

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

5th – 10th June 2022



Fulmar



Marwick Head



Corncrake



Poplar Hawk Moth

Tour report by Simon Woolley, images by Sue Jenkins



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Simon Woolley (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 5th June

Our joining instructions said, “meet your group leader in hotel reception at 3pm, for a short excursion before dinner” Ha, no chance! Those that had arrived yesterday were duly scooped up with little warning just after breakfast and whisked the 2km down to the pier at Scapa where we soon found ourselves enjoying the spectacle of a pod of five Orca, that, although some distance away, could be clearly seen, playing and tail slapping with the occasional breach. Absolutely first class! Some of the group had never seen Orca before making this sighting even more satisfying! The waters just off the pier held at least five smart Red-throated Divers and a few Eider and Red-breasted Mergansers fed in the bay too, while a handful of Razorbills were further out in Scapa flow.

Returning to Kirkwall before lunch, we got settled in before meeting up at 3pm for our trip together to start proper.

Forgoing the stuffy talks about clothing, venues and times, we set straight to it once all our group were together. The sun was shining, and it was pretty warm, which it certainly wasn't when I was here a week ago, so we decided to nip back to Scapa to see if the whales were still around. Sadly not, but we did connect with two divers again. Always great to see. Trying to maximise our chance of bumping into the whales, we headed west to Waulkmill bay, part of the RSPB managed Hobbister moors reserve. Scanning out over a wide vista of Scapa flow, we really hoped to connect, but had to content ourselves with some great views, in the bright sunshine of at least four more Red-throated Divers, their bold red throat patches being visible in the good light. Shag, Great black-backed Gull, two Cormorants and a dozen or so Fulmar preened and fed in the shallow waters while a Cuckoo called from nearby trees.

Cutting our losses, we carried on towards Kirbister, taking the small road that cuts up to Stenness. Here we saw lots of Curlew in roadside fields, with Oystercatcher, Lapwing and Greylags in good numbers too. Approaching Nisthouse, the distinctive form of a male Hen Harrier appeared over distant fields before crossing the road and giving adequate views as he slowly patrolled a nearby hillside on stiff wings, held in the characteristic shallow v. This bird was a joy to see so early on in the trip, and we hoped for more! As we carried towards Heddle, Brown Hares were found at several locations and a small gang of Swallows took full advantage of the great weather. Reaching Finstown we turned back towards Kirkwall and took the Grimbister road. Driving steadily along Stewart caught a glimpse of a distant movement and pulled over, we were soon all watching our first Short-eared Owl of the week. Get in!! Although not what one may call great views, the distance gave us the advantage of a decent viewing time, and we watched the bird until it gradually drifted out of sight. Well satisfied with our finds, we slowly headed back to Kirkwall, just stopping briefly at a disused quarry close to Kirkwall where several pairs of Fulmar nested on the sheltered cliff while a nice mixed group of Herring, Lesser and Great black-backed Gulls bathed in the freshwater. Ready for our first meal together, we settled into the hotel in plenty of time for dinner and to natter about plans for tomorrow.

Day 2

Monday 6th June

West side of Mainland, Yesnaby, Skail Bay, Skara Brae, Marwick, Loch of Isbister, Dounby and Brodgar area

Customary on most of our trips is the pre breakfast excursion, so keen to make the most of our time here on Orkney. The early risers set off at 6am for the short drive to the Head of Work, a promontory just to the east of Kirkwall. The route passes through areas of grazing and grass grown for silage making. It was in one of these fields, just out of the town, where we stopped and counted an astonishing twenty five Brown Hares, some were sat feeding while a small group played “follow my leader” - probably several males in slow pursuit of an unwilling female.

Soon arriving and parking the bus up, we scanned across the large commercial Salmon farm out in the bay of Carness. Here several hundred Common Eider sat around on the cage floats and in the surrounding waters. They would have been searching for the large numbers of Mussels that grow well on the cages. The walk out towards the point saw us accompanied by the sound of singing Skylark and calling Curlew with the occasional alarm calls of Oystercatcher.

Looking out towards the island of Shapinsay with its impressive mansion house, a handful of Common Guillemots loafed in the sound with one or two Shag passing through low and at speed. The stretch of water between where we stood and the island is called the String, and is the only deep water access to Kirkwall. We watched as a modestly sized cruise ship slowly, and surprisingly quietly slipped by and into town, with passengers no doubt keen to enjoy the neolithic sites of Mainland Orkney.

Our wee walk saw us hug the shore, with areas of damp, peaty ground to negotiate, here we found a good number of the unusual Common Butterwort, an insectivorous plant with attractive purple bell flowers on long straight stems. Carrying on a short distance, a really smart dark morph Arctic Skua sat on waterside rocks, its’ soft, velvety dark brown plumage camouflaging it perfectly against the rock that were covered in Bladder Wrack and other sea weeds. This bird was fairly relaxed with our company, and we eventually stood no more than 40 metres away before it finally moved off and sat on the nearby moor. Keeping an eye on the time, we began to wander back, finding a few Northern Marsh Orchids in flower next to the track, while an inquisitive Common Seal slowly followed us as we walked. Arriving back just a few minutes late, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast before setting off for the day’s adventures.

