

Fair Isle: Simmer Dim on the Magical Isle

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th June – 8th July 2026



Trumpeter Finch



Red-backed Shrike



The north coast of Fair Isle



Adder's-tongue Fern

Tour report by Mark Wood



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: Mark Wood (leader) with three Naturetrek clients

Summary

Fair Isle is a magical place to visit at this time of year: the sun barely sets and the seabird colonies bustle with activity. We were blessed with pretty good weather throughout our stay, with only one windy day and one rainy one, so we couldn't complain. We were also blessed with some excellent, late spring migrants, including Red-backed Shrike, Western Subalpine Warbler, Melodious Warbler and best of all a Trumpeter Finch on day one! The real joy of the island is the slow pace of life and the very few inhabitants, resulting in a lack of anthropogenic noise: the sound of the waves, the wind, the birds and the wail of seals dominate. The accommodation and food at the Bird Observatory (now fully rebuilt after a fire destroyed the previous building) were excellent, and it was a joy to converse with many other travellers and wildlife enthusiasts in the evenings.

Day 1

Monday 29th June

The tour began in Aberdeen where we boarded the ferry for a 7.00pm departure. We met on the rear deck as the ship set sail, and spotted some Goosander, Eider, and Great and Lesser Black-backed, Common and Herring Gulls. The sea wall was home to many Shags and Cormorants. Once we left the harbour, several Bottlenose Dolphins were seen, including one breaching. As we got further out, we encountered Common Guillemots, Razorbills and Gannets. We then returned inside dinner, and settled into our cabins for a comfortable crossing.

Day 2

Tuesday 30th June

We docked at 7.00am in Lerwick, Shetland's capital. We took a thirty-minute taxi ride south to Grutness, near Sumburgh Head, where we had a little time here to explore before we had to board the ferry: we found a fine summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver. There were also Ringed Plovers, Oystercatchers, Razorbills and many Arctic Terns and Common Gulls, the last coming from the nearby colony. We boarded the Good Shepherd and began our two-and-a-half-hour crossing to Fair Isle. It was a calm at first, but got pretty rocky once we passed Sumburgh Head. Many Puffins were on the water, and Fulmars and Gannets soared by. The crossing was otherwise pretty uneventful, aside from three Storm Petrels.

Fair Isle loomed on the horizon, gradually drawing closer, and soon we were sailing into the shelter of North Haven. We were met by the Bird Observatory staff, with whom we would be staying all week, and they took us and our bags up to the observatory. After a quick orientation, we headed straight up to the North Lighthouse, where an ultra-rare Trumpeter Finch had been found a few days prior. Fortunately, the bird was still there, and we quickly found it resting on a hillside, preening and then feeding for a bit. The views were exceptional and we were all very pleased to start with such a star bird!

We then walked around the clifftops, being greeted by many Puffins, with views to the Gannet colony further down the coast. It was nearing dinner time already, so we began the return walk to the obs. Along the way, we saw many Ringed Plovers, Oystercatchers, Wheatears, Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, a House Martin, and a few pairs of nesting Arctic Skuas, with many Great Skuas flying above. Dinner in the observatory was excellent, as was all the food throughout our stay: the kitchen team does a fantastic job delivering a great variety of dishes, even when the boat doesn't come and supplies run low! A talk about Fulmars was delivered in the observatory in the evening.

Day 3

Wednesday 1st July

Our first morning on Fair Isle was a bright and sunny one. After a great breakfast, we started walking towards the south end of the island: our destination was Auld Haa garden, where a Melodious Warbler had just been found. Along the way, we found many more of the same birds as yesterday, but also Lapwings, Redshanks, Curlews, a posing Snipe and a single Teal on a pool. Once we reached the garden, we spotted the Melodious Warbler immediately, on a pile of grass cuttings. After standing at various points around the garden, we settled for the south side, where this colourful, lemon-yellow, rare vagrant showed very nicely in the sunshine at close range.

We started to make the journey back up the island, when the observatory van came along: a Western Subalpine Warbler had just been caught in the obs garden! So, we jumped in the van to expedite our return. We assembled in the garden, where we all got to see this rare migrant in the hand before it was released. It would spend the remainder of the week in the garden, showing every now and then.

