Shetland: Autumn Bird Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th - 16th October 2021





Woodchat Shrike

Long-tailed Ducks





Razorbill

Otter

Report and images by Matt Eade



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Tour Participants: Matt Eade (Naturetrek tour leader) and six clients.

Day 1

Friday 8th October

We all met pre-departure at Aberdeen Ferry terminal, before embarking on our 12-hour overnight ferry to Lerwick, Shetland. The journey was calm and we all enjoyed a good night's sleep, ready for the day ahead.

Day 2

Saturday 9th October

We docked into a rainy Lerwick Harbour on time at 7am and disembarked, collected the 9-seater minibus and headed north for 10 minutes to Girlsta. A distant Eider flock, a redhead Red-breasted Merganser and a couple of winter-plumaged Black Guillemots were all on view, although the weather was murky, restricting the visibility. We later drove the entire stretch of South Nesting Bay, finding a handful of Great Northern Divers, a Red-throated Diver, more Black Guillemots and a wonderful feeding frenzy of Harbour Porpoise – none of us had ever seen such a large congregation of this shy mammal! It was great to even observe the porpoise surrounding a feeding Great Northern Diver. All was calm until a message came through of a Baikal Teal just up the road; it later transpired this was in fact a Garganey; however, this being an excellent record for the archipelago meant we still twitched this shy, distant duck. Two Scaup were more obliging alongside a Pochard and a Tufted Duck, whilst a small group of Whooper Swans were nearby.

We re-traced our steps to South Nesting Bay and were finally rewarded with a stunning adult White-billed Diver. An Otter was also spotted which created excitement, showing how fortunes can change when on Shetland.

After dropping items off at our lovely hotel in Lerwick, we made our way over to Kergord. Despite the rain increasing, we managed prolonged views of a Bluethroat feeding along a vegetated ditch. We of course had to add Rook to our list and were pleased to do so, but the trees held little, bar a fly-over Siskin and two Redwings.

As the afternoon progressed, we returned to Girlsta, where some saw a Merlin cross our tracks, but the large Eider flock was seen much closer this time, but only close enough for one member of the party to see a King Eider – thankfully, with two of these fabulous ducks present on Shetland, we had another opportunity. A circuit of Loch of Tingwall failed to add anything of interest so we returned to our hotel with plenty of time to settle down, ready for dinner and the checklist.

Day 3

Sunday 10th October

After a prompt and warming breakfast, we opted to head to the southern point of Mainland, as the sun was shining and the wind was at its 'calmest'. Two Merlins were seen on the journey south. On the way up to the lighthouse, a quarry contained many settled Fulmars and, as we looked offshore, hundreds were steaming past. Despite being very blustery, the cloud was thankfully clearing, and we enjoyed a prolonged spell of sunshine. From the lighthouse, a group of Eider were observed below, and Gannets and the odd Kittiwake also flew past – sadly no dorsal fins were found, but it was always a long shot.

After this particularly enjoyable start, we moved around the bay to Scatness and viewed a group of five Shore Larks. Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and an adult Kittiwake were also seen, but perhaps the highlight for some was a Great Skua which glided past us on three occasions! A walk around Quendale Mill was quiet, but we did see a couple of Siskins, two Chaffinches and the bushes held many resident species.

We were keen to visit Loch of Spiggie, and in doing so, we were fortunate to have a 10-minute view of a juvenile Glaucous Gull roosting amongst two other gull species. An eclipse drake Goldeneye and several Whooper Swans

were also in evidence, but it was at the northern end where we scoped two Slavonian Grebes, several Scaup, Wigeon, Tufted Ducks and more Goldeneye. As we left the loch, we were all stunned to come across a feeding Siskin within metres of the van as it happily fed on a seed head.

To continue our wonderful journey of South Mainland, we next headed to Rerwick Beach to observe at a distance a small gathering of Grey Seals. A Ringed Plover was new for the trip, but we thoroughly enjoyed watching a duck Eider seemingly surfing and having a jolly good time.

