

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## SCOTLAND

### Shetland Wildlife & Photography

13<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> June 2016

#### TOUR REPORT

**Leaders: Paul Harvey & Phil Harris**

##### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> June**

Fine, sunny and calm.

What a lovely day to start the tour with glorious sunshine and calm seas. With the weather forecast to change, this was the day to do the Noss and Mousa boat trips. Unfortunately Loganair had other ideas and flight delays meant that only five folk were able to join Phil on his RIB to travel to Noss during the afternoon to enjoy the spectacular seabird cliffs. It was difficult to know where to look next with rafts of guillemots, razorbills and puffins on the sea, a constant whirl of gannets up above, many diving around the boat to take mackerel, and dramatic aerial chases involving great skuas. Paul meanwhile operated a shuttle system to pick up the remaining three members of the group, and thankfully the whole group had assembled in time for an evening trip to Mousa. The trip did not disappoint and despite the bright conditions – you really could have read a newspaper at midnight – hundreds of storm petrels made it ashore during the early hours and we were treated to the superb sight of these tiny seabirds flying around the 2,000 year old broch – the best preserved of its kind anywhere.

##### **Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> June**

Fine and sunny with force 4-5 north-easterly winds.

The group split into two today with half of the group - Chris, Gerry, Mary and Penny - accompanying Paul into the south Mainland and Lara, Jurgan, Renate and Sara travelling east with Phil to look for otters.

Paul's group were lucky enough to encounter four red-necked phalaropes, albeit on some rather distant pools with the first of many family parties of greylag geese nearby. Skylarks and meadow pipits were singing in glorious sunshine at Virdi Field where an Arctic skua performed well just a few metres away. Waders were then order of the day with turnstone the highlight at Boddam, bar-tailed godwits at Virkie and six super summer plumages sanderling joining us for lunch at the West Voe of Sumburgh. We admired the Arctic tern colony at Grutness before visiting the Sumburgh Head Lighthouse where several puffins did their thing just a few metres away. Wigeon, cormorant and grey heron were added at Hillwell, all surpassed by a pair of whooper swans and their six cygnets at Loch of Spiggie.

Phil's group headed off via the Loch of Tingwall, where a pair of whooper swans and six red-breasted mergansers were the highlights, while a short stop at Kergord produced brief views of siskins. Next a five

kilometre walk along a section of the east coast to search for otters. After finding plenty of spraint, footprints and holts, an otter was spotted fishing out in the bay. It drifted closer giving reasonable views, catching a large fish and then making its way to the shore. Unfortunately it devoured the fish out of view and then made its way off around the headland.

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> June**

Dry with sunny spells but a strong force 6 north-easterly wind.

Roles were reversed today with Lara, Jurgan, Renate and Sara travelling south with Paul and Chris, Gerry, Mary and Penny heading out with Phil.

Paul's group were again lucky to see four red-necked phalaropes, although no closer than yesterday. The flock of bar-tailed godwits at Virkie had increased to 12, while the brood of two shelducks, and turnstones were again at Boddam and were soon brought into focus in the group's cameras! The sanderling were at Grutness today and paraded right past us just to help the photographers out, while a small wigeon on the edge of the nearby Arctic tern colony also yielded some classic shots. A repeat of yesterday's quick visit to the Old Scatness archaeological site again proved popular but was easily matched by the site of an adult crane strutting its stuff at Hillwell. Then it was on to Loch of Spiggie to enjoy the whooper swan family, followed by views of common seals hauled out at Rerwick and finally a wee visit to the famous St Ninian's Tombolo.

Due to the strong, cold wind, Phil's group decided to try their luck at several sites rather than go for a longish walk. First up though was Weisdale valley where a grey wagtail was found at the mill, and siskin, chaffinch, goldcrest and robin all performed at Kergord – all very rare breeding birds in Shetland. Sullom Pier was the first port of call for otters but drew a blank as indeed did Gluss Isle, Ollaberry and Collafirth! It looked like it was going to be one of those days but then a repeat visit to Sullom Pier produced a mother and cub which performed for several minutes before disappearing into the boulders of the pier then reappearing on top briefly. Persistence had paid off.

