

Shetland's Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 30th May 2025



Oysterplant



Red-necked Phalaropes



Otter



Eiders

Tour report by Gavin Maclean
Photos by Martin Webb



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Tour participants: Gavin Maclean (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

Despite challenging weather conditions at times, we enjoyed an excellent week of wildlife in stunning scenery on beautiful Shetland. We enjoyed spectacular seabird colonies, breeding waders (including Red-necked Phalaropes on a roadside pool) and skuas on the rugged moorlands. It wasn't just the fabulous birds that made the week so special, as we encountered some rare flora in full bloom, including the strange Oysterplant and the Unst endemic Shetland Mouse-ear. To round things off, a last gasp Otter on our final morning was both a relief and trip highlight, after a significant effort throughout the trip to see this secretive mammal.

Day 1

Friday 23rd May

The group met at the Aberdeen Ferry terminal in good time for the 7.00pm departure to Lerwick. The forecast for the crossing was fairly benign, a relief to those with sub-optimal sea legs. As the departure was delayed an hour by the late arrival of a coach full of school kids, we had an early dinner in the restaurant, before moving outside to the top deck, hoping for a cetacean sighting. No sea mammals were in evidence, but we enjoyed plenty of Kittiwakes following the boat, plus the odd Gannet fly-by. We had nice views of several Common Guillemots on the water close to the boat as we moved out into the North Sea, before calling it a day just before 10.00pm.

Day 2

Saturday 24th May

The ferry passed Sumburgh Head around 6.00am, then hugged the eastern coastline northwards towards Lerwick. We enjoyed our first views of Black Guillemots in resplendent summer plumage on the approach to Lerwick Ferry Terminal, arriving on time at 7.30am. By 8.30am we were aboard the minibus and heading south towards Sumburgh. A stop at the beautiful Levenwick beach rewarded us with fine views of a pristine Red-throated Diver close inshore, with Shags, Black Guillemots and a single Razorbill also viewable in the bay. Oystercatchers, Ringed Plovers, Turnstones and single Curlew provided a nice assemblage of waders, with several Arctic Terns patrolling the beach front.

After dropping our bags at Sumburgh Hotel and a quick coffee stop, we travelled the short distance to Grutness to explore the coastline. A fine selection of coastal flora was noted, with Spring Squill, Sea Campion and Thrift all in full bloom. A small number of Eiders were present offshore, with a colony of Arctic Terns giving fine views. Our first Shetland Wren was seen playing hide and seek in a lichen covered stone wall, with several Wheatears and a Rock Pipit noted, as we admired the nesting Fulmars in the lower Sumburgh Quarry. Having refueled at the hotel, we spent the afternoon at Sumburgh Head in deteriorating conditions, with low-cloud and persistent rain. The poor weather didn't bother the seabird colony, and we were entertained by Atlantic Puffins navigating the strong winds, by reversing into their nest holes, together with close views of Razorbills, Common Guillemots and Fulmars at one of the UK's most dramatic seabird settings.

The group dined early before visiting the RSPB Loch of Spiggie reserve. The wind had dropped and we enjoyed a collection of new species in calm, dry conditions. A group of Whooper Swans gave reasonable scope views on the opposite side of the Loch, with a flock of Greylag Geese in the adjacent field, as Sand Martins swooped low over

the water catching insects. Several Arctic Terns were perched on low rocks at very close range, allowing the salient identification features to be seen clearly.

We finished the day at Scousburgh Beach with excellent close views of both a Great and a dark-morph Arctic Skua. A single Red-throated Diver was close inshore in flat calm conditions, with a small number of Razorbills feeding actively, spending more time underwater than on the surface. Having located two Harbour Seals on the distant shore, it was great to be able to see one at close quarters, as it appeared on the close shore to check us out, before melting away into the bay.

Day 3

Sunday 25th May

After picking up provisions for lunch, we headed initially to Loch of Tingwall, in wet blustery conditions, taking shelter under the open boot of the van as we searched the waterbody and surrounding fields. We added some new birds to our trip list, including our first Tufted Ducks, plus a couple of Common Sandpipers. We had great views of a pair of Reed Buntings in rank vegetation at the near edge of the loch and a nice selection of familiar waders in the local fields. Botanical interest was provided by a patch of Bogbean in among the widespread Marsh Marigolds and Cuckoo-flowers.

