



Orkney Islands

Dates: 14th – 20th July 2019



Orkney is rich in natural and cultural history and although the tour concentrates on the diverse wildlife to be found in the islands we will also visit a number of archaeological sites such as Skara Brae and Maeshowe. There are so many signs of recent and ancient history scattered around the islands that you can hardly go anywhere without bumping into it.

Wildlife wise we'll be visiting a number of relatively easily accessible seabird sites on Mainland Orkney that are thronged with breeding birds at this time of year including Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Black Guillemots. Kittiwakes and Fulmars are common and the menacing shapes of both Great and Arctic Skuas are a frequent site patrolling the cliffs. The Mainland also offers a host of other breeding birds such as Red-throated Diver, Shoveler, Pintail, Black-tailed Godwit, Snipe, Short-eared Owl, Merlin and Hen Harrier which we should connect with during the week. Besides the rich birdlife we'll also explore some of Orkney's flora which includes two very specialist flowering plants - Oysterplant (becoming increasingly rare in the UK) and the endemic Scottish Primrose.

We'll also make day trips to Hoy and Westray. At Hoy we'll make the roughly three hour / nearly six miles round trip to visit the Old Man of Hoy which takes us across the RSPB reserve where we should see a good selection of seabirds as well as some of the most stunning scenery in the UK. Hoy should also provide us the opportunity to catch up with Red-throated Diver, Hen Harrier and possibly White-tailed Eagle that have very recently nested. We'll also visit the "Dwarfie Stane" which is a

megalithic chambered tomb carved out of a huge block of Old Red Sandstone; the construction of which using the most basic of tools is quite staggering. Westray lies to the north of Mainland and rises at its north end to form the dramatic seabird cliffs at Noup Head. These busy cliffs hold large colonies of seabirds including nesting Gannets, kittiwakes, Fulmars, Puffins, Razorbills and vast numbers of Guillemots. By contrast the lower lying areas support Corncrakes whilst the freshwater lochs provide a home for a variety of nesting wildfowl and waders. We'll also see if it's possible to visit North Ronaldsay which is reached via a short flight from Kirkwall although the plane only takes 8 passengers so we'll need to book well in advance if we're going to visit.

There's also a chance to spot cetaceans such as Minke Whale or even Orcas on the crossing from the Scottish mainland as well as the many headlands and coastal habitats we'll be visiting whilst in the islands. Although this is not a photographic holiday there will be many opportunities to capture images as the pace is slow, the wildlife often close and the scenery stunning.



Itinerary:

Day 1: This morning we travel up from Inverness to catch an early afternoon ferry from Gills Bay to St. Margaret's Hope in South Ronaldsay. The journey from Inverness will take approximately 3 hours which should allow us time to enjoy a packed lunch at the Cliffs of Duncansby before taking the ferry. The views from the cliff top across to Orkney on a fine day are superb and there's always chance of the odd cetacean too if the waters are calm. The crossing, which takes around an hour, heads north past the uninhabited islands of Stroma and Swona; the latter famous for its feral herd of cattle whilst the former has a healthy population of nesting seabirds. We should pick up our first Puffins as well as Black Guillemot, Great Skua and maybe the odd Storm Petrel. Once on Orkney we travel a short distance north to the Churchill Barriers where we'll make our first stop to look for the rare Oysterplant. This beach also holds a couple of pairs of Little Tern although numbers have dwindled in recent years.

Day 2: We'll start the day at Cottasgarth RSPB bird hide with the possibility of picking up Short-eared Owl, Hen Harrier and Merlin before taking the minor road west across the island to Skara Brae. We'll spend some time looking around the Prehistoric village which was discovered in 1850 following a violent storm. The village lies on the edge of the Bay of Skail and is relatively small although it's not the size that makes Skara Brae remarkable but the degree to which it has been preserved. The structures of this semi- subterranean village survive in impressive condition. So, amazingly, does the furniture in the village houses including a stone dresser. After our dose to archaeology we'll head to the nearby Yesnaby cliffs which support good numbers of breeding seabirds, including Guillemots,

Razorbills, Black Guillemots and a few Puffins. The coastal cliffs are formed from the Lower Devonian sandstones and contain fossil stromatolites formed 390-400 million years ago. As well as the impressive coastal scenery we'll also explore the short, maritime grassland just back from the cliff edge. This exposed turf holds a healthy population of the rare and endemic (to Scotland) Scottish Primrose as well as Grass of Parnassus. If the weather's calm enough there's also a chance of picking up cetaceans off-shore.