Planning to explore West Mainland today, we travelled out to Finstown, stopping on the way as Stewart spotted a lone Whooper Swan at Bridgend. Straight and slim necked, it just stood out as a little different!

Once past Finstown we carried on towards Stenness, pulling in at the Bridge of Waithe for a scan over the exposed muds of the low tide inlet. Several Curlews probed for marine worms with a few Eiders in the background. Soon ready to move on we caught sight of a nice Short-eared Owl quartering over a distant meadow. This bird gave several fleeting views before moving off. Just as we were about to pull back onto the main road, another “Shortie” flew left to right, quite high, heading for the moors of Orphir, certainly a different bird and a great start to the day.

Our first target species today was the very pretty and tiny *Primula Scotica*, or Scottish Primrose. This rare plant stands no more than a few inches tall and has two flowering seasons, one in May and one in July, none in June! So we were really lucky to find just a single stem still in flower, a real bonus! Other plants noted on the clifftop habitat at Yesnaby, were Thrift, Spring Squill, Wild Thyme, Milkwort, and plenty of Bird's-foot Trefoil.

Wandering over to the cliffs for a look out to sea, Stewart commented that it's always worth keeping an eye to the water when a large gathering of feeding seabirds is found, and with huge numbers of Kittiwake and auks just offshore we had a good feeling! Just then Marian said she'd seen a fin and then boom! - fantastic Rissos' Dolphins slowly headed North past the Brough of Bigging and on up towards Marwick. These were new to many of the group, and, along with yesterday's Orca, were a big surprise!

Reluctantly moving on, we set off for a look around the world-famous Skara Brae - a neolithic village dating to around 3,100 BC. The great visitor facilities here and the fantastic preserved original buildings allow for a good understanding of what life may have been like here on Orkney some 850 years before the pyramids of Egypt were built!

We also looked around the Lairds house at Skaill, home to the original finder of Skara Brae, this intimate view into the Orcadian aristocracy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was one of military service, and, by comparison to the "big houses" of the mainland, was a comfortable, luxurious, but relatively modest and cosy world, certainly a family home feel was noted by us all.

Moving on from the Skaill area, we travelled the short distance North to Marwick Bay where we sat and enjoyed lunch overlooking the Choin, a shallow lagoon that forms each low tide, and is used by gulls who come to bathe in the tiny freshwater stream that drains to sea here. As we sat surrounded by Scots Lovage and watching the Kittiwakes and Shelduck, a movement right below our feet grabbed the attention and we soon all had very brief, but reasonable views of an Orkney Vole as it shuffled between the slabs of rock where we sat. These endearing wee beasties are notoriously hard to spot other than in the grasp of Short-eared Owls, so we were really pleased with this sighting.

With much to see still today, our next stop was The Loons RSPB reserve and the Loch of Isbister. We went to the comfy roadside bird hide and sat for a while enjoying the view, although relatively quiet birdwise we did find several Sedge Warblers, Reed Buntings, Coot, Moorhen and Shoveler, while plants on offer included Ragged-Robin, Northern Marsh Orchid, Bogbean, Water Avens, still yet to flower Marsh Cinquefoil and lots of vibrant Marsh Marigold. The weather was great as we tore ourselves away from the hide and drove the half mile or so to the "Listening Wall" a concrete structure designed and built to reflect the sounds of the marsh. This is always a popular stop with our groups, and really does work. From here, we sat in the lee of the breeze, the wall acting as a sun trap and absorbed the sounds of drumming Snipe, calling Curlew, the alarm of Redshank, and the ever-present piping of Oystercatchers. As well as the sounds, a cracking pair of Black-tailed Godwit showed well not far away, and I've subsequently learnt that this pair now has three well grown young!

With such long hours of daylight this far north in the summer it's easy to lose track of time, so reluctantly we carried on, stopping at the Loch of Banks on our way to Brodgar and the heart of Neolithic Orkney. Another small group of Black-tailed Godwits were found, some in really smart summer plumage, but difficult to see well

in the heat haze, a nice complaint to have! Also noted here, Wigeon, Teal, a single Gadwall and hundreds of Greylags.

