

# Orkney

## Naturetrek Tour Report

20th – 26th May 2023

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Guillemots and Kittiwakes at Noup Head



Scottish Primrose



Ring of Brodgar



Puffin at Noup Head

Tour report and images by Keith Buchanan

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## Summary

One doesn't go to Orkney for the weather but, in fact, our week was mostly dry and sunny, although never warm. This was absolutely fine for our purpose – to explore the local wildlife and archaeology. We encountered magnificent seabird cliffs on the island of Westray, a pod of Orca beneath those cliffs, and heartening numbers of Curlew, Oystercatchers and other waders in many places. Then add to this the special pleasure of Hen Harriers, a close Short-eared Owl and regular encounters with Great and Arctic Skua. Interspersed with these delights were the stunning neolithic remains that Orkney is becoming rightly famous for, including the on-going discoveries on the Ness of Brodgar. Added to this mix was the constant soundtrack of bubbling Curlew and singing Skylarks - a week to live long in the memory.

## Day 1

**Saturday 20th May**

The group met up for the first time at mid-afternoon in the lobby of our hotel in Kirkwall. The little hotel, in a 300 year old building, was conveniently situated near the cathedral although finding it, and its car park, proved an early challenge.

As a gentle opener to our trip, we headed north, to the coast overlooking the area of sea called The String and the island of Shapinsay. The weather was cool and calm as we set up the scope to overlook the bay. Just in front of us a field was being ploughed, enabling us to check out the many gulls, along with Oystercatchers, which were enjoying the resulting bounty. We were looking through the many Eider duck attracted by the mussels growing on the nets when we picked out a male Long-tailed Duck; a great early find. A little later, a large dark bird being harried by gulls proved to be a Great Skua. It sat on the beach giving us good views through the scope.

Further along the shore we began to pick up Turnstones, many in their bright summer clothes, chasing each other constantly around the Bladder Wrack encrusted rocks. On the inland side, we enjoyed the many singing skylarks, intermingled with the constantly alarming Oystercatchers. Here and there Lapwings swooped, and in the background, Curlews could be heard.

A fine male Northern Wheatear sat on a dry-stone wall in front of us and was then joined, further along, by a piping Redshank. On the other side of the wall, where heather grew, Curlews bubbled constantly, some also flying overhead. A dark shape in the heather proved to be a dark phase Arctic Skua, and its mate was soon spotted nearby. But by then it was starting to rain so we beat a hasty retreat, ready for our briefing on the week's activities, and looking forward to our first dinner in the hotel.

## Day 2

**Sunday 21st May**

Some of us ventured out on an early morning pre-breakfast visit to a small marshy area adjoining Ingaess Bay. The sun came out and it was a delightful morning as we pulled into the little car park above the beach. The rusting hulk of a ship was a rather striking addition to an otherwise pristine beach, but Common Terns had made good use of it for a nesting platform. An early morning swimmer greeted us cheerily as we started scanning the water.

Almost immediately we located a Great Northern Diver swimming out in the bay. Fulmars drifted past and Sand Martins were working around the cliffs at the far end of the bay.

Inland, the air was filled with the busy chaotic songs of Sedge Warblers singing in the Willows fringing the marsh. Reed Buntings flitted about, and more Sand Martins worked their way along the stream. As we walked along the stream, the wet fields were filled with the bubbling of Curlews and the frantic calls of Oystercatchers. Time was running out by then and we reluctantly left this lovely spot to return to the hotel for breakfast.

After breakfast we worked our way along towards Waulkmill Bay. But before that, we stopped at the RSPB car park and walked towards the coast. Immediately on emerging from the van we were serenaded once again by Sedge Warblers. Further on many small birds were located in the low growing willows mixed in with the heather; the most striking of which were the strongly coloured male Redpolls with their buzzing calls. Moving on to the bay, we located a lovely pair of Red-throated Divers, resplendent in their summer plumage.

