

Northumberland & the Farne Islands (Wildlife Photography Tour)

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th June – 4th July 2021



Report and image by Oliver Smart



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Introduction

Northumberland is an historic county in North East England, bordering Scotland and the North Sea with Cumbria to the west and Tyne & Wear to the south. The county is rich in wildlife with the famous Farne Islands just two nautical miles from the coast. It is therefore a fantastic destination for seabird photography and natural history viewing. Due to the close proximity to Scotland, there have been many battles and castles are dotted all along the coastline with many more inland too. It's a wonderful county to explore and our trip was based in Bamburgh and was to focus on the incredible seabird life as well as scenic landscapes, incorporating some of the most picturesque castles in the country.

Day 1

Wednesday 30th June

Our small group of five photographers and tour leader Oliver Smart arrived at the Victoria Inn in Bamburgh for our four-night stay. We met for a pre-tour briefing before our first delicious dinner in the hotel restaurant and then straight out to Bamburgh Castle to explore the surroundings, the beach, rocks and dunes. We were looking for interesting compositions of the castle as the sun began to set. At first, we were struck by Inner Farne and the lighthouse in the distance and we experimented with slow exposures, blurring the water in the foreground. The sun was hitting the lighthouse and it was a beacon in the bay. Back to the castle and we continued changing position but we felt the wind was too strong for pleasant reflections so we would save that for another night. We relocated to the east side of the castle and positioned ourselves in the dunes, using foreground foliage and meadow flowers to capture the stunning landscape as the sun disappeared and the sky turned pink and orange. A great start to our trip.

Day 2

Thursday 1st July

We carried a packed breakfast for an early start out to Holy Island. With tide times against us we decided to beat the rush and head out before 6am. We crossed and made our way to the main car park to explore Lindisfarne Castle. We were the sole vehicle in the car park and only joined by one other van several hours later! We literally had the place to ourselves for several hours and we enjoyed walking, chatting and getting to know each other whilst taking in the surroundings.

The castle is 16th-century and sits prominently on Holy Island. We took our time to explore different vantage points, taking in the fantastic views of this incredible building and surroundings. We would save the classic leading line angle from the west for another evening when the tide would allow us out, however we enjoyed the standing piles of stones that people had been gathering along the beach to the east. The bird life here too was nice with a flyover Twite, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, a flock of 30 Golden Plover and Curlew, along with Lapwing and a single Dunlin passing by. Distance flocks of birds on the nearby spits were unidentifiable but a group of Goosander lazed in the harbour.

We walked through the village and enjoyed Song Thrush singing and on arrival back to the vehicle our leader could not locate the vehicle key. After checking every pocket four times, he finally found it in a camera bag pocket, placing it there for safety whilst busy discussing plans earlier in the day! Disaster avoided we drove back to the Snook and had our picnic breakfast in the sun.

After refreshments, we meandered through the marshy dune system hunting for wildflowers and butterflies. Orchids abound here and we were delighted to track down five Lindisfarne Helleborine along with hundreds of Marsh Helleborine, Northern Marsh, Common Spotted and Pyramidal Orchids. There was an abundance of Dark Green Fritillaries, Small Heath, Common Blue and Meadow Brown butterflies and a view of the beach was a nice end to the morning.

Back to the hotel we relaxed over lunchtime and then reconvened for the afternoon trip to Low Newton where we walked for a little over an hour, enjoying the coastal wildflower meadows and a few birds milling around in the pools and along the banks. A Little Tern was a nice surprise along with Sandwich Terns diving and numerous hirundines hawking over our heads.

After dinner at the nearby The Lord Crewe Hotel, we headed to Dunstanburgh Castle and walked the beach to a vantage point overlooking the rocky shoreline and the striking castle ruins on top of a seabird cliff. We were disappointed that the light was very dull, but there was a break in the lower part of the sky so we felt there was a remote chance of some sunshine later. We were not to be let down tonight and the most beautiful colours of orange, pink and magenta cast hues unimaginable across the rocks and cliffs. Again, using slow shutter speeds, the creative collection of images was very pleasing indeed.

We drove the half-hour back at dusk, spotting Tawny Owl perched on wires and several bats hunting the quiet lanes for the many moths that were now emerging. The temperature was mild but very calm and a pleasant evening to be out late.

Day 3

Friday 2nd July

Our day consisted of two boat trips, covering the Farne Islands, inner and outer groups with a landing on Inner Farne in the afternoon. We were delighted to find the weather for the day was very settled with incredibly calm waters, lit blue by the sky, and perfect for photography at sea.

