

Orkney 2022 — Natural History Society of Northumbria

Naturetrek Tour Report

27th May – 1st June 2022



Whooper Swan



Curlew



Little Terns



Great Skua

Tour report by Stewart Woolley, images by Neil Pont and Julia Black



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: Stewart Woolley with eight members of the Natural History Society of Northumbria

Day 1

Friday 27th May

With various travel plans meaning some of our group would not arrive at the hotel in time for the three o'clock start, Stewart gave the three group members who arrived earlier a brief run-down of plans and we soon set straight to it. There are birds to be seen!

A short drive out of Kirkwall saw us arrive at Waulkmill Bay, a sheltered inlet on the north side of Scapa Flow. Although the tide was a good way out leaving a large expanse of sand, we had a quick scan out in the bay. One or two Fulmars drifted by, several Shags fed in the deeper water and then we found a single Red-throated Diver. This bird was quite some way away but in the bright direct sunlight we were still able to make out the characteristic head carriage, with bill held slightly skyward. Pleased with our early find we carried on and made for the small road that skirts the west shore of Loch of Korbister before it winds its way North through some fabulous looking rough grazing land and large areas of damp meadow with sparse scrub. From the roadside we started to see Curlew in good numbers with pairs dotted along the length of the road. Greylag Geese were everywhere, many with young and seemed to occupy nearly every water body.

Stopping to scan the lower slopes of South Rusky, a nearby hill, Stewart picked out the distinctive forms of not one, but three Hen Harriers. Two males and a ringtail. These were a long way off and the heat haze was pretty bad - the scope views of one of the males sat on a small ridge could best be described as suboptimal! Wanting to try for better views, we headed around and took the dead-end road to Bigswell. Unfortunately, we couldn't locate any of these birds but were delighted to find a pair of Curlew with young chicks, and a family of Oystercatchers with three young in the same area. Our short trip also gave us a handful of Brown Hares too, which do really well on Mainland Orkney. Other birds noted using the farmland being lots of Meadow Pipit, a few Skylarks and Lapwings, also doing well here.

Passing through the small town of Finstown, we headed south taking the small road to Heddle. Driving very slowly and scanning the surroundings, Stewart picked up a gorgeous Short-eared Owl, which hung in the air like a child's toy kite. It drifted right and out of site over some unimproved grassland, then, out of nowhere, an absolutely stunning male Hen Harrier gave us great, if a little bit brief view as he passed very close to where we were stood. What a start! We continued to enjoy the plentiful Curlews in roadside fields and several Northern Ravens were seen along our route as we headed back to Kirkwall to meet the rest of our group at dinner, and to chat about plans for our time here on Orkney.

Day 2

Saturday 28th May

Our first morning together dawned breezy and pretty chilly, with winds set from the north we were going to need to wrap up! Our pre breakfast trip out saw everyone turn out for 6am, which was mightily impressive! We set off toward Finstown taking the B road that passes Wideford Hill which lies just a few km outside of Kirkwall and is the site of a well preserved neolithic burial chamber.

Passing the agricultural land on each side of the road we soon saw our first Raven of the day, with plenty more as the day went on. Curlews rose up from the grasslands and bubbled their evocative song as they parachuted back to earth, such a wonderful sound first thing in the morning!

As we dropped down behind the hill at Bridgend, we caught sight of the distinctive form of a male Hen Harrier, this adult bird unfortunately quickly disappeared out of sight and settled tantalisingly obscured by deep vegetation.

We reluctantly carried on toward Finstown, stopping briefly at the pier for a quick scan across the bay of Firth. Several Fulmars drifted by at close range and three Red-breasted Merganser showed some way off close to Scarva Taing.

Taking the road to Heddle where we'd gone yesterday with the early arrivals. We slowly made for the Kirbister road. Our route took us past lots of grazing land and rough pasture, less intensively managed than farms further north on Mainland Orkney, and we were pleased to note the large numbers of Curlews that seemed to occupy every field. Also of note were Brown Hare, again present in much higher densities than elsewhere in the UK. This species was introduced to Orkney many years ago but is now well naturalised and is thriving here.

Just as we passed Nisthouse, a cracking Short-eared Owl was seen as it flew off from a roadside fence post, this beautiful bird only travelled a short distance before settling and giving us all pretty decent views from the minibus. Taking a bit of a guess, I'd say that in my lifetime, I've probably seen five or six hundred Short-eared Owls, and each new one is as much of a thrill as the first, those eyes!!

Chuffed with our sightings and keeping an eye on the time, we then made for Waulkmill Bay hoping to see a Red-throated Diver as we did yesterday. Sadly not today, in fact the bay was quiet all round, with just a few Shags feeding distantly and yet more Fulmar that breed on the low cliffs here.

