

# Shetland's Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

16th – 24th June 2022

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Arctic Skua



Red-throated Diver



Whimbrel



Golden Plover

Tour report by Andy Smith, images by Rob Tilt

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Tour Participants: Andy Smith (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

**Thursday 16th June**

The group assembled at the ferry terminal in Aberdeen in the mid afternoon and shortly after 5pm we were all up on deck as the ferry left the harbour. It was a mild sunny evening with scattered cloud and a light breeze and as we cleared the breakwater and headed out into the open sea we noted a range of birds including some Eider, several Shags and Cormorants, a few Common, Arctic and Sandwich Terns and lots of Kittiwakes. Further out we added Gannets, Fulmars, Guillemots and Razorbills, plus a couple of Puffins, several Manx Shearwaters and our first Bonxie. It all made for a good start and eventually, as the ship steamed north, we retired to our various overnight accommodations full of anticipation for the week ahead.

## Day 2

**Friday 17th June**

We arrived at Lerwick on time at 7.30 am. It was overcast, cold, windy and wet; not very appealing! We collected our minibus, dropped our luggage at our nearby hotel, bought a picnic lunch from the supermarket and then headed off towards Sumburgh at the southern tip of Mainland. As the morning progressed the rain eased off but the wind freshened. A first brief stop at a bay just south of Sumburgh Airport produced a Red-throated Diver on the water and a Bonxie low overhead. Next, at Grutness, we spent a good while enjoying the busy Arctic Tern and Common Gull colony amongst the exposed boulders above the shore. Here too were a Ringed Plover, three or four Sandwich Terns, a pair of Oystercatchers with a well grown chick, a few Rock Doves and a pair of Shetland Wrens who were feeding young in a nest hidden in the depths of a stone wall.

From here we went into the nearby archaeological site at Jarlshof and enjoyed a short walk around the beautiful and atmospheric Viking ruins. Wheatears and Meadow Pipits foraged on the short-cropped grass, a Curlew strutted around in an adjacent meadow and a number of Black Guillemots fished in the bay below.

By now the sun was out but there was still a very keen wind blowing and with our lunch eaten we drove the short way up to Sumburgh Head. We stopped to admire the Fulmars nesting in the quarries on the way up and then, walking up to the lighthouse itself, we took in the spectacular views and enjoyed some wonderful close encounters with Puffins, lots of them. They were a joy to watch, especially as they came into their nest sites on the exposed cliff tops and had to negotiate the very stiff wind - we even saw some reversing in, a clear tactic to maximize their aeronautic abilities and avoid accident or injury. Here too were Guillemots and Razorbills, Kittiwakes, a couple of dashing Arctic Skuas, a few Twite, some Rock Pipits and, to round it all off, a lovely cup of tea in the superbly positioned Lighthouse Café.

Heading back north from Sumburgh Head we skirted Loch Spiggie, where we found over 30 Bonxies having a bath, and then stopped to look down at a scenic wee beach a little north of Scousburgh where there were over a dozen each of Harbour and Grey Seals; a nice sight and an informative comparison. One of the Harbour Seals even had a small pup.

Finally we stopped briefly at the tombolo leading across to St Ninians's Isle, a scenic and interesting spot, before heading back to Lerwick and our hotel. It had been an action packed and satisfying first day.

## Day 3

## Saturday 18th June

The high winds scuppered our planned boat trip around Noss and also curtailed any crossings from Bressay to Noss and so, reverting to Plan C, we contented ourselves with an exploration of Bressay itself. Wind notwithstanding, the weather was nice enough with a good deal of sunshine and only occasional light showers and we had a fine time. First we headed across to Setter on the east side of the island with a stop by one patch of damp moorland to watch a pair of Curlews with two very pretty chicks. From Setter we walked out along the shore to the graveyard and ruined church at Cullingsburgh. A few Dunlin and Turnstone foraged among the boulders at the water's edge, some Arctic Terns and a Shag fished offshore, an Arctic Skua flew fast and low over our heads, Twite and Wheatear flitted over the grassland and in the shelter of the walled graveyard we found an intrepid Shetland Bee visiting the flowers.

