

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 22 June 2012



Oystercatcher



Northern Fulmars



Short-eared Owl

Report compiled by David McAllister
Cover images courtesy of Chris Wood



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Participants:	Chris Wood	
	Mary Wood	
	Art Hulse	
	Alicia Hulse	
	Claire Langelaan	
	Sandy Alexander	
	Jill Alexander	

Day 1

Sunday 17th June

Weather: Fine, overcast

Chris and Mary were first to arrive at Kirkwall's friendly little airport at 15:25. David met them and took them straight out to the Deerness Peninsula where we visited Sandi Sand, Taracliff Bay and Newark Bay - three bays with rather different natures, the first mudflat, the second sandy and the last rocky. This provided a brief introduction to the coastal birds of Orkney. On the way back to the airport to pick up Sandy and Jill at 16:10, Mary noticed a Short-eared Owl crossing the road behind the bus, our first fleeting glimpse of one of the iconic birds of the islands.

With Sandy and Jill on board we returned to the hotel and after a brief stop to settle in David took us for a short walk through the winding main street of Kirkwall to the harbour and the Peerie Sea. Claire was next to arrive, and we all got together for dinner in the hotel.

In the evening David and Claire drove out to the ferry pier to meet the 23:00 ferry from Aberdeen which had the last two of the group, Art and Alicia. The sea was glassy calm and terns, gulls and an occasional Bonxie (Great Skua) flew around the bay as the ferry approached.

Day 2

Monday 18th June

Weather: Fine, sunny, calm

Breakfast was at 07:45, then off to Kirkwall Harbour where we had a little time to watch the gulls, terns and skuas before boarding the ferry to Westray. We quickly learned to distinguish Guillemots and Razorbills on the water and spent the whole journey on deck bird watching. Off Eday David noticed two Porpoises in the sound but we only had a fleeting view of them.

Arriving at the little pier of Rapness we headed north through the surprisingly rich farmland of Westray to Pierowall, the only town on the island. We first stopped at the local baker and ordered sandwiches. While they were being prepared we went to the Westray Heritage Centre which has displays of the local natural history and archaeology. One of the major items is the tiny figurine known as the "Orkney Venus" or locally as the "Westray Wife" the only Neolithic human figurine found in Scotland which was discovered at Links of Noltland in 2009.

Before collecting our sandwiches we visited the ruins of the little 13th Century Lady Kirk. As well as the interesting building we saw butterflies and bumblebees in the graveyard and both Grey and Common Seals on the rocks behind the church.

We went on along the long, winding and bumpy road and track to the Noup Head lighthouse. With calm warm weather we were able to eat our sandwiches on the cliff top while watching the Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins, Gannets and Kittiwakes. All the time Bonxies glided along the cliff, occasionally diving to menace a Gannet returning to the enormous colonies to feed a chick. More acrobatic were the Arctic Skuas which occasionally soared over and harried the passing Arctic Terns. On the rocks below the lighthouse there was a large group of Grey Seals.

All too soon we had to head back, stopping briefly at the Loch of Burness to look for the most northerly breeding Dabchicks (Little Grebes) in the British Isles. We didn't find any here but did further south on the island. Our next stop was at the Castle O'Burrian a grass covered coastal stack. Here Fulmars and Puffins breed in large numbers. We were greatly entertained watching the antics of the Puffins which had a one way system in the wind, landing on the east of the stack but climbing to the summit and jumping off on the west side when leaving.

In the remaining time before our ferry we looked at the southern coasts of Westray – the sand and mud flats of the Bay of Tuquoy and the rocky shore near Rapness. In the sound near the ferry terminal we again saw two Common Porpoises, one large and one small, and everyone had good views once we had worked out that David had a different perception of roof colours to the rest of us!