Back at the hotel for seven thirty we settled in for breakfast (Kind of!) before heading out for the day proper.

Our first stop today was to the famous neolithic site of Skara Brae on the western side of Mainland Orkney. Our route there took us past the Loch of Skaill where we picked up lots of hirundines doing well to find food over the water on such a cold day, a mix of Sand Martin and Swallow hawked over the loch and the ever-present Greylags numbered well over one hundred. Arriving at Skara ahead of the expected crowds that come to Orkney on visiting cruise ships, we had the site virtually to ourselves, we were able to gain an impression of life here some five thousand years ago. The people then were farmers, foragers, and fishers and, from the information provided, lived a fairly settled and relatively comfortable life. The remains of the buildings showed that the only fortifications required were against the weather. Conflict, jealousy and clan warfare came much later which shows in the construction techniques of the younger iron age ruins elsewhere on Orkney.

Walking around Skara today was chilly to say the least, so we were glad to enter warmth of Skaill House, the home of the Balfour family who discovered Skara Brae after a great storm in the eighteen hundreds had exposed some of the ruins. Although quite a grand house, the feeling inside was intimate and welcoming. The mostly small rooms were decorated in a stylish but not over the top way, and it was interesting to read about the family ties to some of the great explorers and military minds of the time.

We left as the numbers of visitors increased and as we walked back to the bus, two Ravens flew low over the car park, and as we watched the regular comings and goings of a pair of Starlings that had set up home in a dry-stone wall next to the visitor centre.

Leaving Skaill, we re-traced our steps a little to the sandstone clifftops at Yesnaby, as we pulled up a pair of Common Ringed Plover scurried over the motocross track and a superbly camouflaged female Wheatear was hard to pick out against the stone.

With a little effort we were soon rewarded with good views of our main target species here, the diminutive, rare and beautiful *Primula Scotica*, or Scottish Primrose. The gorgeous pinky purple tiny flowers, no more than 10mm across, were a delight to see for all.

A wander to the clifftops close by gave us several Common Eider below, a singing Rock Pipit, and some nice views of nesting Fulmar. Out to sea a little, we spotted two superb Arctic Skuas, both dark morph birds which passed very close to us, and as always, were pleased to see Puffins! A few small groups of Common Guillemots headed north, and several Gannets glided by further out to sea. Very close in, a single Black Guillemot, (Tystie in these parts!) was nice to see.

From Yesnaby, we drove on up to the Loons RSPB reserve at the Loch of Isbister. Here we took lunch into the comfortable hide and enjoyed the view as we ate. The nippy wind kept birdsong to a minimum, but we still managed to find Sedge Warbler, Reed Bunting, Coot, Moorhen, three Black-tailed Godwits in smart summer plumage, Redshank, Curlew, Gadwall, Shoveler and yet more Greylags. Happy to have a little respite from the chill wind we then nipped back to Marwick Bay and the “choin” which is a lagoon that is formed every low tide, giving shelter to seabirds. Again pretty quiet, a couple of wild swimmers didn’t help, but we did manage to find a nice clump of Scots Lovage, an unusual plant that is very localised here. The road end at Marwick also gave us two very smart male Wheatears.

Now although we had visited the Loch of Isbister for lunch, our afternoon route took us once again past the hide and on to the “listening wall”, and interesting curved concrete wall that is designed to reflect and somewhat amplify the sounds of the marsh, and it works a treat! Here we sat comfortably on the sculpted benches, protected from the winds and just took in the noises that came our way. The echos of Curlew, alarm calls of Redshank, and the drumming of Snipe - a sound new to some of the group. From here we also found another Black-tailed Godwit, much closer than the earlier birds, while further out, a smart Arctic Skua sat for a while on the margins of a distant pool. Just to our right, we admired the vibrant display of Marsh Marigold and the more subtle flowers of Bogbean, a Common Snipe was also making good use of this cover but did give us excellent scope views.

Wanting to make the most of the day, we carried on and passed the small enclave of Twatt, which, even Naturetrek clients raise a smile at in passing! Before long, we arrived at the Loch of Banks. This nice area of weedy, muddy pools, extending for about half a mile is a superb habitat, and soon gave us our target species. A Spoonbill had been reported earlier in the day and we connected quickly. Initially stood asleep, it woke when tormented by gulls and expressed its displeasure at the intrusion!