Our first trip departing at 09:30 took us on a three-hour trip around the islands to explore the nooks and crannies of these seabird meccas and to pick out the many breeding species. Shortly from the harbour we encountered a pod of Common Bottlenose Dolphins and tracked them for about 15 minutes, with several leaping fully out of the water. They cruised on by and headed south as we progressed east towards the islands. The throng of birdlife was exceptional, and thousands of birds were already active on the water including Razorbill, Guillemot, Puffin and Shag. Overhead there were five species of gull and a few Gannets too. Grey Seals made a presence in the outer group towards Longstone and the skipper talked to us about the history of the human settlements and lighthouses over the centuries.

After a light lunch in Seahouses we milled about the harbour, photographing some delightfully tame Eider chicks and females and a Herring Gull eating a fish on the beach.

Back out in the afternoon we completed a similar tour, with the weather conditions slightly choppy, but this time we were able to complete a landing on Inner Farne. This is always a real treat and despite the absence of large numbers of Arctic Tern bombarding us from above, there were plenty of opportunities with Sandwich and Common Tern present alongside the usual assortment of auks and gulls. From the cliffs, Puffins landed with beaks full of Sand-eels. When they landed on the muddy nesting colony they would be immediately attacked and harassed by Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed Gulls, some often poking their beaks into the burrows in an attempt to steal the Puffin's catch. Quite often they were successful too! The boardwalk felt slightly empty without the Arctic Terns, but nevertheless the experience was a grand one with a repeat to be completed the following day.

With memory cards groaning and batteries depleted we returned for a freshen up at the hotel, followed by a super meal at The Lord Crewe Hotel, with further discussions about our final full day and what we'd experienced on the Farnes.

A brief walk to end the evening resulted in a lovely encounter with a Barn Owl hunting over the dunes by the small car park to Bamburgh Beach. A fabulous way to end a very productive day.

Day 4

Saturday 3rd July

Today was our longest day with a 04:30 start and beginning with a trip to Seahouses to walk the coast path and photograph Kittiwakes on their natural nesting ledges. The cliffs here are not particularly tall but are home to a few hundred pairs of birds and with early morning light the cliffs were a golden colour and vegetation backlit. Their calls saying their name "kitti-wa-a-ke" carry far and it wasn't long before we were able to create some wonderful compositions with distant rocky backgrounds and wildlife-in-the-landscape shots. A few chicks were visible too. As we came to an end of our early morning shoot, the sea fog descended and drifted inland. It wasn't long before we lost all visibility and the sun disappeared for the rest of the day!

After breakfast we headed back to the famous harbour and sped out towards the Farne Islands, repeating the trips from the day before. Today, however was quite different, and had it been our only day on the water, it could have been a little disappointing. But this is nature and the British weather so you are just happy to be out there taking it all in. It also meant we were able to take on different challenges and consider alternative shots to add to our collection of beautiful blue sky and water images from the day before. One such opportunity was to practice shooting high key images where there is little tonal range. This was particularly useful for the terns, auks and gulls against a white sky. The effects are actually very pleasing if correctly used.

We landed on Inner Farne once more for an hour and had a good chance to hone these new skills and also to inspect and photograph more chicks, including those of Razorbill, Sandwich Tern, Kittiwake, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Following a final navigation around the islands we returned to Seahouses where we refuelled at a sit-down fish and chip shop, allowing us time to return to Holy Island that evening. We were really hoping the sun might break through late in the day to allow us to photograph Lindisfarne Castle from the western side in good light,

but this was not to be. We did spot a Bar-tailed Godwit, Kestrel and Roe Deer and focussed on some black-and-white shots instead. Even though the light did not allow us to portray the castle as we would have wished, it was good practice to generate ideas and look at the subject with alternative compositions and angles.

Day 5

Sunday 4th July

Our final morning and we were lucky to have managed to secure a cruise around Coquet Island. This was a unique opportunity for the whole group as no-one had been there before and particularly as there is a rare tern that nests on the island. We sailed with Puffin Cruises from Amble Harbour and our visit coincided with the Sunday market. The harbour was bustling and the excitement of getting back out on a boat was evident to all. We took our seats and headed out into the bay.

Sea mist was hanging in the air, but with a miraculous turn of fortune this lifted temporarily and the sun shone through. The island itself is unremarkable apart from the superb wildlife. Landings are not allowed but we were able to pick out the different tern species and the Roseate Tern played its part in making it a super little outing. Many of the group even managing flight images as they returned to their colony with food.

Almost as soon as the mist had gone, it returned and lingered for the best part of the day. We were so lucky to have made this trip and get to see and photograph one of Britain's rarest species.

After collecting some lunch from the market, we headed south to Druridge Bay and explored some of the inland marshes. Avocet, Common Snipe, Wigeon, Lapwing were present in the gloom and Common Spotted Orchids tucked into a hedgerow. Whilst sitting in one hide a Jack Snipe made an appearance, distinctively smaller than the Common and bobbing up and down. Unfortunately, the group didn't get to see it before it snuck back into dense marsh-side vegetation.

We proceeded further to Cresswell, after having scored a wonderful Grasshopper Warbler reeling from the hedgerow, picked up by our tour leader, whilst driving with the car windows open!

