

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 15 June 2018



Meadow Pipit



Northern Fulmar



Little Tern



Twite

Report and images by Stewart Woolley



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Day 1

Sunday 10th June

Where does the time go? It hardly seems like yesterday that I was meeting last year's group for our short tour of Orkney.

The St Magnus lounge at the Orkney Hotel once again gave us the opportunity for a meet and greet, and a chat over a coffee about plans for the week. Keen and refreshed, we headed for the minibus and set off straight away for a quick trip out before dinner. Only venturing a short distance from Kirkwall, we made for the 'Head of Work', a promontory north of Kirkwall, looking out towards the island of Shapinsay. Parking up, we were soon looking at our first Common Eider of the trip, with several hundred, if not a thousand, gathered around the cages of the salmon farm sited in the Bay of Carness. Here too, an Atlantic Grey Seal spy-hopped, keeping an eye on our progress as we made our way towards the open moorland. Great Cormorant passed by and the first 'Bonxie' or Great Skua went west, close in. Out in the deep-water channel that allows cruise ships access to Kirkwall, several Black Guillemot fed distantly with many Shag also present. The pathway out was lined on both sides with an impressive display of Northern Marsh-orchid, with Cuckooflower giving a delicate pink contrast to the vivid orchids. Skylark and Meadow Pipit were both in song overhead, with Redshank and Oystercatcher calling nearby.

As the path became a little damper, we soon found some fairly stunted Common Butterwort, an interesting insectivorous plant, that had clearly been feasting on small flies and midges that were stuck to the leaf rosettes. Our main 'target' species soon became evident, as we all watched an elegant dark-phased Arctic Skua, soon followed by a second. Both birds gave a good aerial display before settling and giving us views through the scope. No matter how many skuas one sees, they always draw the attention and have a certain aura of mischief and menace about them, whichever species. With time marching on, and tummies rumbling for dinner, we slowly made our way back to the bus, stopping to watch two Common Ringed Plover on nearby rocks, and more Redshank sounding the alarm. A handful of Arctic Terns fed just offshore, and several Greylag Geese made a racket as they passed overhead. This species is doing very well on Orkney, possibly a little too well, and has become cause for debate and complaint in some circles. A project aimed at controlling numbers has now come to an end, and the population is once again on a rapid rise. Feeling satisfied with our start, we headed for the hotel and our first tasty meal of the week.

Day 2

Monday 11th June

A grey but bright dawn greeted the seven early risers for our daily pre-breakfast trip out. Our route this morning took us just a few miles west of Kirkwall to Waulkmill bay, adjacent to the RSPB Hobbister Hill site. Several Wrens sang as we parked up and two Twite worked their way along the road side as we de-bussed. From here we took a short stroll down the steps to overlook the bay. A male Stonechat called from nearby Heather tops, with at least two young birds looking for food too. The bay was generally quiet, with a handful of Fulmar working the low grassy cliffs below our position and a minimum of five Rock Pipit feeding on the weed-covered rocks in front of us. A scan out into Scapa Flow produced the usual small numbers of Shag and Common Guillemot, along with the surprise of four Great Northern Divers, a party of two adults and two young, feeding together at distance.

Returning slowly to the bus, the distinctive, Greylag-geese-like call of Red-throated Diver was heard overhead as two of these stunning birds headed out into the Flow and gave adequate, if not great, views to all. Pretty happy with our haul, we made for the pier at Scapa, as we still had a little time before breakfast. Passing close to the shore, a wake, very close in, proved to belong to a Harbour (also known as Common) Seal as it swam submerged past us, clearly visible through crystal clear waters.

Making for the pier, we were impressed at the scale of the ship-handling tugs moored alongside, ever ready to aid the huge oil tankers that use Scapa Flow to load and discharge into the storage/processing facility on the island of Flotta. Just beyond these boats, a pair of Long-tailed Duck drifted by, asleep, with several Common Eider for comparison. A look to the south gave us great views of Black Guillemot and an absolutely stunning, full-summer plumaged Great Northern Diver, no more than 50 yards away, with two Razorbill even closer at the pier end. I think the chances of seeing such a smart Great Northern, this well and as close again, must be slim at best!! Well satisfied, we set off for the hotel and a hearty feed.