Orkney is famed for its neolithic remains, and we were about to have an overload! Heading south-west through Dounby and Mill of Rango, we arrived at Brodgar, a narrow strip of land that sits between the lochs of Stenness

and Harray. This area is otherwise known as the “Heart of Neolithic Orkney” and is steeped in history, with much of it very much on display. Our first stop was at the Stones of Stenness. Here three huge stones still project tall from the landscape, once a ring of twelve and the earliest construction at Brodgar. Radiocarbon dating suggests work had begun on the stones by 3,100 BC!

With photos taken, we walked the very short distance to the Barnhouse settlement. Here we could see the buildings layout of the small village that once occupied this area. One can only guess as to how the people of the time used the stone circles, Ceremony, celebration, worship, thanksgiving, or justice? Every Scientist in the field has a slightly different theory, but it's more fun to just try and work it out for yourself!

Loch of Harry is popular with anglers on a still evening, but this wasn't one of those! So, once again looking for a little shelter, we made for the wee bird-hide at Barnhouse. From here we found the now resident Black Swan among the many mutes, and to our delight, a pair of Red-throated Divers on the far side of the loch. The divers soon took flight, and we were able to hear the slightly odd Greylag Goose like call that they sometimes make, always in flight. Walking back to the bus, Swallows and House Martins fed in the shelter that the narrow strip of willows provided from the wind, glad and somewhat lucky to find any insects today!

Our last stop of the day was a walk around the Ring of Brodgar, this is the impressive classic henge arrangement that dominates this area. Some 104 m across, 27 of the original 60 stones still stand, with some of these having been re-erected in recent centuries. Again, no-one is exactly certain as to the purpose of the ring, but the scale of the construction at the time must have been huge. The ditch that surrounds the ring, at the point of construction was 3m deep and 10m wide, chipped out of bedrock, a huge task! It was especially nice to have the ring all to ourselves, as the large number of visitors that are always present at this time of year had now gone for the day. We were however, being watched, a single Great Skua or “Bonxie” stood guard on a nearby mound, quite unphased by our presence! Bonxies are great birds, so full of character, powerful, deep chested and able to analyse a group of Naturetrekkers like no other! Sadly, the Great Skua is currently suffering badly from the effects of birdflu, we had definitely seen fewer Bonxie than expected so far with large losses being recorded in the colonies of the north. Our bird though looked pretty relaxed, and only moved off when good and ready. Completing our walk around the stones, we headed to Kirkwall and the hotel, stopping briefly for a Whooper Swan that Stewart spotted at Ingashowe on the way back. After a full day, we settled in for a hearty meal and our chat about the day and plans for tomorrow.

Day 3

Sunday 29th May

With this annoying northerly airflow still in command, Sunday brought us yet another chilly start, and the strong breeze made it feel even cooler than it actually was. These poor conditions don't stop us, so once again, a full house for the early morning wanderings.

Not far to travel today, just a few kilometres outside of Kirkwall lies the Head of Work, a promontory that juts out into “The String” a deepwater channel that provides large ships with an access to Kirkwall harbour. Just as we arrived, a heavy squall nearly changed the plan, but a few minutes later the rain had passed and we set off on foot. The large salmon farm in the bay of Carness held several hundred Common Eider and a few Grey Seals spy hopped close by. As we walked out towards the point, we could see across to the island of Shapinsay and its' impressive mansion house, handfuls of Common Guillemots, a few Razorbills and one or two Tysties (Black Guillemot) sat

mid channel. While we found Common Ringed Plover and a couple of Turnstone on the near shore. The sound of singing Skylark is becoming increasingly rare elsewhere in the UK, but thankfully, they are still plentiful here, and always a joy to hear, so the ones that performed as we walked were not unexpected.

Heading out onto the damp path that skirts the small moorland here, we found a few Common Butterwort, an insectivorous plant that thrives in the wet peat bog margins, lots of Silverweed carpeted the ground and Lousewort were brave enough to bear flowers even in this cold!

As we walked on, we soon stopped to watch one of the prettiest and most engaging of our seabirds, a cracking dark morph Arctic Skua sat on a heather tuft a hundred metres or so away, its eyes fixed on us, sussing us out and our threat level. This bird was joined by another, also a dark bird, this was no surprise as around eighty percent of Arctics here in Orkney are dark morph birds. The pair, no doubt on a breeding territory, were quite relaxed, only occasionally launching to see of any passing Great Back Backed Gulls.

Further out toward the point, three Great Skuas, (Bonxies) sat on the ruins of the old chambered cairn here, great to see considering the havoc that is being wrought by bird flu not too far away just now. With time pushing on toward breakfast we slowly wandered back, with Meadow Pipits, Curlew and Skylark for company.

