

Go Slow in Alderney

Naturetrek Tour Report

20th – 26th May 2022



Puffins



Glanville Fritillary



Blond Hedgehogs



Red-veined Darter

Tour report and images by John Horton



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: John Horton & Matt Scragg (Leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 20th May

The group landed ten minutes ahead of schedule and were met by John and Matt. We headed straight to the hotel, meeting for a “meet and greet” session after everyone had had time to unpack. After collecting two more clients joining us directly from the Naturetrek Sark trip we stopped at a wildflower meadow on the west coast where we found Musk Thistle, Crimson Clover and Vipers Bugloss. A Cuckoo repeatedly called during our thirty minute exploration of the meadow, but we couldn’t spot him! Good views were obtained of a singing male Whitethroat and three Swift passed overhead.

Next up was a walk from Fort Tourgis to Fort Clonque. At our start point John pointed out Sainfoin and Purple Broomrape at the edge of a flora-packed meadow and then on the beach edge we found Small-flowered Catchfly, Yellow-horned Poppy, and Sea Kale. Setting out along the footpath the leaders knew a site for Ragged Robin and as we looked at these eye-catching pink flowers growing amongst a sea of grasses the sound of a Whimbrel was heard from across the bay behind us. We picked up three Whimbrel some distance out across the bay and once again our attention changed as John picked up a bird of prey approaching from across the sea; as it got nearer, we identified the bird as a 2nd summer male Marsh Harrier. A short distance further along the beach side track Matt found a Green Hairstreak butterfly that posed wonderfully for all to see. In a sheltered clearing a Spotted Flycatcher showed briefly but well and as we passed Platte saline beach, we stopped to see a Wheatear on the dunes and a Grey Heron amongst the rock pools.

After completing our evening checklists and discussing the itinerary for the following day dinner was at the hotel restaurant.

Day 2

Saturday 21st May

This morning we took a walk along Braye Common flower meadow close to the hotel and overlooking the bay. Several specialist shoreline wildflowers can be found on this stretch and of these we quickly found Sea Sandwort, Frosted Orache and Sea Spurge. On the Common a sea of grasses and Bird’s-foot Trefoil attracted good numbers of Wall Brown and Common Blue butterflies and we also saw Clouded Yellow and our first Small Tortoiseshell of the trip. The very pretty Flax flower was in bloom and a beautiful Blue-tailed Damselfly sat still for all to enjoy, and this was followed by an equally impressive Yellow Shell moth. The highlight of the walk for many was undoubtedly the Lizard Orchid amongst the dunes, the only one in the whole of the Channel Islands; it had been discovered by tour co-leader Matt just a few days earlier.

A very good lunch at The Moorings restaurant was followed by the much-anticipated boat trip, brought forward by a few days to take advantage of the windless and sunny afternoon. The Puffins were a big hit as usual and the thousands-strong Gannet colony never fails to impress. We also got great views of Guillemet, Razorbill and Fulmar. As our boat circumnavigated the coastline a Peregrine Falcon was spotted on the adjacent cliffs.

After dinner at the Marias Hall pub, it was time to go on our night safari, searching initially for bats and then moving on to try to see the iconic Alderney blonde Hedgehog. John had a thermal imaging camera borrowed from the bird observatory and using this cutting-edge equipment located not only 12 Hedgehogs (eight blonde

and four brown) but also two very approachable Wood Mice. About a dozen Common Pipistrelle bats circled about our heads. At about 11.30pm a very satisfied and buoyant group were driven back to the hotel.

Day 3

Sunday 22nd May

Following a very late night everyone was refreshed after a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast. We headed to the bird observatory research room where Matt emptied the moth trap passing round the egg cartons containing over 20 species of moths including an impressive Poplar Hawkmoth. Close by John led us to the location of the rare and endemic Alderney Cranesbill flower.

