

Pembrokeshire in Early Summer

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 – 12 June 2014



Otters by Jim Bebbington



Heath Spotted Orchid by Barry Oxley

Report compiled by Barry Oxley

Images courtesy of Jim Bebbington and 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 was kind to us on our pelagic trips and Skomer and Grassholm Island were visited in quite balmy conditions. Our trip to Bosherton turned out better than the weather forecast, as we experienced only a little rain which was more than compensated with an otter sighting and the wonderful flora of the pools and surrounding vegetation. We also visited St. Davids and Dowrog Common albeit rather briefly, 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 and geography of the area.

Day 1

Monday 9th June

After travelling to Pembrokeshire, we all checked in at the Beggars Reach Hotel and met at the bar at 5.30 p.m. to become acquainted, and discuss the next few days itinerary. It was a pleasant evening, and before our meal we explored the garden, noting Mistlethrushes taking food to chicks in a nearby copse, and listening to and identifying birds by song. We ended up at a small natural pond where wetland plants such as Water-forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpioides*, Celery-leaved Buttercup *Ranunculus sceleratus* and Marsh Thistle *Cirsium palustre* were in flower. The water surface was sprinkled with the dainty white flowers of Common Water Crowsfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis* and behind the pool on a bank there was a fine display of Foxgloves *Digitalis purpurea*. Foxgloves and Red Campion *Silene dioica* were to become a floral feast as we explored the lanes of Pembrokeshire in the following days. As we returned for dinner we watched swallows nest building in a store shed under the hotel, a taster we thought for our next few days in Pembrokeshire.

Day 2

Tuesday 10th June

Weather - Cloudy with showers and windy

Having heard the weather forecast we decided to avoid the boats today and go for an otter foray at Bosherton. This meant an early start but we toggled up in our wet weather gear and set out at 5.30 a.m. to meet Jim the local National Trust volunteer and otter expert at 6.00 a.m.

Walking to the eight arch bridge and turning right along the west bank of the eastern arm, we scanned the waters for elusive otters. Jim told us that no cubs had yet emerged and were probably quite small and still in the holt. The ponds were being patrolled by a dog otter and two females at present and as we stood on the wall dividing the eastern and central bank a female emerged from her resting place in a drainage sluice. She peered quizzically at us before swimming into the nearby undergrowth and completely disappearing. Eureka we thought - a sighting of the ever elusive otter is always an exciting event and made more special by being only 3 metres away from us. Jim explained the history of the ponds as we returned to the car park and mentioned a few spots we might like to visit later, and then we said our goodbyes to him and returned to the hotel for a well-earned breakfast.

Replete, we left again for Bosherton driving over the Cleddau Bridge again and after parking in the official N.T. car park, made for the western arm, as we went admiring the White Water Lilies *Nymphaea alba* which were in full bloom. Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Wren were in full voice and a Grey Heron sat obligingly on the walkway and posed for a photograph or two as we headed towards the dunes, here finding that Silver-studded Blue butterflies were on the wing. We managed to photograph these to confirm their ID and noted Speckled Wood, Small Heath and Common Blues flying also. The weather had improved and we spent some time looking at the dune flora noting Common Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, Common Broomrape *Orobanche minor*, Seaside Centaury *Centaureum littorale*, Vipers Bugloss *Echium vulgare*, Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* and Burnet Rose *Rosa piminellifolia*. Moving towards the bay we hopped around numerous toadlets exiting from the ponds before returning via the opposite bank, stopping to admire some Early Purple Orchids *Orchis mascula* and Common Twayblades *Listera ovata* flowering at the side of the path, arriving back at the car park around 2.30 p.m.

Stackpole Quay was our next destination for a welcome cuppa at the N.T. café, after which we climbed the steps for a walk along the cliff-top spotting Fulmars on nests and watching Gannets fishing out at sea. The weather had turned out better than forecast and we returned content with our visit to this amazing and beautiful area of Pembrokeshire. Dinner at seven was enjoyed before we gratefully retired after a long day in the field.

Day 3

Wednesday 11th June

Weather - Mostly sunny and warm with a light breeze

Our plan today was to go to Skomer, the forecast was good so we breakfasted at 7.00 a.m., checked that the ferry was running and made for Martins Haven. Arriving around 8.45 a.m. we noted the N.T. car park was filling rapidly and so dived for the shop and bought tickets for the 11.00 a.m. sailing.

We had bought some sandwiches at the Marloes shop as we passed through, and so geared up for an exploration of Woolpack Point while waiting for our sailing. Meadow Pipits were trilling and parachuting over territories and Linnets twittered and flew purposefully from gorse bus to gorse bush as we watched Northern Wheatears feeding chicks with beaks full of insects. Auks were bobbing on the sea giving us a taste of things to come and Choughs clacked and swooped around the clifftops, it was amazingly clear and we could see for miles across the sea to distant beaches and islands.

Thrift *Armeria maritima* had all but finished flowering here but Sheepsbit Scabious *Jasione Montana*, Biting Stonecrop *Sedum acre*, and Sea Plantain *Plantago maritime* flowered among the closely nibbled grasses.