Orkney is famed the world over for its neolithic history, and having visited Skara Brae earlier in the day, we had a taste for more! So with the sun shining, there was a second reason for the next stop. Between the Lochs of Stenness and Harray in West central mainland, lies Brodgar, a narrow strip of land forming a natural causeway between these two large water bodies, the low-lying land here is surrounded by hills, a kind of landscape scale amphitheatre, and the position would have been significant at the time. Today, this tiny area, just a few km square, is peppered with the remains of ceremonial activity, some of it dating as far back as 5,400 years, and at the centre lies the Ring of Brodgar, sitting prominent in the landscape, the remains of a huge henge, measuring 104 metres in diameter. A total of 36 stones remain standing of an estimated 60 when built. One can only guess as to the actual use of these sites some 3,400 years before the birth of Christ, the experts have plenty of theories, but it's fun to come to ones' own conclusions.

As we walked to the stones, we noted Snipe, Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Reed Bunting and Sedge Warbler, with several Fulmar flying along the shore of Loch of Harray.

I'd mentioned earlier coming here with the sun shining. With this in mind, we walked to the RSPB reserve at Brodgar, leaving the stones till later. Walking down the grass path to loch of Stenness, we were surrounded by the rich wildflower filled meadows either side of the path, perfect for insects, and we were eventually rewarded with good views of the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee, Northern White-tailed Bee and a couple of Twite that sat briefly on fences close by. We all eventually got onto a smart summer plumage Dunlin that was amazingly well camouflaged among some weed covered stones at the waters' edge. Our walk around the reserve path was relatively quiet, but it was lovely to get a leg stretch and to enjoy the vastness of the landscape in this part of Orkney. The path eventually led us back to the impressive and atmospheric ring of standing stones, and with all of the cruise ship day trippers now gone, we had it virtually to ourselves, just us, a few Meadow Pipits, and the hundreds of Garden Tiger caterpillars that were all over the path!

With an eye on the time, we stopped for a short while at the Standing stones of Stenness, just a kilometer or so to the south. It was interesting to just lay our hands on these massive slabs and wonder how many others had done the same over the last five thousand four hundred years! Again, we had the place to ourselves, which made it even more special.

Heading back to Kirkwall after another full day, our very last stop was at the viewpoint close to the summit of Wideford Hill. From here we had a superb view right across Kirkwall and on up towards the "northern islands" with Shapinsay, Eday, and Stronsay clearly visible to the East, with Rousay, Gairsay and Wyre off to port.

A fabulous and varied day was had by all, and it was time for a decent feed and feet up!

Day 3

Tuesday 7th June

Southern islands, Lamb holm, Glimps Holm, Burray, South Ronaldsay, Deerness and Mull head late pm.

Yet again, dry, and warm, already a good start to any day! Heading out at 6am for our daily pre-breakfast trip, we drove the 3km or so straight to the pier at Scapa as the pod of Orca had been seen not far away last night. We scanned for just a few minutes and bingo! The family group of five animals were giving quite the show again with lots of spy hopping, breaching and tail slapping. Even at distance it was possible to get a sense of the power that is generated during these tail slaps, with large plumes of water displaced each time. Scapa bay held a single distant Great Northern Diver and closer in, a few Eiders and a single Red-breasted Merganser. Having watched and enjoyed these amazing creatures for a while, and feeling really lucky to have had the experience, we moved on to Inganess bay. Here, in prominent position lies the wreck of the Juniana, a small tanker that was towed to the bay in 1948 for scrapping and sits where she washed up all those years ago, still awaiting her fate. Today she is the ideal nesting site for a few pairs of Arctic Terns, whilst a decent number of Fulmar nest on the low grassy cliffs at the North end of the bay.

From the car park we went for a stroll along the Wideford Burn. The path here threads through a great area of marsh and damp grassland, as we walked at least four Sedge Warblers sang from pathside vegetation, and a few Sand Martins hawked over the pool close by, here also were a pair of Moorhen with four tiny youngsters. I decided to set the group in the direction of the airport road and would nip back for the bus, drive round, and meet the group at the other end, I'd be away for six, maybe seven minutes max - just enough time for the group to get absolutely stunning close views of a Short-eared Owl, with cracking photos taken by some, with a second bird showing soon after - the poor old guide didn't see a sausage! Anyway, delighted for the group, we enjoyed the varied plant life along the path with a really nice area of Water Aven in flower and lots of Marsh Cinquefoil ready to bloom, before heading back to the hotel for breakfast. We'd already had a really good days wildlife watching and wasn't even seven thirty!

Once we'd had breakfast and we were all together, we set off for an exploration of the southern islands, briefly stopping in at Scapa on the way out we didn't manage to see the Orca again, so we carried on making our first stop at the Loch of Graemshall. Here we found some smart male Gadwalls, and Shovelers as well as a big day roosting flock of Oystercatchers - maybe 50 birds. The loch overlooks Holm Sound, a sheltered sea loch that is often a good site for divers and today was no exception. A really smart looking summer plumage Great Northern Diver was showing from close to Lamb Holm, so we hopped in the bus and headed across the first of the Churchill Barriers to try for a better view.