Next, we headed along Longis Road, stopping at a location where Matt had found the first Pyramidal Orchid recorded on the island this year, a Cuckoo serenaded us as we enjoyed the orchid and Chris then spotted the bird on top of some bushes at the edge of the nearby nature reserve. Our leaders were able to quickly set up the telescope; fortunately the bird was content where it was, and everyone managed wonderful views of the still present and calling Cuckoo.

We then walked to The German range finding tower locally known as 'the Odeon' beside which was a rather tired looking Green-winged Orchid at least still showing a few purple petals. The Cuckoo shot passed us heading into Mannez Quarry below and a Swift came in off the sea and headed strongly north east.

Lunch was at the campsite cafe which provided did us with a variety of sandwiches and drinks. A pair of White Wagtails and an obliging Wheatear provided entertainment during our dining as they plucked insects from the surrounding habitat. After lunch we walked to Arch Bay heading under the Norman- built tunnel and learning of its history. On the beach side of the tunnel after admiring Sea Holly and Sea Spurge we took the short walk around the headland passing Chateau l'Etoic and then headed back through the sand dunes where John spotted our first Glanville Fritillary of the trip. This rare butterfly was soon joined by another, the two individuals taking in the afternoon sunshine at a spot sheltered from the breeze.

Our next stop was the Giffionne, a south west facing headland strewn with Gorse where we hoped the afternoon sunshine might tempt out some Dartford Warblers. We were not disappointed as a pair who were contact calling came very close to the group showing several times just a few feet from the path where we gathered. Also here was a fine male Stonechat, two Green Hairstreak butterflies and a Clouded Yellow. Just as we were about the board the van, we also had our first Small Copper butterfly of the trip.

Day 4

Monday 23rd May

We had an early start to see the bird ringing demonstration, an expertly delivered insight into the research work of the Alderney Bird Observatory that is always extremely popular. During periods between bird ringing sessions, we spotted Little Egrets and half a dozen Common Terns in the bay below. An hour later it was back to the hotel for breakfast. The weather was much better than the forecast had predicted, so we headed to the island allotments. a good site for butterflies and insects. A large patch of flowering Comfrey attracted several species of bees including Hairy-footed Nomad Bee and Scilly Bee. Further wild flowers were added to the trip list and the group also saw Large White, Holly Blue, Wall, Small White, Speckled Wood and Glanville Fritillary butterflies

Lunch was at Jack's Brassiere in town after which we headed down to Longis Bay. Here we walked to Longis Nature Reserve and the Naturetrek hide. Along the way were several Small Heath butterflies, while Painted Lady and a tiny Nettle Tap moth were also spotted. From the hide we quickly added several waterbirds to the list and a welcome surprise was a Water Rail, a species rarely seen during daylight hours. This one stayed out in the open for a minute or so between patches of Amphibious Bistort allowing everyone to get good a look at it.

Day 5

Tuesday 24th May

At the hotel before boarding the minibus we found a Hummingbird Hawkmoth feeding on Red Valerian. Greeted by another warm sunny day we eagerly headed out on our first walk but first stopped off at Platte Saline Beach where John spotted Ringed Plovers and Sanderlings. A wonderful find by Liz was one of the British Isles' rarest moth species, a Fiery Clearwing, a species for which there have been only a handful of records across the British Isles! Also here was Yellow-horned Poppy.

Our next stop was at the historic gates of the WWII 'SS' camp, Lager Sylt. John explained some of the history of this very thought-provoking location and we then moved on to walk along the south cliffs, soon adding Raven and Skylark to our trip lists, before arriving at the headland from where we could see the French coast, Jersey, Sark, Herm, and Guernsey. Greater Broomrape and Prostrate Broom were new to our flowers list and as with other locations butterflies were plentiful, particularly Small Heath, Common Blue and Wall, along with a few Painted Lady and Red Admiral. Ange found a 7-spot Ladybird and Peter spotted a Large Tiger Hoverfly and our first Red-veined Darter of the trip.