After lunch, we headed back up to the North Light to see if the Trumpeter Finch was still there. We had no joy on that front, but it was nice spending more time with the Puffins and other seabirds, and after a bit of patient seawatching we picked up a distant Minke Whale. We returned for our second dinner, enjoying many fine views of Arctic and Great Skuas along the way.

Day 4

Thursday 2nd July

Today was pretty windy throughout, and overcast, but reasonably mild. A Red-backed Shrike had been found at Quoy, and Steve kindly gave us a lift down to search for it. We arrived and searched the area, but could not see it. We walked a large circuit, but it was difficult in the wind. Despite there being no shrike, we did spot a Serin in some bushes, a bird that had not been seen for a few days. We got decent views in the scope. We admired the Northern Marsh Orchids, Dennis spotted our only Carrion Crow of the week, and we found a few Shetland Bees. Walking past a marsh, we stopped a while and watched five Arctic Skuas playing in the wind, and often coming very close. We also had some Mallards, Snipes, Lapwings, Redshanks and a large flock of Curlews.

We returned to the obs for lunch, before venturing out into the wind again: at least now it was very sunny. We walked the relatively short distance to the airstrip, where many pairs of Arctic Skuas were nesting, and we watched them at close range for a while. There were also nesting Ringed Plovers and Oystercatchers. A short distance further on, we explored a small gully which held a pair of Grey Wagtails: they showed nicely, along with nesting Fulmars and many young Wheatears. Lastly, we walked down to the beach at North Haven, where we found a Grey Seal, and Eiders with chicks.

Day 5

Friday 3rd July

This morning, we had packed lunches prepared for us by the obs kitchen staff, so we could spend longer in the south of the island. We also convinced Steve to take us half way down the island in the van again, which was also beneficial. First, we stopped at the shop, where postcards were purchased and where we sheltered from a passing rain shower. We slowly wandered down to the southern lighthouse, spotting several flocks of Oystercatchers and Curlews along the way.

At the light were many nesting Arctic Terns, and Arctic Skuas would frequently buzz them, resulting in a frantic surge of terns chasing them away. Out at sea were numerous auks, Gannets, Fulmars and Grey Seals. We walked along the coast, finding a Swallow and Sand Martins, and then we paused in the old cemetery, where there were Rock Pipits nesting in the stone walls. We had lunch on the bench here.

Joan had ventured off to visit the museum and met us here, and then the three of us headed back north. We checked Auld Haa garden again, but found only Rock Doves, House Sparrows and Starlings. A little further on, however, we refound yesterday's female Red-backed Shrike, hunting from wire fences. We were able to watch her for some time, flitting between posts, leaving us very satisfied; we also had a Raven. We continued back via the wreckage of a crashed Heinkel bomber from the second world war, and found some Butterwort, Round-leaved Sundew and Lesser Marshwort nearby. A relaxed afternoon was had, with some choosing a walk on Bunes to hang out with the Puffins. In the evening, Mark gave a talk on his birding travels in Central Asia.

Day 6

Saturday 4th July

The day started warm and sunny with a light breeze, and it looked like a great day to hike up Vaassetter hill to overlook the iconic Sheep Rock. We took a slow walk up the cliffs, enjoying the ubiquitous Puffins; lower down were hundreds of Common Guillemots packed onto the cliff ledges, along with lesser numbers of Shags, Razorbills and Black Guillemots. We also had a nice Fair Isle Wren singing. On the upper slope we found a Twite, which posed nicely, many Wheatears, and both Meadow and Rock Pipits. From the summit, we had amazing views of the towering Sheep Rock, its cliffs covered in many auks and Fulmars, and with a sizeable Gannet colony on the steep southern cliffs. We admired the Gannets through the scope, spotting a few fluffy, white chicks in their nests.

We then made our way down hill, getting close to some nesting Great Skuas, but they let us be. Then some rain came through, so we beat a retreat to the observatory for lunch. Another relaxing afternoon followed, with a visit to Bunes in the afternoon; we had a single Whimbrel fly over, and while walking among the Puffins, a Quail was flushed from beneath a boulder and flew a short distance. We stood where it had gone, and after a short while it flew again, allowing everyone to get a close view of this infrequently-seen bird.