From here on, it went a tad crazy in the final hours of the day. We were keen to see an eclipse drake King Eider just south of Scalloway at Trondra (which we succeeded in and what a beautiful duck it was!) but along the way an Eastern Yellow Wagtail was found only five minutes away. The eider was a rather rushed affair, and we were soon twitching what we thought was a rare vagrant from East Asia nearby at Gulberwick. Despite hiding every now and then in the longer grass, all of us saw this the bird, which sadly later transpired to be just an ordinary Western Yellow Wagtail. A false alarm for a Barred Warbler a few hundred metres away from the wagtail proved to be our final event of what had been a superb day on Shetland.

Day 4

Monday 11th October

It was a wise decision to head to North-west Mainland as heavy rain was forecast for the first hour, which is just about how long it takes to reach the dramatic cliffs of Esha Ness. Once the rain had cleared, the scenery was just superb as we meandered our way through the hills. Flocks of Golden Plover were checked, but only revealed accompanying Lapwings, Redshanks and Turnstones. The final 20 minutes towards the lighthouse at Esha Ness was simply stunning, but when we arrived at the wind-battered cliffs, we were all amazed by the views. The wind was strong, which prompted many seabirds to fly past the headland, with many Fulmars and Kittiwakes on the move, but by far the highlight here were two Sooty Shearwaters, flying in unison.

We then moved around the headland, parked up, and walked a stretch of coastline which soon overlooked a spectacular arch on a past headland. An Otter appeared briefly, Rock Pipits were feeding on the beach and several Gannets flew through.

After a few hours admiring the views, with the day now dry with sunny periods from now on, we drove to nearby Hillswick and walked around the scrub here, but found little bar some Black Guillemots on the water, although a group of Pheasants was unusual! As we drove to Brae for lunch, four lovely Red Grouse were spotted on the moor and showed well as they casually strolled along the ridge.

During lunch, news came through of a few species we had yet to see only a short drive away, so we soon made our way to Ollaberry and although not everything was on view, a Yellow-browed Warbler did show relatively well; another Black Guillemot was in the bay here too. With our twitching boots firmly on, we then drove to Aith in West Mainland, and after a frustrating time with our target bird giving is the run around, we eventually obtained great views of a juvenile Woodchat Shrike!

After a wild goose chase and a brief search at an Otter location, the day was sadly over, but the drive back to base allowed us to appreciate the perfect landscapes in the 'Golden Hour'.

After dinner, and with aurora alerts on every electronic device, we all got back in the van and undertook a two-hour vigil and managed to see a presumed aurora glow, but with no correct camera settings, capturing the glow proved impossible, but we were all certain we had at least witnessed an effect of the northern lights.

Day 5

Tuesday 12th October

The day dawned bright and calm, and it remained this way for most of the day. With the weather forecast, it was an easy decision to head to the UK's most northerly island – Unst. We left Lerwick promptly and caught the two ferries from Mainland and Yell, arriving onto Unst a mere two hours later.

Our first port of call was the extensive plantation at Halligarth. Although appearing devoid of life, sharp eyes led us onto a highly elusive Pied Flycatcher and a Blackcap. Wrens were showing well though and we saw many of these delightful birds. With such calm conditions, it really was a pleasure being on the island and the silence was fantastic to witness.