With the leader having seen Otters at Bridge of Walls on previous trips, we headed west in deteriorating conditions to try our luck over lunch at the van. There were no Otters this time, but a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers and a single displaying Snipe were both new, and we found a nice selection of flora close by, including Common Butterwort, Pignut and Lousewort, all in bloom.

Disappointing news for the group was confirmation from the operator that the planned boat trip to Noss had been cancelled due to the inclement weather. However, undeterred by wind and rain, we visited the impressive Kergord woodland, full of mature trees including Elm, Horse Chestnut and Sycamore: this habitat is quite a rarity in Shetland. We entered the woodland and were greeted by carpets of Wild Garlic (Ransoms) and the ubiquitous Ground Elder. We enjoyed listening to a number of new birds in song, including Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Robin and a Cuckoo. Kergord is noted as the only spot on Shetland where one is likely to see Rook, and we found a good number feeding in the surrounding fields, together with Curlew, Wood Pigeons and a small group of Wigeon.

Heading south, we elected to finish the day with a walk across the UK's largest tombolo to St Ninian's Isle. While it was still blustery, the rain abated and the sun appeared. We enjoyed a fine selection of small waders feeding among the kelp on the shore, with good numbers of Sanderling, Turnstone, Ringed Plover and a single Dunlin. Two standout birds were seen, with a stunning dark phase Arctic Skua flying low across the tombolo, giving excellent views before arcing north across the bay. However, best of all was a Great Northern Diver in full summer plumage, a hoped-for, but nonetheless unexpected bonus.

Day 4

Monday 26th May

With an improvement in the weather, our first stop was a return to Sumburgh Head, to allow the photographers an opportunity to enjoy improved conditions. As well as the now familiar seabirds, we had excellent views of a few Twites singing in flight and from close fence posts. Really special was a close and extended encounter with a 'Shetland' Bumblebee, feeding on Common Bird's-foot Trefoil on the cliff top. This sub-species of the nationally

rare Moss Carder Bee is more brightly-coloured than those further south, and it was great to be able to see it so well.

After picking up our lunch en route, we continued north to the dramatic setting of Eshaness, in the far north-west of Mainland Shetland. A walk along the cliffs allowed us to enjoy the spectacular coastline in this location, with Rock Pipits giving good views on the short turf. A small number of waders included a Dunlin and a Turnstone with several Ringed Plovers.

Moving on to nearby Hillswick, we took our lunch in dry, bright conditions overlooking the bay, with several Red-breasted Mergansers and Red-throated Divers in evidence, and our first Merlin, which flashed through low over the water. A small number of Kittiwakes and a couple of Herring Gulls were resting on the beach, and inspection of the local wet fields revealed a pair of Pheasants, which is not a common bird on Shetland.

The botanically-minded group participants enjoyed a treat at Urafirth, one of the very few sites on Shetland for the curious Oysterplant, a nationally-rare plant restricted to a few coasts in northern Scotland and Northern Ireland. Sea Sandwort was also a new plant for the trip.

With news that a male Quail was singing near Geosetter, which would need only a minor diversion en route to our hotel, we parked up at this famous Shetland site, which has hosted a string of rare migrant birds in the past. We didn't have to wait long before the Quail could be heard singing from a ditch next to the road. It was relatively close, and we all enjoyed hearing the distinctive song.

The expected bad news arrived, with confirmation that our planned late evening boat trip to Mousa had been cancelled due to the poor weather conditions. Instead, we spent a pleasant hour or so mid-evening at Spiggie Loch. There were no new birds, but one of the clients, a talented musician, serenaded us on guitar with a collection of folk songs! A perfect end to a long day.

Day 5

Tuesday 27th May

Some of the group took the opportunity to visit the famous archeological site of Jalshof after breakfast, before we left Sumbugh to spend the day slowly travelling north towards our destination for the next three nights: Unst.