Day 3: We'll head to Hoxa Head this morning which provides us with a good viewpoint looking out across Scapa Flow where we have an opportunity to search for whales and dolphins as well as the local Black Guillemots which are often seen at close range floating below the low cliffs. From here we'll return north, stopping to check the loch at Graemeshall which often holds a decent variety of wildfowl and waders whilst occasional Great Northern Divers may also be over-summering on the coast here. Continuing to the east coast we'll take a walk around Mull Head local nature reserve where we have chance of picking up passing seabirds and maybe the whale or dolphin. Finally we'll finish the day at Maeshowe and the Ring of Brodgar. The latter site and the Stones of Stenness are situated between the Loch Harray and Loch of Stenness which are always worth a check for any wildfowl or terns that may be present to the backdrop of some of the earliest civilisations in the UK.

Day 4: Westray, known as "Queen of the Isles" lies at the north-west end of Orkney and the ferry which follows the old Viking route from Kirkwall provides us with further opportunities to spot cetaceans and seabirds as we weave our way north. Once on the island we'll head straight to the northern point and Noup Head. The stunning cliffs are thronged with seabirds and include Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots, Black Guillemots, Gannets, Kittiwakes and Fulmars with both Great and Arctic Skuas patrolling the cliff top looking for a meal. This is a stunning location and provides us with a superb vista over islands to the south. Once we've made the most of the seabird colony we'll head back south along the island past an Arctic Tern colony to scan the two largest lochs on the island; Burness and Saintear which support a variety of breeding wildfowl. The area also plays host to a few Corncrakes which we may hear calling as we explore in the vicinity of the lochs. We'll also visit the Loch of Swartmill and the adjacent beach which is home to otters as well as providing a chance to pick up some early returning waders. Last but not least we'll take a short walk along coast to Castle o' Burrian where we will be able to enjoy the nearby Puffin colony as birds come and go with beaks full of sand eels to feed their young.

Day 5: If we've been successful in securing seats on a flight to North Ronaldsay then we'll spend the day here otherwise we'll head to North Mainland and the Loons. This is one of the best remaining marshes in Orkney and supports breeding Pintail and Black-tailed Godwit as well as Snipe, Curlew, Shoveler and Wigeon. There is no general access to the reserve so we view it from roadside passing places and a strategically placed hide that is overlooking a couple of pools. Not far away lies Marwick Head which is home to the largest seabird colony on Mainland Orkney with around 25,000 breeding birds. We'll take a walk from Marwick Bay up to the Kitchener Memorial which will allow us great views of the seabirds and the ever present marauding Bonxies looking to steal a meal. We'll also take a walk onto Brough Head before heading across Birsay Moors where, with a bit of luck we should be able to find Hen Harrier, Merlin, Short-eared Owl, Whimbrel and Red-throated Diver. Finally we'll return along the Lyde Road which will provide further chances of picking up the moorland breeding raptors and completing a circuit of the north mainland of Orkney.

Day 6: This morning we'll catch the ferry across to Hoy; a very exciting island quite unlike the rest of Orkney. It holds some of the most dramatic scenery, especially the Old Man of Hoy which is reached by a decent path across the RSPB reserve. On the route out we have chance of picking up Hen Harrier, Red-throated Diver and Great Skua whilst the cliffs opposite the stunning sea stack hold a few pairs of Puffins amongst many other auks and Fulmars. The walk is mostly on a good path which starts steeply but soon levels out and should take around 3 hours there and back. This should allow us plenty of time to enjoy other parts of the island including the Dwarfie Stane which is a megalithic chambered tomb carved out of a huge block of Devonian Old Red Sandstone. It's truly quite bewildering how long this must have taken to complete with the rudimentary tools that would have been available. It also lies very close to the only recent attempted nesting site of White-tailed Eagles in the Orkneys. Other birds we're likely to see include Red-throated Diver, Arctic Skua and Arctic Tern.

Day 7: After breakfast we'll say goodbye to our hosts and head back to St. Margaret's Hope to catch a late morning ferry back to Gills Bay. On route to the ferry we'll stop for a look around the stunning Italian Chapel.

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Cost: £1,200 per person

Price includes 6 nights' accommodation, all meals, entrance to archaeological sites, cost of ferries and road transport throughout the tour.

Accommodation: We'll be staying in a comfortable guesthouse on the edge of Kirkwall.

Group size: 7 (maximum)

Booking: Please email: steveduffield70@gmail.com

Call Steve on 01876 580619 / 07867 555971

Where to meet: The tour begins and ends in Inverness with a pick up around 8 am on the first morning for our connecting ferry from Gill's Bay to St. Margaret's Hope, Orkney in the early afternoon. We can pick you up from the airport or central bus / train station on the first morning. If you prefer to fly we can collect you from Kirkwall airport.

Getting here: There are many trains to Inverness: the trainline.com and regular bus from around the UK. Inverness airport lies just 8 miles from the city centre and is easily reached by a regular bus service.