We moved around to Haroldswick and enjoyed walking upon the viking longboat, whilst of course looking out for any wildlife, of which there wasn't too much, with a few Black Guillemots, Razorbills and Red-breasted Mergansers of note. Moving around to Norwick, we were soon to enjoy four pristine Long-tailed Ducks, including three 'long-tailed' males. Dunlin and Sanderling were feeding along the shoreline and out to sea swarms of Fulmars and Gannets were piling north, but try as we might, we couldn't pick out any dorsal fins. As we stood on the beach, a 'snowball' of a bird came hurtling towards us and was quickly identified as a Homemann's Arctic Redpoll – this rare Arctic visitor was initially found by a local yesterday, but we were just as fortunate to come across it today because as soon as it had arrived, it was off again and was only seen in flight twice more before flying along the cliffs towards Lamba Ness. Despite much time, we couldn't re-locate the bird, so we walked up to the impressive area of Valyie, a superb area of low pines, sycamores and a house owner who welcomes birders into their garden. We soon picked out a few Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs and a surprise Lesser Whitethroat, but we were equally pleased to come across around 10 stunning Bramblings, some of which showed incredibly well. A Robin was finally added to our trip list and a couple of Siskins were also mixed in with the House Sparrows. This was a brilliant spell of birdwatching, but as we walked back towards the beach, an adult Ring Ouzel showed brilliantly along the entrance track and happily fed on the ground only 20 metres away!

We drove around to Skaw beach for lunch and picking out a Shelduck flying north. A few stops afterwards only produced a small group of Teal, Grey Seals and Golden Plover. We departed Unst mid-afternoon after a very enjoyable visit in such glorious weather, but our day wasn't over as our drive through Yell was diverted into the small town of Mid Yell where a Great Egret was a fine addition and a shoal of Sand Eels in the harbour was most peculiar as they circled in close unison in the shallows. From here, we departed Yell bound for Lerwick, a drive with yet more stunning views and a brief encounter with an Otter.

Day 6

Wednesday 13th October

A far blustery today which prompted a mass arrival of 'Icelandic' Redwings onto the islands, with flocks constantly flying south throughout the day. We concentrated our efforts along the south-eastern part of Mainland, but due to the wind we struggled with sightings.

A lovely walk around Hoswick produced a Brambling and a couple of Twite, whilst a Blackcap was seen up the Burn and a trio of Ringed Plover were on the beach. As we navigated around to Sandwck, a large gathering of Golden Plover was studied, but nothing else could be found amongst them.

Checking other sites further south again didn't reveal too much, but as it is with Shetland, there is always that excitement and energy that something special may be lurking just around the corner, and this is the fuel one needs to keep going.

At Boddam Voe, a small gathering of balancing Harbour Seals were a treat and a small group of Teal were sheltering here too. We crossed over to the west side of the island and walked the Tombolo across to St. Ninians

Isle, setting foot on its outskirts to safely tick off another island. There were also some great birds here, with both Great Northern and Red-throated Divers, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and a Sanderling.

Although it was obvious Wester Quarff was going to be a windy affair, it felt rude not to try again for the drake King Eider, but this time from the opposite side from before. This gorgeous bird was picked out amongst the Common Eiders and provided distant views for some.

With time ticking on, we slowly made our way back north and stopping off at Channerwick. This tiny hamlet holds one sycamore tree and here we found a Robin (only our second so far on the trip), 30 Redwings, but the highlight was a Common (Mealy) Redpoll which flew over calling. Afterwards, we toured Gulberwick finding nothing, but, just as we were about to leave and onto the main road, David spotted a warbler sat on the rockface opposite the junction on the busy main road. It was a Willow Warbler and was happily feeding on the rocks and short grass – quintessentially Shetland!

The day ended at Clickimin Broch in the centre of Lerwick. A tough day on the islands today, but any day on Shetland, no matter how birdy or birdless, is just as memorable as the last as the views are unrivalled.

