

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

24th – 30th May 2025



Black Guillemot



Northern Gannet



Little Terns



Short-eared Owl

Tour report by Mick Durham



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Day 1

Saturday 24th May

The Orkney tour started with everyone meeting in the Orkney Hotel mid-afternoon. The day had started wet and misty, but it was beginning to cheer up a little. Some guests still had to arrive, and a couple feeling the effects of a long travelling day decided not to come out, but for the four remaining, Mick suggested a mini afternoon excursion to see what was about. We left the hotel and drove a short way out of Kirkwall to Inganess Bay, at the back of the airport. This bay is where the HMS Junia is wrecked, and can be a good place to look for divers. Conditions were reasonable for scanning the bay, and although we didn't pick up on any divers we soon saw the Arctic Terns which nest on the wreck. A couple of Black Guillemot and a Common Guillemot soon followed. There were a number of gulls around: Black-headed, Common, Herring and Great Black-backed were soon added to our list. By now the sun had come out, which was a pleasant change.

Far out in the bay a single Gannet fished, and a Ringed Plover flew by. Rock Doves were also seen out on the wreck. We then turned our attention to the reedy marshes behind us. On a small patch of water there was a pair of Mallard, a few Swallows flew by, and then we heard a Sedge Warbler, which very kindly flew up on to a perch, giving us all excellent views. Having decided that we had probably seen all that was going to be obvious, we decided to move on.

We went back on to the main road, out past the airport and then explored the minor roads around Tankerness. Mick drove a circular route, which gave us views of Oystercatchers, Curlews, more gulls, Rock Doves, Wood Pigeons and a lone Pheasant, and then Mick spotted a Hare hunkered down in amongst the buttercups. A little further along the road a second Hare was spotted, this one being a little livelier. Along the road to Rerwick we found Redshank and Lapwing, as well as a Meadow Pipit posing nicely on a fence post.

Time was slipping away, so we started to make our way back towards the main road. Just before we reached it, Mick spotted a movement above a small bank and was just in time to see a Short-eared Owl drop into the vegetation and disappear from view. Sadly, the group missed it, and though we sat and waited it didn't reappear, and eventually we left it and made our way back to the hotel.

Before the evening meal the whole group got together and Mick ran through the format for the week; where we might go, what we might see and the planned visits to some of Orkney's finest archaeological sites. It was then time to move into the dining room. After the meal the group headed back to their rooms for an early night following a long travelling day (two days for some).

Day 2

Sunday 25th May

The weather forecast was quite dismal for today: heavy rain during the morning and clearing during the afternoon, but with the wind increasing to very strong. Mick decided that the best itinerary for such a forecast was to head south and look at South Ronaldsay, Burray and the two smaller islands which make up South Orkney. In fact, as we left the hotel it wasn't raining too hard, but during the morning we did get some quite heavy showers, accompanied by a strong, gusty wind.

The first stop was Tesco to sort out some lunch options, and then we set off south out of Kirkwall, past the Highland Park distillery and on down to the village of St Mary's and Loch of Ayre. The plan was to make use of the hide to keep out of the rain, but another group had beaten us to it, so we moved on to the Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm. Here, we were beaten by a large tour coach, and decided to look at the chapel on our return. However, out in the bay we spotted a Great Northern Diver very close in, so despite the squally rain we all got out to take advantage of close-up views of this spectacular bird in its summer plumage. We also picked up Arctic Terns and a Common Gull.

Moving on, but not very far, just as we were about to cross the second Churchill Barrier, we spotted a Great Skua (though the cry that went up was "Bonxie", the Shetland name which seems to be becoming better known now). There was a large pull-in, so we stopped and in fact one skua became two, and then three, and we realised that they were feeding on a dead Greylag Goose, which really gave us a wonderful opportunity to study these birds.

A little further down the shoreline there was a family group of Eiders: several males, two females and a small flotilla of ducklings. Among them were some Herring Gulls and a little offshore were four Great Black-backed Gulls. Starlings and a Rock Pipit completed the bird count.

While watching the skuas, we also looked at the plants growing on the foreshore and identified Sea Campion, Sea Mayweed, Common Scurvygrass, Scots Lovage, Kidney Vetch and Bird's Foot Trefoil.

