5th - 10th June 2021

Report and images by Tom Brereton



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Tour Report Orkney

Tour participants: Tom Brereton & John Davis (leaders) with eight Naturetrek clients.

Day 1Ring of Brodgar

Saturday 5th June

Our holiday began at the Orkney Hotel, situated in the centre of Kirkwall on Mainland Orkney, where we checked into our rooms mid afternoon then departed for our first excursion. The weather was warm with sunny spells. We headed to the magical Ring of Brodgar, a Neolithic henge and stone circle located 11 miles north-west of Kirkwall, dramatically situated between the saltwater Loch of Stenness and the freshwater Loch of Harray. The Ring comprises a ring of 36 stones, from an original 60 placed in a perfect circle measuring 104 metres in diameter. It was not too busy, and we were able to ask questions about the Ring from the resident guide, which was really informative.

There was much wildlife of interest, including singing Sedge Warbler, a Fox Moth caterpillar and an abundance of waders including several drumming Snipe, Curlew with chicks, Redshank and Oystercatcher. The grassland surrounding the Ring was botanically-rich, containing Lousewort and Northern Marsh Orchid, but it a little cold and early for Great Yellow Bumblebee.

As we left, we caught site of Maeshowe, a Neolithic chambered cairn and passage grave, which was unfortunately closed due to Covid19 restrictions. Back at the hotel we enjoyed a three-course meal in the Hotel's restaurant, whilst some adjourned to the bar afterwards to sample a 'wee dram' from a selection of nearly 500 whiskies.

Day 2 Sunday 6th June

Waulkmill Bay, Loch of Kirbister, Yesnaby, plus the Loch of Loons, Loch of Banks & Settiscarth RSPB Reserves

A pre-breakfast drive was made over to Waulkmill Bay, where Grey Heron, Kittiwake, Razorbill and Guillemot were seen, whilst a pair of Peregrine soared overhead, and Stonechats were in the gorse. At nearby Loch of Kirbister, there was a small flock of Red-breasted Merganser, Tufted Ducks and a gorgeous Black-throated Diver in summer plumage.

Our first stop after breakfast was Yesnaby, on the west coast of Mainland Orkney and renowned for its spectacular Old Red Sandstone coastal cliff scenery. Our focus though, was to search for the diminutive but beautiful Scottish Primrose, which occurs in maritime heathland habitat and flowers in the Spring and again early Summer and is endemic to a small area of north Scotland. We searched the wind blasted short-turf grassland and found numerous spikes, but they had all gone over. Botanical compensation came in the form of a pretty display of Spring Squill, plus Sea-milkwort and Sea Arrowgrass and Thread-leaved Water-crowfoot in flooded areas.

We continued along the coast path admiring the scenery and picking up Black Guillemot, Fulmar, Rock Pipit, a close fly-by Great Skua and wild-looking Rock Doves. On our return we scanned the grassland again, and to our delight found a single Scottish Primrose in flower – such a gem! Back at the car park, a ploughed field held a stunning summer-plumaged 'Northern' Golden Plover, seemingly oblivious and unafraid of the racket being made from the nearby moto-cross race!

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For our picnic lunch we drove to Loch of Loons RSPB Reserve, where we took it in turns to visit the hide. Birds seen here included Reed Bunting, Sedge Warbler, Little Grebe and Coot. A little bit further along the road we stopped and scanned the grassy fields picking up our target species, a Black-tailed Godwit. At the The Loons Listening Wall we had a panoramic view over the Reserve, with plenty of waders and wildfowl on view including Gadwall, Shoveler, Teal and many Greylag Geese. A brief stop at the Loch of Banks failed to deliver the hopedfor Ruff, but again, lots more wildfowl.

Our final stop of the day was the Eddie Balfour Hide at Settiscarth RSPB Reserve, which offers a fine view of the surrounding moorland and farmland. With patience, we were finally rewarded with excellent views of a pair of Hen Harriers. Two other Orkney bird specialities were seen: Twite and Arctic Skua, whilst Cuckoo and Raven further made this a productive bird-watching visit. Of further interest, behind the hide we had excellent views of Moss Carder Bee and a Red Admiral butterfly.