The "southern" islands of Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm, Burray and South Ronaldsay are connected to mainland Orkney by a series of road causeways. These were the product of one of the largest tragedies in British naval history. On the night of the 14th October 1939, the German U-boat, U47 under the command of Gunther Prien, slipped past Couse Point on Lamb Holm and into Scapa Flow. Here he found The Revenge class battleship, HMS Royal Oak lying at anchor not far to the north. He fired three torpedoes, inflicting mortal damage on the outdated ship. She soon sank with the loss of 835 lives.

This single event led to the then First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to order the construction of permanent defences to replace the sunken "Blockships" that had proven unsuccessful in preventing attack. The islands of Lamb and Glimps Holm as well as Burray became the home of several prisoner of war camps, these in turn provided the huge amount of labour required for such a huge project. Today, the Churchill Barriers stand strong against the ravages of the sea and the huge number of massive, hand cast concrete blocks that form the structures (some 66,000, five and ten tonne blocks) can be seen from the road that crosses them.

Once on Lamb holm, at the end of barrier 1, we parked up and soon had good but brief views of the diver before it flew off and out to sea, we also got much better views of two Red-throated Divers that fed in the bay. Lamb Holm also plays host to the famous Italian Chapel. This wonderful site, one that has become a point of pilgrimage to some of our Italian friends, is made up of two WW2 Nissen huts that were turned into an ornately hand decorated chapel by the prisoners during the last war. The brush and carving skills of the men are astonishing, and it stands today, precious to the people of Orkney as a reminder of the good that can be found even from a bad situation. A must for anyone visiting Orkney!

Heading on south, we arrived at barrier no 4, the last to be constructed, which connects Burray with South Ronaldsay. This is an interesting site as an extensive sandy beach and small grassy dune system has built up over the last eighty years or so. Here we took a stroll in the pleasantly warm weather to view the slowly growing Little Tern colony.

I love this site, not just for the birds, but because the kids of Burray primary school have really taken "Ownership" of the terns and do all they can to protect them. The children, with the help of the kind of teachers I wish I'd had, have put up signs helping visitors to avoid disturbance to the breeding birds and giving lots of information to non-birders who happen to visit, so great to see the next generation getting stuck in!

Barrier 4 also gave us Stonechat, Sanderling, Common Ringed Plover - some with oh so-cute-chicks, and just a single example of the rare native Oysterplant. This is now quite hard to find as the large area that once grew on South Ronaldsay is now a car park. The fleshy leaves are said to taste of Oysters. Not sure whether that's good or bad!

With much to see and do today, we carried on down to South Ronaldsay, along the southern shore of Water Sound and into St Margarets Hope, the largest village in the south islands. From here we ended up at the Sands of Wright, a super wee spot overlooking Widewall Bay. Here we went for a short walk through the informal nature reserve that has formed over the years around a series of small freshwater pools. The habitat here is quite varied and this is often reflected by the birdlife present. Today was relatively quiet, but we did pick up Greenfinch, Curlew, Willow Warbler, Lesser Redpoll, Dunlin, Shelduck and Snipe as we wandered back towards the bus and lunch in the sunshine. A couple of us skimmed stones before "Growing up" and realising we are not 10 anymore!

After lunch we carried on South as far as Olav's Wood at Mossetter. This interesting little woodland started its life in 1970 with the planting up of a small burn and has grown since then to include an intriguing mix of native and exotic plantings. It offers areal contrast of habitat types compared to most of the rest of Orkney and can be a draw for migrants at the right time of year and in favourable conditions. Our walk around yielded just a couple of singing Goldcrest and the remains of a young Starling that had most likely fallen prey to a Long-eared Owl, given the position of its remains.

We'd had a taste of the habitats and learnt a little of the history of the southern islands, and were in need of a good walk, so we set off north, back over the barriers, onto mainland and made for Deerness, an area to the southeast of Kirkwall some twenty-four square km and connected to mainland by a strip of land just wide enough to carry the road. Here we drove up to Mull Head for our afternoon walk.

Along the narrow land to the car park, we found several family groups of waders with young, Redshank, Oystercatcher and Lapwing all sounded alarms, protecting their wee ones as we slowly drove by. Soon parking up, we set off towards the East Denwick plantation, a sheltered spot popular as a bird ringing site, and then carried on into open farmland. Mixed species grassland held good numbers of Skylark and Curlew before we began to reach the margin of the heather moorland and rough, damp grasses of the reserve. One or two Northern Marsh Orchids were in flower as we approached a slight rise where we could see over the several small lochans that are centre in the reserve. Straight away we found two Red-throated Divers on the nearest area of water and a cracking pale morph Arctic Skua that sat sentinel on a grassy tuft not far from our position. This bird was watching our every move, ever alert and had no doubt worked out our intentions before we'd even seen it! The walk across the moorland also gave us drumming Snipe, always great to see and hear, and several Bonxie (Great Skuas), this was especially good as there has been a noticeable impact on their numbers locally from the current wave of bird flu. A very confiding, and well posed male Twite allowed us all to see the bright candy pink rump that these otherwise demure looking birds have at this time of year, a surprise to many of the group. As we approached the cliff path, about halfway round our 4km amble, we found the partner of the pale Arctic Skua, this time an all-dark bird, with its rich, velvety chocolate coloured plumage every bit as attractive as the showier pale bird.

