

**Fair Isle**  
**Holiday Highlights**  
**1 – 8 September 2018**

**Guide:** Craig Round

**Guests:** Hazel Pickering, Alison Cawley and John Scotford, Maureen and Ted Cawley, Roger Rooke

**Day 1:** We all meet up at Aberdeen airport, where we fly north direct to Shetland. Landing at Sumburgh airport on Shetland, a taxi takes us around to Grutness pier to meet the boat, the Good Shepherd, which will take us over to the island. We have a little time to do some birdwatching before the boat arrives. Rafts of Shags are just offshore and a few Great Skuas fly over, whilst a few Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails are feeding around some Shetland ponies in a nearby field. A few waders are also picked out on the beach including five Knot, two Turnstone, along with a single Redshank and Curlew and a migrating Grey Heron flies over and heads out to sea.

Soon the ferry appears and with our luggage safely stowed on board we steam out of the harbour. It's cool, cloudy and breezy as we round the imposing cliffs of Sumburgh Head and head out for the magic isle. Numerous Gannets, Fulmars and more Great Skuas fly past the boat during the crossing and we also get great views of a stunning Sooty Shearwater gliding very close past the boat as well as three Arctic Skuas. Several rafts of Guillemots are on the sea and we also get a brief view of a distant Storm Petrel.

The ferry finally approaches the island and we get our first views of the island as we steam in under the North Lighthouse and into the North Haven, we have arrived! We get a lift in the Observatory minibus up to the Bird Observatory, our base for the week. After stowing our luggage and sorting out rooms we have some late lunch and a welcome talk from Susannah the administrator, about the island and the working of the Observatory, before taking some time to relax and settle in. Outside the Observatory the garden shelters some migrant birds including a Willow Warbler and a Reed Warbler, along with some Twite and we get our first look at some Fair Isle Wrens with several juveniles seen.

After tea in the evening, log call follows where we catch up with news of birds seen on the island today, followed by some delicious Observatory home bakes and hot chocolate, yum! And later at 10.30pm some folk head back down to the Havens in the dark to see Storm Petrels in the hand being ringed, in the end some 79 birds are caught and ringed before being released back into the night! Magic!

**Day 2:** Our first full day on the island dawns fine and sunny, with a light SSE wind blowing. At first light a Common Rosefinch is trapped in the Observatory garden

and ringed, allowing great views in the hand of this scarce migrant. A little later, on the morning round of the Heligoland traps, two Meadow pipits, Rock Pipit and a Twite are caught and ringed back at the Observatory.

After breakfast we take a walk south from the Observatory, it's a lovely morning to be out, with many Fulmars soaring along the cliffs, Great Skuas flying overhead and a few Wheatears flitting ahead of us along the tops of the dry stone walls as we walk. Further on two Hooded Crows and a Raven fly by and we see more Wheatears, before we stop to have a look at the wreckage of a crashed German WWII Heinkel bomber at Vaassetter, the plane was shot down by two Hurricanes from Shetland in January 1941 and forced to make a crash landing on the island.

Walking further south towards the ruined croft at Pund, a few Skylarks fly out of the fields along with flocks of Meadow Pipits and a Snipe is flushed and we also pick out a Kestrel flying over the fields and getting mobbed by a Great Skua! From Pund we check some of the crofts and gardens for birds, finding a few Willow Warblers and get some fabulous views looking down to the south end of the island. At the shop at Stackhoull we get some nice views of a very flighty Barred Warbler along with two more Willow Warblers and there are also a Red Admiral and Painted Lady butterfly nectaring on the flowers here. From here we get a lift back to the Observatory for lunch, making a stop enroute near the Obs to relaunch a fledgling Fulmar that had crash landed in the shop garden!

After a delicious Sunday lunch we have a short walk across to the fascinating remains of the Iron Age promontory fort on Landberg, where we take in the stunning views out to sea and across to Sheep rock, before heading down to the Havens nearby. Four Dunlin and two Turnstone are roosting on the beach here giving good views and there are also lots of Rock Pipits and White Wagtails feeding along the shore. Four Grey Seals poke their heads out of the water just offshore and there are also a couple of female Eiders in the harbour.