With breakfast done, and flasks filled, today's plan was to explore a little of the "Southern Islands", so we set off, heading for Lamb Holm, the first of the islands that sit south of Mainland Orkney. Stopping on the way at St Mary's, we had a quick scan over the loch of Ayre, a small freshwater pool. Here we found 24 Red-breasted Mergansers, a few Tufted Ducks and a pair of Mute Swan with young. Sand Martins hawked low over the water, as we moved on and over barrier No1. These barriers, named after the then First lord of the admiralty, Winston Churchill, were commissioned as a defensive measure after the German U-boat, U47, slipped into Scapa flow under the cover of darkness on 14th October 1939 and sunk the British battleship, Royal oak, with the third torpedo fired. A total of 833 officers and men perished when the ship turned turtle, this was a huge shock to the people of Orkney, and Britain as a whole, and swift action was needed.

Lamb holm became a prisoner of war camp, housing mainly Italians, captured during failed battles in Europe. These men were the ready source of labour that allowed the massive construction project to succeed.

Interestingly, law states that prisoners of war are not to be used for military gain, so, with this restriction in mind, Balfour Beattie were commissioned to provide the islands with a network of Causeways with a road surface, which also happened to be a great way of keeping U-boats out of Scapa!

The project required the hand casting (by the POWs) of around 66,000 concrete blocks in both five and ten ton weights, these accounted for the use of 333,000 tons of concrete and about 580,000 tons of quarried stone, a huge project, and one that saw completion well after the war had finished.

A truly wonderful legacy of this pow camp is the Italian chapel, still standing in its original form and preserved by the people of Orkney. The chapel is made from the marriage of two WW2 Nissen huts with a concrete skin and plaster lining, the artwork inside is astonishing, carried out during the war by the steady, creative hand of Dominico Chiocchetti.

The chapel is a very popular tourist attraction and still a place of pilgrimage by the many visiting Italians that come here just to stand inside this tiny, atmospheric building.

Carrying on south, we crossed barrier no2 onto Glimps Holm, barrier 3 onto Burray and stopped for a walk at Barrier 4.

A large sandy beach and marram grass system has built up on the Eastern side of barrier no 4 and is now the site of a growing Little Tern breeding colony, this colony is fairly modest in size but today birds numbered at least 25, which was great to see. The Little Tern is so smart with their yellow bills and wee black “Bandito” masks!

The beach also held good numbers of breeding Common Ringed Plover, 20 or so, with one of these being noted as a really odd looking leucistic bird with a very “bleached” looking head. We also managed to find just a single small Oysterplant growing here, vulnerable to rapidly shifting sand, this attractive plant is quite distinctive with its silvery thick leaves and blue flowers.

The weather had really begun to improve by the time we wandered back to the minibus, a pair of Stonechat were close to the carpark and a Bonxie passed overhead, no doubt looking for an easy meal.

Passing the southern shore of Water sound, a long sea loch, we reached St Margaret’s Hope on South Ronaldsay, and then on to Hoxa, parking at the Sands of Wright. From here we scanned out to sea and found two distant Great Northern Divers in smart full summer plumage. A short walk around the small marshy area just to the north gave us some stunning close views of Curlews, who obliged for the photographers by sitting atop fenceposts posing for us. Other species noted here were Snipe, Willow Warbler, Teal, Moorhen, Reed Bunting, Lesser Redpoll, Greenfinch and Wren. Our walk only took half an hour, and with decent dry conditions we took lunch before carrying on south.

Decent areas of woodland are few and far between on Orkney, so we took the opportunity to motor the few km south to Mossetter for a stroll around Olav’s Wood, a community-based project that saw the first plantings next to the burn back in the 1970s. Today can be found a fabulous mixed woodland, quite dense in places, with a stand of spruce further down. A network of paths criss-cross the site which provides cover for both breeding and migratory birds. Although relatively quiet today, not surprising given the cold northerlies, we did pick up singing Goldcrest, our first Robin of the trip! And the briefest glimpses of a Garden Warbler. We enjoyed our amble, which gave both shelter from the wind and a contrast of habitat from the exposed terrain all around.

We’d been in and out of the bus a fair bit today, so a good leg stretch was needed to round the day off, and with better conditions, we set off north to Deerness, on Mainland Orkney. This 27square km, “almost island” connected to mainland by the narrowest of sand bars. The drive towards or parking spot at mull head passes some lovely habitat, rough grazings, damp ditches and small marshy areas, along with sites of previous excavations and hedges that run down to the sea. From the bus we saw several pairs of Lapwings with young and Redshank with tiny chicks, it always amazes how these tiny baby waders are able to feed themselves almost from hatching, with the parents just providing protection, warmth and a little guidance! Northern marsh orchids were present in reasonable numbers in one field, their vibrant deep purple flower heads very obvious.

