *Silene latifolia*?? white plants on Stockholm