A boat trip in search of wildlife always promises adventure, and the unexpected. We made for the quay at Kirkwall and waited to board our ship, The Earl Sigurd, named after the “Mighty” first earl of Orkney, for the nearly 1½-hour crossing to Rapness at the Southernmost tip of the island of Westray. Leaving the confines of Kirkwall, we headed north, out past Shapinsay, Gairsay, Egilsay and Eday, in totally flat, calm conditions. Bird-wise, the voyage was relatively quiet, with small groups of Common and Black Guillemot, occasional Arctic Terns and Greylag Geese being noted initially. Later on, we saw our first Puffins of the trip, with a few dozen seen during the crossing. Northern Gannet, Shag, Great Cormorant and a single Great Skua were seen off our port side. With Westray now in view, the sheltered waters of Rapness Sound gave us a single Harbour Porpoise, loitering on the surface long enough for most the group to see.

Soon disembarking, we headed north for the fantastic high cliffs at Noup Head; here, the numbers of seabirds are staggering, with thousands of Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Northern Gannet and Fulmars filling the rugged ledges. The short sward under our feet was covered with the delicate lilac flowers of Spring Squill and the yellows of Trefoils and Buttercup. Approaching the edge at a safe distance, the smell of a bustling seabird cliff soon became apparent, and the sounds, mainly of the Kittiwake, added to the scene, as did the always well-received sightings of Puffins. These birds never fail to entertain and seem to be thriving here on Westray. Other cliff nesters present were Rock Dove (the genuine article), Jackdaw and Great Skua, and we were able to pick out many ‘bridled’ Common Guillelots, distinctive with their white ‘glasses’. Wandering on for better views, David called out that he had, quite remarkably, just seen a Common Quail, as it flew from under his feet, out of the tufty grasses of the cliff top. With a little searching, several of the group also had brief but adequate flight views of this most unexpected summer migrant, usually only heard singing from the deep cover of a barley crop. Chuffed to bits, we made for the lighthouse and a relaxed lunch in stunning, sunny and calm weather, stopping to watch and listen to a drumming snipe overhead en route. The lighthouse garden held a single male Northern Wheatear and the familiar sight of a rowdy group of juvenile Starling, very much a farmland bird here on Orkney. An opportunist Great Skua was eyeing up our fayre, with several more seen during the short drive to the main village on Westray, Pierowall.

With a comfort break required, we spent some time in the Westray heritage centre, home to the famous ‘Westray Wifey’, a diminutive carving reckoned to be the earliest representation of the human form in Scotland. Dating back some 5000 years, she stands barely two inches tall, but has a big presence here! Other exhibits on show

included a humbling account of the sacrifices made by the people of Westray during the Great War, and the superb and fun recreation of a busy seabird cliff, complete with sounds, but luckily not smells! Bad smells were to be a recurring theme over the next hour, as we headed for the well-preserved ruin of Noltland Castle. Built around 1560, its imposing and austere ramparts certainly exhibited function over form; just as well, as its original owner, Gilbert Balfour made plenty of enemies in the C16th political scene on Orkney. A call from an upper level soon saw Stewart, 'volunteered' to rescue a Fulmar that had just crash-landed, unable to find an exit point. Knowing full well what was coming his way, Stewart soon scooped up the stranded wee soul, and was soon the owner of a handful of Fulmar oil, a putrid smelling substance, disgorged, in defence to ward off attackers. Taking the bird downstairs to a suitable release point, it flew off strongly, ready to re-arm itself!

The Loch of Burness, just below the castle, held a large group of preening Kittiwake, a single dark-phased Arctic Skua, Tufted Duck and the now omni-present Greylags, along with a small breeding colony of Black-headed Gull just to the east. With the aroma of Fulmar very much needing to be removed(!), we made for the village shop and a stop for coffee at the super little tearoom.

Conscious of the time, we began the short drive back towards Rapness, noting both Common and Atlantic Grey seals hauled out in the bay of Pierowall. As it's nearly impossible to see too many Puffins, another 'fix' was had at the Castle o' Burrian, a small grass-covered sea stack, accessed by a wonderful short walk along a flower-rich clifftop path. Red, pink, white and Bladder Campion, Cuckooflower, Spring Squill and Thrift provided a glorious scene as we made for a suitable vantage point. Looking down to the waters of Rack Wick, around 150 Puffins were in a raft on the sea with many more at their burrows; Rock Pipit, Fulmar, Twite and Northern Raven made up the supporting cast. A brief stop at the Bay of Tafts proved very quiet, with just a few Sanderling, Common Eider and Great Black-backed Gulls for interest. Waiting for our ferry 'home', a calling Sandwich Tern was new for the trip, accompanied by Arctics for comparison. The return sailing was even quieter than the outward crossing, with just a few Northern Gannet and a single dark Arctic Skua for interest.