Parking up we set off for the 4 km walk, first through farmland, which was rather quiet, then crossing the boundary between the heather moorland of Mull head and the low pools at Denwick. Scanning over the waters we found up to three cracking Red-throated Divers, such a joy to get decent views of these slightly mysterious birds, and an opportunity for group members to see the distinctive head carriage and bill shape. The moorland just adjacent to the pools once again played host to a pair of Arctic Skuas, with one being a very handsome pale morph bird, built for speed, handsome and athletic, a bit like your guide!

Stewart had hardly finished saying that the habitat looked great for Short-eared Owl, when one appeared over the moorland and was then seen heading across a nearby bay, some way over the sea, a bit odd to see one over sea cliffs as opposed to the moors. Several Brown Hares were seen around the pools too.

As we approached the cliff path another, much darker Arctic Skua came into view, at first in “loiter” mode, but then turned, banked sharply and slipped into full high speed attack setting! It was astonishing to see close up just how quickly it accelerated, before it disappeared below the cliffs, no doubt in pursuit of a Kittiwake or Arctic Tern.

The cliffs and rocky ledges at Mull head held lots of Shags and also gave us the chance to compare Shag to Cormorant, both sat and in flight. A narrow geo played host to several nesting pairs of shag, which were fully protected from both the worst of the weather and from attack by gulls and skuas, the bay of White Fowl Nevi held a few Puffins, and we could see the bright red feet of a Black Guillemot from our elevated position. As we slowly made our way back, the unfamiliar to most flight call of a Red-throated Diver was heard, sounding a lot like a Greylag Goose, rather than the haunting, echoing wail of the birds on their breeding lochs. A pair of Raven, no doubt with a close by nest, were seen along with a few Northern Wheatear and the ever-present Skylark. The last point of interest on our walk was the “Gloup” this is a very deep sea cave with a collapsed roof allowing us to look down into the depths, quite benign looking today, but this can get pretty exciting when the sea is smashing in during a storm and the water boils up from below.

With our day filled, and a few weary legs, we made for Kirkwall and our meal. Tomorrow was set to be another busy day, and a little different for all!

Day 4

Monday 30th May

An early start for all today, and one that I look forward to every year during my time on Orkney, we headed down to Kirkwall harbour for just after 06:30 to board our ferry for a day on Westray, one of the Northern Islands. Boarding the Earl Sigurd, named after “Sigurd the Stout” who was one of the Norse earls of Orkney, we settled in for the one hour forty minute journey north. The route up took us past Gairsay, Wyre, Egilsay and Rousay to port and to starboard, Shapinsay, Stronsay, Eday and in the distance, Sanday, before reaching Westray.

The comfortable journey allowed us time to eat our breakfast bags, and bird as we went. A steady stream of auks passed in all direction, mostly common guillemot with lesser numbers of Razorbills too and the further north we travelled, more and more Puffins were noted. Just one Bonxie was seen during the crossing, more on that later. Approaching Westray, Northern Gannet began to appear in modest numbers, and Julia did well to pick out a pair of Red-throated Divers in flight just ahead of the boat.

Pulling into Rapsness, at the southern end of the island, a single Black-throated Diver passed by the ship, a decent record and a bird not seen on every trip to Orkney.

Boarding the bus, we set off north to explore this lovely relaxed island. Westray has a different feel than “Mainland” and a strong sense of community spirit is very evident, especially around Pierowall, the main settlement on the island.

Our first stop was the Loch of Swartmill, South of Pierowall, roadside boggy areas held Northern Marsh Orchids as we pulled up. The loch itself was quiet today, but driving slowly on, Stewart heard the distant, but distinct sound of a calling Corncrake, which everyone in the group eventually heard, the very deep and extensive vegetation meant we had no chance of even catching a glimpse, but it was great to get one so soon after setting foot on the island. The bay at Swartmill held several small groups of Eiders with ducklings, beginning to form creches, where one or two females take care of all the young while other adults feed. Turnstones picked through the weed and half a dozen Sanderlings were seen further round the bay before we carried on, through Pierowall and on up to Noup Head.

The drive to Noup, once out of Pierowall, eventually becomes a rough, in fact very rough! Track, that commands low speed, giving plenty of time to bird! I had mentioned the single Bonxie seen from the ferry earlier, Noup Head is usually a dead cert for good views of these incredible powerful hunters, but sadly, H5N1, bird flu, is ravaging the northern colonies, not just Bonxie, but Gannet, Eider, and now Arctic Terns are taking a hit. The scavenging habits of Bonxie mean they are very exposed to disease that has taken the lives of others. The earlier bird was to be the only live one we saw all day, along with the three dead birds at Noup. Hopefully, the colonies will be able to last past the breeding season and once dispersed, and less densely packed, might just be less exposed to this awful disease.