From Cullingsburgh we moved on towards Noss Sound. A lovely stand of Northern Marsh Orchids at the roadside prompted one brief stop and at a small loch called Ullins Water we stopped again to watch a pair of very handsome Red-throated Divers. There were a couple of distant Golden Plover out on the moorland here and our first pale phase Arctic Skua which was busy hawking low over the vegetation around the loch. We wondered what it was hunting when it suddenly flushed a Meadow Pipit and then pursued it much as a Merlin chases its prey, following every twist and turn. The Pipit eventually got away but it was all very exciting to witness!

At Noss Sound, looking across to Noss itself, with the sun out and the sea a delicious turquoise, we watched an avian feeding frenzy take place with scores of Gannets, Kittiwakes and Arctic Terns diving into the sea in a small, concentrated area. Observing carefully we could see the switchback of the Gannets' wings at the moment they hit the water. There were good numbers of Shags, Razorbills and Guillemots out on the water too, plus a few Black Guillemots and a fly-by Red-breasted Merganser. Two Arctic Skuas which came in to harry the terns and Kittiwakes added further action and completed a thoroughly enjoyable half hour.

We ate our lunch out of the wind in the minibus then proceeded back across the island to the community centre café for a welcome cup of tea. From here we drove out to the southwest, passing two Whooper Swans on Loch Kirkibister, and finished the afternoon out at Bressay Lighthouse, in a world of spectacular cliffs, buffeting wind and crashing waves. A pair of Black Guillemots comfortably and unconcernedly bobbing around in the heavy swell below us presented a lovely picture with which to finish the day.

## Day 4

## Sunday 19th June

A day of sunshine and cloud with a brisk, cool northerly wind. This morning we drove through Voe and Bray towards the far north-west of Mainland. Our first stop was at Mavis Grind where the Atlantic Ocean almost meets the North Sea. Fulmars were at their nests on the ancient cliffs, Arctic Terns fished out over the water and a Wren sang from among the shoreline boulders. The staccato flight call of a Whimbrel drew our attention and as we turned to watch it a Merlin appeared, racing towards us, and flashed by close overhead – very nice!

Continuing on through some lovely wild country towards our destination of Eshaness we stopped at one small roadside loch (Helga Water perhaps?) where a Red-throated Diver was out on the water. A quick scan revealed a second on the shoreline, just a head and neck visible in the lush vegetation and almost certainly on a nest. This

was an exciting discovery and represented a typical nest site for this species which, like other Divers, being so ungainly and uncomfortable on land, always nests very close to the water's edge. Lapwing, Redshank and Oystercatcher were all apparently breeding on the adjacent bogland too, so all in all, this was a rich little spot!

At Eshaness we had a good walk and enjoyed the stupendous cliff scenery made all the more exciting by the brisk wind and the massive waves crashing in. It was a really superb area and we walked all the way around to the ruined broch on the shore of Loch of Houlland. En-route we saw all the expected seabirds (including a few Puffins) plus Rock Pipits, Twites, Wheatears and cliff nesting Starlings. We also found a few Shetland Bees as they foraged around some sheltered patches of Bird's-foot Trefoil and had excellent views of another pair of Red-throated Divers.

After a picnic lunch out of the wind which was interrupted by an Arctic Skua passing low over our heads, we proceeded the short distance to nearby Stenness. This was a lower lying stretch of coast, less exposed than Eshaness, but still beautiful and with fantastic views out to some mighty offshore stacks and arches. After a short walk here and encounters with a couple of Grey Seals and a range of birds, including a pair of Oystercatchers with well grown chicks and a close pair of Ringed Plovers, we began the drive back to Lerwick.