We then drove across Glimps Holm and Burray, stopping briefly for a comfort break by the beach, which is known for its small colony of breeding Little Terns. Mick had checked the beach a few days ago and hadn't seen anything, and as it was raining hard, we decided not to go and have another look. We moved on to South Ronaldsay and drove to St Margaret's Hope, and out on the road toward Hoxa. We stopped at Sand of Wright, a beautiful sandy bay, and once again putting up with the rain we had a very productive twenty minutes, picking up Red-throated Diver, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Redshank, another Great Skua and a very brief Arctic Skua.

Having had enough of the rain, we carried on south, pausing briefly at the Olad viewpoint to look for raptors, finishing up at the road's end at Bur Wick. The wind was extremely strong here, but we battled out to the The Wing to watch the turmoil that was the Pentland Firth. We also found Ragged Robin, Centaury and Spring Squill. Cobwebs well and truly blown away, we started to make our way back north.

A diversion from the main road took us to Wind Wick where we found another Red-throated Diver, a Gannet fishing far out to sea, some Turnstones and a few Jackdaws. Passing Olaf's Wood we stopped briefly to look for small birds, but the wind defeated us. We did find a small patch of Bluebells, though.

A comfort break and lunch were next on the agenda, so we made our way back to St Margaret's Hope and sat overlooking the bay. After lunch, we went back to Burray, and this time, because it was reasonably sunny, we did walk out to look for the Little Terns. And they were there! We kept well clear of the nesting area, but one individual decided to fish right in front of us, and because it was windy it was hovering, giving great views. It then obliged by catching a fish, and we watched it fly back to the colony and land: wonderful. As we walked back to the van, a Linnet was spotted.

The next stop was the Italian Chapel, and this time it wasn't too busy, so we spent half an hour admiring the achievements of the Italian prisoners of war, who had turned an old Nissen hut into a very ornate place of worship.

From there we drove back onto Mainland and to Hobbister RSPB Reserve. A short walk out gave us a singing Wren, heard but not seen, but no raptors. A quick visit to the toilets above Waulkmill Bay produced no new birds. It was almost time to start heading back to Kirkwall, but in a last effort to find either a harrier or owl, Mick took the minor road, past Loch Kirkbister, and then on to the Heddle road and on to Finstown. About half way along this road, Mick spotted a movement high up on a ridge to the right of the minibus, and there was a beautiful male Hen Harrier. It came down the hillside, across in front of the minibus and then started to fly parallel to the road, making it possible for Mick to drive along while, everyone watched it. We followed it for several hundred yards before it finally dropped down out of sight. It was a spectacular way to finish the day and as the rain had started again, everyone was more than happy to head for home, a shower and an evening meal.

We rounded the day off with a review of what we had seen, where we had been, and where we planned to go tomorrow.

Day 3

Monday 26th May

Waking up to a heavy hailstorm was not what we expected, but it was short-lived, and by the time we set off for our daily visit to Tesco, there were some signs of sunshine. However, as some of the group made their way back to the minibus the heavens opened, and in the short dash across the carpark we got soaked.

Once again, the rain was short-lived, and by the time we arrived at our first destination, the Stones of Stennes, it was reasonably dry. We spent some time admiring these huge stones and then made our way to the Barnhouse bird hide, on the shore of Loch of Harray. The loch looked more like the sea, with white horses rolling across it. Viewing was not easy, but we found a Cormorant, Tufted Duck, a Great Skua and a Lesser Black-backed Gull, the last a new bird for the week. We soon realised that we weren't going to see much else from the hide, so we walked back to the Barnhouse Neolithic Village, picking up Linnet and Skylark on the way.

The Ness of Brodgar is a World Heritage Site, with good reason. We had already seen two fascinating sites, and there were more to come. We drove the short distance up the road to the Ring of Brodgar, a large circle of standing stones. The path round them leads on to the circular walk around the Brodgar RSPB reserve. As we approached the stone circle, a very ominous looking sky was creeping towards us, and within a few minutes the heavens opened again. With no shelter, we put our heads down and continued on our walk. Fortunately, blue skies quickly followed, and by the time we had finished our walk we were dry again.

