

Shetland's Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 30th May 2026



Lesser Tawnyblade



Knot



St Ninian's Isle



Edmondston's Chickweed

Tour report by Mark Wood



Naturetrek

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Summary

This was a superb week on Shetland: we visited much of the mainland and the islands of Fetlar and Unst. The weather remained surprisingly pleasant throughout, and we had a great band of participants, comfy accommodation and a host of beautiful wildlife. Highlights ranged from visiting huge Gannet and other seabird colonies by land and sea, the atmospheric Storm Petrel colony on Mousa, a playful pair of Otters, very obliging Red-necked Phalaropes, Whimbrels, Red-throated, Great Northern and Pacific Divers, colourful Turnstones, Knots and Sanderlings all in breeding plumage, rare and delicate plants, and some incredible coastal scenery. All in all, it was a really memorable trip.

Day 1

Friday 22nd May

The tour group all assembled on deck of the MV Hrossey as the ship departed just before 7.00pm. As we made our way through the harbour we picked up Herring, Common and Great Black-backed Gulls, Cormorant, Goosander, Eider and Grey Heron. As we passed the breakwater to the open North Seam we had several groups of Bottlenose Dolphin feeding, some even jumping a little: there were perhaps twenty or more. Out on the open sea we passed many large flocks of feeding Kittiwakes and Guillemots, and a few Gannets cruised past. After a while we retired for dinner and then our cabins.

Day 2

Saturday 23rd May

Once docked in Lerwick, we disembarked, collected our luggage and the rental van very efficiently, and were on our way south in no time. We stopped at our hotel (The Sumburgh Hotel) to ditch our bags, then made our way down to the nearby Sumburgh Head. The many Fulmars were obvious, nesting on the cliffs and circling about in the air. A few Puffins posed on the grassy slopes, and many Guillemots packed themselves onto the steep rock faces. As we climbed higher up the cliffs towards the lighthouse we picked up nesting Kittiwakes, Razorbills and Shags, as well as marauding Great Skuas. Wheatears, Shetland Wrens and a few Twites flew over. We stopped in the café here for a drink and to get out of the wind, while enjoying its panoramic views.

We headed to Loch Spiggie, where we sat and enjoyed our lunch in the bird hide, while admiring Arctic Tern, a bathing Great Skua, Red-throated Diver, Turnstones and a single Barnacle Goose.

Next was the Pool of Virkie, where there was a nice selection of waders, including breeding-plumaged Sanderling, Turnstone, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ringed Plover, Curlew and Dunlin, as well as Shelduck and Eider.

We then went to Sandwick to look for a reported Pectoral Sandpiper: we couldn't find it, so went for a walk around the streams and fields at Hoswick. It was pretty quiet, but we did see several Swallows, Rock Dove and some plants like the abundant Marsh Marigold. We then returned to the hotel to rest, before dinner and running through the list.

Day 3

Sunday 24th May

We began the morning with a look at nearby Grutness Voe. Here we had very close views of summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver, plus Red-throated Diver and Eider. In the nearby garden were Chiffchaffs and a Redpoll.

We then headed to the west side of the mainland and walked across the beautiful sandy tombola to St Ninians Isle. Here we got very close to Red-throated Diver, Common and Arctic Terns, Black Guillemot, Razorbill and, on the island itself, very close views of Twite around the twelfth-century kirk.

We retraced our steps back to the mainland, picking up Sand Martin and Rock Pipit. It was time to go to Lerwick for our boat trip out to the island of Noss. We set off around the north of the island of Bressay, where we found a Minke Whale surfacing a few times. Upon reaching Noss, we were greeted by large colonies of Guillemots, with a few Razorbills and Kittiwakes. A few skuas squabbled over a dead Gannet in the water, and a Fulmar waited patiently on the sidelines. Then we sailed around the corner to the awe-inspiring spectacle of the Gannet colony proper: it was a feast for the eyes, ears and nose. After drinking it all in, we headed out to sea a little, where Phil threw the Gannets and Skuas some mackerel: it was a real delight to see them diving into the water right next to us.

On the drive back from Lerwick, we stopped to look for the Pectoral Sandpiper again, but only found a Purple Sandpiper. We returned to the hotel to rest and have dinner, and then at 9.30pm we set out again for our evening boat trip to the island of Mousa. We followed the boatmen towards the Bronze Age broch, while they told us about the history of the island and the biology of the Storm Petrels which breed here. It was heavily overcast and quite dark tonight, and as a result many Storm Petrels arrived in the darkness, whirling about the old stone walls and looking for their nest cavities. It was a marvellous and atmospheric experience.

