

Orkney

Saturday 24 - Saturday 31 May 2008

Leaders:

Robin Noble

Trip Report

Sunday 25 May

Today dawned bright, with all the group (but not all their luggage!) duly assembled in Orkney, settled in to the Barony Hotel, and ready to go: there was a cold wind from the north, but there was also sun all day. To take full advantage of the weather, we travelled the short distance to Marwick Head, left the minibus, and made the gentle ascent to the cliff-top. The outlook from here was wonderful, and we took up my favourite station, well sheltered from the wind and with a view along the cliffs where seabirds were busily flying in and out, or making the rounds along the busy ledges. We had good sightings of most of the expected seabirds, including gannets, but without puffins, and we went a bit further north along the cliff to a place which normally gives us views of this special bird-if a bit distant. They were certainly there, in the middle ground, backed by the expanse of Birsay Bay, and the distant isles of Rousay and Westray; such cool air gives real clarity.

We had lunch overlooking Skail Bay, and then headed for Yesnaby, another cliff-top location. As the day was still fine, we thought we would get a reasonable walk while we could, and explored the amazing rocky coast. There was *primula scotica* in (fading) bloom, but other flowers were wonderful; especially the marsh marigolds, thrift, and spring squill. We had a moment of luck among the flowers, as one member of the party managed to mislay her glasses; fortunately another found them! We went up on to the hill at Yesnaby, to see the change in the flowers-there was lots of mountain everlasting-and if we could get views of the beautiful arctic skuas, which we did.

The last visit of the day was to the Loons Reserve, where the bogbean was in brilliant bloom, and a female hen harrier provided a real treat; but then so did the excellent supper in the Barony!

Monday 26 May

It was another day of blinding light and cold wind; Orkney looking good. We went inland this time, along the empty Hillside Road and up to Lowrie's Water under the wind turbines; on the way up we had wonderful views of a short-eared owl. The lochan seemed to have been taken over by greylag geese this year, and we saw no divers or wigeon. We went back down to the shore, and explored the beach for a while. There were distant divers, shelduck, two common seals basking and an atlantic further out in the Sound of Eynhallow. We went to the other side of the Sands of Evie for lunch, warm in the shelter, with amazing colours of sand and sea-as well as a lot of mergansers!

After lunch we looked at the small wildflower reserve, with field pansy and cowslip, and orchids coming, and then went to the remarkable ruins of the great Broch of Gurness, which we looked at in detail: it is the most wonderful place, and in the brilliant light could have been in Greece. (But I don't think that the false oxlip grows in Greece?!).

Round by Swannay, and down to the small stacks in Skippiegoe, where there were a few terns, and more squill. We walked out to the strange Whalebone, looking across to the tidal island of the Brough, and the far, far horizon.

Tuesday 27 May

Still mainly bright, and always dry. We headed across the West Mainland, via the Loch o' Banks, and the larger Harray Loch; this gave us a reed bunting close by, and, unexpectedly, a black swan, not a bird you associate with Orkney! We then visited the superb Neolithic tomb of Maes Howe, the finest in Western Europe, and famously embellished with important-or scurrilous-Viking graffiti. Then via the imposing Stones of Stenness, and the huge Ring of Brodgar, with curlew, lapwing and redshank to Skaill Bay, once again for lunch.

Afterwards, we went round the village of Skara Brae, the sort of place where the builders of Maes Howe must have lived. We were lucky, in that this famous site was quiet, and we could drink in its amazing state of preservation, and the calm beauty of its location. Later, we went to Marwick itself, and walked the quiet shore to Sand Geo, with its flowers and fishermen's huts. Here we had tea, and looked out over the sea, before making a quick, final visit to the Loons.

Wednesday 28 May

We went to Rousay today; it was cooler, grey, and became damp later on, but we managed a pleasant day. It was very grey on the sea and there were surprisingly few birds. We toured around the island, but saw little from the highest point; from here on, though, things improved. We walked down to the shore at Midhowe, and first inspected the astonishing ruins of the chambered tomb: it dates from around 3500 BC, and is often described as a huge "ship of death", a description which is probably, for once, deserved. We were hungry by then, and lunched by the shore. A bonxie suddenly appeared very close by, and there were seals of both types, a grey with a pup of last year. We next looked at the nearby broch, similar in many ways to Gurness, but the tower is preserved to a greater height, and the stonework very fine. The whole ancient site is bounded by, and partly defended by, remarkable narrow geos. We continued along the shore, opposite the island of Eynhallow, looking at the numerous and beautiful structures there, before making our way back up to the road and the minibus.