Arriving back in Kirkwall around 7.15pm, well satisfied with our day's efforts and sightings, we headed for dinner and a well-earned rest.

Day 3

Tuesday 12th June

A damp start greeted the early risers, with a swing of wind direction to a south-easterly, bringing slightly cooler temperatures in the morning. Heading just a couple of kilometres south-east out of Kirkwall, we made for Heatherquoy, at the head of Inganess Bay. Strikingly obvious here lies the wreck of the Juniana, a coastal tanker sunk by torpedo during the early part of the Second War. She was re-floated and towed to Inganess in 1948 for scrapping, but this never happened, in part due to the lack of available funds in the UK after the war. She stands as an impressive reminder of hard times, and the sacrifices made by many.

The bay was quiet, bird-wise, with a handful of Fulmar on the low cliffs, one or two Arctic Terns further out and an occasional passing Great Skua. Heading west along the footpath towards Scapa, a Coot fed on the small pool, as Sand and House Martins hawked overhead. Stewart briefly played a recording of the song of Sedge Warbler, and we were soon watching, at close range, one of these inquisitive birds, as it came to investigate the interloper! The overhanging vegetation made our progress a little too damp for comfort, so we retraced our steps and made for the bus.

With plenty of time before breakfast we continued south, past the airport, and turned east for the Loch of Tankerness. Stewart had found a drake American Wigeon here on Saturday, soon after arriving on Orkney, but alas, it had moved on. The loch held a small number of Greylag Geese, several Tufted Duck and a single Red Throated Diver. Redshank and Common Snipe sat on distant posts, as we scanned the far shores. Orkney has a very healthy population of Brown Hare, so two on the way back to the hotel were no surprise, but very welcome.

Taking advantage of a cruise-ship-free day in Kirkwall, and hugely reduced visitor numbers, we all set off after breakfast and headed west for the loose, red sandstone cliffs at Yesnaby. The approach road is bordered on both sides by a mixture of grazing land and boggy unimproved areas. Perfect for breeding waders, we were soon enjoying Lapwing and Oystercatcher, with young of various ages; Common Snipe “sang” from deep cover and a very smart pair of Linnets kept just ahead of us as we approached the cliff top. Setting off on foot, we went in search of our main target here, *Primula scotica*, or the Scottish Primrose, a diminutive but stunning three-inch-tall plant with vivid purple-pink flowers on stiff upright stems. We soon found plenty of leaf rosettes and spent flower heads, but failed to find any in bloom; frustrating, but expected as this species flowers in early to mid-May, and again towards the end of July. Content with finding such a large number of specimens, we could only wonder just how pretty this area must look later in the summer. The short sward here is made of a rich mixture of species, with Wild Thyme, Milkwort, Tormentil, Spring Squill, Bird’s-foot Trefoil and Thrift (Sea Pinks), obvious. Overhead, Great Skuas patrolled the cliffs and a single Arctic Skua did not linger, whilst below, Common Guillemot, Kittiwake, Fulmar, Razorbill, Black Guillemot and Northern Gannet went about their business of bringing up young!

The Neolithic settlement at Skara Brae, a short distance north, was our next port of call. Passing along the north shore of Loch of Skail on our approach, we stopped to watch a pair of Common Sandpiper with at least one youngster: a delightful summer migrant, common throughout Scotland. Skara Brae dates back some 5000 years and is remarkably well preserved. Exposed in parts by a great storm in the 1850’s, subsequent excavations have revealed a complex assortment of dwelling houses and passages. It would appear that life might well have been quite comfortable and organised for the population here. Artefacts pointing towards crop production, hunting and fishing are all on display, as well as plentiful evidence of hand crafts and jewellery. We then visited Skail House, a magnificent seventeenth century mansion, the home of William Grant Watt, who discovered Skara Brae. The family history and artefacts from the site and abroad fill the many, relatively small, rooms. Filled with information, we decided to wash it all down with a coffee in the tearoom, before continuing north towards Mar Wick, and the “Choin” a tidal pool cut off from the open sea at low tide.