Our first stop at Setter Marsh, Spiggie, gave distant scope views of a migrant Wood Sandpiper feeding at the pool edges. However, the viewing distance and strong winds meant that views were poor. Next up was one of the tour highlights, with a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes seen on a roadside pool, providing a great opportunity to study one of Britain's rarest breeding birds. The birds are renowned for being tame and so it proved, with super-close views both swimming and on the pool edges, just a few metres from the tour bus.

On the outskirts of Lerwick, a client spotted a collection of deep red flowering plants he didn't recognize, growing on a roadside bank. We stopped the bus and were thrilled to find a colony of Northern Marsh Orchids in pristine condition. Everyone took the opportunity to take pictures of these stunning flowers, be it with phones or cameras, and we stopped for a well-deserved coffee break, excited by this chance encounter.

With time for one more stop before heading to Toft to board the ferry to Yell, we drove to Swinning, a Shetland stake out for Red Grouse and other moorland birds. With Snipe displaying overhead, almost immediately a Red Grouse flew across the road and settled at relatively close distance, allowing everyone a good scope view, once the torrential rain had stopped.

We were lucky with our timing for the ferries, with only a short wait before taking a boat to Yell and then another to Unst, where we arrived at Baltasound Hotel, our digs for the next three nights.

Day 6

Wednesday 28th May

With a positive weather forecast for the day, the group set off from the Hermaness car park full of energy, excited at the prospect of witnessing one of the most dramatic seabird spectacles in Britain. Great Skuas were our constant companions on the trail that leads to the cliffs. We saw some exciting plants on the way, including two species of orchid. All the plants in this environment are stunted in comparison with elsewhere in Britain, and the Heath Spotted Orchids were diminutive. Lesser Twayblade is both a rare and inconspicuous plant in any case, and they really are tiny on Shetland. We found a nice individual in full bloom nestling in the heather, providing excellent photo opportunities for those with cameras and phones alike.

We made it to the famous Saito Outcrop in good time, and spent a while enjoying the enormous Gannet colony, especially the mastery of the birds in negotiating the strong winds with just a tilt of the wings. The group arrived back at the tour bus exhausted from the constant strong winds. We were revived by a late lunch and a much-needed coffee stop, before continuing to the strange lunar landscape that is Keen of Hamar, for a botany fix.

Keen of Hamar is famous for being home to the Unst endemic flower, known as Edmonston's Chickweed, or Shetland Mouse-ear. We found lots of this species on the serpentine moonscape, together with a number of other exciting plants including Frog Orchid, Moss Campion, and Mountain Everlasting. Best of all from the leader's perspective was a single Arctic Sandwort, a new plant for him!

Day 7

Thursday 29th May

With a poor forecast from late morning onwards, the group were keen to make the most of the dry conditions. We parked at a trail head across the moorland, and were soon rewarded with excellent close views of both Whimbrel and Golden Plover. The birds were watched at length and we were able to see the Whimbrel's diagnostic median crown-stripe, strong supercilium and shorter bill, when compared with that of Curlew. We also enjoyed a number of Arctic Skuas, both dark- and pale-morph birds, as they quartered the moorland habitat, showing their narrow, extended tail feathers and slimmer build than the Great Skuas.

As the rain arrived, we devoted a significant amount of time both before and after lunch checking likely spots for Otters, including Skaw, Norwick and Uyeasound. We were not rewarded on this occasion, but did record another Great Northern Diver, this time in winter plumage, as well as a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers and a Black Guillemot. There was time for a last hurrah, with a pair of Sandwich Terns seen in the bay at Haroldswick, a scarcity here in Shetland. With the rain now relentless, we returned to the hotel to dry off.

Day 8

Friday 30th May

This, our last day, would have one focus. We had thus far failed to find an Otter, despite a big effort at many of the places known to the leader as likely spots. With the van packed, we left to try the Uyeasound area once again. There was no sign of any Otters, but a female Goosander on the inland sea was new for the week. We decided to arrive early at the Belmont ferry to Yell, as the leader had seen Otters at this location on several occasions in the past. He had barely stepped out of the van, when the unmistakable shape of an Otter's head surfaced close inshore! The Otter was clearly hunting, spending long periods underwater; however, with patience, all of the group enjoyed increasingly good views as the animal spent longer periods at the surface.