Day 3

Tuesday 19th June

Weather: AM - Wet. PM - Cloudy, bright

Most of the group set out in the minibus at 6:30am. David took us to Waulkmill Bay on the Scapa Flow coast of the mainland. We stopped at the first lay-by to get an overview of the bay. Sedge Warblers were singing in the scrub as we looked around. A male Hen Harrier took off from just in front of us and flew off over the moor, followed by a Whimbrel. After surveying the upper bay we went to outer bay where there were Common Seals and sea duck to be seen. Mary noticed something swimming close to the shore – an Otter! We all had good views as it swam along occasionally diving and showing its tail clearly. It eventually disappeared behind the rocks of the headland. We returned happy for a well deserved breakfast!

In the morning we examined the wonderful ancient monuments of central Orkney, the Stones of Stenness, and Watchstone, the Barnhouse Settlement and the majestic Ring of Brodgar. Natural history was not forgotten with a visit to the Barnhouse Hide where we had distant views of a Red-throated Diver not to mention a fishing dog!

Lunch was at Skara Brae followed by a visit to the ancient settlement. We then headed further south along the west coast of the island to Yesnaby where we were joined by David Kent, a local naturalist. The cliff top vegetation has carpets of Thrift, Spring Squill, Sea Plantain, Thyme and Birds-foot Trefoil and it was among these we searched for *Primula scotica*. We found many plants without flowers but eventually David McAllister found one in flower which we all photographed.

We moved on to David Kent's wood and marshland reserve at Harray where he had put down corrugated iron sheets to act as shelter for animals. We found two Common Frogs but no Orkney Voles. However before leaving we passed an area David was preparing for planting by putting down carpet. We lifted this and under the last piece found a vole. We attempted to get photos of the fast moving mammal before it disappeared into the surrounding vegetation but Chris was the only photographer who was successful. Before leaving we had a lesson in duck identification on the marsh.

After leaving David Kent's we headed to the south of mainland to the Churchill Barriers connecting through three small islands to South Ronaldsay. As well as bird watching we visited the beautiful little Italian Chapel built during the war by Italian Prisoners. Most of the amazing interior decoration was done by one man, Domenico Chiocchetti. When inside it was difficult to remember that we were actually in a Nissen Hut!

Day 4

Wednesday 20th June

Weather: Sunny, warm (David wore shorts in the afternoon!)

The pre-breakfast tour took us to Newark Bay and Taracliff Bay, already visited by Chris and Mary on Sunday.

After breakfast we had free time in Kirkwall. David took those who wanted to visit St. Magnus Cathedral for a very short tour looking at the wonderful building and its many connections to Norway. We met at 11:15 and set off to Maeshowe where we were taken on a very interesting tour of the burial mound which predates the Pyramids and Stonehenge by 1000 years.

We went on to Stromness for lunch and then went to Marwick Head where we enjoyed sights, sounds and smells of colonies with 25,000 auks. On top of the headland stands the Kitchener Memorial 87m (285 feet) above the site where HMS Hampshire was sunk on June 5th 1916.

After leaving the headland we visited the Loons reserve where we were able to watch ducks, waders and, rather to our surprise, Brown Hares on the grassland surrounding the marshy pools.

In the late evening David took his bat detector for a walk around the wooded parts of Kirkwall but didn't find any bats this time...

Day 5

Thursday 21st June

Weather: Cloudy, dry, cold N wind (David wore long sleeves!). Evening: very wet

Before breakfast we went across the Churchill Barriers as far as Echina Loch on Burray. It was a rather cold morning and even the birds and otters seemed reluctant to come out!

The rest of the day was spent exploring the centre and north of west mainland. First stop was Waulkmill Bay where we found some Bar-tailed Godwits on the sand flats. Onwards heading north to Gurness where we had lunch before visiting the Broch of Gurness.

After a stop at the local “Palatial Loos” we climbed up to Burgar Hill, where we joined some other bird watchers in the little hide below the wind turbine towers. The other birders had been waiting for over two hours in the hopes of seeing Red-throated Divers. We were in luck as they flew in about 10 minutes after we arrived, and we all got really good views!

Then on to Birsay for lunch and as the tide was right we were able to cross over to the Pictish and Norse site at the Brough of Birsay.