Day 7

Thursday 14th October

With such horrendous conditions forecast, it was a question of what to undertake today. It was decided that we would first visit the small island of Bressay, just a short ferry journey across Lerwick Sound. The conditions were far from ideal, though it did stop raining for a short period allowing us to escape the van and walk around Bressay Lighthouse. Gannets, Fulmars, Shags and Kittiwakes were making close fly-pasts and a Rock Pipit was in the geo below. We then drove up and over to overlook the island of Noss, finding two Whooper Swans along the way. Further slow driving resulted in a Grey Seal and a surprise find of a Ruff in amongst some Redshank. With the weather still relatively awful, but scheduled to clear slightly, once on Mainland we headed north to Laxo in order to catch a ferry to our third island of the day – Whalsay. It had now stopped raining and the sun was even threatening to emerge. As we waited for the ferry, a distant Otter was spotted and a small group of Wigeon were foraging below. The 30-minute ferry journey saw plenty of Black Guillemots and the odd Razorbill too. We arrived on Whalsay to strong winds but at least there was blue sky, so we drove to the north-eastern tip of the island, arriving at Skaw Golf Club (and an empty car park non-surprisingly) where we had lunch overlooking a mixed flock of feeding waders comprising Golden Plover, Dunlin, Turnstone and Ringed Plover.

To now make the most of the sunshine, we walked the entire golf course in the vain hope an American wader had dropped in; alas not, but the views were stunning, as were a trio of Snow Buntings which were particularly flighty in the buffeting winds. We found some form of shelter on the eastern side and watched the Sound in the hope a cetacean or two might pop along in the calmer waters, but all we could find was a Great Northern Diver. The walk back was harder work than normal, and we all arrived with a distinctive redness to our faces, but it was great to stretch the legs. With little else to see on the island, we headed back to Mainland and briefly checked out the church at Lunna, finding a Merlin and several windswept Redwings. With positive news concerning the American Golden Plover at South Mainland, it was decided to make the most of what was on the island and drive down there and see it. Amongst the 500-strong flock of European Golden Plovers, the American counterpart was picked up and we enjoyed studying the finer details of this bird which had flown across the Atlantic Ocean.

It had been a long day, but despite the weather, it was felt we made the most of it.

Day 8

Friday 15th October

The wind and rain had thankfully abated overnight, and we were to enjoy a pleasant last day together before boarding the ferry in the late afternoon. After our last breakfast, we bid farewell to the excellent hotel staff who worked very hard throughout our stay, and made our way over to West Mainland. Diverting through Loch of Tingwall provided us with a Little Egret – a scarce bird on Shetland – and a number of *Aythya* ducks, which maybe we should have checked more thoroughly!

West Mainland is usually devoid of birdwatchers, which can allow those who visit this sparse region to find something of interest. We began our search at Reawick, then to Walls with both sites offering little bar a few small gatherings of Whooper Swan. Parking up at Dale of Walls, and despite the strengthening wind, we walked down the burn and to the beach, making our way back on the other side of the burn. On the way down to the beach we had lovely views of Foula set against an angry sea. As we walked up the burn, Matt worked through the iris beds and long vegetation in the hope of conjuring a hiding scarcity; two Redwings flew out but then attention was drawn towards an incoming passerine, which called twice and revealed itself as a Redpoll. Initially above the horizon, it soon dropped and revealed its 'snowball' impression, and with the bird landing on a wall not so far away, it was immediately apparent this bird was a Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll! It worked its way down the wall, showing off its superb clean white rump and 'Bullfinch'-like structure, but frustratingly it soon flew off and couldn't be relocated. Despite the short-lived nature of this sighting, our efforts from the week had finally been rewarded with a top-drawer find.

Once Matt had calmed down, we drove up to Sandness for lunch before retreating back to Lerwick, stopping en route for a Ring-necked Duck on Loch of Tingwall, which undoubtably we would also have found if we had checked the ducks properly earlier in the day. A Slavonian Grebe was also present and offered better views than the two earlier on in the week.

After collecting our bags from the hotel, we made our way down to the ferry terminal and eventually embarking on a bumpy crossing back to Aberdeen, via Kirkwall. As everyone would be going their separate ways in the morning, our official end was to be tonight and we all bid farewell to one another, delighted with our excellent week on the beautiful islands of Shetland.

Day 9

Saturday 16th October

We arrived into Aberdeen on time at 7am.