A Redshank was keeping watch, perched high up on one of the standing stones, and this should have given us a warning. As we moved away from the stones, four Redshanks took to the air and harried us as we walked through what was obviously their breeding territory. We didn't linger, but followed the path out to the Loch of Stennes, which is connected to the sea via a small channel known as The Bush. This connection explained why we found a number of Grey Seals well inside the loch, resting on some low-lying rocks. The walk also gave us Sand Martin, Reed Bunting and a Shelduck.

Our next location was the cliffs at Yesnaby, a well-known site for the rare Scottish Primrose. The wind battered the minibus as we drove along the single-track road to the parking area, and as we looked out to sea, once again some dark-looking storm clouds were rapidly approaching. It was time for lunch. When we had all eaten, it was time to go and look for the Scottish Primrose, even though the storm clouds were still gathering. We decided to chance it, but had only been out of the bus a few minutes when the storm hit. We scuttled back to the shelter of the bus and sat it out, until after about fifteen minutes the sky turned blue and it stopped raining.

Spreading out to cover a large area, we all wandered about, backs bent as we stared at the ground looking for the diminutive primrose. Various “possibles” were examined, until finally one of the group said “what’s this?” There was no tell-tale purple flower, but what they had found was a green basal rosette. Soon another was seen, and suddenly, with everyone getting their eye in, we began to find more and more. The colony probably numbered well over a hundred, but none was in flower. The nearest we got were a few specimens still with a single stem and some dried up flower heads. The Scottish Primrose has two flowering seasons: early to mid May and then again in July. So, we were just too late, and yet too early!

With more rain threatening, we went back to the bus, and Mick took the group up to the hide on the RSPB reserve called The Loons. There was not a diver to be seen: the name has nothing to do with ‘loons’ as in the North American name for divers! But with some patient watching of the pools and reedbeds which make up this reserve we added Shoveler, Coot, Little Grebe, Teal and Snipe to our sightings. There were two Brown Hares in a field nearby, bringing our total that day to six.

We then drove a short distance up the road to the Loons Listening Wall, a curved structure which amplifies the sounds of spring birds: but not today! The wind was far too strong to allow any bird call to be picked up. We did, however, sit and watch the Lapwings displaying, an anxious Oystercatcher with her chick, and a black Rabbit grazing in a field.

It was now mid-afternoon, and time to return to Brodgar to experience yet one more reason why it’s a World Heritage Site: the Maeshowe chambered cairn. We duly went into the visitor centre and waited for the guide and bus to take there. No one really knew what to expect, but we all came away amazed and fascinated by what we had seen and heard. Getting into the cairn involved a stooped walk along a passageway, until one could stand up straight in the cairn. This proved to be a domed chamber with some small “rooms” off to one side. The walls were covered in runes which, we were reliably informed, were basically Viking graffiti from the time they had broken into the chamber looking for riches. The guide was excellent, combining fact and humour beautifully, but all too soon his story was told, and it was time to return to the visitor centre.

And it was our time to head for the hotel. Once in Finstown, Mick took the old Finstown road back to Kirkwall in the hope of finding a raptor, but this time we were not lucky. A couple of road closures and a diversion in Kirkwall caused some initial consternation, but Mick eventually found a route back to the hotel in time for showers and a debrief before the evening meal.

Day 4

Tuesday 27th May

We woke to a sky empty of rain clouds but the gusty winds persisted. A slightly earlier start today (with a brief visit to the industrial estate: see below) and we were driving into the Skara Brae Visitor Centre carpark just after 9.30am.

It was almost empty! A quick scurry through the ticket counter, and we were heading out along the path to the village itself. In fact, we were the first people to arrive, and those of us keen on photography took full advantage to get pictures without people in them.

The remains of the Neolithic settlement were first uncovered following a violent winter storm in 1850. Slowly, they have been fully excavated, and now stand as an amazing look back 5,000 years to our predecessors. We took our time wandering around, the sun shone and the surf pounded in an aquamarine bay. Standing overlooking the Bay of Skaill we saw a Grey Seal, Eiders, a variety of gulls and a lovely flock of Sanderlings, resplendent in their summer plumage.