A foul smell hit us as we de-bussed: this was soon attributed to the corpse of a Cuvier’s Beaked Whale, washed up here during the winter. Deciding to take lunch a little up wind, we passed a nice patch of Scots Lovage, a distinctive herb and a northern specialty. The pool held many hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwake, and several small parties of Common Eider with young. These tiny balls of black fluff struggling to submerge, being rather too buoyant!! Out at sea, a small weather front appeared to be heading our way, so we made for the shelter of the RSPB hide at the Loons, an extensive area of reed beds, open pools and rough marsh land. Settling in, a good mixture of species was recorded, with Little Grebe (plus one young), Northern Shoveler (with five young), two smart Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Snipe, Redshank and Sedge Warbler being of note. Plants in front of the hide included Marsh Cinquefoil, Ragged Robin, Northern Marsh-orchid, Bogbean, Aquatic Bistort and Marsh Marigold.

As it looked as though we were going to miss the approaching squall, we made for the high cliffs of Marwick Head. Prominent here, from miles around, stands the impressive obelisk, constructed by the people of Orkney to the memory of Lord Herbert Horatio Kitchener, the famous Field Marshall, who perished just off Marwick on June 6th, 1916, with 734 men and boys. His ship, HMS Hampshire, struck a mine soon after leaving the confines of Scapa Flow, en route to a diplomatic mission to Russia; the heavy seas and high cliffs that night accounting for many. A deck gun from the ill-fated ship stood at the car park as we trundled towards the cliffs.

Several migrant Silver-Y moths fed at trackside Campions, and our first Heath Spotted-orchids, although stunted, were in good numbers. Northern Wheatear showed on field side fenceposts and the ever-present Great Skuas kept an eye out for a feeding opportunity. A big surprise, just at the foot of the memorial, was the sight of a Painted Lady butterfly, another migrant, and understandably not willing to take to wing in the “breezy” conditions. The now-usual mix of sea-cliff species were all present, as was the smell! David found a large *Bombus* which, although a little early, appeared to be a Great Yellow Bumblebee, the very rare specialist bee of the Northern Isles and Outer Hebrides. Not lingering, it moved on and out of sight. More Wheatears fed nearby, as we stood for a while and looked at the differences in flight between Common Guillemot and Razorbill. One or two Puffins passed our position, but the precipitous nature of the cliff edge here prevented us from venturing any closer.

Wanting to fit in as much as we could today, in good weather, we made for the bus, and set off for the heart of Neolithic Orkney at Stenness. The famous Ring of Brodgar, an imposing circle of 36 (originally 60) standing stones was our first stop here. The short walk to the site gave us several Common Snipe, some calling from deep cover whilst others drummed overhead, always a great sound to hear, and one that is unfamiliar to many. Two male Reed Buntings sang from nearby vegetation as we headed to the stones. The endemic Orkney Vole, larger than the Field Vole, is never easy to see, with views usually consisting of a fleeting roadside glimpse, so we were all so very lucky to have one run across the footpath through short grass, just a few feet from us before turning and heading back in our direction. It then sat, seemingly unsure as to its next move, giving us all plenty of time to watch, and appreciate this special moment. Chuffed with our find, we also enjoyed similarly good close views of a smart male Stonechat as we rounded the perimeter of the ring.

Once we had read the information boards and had a guess as to the true purpose of the stones, we made for the standing stones of Stenness, just a kilometre or so south. These impressive slabs, up to six metres high, stand tall in the barren landscape here, and cast long and deep shadows as the sun sets. The four stones, thought to be the oldest monument of its kind in the UK, have watched over Loch of Stenness for some 5000 years, pre-dating the great Pyramids of Egypt easily.

Our last destination of this busy day was at Barnhouse, a very short stroll from the stones. A partially reconstructed settlement, with good interpretation, showed us what life may have been like all those years ago. The Barnhouse area also has a hide that overlooks Loch of Harray. Popping in for a quick look, two Common Terns passed by and a Moss Carder Bee fed on flowering Flag Iris, this *Bombus* being new for most of the group.

