

Orkney – Wildlife & History

Saturday 29 May - Saturday 5 June 2010

Leader

Robin Noble

Saturday 29 May

A greyish day, but all went ok, (despite the threat of BA strikes), and by evening the whole group was safely assembled in the Barony Hotel, for the beginning of the week. One group had had a superb view of a female hen harrier on the main road to Dounby, but we tried not to make too much of it, for the sake of the rest of them!

Sunday 30 May

The day slowly cleared to a cloudless sky with superb visibility, although the wind was cold. As folk have nearly always travelled considerable distances to get here, I always prefer to spend the first day close to our base, and we drove a very short distance to the cliffs of Marwick Head. The views from the cliff-edge, south and north, are excellent, and the flowers on its edge were in gorgeous bloom: luxuriant thrift and the sky-blue spring squill. We went to my favourite viewpoints; the first, in particular, was sheltered and warm, and we spent a comfortable time watching the seabirds, including gannets and puffins-the latter were close by and we had good views. Some rather sinister great skuas passed by, ever opportunistic and on the prowl for prey.

Our next destination was close by. Before we parked by Marwick Bay, we watched redshank and chicks, and then walked along the level shore to the Fishermen's Huts, admiring and photographing the lovely wildflowers along the way-there were still great numbers of primroses, and sheets of squill. Sand Geo itself was sunny and sheltered, a great place for lunch. Thence to the small village by the ruins of the Earls' Palace (and the shop and loos!), before going out to the Point of Buckquoy. The car park there was very busy, but across the causeway people scattered in various directions and there was plenty of space. We made our way above the lowest cliffs, and at the corner checked out the nesting birds on their ledges-an amazing light on the dark green plumage of the adult shags. Further up, we went to another excellent viewpoint, where we could watch guillemots, (some bridled), and spy eggs under a few of them, and some kittiwakes. Beyond the lighthouse, at the north end were a few more puffins which we watched before descending to the extensive Pictish and Viking ruins. There is a lot to look at and talk about here, and we took our time in the sun. Back across the narrowing gap (the tide slowly coming in), we again enjoyed the sun, sitting watching the large group of mute swans and the many seals in the Bay. That night we had the first of many excellent meals; it had been a good start to the week.

Monday 31 May

We were booked to go to Rousay today, and the ferry "terminal" at Tingwall was chaotic as a result of maintenance work on the slip. We managed, however, to get ourselves on board, and on deck in the cold, brilliant sunshine. (En route there, we had had a brief, wonderful view of a short-eared owl on a fence post). We slowly drove around the circuit of the island, with extensive views over small islands and the shining sea, stopped at the highest point and then again on the shore at Saviskaill Bay where seals were hauled out close by. We stopped again, high above Midhowe, and made our way down to the shore and its remarkable collection of ancient monuments: a fine broch, an astonishing, huge chambered tomb, the ruins of two old farms, (cleared by the infamous General Burroughs), and a rather crumbling Viking stair-tower

(constructed, nonetheless, of fine masonry). Much of the time, we were watched by seals, fulmars, and occasionally noisy oystercatchers. Lunch was by the sea, in the cool sunshine.

Once back up the hill at the minibus, we pottered along the remaining section of the island road, through the final townships, with views across the shallow Sound of Eynhallow, with its low-lying, holy island. Back at Brinyan, the tea-shop and the excellent Heritage Centre demanded our attention, before taking the ferry back to the Mainland. We returned to Birsay via Costa and Swannay Loch, with amazing views of the silvery Atlantic.

Tuesday 1 June

Today dawned grey, cold and windy, and we set off up the Hillside Road; on Hundland Loch we think we identified a red-throated diver on a distant nest. Then we went via Dounby through Harray, passing the monolith on Stoneyhill, to the viewpoint on Harray Loch where, as we arrived, there was a wonderful view of another short-eared owl, and the local black swan duly appeared. After our visit to the astonishing tomb of Maes Howe, as the day was improving, we decided to go to the Stones of Stenness and then had lunch before walking round the Ring of Brodgar and enjoying the great sweep of the views over West Mainland, which allowed us to debate why the standing stones had been erected there, and for what purpose. There were a good number of northern marsh orchids coming, which made the planting by the RSPB of strips of plants for birdseed (to encourage autumn finches!), seem rather inappropriate.

From here, we drove quietly through the West Mainland past the big farm of Lyking, to the isolated road-end at Yesnaby, poised on the edge of dramatically-eroding cliffs. Here we had a really good walk, enjoying the coastal scenery, the pleasant, hazy afternoon, a fine display of spring squill, and several passing great skuas. We searched for some blooming Scottish primrose, but found only the neat rosettes of leaves and dry seed-heads; the May flowering had obviously been prompt and good! After that, we continued for quite a while, leaving the sandstone bedrock briefly to head up onto the largely dry heath on the older metamorphic rock, where there were some different flowers, spectacular sheets of (ordinary) primroses, and pairs of Arctic skuas to admire. The calls of the skuas, distant curlews, and the heavy swell on the sea made mesmeric music as we walked back to the minibus.

On the way back to Birsay, (after another good owl!), we looked in at the hide on the RSPB Reserve of the Loons, an expansive and attractive wetland, where shoveler provided a little more excitement-another good day!