By now the crowds were arriving, so we moved on to look at Skaill House, the one-time home of the lairds of this area, including the man who discovered Skara Brae following the storm. Looking across the garden to the nearby farm, we realised that the cattle feeder was proving a big draw to a number of corvids. There were at least twenty Ravens, along with some Hooded Crows. Finally, we regrouped back at the Visitor Centre to do some shopping and enjoy a very welcome cup of coffee.

Leaving Skara Brae to the crowds, we drove north and made a brief stop at Mar Wick. Again, we watched the rollers thunder in, and wondered what it would be like walking up to the Kitchener monument on Marwick Head. We were soon to find out! Leaving the Marwick Head car park, we were initially sheltered, but soon we were feeling the force of the wind. The path led uphill and finally met the cliff edge. Keeping well away from the edge, we battled our way up to the Kitchener Monument, where Mick told the group that he thought it too risky going on to the best viewpoint for the seabirds, as the wind would be blowing us directly towards the cliff edge. We did get a view of the birds from the monument, and picked up Razorbill, Common Guillemot, Kittiwake and Gannet. We retreated and were more or less blown back to the minibus. Just before we left the cliffs and headed downhill, we spotted two or three Puffins flying in.

Mick talked to the group and told them that he thought a change of plan was sensible, and that we should give up on coastal watching and walking: it was extremely hard work, we couldn't hold our binoculars steady and we weren't seeing a great deal as a result. We drove to the Brough of Birsay where we made use of the public toilets and had our somewhat late lunch.

While we ate, we scanned the shore and found some Ringed Plovers, all the gulls we had seen so far and, new for the trip, a Harbour Seal. Then Mick drove the group up to the hide by the wind turbines on the RSPB Birsay Moor Reserve. Completely out of the wind, we sat down to see what was on offer. Not a lot: or at least not to begin with. The hide overlooks Lowrie's Water, and a lone male Tufted Duck and a few Greylag Geese were all that we could see. Mick had explained that the loch often had a pair of Red-throated Divers nesting on it, and the visitors book confirmed that they had been seen quite recently.

After about fifteen minutes, the cry went up and a single diver flew over and then landed on the loch. It started to wash and preen, and although the sun made it difficult to see its red throat, we all enjoyed good views of it. In fact, most of us were still watching it, but one client was scanning the surrounding moorland and spotted a male Hen Harrier. It was a long way off, quartering Mid Hill, but we were able to watch it for some time before it rose up and then dropped out of sight.

The diver was still there, and we began to realise that there were many more Greylag Geese around, including some goslings. Suddenly two birds appeared and flew past the hide. They were two Arctic Skuas; one was a dark-morph bird, while the other was a light-morph. Fortunately, they circled around and landed on the water. They continued to take off and land again for some time, but eventually they pitched next to each other on the far side of the loch. Mick got the 'scope on them and everybody enjoyed good views. Then people started to have a go at taking a picture using the 'scope and a smart phone: some had success and one person was lucky enough to take a photo just as the two birds took off. The reason was that a couple of Great Skuas had appeared. There was a little bit of flying around, and then the Arctic Skuas flew off to the left and disappeared from view.

We were all rather stunned with the action we had enjoyed. Mick joked that it wasn't that good because we hadn't seen a Short-eared Owl, which was a possibility, nor had we seen the White-tailed Eagle mentioned in the visitor book. But, of course, it had been spectacular and certainly confirmed that the decision to abandon coastal watching had been the right one.

Time was passing, and we set off back towards Kirkwall, taking the road across Birsay Moor to see if we could see any more harriers or an owl. This was not to be, so as we approached Kirkwall, Mick went back to the area of the industrial estate which often holds Short-eared Owls. The terrain looked good, but, as with this morning, it was all quiet.

We filled the van up with diesel and headed back to the hotel. We met up before the meal to talk through what we had seen, and also to finalise the arrangements for tomorrow's visit to the island of Westray.

Day 5

Wednesday 28th May

The forecast slight lessening of the wind appeared to have come good as we all assembled, a little bleary-eyed, just after 6.30am in the hotel reception, ready to go to the ferry terminal to catch the early morning boat to the island of Westray. It was only a short drive, and soon we were being directed towards the correct lane at the terminal, ready for boarding. Once on board, we found a suitable place on deck, out of the wind, to enjoy the hour and a half crossing to Westray. We set off promptly just after 7.20 am, and settled down to some seawatching.