On the headland of Bunes, we get some lovely views of Fulmars gliding effortlessly along the cliff edge and Gannets plunge diving just offshore. It's a lovely sunny evening as we sit and admire the views out to sea and also get some great views of a flock of 22 Turnstone that are roosting on the rocks below us and a single Redshank before heading back to the Observatory for tea.

**Day 3:** It's a cloudy start this morning, with overnight rain moving away to the ESE. The morning trap rounds today produce two Wheatears including a lovely 'Greenland race' bird which are ringed back at the Observatory, giving us some great views of these smart birds in the hand. A Whimbrel is also heard flying over the Havens by Roger first thing this morning. A Common Whitethroat, two Willow Warblers, two Reed Warblers and a Chiffchaff are in the Obs garden and two Grey Herons are seen circling overhead calling before heading off west.

After breakfast we get a lift down to the south end of the isle where Craig has organised a visit to the magnificent South Lighthouse, designed and built in 1891 by David A. and Charles Stevenson (cousin of author Robert Louis Stevenson). The lighthouse tower at 85 feet is the tallest one in Shetland and we get to go inside and climb the 106 steps up the spiral staircase to the top. At the top we climb out onto the gantry from the lamp room, where the views are just breathtaking in the warm sunshine, looking out across the isle and with the sea crashing in onto the rocks below. What a view!

After our lighthouse visit we head back around the coast towards South Harbour and find a good selection of waders on the rocks near the lighthouse including nine Ringed Plover, five Dunlin, two Redshank and a Whimbrel that flies over calling, as well as several Grey Heron.

In the Skaddan oat crop Craig finds two stunning Common Rosefinches which give us good views perched on the fence line around the crop and in the South harbour there are more waders to be seen including five Knot, four Turnstone and a flock of Curlew before we get a lift back north for lunch.

After lunch we get a lift south again and call in at the museum to see some of the fascinating exhibits on Fair Isles history. Inside there are some great displays on crofting, Fair Isles many shipwrecks and famous knitwear. From the museum we walk back north up the isle seeing three Swallows fly over near Schoolton and get great views of a Merlin that dashes past hunting. Passing the Kirk we have a look for a Greenish Warbler that had been reported here earlier, but there is sadly no sign, though we do see two Teal on Da Water. As we make our way further north more Wheatears are apparent dotted around the walls and fence lines and the alarm call of a flock of Starlings at Setter alert us again to a passing Merlin.

After log call in the evening luckily the wind is light enough for some more Storm Petrel ringing to be attempted down in the havens and the chance to see these incredible seabirds in the hand. With a stunning clear night sky overhead our luck is in and we manage to see some 40 'stormies' caught and ringed, a magic night indeed!

**Day 4:** This morning starts fine so we take advantage of the good weather to tackle an ascent of the highest point of the island, Ward Hill. As we approach the airstrip a Kestrel soars high overhead, again being mobbed by a Great Skua and the sky is full of Bonxies as we continue the slow walk up hill towards the mast, where we find a few Meadow Pipits, Wheatears and two White Wagtails.

From the mast we press on steeply upwards, towards the summit of the hill and from the top are rewarded with some beautiful views out across the whole island from North to South. Around the summit are 4+ Wheatears and a smart Whinchat and the views are just stunning looking out across the flat calm sea.

We take some time enjoying the fantastic views out across the island before we start the slow walk down, flushing a Snipe as we go.

On the way back to the Observatory we find a smart Lesser Whitethroat sheltering in the bushes at the bottom of the gully as well as a Willow Warbler and Garden Warbler.

After lunch we take another walk, this time out towards the top of Vaasetter and the east cliffs. It's a lovely warm, still and sunny afternoon as we head out and a stop at the gully gets more views of the Garden Warbler feasting on rosehips, as well as brief glimpse of an elusive Redwing.