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June**

Dry with occasional sunny spells but very strong force 6-7 north-easterly winds. Cold, wind chill factor of 5 degrees.

Today we said goodbye to Scalloway Hotel where we had been looked after very well and headed north, with Unst our final destination. Our first stop though was the Loch of Tingwall where a flock of five goldeneye was an unexpected bonus. We then took advantage of the cold weather to visit the Lerwick shops and Museum, giving some an opportunity to contribute some money to the local economy! As we headed out to Eshaness we were treated to several close encounters with wildlife enabling the photographers among us to get some quality shots. First, three red-throated divers together just 20 metres away, and then an obliging golden plover, which sat atop a small mound. We enjoyed lunch at the Eshaness Lighthouse among the volcanic rocks formed 350 million years earlier, and then went for a bracing stroll.

We crossed Yell quickly and then had a look at a few sites on Unst before heading to our hotel. Uyeasound held seven mute and two whooper Swans, with a further three mute Swans at Haroldswick. It had been a fine day despite the weather and one highlight was encountering the chicks of several wader species – lapwing, redshank, oystercatcher and ringed plover.

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> June**

Overcast with a few spots of rain but strong force 6-7 north-easterly winds persisting.

A pre-breakfast jaunt for some saw us visit Baltasound and Haroldswick although we were rewarded with nothing other than the cluster of swans encountered yesterday. After breakfast we enjoyed a brief stop on a track to Colvadale where a whimbrel afforded us some fine views. Then it was on to Belmont to get the ferry to Fetlar. Despite the strong wind, Fetlar did not disappoint. Two female and a male red-necked phalarope performed admirably at Houbie – just ten or so metres away at their closest, and a further pair were swimming around a small pool near Funzie. A snipe joined them distracting the photographers in our

group. A pair of red-throated divers patrolled the Loch of Funzie. We enjoyed lunch below the cliffs at Tresta, before walking out on the glorious sandy beach there, where terns and kittiwakes fed offshore. The nearby loch held a large concentration of bathing Great Skuas. Our final treat came in the form of a stunning summer plumage Great Northern Diver off Hamars Ness and then it was back to Unst, where Mary spotted two Shelducks flying over Uyeasound – a rare occurrence up on Unst.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> June**

Dry with occasional sunny spells. Wind initially a force 5 northerly slowly decreasing during the day.

A pre-breakfast visit to the 100+ year old sycamore plantation at Halligarth yielded singing chiffchaff, garden warbler and reed warbler, although none were as obliging as a wren that sang his heart out in full view – allowing everyone great views of this Shetland subspecies. After a full breakfast we headed to the Keen of Hamar where diligent searching allowed us to find all the key rarities of the intriguing open, serpentine debris – a habitat that is unique in the British Isles. Several of the endemic Edmondston's chickweed were found in flower here, at one of only two sites where it occurs, the other lying just across the road! A few northern rock-cress were also in flower but Norwegian sandwort proved much more challenging. Eventually one was located, which although in flower, was just past its best. Early purple orchids too were on the wane, but early and northern marsh orchids were at their best. Mountain everlasting, alpine meadow rue, fairy flax and moss campion were among other highlights.

After a quick lunch we embarked out across the Hermaness NNR. After crossing the edge of the great skua colony (the third largest in the world!) and avoiding their rather menacing dive-bombing antics, we eventually reached the 500 foot cliffs of Saito where we looked down onto a swirling mass of gannets – some 10,000 strong! The occasional puffin distracted us for moments before once again we took in the awe-inspiring view. Most continued on around the cliffs to Hermaness Hill where dunlin's became our almost constant companions and an Arctic Skua was seen close at hand. We all slept well on this night!