Returning to the Jetty we boarded the ferry at 11.00 a.m. and sailed across the straight towards Skomer, apart from a bumpy tidal race the crossing was smooth and after 15 minutes we disembarked and climbed the many steps to be met by the warden, who briefed us on the wildlife and where to go. Soon after we split into two groups; the photographers' making for the Wick, and the rest of us heading for the buildings in the centre. Here we had our packed lunches and then made for the North Pond hide, spending a few minutes watching two broods of Shelduck and numerous Lesser Black-backed Gulls before moving off to Skomer Head. Everywhere Meadow Pipits were singing together with the odd Skylark, Curlews called as they patrolled their territory, and as we neared the cliff-tops raucous Wrens and scratchy Whitethroats proclaimed their presence.

We caught up with our photographers at Wick and spent time enjoying the endearing Puffins which stood at their burrow entrances wondering who or what we were. Rabbits were numerous here and clearly were an important part of the eco-system, creating a short sward and numerous burrows. It was also hard to imagine that 300,000 Manx Shearwaters were on the island, being hidden away in burrows or out fishing at sea, although we did see a number of corpses, presumably predated by the Great Black-backed Gulls. After numerous photos we moved along to look at the seabird cities on the Mew Stone. Here lines of Guillemots were nesting together with Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Fulmars, each species occupying a different section of the rock face. The noise and smell all became part of the spectacle but all too soon we had to make for the jetty ready for our return boat at 4.00 p.m. Landing at Martins Haven we checked out the shop and booked tomorrow's trip to Grassholm before making for home. After another enjoyable meal we did the checklist and made for bed after an inspiring day.

Day 4

Thursday 12th June

Weather - Sunny and warm

We awoke to a light mist carpeting the surrounding fields, however a hazy sun soon emerged and burnt this off, resulting in a beautiful day. After breakfast we drove through the lovely Pembrokeshire countryside emerging occasionally to drive through magnificent coastal scenery on our way to the city of St. Davids. Parking near the Cathedral we studied the amazing wall flora on the ancient stone walls noting Pellitory of the Wall *Parietaria judaica*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis* various Spleenworts *Asplenium sp.* including Wall Rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria* and Valerian *Centranthus ruber* in an assortment of colour forms. Time did not allow too much of an exploration of the magnificent and historic Cathedral, however we gained a flavour before exiting and heading a mile or two to the north east of the city to Dowrog Common. Managed by the West Wales Trust for Nature Conservation and fed by the diminutive River Arun, we first checked we were able to access the common without wellies before heading out. There had recently been copious amounts of rain which left some areas very boggy and the vegetation lank, but a fine specimen of Southern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* flowering near the road spurred us on to discover many Heath Spotted Orchids *Dactylorhiza maculata* and the diminutive Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* about to flower.

It was still quite early in the day but Small Heath Butterflies were emerging and an obliging Grasshopper Warbler proclaimed its' territory atop a gorse bush near our path, it's ventriloquial insect like reeling song intrigued us as we moved towards the centre of the common.

However, we had an appointment with a boat and much too soon we had to drag ourselves away from this fascinating place to return to Marloes for another visit to the shop before heading down to Martins Haven again. We parked again in the N.T. car park and made our way to the jetty where our boat was waiting, and after donning life jackets we all boarded our boat. Sue and Lucy had opted to further explore the flora and fauna of Woolpack Point while the rest of us sailed to Grassholm. The seas were calm and the weather balmy as we slowly exited the bay and made for Skomer. As we neared the island numerous rafts of Puffins, Razorbills and Guillemots bobbed on the sea, off duty from their parental responsibilities. Moving away from the island we speeded up heading towards our destination, the distant RSPB's Grassholm Island. We had chosen a calm day to negotiate these turbulent waters and enjoyed the 12 or so miles out to the Gannet colony, and nearing the island a lone Harbour Porpoise bobbed up near to the boat, apparently feeding among the kelp. These cetaceans are resident but often shy so we considered ourselves fortunate in getting such a good view.

As we approached we noticed one side of the island was white with birds and guano, the north side however was green, the birds opting to breed on the more sheltered side, and as we neared the cliffs we saw the sea was again busy with more feeding auks. We wondered at the spectacle of 40,000 or so pairs of Gannets going about their business, but as it was such a balmy day many were lazing in the sun or incubating eggs. 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. Before returning the skipper wrestled with the swirling currents to allow us good views of Grey Seals which were basking on the rocks, and seemed as curious about us as we were them.

After returning to Martins Haven we made a stop at Marloes for some refreshment and to reflect on a successful trip blessed with good weather allowing us to visit the wonderful bird islands of Pembrokeshire. Convening at the comfortable Beggars Reach we all said our goodbyes and made for various destinations, some choosing to stay an extra night at the hotel.

I sincerely hope you all enjoyed the trip as much as I did, it was both fun and informative and most importantly the weather was kind, allowing us to complete our agenda. I hope to have the pleasure of your company again sometime!