Whilst driving, Orkney Vole was seen from one of the minibuses.

Back at the hotel and before heading off to dinner, we did a log call in one of the lounges recalling and tallying up the super range of wildlife sightings seen over the last two days.

Day 3 Monday 7th June

Westray - Loch of Swartmill, Pierowall, Noup Head, Noltland Castle, Rackwick

We took a picnic breakfast today, as it was an early start for our scheduled full day on the island of Westray. It was cool today, with sunny spells and a few showers. The ferry departed at 7.20am from Kirkwall and there followed a highly scenic journey in thankfully calm seas, passing numerous islands, amongst them Shapinsay, Eday, Rousay, Egilsy and Faray. Several Puffins and three Manx Shearwaters were seen on the crossing, amongst a larger number of Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Razorbills. After arriving on Westray soil at Rapness, we spotted a small café and had a welcome cup of tea. Stopping here proved a good call, as the accommodating owner made rustled up some fresh sandwiches to take away for our picnic lunch – as it turned out, the only ones available on the island that day!

Our first natural history stop was at the Loch and Bay of Swartmill. In the Bay, a Great Northern Diver was showing well, though we couldn't find the Iceland Gull that had been on the Loch recently. From the Bay we could see Papa Westray. This was a special view for the leader Tom, as he was last on 'Papay' in 1989, when he was working there as an RSPB Warden!

We moved on to the 'capital', Pierowall, to flesh out our picnic supplies, where we had great views of Grey Seal, Common Seal and a crèche of Eiders. We then took the rough road up to Noup Head, where we spotted a Black Redstart at North Hill – an uncommon migrant on Orkney. From the car park we walked to the cliff edge which provides spectacular views of the seabirds breeding on the towering cliffs - a really wonderful spectacle. Amongst the Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins were large numbers of Gannets – a bird which first bred here in 2003, with numbers rising to over 1300 pairs by 2016. Other highlights here included superb views of Great Skua.

The wind had picked up, so our picnic lunch was taken in the relative shelter beside the imposing Notland Castle, a 16th-century tower house with 71 gun-holes, built by Gilbert Balfour, the then Sheriff of Orkney, which was never fully completed.

Our last stop of the day was Rack Wick. Here the coastal paths leads out by the Bay to an area of low cliffs which is well known as one of the best places on Orkney to get close views of Puffins. At the start of the walk two Twite were seen, albeit briefly. We reached the main Puffin colony and had excellent views but were a little saddened that there were far fewer than had been present in previous years, most probably due to a lack of Sandeels, the birds' main food source, nearby. There were signs of long distance insect migration with Silver-Y and Painted Lady seen, both originating in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco!

After a further cup of tea at Richans Retreat we boarded the ferry, which departed just before 6pm. The journey, enlivened by numerous Puffin, Fulmar and Gannet sightings, passed quickly and with a quick turnaround we were back in good time for another excellent dinner at the hotel restaurant.

Day 4 Tuesday 8th June

Stones of Stenness, Skara Brae/Bay of Skaill, Mar Wick

It was a day of beautiful weather and, for Orkney, rather warm at 17°C. Our first stop was the standing Stones of Stenness, a Neolithic monument that may be the oldest henge site in the UK built some 5,00 years ago. The stones are huge and visible for miles around and it was real privilege to be able to walk amongst them and ponder them the immense work involved in constructing them! Just north of the stones at the Bridge of Brodgar, both Common Tern and Arctic Tern were showing well, with the latter breeding on grassy ground by the bridge. A Common Sandpiper was feeding on the stony edges of Loch Harray where a fine summer-plumaged Slavonian Grebe was present.