Satisfied that we had filled the day, we slowly made for our hotel and yet another tasty meal.

Day 4

Wednesday 13th June

A bright and blustery start to Wednesday greeted the early risers, and feeling suitably energetic, we made for the Wideford Hill Chambered Cairn, a Neolithic burial mound, whose internal stone structure has been partially exposed over millennia. From the parking area that affords a dramatic view over Wide Firth, north-west of Kirkwall, we yomped through the heather towards the cairn; one or two unexpected obstacles hindered our progress a little, but we were determined! Northern Raven and plenty of Meadow Pipits were noted on our approach. The cairn is now accessed via a sliding roof hatch and ladder, and some of the group descended for a closer look at the construction and arrangement of the main and sub chambers; Stewart bravely volunteered to stay on the surface and take photographs! Alison had returned to the bus ahead of the main group and informed us, once we had climbed the steep path, a smart Short-eared Owl had drifted past her as she waited for us. This is a species whose numbers have suffered recently here as, in 2010, a misguided idea led to the introduction of Stoats. These were released to get on top of the Brown Rats, but prefer the taste of Orkney Vole, the Short-eared Owls' main prey. Very much ready for our breakfast we made for the hotel and refuelling!

Once again all together, we set off for a look around the northern part of Mainland. Taking a side road from Finstown, and heading into exposed moorland and farmland, Alison's keen eye picked out a shape a little way from us. Clearly a raptor, we were soon looking at a cracking male Hen Harrier, as he worked along the nearby ridgeline. Hen Harriers are a little unusual here as females outnumber males three to one, a higher ratio than elsewhere in the country. The males tend to have several breeding females, so are often seen travelling between nests. Happy, as this was the main target species here, we moved on towards Lower Cottascarth and the RSPB's Eddie Balfour hide; named for the Orcadian conservationist who studied these Harriers over four decades, he provided invaluable data and information that is proving so vital to their survival. The short walk to the very comfortable hide allowed us to see a large area of Heath Spotted-orchids with maybe a few Common Spotted hybrids in the mix. Viewing from the hide, Northern Raven and Great Skua passed through and Kathleen was quick to pick out the distinctive floaty form of another male Hen Harrier as he quartered over the close by hillside. The twisted sycamore just outside held plenty of Bumblebees, with both Buff-tailed (*Bombus terrestris*) and Northern White-tailed (*B. magnus*) present in good numbers. Both Common Buzzard and Kestrel worked a distant slope too.

Feeling we had covered the site well, we moved on a little North to the fabulous iron age Broch at Gurness. This atmospheric site looks out across Eynhallow sound to the Island of Rousay. Heavily fortified, the extent of the stone and earthworks in defence was in stark contrast to the seemingly peaceful lives the people had led at Skara Brae, some 2000 years earlier. Impressed with the construction and the information about how the site may have looked, we turned back to the wildlife and picked out many, several dozen, Black Guillemot in the channel as well as a pair of Red-throated Diver very close in to shore; a few Fulmar and Shag passed by, with a handful of Arctic Terns feeding nearby.

The weather was now starting to look like it might soon change for the worse, so we set off for the shelter of the RSPB's Burger Hill Hide, looking out over the small loch called Lowrie's Water. This is a regular breeding site for Red-throated Diver and can afford very good, close views. Unfortunately, there were no divers here today, but we had probably just been watching this pair on the sea at Gurness. Also present today were at least 230 Greylags, a single Tufted Duck, and Shoveler and Eurasian Teal, each with young. Great Skua and Great Black-backed Gulls patrolled the nearby moorland for 'targets', as we prepared to head for lunch at the Birsay tearoom.

Once fed, we paid a visit to the Earl's Palace, a remarkably intact courtyard castle, built in the 1500's by Robert Stewart who was half-brother of Mary, Queen of Scots and one of the illegitimate sons of James V. Known for being a harsh earl, the number of gun holes that stud the walls suggest he might, at some point, have been expecting trouble; this came in 1615 with the overthrow of the Stewarts. Moving just a very short distance, we looked out across the Bay of Birsay. Grey Seals relaxed and played, and Common Eider, plentiful here, tended to their young.