Day 7

Sunday 5th July

Flawless weather greeted us today: bright warm sunshine and almost no wind. We decided it was perfect for a climb up to Fair Isle's highest point: Ward Hill. We set off and crossed the airstrip, where the Arctic Skuas were showing nicely around their nests. The hike up the track was quiet, with mostly Wheatears and Meadow Pipits for company. The view from the summit was excellent, with Orkney visible to the south and mainland Shetland to the north. There were also many remains of old buildings from the war, which were interesting to explore.

Our descent on the north side of the hill took us through an expansive Great Skua colony: many chicks were wandering about the moor, and we had to change direction a few times to avoid them. They were super cute! We returned to the obs for lunch, where we saw the Western Subalpine Warbler in the garden again, after a gap of a few days. There were also several Chiffchaffs, and a Blackcap. In the afternoon, we explored The Gully more thoroughly, finding the resident Grey Wagtails again, some Hooded Crows, a Wren and nesting Fulmars. On the walk back, we saw our only Common Seal of the week, and a long dead Harbour Porpoise on a rocky beach.

Day 8**Monday 6th July**

On our last full day on Fair Isle, we decided to walk back to North Light. Nothing new was found, but it was very enjoyable spending more time with the Great and Arctic Skuas, and the many Puffins, Ringed Plovers and Oystercatchers. On the return walk, we found some more Twites, and a Song Thrush appeared in the obs garden. It rained for much of the afternoon, but later on we returned to Bunness, enjoying the numerous Puffin shenanigans. A few Common Gulls also appeared to be nesting along with the Arctic Terns here, and we got excellent views of Black Guillemot and Grey Seal around the cliffs. Finally, after a week of searching, we also found a diminutive Frog Orchid.

Day 9**Tuesday 7th July**

We were up early for breakfast at 6.30am this morning, to catch our ferry at 7.30am. Just before we left, a summer-plumaged Brambling appeared in the garden, briefly. We were given a lift down to the dock by our gracious hosts, where we said our goodbyes to them, and to this marvellous island which had been home for the week.

The crossing back to Grutness was much smoother than on the way out, and the sky was clear and blue. Birds were mostly limited to Fulmars, Puffins, Gannets and Great Skuas. Back at Grutness, the summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver remained, and Arctic Terns and Common Gulls zipped around the colony, but there was not much else. We got our taxi back to Lerwick, where we dropped off our bags at the ferry terminal, and we were then free to explore the area for the rest of the day.

Initially, we went into the town centre and found some lunch, and then we split up. Joan went to do some shopping, and the rest of us went to Loch Clickimin, where we explored the surrounding shore and the ancient broch. We found several showy Redpolls, our first Blackbirds of the trip, Mute Swan, nesting Common Terns, Mallards, and Tufted Ducks with chicks. Afterwards, we walked down to the coast to try our luck with Otters, but none appeared. We did enjoy watching a Herring Gull eating a crab, however, and there were a few Shags and Black Guillemots to see. We made our way into the town centre, where we stopped for tea and cake, before returning to the ferry for our 7.00pm departure. We set sail early on calm seas, hoping to catch some Risso's Dolphins that had been seen off Bressay, but we couldn't spot them.

Day 10**Wednesday 8th July**

We arrived back in Aberdeen at 7.00am: a Bottlenose Dolphin was at the harbour entrance. We said our goodbyes, and the group split up for their onward journeys.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	June - July 2026									
		29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>									✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓	✓				✓	
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓							
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>						✓				
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓					✓	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓	✓	✓					
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>						✓				
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓	✓	✓					
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</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>	✓				✓	✓			✓	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓								
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>		✓								
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓									
Red backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>					✓					
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓		✓					
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>				✓						
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			✓							
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					✓					
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓					
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓								
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>							✓	✓		
Western Subalpine Warbler	<i>Curruca iberiae</i>			✓				✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓				✓	✓		✓	

		June - July 2026									
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>									✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓		H	✓			
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>		✓								
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓						✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				✓						

Mammals

I=introduced, D=dead		June - July 2026									
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			✓							
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	✓									
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>							D			
Domestic Sheep - I	<i>Ovis aries</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>							✓			

Other species

		June - July 2026									
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Shetland Bee	<i>Bombus muscorum agricolae</i>			✓	✓	✓					
Frog Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>									✓	