As we walk up around the cliffs to the top of Vaasetter the views are amazing looking out from the cliffs as Fulmars glide by at eye level and looking across to the dramatic sheer cliffs of Sheep Rock and the swirling flocks of Gannets all around us there are stunning views out across virtually the whole island from North to South. What a view! Making our way back down from here takes us through the nesting Great Skuas and we get some great views of some of the juvenile Skuas still noisily begging for food from their parents and also get more brilliant views of a hunting Merlin that flies right over us.

**Day 5:** Dawns cloudy with a SSE breeze and its a simply incredible start to the day as a Lanceolated Warbler is trapped in the gully and brought back to the Observatory to be ringed! There are lots of smiling faces in the ringing room and we all get some great views of this rare far-eastern skulker in the hand before it is ringed and released back into the gully. What a simply amazing wee bird!

After this morning's high excitement of the 'Lancy', after breakfast we head north from the Observatory towards the North lighthouse. As we walk north we find a newly arrived Willow Warbler in the bracken along the cliff top and also flush three Snipe and see a Red Admiral near the North Lighthouse.

The scenery here is amazing and from the lighthouse we get great views from the cliffs looking out to sea with Shetland visible on the horizon some 26 miles away, as Gannets and Fulmars glide past. From the lighthouse we press on, up along the cliffs to the top of Wester Lothar. Here we get some great views of a Swift hawking at eye level along the clifftop, only feet away from us and against a dizzying backdrop of swirling gannets and Fulmars as we look out to the Kirk Stack. What a mind blowing place to see a hawking Swift!

After lunch some folk get a lift down to Burkle for a demonstration of Fair Isle knitting, whilst the rest of us get a lift to the shop at Stackhoull to try and re-locate an Arctic Warbler seen earlier on today. On first check there's no sign of the Arctic Warbler here only two Willow Warblers, so we head off to check the north and South Raevas nearby, before returning to the shop for another look for the elusive warbler and to buy an ice cream! This proves to be an inspired move,

as when we get back to the shop the Arctic Warbler is there in the garden! We get some fantastic views of this rare warbler in the garden and also find a Pied Flycatcher at the same time before getting an ice cream to celebrate!

Walking back north we find another couple of Willow Warblers and a Kestrel soars over at the plantation and at the gully Craig finds a gorgeous Icterine Warbler perched in the top of a conifer in the sun, giving us some fantastic views, along with a Willow Warbler.

Back at the Observatory later, a Barred Warbler is trapped and ringed along with the Icterine Warbler from the gully allowing us to get some lovely views in the hand of these two scarce migrant warblers.

**Day 6:** After the overnight SE winds and rain that moves up from Orkney clears, there's some new arrivals in the Observatory garden this morning with a Spotted and Pied Flycatcher seen along with at least three Willow Warblers. After breakfast we walk south finding a Painted Lady in the gully and a Willow Warbler along the Vaadal, a Curlew flies over calling and a few Wheatears dot the top of the dry stone walls.

Near Pund two Snipe fly out from the wet ditches and another Willow Warbler flies past, before Craig gets a phone call to say there are Pilot Whales currently heading south off the North Light! A lift north is quickly organised and we are ferried up to the North Light and after getting some distant views to begin with of the strung out large group of c60 Pilot Whales, some of the whales come much closer giving us some great views of these very scarce visitors to Fair Isle waters! It's obviously a great day for cetaceans on Fair Isle as whilst watching the Pilot Whales, a school of c8 Rissos Dolphins suddenly appears close in under the cliffs heading west!

After lunch sadly the weather takes a distinct turn for the worse, as heavy rain rolls in off the sea and the weather conditions outside become pretty 'un-birdable', so we take the drier more sensible option and try to see how many birds we can spot from the comfort of the Observatory lounge!

**Day 7:** Dawns to heavy rain clearing. Heading south this morning a Garden Warbler and Wheatear are seen perched up on top of the double-dyke Heligoland trap! We also see the first of at least four tiny migrant Diamond-back Moths flitting erratically low over the heather. At the Plantation another Garden Warbler is seen and we get great views of a Lesser Whitethroat perched on the dry stone wall nearby. A Common Rosefinch flies out of the Bulls Park crop strip and right overhead giving us some great flight views before heading over towards the plantation, and there is also a single Willow Warbler and Snipe in the crop here and a Teal flies overhead. As we walk further south we check the crofts for migrants and find another couple of Willow Warblers and a Common Whitethroat.