When on Orkney, keeping even a cursory look at weather prospects is not a bad plan, and the forecast for Thursday showed a named storm rolling in from the west. With this in mind, and the likelihood of disruption to Friday's plans, Stewart set off south, for the relatively long drive down through mainland and the southern islands to Churchill Barrier No. 4. Here we walked, in slightly damp conditions, to look for Oysterplant, a distinctive waxy, blue-grey-leaved plant with bright blue flowers emerging from pink flower buds. Although not large patches, we soon found several small areas, with some coming into flower, this being a plant new to some of the group. The beach here also holds a small, but busy, breeding colony of Little Tern, delicate and elegant, with its black "bandito" mask and black tipped yellow bill. Common Ringed Plover were plentiful, and a few Sanderling worked along the shore, with just a single Dunlin for company.

The rain had now become a bit more of a feature, so we decided to head gradually for Kirkwall, stopping briefly along the way to look across Loch Graemshall, adding Gadwall, Reed Bunting, Sedge Warbler and Moorhen to our daily total. The shelter of Kirkwall was welcome, as we settled in for dinner and bed.

Day 5

Thursday 14th June

The first named storm of the year, Hector, was forecast to hit this morning, so we decided against an early start, and settled for a more leisurely outing after breakfast. Heading south, we made for the small island of Lamb Holm, connected to Mainland by Churchill Barrier No. 1. The four Barriers were built in the aftermath of the sinking of HMS Royal Oak on 14th October 1939. The German U-boat, U-47, under the command of Gunther Prien had slipped unnoticed into Scapa Flow through Kirk Sound, between Lamb Holm and Mainland Orkney and proceeded to launch a torpedo attack at the anchored battleship. Of the ships complement of 1234 men and boys, 833 lost their lives that night. The then first Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, ordered work to begin on the concrete barriers. Much of the labour was provided by Italian prisoners of war, who were, for the most part, treated very well on Orkney. The results of their labours are still evident, with many of the 66,000 five- and 10-ton blocks visible today. Also surviving, is the wonderful little chapel on Lamb Holm, built by the Italian residents of Camp 60. The chapel was a product of an agreement by the camp commandant, Major Thomas Pyres and Father Gioacchino Giacabazzi, the camp's Catholic priest, that a place of worship was needed. Two Nissen huts were fitted end to end and much of the ornate interior decoration was done by Domenico Chiocchetti, a prisoner from Moena. The baptismal font was created from a car exhaust covered in a layer of concrete and survives on show today. Unusually, we had the chapel to ourselves today, as visiting cruise ships had been cancelled due to the weather. Arctic Terns hawked over the sound, with one or two Common Guillemot present too. A single Great Skua flew close by as we admired the seemingly ever-present Northern Marsh-orchids. A nearby fence briefly held two Twite, with plenty of Skylark overhead.

The weather was forecast to close in by lunchtime, so we made our way south over the remaining barriers connecting with the islands of Glimps Holm, Burray, and South Ronaldsay. Just outside the port village of St

Margarets Hope on South Ronaldsay lies Hoxa, and the Sands of Wright, a secluded bay with a small freshwater pool. Here we took a short circular walk through a heavily vegetated, damp area. Curlew and Redshank called from nearby pasture, and the small colony of breeding Black-headed Gulls made quite a racket. Both Silver-ground Carpet and Garden Carpet moths were noted as we strolled onwards. The pool held lots of Arctic Terns and a few Tufted Duck. Continuing on, Brown Hare and Rock Dove were seen in trackside fields and we admired the efforts of an enthusiastic local who had obviously been finding a home for “spare” garden cultivars along the verges, with impressive displays of Poppy and Bistort amongst the blooms. The conditions heading our way from the south-west looked pretty foul so, in light rain, we made for the bus and shelter. The wind had steadily increased throughout the morning, and it was decided that a clifftop walk at Deerness, planned for the afternoon should be shelved. All in agreement, we made our way back towards Kirkwall, stopping for a brief look over the Loch of Graemshall. Reed Bunting and Sedge Warbler were seen at distance, with both Common Teal and Gadwall on the loch. Other species noted included Oystercatcher, Common and Great Black-backed Gull, Greylag and Grey Heron, a species we never see many of on Orkney.