Checklist

Birds

			October 2021						
	Common name	9 10 11 12 13 14 1						15	
1	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus		1	1				
3	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	1	1				1	1
4	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	1	1		1		1	1
5	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna				1		1	
6	Garganey	Spatula querquedula	1						
7	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope	1	1	1	1		1	1
8	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
9	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		1	1	1	1	1	
10	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	1	1					
11	Ring-necked Duck	Aythya collaris							1
12	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	1	1					1
13	Greater Scaup	Aythya marila	1	1	1				
14	King Eider	Somateria spectabilis		1			1		
15	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
16	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis				1		1	
17	Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula		1					
18	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator	1		1	1	1		1
19	Red Grouse	Lagopus lagopus scoticus			1				1
20	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus			1				
21	Rock Dove	Columba livia	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
22	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
23	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		1					
24	Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus		1					1
25	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
26	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
27	European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
28	American Golden Plover	Pluvialis dominica						1	
29	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		1					
30	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		1	1	1	1	1	1
31	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
32	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa						1	
33	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
34	Ruff	Philomachus pugnax						1	
35	Sanderling	Calidris alba				1	1		
36	Dunlin	Calidris alpina				1	1	1	
37	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
38	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
39	Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla		1	1	1	1	1	1
40	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
41	Common Gull	Larus canus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
42	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
43	Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus		1					
44	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
45	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua		1					
46	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge	1	1		1	1	1	
47	Razorbill	Alca torda	1		1	1	1	1	1

			October 2021						
	Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
48	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
49	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata	1			1	1		
50	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer	1				1	1	
51	White-billed Diver	Gavia adamsii	1						
52	Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
53	Sooty Shearwater	Ardenna grisea			1				
54	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
55	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		1	1				
56	European Shag	Gulosus aristotelis	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
57	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
58	Great Egret	Alba alba				1			
59	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta							1
60	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	1			1			
61	Merlin	Falco columbarius	1	1	1	1	1	1	
62	Woodchat Shrike	Ladius senator			1				
63	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	1						1
64	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
65	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
66	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		1		1	1		
67	Shore Lark	Eremophila alpestris		1					
68	Yellow-browed Warbler	Phylloscopus inornatus			1				
69	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus					1		
70	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita				1			
71	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		1		1	1		
72	Lesser Whitethroat	Curruca curruca				1			
73	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	1	1	1	1	1		1
74	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
75	Redwing	Turdus iliacus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
76	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
77	Ring Ouzel	Turdus torquatus				1			
78	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula				1	1		
79	Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica	1						
80	European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca				1			
81	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	1	1			1		
82	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
83	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava		1					
84	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea					1		
85	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii	1	1	1	1			
86	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
87	European Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		1	1	1	1	1	1
88	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		1		1	1		1
89	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla				1	1		
90	Twite	Linaria flavirostris	1	1	1	1	1	1	
91	Common (Mealy) Redpoll	Acanthis flammea					1		
92	Arctic Redpoll	Acanthis hornemanni				1			1
93	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	1	1		1			
94	Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis						1	

Other

			October 2021						
	Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Eurasian Otter	Lutra lutra	1		1	1		1	1
3	Stoat	Mustela erminea							1
4	Harbour (Common) Seal	Phoca vitulina					1		
5	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
6	Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena	1						
7	European Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus			1				
	Insects								
1	White-tailed Bumblebee				1	1			

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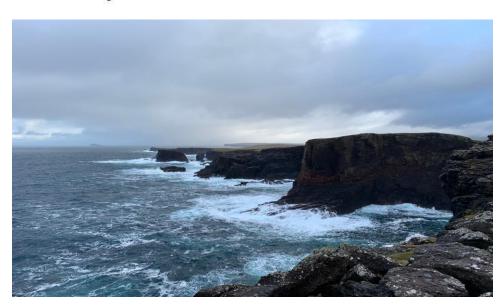


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