### **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June**

Calm with sunny spells at first but wind increasing to force 5 south-easterly by the afternoon.

The early risers visited the lovely beaches of Skaw and Norwick where the sharp-eyed Penny found a redwing. Not just any redwing either – this one had a beak full of food – and clearly they were breeding nearby – only one or two pairs breed in the British Isles most years so this was a significant sighting. Almost as good was the oysterplant at Skaw, which was just coming in to flower.

After breakfast we said goodbye to the Romanian team that had prepared such fine evening meals and made our stay at the Baltasound Hotel so enjoyable. As we travelled south we stopped for a wee look at the pools along the Westing road where we found yet more red-necked phalaropes – three females and a male. On Yell we took a short walk at Burra Ness and then it was on to Brae for fish and chips at the award winning Frankies, where we were joined by Phil and Rebecca and their happy daughter Ayda. A trip back to Toft produced an otter, albeit rather distantly and then we headed north a little way to study a pair of common sandpipers and their chicks on a loch near the road. Luckily, both a male and female Merlin were seen on the hill opposite. A stop at Voe produced some excellent comparisons of Arctic and common tern, and then we travelled south from Voe to Aith, admiring the scenery and an oystercatcher nesting on top of a fence post, on the way! Back in Scalloway we enjoyed a final evening meal together.

### **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> June**

Wet with strong force 6 south-easterly winds.

Phil collected the team after breakfast and dropped Sara, Chris, Mary, Renate and Jurgan off at the Sumburgh airport. A visit to Hillwell allowed Gerry and Penny to catch up with the crane and then it was off to Sumburgh Head for a final goodbye to the puffins! A great week had finally come to an end. A super group of folk that had gelled together well, and enjoyed some decent weather and splendid wildlife.

## Systematic List

### Birds

Greylag goose:	The breeding population of this species is rapidly increasing in Shetland since it first bred in the mid-1980s and up to 100 were seen daily including a few family parties.
Mute swan:	Seen daily on mainland and Unst, with a max of 12 on 16 <sup>th</sup> . One on a nest at Strand.
Whooper swan:	Non-breeding adults were seen daily at a variety of sites but most exciting was the brood of six cygnets seen at loch of Spiggie on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Shelduck:	Seen on both visits to the south Mainland including a brood of two ducklings at Boddam. Far more unusual was a pair at Uyeasound on Unst on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Eurasian wigeon:	Up to five seen at Hillwell on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 15 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> .
Common teal:	One or two seen on four days, the best views of a female at Haroldswick pool.
Gadwall:	A male briefly at Hillwell on 13 <sup>th</sup> .
Mallard:	Seen daily.
Tufted duck:	Five at Loch of Spiggie and 20 at Loch of Tingwall.
Common eider:	Seen daily. Quite a few creches of ducklings observed.
Goldeneye:	A flock of 5 at Loch of Tingwall on 16 <sup>th</sup> were unexpected on such a late date.
Red-breasted merganser:	Seen on four days with a max of 6 on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Red-throated diver:	Seen daily with a max of ten on 16 <sup>th</sup> . Some great views of a trio in the north Mainland.
Great northern diver:	A fine summer plumage adult was a nice surprise off Hamars Ness, Fetlar, on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Northern fulmar:	Common
Storm petrel:	Several hundred came ashore on Mousa in the early hours of 14th.
Northern gannet:	Seen daily with vast numbers at both Noss and Hermaness
Cormorant:	Singles at Hillwell on 14 <sup>th</sup> and off Fetlar on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Shag:	Common, seen daily.
Grey heron:	Two at Hillwell on 14 <sup>th</sup> and singles on Fetlar on 17 <sup>th</sup> and Baltasound on 19 <sup>th</sup> .
Moorhen:	One at Hillwell on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> .
Common crane:	A stunning adult strutting around in amongst the marigolds at Hillwell on 15 <sup>th</sup> and again on 20 <sup>th</sup> .
Oystercatcher:	Seen daily with a few chicks seen too.
Golden plover:	Seen on four days – the best view of one near Eshaness. One also serenaded us in the Baltasound Hotel car park in response to our whistling back its song.
Lapwing:	Seen daily including one very young chick on Unst.
Ringed plover:	Seen daily including several chicks.
Common sandpiper:	Lovely views of a pair and their three chicks near the Sullom turn off in the north Mainland.
Common redshank:	Seen daily including one brood of chicks on Unst.
Whimbrel:	Seen at Colvadale, with one close one on 17 <sup>th</sup> and three more distant individuals on 19 <sup>th</sup> .
Eurasian curlew:	Seen daily
Bar-tailed godwit:	Up to 12 non-breeding plumage birds at Virkie on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Turnstone:	Up to seven seen daily from 14 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup> , all migrants.