With the rain now falling steadily, we spent the afternoon exploring Kirkwall, looking at the very good museum, which gives an idea of life here through the ages. Just across the street lies the magnificent St Magnus Cathedral, constructed from Kirkwall red and Eday yellow sandstone. Work here began in 1137 and the building was added to over the next 300 years. In the ownership of the people of Kirkwall, and not the church, it stands as a focal point of thriving Kirkwall. Wandering round today, we were very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, as two lads from Rugby Scotland pulled out the stunning Calcutta Cup from a bag for a quick photo session: the prize of the annual grudge match between the national sides of Scotland and England, and on a tour of the current holder’s country. We were thrilled to be able to get within a few inches of such an iconic trophy. The cathedral is home to many memorials to individuals and events, such as the sinking of HMS Royal Oak and the statue of the great Orcadian explorer, John Rae, the discoverer of the North-west Passage.

With leisurely lunches and afternoon teas being taken, we met for dinner at 7.30pm and a natter about our week together.

Day 6

Friday 15th June

Our last morning together, as usual, had come around all too quickly so, wanting to make the most of our time, we set out early to a spot we had visited earlier in the week. The Head of Work, just outside Kirkwall, gives a good view across the deep-water channel called the String, overlooking the island of Shapinsay, and its impressive house. From here, we scanned the mass Common Eider flock, that tend to gather around the nearby salmon farm, estimating numbers at around 2000. Northern Marsh-orchid had been a constant companion this week, being seen all over the island and on Westray too, with some impressive displays, even on roadside verges, so we were pleased to have a good look at the plants on either side of us as we carried on towards the point. Heath Spotted-orchids were also very evident as we stopped to watch the fabulous pair of dark-phased Arctic Skuas on territory not far from where we stood. One of the pair gave a passing Great Black-backed Gull short shrift as it got a little too close! Very noticeable on Orkney is the song of Skylark, which seem to be thriving here in the north; the mixed agriculture, with a late silage-making season must help, along with plenty of areas unsuitable for farming, so the numbers in full song this morning came as no surprise. Other species, noted whilst we stood, included Meadow Pipit (again very abundant), Fulmar (everywhere!) Great Skua, Common Guillemot, Razorbill and Shag. Having seen the Kirkwall pilot boat return to harbour, we waited as the huge cruise ship

Oriana, silently passed by, on her way to berth in Kirkwall, to drop off her many passengers. Although we had had some challenging conditions this week, the weather gods had played us a fair hand, as some of the cruise ships due in had been cancelled or re-scheduled, this allowed us to visit some of the normally busy historic sites in comparative peace, with us being the only visitors to the Italian Chapel!

Orkney is a hugely varied destination, with so many areas of interest to explore, from Neolithic history, through the Iron Age, Viking settlements and other Norse Heritage, the evidence of its strategic importance during two world wars and its abundant natural history. The Islands are starting to write their next chapter, as world leaders in renewable energy research and development, as well as accommodating the needs of visitors.

Orkney is very difficult when asked to pinpoint a highlight of the week, as we had seen so much, but for me, this week, the cheeky appearance of the very confiding Orkney Vole at the stunning setting of Brodgar has to be right up there, along with the amazing weather afforded to us as we lunched at Noup head on Westray. Another amusing facet of the trip to Westray for me, is the underwhelmed look on faces as the group members, for the first time, clapped their eyes on the Westray Wifey! Come and see for yourselves!

This week had given us a real “feel for the place” and hopefully ignited a desire to return to explore further in the future. Thanks everyone for the great company, fun times and understanding when things needed to be changed around a little!

Until next time, Stewart.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	230+	✓	✓
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓				
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓	✓		
5	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				✓	✓	
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					✓	
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓	
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		2				
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				22		
13	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		✓				
14	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
15	Red-throated Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓	✓	2+		
16	Great Northern Diver (Common Loon)	<i>Gavia immer</i>		4+				
17	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓			
19	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓	✓
20	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
21	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
22	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓			✓	
23	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓		
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				✓		
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓		
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				✓		
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓			
28	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
30	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
31	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
32	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			✓			
33	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		✓		
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓			✓		
35	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓			
36	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
37	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
38	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓		✓	
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓				✓	✓
40	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓				✓	✓
41	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
42	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓					✓
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓		
44	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓				
45	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>				✓		
46	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			2+			
47	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			10	11	12	13	14	15
48	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	2	✓	✓			✓
50	Common Guillemot (Murre)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓		2	✓
51	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓			
52	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
53	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		150	✓			
54	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓			✓	
55	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
56	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				✓		
58	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				✓		
59	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓		✓	✓	
60	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓		✓		
61	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓		
63	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	✓		
65	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
66	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓			
67	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
68	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		✓		✓
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓		✓
71	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓		✓		
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓		
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓			
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓			
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
77	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		5+		✓		✓
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			✓	
81	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		✓		
82	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		2			2	
83	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			2		✓	
84	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			2	✓	✓	