## Day 5

## Monday 20th June

Overcast with a cold NNW breeze and occasional drizzly spells. We left Lerwick after breakfast to begin our journey north to Unst. An unexpected Black-throated Diver at Villin Ness and a Great Northern in in South Nesting Bay started things well and at Grunna Voe, a little north of Vidlin, we enjoyed some lovely views of Arctic Terns and Ringed Plovers nesting on a shingle ridge at the top of a small beach. A little further on at Lunna we found Oystercatchers and Redshanks, three drake Wigeon, a pair of Fulmars nesting on the chimney of the ruined church and several Harbour Seals.

We reached Toft harbour as the rain set in and we ate our lunch in the bus as a Black Guillemot fished off the quay just metres away. The ferry crossing to Yell produced several more Black Guillemots and good numbers of Razorbills and Gannets. We drove across Yell in the rain, caught the next ferry to Unst and then completed the last few miles to Baltasound noting Ringed Plover, Curlew, Snipe and Redshank along the roadside en-route.

We settled in at the Baltasound Hotel and took pre- and- post-dinner walks along the nearby shore. The weather was decidedly dreich for mid-summer's eve and the hoped for Otter didn't appear but the Skylarks were still singing and we also saw Curlews, Redshank and Arctic Terns and had a lovely encounter with a Harbour Seal which was as interested in us as we were in it.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 21st June

A cold, overcast start to the day belied the fact that this was the summer solstice. Undeterred, a few of us set out along the shore before breakfast. The Skylarks were still singing, the Curlews were active in the fields and out on the sound we found a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers and a distant summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver. Yesterday's Harbour Seal had been joined by several more, including five who were hauled out on an old stone slipway and remained very relaxed as we passed.

After breakfast we set off back to Belmont harbour and took the ferry across to Fetlar. Arriving in the late morning after a pleasant crossing we drove straight to the Wick of Aith, a small and picturesque little inlet with a

shingle beach. The tide was quite low, exposing seaweed covered rocks and shallow pools and in amongst these we almost immediately found a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes. True to form they paid no attention to us and over the next 20 minutes or so we were able to get some really fantastic views of these delightful little birds as they bobbed about in the shallows or preened on the pebbly shore.

From here we drove a little further to the famous Loch of Funzie where we found a trio of Red-throated Divers on the loch and both Snipe and Golden Plover displaying overhead. We ate lunch in the café at Houbie, stopped briefly at the nearby Mires of Houbie, where some of us glimpsed another Phalarope, then headed out to Papil Water, a large lake separated from the sea by a broad machair covered sand bar. The Sun was out now and this proved to be a very pleasant place to spend some time. Offshore there were over 30 Black Guillemots, another Great Northern Diver and a brief Harbour Porpoise, whilst White-tailed Bumblebees buzzed around the flower-studded grassland at our feet and a group of around 25 Bonxies bathed in the loch. These last allowed a close approach and we had some great views of them. Sadly though, there were also a number of dead ones scattered around in the grass, grisly evidence of the Avian Flu outbreak that was sweeping through Shetland's seabird colonies.

Next we proceeded to the airfield on Turra Hill and during a short walk we enjoyed some fabulous views of a couple of pairs of Whimbrel and several Golden Plover. Our last stop was at Ugasta Pier on the west side where we finished our time on this lovely island with two more Great Northern Divers, a couple of Red-throated and two Grey Seals.

Back on Unst a few hours later we took a late walk along the Balta Sound shore. It was a really beautiful evening; sunny, mild and still, with the air full of the sound of Skylarks and Curlews. The Harbour Seals were enjoying the occasion too, with one out in the water singing and gurgling in an apparently light-hearted manner for a good long time. It seemed like the perfect occasion to spot an Otter, with the water mirror-calm for once, and indeed, one did appear, but only briefly, and whilst certainly exciting, it was only seen by a couple of us.