The crossing was much calmer than we had anticipated, given the wind that had been blowing over the last few days, but even so the waves made for difficult scanning. We actually saw very little other than a few Black Guillemots, Shags and gulls, and we spent most of our time trying to identify the many islands we passed en route. The hotel had provided us with a packed breakfast, but most of the group succumbed to the temptation of a hot sausage in a bun and a warming cup of coffee.

By 8.45am we had docked and were driving to the southern tip of Westray. We drove north until a minor road on the right led us to Loch of Swartmill. We pulled into a layby and scanned the loch, paying particular attention to the many swans there: we were looking for a Whooper Swan, but they all turned out to be Mutes. Close to the edge of the loch, two Shelduck were keeping a watchful eye on their three young, and elsewhere we picked up on Tufted Duck.

The road took us down to the Bay of Swartmill and then back around on to the main road. There was nothing new here, so it was time to head up to the village of Pierowall and find the road to the RSPB Reserve at Noup

Head. Driving through the village, we spotted the Heritage Centre, which we intended to visit later in the day. The road out of the village leading north-west towards the Noup went up by the school, and soon we were turning left and right as we worked our way over to the large farm at Noup.

This was where the road changed its character: the RSPB information warned that this was a track suitable for four-wheel drive vehicles only, but we knew from past trips that, with care, it was possible to drive the minibus all the way to the lighthouse. Mick drove slowly, with much dodging and weaving of potholes; the group all held their breath as he negotiated the two very narrow bridges, but eventually we made the small carpark next to the lighthouse. Mick wasn't able to look for birds while driving but a client sitting up front spotted our first Wheatear, much to everyone's delight. There were no coaches, no campervans and in fact no other cars; everyone had no doubt been put off by the track. We had the place to ourselves.

The cliffs around Noup Head are home to a large number of seabirds, including a Gannet colony, and we could quickly see and smell activity. After a short walk up to the trig point and along the cliffs, we found ourselves in among the birds. Although the wind had eased, it was still quite breezy, but we found some shelter, and with the sun shining we spent the next two hours enjoying the sights and sounds of a seabird colony. Gannets and Fulmars wheeled close by constantly, while Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes tended to be a little further out, but every now and then they would come closer, giving lovely views. At one point, a Black Guillemot hung in the updraft only feet from us. Great Skuas patrolled the skies, and the sun continued to shine: wonderful.

We began to spot a few Puffins to add to the mix. Time drifted away, and all too soon we needed to head back to the minibus to go and enjoy a lunch at the Groattie Buckies café. (Grottie Buckies are cowrie shells in the local dialect). As we walked back towards the carpark, two Arctic Skuas flew overhead, and as we drove back down the track a third Arctic Skua was briefly seen.

Down in Pierowall, the café were ready for us, and the soup of the day proved to be very popular. The staff were delightful and we all agreed that lunch had been a great success. We next drove out to Rackwick and on to the Westray airport, which provides a link with Westray's smaller neighbour, Papa Westray. The Ouse, a large sandy bay, looked very promising for waders, but was in fact empty. However, a large flock of small waders was spotted a little distance away in a field. Mick drove around to get a better view, and while he got the 'scope out of the van, the rest of the group were able to determine that while most of them were Ringed Plovers, a few were Dunlins, a new bird for the trip. Unfortunately, just as Mick got the 'scope set up, they decided to fly!

Feeling slightly frustrated, we moved on to the Heritage Centre, which was bursting with information about life on Westray, far more than we could take in on a short visit. We all made sure we saw the small sandstone Neolithic figurine known as the "Westray wife". Small it was, but fascinating to see and read about.

Time was slipping away, and we did want to visit Castle o' Burrian before we left, so that was our next stop. We parked in the small carpark next to the ruined mill and our first sighting was of a Green-veined White butterfly, soon followed by a Red Admiral: obviously the warm sun and the lessening wind was finally bringing out the insects.