We then potted along through the small townships on the island circuit, and stopped to look at the smaller tomb of Blackhammer; because you can get right into the structure, it is very atmospheric. We passed the rather gaunt Victorian house of Trumland, and halted at Brinyan, where the tearoom and the Interpretive Exhibition vied for our attention. The sea was fairly impressive on our way back to Mainland, but it only served to give us an even better appetite once safely back in the Barony!

Thursday 29 May

Today dawned grey and misty, and slowly cleared into a lovely evening. We went first to the tidal island of the Brough of Birsay; we walked the circuit of its cliffs, with close views of kittiwakes and guillemots, (but no puffins!), before considering the extensive Pictish and Viking settlement. We then made our way across the West Mainland, visiting the large wetland in Kirbister glen, where a short-eared owl rather compensated for the missing puffins. We had lunch by the sands of Scapa Beach, before heading into East Mainland and the famous Churchill Barriers, which date

from the Second World War, as does the lovely Italian Chapel. I explained something of the complex history of Scapa Flow, and we looked at the remains of the blockships which had defended its channels in the First World War, before heading back to Kirkwall, and visiting the superb Cathedral of St. Magnus, and the ruins of the Palaces of the Bishops and the Earls, buildings which help give us a picture of Kirkwall as one of the great capitals of the Viking world.

Friday 30 May

The day was calm, grey, hypnotically peaceful, and we went to the sombre but beautiful island of Hoy. The boat trip was uneventful, and as we drove north along the Scapa coast, the views became subtly colourful. The moorland was populated by great skuas and gulls, and the roadside orchids got better and better. The glens between the big hills are rather better sheltered from salt spray than many parts of Orkney, and the bushes of birch and willow gave us stonechats and concealed willow warblers-the first of the week! We crossed the valley to inspect the Dwarfie Stane-(who can have laboured so long to create this unique, rock-cut tomb?)-and saw a lovely male Hen Harrier.

We lunched at Rackwick, and then wandered around its magnificent bay: there was still some squill along the shore, with lots of tormentil and heath bedstraw. The great beach, part of blue and pink boulders, part of sand derived from them, drew most of us, but others wandered back along the burn, hoping for common sandpipers and other waders, but there were a lot of skuas to intimidate those quieter birds. Back then along the narrow road to Lyness, where everyone had a look at the museum of wartime Scapa Flow, (and, possibly, the tea-room!), before we took the ferry back to Mainland Orkney, and the last evening in Birsay, the week's holiday being, (very rapidly it seemed), now at an end.

Species seen

Birds

Common pheasant
Greylag goose
Mute swan
Whooper swan
Black swan
Shelduck
Mallard
Tufted duck
Eider
Red-breasted merganser
Red-throated diver
Black-throated diver
Fulmar
Grey heron
Gannet
Shag
Hen harrier
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Lapwing
Ringed plover
Common snipe
Curlew
Redshank

Common gull
Herring gull
Lesser black-backed gull
Great black-backed gull
Black-headed gull
Kittiwake
Common tern
Arctic tern
Great skua
Arctic skua
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black guillemot
Puffin
Rock dove
Wood pigeon
Collared dove
Short-eared owl
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded crow
Raven
Swallow
House martin
Skylark
Sedge warbler
Willow warbler
Wren
Starling
Blackbird
Stonechat
Wheatear
House sparrow
Pied wagtail
Meadow pipit
Rock pipit
Linnet
Reed bunting

Mammals

Common seal
Grey seal
Brown hare
Rabbit

Butterflies

Green-veined white

Flowers

The usual haphazard list, with some rather more detailed botany from Michael; includes some not actually in bloom. Spring squill, tormentil, bird's foot trefoil, thrift, sea campion, sea mayweed, lesser celandine, scurvy grass, marsh marigold, common dog violet, mountain everlasting, red campion, dandelion, primrose, cuckoo flower, Scottish primrose, common lousewort, milkwort, butterwort, ribwort plantain, greater plantain, hoary plantain, sea plantain,

buckshorn plantain, marsh cinquefoil, silverweed, crowberry, water mint, creeping willow, nettle, yellow iris, field buttercup, creeping buttercup, common sorrel, bog bean, northern marsh orchid, kidney vetch, red clover, sea sandwort, field pansy, cowslip, false oxlip, mouse ear hawkweed, wild thyme, butterbur, coltsfoot, creeping thistle, hoary cress, good King Henry, (think we argued about that!), daisy, wild angelica, meadowsweet, cotton grass, sweet cicely, cow parsley, woodrush, sundew, heath spotted orchid, hybrid heath spotted/ northern marsh orchid, meadow vetchling, marsh thistle, greater spearwort, knotted clover.

Robin Noble, December 2008

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