From here we moved on to Skara Brae, where we had a wonderful visit to this World Heritage Site, which is the best-preserved Neolithic settlement in Western Europe, leading to it being dubbed "Orkney Pompei". Uncovered by a storm as recently as 1850, yet dating from around 5,000 years ago, the site gives an extraordinary insight into life at the time, with ancient homes fitted with stone beds, dressers and seats all visible, together with a primitive sewer system, with "toilets" and drains in each house which carried effluent to nearby Bay. In the car park there was a very obliging Sedge Warbler, whilst out in the Bay of Skaill there was much of interest, including a drake summer-plumaged Long-tailed Duck, Great Northern Diver and Common Scoter.

We had a picnic lunch overlooking the Bay of Skaill where we had good views of Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Wheatear on the beach. A search of the flowery grassland here was highly rewarding for insects with Large White, Great Yellow Bumblebee (a top target for several of the group), Moss Carder Bee and Common Snouthoverfly all seen. From here we drove a short distance north to picturesque Mar Wick, where in the marshy fields full of Flag Iris a Corncrake had been calling of late. Alas, there was no sight or sounds of it, though we had a close flock of Ringed Plover and Dunlin on the beach and hundreds of seabirds passing offshore from their breeding grounds at Marwick Head. Scots Lovage was growing there in quantity.

From the Mar Wick we cut across to the north-east side of the island. This was a lovely scenic drive over wild moorland. As we joined the coast road at Stenso, a Short-eared Owl was spotted right beside the road in some

rough grass (where it had probably caught an Orkney Vole), giving brilliant views. At the nearby Lowrie's Water, we saw Red-throated Diver on the nest, before it flew out to feed at sea along with Teal and Great Skua.

The final stop of the day was the Broch of Gurness, which also contains the Mediaeval church, Chapel Knowe. The Eynhallow Sound between here and Rousay was full of birds including hundreds of Black Guillemot, Curlew, Sandwich Tern, several Red-throated Divers and both Great and Arctic Skuas, providing a most enjoyable end to an action packed day.

Whilst driving, Orkney Vole was again seen from one of the minibuses.

Day 5 Wednesday 9th June

South Mainland – Italian Chapel, Burray Barrier, sands of Wright, Deerness, Newark Beach, Peedie Sea

There was some excitement first thing in the morning, when Tom, the leader, had been out early and found a Ring-necked Duck on the Peerie Sea in Kirkwall! A must-see for later in the day. For our last full day on the island though, our focus was visiting several sites on South Ronaldsay. The first stop was the Italian Chapel, a beautiful ornate Roman Catholic chapel in Lamb Holm, which was built by Italian Prisoners of War working on the Churchill Barriers during the Second World War. A little further along the road at Churchill Barrier No. 2 we had excellent views of Arctic Tern and a family of Ringed Plovers. Then at Echna Loch on Burray we watched good range of wildfowl, including a smart flock of Red-breasted Merganser and a female Wigeon with ducklings.

The next stop was Churchill Barrier No. 4, where constriction of the causeway has created a sandy beach. Here, we watched a thriving Little Tern colony at a safe distance, avoiding any disturbance, along with spotting Oysterplant, Sanderling and another Ringed Plover family party.

At lunchtime it was raining steadily, so we had our picnic at the Sands of Wright car park which offers indoor shelter. After lunch we took a short walk along the nature trail at the adjacent wetland obtaining great views of singing Redpoll and Reed Bunting, a Snipe on a fence post, Shoveler with young and several Shelduck.

With the main archaeological sites on South Ronaldsay closed due to the pandemic, we decided to head back north for an afternoon walk at the Gloup and Mull Head reserve, Durness which has dramatic coastal scenery. Here we first walked to The Gloup, a collapsed sea-cave separated from the sea by a land bridge about 80 metres then walked then coast path enjoying the fabulous scenery and picking up more Rock Pipits and seabirds including Great Skuas and Puffins. On the way back to Kirkwall, we stopped briefly at Newark Bay, where we saw Oysterplant again but this time in flower at closer range. At Kirkwall, we stopped at the Peedie Loch, soon picking up and obtaining good views of the Ring-necked Duck, which was actively feeding with a small flock of Tufted Ducks. A great find and only the eighth for Orkney, providing a superb nature note to finish on.