Seabirds were now very evident as we walked past the Brough of Deerness, a Norse church whose ruins sit prominent on a large sea stack. Lots of Shag, some in a small nesting colony were noted, as was the amount of marine plastics that they use as nesting material, Razorbills, Fulmars, and a few Puffins were also seen, along with a Raven. The calm waters of the bay at White Fowl Nevi, gave us the chance to look down on a few Black Guillemots, and from our elevated position we could see their bright red feet as they dived for fish. Hard to believe that such a clean black and white bird could look so very different in winter.

Really enjoying the walk, we carried on gradually. Two Wheatears flitted away, and a singing Rock Pipit parachuted over the cliff edge as we approached the "Gloup" a collapsed sea cave. Here we stood on the viewing platform and peered down into the darkness, the water some 30 metres below us, calm today, but during a good easterly blow, the funnel allows the sea to smash in here, a scary place indeed on the wrong day.

As we finally approached the minibus, a Red-throated Diver called as it flew over the visitor centre, its Greylag Goose like call unfamiliar to most and a sound Stewart had spoken of earlier in the week.

Back at the hotel, and all pretty tired, we went through the days' sightings, which had been many and varied! We had our meal and readied for another busy day tomorrow, one we'd all remember!!

Day 4

Wednesday 8th June

Westray. Swartmill area, Noup head, Noltland, Pierowall, Westside and Castle of Burrian

Another decent day of weather was forecast, a little dull to start with but dry. We all had an early start today, as we were heading for the fabulous island of Westray, a one-and-a-half-hour ferry ride to the north. Boarding the Earl Thorfinn, named for an eleventh century earl of Orkney, we settled into the comfortable open viewing area and scanned the harbour area. Stewart picked up the distinctive shape of an Otter as it gradually made its way to the shore, before it gave us all good views as it fed sat on rocks, just metres from the busy roads around the

harbour, this was a great start to the day, as Otter is not always an easy species to find here on mainland Orkney. Leaving on time, the ferry made its way north, passing the island of Shapinsay to starboard and Gairsay, Egilsay and Wyre to port. The trip up was fairly quiet with numbers of passing auks gradually building the further north we travelled, and a few dozen Grey seals were seen on Little green holm as we passed by. A few small feeding groups of Arctic Terns were noted too along with our first Puffin of the day as we approached Westray.

Reaching Rapness, at the southern end of the island, we boarded the bus and set off the short distance to the Loch of Swartmill, a small muddy pool at the roadside was scanned on the way up, which was well worthwhile, as a beautiful male Ruff strutted around in all his flamboyant finery! These are a joy as most folk only see Ruff in the autumn on passage when they are not so flashy looking!

The loch itself was pretty quiet, a few Tufted Ducks, Greylag Geese and Mallard but then fate somewhat played a part in proceedings, during last weeks' private group tour up here, Stewart had found a calling Corncrake in the long vegetation at the east end of the loch, and we attempted to connect again, our listening period was extended a little as Stewart extracted the front end of the van from the hidden ditch he failed to notice when parking up! I mentioned it, as someone else was going to anyway! Just as we were giving up, the bird called, not from deep cover, but from low grass close to the van. Over the next few minutes, we stood amazed as the bird eventually crossed said ditch and stood out in the middle of the single-track road like a domestic chicken, perfectly posed for the photographers in the group! Absolutely first class, male Ruff, and Corncrake in the first half an hour! The bird eventually carried on with its day and moved off into deep cover. We had a look over Swartmill bay, lots of Eiders, many with ducklings pottered about among the rocks and a couple of Common Seals spy hopped close in.

Seabirds reign supreme on Westray, and with this in mind, we drove on to the north end of the island taking the rough (increasingly rough) track to the lighthouse at Noup head. The lighthouse here was built in 1898 by David Stevenson, and, although not bold in design, or particularly rich in history, is notable as being the first Scottish lighthouse to have its lens mounted on a mercury float, an idea borrowed from the French! The 24 metre tower stands on top of the eighty metre cliffs at Noup, these are home to thousands of seabirds, and we took a stroll to a safe viewing area where we could overlook the busiest parts of the towering tenements.

