

Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way - 'the road to Tory Island'

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 June - 2 July 2018



Brown Hare



Corn Crake



Red-billed Chough

Reports compiled by Brian Nobbs & Anne McGregor
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Summary

This holiday, organised by Naturetrek specifically for Sevenoaks RSPB Local Group was professionally led by Chris Murphy. The plan to visit areas from County Antrim in Ulster to County Donegal in Eire proved so popular that it was decided to run two consecutive weeks with the same itinerary so that the size of the party was split. Here are just some of the highlights from each

Week 1

Tuesday 19th - Monday 25th June

Our tour of the north of Ireland began almost immediately after leaving the airport. The RSPB has created a visitor centre on the bank of Belfast Lough, aptly named "Window on Wildlife". That window revealed a large group of loafing Black-tailed Godwits, Common Terns, and a raft covered with nesting Black-headed Gulls, with a few Mediterranean Gulls amongst them. An excellent way to introduce the human city dwellers to their wild neighbours.

The drive to our overnight hotel at Ballycastle was enlivened by a stop near a bridge over the Glenarm River, where an Irish Dipper was busy submarining for its supper. Ballycastle had a nice park between the hotel and the sea which was good for evening and morning walks. It is also at the mainland end of the ferry to Rathlin Island, our destination on day two.

Rathlin is an RSPB reserve, the highlight of which must be the seabird colonies, particularly at the western end, where the RSPB's West Light Seabird Centre is located alongside the "upside-down" lighthouse. A conventional layout would have put the light too high to be easily seen by local shipping, so the lamp housing is halfway up the cliff and the keeper's accommodation built on top of it!

The result is a range of viewing points at various heights, giving wonderful views of the Guillemots crowded shoulder to shoulder on the stacks, Fulmars nesting on the wider ledges, and a range of seabirds either on the cliffs or cruising past at eye-level, including Razorbills, Puffins, Gannets, Kittiwakes and a range of gulls.

A walk back towards the harbour gave close views of a number of Irish Hares, Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Wheatears, and at the water's edge a group of Atlantic Grey and Common (or Harbour) Seals were hauled out – sleeping until disturbed by an inconvenient wave.

The spectacular north Antrim coast was explored further on the way to our next destination, and one photo stop was at Dunluce Castle, built around 1500 on the very edge of the cliff – a little too close as during a banquet in 1639 the kitchens, complete with staff, fell into the sea! Fortunately we had no such problems at our hotel in Dunfanaghy in County Donegal, over the border in the Republic.

The dunes near the town were full of orchids, mainly Northern Marsh, Heath Spotted, Pyramidal and Common Twayblade.

The ferry trip to Tory Island was somewhat enlivened by the appearance of the Coastguard helicopter which used a close approach to the ferry as a training exercise and came close enough to raise a wall of spray from the downdraught of the rotors.

The name of Tory probably comes from the Middle Irish word *Tóraidbe* which means 'bandit' or 'pirate'. The island is about 2 miles (3 km) long by 0.6 miles (1 km) wide, and during our two night stay we covered virtually all of it, from the Arctic Tern colony near the lighthouse at the western end to the cliffs in the east, dominated by a 300ft knife-edged pinnacle where Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Shags squeezed onto the vertiginous rocks, whilst on the slopes covered in short turf Puffins stood guard outside their burrows and exchanged news or perhaps fisherman's yarns. The same slopes were also occupied by a small family party of Red-billed Chough, the rarest but also the most elegant of the crow family.

As well as the seabirds, drumming Snipe, Rock Pipits and other distractions, the star birds were surely the Corn Crakes. A few fields around West Town held several of these now rare birds. A still evening or early morning made it easier to hear their rasping calls, like running a thumb nail down the teeth of a comb, but not necessarily easier to locate the source! Fortunately on several occasions the birds finally showed themselves, perhaps goaded by the closeness of their equally noisy neighbours, and everyone eventually had a good view.

West Town itself was interesting, with the remaining tower of St. Columcille's 6th century monastery, now a retreat for gulls and sparrows rather than monks, and a very unusual "T" shaped Tau Cross, carved, probably in the 12th century, from a single slab of mica slate.

After returning, reluctantly, to the mainland, we returned westwards, with a brief stop at Glenveigh National Park and a tour of Derry/Londonderry, to our final overnight at Castle Dawson. A visit to the shore of Lough Beg was interesting, and that to the RSPB Reserve at Portmore Lough would probably have been even more so, but unfortunately by the time we had located it (*not* the best signposted reserve) it was time to leave again for the airport – a promising place to visit in the future though.

A very rewarding week with excellent company, comfortable accommodation, a knowledgeable and entertaining leader, and plenty of *craic*.

Brian Nobbs

Week 2

Tuesday 26th June - Monday 2nd July

Memorable moments from week two in Ireland.

Hares right by the side of the runway when we landed at Belfast.

A very dark Ruff with blonde head at RSPB reserve in Belfast.

The beauty of Rathlin Island in the sunshine. The lighthouse cliffs crowded with Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes. Then sitting in the sun watching, and listening to, the seals hauled out close by on the rocks.

Our thwarted plans on arrival back onto the mainland finding the mini bus totally blocked in by illegal parkers. Plan A became Plan B (ice creams) became Plan C: an exceedingly early dinner followed by a magnificent sunset over the Giant's Causeway.

A dusk walk through an incredibly atmospheric landscape. Due to a tidal surge all the vegetation had been destroyed by the salt and we were surrounded by black soil and ponds, black trees rising out of ink dark water and ooze, many uprooted, others stark against the skyline, and lots covered in a dense layer of feathery, grey lichen resembling, at a distance, silvery foliage. Nevertheless, the area was not devoid of wildlife, which included herons and ducks, a herd of Red Deer, and an adult and younger Otter catching and consuming numerous small fish.

Chris' repeated assurances that there was ample time to catch the ferry to Tory Island. As the harbour came into view he cheerfully indicated the ferry coming in to dock - becoming slightly less cheerful when someone pointed out that the ferry was actually sailing away from the harbour. Entertainment was provided by Chris driving the mini bus to the end of the jetty, leaping out and waving his hat after the departing vessel - to no avail. After some searching around the harbour buildings, devoid of human life ("Don't worry, it'll be fine" said Chris with slightly less conviction) it eventually transpired that the ferry was out of commission due to a broken propeller which had to be re-replaced under the eagle eye of the health and safety team. The ferry's replacement was absolutely brilliant, in a wet and splashy sort of way, being an eight seater and providing eye level views of the birds, shearwaters in particular coming lovely and close.

On Tory Island one of our party gave us an interesting demonstration of how to soften the rock hard cubes of butter at breakfast. You put them under the teapot. We were all lost in admiration as success was achieved, the butter flowing copiously leaving an empty wrapper...

Carpets of flowers, including twisting masses of Yellow Vetchling, Purple Tufted Vetch, Northern Marsh Orchids and numerous others with brilliant Common Blue, and other butterflies, flying amongst them.

The excitement of standing in the woods at dusk in hushed expectation listening to the creaking call of a young Long Eared Owl - until the arboreal culprit was revealed.

Coffee and scones under the trees on the lawn of a stately home.

To sum up, a great trip, in a beautiful country with wonderful weather.

Anne McGregor

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