In the evening we enjoyed a log call, a meal at the hotel restaurant, then a final dram in the Hotel Bar to toast the end of what had been a fabulous holiday packed with memorable wildlife encounters set in marvellous scenery.

Day 6

Thursday 10th June

Departure day.

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Checklist

Birds

			June	June					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
2	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		10		✓	3		
4	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	✓	15		✓	✓		
5	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope					5		
6	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓			
7	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		4		1			
8	Ring-necked Duck	Aythya collaris					✓	✓	
9	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima		3	50+	100	50		
11	Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra				1			
12	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis				2			
13	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator		10		10	12		
14	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus			2	1			
15	Common Swift	Apus apus			5		1		
16	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		1					
17	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia		50	✓	✓	✓		
18	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		1	2		4		
19	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		1			✓		
20	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus			✓				
21	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		✓			1		
22	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		✓	1				

			June					
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	√	√	· /	✓	✓	
24	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		1			-	
26	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		\ \ \	2	10	✓	
27	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	✓	→	<u>∠</u>	√ V	✓	✓
28	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa		· ·	V			<u> </u>
29	Sanderling	Calidris alba		,		20	32	
30	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	/	✓	✓	✓	- 5 <u>Z</u>	
31	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		-		1	_	
32	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	/	✓	✓	1 ✓	✓	✓
33	Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla		· •		3	2	_
34	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		✓	✓	<i>√</i>	∠ ✓	
35	Common Gull	Larus canus	/	▼	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	V ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	▼	+			✓	√
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	•	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	∨	✓ ✓
38	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		V			V	
39	Little Tern	Sternula albifrons			6	5		
40	Common Tern	Sternal albinons Sterna hirundo				_	20	
41	Arctic Tern					2	1	
42		Sterna paradisaea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua		30	20	6	6	
44	Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus		3	5	3	3	
45	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge		✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Razorbill	Alca torda		✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle		2	20	140	10	
48	Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica			150		2	
49	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata				7	5	<u> </u>
50	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica		1				
51	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer			1	4	1	
52	Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus			3			
54	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus		✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	✓		✓	✓		
56	European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	✓				
58	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		1				
59	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		2				
60	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo				✓		
61	Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus				2		
62	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		1		1		
63	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		2				
64	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Rook	Corvus frugilegus		✓	✓	✓	√	
66	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix		✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Northern Raven	Corvus corax		5	3	3		
68	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia			6	30	✓ ·	
70	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	√	√	✓	
71	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		✓	10	10	3	
72	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus		2	10	10		
73	Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus	2	10	1	2	1	

			June						
	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10	
74	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes			✓	✓	1		
75	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
76	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓		✓		
77	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		1		1	1		
78	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			1				
79	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		5			2		
80	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe				1			
81	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
82	Dunnock	Prunella modularis				2	1		
83	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
84	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
85	European Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		2	✓	✓	✓		
86	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓		✓			
87	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				1	5		
88	Twite	Linaria flavirostris	✓	10	✓	2			
89	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		20	15	10	6		
90	Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret		3		1	2		
91	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis						3	
92	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		1			2		

		Scientific name	June					
	Common name		5	6	7	8	9	10
	Mammals:							
1	Orkney Vole	Microtus arvalis orcadensis		✓		✓		
2	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	✓		✓	✓	✓	
3	Brown Hare	Lepus capensis		15				
4	Common Seal	Phoca vitulina			✓	5		
5	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus			✓	3	4	
	Amphibians:							
1	Common Frog	Rana temporaria						
	Insects:							
1	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui			✓			
2	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		✓		✓		
3	Large White	Pieris brassicae				✓		
4	Green-veined White	Pieris napi		✓		✓	✓	
5	Great Yellow Bumblebee	Bombus distinguendus				2		
6	Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	Bombus magnus				✓		
7	Moss Carder Bee	Bombus muscorum		✓		✓		
8	Silver-Y	Autographa gamma			✓			
9	Fox Moth	Macrothylacia rubi	✓	✓				