It had been a fantastic five days of exploring and photography and everyone departed, having enjoyed their stay in this mecca for seabirds. Until the next time...

Checklist

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	30-Jun	01-Jul	02-Jul	03-Jul	04-Jul
1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>					Y
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	Y				Y
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Y				Y
4	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					Y
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	Y				Y
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Y			Y	Y
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Y				Y
8	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
9	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y
10	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	Y				Y
11	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y
12	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					Y
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
14	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Y				Y
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	
16	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			Y	Y	Y
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		Y	Y	Y	
18	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Y				Y
19	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Y				Y
20	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
21	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Y	Y		Y	Y
22	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		Y		H	
23	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			Y		
24	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	Y	Y		Y	Y
25	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				Y	
26	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		Y			
27	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					Y
84	Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>					Y
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Y			Y	Y
29	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
31	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		Y			Y
32	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			Y	Y	Y
33	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			Y	Y	Y
35	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
36	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		Y			
37	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>					Y
38	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Y		Y	Y	Y
39	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			Y	Y	Y

	Common name	Scientific name	30-Jun	01-Jul	02-Jul	03-Jul	04-Jul
40	Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>			Y	Y	Y
41	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			Y	Y	Y
42	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			Y	Y	Y
43	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		Y		Y	Y
45	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			Y		
46	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		Y			
47	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Y				
49	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
50	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Y		Y	Y	Y
51	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
52	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Y	Y	Y		
53	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
54	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Y				
55	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Y				
56	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	Y		Y	Y
57	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Y				Y
58	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
59	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y
60	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H				H
61	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Y		H	H	H
62	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	Y				
63	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>					Y
64	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	Y	Y			Y
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H				
66	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
67	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Y	Y	Y	H	
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				Y	
70	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	Y	Y			
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
72	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				Y	
73	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
74	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Y	Y		Y	Y
75	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				Y	
76	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>					H
78	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					H
79	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	Y	Y			Y
80	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
81	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Y	Y		H	H
82	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	Y	Y		Y	Y
83	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		Y			

	Common name	Scientific name	30-Jun	01-Jul	02-Jul	03-Jul	04-Jul
	Mammals						
1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		Y			
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				Y	
4	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Butterflies						
1	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		Y			Y
2	Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Speyeria aglaja</i>		Y			
3	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		Y			Y
4	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		Y			Y
5	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		Y			Y
6	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		Y			Y
7	Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i>		Y			
8	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icaru</i>		Y			
9	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		Y			
	Moths						
1	Drinker Moth (larva)	<i>Euthrix potatoria</i>					Y
2	Flounced Rustic	<i>Luperina testacea</i>		Y			
3	Yellow Shell	<i>Camptogramma bilineata</i>		Y			
	Orchids						
1	Common Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>		Y			Y
2	Northern Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Y	Y			
3	Early Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i>		Y			
4	Marsh Helleborine	<i>Epipactis palustris</i>		Y			
5	Pyramidal Orchid	<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>	Y	Y			
6	Lindisfarne Helliborine	<i>Epipactis sancta</i>		Y			
	Plants						
1	Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>		Y			
2	Common Restharrow	<i>Ononis repens</i>		Y			
3	Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>		Y			
4	Mallow	<i>Malva sylvestris</i>		Y			
5	Maidenhair Spleenwort	<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>		Y			
6	Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>		Y			
7	Common Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>		Y			
8	Kidney Vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulnerari</i>		Y			
9	Creeping Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla reptans</i>		Y			
10	Common Silverweed	<i>Argentina anserina</i>		Y			
11	Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>		Y			
12	Common Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>		Y			
13	Yellow Rattle	<i>Rhinanthus mino</i>		Y			
14	Mouse-ear Hawkweed	<i>Pilosella officinarum</i>		Y			
15	Common Centaury	<i>Centaurium erythraea</i>		Y			
16	White Stonecrop	<i>Sedum album</i>		Y			
17	European Marram Grass	<i>Ammophila arenaria</i>		Y			
18	Yorkshire Fog	<i>Holcus lanatus</i>		Y			
19	Toadflax	<i>Linaria vulgaris</i>		Y			

20	Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>		Y			
21	Viper's Bugloss	<i>Echium vulgare</i>		Y			
22	Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>		Y			
23	White Campion	<i>Silene latifolia</i>		Y			
24	Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>		Y			
25	Rosebay Willowherb	<i>Chamaenerion angustifolium</i>		Y			
26	Black Knapweed	<i>Centaurea nigra</i>		Y			
27	Smooth Cat's-ear	<i>Hypochaeris glabra</i>		Y			
28	Opium Poppy	<i>Papaver somniferum</i>		Y			
29	Herb Robert	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>		Y			
	Dragonflies						
1	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>				Y	
	Beetles						
1	Dune Chafer	<i>Anomala dubia</i>		Y			

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