Sanderling:	Up to eight seen in the south Mainland (Grutness and Virkie) on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 15 <sup>th</sup> . An unusual sight for many in their summer attire.
Dunlin:	Seen daily in good numbers (10-20), with all birds in summer plumage.
Common snipe:	Seen daily although a perched individual at a pool on Fetlar provided the best views.
Red-necked phalarope:	Four at some pools on Mainland then 5 on Fetlar and four on Unst. A total of 13 is probably the highest seen by a Travelling Naturalist group in Shetland and included some very fine views on Fetlar.
Great skua:	Seen daily in large numbers.
Arctic skua:	Seen daily in small numbers, max of six on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 19 <sup>th</sup> . The population continues to decline.
Guillemot:	Seen daily and in large numbers at seabird colonies.
Razorbill:	Seen daily.
Black guillemot:	Seen daily in small numbers
Puffin:	Entertained us on a daily basis.
Kittiwake:	Seen daily in small numbers
Black-headed gull:	Seen daily in small numbers, except for 100s at the large colony on the island in Tingwall Loch.
Common gull:	Seen daily
Herring gull:	Seen daily.
Lesser black-backed gull:	Seen daily in small numbers, max of 15 on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Great black-backed gull:	Seen daily.
Common Tern:	Two on 15 <sup>th</sup> and a single on 16 <sup>th</sup> but the best views were of four at Voe on 19 <sup>th</sup> .
Arctic tern:	Seen daily in good numbers.
Rock dove:	Seen daily
Wood pigeon:	Seen on both visits to Kergord and up to four daily on Unst.
Collared dove:	Six on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Merlin:	A single female in the north Mainland on 15 <sup>th</sup> and a pair at a different place in the north Mainland on 19 <sup>th</sup> .
Rook:	Seen at Kergord and near Strand.
Hooded crow:	Seen daily in small numbers.
Raven:	Seen daily in small numbers.
Skylark:	Seen daily.
Swallow:	Up to six seen daily.
Wren:	Seen at Kergord and Halligarth – giving especially good views singing at the latter. All of the Shetland subspecies.
Goldcrest:	One at Kergord on 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Chiffchaff:	A singing bird at Halligarth on Unst.
Garden warbler:	A singing bird at Halligarth on Unst.
Reed warbler:	A singing bird at Halligarth on Unst.
Robin:	One carrying food at Kergord on 15 <sup>th</sup> – this is the only reliable breeding site in Shetland.
Northern wheatear:	Seen daily.
Blackbird:	Seen daily.
Redwing:	One carrying food at Norwick on Unst was a nice surprise. This is a very rare breeder in the British Isles.
Starling:	Seen daily including many juveniles, these darker than those on mainland Britain, leading some authorities to suggest that the Shetland birds belong to a different subspecies.
Grey wagtail:	One in the Weisdale Valley on 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Pied wagtail:	Singles seen on three days. All were of the race M. a. yarrelli.
Meadow pipit:	Seen daily.