A drive north took us to the heart of neolithic Orkney in the form of the Stones of Stenness. In the bright sunshine we absorbed the powerful atmosphere of the site and the adjoining neolithic village of Barnhouse which had possibly housed those who had constructed the henge and raised the stones.

Moving on to the Ness of Brodgar we parked up and had our lunch picnic overlooking the water. We walked up towards the iconic stones of the Ring of Brodgar then skirted them to take us to the far shore, an RSPB reserve. Here Skylark song formed a constant soundtrack as we followed the shore, doing a loop which brought us back to the road. Tufted Duck, Common Sandpiper and Red-breasted Merganser were added to our bird list as well as a number of butterflies and Northern Marsh Orchid. Pausing on our return to absorb the atmosphere of the stones, we returned to the van ready for our final adventure of the day.

This was our trip to Maeshowe, the best preserved neolithic Chambered Cairn in Northern Europe. As we stood inside we listened to its fascinating history, and marvelled at the 12<sup>th</sup> century Norse runes inscribed on the stones, indicating the many phases of this 5,000 year old structure. A dramatic end to a fascinating day.

## Day 3

## Monday 22nd May

A very early start this morning as we headed down to the pier in Kirkwall to catch the ferry to Westray. The journey takes about an hour and a half, and the time went by pleasantly as we sat outside watching flotillas of auks flying by, just above sea level. Setting off from Rapness, our first stop was at a small freshwater loch at Swartmill. On stopping at the side of the loch we immediately spotted a pale phase Arctic Skua standing in the water. Sand Martins sat on fences and Greylag Geese with goslings in tow cruised across the open water. At the far end of the loch, a stop overlooking the bay produced two Great Northern Divers.

Our next destination was the bird cliffs on Noup Head. Arriving in Pierowall, we found the narrow road leading north next to the school. This road eventually became a rough track, which slowed us down considerably, but we finally reached the light house just as the sun was coming out and the day warming up. We climbed up to the cliffs and were immediately entertained by the acrobatics of Gannets coming and going to their elaborate seaweed-constructed nests.

The horizontal bedding of the rocks has produced perfect nesting platforms. Gannets had the most elaborate nests but the ledges were jammed with Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes. Surprisingly, Puffins were not in evidence although we did find one which was nesting in a crevice. High above us, a Great Skua patrolled in its menacing way, and Jackdaws and Starlings came and went in their own breeding activities. Underfoot, the soft turf was studded with Thrift and Spring Squill.

As we started to make our way back from this seabird spectacle, our attention was drawn to a flock of birds on the sea below. A dorsal fin appeared and the cry of 'Orca!' went up. A pod of between three and five animals was clearly feeding on whatever had attracted the birds. As typically happens, after a few minutes of this activity everything went quiet and that was the last we saw of them.

Driving back down from the cliffs, we picnicked at Noltland Castle. A short tour of the castle followed, where we learnt of the colourful life of the castle's owner, who eventually came to a sticky end in Sweden. We dropped back down into Pierowall and made a short visit to the Heritage Centre, home to the celebrated 'Westray wife', a 5,000 year old miniature statue.

Our next stop was to the bay near Mount Pleasant. This broad sandy bay can be very good for waders but was today rather quiet, so we did not linger.

Our final stop was to walk to the sea stack at Caste O'Burrian. On the way we watched the antics of nesting Fulmars, struggling to land in the strong wind and we actually watched one laying an egg! At the stack, we were entertained by a pair of Ravens in a nest but taken aback again by the absence of Puffins. A Whimbrel flew overhead, calling, and some splendidly plumaged Shags were compensation. On retracing our steps, we did encounter a Puffin which seemed to have trouble locating its burrow and we watched with amusement as it ran the gauntlet of Fulmars as it tried to do so. By then it was time to return to the ferry and our hotel.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 23rd May

We set off this morning for the famous site of Skara Brae. On the way we had a brief stop at Lock Skail. Common Terns were flying over, and a largish group of Tufted Duck were in residence at one end. Sand Martins and Barn Swallows soared on the strongish breeze whipping up white horses on the lake and we left them to it as we finished the short journey to the Skara Brae visitor centre.