Plants

			Date
	Common name	Scientific name	
1	Lady-fern	Athyrium filix-femina	✓
2	Male-fern	Dryopteris filix-mas	✓
3	Hard-fern	Blechnum spicant	
4	Marah Marigold	Caltha palustris	✓
5	Meadow Buttercup	Ranunculus acris	✓
6	Creeping Buttercup	Ranunculus repens	✓
7	Orache	Atriplex sp.	
3	Pink Purslane	Claytonia sibirica	✓
9	Sea Sandwort	Honckenya peploides	✓
10	Ragged Robin	Silene (Lychnis) flos-cuculi	✓
11	Sea Campion	Silene uniflora	✓
12	Red Campion	Silene dioica	✓
13	Sheep's Sorrel	Rumex acetosella	✓
14	Thrift (Sea Pink)	Armeria maritima	✓
15	Osier	Salix viminalis	
16	Eared Willow	Salix aurita	✓
17	Cuckooflower	Cardamine pratensis	✓
18	Common Scurvygrass	Cochlearia officinalis	✓
19	Heather	Calluna vulgaris	✓
20	Primrose	Primula vulgaris	✓
21	Cowslip	Primula veris	✓
22	Scottish Primrose	Primula scotica	✓
	Sea-milkwort	Lysimachia (Glaux) maritima	
23	Grass-of-Parnassus	Parnassia palustris	✓
24	Meadowsweet	Filipendula ulmaria	✓
25	Tormentil	Potentilla erecta	✓
- <u>-</u> 26	Water Avens	Geum rivale	✓
 27	Kidney Vetch	Anthyllis vulneraria	✓
 28	Bird's-foot Trefoil	Lotus corniculatus	✓
<u></u> 29	White Clover	Trifolium repens	✓
30	Red Clover	Trifolium pratense	✓
31	Sycamore	Acer pseudoplatanus	· ✓
32	Bogbean	Menyanthes trifoliata	✓
33	Oysterplant	Mertensia maritima	√
34	Water Forget-me-not	Myosotis scorpioides	√
35	Wild Thyme	Thymus polytrichus	· ·
36	Sea Plantain	Plantago maritima	√
37	Greater Plantain	Plantago major	· ·
38	Ribwort Plantain	Plantago lanceolata	✓
39	Eyebright	Euphrasia officinalis agg.	→
59 40	Lousewort	Pedicularis sylvatica	→
1 0 11	Common Butterwort	Pinguicula vulgaris	✓
+ 1 12			✓
+2 13	Lady's Bedstraw Creeping Thistle	Galium verum	✓
+3 14		Cirsium arvense	V
	Daisy	Bellis perennis	_
15 16	Yarrow	Achillea millefolium	✓ ✓
16 17	Sea Mayweed	Tripleurospermum maritimum	-
47 48	Magellan Ragwort Colt's-foot	Senecio smithii Tussilago farfara	✓

			Date:
	Common name	Scientific name	
49	Common Cottongrass	Eriophorum angustifolium	✓
50	Common Reed	Phragmites australis	✓
51	Spring Squill	Scilla verna	✓
52	Bluebell	Hyacinthoides non-scripta	✓
53	Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	Iris pseudacorus	✓
54	Heath Spotted-orchid	Dactylorhiza maculata ssp. ericetorum	✓
55	Northern Marsh-orchid	Dactylorhiza purpurella	✓
56	Bladder Campion	Silene vulgaris	✓
57	Scots Lovage	Ligusticum scoticum	✓
58	Dame's Violet	Hesperis matronalis	✓
59	Oriental Poppy	Papaver orientale	✓
60	Common Dog Violet	Viola riviniana	✓
61	Devil's-bit Scabious	Succisa pratensis	✓
62	Sea Arrowgrass	Triglochin maritima	✓
63	Branched Bur-reed	Sparganium erectum	✓