A short walk around the cliffs brought us to the sea stack know as Castle o' Burrian, and again we sat in the sunshine watching the activities of a few Puffins and some other auks. We were a little disappointed by the Puffin

numbers, but learned from a local that the best time to see them at this time of year was in the evening. This was later confirmed by someone Mick talked to on the ferry, who had been there the evening before and witnessed several hundred birds coming in from the sea. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the scenery, the warmth of the sun and sitting staring at what we think was an Orkney Vole burrow. No vole appeared to confirm our suspicion!

It was time to drive back to the ferry terminal. We were a little early, and spent the time scanning the bay for Otters. There was no sign. It was soon time to drive onto the ferry and head back to Kirkwall. Once again, the crossing was relatively calm, but quite cold. Most of the group retreated to the warmth of the lounge, but a few hardy folk sat outside. Apart from some Black Guillemots sitting on a cardinal mark buoy, there was little to see.

Once back in Kirkwall, we drove back to the hotel, and after a quick wash, settled down to a slightly later evening meal, followed by our catch up of the day, one full of sunshine and fresh air, and some wonderful sights.

Day 6

Thursday 29th May

The Met Office was bang on with their forecast, and by the time we were driving away from Tesco it was raining heavily. Mick had planned to spend most of the morning at the RSPB Cottascarth hide in the hope of seeing Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owls, with a quick visit to the summit of Wideford Hill (another potential site for owls), and despite the clouds gathering we drove up the single-track road to the masts on the summit. The view was rapidly disappearing, and we didn't linger.

By the time we arrived at Finstown, it was impossible to see out of the minibus due to the rain, and the cloud was so low down that nothing would have been visible at Cottascarth. Mick suggested to the group that it was pointless carrying on with the intended itinerary, and that we should return to Kirkwall and then go out on to the Tankerness and Deerness peninsulas, which would be less affected by the low cloud. He also gave the option of staying behind in Kirkwall and then rejoining the minibus for the afternoon: the weather was set to improve and we would then visit Cottascarth.

Half the group took up this option, so we dropped them off at the hotel before continuing along to Tankerness. A quick visit to Inganness Bay drew a blank, but as we drove around Tankerness we did pick up on a few birds, though nothing out of the ordinary. Two Hares were spotted before we drove out to Rerwick Head. Here, we found the resident Redshank pairs still complaining about visitors, and having spotted at least one chick we didn't linger. We watched an Arctic Tern hovering with a fish in its beak before landing and attempting to mate with its partner.

Then one of the group decided to bribe the guide with a "would you like me to buy you a coffee" and everyone agreed that a coffee stop would be most welcome. Fortunately, the Sheila Fleet Jewellery shop and Kirk café were nearby, and we enjoyed a welcome cup of coffee in beautiful surroundings. They have renovated the old kirk into a stunning shop and café: well worth a visit.

Coffee over, we drove out on to the Deerness peninsula as far as Sandi Sand, where we parked up and scanned the bay. Very soon we picked up on two Arctic Skuas, again one of each colour morph (surely not the same birds we saw up at Birsay Moor hide?). They sat a distance away from us, but then the dark-morph bird took off, circled

around and then flew right over our heads, only metres above us. To cap it all we then watched it harass an Arctic Tern until the tern dropped its fish, which was quickly scooped up by the skua.

It was time to go back to the hotel and pick up the other half of the group. There were signs that the weather was slowly, very slowly, improving, so we decided to go out to Cottascarth, come what may. By the time we reached the reserve car park, the rain had all but dried up, and the cloud was lifting. Mick had climbed into the back of the van to get the 'scope and tripod, when a call of "Short-eared Owl!" went up, and there, a little distance away, was a Short-eared Owl hunting. We were extremely lucky: it landed on a fence post and stayed there long enough for us to get the 'scope on it. While people were taking it in turns to view the owl, another cry went up: "harrier!". This was even further away, against the skyline, but we were fairly confident that it was a male.

Both birds eventually flew off out of sight and so we walked up to the Eddie Balfour hide, which is a magnificent affair, and probably the largest RSPB hide in Orkney: it literally is 'barn-sized'. Most of us hadn't had our lunch, so we sat eating sandwiches and scanning the hillside. A calling Cuckoo was located on a nearby tree, our first for the week. Eventually, a male Hen Harrier was spotted and then, while we were still watching it, a second male flew close by and drifted across the moorland. At one point, both birds were perched, giving us good views through the 'scope.

