

# - Orkney Islands -

**Trip Report**

**June 13-20, 2000**



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« Few places in the world can provide such a millenium experience as Orkneys »

## **The itinerary...**

We left Brussels (Belgium) on June 12, drove to Zeebrugge, and spent the first night on the P&O Ferry « Nordland » to Hull, before driving to Scrabster on June 13. Night at Thurso.

On June 14, we visited the first cliffs at Ducansby Head (John O'Groats) in Caithness, before sailing the scenic route from Scrabster to the picturesque fishing port of Stromness, passing the spectacular cliff scenery of Hoy and the impressive 450ft rockstock « The Old Man of Hoy », as a first foretaste of the Orkney Islands. In the evening, we drove to Birsay (Mainland) where we spent the night.

On June 15, we visited the wonderful cliffs of Marwick Head in the morning, ate lunch with the Puffins at Brough Head, in the Birsay Bay, and explored the main RSPB nature reserves on Mainland (including The Loons ...) and the standing stones of the mysterious Ring of Brodgar in the evening. Night in the same B&B at Birsay.

On June 16, we drove from Birsay to Kirkwall, where we took a flight for North Ronaldsay to meet our friend Kevin Woodbridge, Director of the Bird Observatory. Following a walk on the beaches of the linklet Bay and a ringing afternoon at Gretchen Loch, we birded the Bewan Loch and surroundings, near the Old Beacon. Night at the Bird Observatory.

On June 17, we stayed on North Ronaldsay, visited the inland, around the great Acum and Hooking Lochs. Short visit at the local school and quick lunch before flying back to Kirkwall. We slowly reached Stromness through Stenness and arrived just in time to get a ferry to Hoy. Night at Rackwick.

On June 18, wonderful walk to the Old Man of Hoy and St. John's Head in the early morning, then second visit at the fascinating cliffs of Marwick Head on Mainland. Ferry from Stromness to Scrabster, and 3 hours-drive to spend the night in Aviemore.

On June 19, we drove back to Hull and caught the P&O ferry to ... Belgium.

## **Day by day...**

### **June 13.**

Despite the 550 miles that we had to drive, this first birding day was already full of interesting species, including many Shelducks (*Tadorna tadorna*), a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*), one snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), a flock of Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*), Rock and water Pipits (*Anthus petrosus* and *A. spinoletta*, respectively), and two Pied Wagtails (*Motacilla alba yarellii*).

### **June 14.**

At John O'Groats, we discovered a foretaste of the birding opportunities Orkneys can provide : large cliffs, with lots of nesting seabirds, including the Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Guillemots (*Uria aalge*), Razorbills (*Alca torda*), Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*), some Shags (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), many Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) and Hooded Crows (*Corvus corone cornix*).

En route to Stromness, we noted the same species, Eiders (*Somateria mollissima*), a Gannet (*Sula bassana*) and a Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*).

On Mainland, on the road to Birsay, we already found several interesting birds, including shovelers (*Anas clypeata*), Wigeons (*Anas penelope*), a flock of more than 300 Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*), Curlews (*Numenius arquata*) and Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*).

### **June 15.**

One of the most interesting spot on Mainland is certainly Marwick Head (87 m) and its RSPB reserve, in front of the Kitchener Memorial, near Birsay, the northwest corner of the Mainland. A visit here in early summer is certainly unforgettable: thousands of seabirds nest there, including Northern Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Guillemots (*Uria aalge*), Razorbills (*Alca torda*), Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*). We also watched several Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) over the sea, a few Rock Doves (*Columba livia*) and meadow Pipits (*Anthus pratensis*). Both arctic Jaeger

(*Stercorarius parasitus*) and "Bonxies" (Great Jaegers, *Catharacta skua*) can be seen easily here, attacking other birds until they disgorge their food.

The senses of smell and hearing are also well stimulated ! The cliff-tops are carpeted with Thrift and other typical flowers.

The imposing memorial at Marwick Head overlooks the spot where the HMS Hampshire warship went down: in 1916, a German U-boat crossed Scapa Flow and travelled north to Birsay where it laid the mine that sank HMS Hampshire, with General Kitchener on board.

We decided to have lunch on the Brough of Birsay, a very attractive grassy island off the beach of Birsay. This tidal island has a lighthouse which was built in 1925, above low cliffs, on the seaward side. Puffins nest in rabbit burrows along the top of these cliffs. The island is only accessible during 5-6 hours when the tide is out. A concrete path leads across the rocks. An interesting Viking settlement can be visited there. We made our best pics of Puffins during the lunch.