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>			2		✓	✓
6	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓				
7	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
8	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓				
9	Cuvier's Beaked Whale - Dead	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>			✓			

Amphibians

1	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	Recorded during the tour					
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	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			10	11	12	13	14	15

Invertebrates

1	Silver-ground Carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe montanata</i>			✓		✓	
2	Garden Carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe fluctuata</i>					✓	
3	Silver Y Moth	<i>Autographa gamma</i>			✓			
4	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓			
5	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓		✓		
6	Great Yellow Bumblebee	<i>Bombus distinguendus</i>			✓			
7	Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>				✓		
8	Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>			✓			
9	Buff-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus terrestris</i>				✓		

Plants (with thanks to David Sales for assistance)

	Common name	Scientific name	trip	June					
				10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Male-fern	<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>	✓						
2	Hard-fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	✓						
3	Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>	✓						
4	Good-King-Henry	<i>Chenopodium bonus-henricus</i>	✓						
5	Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	✓					✓	
6	Marsh Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>	✓	✓		✓			
7	Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	✓		✓				
8	Lesser Spearwort	<i>Ranunculus flammula</i>	✓						
9	Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	✓						
10	Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	✓						
11	Lesser Stitchwort	<i>Stellaria graminea</i>	✓						
12	Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>	✓		✓				
13	Ragged-Robin	<i>Silene (Lychnis) flos-cuculi</i>	✓			✓			
14	Sea Campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>	✓						
15	Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>	✓			✓			
16	Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	✓						
17	Amphibious Bistort	<i>Persicaria amphibia</i>	✓			✓			
18	Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	✓		✓	✓			
19	Osier	<i>Salix viminalis</i>	✓						
20	Eared Willow	<i>Salix aurita</i>	✓						
21	Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓				
22	Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	✓						
23	Shepherd's-purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	✓						
24	Sea Rocket	<i>Cakile maritima</i>	✓						
25	Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓				
26	Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	✓						
27	Sea-milkwort	<i>Glaux maritima</i>	✓						
28	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	✓						
29	Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>	✓			✓			
30	English Stonecrop	<i>Sedum anglicum</i>	✓						
31	Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	✓						
32	Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	✓			✓			
33	Marsh Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla palustris</i>	✓						
34	Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	✓						
35	Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>	✓						

	Common name	Scientific name	trip	June					
				10	11	12	13	14	15
36	Kidney Vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	✓						
37	Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	✓		✓	✓			
38	Bush Vetch	<i>Vicia sepium</i>	✓						
39	Meadow Vetchling	<i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>	✓						
40	White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	✓						
41	Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	✓						
42	Scots Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>	✓			✓			
43	Marsh Pennywort	<i>Hydrocotyle vulgaris</i>	✓						
44	Ground-elder	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>	✓						
45	Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	✓						
46	Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	✓			✓			
47	Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>	✓				✓		
48	Water Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>	✓						
49	Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>	✓			✓			
50	Heath Milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	✓						
51	Heath Bedstraw	<i>Galium saxatile</i>	✓						
52	Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	✓						
53	Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>	✓	✓					
54	Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	✓	✓					
55	Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	✓	✓					
56	Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	✓						
57	Sea Mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	✓						
58	Spear Thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	✓						
59	Marsh Thistle	<i>Cirsium palustre</i>	✓						
60	Scentless Mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum inodorum</i>	✓						
61	Marsh Ragwort	<i>Senecio aquaticus</i>	✓						
62	Butterbur	<i>Petasites hybridus</i>	✓						
63	Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	✓	✓					
64	Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>	✓						
65	Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>	✓		✓	✓			
66	Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
67	Heath Spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata ssp. ericetorum</i>	✓			✓		✓	
68	Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	
69	Sea Arrowgrass	<i>Triglochin maritimum</i>	✓						



Common Snipe