## Day 7

## Wednesday 22nd June

Back to the wind, the grey and the drizzle again this morning. After breakfast we headed up to Hermaness, the most northerly point of the British Isles. The walk out to the cliffs along the boardwalk led across a wide open area of wind-clipped moorland and bog, bleak but atmospheric. The most conspicuous birds were Bonxies and we had lots of views of them both in the air and on the ground. Otherwise there were Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and a few trilling Dunlin, and amongst the plants, good numbers of Sundews and Butterworts.

The cliffs, when we reached them, were utterly spectacular but the wind was ferocious and the low cloud unfortunately descended so that all too soon our visibility was reduced to almost zero. We weren't seeing the place at its best! Nevertheless, in and out of the mist, we gained some sense of the grandeur of the setting and had some good views of the awesome Gannet colony at Neap. It was wonderful to watch these large birds dealing with the wind as they came into the cliff ledges just below us; with wings crooked and feet down, like the Puffins we'd seen at Sumburgh Head a few days previously, they turned at the last moment to face the wind and reverse in.

Retracing our steps back across the moor we then dropped down to the relative shelter of Burrafirth and ate our lunch by the loch shore as a steady stream of Bonxies flew in to bathe. After this we headed across to

Northwick, a lovely spot, and spent a while on the beach and headland there enjoying great views of Ringed Plovers and Arctic Terns, Black-headed and Common Gulls, a dark Arctic Skua, three Red-throated Divers and several Shags and Kittiwakes.

From Northwick we back-tracked to the Viking longhouse at Haroldswick and then finished the day in inclement conditions at the relative moonscape of the Keen of Hamar, where some diligent searching unearthed a Frog Orchid and a few specimens of the legendary Edmondston's Chickweed.

## Day 8

**Thursday 23rd June**

Away after breakfast, we began our journey back to Lerwick. Driving across Unst we stopped by a big standing stone in the south-west of the island. The moorland here was alive with breeding waders: Snipe, Curlew, Redshank, Lapwing and Golden Plover were all present, but best of all, on a small lochan we found a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes, delightful as ever, and a great start to the day.

We caught the ferry across to Yell and drove straight down to the harbour at Ulsta where we took a walk along the shore to the south. It was our last realistic chance of seeing an Otter and I think by this stage most of us had resigned ourselves to disappointment when, just as the sun broke through the thick clouds, a big dog Otter ran across the beach about 30 metres behind us. He paused halfway to take a look at us then continued out across the seaweed covered rocks to the water's edge, where he paused briefly again before diving in and disappearing. Bingo! What a finale!

We caught the ferry across to Mainland by the skin of our teeth and then drove directly to Lerwick. We ate lunch in a café in the town centre and then, whilst some explored the town, others took the opportunity to whizz down to a marsh near Levenwick some 30 minutes or so to the south to try to see a recently reported Broad-billed Sandpiper. We were unsuccessful in our quest but it was a lovely spot in the fine weather and we saw a satisfying range of other now familiar Shetland birds.

We reconvened back in Lerwick and a little later made our way to the ferry terminal. The ship departed on time and we enjoyed a pleasant evening passage south past Bressay lighthouse and along the coast of Mainland past Mousa and then Sumburgh Head. Finally Shetland slipped into the haze behind us and that was it. It had been a great trip!

## Day 9

**Friday 24th June**

The ferry arrived in Aberdeen early morning where the party went their separate ways home.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