Finally after a brief stop at the Loons again we went back up Burgar Hill from the other side. Near the summit Jill spotted a Short-eared Owl and we watched it for some time until it settled in the heather. After we had parked the bus on the rather cold summit we walked back and to our surprise the owl was still sitting in the same place in the moor, depending on its excellent camouflage to protect it from us or predators!

Our last stop was at Binscarth Wood the only sizeable wood in the Orkney Islands. Unfortunately by now it was rather windy so the conditions were not good for listening for woodland birds.

Day 6

Friday 22nd June

Weather: Cloudy, dry. Windy at first

Goodbyes and departures...

"The essence of Orkney's magic is silence, loneliness and the deep marvellous rhythms of sea and land, darkness and light."

George Mackay Brown

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			17	18	19	20	21	22
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				✓		
4	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓	✓	✓	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			✓	✓	✓	
8	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓	✓	✓	
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓		✓	
10	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓		✓	
12	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓	✓		✓	
13	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓				
14	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓		✓	✓	
16	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓			✓	
19	Northern Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓		✓	
21	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
25	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓		
26	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
27	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					✓	
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓					
31	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓			
32	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>					✓	
39	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓		✓	✓	
40	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓		✓	✓	
42	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓		✓		
43	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓		✓	✓	
45	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓		✓		
46	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓		✓		
47	Common Pigeon Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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			17	18	19	20	21	22
48	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> (domest.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	✓		✓		✓	
52	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓	✓	
56	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓	✓	
59	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓			
60	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus paludicola</i>			✓		✓	
61	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					h	
65	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓			✓	
66	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓				
69	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
70	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓		✓	
71	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓	✓			

Mammals

1	Orkney Vole	<i>Microtus arvalis orcadensis</i>			✓			
2	Common Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>				✓		
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>			✓	5+		
5	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			✓			
6	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓		✓	
7	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓				
8	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓				

Amphibians

1	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>			✓			
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Butterflies

1	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓				

Bumblebees

1	Great Yellow Bumblebee	<i>Bombus distinguendus</i>		✓				
2	Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>				✓		
3	Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>				✓		

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Plants

1	Lady-fern	<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i>				✓		
2	Male-fern	<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>				✓		
3	Hard-fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>				✓		
4	Marah Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>		✓	✓	✓		
5	Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>			✓	✓		
7	Orache	<i>Atriplex</i> sp.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Pink Purslane	<i>Claytonia sibirica</i>					✓	
9	Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	✓			✓	✓	
10	Ragged-Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>		✓	✓	✓		
11	Sea Campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
12	Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>	✓		✓		✓	
13	Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>				✓		
14	Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Osier	<i>Salix viminalis</i>		✓		✓		
16	Eared Willow	<i>Salix aurita</i>		✓		✓	✓	
17	Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
18	Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
19	Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	✓			✓	✓	
21	Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>	✓					
22	Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>		✓				
23	Grass of Parnassia	<i>Parnassia palustris</i>		✓				
24	Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>		✓		✓	✓	
25	Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>		✓	✓	✓		
27	Kidney Vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>		✓	✓			
28	Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	✓		✓		✓	
30	Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>			✓	✓	✓	
31	Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
32	Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>		✓	✓			
33	Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>		✓				
34	Water Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>			✓			
35	Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>		✓	✓			
36	Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
37	Greater Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>				✓		
38	Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>			✓		✓	
39	Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia officinalis</i> agg.			✓			
40	Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>		✓		✓	✓	
41	Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>				✓	✓	
42	Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>				✓		
43	Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>				✓		
44	Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>				✓		
46	Sea Mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>		✓	✓		✓	
47	Magellan Ragwort	<i>Senecio smithii</i>			✓			
48	Colts-foot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>	✓				✓	
49	Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			17	18	19	20	21	22
50	Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
51	Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
52	Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>			✓	✓		
53	Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Heath Spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> subsp. <i>Ericetorum</i>			✓	✓		
55	Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	



2012 Naturetrekers at Noup Head, Westray by David McAllister



Marwick Head by David McAllister