Day 4

Monday 25th May

We started the day at the fabulous archaeological ruins at Jarlshof, right next to the hotel, where the remains of many thousands of years of human habitation are stacked on top of each other, and are wonderfully preserved. Birds seen here included Wheatear, Wren, Rock Dove, Ringed Plover and Turnstone. We set off north again, stopping at Loch Asta where we found lots of nesting waders, many with cute little chicks, including Redshank, Lapwing and Snipe. On the loch itself we found the vagrant Ring-necked Duck, as well as many Tufted Ducks, and Arctic and Common Terns. Further north, we stopped at Mavis Grind, a narrow strip of land between the North Sea and the Atlantic, where we ate lunch, and then we moved on to Hillswick, a nice bay where we had really close views of Red-breasted Merganser, plus Red-throated Diver and Black Guillemot.

Finally, we ended the journey at the road end at Eshaness, where we went for a walk around the spectacular cliff tops and got close to many nesting Fulmars, and also a very confiding juvenile Raven. From here we returned to the hotel, picking up a Teal and lovely pair of Red Grouse along the way.

Day 5

Tuesday 26th May

Today was largely a day of transit north to Unst. We loaded the van with our luggage and set off north again to Toft, where we caught the inter-island ferry to the island of Yell. The crossing yielded the usual seabirds, like

Kittiwake, Gannet, Black Guillemot and Shag. Once on Yell we explored the south coast and finally found our first Otter near Burravoe: we were able to watch it for a good time as it fished in the sea, always staying fairly far out. We drove up to the shop at Mid Yell, where we got lunch, and then had our picnic by the coast at Gutcher, where we had more good views of Red-throated Diver, and a Herring and a Great Black-backed Gull fighting over a dead fish. We travelled on to Gloup, where we checked the fields for a rare goose, but only found the resident Greylags Geese, and then visited a memorial to the fishermen who died in a great storm.

We crossed to the island of Unst, where we would stay for the next three nights. We stopped at the roadside pools at Lund, where we found Golden Plover, and Redshanks with adorable chicks at very close range, plus a single female Red-necked Phalarope busily swimming about on the water. We arrived at our hotel, where we got acquainted with our cabins, and met for dinner at 7.00pm.

Day 6

Wednesday 27th May

Our first stop was at Haroldswick, where we visited a reconstructed Viking long house and long ship. We also saw Great Northern Diver and five beautiful summer-plumaged Knots with the Turnstones here. In a nearby marsh, Sue spotted a Little Egret, a Shetland rarity.

We continued to Hermaness, where we spent around three hours walking up the boardwalk, across the moorland and to the Gannet colony and back. Along the way, we found excellent plants like Lesser Twayblade, Heath Spotted Orchid, Butterwort and Round-leaved Sundew, and birds like Dunlin, Twite, Skylark and at least nine Great Skuas on their nests. The seascapes viewed from the cliff tops were marvellous, with wonderful blue skies and water, and white fluffy clouds. The Gannet spectacle was incredible, with every available space packed with birds, and the skies full of soaring birds.

We travelled to Skaw, the most northerly settlement in Britain, where we had lunch on the scenic beach while we watched Gannets fishing in the bay. The stream vegetation here held a migrant Lesser Whitethroat, which showed really well, plus a Chiffchaff. We then went to the beach at Norwick, where a very rare breeding-plumaged Pacific Diver had been seen. We arrived, and several other birders were already there. We all got reasonable views of the bird as it fed in the bay, but never too close to shore.

To end the day we went to Keen of Hamar, where we explored the bizarre serpentine heath plant community. We found an array of beautiful, miniature plants including the endemic Edmondston's Chickweed, plus Northern Rockcress, Arctic Sandwort, Early Purple Orchid, Frog Orchid and Mountain Everlasting. We also had great views of a grounded Whimbrel, plus another flying over giving its evocative song.

Day 7

Thursday 28th May

Another island to the south of Unst was on the agenda today: Fetlar. We checked a few areas of coastline and lochs for Otter, finding a Goldeneye and some Mute Swan, and two male Crossbills behind the Baltasound Post Office. We finally found an Otter (with a big fish) at the ferry terminal: it swam ashore and hauled up on the rocks to eat it. Unfortunately, we had to board the boat, so we could not enjoy the animal for as long or as close as we could have.