Once at Noup Head lighthouse, we were treated to some gorgeous weather, the sun was out, and the wind had dropped off to a gentle breeze, a stark contrast to earlier in the week! A smart male Wheatear stood on the lighthouse garden wall as we walked close to the high cliffs to look down on the masses of birds occupying the tenements below. Each species here filling a slightly different niche on the cliff, the Fulmars had the penthouse, comfortable, quiet hollows and crevices held many pairs, slightly lower, Kittiwake and Razorbills shared the space just above the masses of Common Guillemot. These birds crammed onto the smallest of ledges, every available guano covered surface taken up by a bird. The growing Gannet colony took the best spots on exposed rock shelves, this population is (until bird flu) thriving here, in 2003, there were just three pairs at Noup, now they number around 900 pairs! One vantage point not only allowed us to enjoy the busy sights and sounds of a large seabird cliff, but we were also able to take in the aroma! The wind was just in the “right” direction to guide the smell our way! The full experience was had! The scenery from Noup is stunning, the surrounding cliffs, the islands of Papa Westray and North Ronaldsay visible to the north east and back down to Birsay on Mainland Orkney.

We reluctantly decided to move on as there was much still to see here, so we made for the bus and headed back towards Pierowall for a look around the imposing Ruins of Noltland Castle. As we pulled up, another Corncrake rasped loudly from a large nettle patch very close to the car park, it teased us for a while before dashing for deeper cover, only seen by two members of the group. Lunch was taken here before we explored the ruins.

Noltland was built in around 1560 by Gilbert Balfour, a member of the new Scottish aristocracy, who was deeply involved in the political intrigue of the time, this is no doubt why his strongly built home had 71 gun ports built into the walls!

From here, a third crake called out from close to a nearby Black-headed Gull colony and a Cuckoo was heard by the group too. One of the strangest sounds that emanates from these damp meadows at this time of year is the drumming of Common Snipe. From the castle walls, we watched a single bird, continuously flying around and diving steeply, the vibrating sound made by air passing specially adapted tail feathers. This was a sound new to some of our group and is always a joy to hear and to explain how it is made!

Back in Pierowall after lunch, we made a stop at the Westray heritage centre to go and see the famed “Westray Wife”, this diminutive and slightly crude carving, standing no more than a couple of inches, is reckoned to be the earliest representation of the human form in Scotland, and was accompanied by other artefacts that have been found on the island over the years.

Very slowly, we began to gradually make our way back down the island, detouring to Westside and the Bay of Tuquoy, this was very quiet, but roadside vegetation gave us a nice family group of newly fledged Wren and a singing Sedge Warbler.

Now everyone loves a Puffin, and we’d only seen two or three at Noup, so we stopped and took a walk to the Castle of Burrian, a low grass covered sea stack that sits in a beautiful setting, accessed by a narrow path taking us by swathes of Thrift, Spring Squill, both Red and Sea Campion with an understory of Silverweed, the heady aroma of wildflowers and grasses in the late afternoon sunshine was magical as we approached the stack and sat and watched the busy Puffins for half an hour. The walk back to the bus gave us a nice male Twite and a few singing Rock Pipits, something a little different.

Back at Rapsness in plenty of time for our return sailing, we had a welcome coffee and enjoyed great views of a dark morph Arctic Skua sat on the rocks with at least three Great Northern Divers just offshore, one of these very close in.

The trip back to Kirkwall was extremely quiet, flat calm seas and bright sun, with the only real highlights being more Arctic Skuas and masses of auks in long “strings” flying once again, in all directions. The Westray day is a long day out but is a great place to visit. The superb afternoon weather eventually broke to drizzle as we berthed in Kirkwall, ready for a sit down and a decent meal. A great day!

Day 5

Tuesday 31st May

Our early morning excursion saw us arrive at Inganess bay, just a few kilometers out of Kirkwall. This peaceful and sheltered bay is the resting place of the Juniana, a World War Two wreck that still sits in the shallows and provides a few pairs of Arctic Terns with a safe nesting place. Parking up, we went for a stroll along the Wideford Burn. This stream is flanked by lush marshy vegetation, Common Reed, sedges, Water Avenas, Marsh Cinquefoil, Bogbean and Marsh Marigold being some of the more obvious plants we could see. As we walked, at least four Sedge Warblers sang their distinctive scratchy song, with one of these proving quite showy, such pretty birds, boldly head marked, and in no way the dull brown jobs that they may at first appear.