Arriving back on the mainland, we headed for Busta House for a well-deserved coffee, before exploring the mature vegetated garden which leads down to Busta Voe. No new birds were seen, but with the sun now in charge, we recorded our first butterflies of the week, a Red Admiral and a Large White. Better still, we had lovely views of another 'Shetland' Bumblebee, feeding on a patch of Bugle.

Our time on Shetland was drawing to a close, but we managed a brief visit to a knitwear outlet in Lerwick, before the group were dropped at the Ferry Terminal for the return overnight trip to Aberdeen.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

E=Endemic		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		✓			✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓		✓				
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓						
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓					
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓						
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>								✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓
Red Grouse - E	<i>Lagopus scotica</i>								
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>					✓			
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				✓				
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		✓						
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓				✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>							✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>							✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓		✓		✓	
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>					✓			
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓					
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>					✓			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>							✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓					
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓					✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓		✓		✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓					

E=Endemic	Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓
	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓				✓	
	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓		✓		✓			
	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				✓		
	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓				
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓					
	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓	✓			
	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓		✓				
	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓
	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓					
	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓					
	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓					
	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		✓				
	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓
	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓					
	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓					✓	✓
	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓		✓				
	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>			✓					
	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓						

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>

Bees

Common name	Scientific name
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>
Shetland Bumblebee	<i>Bombus muscorum agricolae</i>

Plants

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	Sycamore
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>	Ground-elder
<i>Alchemilla</i> sp.	a Lady's-mantle
<i>Allium ursinum</i>	Ramsons (Wild Garlic)
<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>	Wild Angelica
<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Mountain Everlasting
<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	Kidney Vetch
<i>Arenaria norvegica</i>	Arctic Sandwort
<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Thrift (Sea Pink)
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	Hard Fern
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Heather
<i>Caltha palustris</i>	Marsh-marigold
<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Cuckooflower
<i>Cerastium nigrescens</i> var. <i>nigrescens</i>	Arctic (Edmonston's) Mouse-ear
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Creeping Thistle
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Spear Thistle
<i>Claytonia sibirica</i>	Pink Purslane
<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	Common Scurvygrass
<i>Conopodium majus</i>	Pignut
<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Heath Spotted Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Northern Marsh Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>	Frog Orchid
<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Foxglove
<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>	Round-leaved Sundew
<i>Erica cinerea</i>	Bell Heather
<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Common Cottongrass
<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>	Hare's-tail Cottongrass
<i>Erythranthe guttata</i>	Monkeyflower
<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Meadowsweet
<i>Galium saxatile</i>	Heath Bedstraw
<i>Geum macrophyllum</i>	Large-leaved Avens
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed
<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	Dame's Violet
<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	Sea Sandwort
<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Bluebell
<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	Yellow Iris
<i>Jacobaea aquatica</i>	Marsh Ragwort
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Common Bird's-foot-trefoil
<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	Bogbean

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Mertensia maritima</i>	Oysterplant
<i>Myosotis discolor</i>	Changing Forget-me-not
<i>Neottia cordata</i>	Lesser Twayblade
<i>Orchis mascula</i>	Early Purple Orchid
<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>	Lousewort
<i>Pilosella aurantiaca</i>	Orange Hawkweed
<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Common Butterwort
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Ribwort Plantain
<i>Plantago maritima</i>	Sea Plantain
<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	Heath Milkwort
<i>Potamogeton polygonifolius</i>	Bog Pondweed
<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	Silverweed
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Tormentil
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	Bracken
<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Meadow Buttercup
<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Creeping Buttercup
<i>Reynoutria japonica</i>	Japanese Knotweed
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow-rattle
<i>Rumex acetosa</i>	Common Sorrel
<i>Scilla verna</i>	Spring Squill
<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Common Groundsel
<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Moss Champion
<i>Silene dioica</i>	Red Champion
<i>Silene uniflora</i>	Sea Champion
<i>Sonchus arvensis</i>	Perennial Sow-thistle
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed
<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.	Dandelion
<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	Red Clover
<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White Clover
<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	Sea Mayweed
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Common Nettle
<i>Vicia sepium</i>	Bush Vetch
<i>Viola riviniana</i>	Common Dog-violet