A female Stonechat made a brief appearance, and then both male harriers flew up and drifted off in different directions. For a while it was very quiet, and then one of the group spotted a grey patch high up on the hillside. One of the Hen Harriers (or was it a third bird?) had come back and was on the ground. It also took off and flew left and out of sight.

By now, some weak sunshine had arrived, and a few insects took to the air. Green-veined Whites were seen, and then a few of the group went looking in the 'garden' next to the hide and found a few Northern White-tailed Bumblebees and some Moss Carder Bees. The hillside remained quiet until two small raptors flew in and disappeared. Had they been Merlins? We spent a long time searching for them, but to no avail, and eventually it was time to leave the hide and head back down to the minibus.

Mick chose the Old Finstown road back to Kirkwall, and just out of Finstown our fourth and final Hen Harrier, another male, appeared. It flew near the minibus, then hovered, dipped and rose right in front of us before flying along the road with us following it. Finally, it dipped away and we continued on to Kirkwall, amazed at how successful the afternoon had been given the awful weather in the morning. It just goes to show!

Before the evening meal Mick rounded up the week, and everyone agreed that it had been an extremely successful visit to Orkney.

Day 7

Friday 30th May

Today marked the end of the tour, and we all met at 8.00am for a final breakfast, before saying goodbye. Some were flying home, others were off to the ferry, while a couple were staying on for a few days. It had been a great week, and I suspect no one wanted it to end.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		May 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓			✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓			
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓	✓			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓			
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>						✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓				
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					✓	
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		✓				
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>				✓	✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓	✓	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓				
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓

I=Introduced		May 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1		1		4
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>						1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓				
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓		H			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓			✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓		✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓			

Mammals

		May 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>		✓				
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓		

Butterflies

		May 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>			✓			✓
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓			

Other insects

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025					
		24	25	26	27	28	29
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>			✓			✓
Moss Carder Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum</i>				✓		✓
Coppery Click Beetle	<i>Ctenicera cuprea</i>		✓				

Fungi

Common name	Scientific name
Egghead Mottlegill	<i>Panaeolus semiovatus</i>

Plants

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	Common Hard Fern
<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>	Common Male Fern
<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Northern Marsh Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Heath Spotted Orchid
<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	Yellow Iris
<i>Scilla verna</i>	Spring Squill
<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Common Bluebell
<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Common Cottongrass
<i>Phragmites australis</i>	Common Reed
<i>Caltha palustris</i>	Marsh-marigold
<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Meadow Buttercup
<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	Common Kidney-vetch
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Common Bird's-foot-trefoil
<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White Clover
<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	Red Clover
<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Meadowsweet
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Common Tormenitil
<i>Geum rivale</i>	Water Avens
<i>Salix aurita</i>	Eared Willow
<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	Common Sycamore
<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Cuckooflower
<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>	Common Scurvygrass
<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Common Thrift
<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	Sheep's Sorrel
<i>Silene uniflora</i>	Sea Campion
<i>Silene dioica</i>	Red Campion
<i>Silene flos-cuculi</i>	Ragged Robin
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Common Primrose
<i>Primula scotica</i>	Scottish Primrose
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Common Heather
<i>Plantago maritima</i>	Sea Plantain
<i>Thymus praecox</i>	Wild Thyme
<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>	Common Lousewort
<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	Bogbean
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Creeping Thistle

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Common Daisy
<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	Sea Mayweed
<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>	Scots Lovage
<i>Vicia sempium</i>	Bush Vetch
<i>Lysimachia maritima</i>	Sea Milkwort
<i>Triglochin maritima</i>	Sea Arrowgrass
<i>Conopodium majus</i>	Pignut
<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	Heath Milkwort
<i>Lepidium draba</i>	Hoary Cress
<i>Viola riviniana</i>	Common Dog Violet
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed
<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	Cow Parsley
<i>Empetrum nigrum</i>	Crowberry
<i>Angelica archangelica</i>	Angelica
<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	Silverweed
<i>Silene vulgaris</i>	Bladder Campion
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	Bilberry
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed
<i>Polytrichum commune</i>	Marsh Haircap Moss