Late in the afternoon, we visited the Loons, another RSPB reserve, where a hide provides an excellent opportunity to see a variety of species. The loons is a large expanse of marsh with an area of water and much cover for breeding and visiting wildfowl and waders. Full access is not allowed but excellent views can be had from the hide and other vantage points on the public road. We got many Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Snipes (*Gallinago gallinago*), Curlews (*Numenius arquata*), Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*), Wigeons (*Anas penelope*) and Tufted Ducks (*Aythya fuligula*). Sedge Warblers (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) were seen in Birsay, along the small river near Earl's Palace.

#### **June 16.**

On this very special day, we met Kevin Woodbridge at the Bird Observatory on North Ronaldsay, Orkney's most northerly isle. This island is low-lying, reaching only 20 meters at its highest point, and is about 5 Km (3 miles) long by 2 Km (1.5 miles) wide.

Access is easy by air from Kirkwall. The island shares special subsidized air fares (10£) due to the lack of a daily ferry. Access by sea is normally weekly (on Friday), but there is also a Sunday service during the summer. We briefly saw a Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) at the airport.

We first made a walk on the beach, outside the drystone sheep dyke, where many Common and Grey Seals can be seen. Great place to see breeding Terns (all local species), Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*), Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), Skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*), Oystercatchers (*Haemantopus ostralegus*).

After the lunch, we visited Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) and Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) colonies near Twingyness to ring some young birds. Very exciting but not a lot of new species there. Many Linnets (*Carduelis cannabina*) in the fields.

We then spent most of the day at the northeast extremity of the island, around the ponds near the old lighthouse. Many waders there, flocks of Arctic and Sandwich Terns, some Eiders and other Ducks, including a Scaup (*Aythya marila*). Many Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and Fulmars along the beaches. Finally, we spent an unforgettable evening in the Observatory, with Kevin, Alison and their collaborators. See the North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory website for much more details on the island and its treasures (URL below).

#### **June 17.**

Rainy weather this morning. We drove across the meadows with Kevin, finally heading north to Torness. There is a fantastic colony of 50 Black Guillemots (*Cepphus grylle*) there ! Many birds were still displaying, others were on the nests. Good place for Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) too. Many Fulmar, as everywhere on the island.

Bad conditions for sea-watching, but we got two Gannets (*Sulla bassana*), and most usual seabirds. After lunch, we flew back to Kirkwall to visit West Mainland where you can find the best moorland. We got several interesting species there: Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*), breeding Arctic Skuas, Red Grouse (*Lagopus scoticus*), and a Red Kite (*Milvus migrans*).

We arrived just in time in Stormness and got the ferry to Hoy. We didn't know it at that time, but we slept at the best place you can find on Hoy: Rackwick, at the border of the North Hoy RSPB reserve.

#### **June 18.**

We started the first walk of the day at 4:00 AM, heading to the famous Old Man of Hoy, a great rock stack which stands on a lava flow, forming a skerry which protrudes about 200 meters high. A climbing trail through the

uncultivated lands leads to St John's Head. There is a huge colony of Great Skua, dive bombing when you approach their nests. Fulmar remains the commonest seabird but there are also other breeding seabirds, including the wonderful puffins. A Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) was hunting over the cliffs. Mountain Hares were quite common. At 10:00 AM, we were back to the Harbour and had the ferry to Stormness.

Before taking another ferry to Scrabster, we went back to the Kitchener memorial. One more time, a wonderful scenery, with most typical seabirds. One of the reserves you must see when visiting Orkneys.

Long drive from Scrabster to Aviemore, where we visited the Osprey RSPB center. A few Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) fishing here and there.

### **June 19.**

Nice walk around Aviemore in the early morning: Common Sandpipers (*Actitis hypoleucos*), Goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*), Red Grouse (*Lagopus scoticus*)...

Back to Hull, night on the P&O ferry to Belgium.

### **Accommodations...**

#### **Thurso :**

Wonderful B&B of Mrs Phyllis Yates, 1 Janet Street, Thurso, Caithness, KW14 7 AR. Scotland.

Phone : 01847 896727.

Phyllis@thursol.fsnet.co.uk

#### **Birsay :**

Warm welcome at Fiddlers Green guest house. Definitely the place to remember on Mainland.

