

Orkney – Wildlife & History

Saturday 26 May - Saturday 2 June 2007

Trip Report

Leader

Robin Noble

Saturday 26 May

As ever, it was a relief to collect everyone together and enjoy a good evening meal, all travelling done and all luggage accounted for!

Sunday 27 May

A day of brilliant light, cold wind and one fairly short shower. As everyone had done so much travelling the day before, we spent the day close to home, visiting the tidal island of the Brough of Birsay, the cliffs of Marwick Head, and the fishermen's huts at Sand Geo. The tides were fine for the Brough, and we first skirted the perimeter of the island, getting a feel for the Birsay corner of Mainland Orkney, enjoying the clear views, and getting our first close views of the seabirds: eider, fulmar, shags, razorbills, kittiwakes and so on, including that crucial view of a puffin! The shower caught us just up by the lighthouse, but we were able to find some shelter, and later enjoyed lunch in the sun, while sitting on the short turf above the extensive archaeological site. The view from here was spectacular, with sheets of sky-blue spring squill, the blazing light on the water and the bright sky. After looking around the Pictish and Viking settlement, (and for once the light on the carvings on the Pictish stone was perfect), we returned to the minibus and made for the bigger cliffs of Marwick Head. Here there were more birds, of course, (including more skuas passing by), and fine views down the coast. We ended the day by walking along the shore from Marwick itself, to Sand Geo, with its fishermen's huts, and enjoying the shelter there, had a quiet cup of tea. An excellent meal back at the hotel concluded a great first day.

Monday 28 May

Still cold, greying over, but dry. We headed for Rousay via the Hillside Road, which gave us excellent views of both hen harrier and short-eared owl. We have had to adopt a new routine for these Rousay visits, which entails me reversing the minibus on to a small and awkward ferry, but that was achieved, and we drove the quiet circuit of the island, enjoying the views of all the different isles around. We stopped above Midhowe, and walked the best section of the coastal trail, first visiting the amazing tomb under its protective hangar. Lunch was by the sea, in a wonderful little inlet, which may once have been where they quarried stone for the tomb, or the nearby broch which we visited next. After this we followed the shore, one monument after another, with seals on the shore and birds flying past. Back up at the road, we added one more tomb before returning to the ferry; sadly the water was too choppy for good views on the sea, but there was certainly no shortage of fresh air!

Tuesday 29 May

The forecast was bad, and the day dawned very murky, so we headed east to Kirkwall. A male Harrier scooted across our bows before we even reached the main road, making the point that in Orkney you never know where you may see something good. We went to Kirkwall, toured the impressive and beautiful cathedral of St. Magnus, and the fascinating ruins of the Earl's and Bishop's Palaces. After lunch we headed down the East Mainland, by Scapa Flow, and saw the remains of the Blockships from the First World War, the

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Churchill Barriers from the second, and the lovely Italian Chapel, created by the Italian prisoners-of-war. The little loch at St Mary's gave us a good view of a female long-tailed duck, which certainly should not have been where it was, but seemed completely self-possessed! After a visit to the remarkable Tapestry Gallery at Hoxa, with works inspired by the Orkney landscape, we headed back towards home, returning again via the Hillside road, hoping for further raptor sightings-this time in vain!

Wednesday 30 May

The weather was fairly grim today, so we went looking for sites with roofs, or at least a little shelter. First stop was Maes Howe, hugely impressive and well explained by the chatty custodian on duty. We stopped to look at the Stones of Stenness, but did not venture out. We did manage the Ring of Brodgar, rather briskly it is true, but missing the worst of the rain, and sat in the bus having lunch watching parties struggling with ponchos and umbrellas in the wind. (Quite amusing when you are not in it!). We then travelled through the Kirbister wetland valley, where we saw virtually nothing, and turned into Orphir and Waulkmill Bay, where we had distant views of divers and mergansers. Thence to the Saga Centre, but on route we got caught up in a funeral procession which slowed things up. The Saga Centre offered us shelter, warmth, loos, interpretation but sadly no video on the Orkneyinga Saga stories. On the way home, we stopped at the Kirbuster Farm Museum, which gave us an insight into the everyday life of Orcadians of the past. Quite soon after we returned to base, the rain at last began to desist.....typical!

