

Pembrokeshire in Early Summer

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 – 12 June 2013



Southern Marsh Orchid



Northern Gannets



Atlantic Puffins

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 and although we only managed to visit Grassholm Island before the weather caused problems, our trips to Bosherton, Dowrog Common and Broomhill Burrows 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 explore the geology of the area.

Day 1

Sunday 9th June

After travelling to Pembrokeshire, we checked in at the Old Cross Hotel and met at the bar at 6.00 pm to become acquainted and discuss the next few days itinerary. The weather for the previous week had been idyllic and we were hoping for this to continue, it was a pleasant evening and after our meal we walked down to the magnificent St. David's Cathedral to explore the surrounding local flora and fauna. The local ancient stone walls were draped with plants tolerant of this unique but sparse habitat. Red Valerian *Centranthus ruber*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis* and Pellitory of the Wall *Parietaria judaica* were prominent 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 while Blackbirds sang, competing with the clacking Jackdaws which were squabbling over their evening roosts. Returning to our hotel we retired full of anticipation for our exploration of the area over the next few days.

Day 2

Monday 10th June

Our first boat trip was scheduled for today and as we arose we noted the overcast skies, however a phone call confirmed the weather was set fair and the seas were calm, and so after a quick breakfast we left at 8.30am to catch the 9.00 am. boat at St Justinians lifeboat station, two or three miles down the road from St. David's. We were soon leaving the shelter of the harbour and out into the open sea heading towards the RSPB's island of Grassholm. As we approached we noticed one side of the island was white with birds and guano, and as we neared the island we noted the seas around 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.

It was a visual feast accompanied by raucous sounds and a pungent aroma, overwhelming all our senses. The 6 foot wing span of the Gannets 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 as these large birds dived for fish and when we stopped were investigated by young Grey Seals who were as curious about us as we were them.

Heading out to some low rocks called The Smalls, which supported an unmanned lighthouse, the skipper remarked that we did not have time to go any closer and so headed back towards St. Justinians, however it was here we were given a special treat as we encountered a few Manx Shearwaters, presumably feeding, which gave us good views as they flew away from the approaching boat. 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 it was distinctly chilly skipping over the waves at speed. As we neared the harbour we were entertained by some Harbour Porpoises which were feeding on Mackerel or the like. These shy cetaceans did not allow a close approach but we had close-ish views before we disembarked, thanked the crew and returned to our vehicle to return to St. David's. On the way we stopped to admire and photograph some Southern Marsh Orchids *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* growing at the side of the road and just opening. A Grasshopper Warbler was reeling here but as is usual with this elusive species we were unable to get a view.

After lunching at St. David's 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. After checking we were going to be able to access the common without wellies we crossed comfortably despite 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*, Marsh Bedstraw *Galium palustre*, Bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix* and Lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica* 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 were common and elusive Cuckoos were calling and lurking 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. David's to relax before dinner after a fulfilling day.

Day 3

Tuesday 11th June

Our plan today was to go to Skomer. We had arranged for breakfast items to be left out for us at the hotel, as we wanted to be away at 8.00 a.m. The weather was overcast and drizzly but we opted to make for Marloes N.T. car park to check on sailings, however upon arrival were told the wind was too ferocious and sailings were cancelled, and would probably be so for the next few days. We were disappointed not to have the opportunity to visit this wonderful island and reverted back to plan B, starting with a short walk around nearby Woolpack Point.

As we neared the higher elevation of the point we were able to see the waves battering the rocks and the wind became very apparent, now it was clear why the boats were not leaving harbour. Despite the wind and drizzle it was a beautiful spot and the wildflowers again attracted our attention, so much so that we nearly missed 2 Choughs as they swooped by, they landed and began foraging along the cliff-top allowing us good views. 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, and not in a cultivated rock garden. Ros and Ian explored the intriguing rocks of this area and pointed out features of geological importance.

Driving via Pembroke to Bosherton Lily Ponds for the afternoon we ate our sandwiches, purchased the day before, in the N.T. car park, before wending our way around the pools. These artificially created pools were home to at least two families of Otters which we hoped to surprise. Although we dipped on the otters we nonetheless enjoyed this amazing place, we listened to Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps competing with noisy Wrens and an assortment of small birds singing their claim to their part of the woodland. The White Water Lily *Nymphaea alba* was in full flower which attracted insects and dragonflies including the Large Red and Common Blue Damselfly, also a Four-spotted Chaser. An otter haul-out point was discovered near the weir together with copious spraint, and we had fun sorting out Reed from Sedge Warblers which were grinding away in the reeds. Common Broomrape *Orobancha minor* was flowering at the side of the path as we approached some dunes, here Vipers Bugloss *Echium vulgare* and Burnet Rose *Rosa pinnatifolia* attracted our attention and a recent hatch of Common Blue Butterflies were found absorbing the sparse sunlight before looking for a mate.

Returning via the woodland we discovered Early Purple Orchids *Orchis mascula* and Common Twayblade *Listera ovata* in flower, these together with the discreet florets of Sanicle *Sanicula europaea* and the overpowering pungent scent of Ramsons *Allium ursinum* concluded our visit to this unique place.