Near Da Water Craig finds a stunning Yellow Browed Warbler, a very early autumn record of this Siberian gem from the east and we get some good views as it perches on some dead vegetation at the edge of the marsh before disappearing. What a bird and a Speyside Wildlife 'sibe find' finally, get in! At Schoolton we find another Common Rosefinch hanging out amongst the House Sparrows in the Rosa bushes and as we walk towards Stackhoull, Craig picks out a Tree Pipit as it calls and flies right overhead giving us good flight views.

Near the shop an incredible 'wisp' of some 20 Common Snipe fly over along with two Ringed Plover and in the garden here we get good views of a selection of Warblers including Common Whitethroat, two Willow Warblers, Chiffchaff, Garden Warbler and great views of a Barred Warbler.

After lunch we get a lift south again and some folk head to check out more lovely Fair isle knitting at Nether Taft, whilst the rest of us head off birding. Along the Meadow Burn we find another Barred Warbler as well as a Spotted Flycatcher and a few more Willow Warblers and a mobile Redwing is seen and heard a few times flying over. Near the Kirk a smart first winter Whinchat is seen along the fenceline and whilst having another ice cream at the shop a superb female/first year Hen Harrier is seen drifting over towards the cliffs at Hoini as well as two Kestrels. Also here we get news of another possible Arctic Warbler nearby so head over to Shirva where we get some fantastic views of yet another Arctic Warbler in the garden here, our second Arctic Warbler of the trip! We also see another Willow Warbler and Common Whitethroat here, and on the walk back north four Snipe a Ringed Plover and a Dunlin fly over.

Later back at the Observatory a Garden Warbler and a Whinchat are ringed, giving us some nice in the hand views and in the evening tea is quickly abandoned when news breaks that a cracking Wryneck is perched on a fencepost right outside the Observatory ringing room. The views from the ringing room are 'cryptic-woodpeckertastic!'

**Day 8:** Sadly this morning it's an early start as we have to leave the isle for our ferry back to Shetland, where we catch our return flight from Sumburgh back to Aberdeen at the end of a great trip!

**Bird of the trip :** Yellow Browed Warbler, Lanceolated Warbler, Barred Warbler, Merlin, Storm Petrel

**Place of the trip :** Fair Isle!, Top of Ward Hill, West Cliffs, Kirk Stack, Johnny's Peats, Observatory garden

**Magic moment :** Watching the ringing at the Observatory, Pilot whales off north light, Storm Petrel in the hand, Finding the Yellow Browed, Bins full of birds!

## Birds

Mallard  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Eider  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Red-throated Diver  
Fulmar  
Sooty Shearwater  
Storm Petrel  
Grey Heron  
Gannet  
Shag  
Hen Harrier  
Kestrel  
Merlin  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden plover  
Knot  
Sanderling  
Turnstone  
Dunlin  
Common Sandpiper  
Redshank  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Whimbrel  
Common Snipe  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Great Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Guillemot  
Black Guillemot  
Rock Dove  
Common Swift  
Wryneck  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Skylark  
Swallow  
Rock Pipit  
Tree Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied/White Wagtail  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Wheatear  
Whinchat  
Redwing  
Song Thrush  
Icterine Warbler  
Barred Warbler  
Garden Warbler  
Blackcap  
Common Whitethroat  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Lanceolated Warbler  
Reed Warbler  
Arctic Warbler  
Yellow Browed Warbler  
Willow Warbler  
Chiffchaff  
Wren  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Pied Flycatcher  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Twite  
Common Rosefinch

## **Mammals**

Rabbit

Wood Mouse

Grey Seal

Common Seal

Rissos Dolphin

Long-finned Pilot Whale

## **Insects/Moths/Butterflies**

Red Admiral

Painted Lady

Rosy Rustic

Diamond-back Moth

Pink-barred Sallow

## **Amphibians**

Common Frog

## **Plants**

Oysterplant