Thursday 31 May

Today began very grey, but slowly improved. We went first to the wetlands of the Loons, where shovelers were much in evidence, along with their rather comical ducklings. The wildflowers in front of the hide were pretty good, too. Then we headed for Skail Bay and the Neolithic village of Skara Brae, which we were fortunate to visit at a quiet time. We had lunch at Yesnaby, and then went for a good walk; it was almost warm on the way back! We did find a few minute, vivid blooms of *primula scotica*, and saw a number of arctic skuas, of both colour forms. There was a short-eared owl close to the road as we left Yesnaby, heading for the upland Lyde Road to Rendall and the Broch of Gurness. Here it was misty, but it obligingly cleared, and in addition to the fascination of the archaeological site, we had terns and red-throated divers to watch, along with common seals. We sat in the soft sunshine, sheltered by the steep bank, and had tea overlooking the crescent beach. Our usual evening routine of excellent food, and coffee and checklist in the first-floor lounge was illuminated by floods of sunshine from the west.

Friday 1 June

Today we went to the High Island, Hoy of the hills. It was quite grey and cold on the boat crossing Scapa Flow, but again it improved, and the views and light got better as we drove along, with many dramatic sightings of bonxies. We walked over the boardwalk and up to the remarkable Dwarfie Stane (who made it and how long must it have taken?), and a peregrine arrived noisily at the eyrie on the cliffs above us. We had lunch at Rackwick, and then slowly explored the great bay between its high cliffs. There were seabirds far out in the swell, skuas flying over the moor and curlew piping beside the peaty burn. We took our time going back to Lyness, and had time to visit the wartime museum before catching the ferry back to Mainland, and our last evening in the Barony Hotel. We had had rather mixed weather, it is true, but the general consensus seemed to be that we had had an excellent week, with good weather when we really needed it, and lots to look at.

Saturday 2 June

Departure

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SPECIES CHECKLIST

BIRDS (seen and heard)

Red-throated diver
Great northern diver
Fulmar
Gannet
Shag
Mute swan
Greylag goose
Shelduck
Mallard
? Garganey (f)
Shoveler
Tufted duck
Eider
Long-tailed duck (f)
Red-breasted Merganser
Hen Harrier
Peregrine Falcon
Pheasant
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Lapwing
Ringed Plover
Whimbrel
Curlew
Redshank
Common Sandpiper
Common snipe
Dunlin
Great skua
Arctic skua
Common gull
Herring gull
Lesser black-backed gull
Great black-backed gull
Black-headed gull
Kittiwake
Common tern
Arctic tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black guillemot
Puffin
Rock dove
Wood pigeon
Collared dove
Short-eared owl
Swift
Sky lark
Swallow
Pied wagtail
(? Sand Martin)
Meadow pipit
Rock pipit

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Wren
Stonechat
Wheatear
Sedge Warbler
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded crow
Raven
Starling
Reed Bunting
Chaffinch
House sparrow

MAMMALS:

Hedgehog
Common seal
Grey seal
Brown hare
Rabbit (do we have to?!)

BUTTERFLIES:

Green-veined white
Common blue

FLOWERS: (main ones).

Thrift
Scurvy grass
Sea campion
Spring squill
Bird's foot trefoil
Primrose
Tormentil
Silverweed
Lesser celandine
Red campion
Marsh marigold
Heath spotted orchid
Yellow iris
Violet
Sea sandwort
Cuckoo flower
Salmonberry
Fuchsia
Bogbean
Cotton grass
Woodrush
Scottish primrose
Crowberry
Creeping willow
Mountain everlasting
Milkwort
Lousewort
Northern marsh orchid
Field pansy
Cowslip
Wild thyme
Butterwort

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Marsh thistle
Spear thistle

Robin Noble.

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