

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 7 June 2013



Gannets



Calm day on the Yesnaby coast



Primula scotica



The 2013 Naturetrek Group at Yesnaby

Report & images compiled by David McAllister



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Participants:	John Rodgers Jan Rodgers Roy Fenton Heather Fenton Rosemary Bonney Mike Bonney Hans Wolf Inga Wolf Judy Lockett Christine Birchall Duncan Currie Margaret King	

Day 1

Sunday 2nd June

Weather: Calm, overcast

David met nine of the group in the St.Magnus Lounge of the Orkney Hotel at 5:30pm. After an introductory talk we went for a walk around Kirkwall, stopping at the Big Tree, the harbour and the Peerie Sea. The remaining three members of the group joined us for dinner at about 8:30 pm as their plane from Edinburgh had been delayed.

Day 2

Monday 3rd June

Weather: AM cloudy, some drizzle; PM bright, breezy.

We breakfasted at 7:45 am and at 8:45 am set off for Kirkwall harbour and our trip to Westray. We had a very calm crossing and had good views of Common Seals and all the auks from the deck. When we arrived at Rapness Pier at the south end of Westray it was drizzling so we went straight to the Pierowall Heritage Centre to see the “Orkney Venus” or “Westray Wifie” a tiny Neolithic statuette, and interesting exhibits about the history and archaeology of Westray.

We then set out across to the lighthouse at Noup Head. As it was still damp we ate our picnics in the bus. By the time we had finished the sun had come out and we walked along the first section of the spectacular cliffs with enormous colonies of Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Gannets on the ledges below us. There were some Razorbills and Puffins as well. Bonxies (Great Skuas) patrolled the cliffs but to David’s surprise we didn’t see any Arctic Skuas.

Heading back across the island our next stop was the strangely named Castle o’Burrian, the best place in Orkney to see Puffins. There were not many visible, probably because they were incubating, but the area proved very interesting to the botanists in the group as there were many coastal and cliff flowers.

Our last stop was at the Bay of Tuquoy with Letto Sands at its head. Here there are reed beds and extensive areas of mud and sand so we were able to find a good selection of northern coastal and estuarine birds. Then after a short trip along the south shore of the island we returned to the Rapness Pier for the ferry back to Kirkwall.

Day 3

Tuesday 4th June

Weather: AM cloudy; PM warm & sunny then haar (sea fog); Evening haar

Some of the group were up at 6:30 am for a trip to Waulkmill Bay on Scapa Flow. After breakfast we all set off to the “Heart of Neolithic Orkney” the wonderful complex of archaeological sites stretching out between the two central lochs of Stenness and Harray.

Our first stop was at the Stones of Stenness and the associated Barnhouse settlement. While there we had Sedge Warbler singing and John found one on the loch side reeds and we all had excellent views of the bird. While we were watching the warbler Mike found a Red-throated Diver on the loch and with the telescopes we were able to see it rolling preening in the fresh water. We spent same time in the Barnhouse hide before heading up through the Ness of Brodgar to the magnificent Ring of Brodgar. This again turned out to be an excellent botanical site as well as a fascinating archaeological one.

We had lunch at the restaurant at Skara Brae before visiting the famous Neolithic village which was buried under sand dunes for over 200 years. Our next stop was at the exposed coastal cliffs of Yesnaby. Here in the warm, sunshine we looked for the botanical highlight of the trip, the little purple Scottish primrose, *Primula scotica*. We found about twenty plants in flower among the drifts of spring Squill, Thrift, Birds-foot Trefoil and Plantains. As we returned to the bus David showed us some of the rock formations in the 400 million year old finely bedded sandstone; wave patterns, mud cracks and horse-tooth stromatolites.

We returned along the north shore of Scapa Flow and drove down to the first Churchill Barrier and the beautiful Italian Chapel built by Italian prisoners of war on the little island of Lamb Holm. As often happens in warm days in Orkney we were now surrounded by haar (sea fog). On the way south we had a Short-eared Owl flying along beside the road.

We returned to the hotel for dinner and to complete the bird list then some of the group set out again for a trip over some of the hill land and marshes listening for Corncrakes. David hoped that the higher ground would be above the haar but unfortunately it was not. We didn't hear any Corncrakes but did add Cuckoo to our lists.

Day 4

Wednesday 5th June

Weather; AM cloudy; PM sunny

We had a more relaxing day today. After breakfast David took us to St.Magnus Cathedral and showed us around it. We looked at the Norwegian connections both in the building of the cathedral and in recent times. We also visited the memorials to eminent Orcadians and in particular looked at the memorial to Dr John Rae, the Orcadian explorer of Canada and discoverer of the Northwest Passage who was born 200 years ago.

At 11:30 am we set off to Maeshowe. While we were waiting for a tour of the monument, the botanists had a look at Magellan Ragwort and the burnside buttercups. Inga and Hans found a large brown trout and an eel in the burn. Between 12:00 & 1:00 pm we had an excellent conducted tour of the Neolithic tomb with its solar alignment and collection of Viking rune graffiti.

We went to Stromness for lunch and then drove north to Marwick Head where there are impressive bird cliffs below the Kitchener Memorial. Again there seemed to be good numbers of Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Razorbills. Gannets and Bonxies were constantly flying along the cliffs.