Not long after setting off, Stewart picked out the distinctive shape of a Short-eared Owl as it flew over very high, these birds are as likely to be seen in high level transit flights as they are found quartering meadows at low level, and it's always worth keeping an eye to the sky!

Part way along the walk. I decided to nip back for the bus and meet the group at the other end. Total time without guide, maybe six or seven minutes. Upon reaching the group I was presented with some absolutely stunning back of camera shots of a Short-eared Owl, this bird flew right past the group, no more than forty yards away and looked straight at them as it went by, It just doesn't get any better!!

Another owl soon followed and disappeared behind some of the airfield outbuildings not to be seen again. Well pleased with our sightings we made for the pier at Scapa to try and pick up a few seabirds. Here we were chuffed to find two Great Northern Divers, one dull looking winter plumaged bird and another, this time in smart full summer dress! A smattering of auks were noted some way off, mostly common guillemot with a few Razorbills much closer in.

After breakfast, we took a while to walk up the street for a visit around St Magnus Cathedral. This beautiful building dominates the Kirkwall skyline and is a must for all visitors. Work began here in 1137 at the behest of Earl Rognvald, who wanted to honour God and celebrate his accession to the earldom of Orkney. The cathedral has undergone many changes over the centuries internally to reflect the changing ways of thinking at any given time, and the way it looks today is very different from the original some nine hundred years ago. Belonging to the people of Orkney, and not to any church, it is treasured and well maintained and provides a window into the past.

Leaving Kirkwall, we planned to cover the north eastern corner of mainland, varied in habitat, our first stop was the RSPB reserve at Lower Cottasgarth. Here we walked the 15 minutes or so to the Eddie Balfour Hen Harrier hide. Eddie spent his lifetime watching and studying the Hen Harriers of Orkney and did much to promote their conservation and continuing success here. A single distant male Harrier was seen quartering the low ground to the south of Queenamidda before he drifted away to the East and out of sight. The walk to the hide took us past a lovely patch of Heath Spotted Orchids, from vibrant pinks to subtle rose washed whites, two Arctic Skua appeared over the nearby ridge, a classic skua breeding area. Common Cuckoo was heard but not seen as we made our way back to the minibus, and to our next stop at another RSPB site, the burger hill reserve and Lowries water. This is a Red-throated Diver breeding loch and birds can often be seen very close to the hide, or out at sea feeding as they clearly were today! We sat for a while and watched a Great Skua "disassembling" a young Brown Hare, it had just stolen this from an adult Great Black backed Gull, no fear! The loch was covered with Greylags, hundreds of goslings being evident with many more no doubt in lochside vegetation. We were keen to catch up with the divers, so we drove the short distance down to Evie pier where we sat in the sunshine and had lunch on the beach. Sat looking out over Eynhallow sound, two divers soon came into view distantly and then took off, flew towards us and landed just a hundred metres or so from where we sat, we could clearly see the deep red throat patches in the bright sunlight, and the delicate pin stripe vertical markings of their necks.

Just in front of us several female Eiders had formed a creche with their young, a peaceful scene that was dramatically disturbed by an Arctic Skua that launched a full on attack, chasing an unsuspecting Arctic Tern relentlessly. This assault was amazing to watch, such athleticism from both birds, and the acceleration that the skua displayed was truly staggering.

Just a short distance along the road lies the Broch of Gurness, this is an iron age settlement with a central, heavily built defensive broch. This site is not on the normal tourist trail and is always free from the large numbers of visitors that come with the many cruise ships that call into Orkney each year.

Here we walked among the stones and explored the broch and learnt how life was different for the people of the iron age, some 2000 years later than the ruins at Skara Brae which we had visited earlier in the week. The Broch is in a dramatic setting, overlooking the island of Rousay and protected by the sea on three sides. Today it gives safe nesting to the many Starlings who bring up their families in its walls and the sea defences and low cliff give Fulmars a quiet place to breed. Out in the sound, we found another two Red-throated Divers, probably different birds, and a good number of Black Guillemot too. Before leaving the site, we enjoyed listening to the obviously enthusiastic Historic Scotland man who looks after the information office here before we moved on heading for Birsay and the north-west corner of Mainland.

Passing the Loch of Swannay we arrived at Birsay bay, still chilly with a stiff wind, we looked out across the rugged low tide landscape, a few hardy Sand Martins hawked along the weedline and a lovely family group of Shelduck poked around in the rockpools just in front of us, the ducklings being super cute! A small group of swans just along the beach were worth a look at with one of them turning out to be a Whooper Swan, albeit with a particularly pale yellow patch on its bill, certainly an unusual looking bird, the rocks in front of us held a decent number of hauled out Grey Seals, and further out to sea, unidentified auks passed by in good numbers, the bright light and distance making positive ID impossible.