|    |                        |                                     | June 2022 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|----|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
|    | Common name            | Scientific name                     | 16        | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 1  | Greylag Goose          | <i>Anser anser</i>                  |           | 40 | 20 | 25 | 25 | 50 |    | 35 |
| 2  | Mute Swan              | <i>Cygnus olor</i>                  |           | 12 |    |    |    | 3  |    | 3  |
| 3  | Whooper Swan           | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>                |           |    | 2  |    | 1  |    |    |    |
| 4  | Eurasian Wigeon        | <i>Mareca penelope</i>              |           |    |    |    | 3  |    |    |    |
| 5  | Mallard                | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>           |           | 6  | 5  | 4  | 5  | 2  |    |    |
| 6  | Eurasian Teal          | <i>Anas crecca</i>                  |           | 2  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 7  | Tufted Duck            | <i>Aythya fuligula</i>              |           |    | 1  |    | 2  |    |    | 1  |
| 8  | Common Eider           | <i>Somateria mollissima</i>         | 10        | 20 | 5  | 5  | 10 | 5  | 5  |    |
| 9  | Red-breasted Merganser | <i>Mergus serrator</i>              |           |    | 3  | 2  | 20 | 10 | 4  |    |
| 10 | Rock Dove              | <i>Columba livia</i>                |           | 30 | 40 | 10 | 5  | 15 | 10 | 5  |
| 11 | Common Wood Pigeon     | <i>Columba palumbus</i>             |           |    |    |    |    | 1  |    |    |
| 12 | Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>        |           |    | 2  |    | 2  |    |    | 2  |
| 13 | Eurasian Oystercatcher | <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>        |           | 15 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 10 | 10 |
| 14 | Northern Lapwing       | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>            |           | 4  | 1  | 8  | 4  | 5  | 2  | 3  |
| 15 | European Golden Plover | <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>          |           |    | 2  |    |    | 6  | 1  | 2  |
| 16 | Common Ringed Plover   | <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>         |           | 1  |    | 4  | 6  | 12 | 4  | 5  |
| 17 | Eurasian Whimbrel      | <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>            |           |    |    | 1  | 1  | 4  | 1  |    |
| 18 | Eurasian Curlew        | <i>Numenius arquata</i>             |           | 10 | 15 | 25 | 20 | 20 | 12 | 10 |
| 19 | Ruddy Turnstone        | <i>Arenaria interpres interpres</i> |           |    | 3  |    | 1  | 2  |    |    |
| 20 | Dunlin                 | <i>Calidris alpina</i>              |           |    | 6  | 7  | 5  | 3  | 3  | 4  |
| 21 | Common Snipe           | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>          |           | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 8  | 1  | 1  |
| 22 | Red-necked Phalarope   | <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>           |           |    |    |    |    | 3  |    | 7  |
| 23 | Common Redshank        | <i>Tringa totanus</i>               |           | 1  | 1  | 3  | 10 | 10 | 2  | 2  |
| 24 | Black-legged           | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>             | 100's     | 50 | 50 | 50 | 15 | 5  | 5  | 10 |