Fulmars and a few Puffins occupied the upper floors, Razorbills sat in cosy niches formed in the eroded sandstone, Kittiwakes made plenty of noise further down and Common Guillemot crowded the cheap seats! Many of these tiny ledges were jam packed full of guano covered birds, a real mess! Gannet numbers at Noup have been building over the years, the first three pairs were seen in 2003, there's now over 900 pairs here, let's just hope that bird flu does not ravage this colony as it currently is elsewhere. Cliff-top flora was made largely of Thrift and Spring Squill, the pink and purple combination looking stunning in the now bright light. I'd been here last week with a group, and we'd been saddened to note how few Great Skuas we'd seen, just one all day, but this week gave a little room for optimism. At least eight individuals were seen in the hour or so we were there, much better, and all seemed healthy! We were also very happy to see Arctic Skuas patrolling the colonies, with an occasional attack being seen, one in particular involved a Guillemot that had no chance as the skua drove it at full speed into the sea, before making off with its meal!

Leaving such a busy, and fragrant seabird colony is never easy, as there's so much to see, but we had much to see elsewhere too. Slowly heading back towards Pierowall, the main village on Westray, we stopped for lunch at

Noltland castle. This well-preserved 16th century ruin was the home of Gilbert Balfour, a serial meddler in politics who became pretty unpopular in these parts, and elsewhere! The locals' fondness of Mr Balfour is reflected in the construction of the castle, its seventy-one gun ports suggested the kind of welcome strangers were likely to expect!

The castle's upper floors allow good views over the surrounding lochs and fields where we saw another drumming Snipe diving at speed, its odd sound being muffled by the strong breeze.

Pierowall is also home to the islands' fabulous wee heritage centre and its many artefacts and archives. One could spend hours trolling through the incredible amount of information that is stored here and the centre gives a real feel of the community spirit and involvement that is obvious here. The famous "Orkney Venus" or Westray wife, is on display here too, a tiny 4cm figure, reckoned to be the earliest representation of the human form in Scotland. Although diminutive in stature, she is hugely important to the people of Westray who are proud of their heritage and history.

Always keeping one eye on the time, as there is only one ferry home! We took a tour of Westside, a less explored part of the Island which overlooks the Bay of Tuquoy, a few Sedge Warblers scratched away from a small reed bed as we made our way back towards Rapsness.

Just a few kilometres to the north of the ferry slip lies the Castle of Burrian - a low grassy sea stack that is accessed by a pretty clifftop footpath that is just ten or fifteen minutes walk from the carpark. We strolled along, surrounded by swathes of Thrift, Squill, Sea and Red Campion, with the delicate pinks and whites of Cuckooflower and Common Scurvygrass. The bold yellow of Trefoil gave warmth, and the many swaying grasses depth to the picturesque scene. As we approached the stack, the first Puffins began to show, and we found a comfy spot out of the wind and just sat for half an hour enjoying the comings and goings of the Puffins and Fulmars, the latter being absolute masters of the air, repeatedly approaching the cliffs, turning on stiff wings and gliding by effortlessly. I have a particular love for Fulmars, the dark powdery smudge of the eye giving a softness to the face, and the way they constantly pair bond, bill tapping and just having little discussions with each other is a joy to sit and watch!

Having to tear ourselves away, we headed for a spot close to the ferry where we enjoyed a cuppa before boarding the Viraggen for a quiet journey back to Kirkwall, arriving just in time for dinner. Today had been a long day, but it's well worth giving a trip to this great island a good full day, yet again, we'd been fortunate with the weather and delighted with our sightings.

Day 5

Thursday 9th June

Tankerness, Kirkwall, Cottasgarth and Rendall, Gurness to Birsay, Marwick head

Just three of us nipped out for the pre breakfast trip this morning, yesterday had been a long day and I can't say I wasn't tempted with a wee lie in myself!

We made for an area just outside of Kirkwall called Tankerness. The route here took us out past the airport which itself can be excellent early mornings for owls and raptors, we turned at Burnside and very quickly bumped into our first Short-eared Owl of the day. This cracker was sat on a nearby fencepost before flying very

close to the bus, flipping back over the road and quartering the rough grassland for voles. We then carried on and took the dead-end road to Rerwick head. Another “Shortie” was working fields below the road, again giving good, prolonged views. Oystercatcher, Curlew and Skylark were in good numbers as we made our way back and around to the Loch of Tankerness.

From a suitable viewing area at the east end of the large loch, we scanned for any birds, and amongst a small group of gulls that were hawking for insects over the water, Stewart picked out a second calendar year Little Gull. This bird was slightly odd looking in as far as it superficially looked like a full adult summer with its all black head, but it had pale underwings and boldly marked upper wings - not a plumage type one would expect. Really pleased with this find, we also got onto a Red-throated Diver as an added bonus before heading back to the hotel for breakfast.