Rock pipit:	Seen most days.
Chaffinch:	One singing at Kergord on 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Siskin:	Up to four seen at Kergord on 14 <sup>th</sup> & 15 <sup>th</sup> including display flighting.
Twite:	Two at Spiggie on 15 <sup>th</sup> and one flying over Norwick on 19 <sup>th</sup> .
Linnet:	A super male at Spiggie on 15 <sup>th</sup> .
House sparrow:	Seen daily in small numbers.

78 species in total.

### Mammals

European otter:	Singles in the east Mainland on 14 <sup>th</sup> and at Toft on 19 <sup>th</sup> and a mother and cub in Sullom Voe on 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Common seal:	Seen daily in small numbers.
Grey Seal:	Seen almost days in small numbers.
Rabbit:	Far too numerous.

### Butterflies

Large white:	Seen on three days.
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### Others

Shetland bumblebee:  
 Northern white-tailed bumblebee  
 Diamondback moth  
 Ghost moth

### Flowers (this list includes only those species pointed out to participants)

Lesser clubmoss	Selaginella selaginoides
Bracken	Pteridium aquilinum
Black spleenwort	Asplenium adiantum-nigrum
Marsh marigold	Caltha palustris
Meadow buttercup	Ranunculus acris
Creeping buttercup	Ranunculus repens
Lesser spearwort	Ranunculus flammula
Alpine meadow rue	Thalictrum alpinum
Pink purslane	Claytonia sibirica
Norwegian sandwort	Arenaria norvegica
Sea sandwort	Honkenya peploides
Edmondston's chickweed	Cerastium nigrescens
Common mouse-ear	Cerastium fontanum
Ragged robin	Lychnis flos-cuculi
Sea campion	Silene uniflora
Moss campion	Silene acaulis
Red campion	Silene dioica
Common sorrel	Rumex acetosa
Thrift	Armeria maritima
Slender St John's wort	Hypericum pulchrum
Round-leaved sundew	Drosera rotundifolia
Common dog violet	Viola riviniana
Heath dog violet	Viola canina

Creeping willow	<i>Salix repens</i>
Cuckoo flower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Northern rock-cress	<i>Arabis petraea</i>
Common scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Cross-leaved heath	<i>Erica tetralix</i>
Bell heather	<i>Erica cinerea</i>
Bog bilberry	<i>Vaccinium uliginosum</i>
Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>
Stone bramble	<i>Rubus saxatilis</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Kidney vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>
Bird's-foot trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>
Bush vetch	<i>Vicia sepium</i>
White clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Red clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>
Fairy flax	<i>Linum catharticum</i>
Heath milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
Cow parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>
Sweet cicely	<i>Myrrhis odorata</i>
Pignut	<i>Conopodium majus</i>
Ground elder	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>
Field forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>
Wild thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>
Sea plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>
Ribwort plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Monkeyflower	<i>Mimulus guttatus</i>
Yellow rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>
Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>
Common butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Sheep's-bit	<i>Jasione montana</i>
Heath bedstraw	<i>Galium saxatile</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>
Mountain everlasting	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Marsh arrowgrass	<i>Triglochin palustre</i>
Heath rush	<i>Juncus squarrosus</i>
Soft Rush	<i>Juncus effusus</i>
Common cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Hare's-tail cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>
Deergrass	<i>Tricophorum germanicum</i>
Black bog-rush	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>
Sand sedge	<i>Carex arenaria</i>
Glaucous sedge	<i>Carex flacca</i>
Carnation sedge	<i>Carex panacea</i>
Yellow sedge	<i>Carex viridula</i>
Red fescue	<i>Festuca rubra</i>
Cock's-foot	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>
Sweet vernal grass	<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>

Spring squill	Scilla verna
Bluebell	hyacinthoides non-scripta x hispanica
Yellow flag	iris pseudacorus
Frog orchid	Coeloglossum viride
Heath spotted orchid	Dactylorhiza maculata
Early marsh orchid	Dactylorhiza incarnata
Northern marsh orchid	Dactylorhiza purpurella
Early purple orchid	Orchis mascula