

Shetland's Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th May – 6th June 2025



Moss Carder Bee (Shetland subspecies)



Red-necked Phalaropes



Otter



Arctic Mouse-ear (Unst subspecies)

Tour report by Gavin Maclean
Photos by Mike Walker



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Summary

Although the weather was a challenge at times, we enjoyed an excellent week of wildlife in stunning scenery on beautiful Shetland. We enjoyed spectacular sea bird colonies, and breeding skuas and waders on the rugged moorlands, including Red-necked Phalaropes on a roadside pool. We were extremely lucky that our trip coincided with the arrival of a mega-rare vagrant thrush from Siberia, which put in a protracted stay in a sheltered garden on Yell for much of the duration of the tour. It wasn't just the fabulous birds that made the week so special, as we encountered some rare flora including the strange Oysterplant, and the Unst endemic Shetland Mouse-ear, as well as having two close Otters encounters.

Day 1

Saturday 31st May

The group travelled overnight on the ferry from Aberdeen arriving on time in Lerwick at 7.30am. By 8.10am we were aboard the minibus and heading south towards Sumburgh. A stop at the beautiful Levenwick beach rewarded us with fine views of three drake Eiders close inshore. Oystercatchers, Ringed Plover, a Turnstone and single Curlew provided a nice assemblage of waders, with several Arctic Terns patrolling the beach front, along with a Common Tern. It was nice to be able to compare the features of these closely-related species

After a quick stop at Pool of Virkie, we arrived at the Sumburgh Hotel, where the group took the opportunity to visit the nearby Jarlshof archeological site before lunch. Having refueled at the hotel, we spent the afternoon at Sumburgh Head in overcast, windy conditions. The weather deteriorated, with low cloud moving in, but this didn't bother the seabird at their colony, and we were entertained by Puffins navigating the strong winds, by reversing into their nest holes, together with close views of Guillemots, Fulmars and the odd patrolling Great Skua, at one of the UK's most dramatic seabird settings.

Moving on, we next visited the RSPB Loch of Spiggie reserve. The water was choppy in the strong wind, but David located a close Red-throated Diver in winter plumage, and several Arctic Terns were perched on low rocks, allowing the salient identification features to be seen clearly. We finished the day at Scousburgh Beach, which was altogether more pleasant, in shelter from the wind. A stunning summer-plumaged Slavonian Grebe was a surprise find, and we were all able to enjoy detailed scope views of this Shetland scarcity, with a small number of Razorbills also visible in the bay.

Day 2

Sunday 1st June

The day got off to a dramatic start with the news that a male Red-backed Shrike had been found a short distance from the hotel. After a short wait, the group were treated to excellent views of this stunning migrant bird perched on fence posts at Eastshore, Virkie. What a bonus!

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 our first Rock Pipits giving good views on the short turf. We also found a confiding pair of Red-throated Divers on a small loch at Eshaness, as well as a pair of dark-morph Arctic Skuas, which looked to be breeding on the

adjacent moorland. Moving on to nearby Hillswick, we took our lunch in dry bright conditions overlooking the bay, with several Red-throated Divers in evidence.

The botanically-minded clients 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. With Sea Sandwort also new for the trip, we continued to the ferry terminal at Toft.

With news arriving that an Eyebrowed Thrush had been found in a garden on Yell, and with time to spare due to a rearranged boat trip, the group was keen to try and see it. With fewer than thirty records ever in the UK, this Siberian vagrant is both super-rare and beautifully-marked. Almost all previous records have been in the autumn, so this find was very unexpected. The garden was close to the Gutcher ferry terminal, and proved to be a magnet for migrants, hosting not only the rare thrush from Siberia, but also a few Crossbills, a singing Willow Warbler and a single Icterine Warbler. The group enjoyed good views of all of these birds, and it was a happy tour bus that returned to the Mainland for the journey south, in deteriorating weather.

Day 3

Monday 2nd June

Our day began with a walk across the UK's largest tombolo to St Ninian's Isle, in glorious sunshine. We enjoyed a fine selection of seabirds, with groups of Razorbills and single Black Guillemots fishing in the bays, with numerous Arctic Terns overhead. A pair of Red-throated Divers was also seen in the bay, and we noted a single dark-morph Arctic Skua when we stopped for a toilet break in nearby Bigton.

Our rescheduled boat trip to Noss left Lerwick late morning, for a seabird extravaganza. The group enjoyed up-close and personal views of a selection of auk species, plus Gannets, skuas and Fulmars aplenty, all attracted to the chum thrown into the water by our skilled skipper. We also enjoyed our first Grey Seals, including a huge bull keen to mop up any scraps.