A coach was arriving as we did but we managed to slip in front of their visitors and got to the village where, initially, we had it virtually to ourselves. It really is the most extraordinary place: a village older than the pyramids, or Stonehenge, and almost perfectly preserved. It is a fascinating insight into how people lived in the neolithic. The visit to the adjoining Skail House, home of the discoverer of Skara Brae after a storm in 1850, was also enjoyed by all.

After Skara Brae we made our way to Yesnaby where we arrived in rainy and windy conditions. A brief search was all that was needed to find many flowering spikes of the exquisite Scottish Primrose, *Primula scotica*. Mixed in with Spring Squill and Thrift it made a lovely combination. Out on the rocks the strong wind made observation difficult, but we did manage to locate Rock Pipit, the first for this trip. On impulse we decided to make our way round to the impressive sea stack of Yesnaby Castle, sometimes used as training for climbing the Old Man of Hoy. On our

way back to the vehicle we understood the alarm calling of Oystercatchers when we almost stood on two chicks, sitting motionless on the ground and almost perfectly camouflaged.

After having our picnic lunch at Yesnaby we drove north and down to the coast near Marwick. We briefly scanned the lagoon there, but then quickly moved on to the freshwater reserve of The Loons. From the hide we watched the activity of various species, the most ominous of which was a Lesser Black-backed Gull continually patrolling in search of unguarded eggs or chicks. In a distant field, several parked vehicles designed to dissuade Greylag Geese from the emerging cereal crop seemed ineffective as many geese were grazing, along with a Brown Hare. Further on, we stopped at the Listening Wall, a parabolic wall designed to amplify the bird sounds from the marsh.

Our final birding stop was overlooking the Loch of Banks, where we watched a Great Skua attempting to raid a Curlew nest and being harried by the Curlew parents. We finished the day with a brief visit to the wonderful little farm museum at Kirbuster. This has the last remaining unrestored farmhouse with a central hearth separating people and animals in western Europe. Then it was back to our hotel.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 24th May

Our early morning visit today was to the Loch of Tankerness. The day was very windy, and our scanning of the loch did not reveal any unencountered species so we moved further on. Along the road we encountered our first House Martins of the trip and when we arrived at Mill Sands we found a group of Bar-tailed Godwit feeding on the exposed mud, accompanied by Dunlin, wearing their breeding finery, and many Ringed Plovers. Then it was back to the hotel for breakfast.

This was our day to head south, so we set off after breakfast over Churchill barrier No 1 and visited the Italian chapel. This little gem was built by Italian prisoners of war who were also constructing the Churchill barriers. They undertook a stunning transformation of two Nissen huts into a beautifully decorated chapel. This was adopted wholeheartedly by the people of Orkney and is also very popular with visitors.

Following our visit to the chapel we turned north again, briefly, to the Loch of Graemshall. Here we picked up some species we had not seen earlier in the week; namely Grey Heron and Wigeon. Heading further south we stopped for coffee before parking up at the last barrier. A walk through the dunes took us to a beautiful beach; even more glorious when the sun came out. As we walked along the deserted beach, we began to see fishing Little Terns, and towards the end of the beach many birds could be seen in the air, some chasing gulls, for this was the site of a Little Tern breeding colony. On the beach itself, we scanned through a group of waders which turned out to be Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Turnstone.

We then had an interesting walk through Olav's Wood, one of the few woods on Orkney. This was interesting as much for what birds were not in evidence as for those that were. But many native tree species were growing well, giving a flavour of what Orkney might have been like before the woods were cleared. Further north, we stopped for lunch at Sand of Wright. The wind was extremely strong, so our picnic was a brief affair, followed by a walk up to the lagoon behind the beach.