Once all together, we started the day's activities with a look at the impressive St Magnus cathedral in Kirkwall. This staggeringly beautiful early 12th century building dominates the Kirkwall skyline and is well worth a wander around for any visitors. We arrived as the doors opened at 9am and felt lucky to have it virtually to ourselves. The cathedral has been altered time and time again internally over the centuries to fit in with the fashions and trains of thought of any given period, and the way it looks today is very different from how it appeared 850 years ago. Owned by the people of Orkney and treasured by them all, the cathedral is full of memorials to individuals and events, none more poignant than the Royal oak memorial, here. In pride of place, hangs the ship's bell and a book of remembrance containing the names of the 833 men and boys that perished in Scapa flow on 14 October 1939.

With the sun shining once again, we set off for towards the eastern side of mainland. Our first port of call being the RSPB reserve at Lower Cottasgarth. A Common Buzzard was seen along the approach road before we parked up and walked the ¼ mile or so to the Eddie Balfour Hen Harrier hide. Along the path we were pleased to find a calling Cuckoo which gave excellent scope views and was soon joined by a second bird, the local Meadow pipits were not so thrilled to see them! A lovely big patch of Heath Spotted Orchids were in full bloom at the trackside as we approached the hide. Suddenly, and out of nowhere, a male Hen Harrier appeared low over the hill, and flew purposefully towards the steep bowl formed on the eastern slope of Baillie Hill. Here, it all happened so quickly! A female, ring tailed Hen Harrier flew up from the heather, inverted and accepted a food item mid-air from the male. What a thrill to witness a food pass, and a sure sign that an active nest was nearby. As quickly as they appeared, both birds vanished with the male being seen again distantly a while later.

We sat in the comfy hide for a while enjoying the harrier themed artwork produced by children from the local school. A pair of Stonechats flicked around in the scrub and a pair of Kestrels were the first seen this week. Leaving the hide, we had one last scan of the ridgeline. A Raven came into view being pursued by a much smaller bird which turned out to be a Merlin. This was joined by a second, and the two feisty falcons were relentless in their attack on the much larger corvid until it got the message and moved off. What a fabulous sighting we'd had of these elusive little raptors! The Cuckoos were still calling from the small patch of conifers as we walked back towards the minibus before we made our way north, heading for another RSPB site a few miles away.

Dominating the skyline of this part of Mainland Orkney are the five large wind turbines at Evie. Right at the foot of these lies Lowries Water, a small moorland loch which is overlooked by another smart bird hide. We took our lunch here while we enjoyed great close views of a pair of Red-throated Divers. The two birds displayed and

called to each other, performing their parallel swimming, head up display which was something many of the group hadn't seen before. After a while the two birds took off, using most of the length of the loch as a runway before turning, flying right over the hide and off out to sea to feed. A surprise find here was a single Barnacle Goose with the many Greylags, possible of dubious origin, but maybe a straggler from the winter who had attached itself to a resident Greylag flock. Who knows, but nice to see all the same. A single Great Skua was the only other bird of note seen here before we packed up and went to Evie pier for a look over Eynhallow Sound, the channel that separates mainland and the island of Rousay. From the parking area we saw another Red-throated Diver, possible one of the birds from the hide, which flew over calling loudly and eventually headed inland. A Common Tern passed by just offshore and a nice group of Eiders tended their many ducklings in the shallows close by.

Orkney's history is evident around every corner, we'd seen its Neolithic past close up earlier in the week, and from modern history, the many remains of activity from the two world wars was very obvious, so now we went for a look at the Broch of Gurness. This site is some two thousand years younger than Skara Brae, dating to around 1000 BC and is from the iron age. Walking around this lovely place, so well preserved and much quieter than Skara Brae, we were able to access the internal structure of the broch and appreciate just how much work went into its' construction. Life must have been very different for the people of the iron age compared with the earlier settlements around Orkney. Once people had learnt how to forge metal, they soon also learnt how to harm each other! This is reflected in the heavily fortified brochs and defensive structures of the time - a far cry from the earlier buildings. Their only in-built defences were from the elements. Today the Broch and its' surrounding walls are home only to healthy population of Starlings, who busily come and go with bills full of Leatherjackets for their young, sourced from the neatly trimmed banks around the site.

Looking out over the sound, two very close Red-throated Divers gave us excellent views in bright sun light and 21 Red-breasted Mergansers fed in the shallow water that covered the sands of Evie, a nearby bay.

Having enjoyed our relaxed visit to Gurness, we set off once again and carried on anticlockwise until we reached Birsay bay. Looking out to sea we could see the Norse broch on the nearby island. This is connected to "mainland" by a narrow low tide causeway and is popular with visitors. The rocky beach area held several Atlantic Grey Seals and a few Sand Martins worked up and down along the weed line picking sand flies as they went.