Wednesday 2 June

Another grey start, another improving day. Kirkwall, the island capital, was our destination and after free time to wander and investigate the shops in the old town, we toured the beautiful Cathedral of St. Magnus, and the ruins of the Bishop's and Earl's Palace. The first moment of entering the nave of the Cathedral is always wonderful, something for which the rather erratic stonework of the exterior does not prepare you, as it is warm and totally unified in its great strength.

After lunch, in the car-park by the harbour, we set off into the East Mainland, stopping next at the wonderful Italian Chapel, where Charlotte found us a splendid great northern diver-difficult to see, though, in the choppy water. I recounted the long story of Scapa Flow, and we crossed the next Churchill Barriers, passing by the remains of the block-ships from the First World War.

It was a nice afternoon by now, and we returned via the sweep of Scapa Beach, but it seemed rather empty, and we took the old high road to Finstown. On the way, we had some exercise, briskly uphill to the green mound of Cuween, into which we duly crawled; an inspiring and authentic Neolithic experience!

Thursday 3 June

The forecast was poor, but completely wrong, as it once again cleared to being glorious; I was soon wearing too much! We went out once again via the Hillside Road, where, once again, there was an owl, and up to

Lowrie's Water, with yet another owl, and good views of red-throated divers. When we descended to the shore (and the loos!), there were eider with ducklings, and a horde of gulls following the silage-making in nearby fields. We made our way round to the other side of the Sands of Evie, and visited the impressive ruins of the beautifully-situated Broch of Gurness. Here we watched terns, duly looked at the false oxlips, and then had a lazy lunch in the sun, on the beach, watching lots of mergansers, and a couple of shelduck.

Later, we visited the little nature reserve on its aeolianite, admiring the cowslips, orchids and field pansies. Then we went again through the hills and across the West Mainland to Skaill Bay, the location of Skara Brae; the car- and bus- park seemed terribly busy, but we actually looked at the famous Neolithic village in quiet and lovely conditions, and the bay was beautiful. On the way home, we looked for waders at the other end of the sand; there were two rather somnolent ring plovers, and a flock of fast little waders, which we decided were sanderling. The Loons again looked serene, but we had to be content with a dabchick.

That night we had to say good-bye, very reluctantly, to Libbie and Charlotte, and (rather less reluctantly), dined on lobster-totally splendid!

Friday 4 June

A very breezy day on Hoy, the remarkable high island of Orkney. The ferry crossing from Houton was too windy for comfort, and cold, but once on the island and through the wartime remnants of Lyness, the views were excellent. There were few birds other than bonxies, but plenty of them, and we left the minibus to cross the glen on foot and inspect the astonishing Dwarfie Stane-the butterwort was in bloom by the boardwalk over the bog.

Rackwick was, sadly, grey and windy; Jim found a sheltered spot and painted the marvellous bothy of Burnmouth, where a group aiming to climb the Old Man was settling in. We went our various ways around the wonderfully atmospheric bay, and later explored the roads at the north end, with a splendid, brief view, (for those in the front!) of a male hen harrier. The tide and wind were high at Moa Ness, with no seals to see, so we returned southwards, with a lovely stonechat on a fence on the way. It was less windy on the ferry back, and we took the road between the lochs of Stenness and Harray, with last views of the stones of Stenness and Brodgar.

That night, we even had traditional music for our final evening. It was the end of the week, but what a week it had been!

Saturday 5 June

It was misty next morning, and there was yet another wonderful owl crossing the road on a trip to the airport. Total confusion over regulations to do with bags on the planes drove Jim and Sally very early to the Distillery, which is where I left them. Just hope they got home ok!

Bird List: (seen and heard)

Pheasant; greylag goose; mute swan; shelduck; gadwall; wigeon; mallard; shoveler; teal; tufted duck; eider; goldeneye; red-breasted merganser; red-throated diver; great northern diver; fulmar; little grebe; grey heron; gannet; cormorant; shag; hen harrier; coot; oystercatcher; lapwing; ringed plover; snipe; whimbrel; curlew; redshank; common sandpiper; sanderling; dunlin; 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; black swan; short-eared owl; rook; hooded crow; raven; swallow; house martin; skylark; sedge warbler; wren; starling; blackbird; robin; stonechat; wheatear; house sparrow; pied wagtail; meadow pipit; rock pipit; chaffinch; reed bunting.

New species: greenfinch; dunnock.

Mammals:

Common seal; grey seal; Orkney vole; brown rat; brown hare; rabbit.

Butterflies:

Large white; green-veined white; small tortoiseshell.

Flowering Plants: (brackets indicate a few special ones that weren't!)

Red campion; sea campion; thrift; bird's foot trefoil; primrose; lesser celandine; spring squill; sweet cicely; sheeps' sorrel; dandelion; daisy; cuckoo flower; scurvy grass; silverweed; tormentil; ladies' mantle; gorse; cow parsley; northern marsh orchid; lousewort; milkwort; mountain everlasting; sea milkwort; crowberry; water avens; bogbean; cotton grass; water mint; violet; field pansy; wild garlic; wild thyme; false oxlip; speedwell; butterwort; sundew; heath bedstraw; woodrush, (Scottish primrose!).

(Exotics): Salmonberry; fuschia; London pride; Magellan's ragwort; rhubarb (in amazing bloom).

Robin Noble, October 2010

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