Our final destination for the day was the dramatic promontory of Mull Head. We marvelled at the dramatic blow hole known as The Gloop then had an enjoyable walk along the cliff to the austere setting of the Brough of

Deerness. Here we also enjoyed the nesting Fulmar, Shags and Guillemots before returning to the vehicle and the hotel.

## Day 6

Thursday 25th May

The day dawned grey and windy as we set off north in our pursuit of Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. The leader had no sooner asked everyone to scan from the vehicle when a Short-eared Owl appeared on the left hand side, flew across the road in front of us, then flew parallel to us for some time before doubling back. A lovely close sighting. Soon after, we arrived at the RSPB site, parked up, and made our way to the Eddie Balfour hide. We sat in the comfortable hide for some time, with only Meadow Pipits, Hooded Crows and the occasional Lapwing to entertain us. The leader did manage to spot a male Hen Harrier a long way away in the valley but unfortunately no one else got on to it, so we cut our losses and moved on.

Our next stop was a change in theme as we pulled up at the impressive Broch of Gurness. This well-preserved broch, originally about 12 metres high, sits right on the edge of the sea, surrounded by the remains of a village, and all about 2,500 years old.

Our next stop was the RSPB hide on Burgar Hill. As we arrived, the two Red-throated Divers which were breeding there took off, presumably out to sea to feed. Greylag Geese and goslings criss-crossed the lochan and Great Skuas passed through from time to time. Out on the left, the pale form of a male Hen Harrier came into view and was immediately chased by a pair of Oystercatchers. Having lunched in the hide we reboarded the bus and headed back to Kirkwall to jettison those who had requested time to look around the town.

The rest of us headed north again, and took a minor road through heather moorland. After a few minutes we pulled over to look at a bird flying in the distance. This was a male Hen Harrier, and it worked its way systematically along the valley. Flying low over the ground, it was clearly hunting. A few minutes later we had a brief view of a female.

We continued on our way to Birsay and parked overlooking the bay. In the strong wind a busy group of waders – Dunlin, Turnstone and Ringed Plover – were working their way along the tideline and there were many Eider in the bay. Finding that the café was closed we decided to work our way south again. Our most significant encounter was a brief stop next to the Loch of Banks. Here we found a Snipe sitting on top of a fence post, singing its ‘tick-tock’ song. A few minutes later another appeared then both took off and went into their display flight, drumming all the while. Further out, on the water, two drake Pintail were up-ending, feeding in the shallow water. Then we departed for the hotel.

## Day 7

Friday 26th May

This was departure day and, with everyone travelling in different ways, we said our goodbyes over breakfast, having enjoyed a fine week on Orkney.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		20	21	22	23	24	25
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓				✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				✓		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
Long Tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	✓					
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓	✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2		1		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓	✓			
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						3
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓		
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				H		✓



Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		20	21	22	23	24	25
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					✓	
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓			
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓				
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</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>				✓		✓
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>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
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>	✓	✓	H	✓	✓	✓
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>		✓	✓	H	H	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		H			H	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H	✓	H	H
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
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>					H	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>						✓
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		✓			✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>			✓			



Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		20	21	22	23	24	25
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	H	✓	✓	

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		20	21	22	23	24	25
Orkney Vole	<i>Microtus arvalis orcadensis</i>						✓
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓		✓		
Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			3			

## Insects

INSECTS	
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>
Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>

## Flora

Common name	Scientific name
Scaly Male Fern	<i>Dryopteris affinis</i>
Hard-fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>
Marah Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>
Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>
Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>
Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>
Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>
Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Greater Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>
Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>
Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>
Dog Violet	<i>Viola raviniana</i>
Silver weed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>
Wild Garlic	<i>Allium ursinum</i>
Sedge	<i>Carex nigra</i>
Common Bistort	<i>persicaria bistorta</i>