From the cliffs we moved on to the bird hide at the Loons, a marshland reserve with lots of ducks, geese and other water birds. We had excellent views of Dabchick (Little Grebe) right in front of the hide. Following this we returned to Kirkwall via the Dounby to Evie road where we had good views of Twite but still no Hen Harriers.

Day 5

Thursday 6 June

Weather: AM cloudy; PM sunny; Evening cloudy

A small group set off with David at 6:30 am to look at the Churchill Barriers and the islands they connect. Our first stop was on Churchill barrier 4 which has built up a sand dune system since it was built in 1944. We found Oyster plant (*Mertensia maritima*) growing on the top of the beach among lots of Orache (*Atriplex sp.*) and Sea Sandwort (*Honckenya peploides*). On the beach we also saw Little Tern, Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Sanderling. We went on to South Ronaldsay and returned along the coast looking for Otters but with no success.

After breakfast the whole group set out along the north shore of Scapa Flow stopping briefly at Waulkmill Bay for those who hadn't been there already. We then turned north to Tuskerbister an area where heather moor comes down to wet grassland and ideal for Hen Harriers. We spent some time bird watching but with no success here, however, as we drove north over the small ridge at the end Mike spotted a Hen Harrier male quartering over the moorland edge – a suitable birthday present for Mike and a great relief to David! We were to see three more during the day....

North of Finstown we called in to a small private reserve where the owner, a friend of David's, had put out sheets of corrugated iron and carpet as refugia for Orkney Voles. We lifted a number of these and saw lots of vole runs but no voles. At this site we had excellent views of a number of duck, a Short-eared Owl and a drumming Snipe. The Snipe was low enough for us to see it spreading its tail as it dived to produce the drumming noise.

We again cut across a hill road to the east coast where we visited the Broch of Gurness, an Iron Age and Viking site with a wonderfully preserved village sitting outside the walls of the massive broch. The coastal birdwatching was also interesting and at last we saw a pair of Arctic Skuas. After this we climbed up to the little hide below the wind turbines on the Birsay Moors. There were lots of breeding Greylag with young chicks and some well fed-looking Bonxies!

We moved on to Birsay where we had lunch in the tea-rooms before going over the causeway to the Brough of Birsay, a small island with Pictish and Norse settlements and monastery and a lighthouse. After looking at the historic site some of the group walked over the island to look at the lighthouse while the rest botanised around the settlements. The light house groups had excellent views of Twite on the fences as they returned.

David then gave us a choice of final visits as we returned south, and the vote for visiting the Binscarth woods was unanimous. These sycamore and pine woods in a gully near Finstown are the only true woodland habitat on the mainland and provided a selection of woodland birds and plants.

After a leisurely dinner David took some of the party out past the airport to the bays which connect the Dearness Peninsula to the rest of mainland. We had excellent views of Sanderling on the sandy bays, and as we returned to the bus a pair of Linnets sat and twittered to us adding a final species to our list.

Day 6

Friday 7th June

Weather: Warm, sunny spells

Breakfast, farewells and departure

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			2	3	4	5	6
1	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scoticus</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	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓				✓
9	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
11	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			✓		
12	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓	
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓	
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓		✓
18	Northern Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					✓
19	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>					✓
20	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</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	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓
26	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓	✓		✓
27	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓			
30	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓			
31	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓			✓
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			✓
33	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓	✓
39	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>					✓
40	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓			
41	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>					✓
44	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	✓	
46	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
47	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			2	3	4	5	6
48	Common Pigeon Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓		✓	
50	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓			✓	✓
51	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			✓		
53	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓		✓
54	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓			
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓	✓
59	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓		✓	
62	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓	✓	
63	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					✓
64	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓		✓
65	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		
68	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
69	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓
71	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓		
72	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓			✓
74	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>					✓
75	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				✓	
76	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	✓				
77	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>				✓	✓
78	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>					✓
79	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				✓	

Mammals

1	Orkney Vole	<i>Microtus arvalis orcadensis</i>				runs	runs
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>			✓	✓	✓
4	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓		✓
5	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓			
6	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>					+

Amphibians

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

1	Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>				✓	
2	Eel	<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>				✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			2	3	4	5	6

Insects

1	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>			✓	✓	✓
2	Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>			✓		✓

Plants

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			2	3	4	5	6
45	Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>				✓	
46	Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>					✓
48	Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
49	Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>					✓
50	White Campion	<i>Silene alba</i>		✓	✓		
51	Common Dog-violet	<i>Viola riviniana</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Buck's-horn Plantain	<i>Plantago coronopus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Water Horsetail	<i>Equisetum fluviatile</i>		✓		✓	✓
54	Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum sp.</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Bracken	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Hare's-tail Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>			✓	✓	✓
57	Water Mint	<i>Mentha aquatica</i>			✓	✓	
58	Charlock	<i>Sinapis arvensis</i>			✓	✓	✓
59	Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>					✓
60	Three-cornered Garlic	<i>Allium triquetrum</i>					✓
61	Lesser Celandine	<i>Ranunculus ficaria</i>					✓
62	Bog Asphodel	<i>Narthecium ossifragum</i>					✓
63	Wood-rush	<i>Luzula sp.</i>					✓
64	Speedwell	<i>Veronica sp.</i>					✓
65	Beech	<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>					✓
66	Hawthorn	<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>					✓
67	Purple-flowered Raspberry	<i>Rubus odoratus</i>					✓