The crossing to Fetlar was fairly quiet, producing mainly Black Guillemots and Fulmars, and after twenty-five minutes we were there. The first stop was at the Houbie marsh, where we were immediately greeted by three pairs of Red-necked Phalaropes, which we were able to watch at length and up close as they swam about the roadside pools: we used the van as a hide. A great start! We then had a soup, roll and cake lunch at the Houbie shop and post office, where there was a Chiffchaff in the garden. Afterwards, we went to the bay at Aith, where we were greeted by a further four phalaropes feeding in the surf, and found the strange-looking Oysterplant on the beach.

We went to the Loch of Funzie area and adjacent beach, where we found nesting Red-throated Divers, more Twites, and another couple of phalaropes. It was time to return to the ferry, where we spent a bit of time looking for Otter again, but to no avail. Back on Unst, most people returned to the hotel, but a few of us went out to explore the wooded garden at Halligarth, where we found a Hummingbird Hawk-moth, a few Red Admiral and Painted Lady butterflies, but only a Chiffchaff on the bird front.

Day 8

Friday 29th May

Our final full day on Shetland saw us checking out of our hotel on Unst (after another good breakfast): we headed down to the shop in Baltasound for snacks and fuel. We checked several areas of coastline for Otters but came up with nothing. It was time to board the ferry for the return trip to Yell. Once on Yell, we dashed across the island and waited a while at the next ferry terminal for an Otter. None appeared, but there were a pair of Twites, and some of us got tea and coffees.

We returned to the mainland once again and made our way south, detouring to Lunna Ness. Along this scenic peninsula we spotted a pair of Red Grouse near the side of the road, and were able to watch them at length, at close range. Further on, we stopped at the Lunna Kirk and its attractive bay, where we sat in warm sunshine eating our lunch and watching a fabulous Great Northern Diver. We explored the coast on the other side of the road, where we spotted a pair of Otters fishing. We were able to watch them at great length as they swam across the bay, getting closer and closer, until they were right under us. We could even see them under the water. We then followed them for a while as they continued along the coast, until we eventually let them go. It was a really memorable Otter encounter!

It was now time to return to Lerwick and board the return ferry back to Aberdeen. As we set sail, it began raining, but we stayed on deck for a bit anyway. As we came out of the harbour, we were told that a female King Eider which had been seen earlier in the day was with a flock of male Eiders, but the ship was already moving quickly, and they soon became too distant in the binoculars: the one that got away! That aside, a few Gannets and Fulmars were the main entertainment. We ate dinner on board together, then retired to our cabins.

Day 9

Saturday 30th May

We arrived back in Aberdeen at 7.00am to glorious sunshine. Once we had disembarked, we said our goodbyes in the ferry terminal, and continued with our separate onward journeys.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
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>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓			✓	
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>				✓				
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓		✓			✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</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>				H				
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i> 'domestica'	✓							
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓				✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</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>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓						
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	✓	H	✓	
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>					✓		✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>						✓		
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	✓			✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</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>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>						✓		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>						✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓							
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓				
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>								✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓					
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓						
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓			✓	H	
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>							✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		H	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</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 Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓						
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓		✓			
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>							✓	

Mammals

		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			✓					
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	✓							
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					✓		✓	✓

Insects

Common name	Scientific name	May 2026							
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>						✓	✓	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>							✓	
Hummingbird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellarum</i>							✓	
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Plants

Common name	Scientific name
Marsh Horsetail	<i>Equisetum palustre</i>
Hard Fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>
Bracken	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>
Sitka Spruce	<i>Picea sitchensis</i>
Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Common Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosa</i>
Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>
Pink Purslane	<i>Claytonia sibirica</i>
Arctic Sandwort	<i>Arenaria norvegica</i>
Arctic (Edmondston's) Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium nigrescens</i> var. <i>nigrescens</i>
Common Chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>
Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>
Northern Rockcress	<i>Arabis patraea</i>
Sea Champion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>
Moss Champion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
Red Champion	<i>Silene dioica</i>
Marsh-marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>
Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>
Lesser Celadine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>
Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>
Common Bird's-foot-trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>
Kidney Vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Meadow Cranesbill	<i>Geranium pratense</i>
Heath Milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>
Common Dog-violet	<i>Viola riviniana</i>
Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>
Ground-elder	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>
Scots Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus drucei</i>
Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>
Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Buck's-horn Plantain	<i>Plantago coronopus</i>
Round-leaved Sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Sea Mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>
Spear Thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.
Mountain Everlasting	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Hare's-tail Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>
Bog Pondweed	<i>Potamogeton polygonifolius</i>
Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>
Ramsons (Wild Garlic)	<i>Allium ursinum</i>
Yellow Iris	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Frog Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>
Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>
Early Purple Orchid	<i>Orchis mascula</i>
Lesser Twayblade	<i>Neottia cordata</i>