A walk around the ruins of the sixteenth century Earls palace at Birsay was fun, a grand house in its day, built by Earl Robert Stewart, half-brother to Mary, Queen of Scots. The architecture would have been striking to the people of the time, being far more ornate and decorative than anything they'd seen on the islands before. The grandeur of these palaces was a symbol of the power that the Earls and lawmakers had at the time, and how difficult life would have been for everyone else. (Nothing changes!)

As the weather was now pretty favourable, we headed for Marwick head where we took a walk up to the Kitchener memorial, this huge tower, along with the recently unveiled commemorative wall remembers those that were lost on the night of the 5th June 1916 when HMS Hampshire struck a mine leaving Scapa at the start of a diplomatic mission to Russia with the loss of 734 men. The great views from here allowed us to see the Old Man of Hoy to the South and to once again enjoy the sights and sounds of a busy seabird cliff. Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Shags, Rock Doves and Gannet were all seen on the cliff, with a couple of Arctic Skua working back and forth looking for an easy meal.

With the day now wearing away, and some great sightings had, I got word that a Great White Egret had been reported not far away, this is still a very rare bird on Orkney, with this potentially being only the ninth record! We arrived at the Loch of Banks a short time later and almost immediately found the egret strutting around out in the open, neck stretched and very active, not the usual view of a bill poking out of a reedbed, fantastic! Also, great to find here was a flock of at least 34 migrant Black-tailed Godwits - a very mobile flock that we were lucky to see as they likely wouldn't be staying long! Really happy with what we'd achieved today, we gradually made our way back to Kirkwall ready to relax over a glass and a decent feed once again.

Day 6

Wednesday 1st June

With travel plans as varied for our return journeys as they were coming north, and a long day of onward connections for some, we enjoyed our last breakfast together before parting company. We'd had a great week, seen so much wildlife and really got a feel for the history and culture of Orkney. Our day on Westray had given contrast against the rich and productive commercial farmland of mainland, more relaxed, cosy and community based. Birdsong had filled the air, our constant companions had been Skylark and Curlew, and my favourite seabird, the Fulmar had seemingly been drifting by on stiff wings wherever we went. Covering Orkney in five days is no mean feat, but I reckon we'd given it a good go!

Thanks everyone for making this such a special trip and I really hope we can meet again sometime (hopefully it'll be a bit warmer!) Cheers for now, Stewart.



Scottish Primrose by Julia Black



Spring Squill by Julia Black

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2022					
		27	28	29	30	31	1
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓			
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>					✓	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓			✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓			
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>			✓			
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Pigeon (Rock Dove)	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>					✓	

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2022					
		27	28	29	30	31	1
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓		✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓			
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓			
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓			
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			✓		✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			✓	
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			✓		✓	
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Whooper Swan			✓			✓	
Spoonbill			✓				
Moorhen			✓	✓			
Pheasant							
Gadwall				✓			
Corncrake					✓		
Black Throated diver					✓		
Great White Egret						✓	

Others

		May - June 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	27	28	29	30	31	1
Mammals							
Orkney Vole	<i>Microtus arvalis orcadensis</i>					✓	
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Insects							
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>					✓	
Northern White-tailed Bumblebee	<i>Bombus magnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Carder						✓	
Garden Tiger caterpillar			✓				
Small Tortoiseshell butterfly					✓		
Red Admiral butterfly					✓		

Plants

Common name	Scientific name	May – June 2022					
		27	28	29	30	31	1
Marah Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>		✓				
Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>		✓				
Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>		✓				
Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>			✓			
Sea Campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>		✓				
Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>		✓				
Thrift (Sea Pink)	<i>Armeria maritima</i>		✓				
Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>		✓				
Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>		✓				
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>		✓				
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>		✓				
Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>		✓				
Scottish Primrose	<i>Primula scotica</i>		✓				
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>		✓				
Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>		✓				
Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>		✓				
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>			✓			
Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>			✓			
Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>		✓				
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>		✓				
Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>			✓			
Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>		✓				
Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>			✓			
Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>			✓			
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>		✓				
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>		✓				
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>		✓				
Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>		✓				
Spring Squill	<i>Scilla verna</i>		✓				

Common name	Scientific name	May – June 2022					
		27	28	29	30	31	1
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>		✓				
Yellow Iris (Yellow Flag)	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>		✓				
Heath Spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> subsp. <i>Ericetorum</i>		✓				
Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Scots Lovage			✓	✓			
Milkweed			✓				
Silverweed				✓			
Marsh Cinquefoil			✓				