With the fine weather continuing, we visited the small settlement of Wester Quarf to look for the 'Shetland' Bumblebee. 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 a number of these insects feeding on the Bird's-foot Trefoil and Bush Vetch next to the road.

Next up was one of the tour highlights, with three Red-necked Phalaropes (a male and two females) seen on a roadside pool, providing a unique opportunity to study one of Britain's rarest breeding birds. The birds are renowned for being tame, and so they proved; they gave us super close views both swimming and on the pool edges, just a few metres from the tour bus.

Day 4

Tuesday 3rd June

After picking up provisions for lunch, we headed to Loch of Tingwall in dry blustery conditions. Although there were few interesting birds, botanical interest was provided by a nice patch of Bogbean in among the widespread Marsh Marigolds and Cuckoo-flowers, with one or two Northern Marsh Orchids.

We next visited the impressive Kergord woodland, full of mature trees including Elm, Horse Chestnut and Sycamore: quite a rarity in Shetland. We explored the woodland edge and were greeted by carpets of Wild Garlic (Ransoms) and the ubiquitous Ground Elder, with large patches of the alien Pink Purslane. Kergord is noted as the only spot on Shetland where you are likely to see Rook, and we found a good number feeding in the surrounding fields, together with a sizable flow of Greylag Geese. Best of all was a singing Cuckoo, which showed in flight to some of the group.

With time for a couple more stops 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, noting a Red-breasted Merganser which flew over the road en route. Almost immediately after parking the van, a Red Grouse was seen walking across the moorland, and it settled at a relatively close distance, allowing everyone a good view, with the bird eventually joined by a second individual. Some of the group also recorded our first Merlin of the week as it flew through low over the moorland.

We took a drive up the nearby Lunna peninsula, hoping for an Otter sighting, before parking up close to the Lunna Kirk at a sheltered bay, which looked like a promising location. It wasn't long before someone spotted a mammal swimming towards the nearby shore. The group was then treated to stunning views of this large dog Otter as it left the water and climbed onto some low rocks, rolling around playfully, before disappearing round the headland. These were the leader's best ever views of Otter, despite having seen perhaps twenty individuals on previous visits to Shetland.

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

Day 5

Wednesday 4th June

With strong winds and rain, conditions were challenging. We parked on a track across the moorland to use the vehicle as a wind-break, and we were soon rewarded with excellent close views of both Whimbrel and Golden Plover. The birds were watched at length, and we were able to appreciate the beautiful intricate markings of the plover, with their black and white underparts contrasting with the golden upperparts. We also enjoyed a dark-morph Arctic Skua harassing the Whimbrel from the air, showing its narrow, extended tail feathers and slimmer build than the Great Skuas.

Moving on to Uyeasound in increasingly difficult conditions, we had nice views of a drake Red-breasted Merganser diving frequently near the pier, in the violent sea conditions. A real surprise was a single Swift, battling the wind over the inland sea.

After a hot lunch and a short break at the hotel to let the worst of the weather pass, we set off for Norwick, stopping first to look at Haroldswick Bay. A fine drake Red-breasted Merganser was in the bay, along with a pair of Red-throated Divers; however, these were overshadowed by both Grey and Harbour Seals close inshore, providing an excellent comparison of their differing head shapes. Best of all was another superb Otter sighting, initially seen eating a meal on the nearby rocks, before entering the water and swimming away to the middle of the bay, where we could watch it diving for fish. Norwick beach provided another treat, with a close, winter-plumaged

Great Northern Diver giving excellent views as it fished offshore, just beyond a single female Eider attended by five amorous drakes.

Keen of Hamar is famous for being home to the Unst's endemic flower, known as Edmonston's Chickweed or Shetland Mouse-ear. We found a few examples of this species on this serpentine rock moonscape, together with a number of other exciting plants including Frog Orchid, Moss Campion, Mountain Everlasting and the rare Arctic Sandwort. The overcast, cool and windy conditions meant that most of the flower heads were, unfortunately, tightly shut.

Day 6

Thursday 5th June

With a better weather forecast for the last full day of the tour, 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 led 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 really diminutive. Lesser Twayblade is both a rare and inconspicuous plant in any case, and they really are tiny here 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, albeit in wind and rain. 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. It was a surprise to find a single Barnacle Goose with a small flock of Greylags in a field adjacent to the road en route to the café.