While at Birsay, we had a stroll around the Earls palace. Again we had the site to ourselves, which was great. Work started here in 1569 and was commissioned by Earl Robert Stewart, half-brother to Mary Queen of Scots. The palace was built around a central courtyard and was far more elegantly built than anything that had come before it on Orkney, especially compared to the likes of Noltland Castle on Westray, which we'd visited earlier in the week. The palace at Birsay was streets ahead of its time.

The palace had a turbulent, and relatively short useful life. Earl Robert got a little above his station, and fell out of favour with his father, the King, and some mistakes in Robert's Latin Syntax were eventually used as evidence as to the family's treasonable intentions. The remains of a Hooded Crow nest was the only evidence of recent inhabitation! With photos taken and with the sun still shining, we drove the few miles for a walk up to the Kitchener memorial on Marwick head. The walk took us up a narrow path past grazing cattle, a Brown Hare, a species we'd seen plenty of this week ran away while the huge number of Rabbits here were far more relaxed!

The clifftop path led us to the impressive tower - a 48 ft high square sectioned memorial funded and built by the people of Orkney in 1926 as a mark of respect to commemorate the death of Field Marshall Kitchener, who perished on the night of the 5th of June 1916, along with 722 men when HMS Hampshire, on a diplomatic mission to Russia, struck a mine just off shore and sunk in fifteen minutes.

The impressive cliffs here were bathed in afternoon sunshine, and we stood and enjoyed our last look over the expanse of Mainland Orkney. From our elevated position we could see down towards Brodgar, the heart of Neolithic Orkney, across to Birsay, its moors and lochans and to the south, we had a clear view of the high peaks of Hoy and the Old Man.

Seabirds had been such a feature of our time on Orkney, and it was fitting that we made the most of our time left here by watching the Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes jostling for position on the busy ledges, the Gannets and gulls drifted by while Arctic Skuas patrolled the colonies with a hint of mischief always in their eye!

Day 6

Friday 10th June

Departure day

With early drop offs at Kirkwall airport, and the prospect of a long day of onward travel for some, we elected to skip the pre-breakfast trip out. After our final breakfast together, we reluctantly said our “cheerios” and headed south. The minibus was heading back to Aberdeen with three of our party plus Stewart, although the trip had officially ended, we stopped off for another look at the Barrier no 4 Little Terns on the way to the ferry. Glorious sunshine gave us some nice photo opportunities, with several small groups of terns sat on the beach, as well as numerous birds noisily flying overhead. The return crossing to Gills Bay was very quiet, just a few Fulmars, a single Arctic Tern and a smattering of auks to be seen along the way. The mainland leg saw us briefly stop at Loch Fleet, where we noted Common Sandpiper, Shelduck, Eider and a very distant large raptor that may just have been a Golden Eagle, heading south onto the Black Isle. A couple of Red Kites were seen close to the road before we all too soon made our first drop off at Inverness train station. The next couple of hours saw us travel gradually towards Aberdeen and our final goodbye.

We’d really had an astonishing week of wildlife sightings, Orca, Otter, Risso’s Dolphin, owls, harriers, Orkney Voles, Corncrake, egrets, Merlin, flowers galore and history by the spade load. The weather had helped a great deal - a little bit of sunshine really makes Orkney “Pop”! I can’t thank you all enough for helping to make this week so special. A week that will stick in the memory for a very long time to come!

Good times and even better company, cheers, Stewart.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	June 2022					
		5	6	7	8	9	10
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>						
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓			✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓				✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓			
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>						✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>						✓
Northern Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>					✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>					✓	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					✓	
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	June 2022					
		5	6	7	8	9	10
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓				
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>				✓		
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>					✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				✓		
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			✓			✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					✓	
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Pigeon (Rock Dove)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>				✓		
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓			
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓		✓			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓			
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>						✓

Common name	Scientific name	June 2022					
		5	6	7	8	9	10
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓			
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			✓			
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓			✓
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			✓			
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>		✓	✓			
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓			✓	

Others

		Date:					
Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mammals							
Orkney Vole	<i>Microtus arvalis orcadensis</i>		1			✓	
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				✓		
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓	
Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		6				
Orca	<i>Orinus orca</i>	5		✓			
Invertebrates							
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Great Yellow Bumblebee	<i>Bombus distinguendus</i>		✓				
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>		✓	✓			
Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>		✓	✓			
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa alalanta</i>		✓				
Buff Ermine	<i>Spilarctia luteum</i>		✓				
“woolly bears” caterpillar				✓			
Poplar Hawk Moth	<i>Laethoe populi</i>			✓			

Plants

Common name	Scientific name
Marah Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>
Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Orache	<i>Atriplex</i> sp.
Ragged-Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Sea Campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>
Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>
Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>
Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Eared Willow	<i>Salix aurita</i>
Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>
Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>
Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>
Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>
Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>
Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>
Greater Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>
Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>
Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>
Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>
Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Heath Spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> subsp. <i>Ericetorum</i>
Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>
Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>
Lovage	<i>Levisticum officinale</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>