We picked up some fine baguettes and cake from the delicatessen in St. Anne and headed to the seating area overlooking Longis Bay to enjoy our lunch. A Shelduck landed on the beach right in front of us and a pair of Buzzards circled overhead.

On our way to the next walk John stopped the van so that the group could watch a passing pair of Peregrine Falcons. John delivered a short history of the lighthouse before we set off along the north east coast. This walk is always amongst the most popular, delivering wildlife, history, and wonderful views. As we made our way along the coast path, we saw three seals including a close to shore and impressive bull. The flora specialists amongst the group were delighted with being shown two rare species of Sea Lavender, 'Alderney and Rock,' and also Golden Samphire. Literally hundreds of butterflies were present along this stretch along with a Yellow Shell moth and a Crab Spider.

Day 6

Wednesday 25th May

We set out for the bird observatory research station where the moth trap had been operating overnight. Once again there were an exciting variation of colours and sizes of moths and 20+ species included several new for the trip, the stand out species being a Cream-spot Tiger moth. A vocal but elusive Firecrest showed fleetingly amongst the conifers above.

Next, we set off up Essex Hill to visit the bird observatory HQ that sits at a magnificent location amongst flowering Gorse overlooking the French coast. Here we saw more new flower species including Hairy Birds-

foot Trefoil, Creeping St. John's Wort, Wood Sorrel and Creeping Wood Sorrel. Heading back down the hill across country we spotted a Green Shield Bug and had excellent views of House Martins as we were able to look down on them from above.

A tour of the Nunnery Roman Fort commenced as we immersed ourselves in this historic location, with Roman though Napoleonic, Victorian and World War II features all present in the one building. Lunch was at the popular Old Barn restaurant and as rain showers set in, we headed back to the hotel where John gave a presentation in the hotel cinema about the research work, he and Matt undertake for the bird observatory.

Day 7

Thursday 26th May

A free morning with lifts to the high street for that essential shopping trip for souvenirs and gifts for some of the group and a visit to the Alderney Museum for others. Lunch was collected from the delicatessen, and we spent a very pleasant hour polishing it off overlooking Corblets Bay.

Our afternoon walk took in areas of the north-east coast we had not yet visited and began at a wonderful spot where the rare and beautiful Bee Orchid nestled amongst the grasses. Moving on we saw a Little Egret in Saye Bay and a Little Grebe on Corblets Quarry along with a male Common Blue Damsel fly. Walking on to the sheltered Mannez Quarry we were soon adding several more flowers to the trip list including Orange Birds-foot Trefoil, English Stonecrop and Yellow Bartsia. After visiting Mannez Nature Reserve where a female Sparrowhawk swooped across in front of the hide, we continued along the coastal path finding Bladder Campion and Mares Tail. Returning back to Corblets Bay a bull Atlantic Grey seal kept an eye on us from the sea below.

Day 8

Friday 27th May

After breakfast, our first departing guests were taken to the airport; travelling up the west coast we got excellent views of a pair of Peregrine Falcons. With the remaining Naturetrekers (all very keen on history) we headed to the German WW11 underground missile tunnels. In one tunnel we found a bat near the entrance and were able to read a tag fitted to the mammal, the details of which were sent to the National British Bat tagging scheme. Having explored the tunnels, we set out to find the megalithic dolmen situated on the west coast. Another sun-drenched day had us regularly not knowing which way to turn, there were so many butterflies. Our next stop was the historic and recently restored watermill where between indulging ourselves in the history and features of the mill we spotted a Meadow Brown Butterfly, our first of the week.

Before lunch back at the hotel there was time to stop at Fort Tourgis, another impressive Victorian structure where on the military parade ground were two Glanville Fritillaries.

After lunch, the rest of the group were dropped at the airport ending a terrific week for weather, wildlife, local history, making friends and having fun.

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The Old Watermill