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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	30c	2
2	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			Many corpses	
3	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		4	2	1000's
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2		
5	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				2
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			2	
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		10		
8	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			40c	
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		3		
10	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			15 Incl.cHicks	
11	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	1	1
12	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	1	
13	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		1		
14	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula colchicus</i>		1	1	
15	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		H	10c	
16	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			2	
17	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
18	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			2	
20	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓	10
21	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			100s	100's
22	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1000s	100's
23	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			100s	10's
24	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓
26	Little Owl	<i>AtHene noctua</i>			1	
27	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1		
28	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dedrocopus major</i>		2		
29	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			1	
30	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	2	6	30c	20
31	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		20c		
32	Meadow Pipit	<i>AntHus pratensis</i>			30c	10
33	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	2	2		
34	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	2	✓	H
35	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1		
36	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		4		
37	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			10	
38	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			1	
39	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	H	H	H	
41	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	2		
42	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		H	2	2
43	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		H		
44	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				1
45	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		H	H	
46	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓		
47	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H		

	Common name	Scientific name	June			
			9	10	11	12
48	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			3	
49	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			3	
50	Tree creeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		H	2	
51	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓
52	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		1	6	
54	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		2		
55	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	2
57	Jay	<i>Garulus grandarius</i>		1		
58	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			10	
59	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		6	20	4
61	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	2		✓	✓
62	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2			
63	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		1	2	
Mammals						
1	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1		
2	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		1		
3	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			10c	10c
4	Rabbit			1	30c	
5	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				1
Butterflies & Moths						
1	Silver-studded Blue			3	4	
2	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		2		
3	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		2		6
4	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		3		
5	Cinnabar Moth	<i>Tyria jacobaeae</i>			1	
Dragonflies						
1	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		2		
2	Emperor	<i>Anax imperata</i>		1	1	

Plants at the Hotel

Common Water Crowsfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis*

Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*

White Water Lily *Nymphaea alba*

Celery-leaved Buttercup *Ranunculus sceleratus*

Water Forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpioides*

Marsh Thistle *Cirsium palustre*

Plants at St. Davids

Red Valerian *Centranthus ruber*

Hemlock Water-dropwort *Conium maculatum*

Wall Rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria*

Navelwort *Umbilicus rupestris*

Ivy-leaved Toadflax *Cymbalaria muralis*

Pellitory of the Wall *Parietaria judaica*

Spleenworts *Asplenium sp.*

Plants of Dowrog Common

Ragged Robin <i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>	Southern Marsh Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>
Heath Spotted Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Yellow Iris <i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Common Cottongrass <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Fleabane <i>Pulicaria dysenterica</i>
Meadowsweet <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Alexanders <i>Smyrniolum olusatrum</i>
Red Campion <i>Silene dioica</i>	Red Clover <i>Trifolium pratense</i>
Silverweed <i>Potentilla anserina</i>	Tormentil <i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Water Mint <i>Mentha aquatica</i>	Sorrel <i>Rumex acetosa</i>
Bog Asphodel <i>Narthesium ossifragum</i>	

Plants recorded on the cliff tops and Skomer

Sheepsbit Scabious <i>Jasione montana</i>	Cut-leaved Cranesbill <i>Geranium dissectum</i>
Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Bluebell <i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>
Thyme <i>Thymus polytrichus</i>	Scarlet Pimpernell <i>Anagallis arvensis</i>
Sea Campion <i>Silene uniflora</i>	Sea Plantain <i>Plantago maritima</i>
Thrift <i>Armeria maritima</i>	Red Campion <i>Silene dioica</i>
White Campion <i>Silene latifolia</i>	Silverweed <i>Potentilla anserina</i>

Plants of Bosherton Pools, adjoining woods and the dunes

Common Spotted Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>	Pyramidal Orchid <i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>
Early Purple Orchid <i>Orchis mascula</i>	Common Twayblade <i>Listera ovata</i>
White Water Lily <i>Nymphaea alba</i>	Yellow Iris <i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Black Bryony <i>Tamus communis</i>	Wild Mignonette <i>Reseda lutea</i>
Viper's Bugloss <i>Echium vulgare</i>	Burnet Rose <i>Rosa pimpinellifolia</i>
Self-heal <i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	Bugle <i>Ajuga reptans</i>
Sanicle <i>Sanicula europaea</i>	Ramsons <i>Allium ursinum</i>
Common Broomrape <i>Orobancha minor</i>	Kidney Vetch <i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>
Common Columbine <i>Aquilegia hybrids</i>	Eyebright <i>Euphrasia ostenfeldii</i>
Yellow Rattle <i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Herb Robert <i>Geranium robertianum</i>
Sun Spurge <i>Euphorbia helioscopia</i>	Hart's tongue Fern <i>Asplenium scolopendrium</i>
Seaside Centaury <i>Centaureum litorale</i>	Valerian <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>
Wild Thyme (pink & white forms) <i>Thymus polytrichus</i>	Scarlet Pimpernell <i>Anagallis arvensis</i>

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