Day 4

Wednesday 12th 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 ignoring the overcast, dreary conditions. Boats were still unable to leave harbour so we took the opportunity for a relaxed visit to the wonderful St. David's Cathedral before heading back towards the Pembroke area again. Arriving at Broomhill Burrows we explored the beech area first, noting the amazing assortment of pebbles originating from rocks from distant shores, and then tearing ourselves away from the beach we crossed the road and followed a small stream draining from a marsh. A Reed Warbler allowed photo's to be taken here and various small birds called and posed for our perusal as we explored the dune flora. A small pool in the dunes suited some Southern Marsh Orchids *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* just opening and Lesser Spearwort *Ranunculus flammula* bloomed dazzlingly, we could imagine butterflies loving this habitat given a quiet sunny day.

Finally we moved to the nearby Stackpole Quay for our last lunch together, enjoying the offerings from the N.T. café. Time was marching on and we just had time to walk up the path to the cliff-top and view the geology of the nearby cliffs before making for St. David's to collect our vehicles and say our goodbyes.

The weather had not stopped our explorations to that point but it finally decided to rain hard and we were grateful it had managed to behave until then. The coast of Pembrokeshire is undoubtedly one of the treasures of our planet and so it was a great pleasure to share it with fellow naturalists. Sharing experiences and knowledge is part of the fun of natural history, and to share it with you all was a privilege. I sincerely hope we meet again in the not too distant future...

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			9	10	11	12
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		6		
2	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		30		
3	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		1000s	20	
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1	
5	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		10		
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1	
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			20	10
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			10	
9	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2		
10	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1		
11	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula colchicus</i>				h
12	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				h
13	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		6	2	
14	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		4	2	4
16	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		10	6	2
17	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		20		
18	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		50	10	
19	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		100s	20	
20	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		20		
21	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
22	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	
23	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		h		
24	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	20	6		30
25	Skylark				1	6
26	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	6	6	10	20
27	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	2	3	10	5
28	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		8	2	3
29	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		1	2	1
30	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	h	h	
31	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	h	h	1	
32	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	h		h	
33	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			4	4
34	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	h	h	h	
35	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	h	h	h	
37	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		8	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			9	10	11	12
38	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>				1
39	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>		h		
40	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>			1	6
41	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		h	h	
42	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1	6h
43	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	
44	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓
45	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			4	1
47	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			30	40
48	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		h	h	h
50	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			10	6
51	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		8	✓	✓
53	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	
54	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			1	
55	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2		1

Mammals

1	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>		1		
2	Common Shrew	<i>Sorex araneus</i>		1		
2	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		10		
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			1	
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		4		

Butterflies

1	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		1		
2	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>			10	
3	Small Heath	<i>Ceononympha pamphilus</i>		6		

Dragonflies

1	Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrhosoma nymphula</i>		1		4
2	Common blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>			1	
3	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		2		

Notable plants seen at St. David's

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*

Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra*

Common Water Crowfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis*

Plants of Dowrog Common

Brooklime *Veronica beccabunga*

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*

Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*

Red Campion *Silene dioica*

Common Vetch *Vicia sativa*

Silverweed *Potentilla anserina*

A wall fern *Spleenwort* sp. ??

Navelwort *Umbilicus rupestris*

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*

Fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica*

Alexanders *Smyrniololus satrum*

Cuckoo Flower *Cardamine pratensis*

Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*

Tormentil *Potentilla erecta*

Plants recorded on the clifftops

Sheepsbit Scabious *Jasione montana*

Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*

Thyme *Thymus polytrichus*

Sea Campion *Silene uniflora*

Thrift *Armeria maritima*

White Campion *Silene latifolia*

Tree Mallow *Lavatera arborea*

Cut-leaved Cranesbill *Geranium dissectum*

Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

Scarlet Pimpernell *Anagallis arvensis*

Sea Plantain *Plantago maritima*

Red Campion *Silene dioica*

Spring Squill *Scilla verna*

Plants of Broomhill Burrows and beach

Orache *Atriplex* sp.

Eyebright *Euphrasia ostenfeldii* ??

Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*

Sorrel *Rumex acetosa*

Sun Spurge *Euphorbia helioscopia*

Common Storksbill *Erodium cicutarium*

Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus minor*

Herb Robert *Geranium robertianum*

Common Columbine *Aquilegia hybrids*

Plants of Bosherton pools, adjoining woods and the dunes

Early Purple Orchid *Orchis mascula*

White Water Lily *Nymphaea alba*

Black Bryony *Tamus communis*

Viper's Bugloss *Echium vulgare*

Self Heal *Prunella vulgaris*

Sanicle *Sanicula europaea*

Ramsons *Allium ursinum*

Kidney Vetch *Anthyllus vulneraria*

Common Twayblade *Listera ovata*

Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*

Wild Mignonette *Reseda lutea*

Burnet Rose *Rosa pimpinellifolia*

Bugle *Ajuga reptans*

Common Dog Violet *Viola riviniana*

Common Broomrape *Orobancha minor* ??