|    |                          |                                   | June 2022 |       |     |     |     |       |        |    |
|----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-------|--------|----|
|    | Common name              | Scientific name                   | 16        | 17    | 18  | 19  | 20  | 21    | 22     | 23 |
|    | Kittiwake                |                                   |           |       |     |     |     |       |        |    |
| 25 | Black-headed Gull        | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> |           | 5     | 2   |     | 5   |       | 15     |    |
| 26 | Common Gull              | <i>Larus canus canus</i>          |           | 20    | 8   | 20  | 35  | 25    | 20     | 10 |
| 27 | Great Black-backed Gull  | <i>Larus marinus</i>              | 2         | 15    | 6   | 10  | 8   | 30    | 5      | 2  |
| 28 | European Herring Gull    | <i>Larus argentatus</i>           | 50        | 150   | 10  | 100 | 50  | 50    | 20     | 10 |
| 29 | Lesser Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i>               | 2         |       |     | 1   | 2   | 2     | 1      | 2  |
| 30 | Sandwich Tern            | <i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>    | 2         | 3     |     |     |     |       |        |    |
| 31 | Common Tern              | <i>Sterna hirundo</i>             | 2         |       |     | 1   |     |       |        |    |
| 32 | Arctic Tern              | <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>          | 15        | 50    | 50  | 50  | 60  | 40    | 10     | 50 |
| 33 | Great Skua               | <i>Stercorarius skua</i>          | 1         | 40    | 6   | 4   | 1   | 75    | 50     | 2  |
| 34 | Arctic Skua              | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>   |           | 2     | 6   | 5   | 1   | 3     | 2      | 1  |
| 35 | Guillemot                | <i>Uria aalge</i>                 | 100's     | 100's | 50  | 100 | 50  | 50    | 100's  | 30 |
| 36 | Razorbill                | <i>Alca torda</i>                 | 15        | 15    | 25  | 25  | 25  | 30    |        | 25 |
| 37 | Black Guillemot          | <i>Cephus grylle</i>              |           | 5     | 6   | 3   | 20  | 60    | 2      | 15 |
| 38 | Atlantic Puffin          | <i>Fratercula arctica</i>         | 5         | 100   | 1   | 30  | 1   | 5     | 30     | 5  |
| 39 | Red-throated Diver       | <i>Gavia stellata</i>             |           | 1     | 1   | 7   | 5   | 15    | 4      | 4  |
| 40 | Black-throated Diver     | <i>Gavia arctica</i>              |           |       |     |     | 1   |       |        |    |
| 41 | Great Northern Diver     | <i>Gavia immer</i>                |           |       |     |     | 1   | 5     |        |    |
| 42 | Northern Fulmar          | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>         | 15        | 100   | 25  | 100 | 50  | 50    | 100's  | 70 |
| 43 | Manx Shearwater          | <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>          | 20        |       |     |     |     |       |        |    |
| 44 | Northern Gannet          | <i>Morus bassanus</i>             | 50        | 10    | 50  | 50  | 50  | 20    | 1000's | 50 |
| 45 | Great Cormorant          | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>        | 5         | 2     |     | 4   |     |       |        |    |
| 46 | European Shag            | <i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>        | 50        | 20    | 20  | 20  | 15  | 50    | 20     | 5  |
| 47 | Merlin                   | <i>Falco columbarius</i>          |           |       |     | 1   |     |       |        |    |
| 48 | Rook                     | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>          |           |       |     | 20  |     |       |        |    |
| 49 | Hooded Crow              | <i>Corvus cornix</i>              |           | 5     | 1   | 5   | 6   | 3     | 4      | 3  |
| 50 | Northern Raven           | <i>Corvus corax</i>               |           |       | 1   | 2   |     | 1     | 1      |    |
| 51 | Eurasian Skylark         | <i>Alauda arvensis</i>            |           | 10    | 10  | 10  | 8   | 12    | 15     | 10 |
| 52 | Sand Martin              | <i>Riparia riparia</i>            |           | 1     |     |     |     |       |        |    |
| 53 | Barn Swallow             | <i>Hirundo rustica</i>            |           |       |     |     |     |       |        | 1  |
| 54 | Chiffchaff               | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>     |           |       | 1h  |     |     |       |        |    |
| 55 | Eurasian Wren            | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>    |           | 2     | 1   | 2   |     | 4     | 5      | 2  |
| 56 | Common Starling          | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>           |           | 100's | 200 | 100 | 100 | 100's | 100    | 50 |
| 57 | Common Blackbird         | <i>Turdus merula merula</i>       |           | 4     |     | 2   | 2   | 3     | 1      |    |
| 58 | Northern Wheatear        | <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>          |           | 12    | 15  | 25  | 10  | 15    | 4      | 4  |
| 59 | House Sparrow            | <i>Passer domesticus</i>          |           | 15    | 10  | 15  | 15  | 20    | 10     | 5  |
| 60 | Pied Wagtail             | <i>Motacilla alba</i>             |           | 3     |     | 1   | 3   | 3     | 1      | 1  |
| 61 | Meadow Pipit             | <i>Anthus pratensis</i>           |           | 10    | 25  | 20  | 8   | 20    | 25     | 15 |
| 62 | European Rock Pipit      | <i>Anthus petrosus</i>            |           | 1     | 1   | 8   |     |       |        |    |
| 63 | Twite                    | <i>Linaria flavirostris</i>       |           | 5     | 4   | 8   | 3   |       |        | 1  |