The afternoon's weather was bright and sunny for a change, and we spent the time at the two lovely bays at Skaw and Norwick. Although no new birds were seen, we all enjoyed the small group of male Eiders at Norwick, with Arctic Terns fishing actively in the bays.

Day 7

Friday 6th June

Today was the best weather of the week, and we took the opportunity to stop on a moorland track en route to the Belmont ferry to Yell. We had nice views of several Whimbrels at this location, and were able to compare the plumage and structural differences from Curlews, which were also present at the site.

With the Eyebrowed Thrush seen earlier in the week still present in its favoured garden at Gutcher, the group made the most of the opportunity to have another look at this rare vagrant in optimal weather conditions. Although flighty, we all managed clear views as it fed in the local fields, and perched for short periods on fence posts.

Arriving back on Mainland, we headed for Busta House for a well-deserved coffee, before exploring the well-vegetated garden which leads down to Busta Voe. There were no new birds, but we had lovely views of a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers while we ate our lunch by the water.

Our time on Shetland was drawing to a close, but we managed a brief visit to a knitwear outlet in Lerwick, before the group arrived at the ferry terminal for the return trip overnight to Aberdeen. It had been a great trip, with many wildlife highlights.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

E=Endemic		May-June 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>						✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓			✓			
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓					
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	✓		✓
Red Grouse - E	<i>Lagopus scotica</i>				✓			
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</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>				✓			
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</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 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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</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>	✓		✓		✓		
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>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

E=Endemic		May-June 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓			✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓			
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓					
Icterine Warbler	<i>Hippolais icterina</i>		✓					
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓						✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eye-browed Thrush	<i>Turdus obscurus</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>	✓	✓	✓				
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓					

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>

Bees

Common name	Scientific name
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>
Moss Carder ('Shetland') Bumblebee	<i>Bombus muscorum agricola</i>

Plants

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	Hard Fern
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	Bracken
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Common Nettle
<i>Rumex acetosa</i>	Common Sorrel
<i>Claytonia sibirica</i>	Pink Purslane
<i>Arenaria norvegica</i>	Arctic Sandwort
<i>Cerastium nigrescens</i> var. <i>nigrescens</i>	Arctic (Edmonston's) Mouse-ear
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed
<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	Sea Sandwort
<i>Silene uniflora</i>	Sea Champion
<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Moss Champion
<i>Silene dioica</i>	Red Champion
<i>Caltha palustris</i>	Marsh-marigold
<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Meadow Buttercup
<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Creeping Buttercup
<i>Ranunculus aconitifolius</i>	Aconite-leaved Buttercup
<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	Dame's Violet
<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Cuckooflower
<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	Common Scurvygrass
<i>Alchemilla</i> sp.	Lady's-mantle
<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Meadowsweet
<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	Silverweed
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Tormentil
<i>Geum macrophyllum</i>	Large-leaved Avens
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Common Bird's-foot-trefoil
<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	Kidney Vetch
<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White Clover
<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	Red Clover
<i>Vicia sepium</i>	Bush Vetch
<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	Heath Milkwort
<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	Sycamore
<i>Mertensia maritima</i>	Oysterplant
<i>Myosotis discolor</i>	Changing Forget-me-not
<i>Viola riviniana</i>	Common Dog-violet
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>	Ground-elder
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed
<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>	Wild Angelica
<i>Conopodium majus</i>	Pignut
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Heather
<i>Erica cinerea</i>	Bell Heather
<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Thrift (Sea Pink)
<i>Galium saxatile</i>	Heath Bedstraw
<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Foxglove
<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>	Lousewort
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow-rattle
<i>Plantago maritima</i>	Sea Plantain
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Ribwort Plantain

<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>	Round-leaved Sundew
<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Common Butterwort
<i>Erythranthe guttata</i>	Monkeyflower
<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	Bogbean
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy
<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	Sea Mayweed
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Spear Thistle
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Creeping Thistle
<i>Pilosella aurantiaca</i>	Orange Hawkweed
<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.	Dandelion
<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Mountain Everlasting
<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Common Cottongrass
<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>	Hare's-tail Cottongrass
<i>Potamogeton polygonifolius</i>	Bog Pondweed
<i>Scilla verna</i>	Spring Squill
<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Bluebell
<i>Allium ursinum</i>	Ramsons (Wild Garlic)
<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	Yellow Iris
<i>Orchis mascula</i>	Early Purple Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>	Frog Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Heath Spotted Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Northern Marsh Orchid
<i>Neottia cordata</i>	Lesser Twayblade