Chris and Fran Whitley, The Palace, Birsay, KW17 2LX

Orkney Isles

Phone : 01856 721221

mailto:chrisandfran@linkshouse.freereserve.co.uk

http://www.linkshouse.freereserve.co.uk

#### **North Ronaldsay :**

Bird Observatory

North Ronaldsay

Orkney Isles

Phone : 01857 633200

mailto:Alison@nrbo.prestel.co.uk

http://www.fs2.nrbo.com

#### **Rackwick (Hoy) :**

B&B of Mrs Dorothy Rendall

'Glen', Rackwick, Hoy

Orkney Isles

Phone : 01856 79262

#### **Aviemore :**

Ravenscraig Guest House

J&J Gatenby

141 Grampian Road, Aviemore, Inverness-shire PH22 1RP

Phone : 01479 810278

mailto:Ravenscrg@aol.com

Bird species	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
RED-THROATED DIVER ( <i>Gavia stellata</i> )			3	2		2	
LITTLE GREBE ( <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> )		1					
FULMAR ( <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> )	2	1000	1000	500	500	1000	100
MANX SHEARWATER ( <i>Puffinus puffinus</i> )		1					
GANNET ( <i>Sula bassana</i> )		1	1		5		
CORMORANT ( <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> )		5	15	5	5		
SHAG ( <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> )		50	25	10	50	50	
GREAT WHITE EGRET ( <i>Egretta alba</i> )						2	
GREY HERON ( <i>Ardea cinerea</i> )	1					3	5
MUTE SWAN ( <i>Cygnus olor</i> )	6	300	300	200		2	
GREYLAG GOOSE ( <i>Anser anser</i> )			20	50		20	4
SHELDUCK ( <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> )	3	5	10	25		10	
WIGEON ( <i>Anas penelope</i> )		1	5		1		
GADWALL ( <i>Anas strepera</i> )					1		
TEAL ( <i>Anas crecca</i> )			2	3	2		
MALLARD ( <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> )	4	10	10	10	5	5	5
SHOVELER ( <i>Anas clypeata</i> )		2					
TUFTED DUCK ( <i>Aythya fuligula</i> )			15		5		
SCAUP ( <i>Aythya marila</i> )				1	1		
EIDER ( <i>Somateria mollissima</i> )		100	100	100	50	50	
GOLDENEYE ( <i>Bucephala clangula</i> )							6
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER ( <i>Mergus serrator</i> )		3	2	2	20		
RED KITE ( <i>Milvus milvus</i> )			1				
HEN HARRIER ( <i>Circus cyaneus</i> )			1		1		
BUZZARD ( <i>Buteo buteo</i> )	10	2			1		
OSPREY ( <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> )						2	
KESTREL ( <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> )	20	5				3	
PEREGRINE ( <i>Falco peregrinus</i> )	1					1	
PHEASANT ( <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> )	1			1			5
COOT ( <i>Fulica atra</i> )	3			10	10		
OYSTERCATCHER ( <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> )	25	100	100	100	5	5	
LITTLE RINGED PLOVER ( <i>Charadrius dubius</i> )			10				
RINGED PLOVER ( <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> )			20	50	50		
LAPWING ( <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> )	30	100	50	50	10	10	5
SANDERLING ( <i>Calidris alba</i> )				2	30	10	
DUNLIN ( <i>Calidris alpina</i> )			1	100	5		
SNIPE ( <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> )	1	1	2	1	5	25	5
BLACK-TAILED GODWIT ( <i>Limosa limosa</i> )				1			
WHIMBREL ( <i>Numenius phaeopus</i> )		2	5	5			
CURLEW ( <i>Numenius arquata</i> )	15	50	100	100	5	10	5
REDSHANK ( <i>Tringa totanus</i> )		10	5	3	20	1	
GREENSHANK ( <i>Tringa nebularia</i> )						1	
COMMON SANDPIPER ( <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> )						1	5
TURNSTONE ( <i>Arenaria interpres</i> )		1		20			
ARCTIC SKUA ( <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> )			15	2	2	3	
GREAT SKUA ( <i>Catharactes skua</i> )		25	20	2	10	50	
BLACK-HEADED GULL ( <i>Larus ridibundus</i> )	50	50	50	200	10	5	10
COMMON GULL ( <i>Larus canus</i> )		200	300	200	15	20	
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL ( <i>Larus fuscus</i> )	20	20	20	100	50	5	
HERRING GULL ( <i>Larus argentatus</i> )	100	500	100	250	20	10	
GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL ( <i>Larus marinus</i> )	10	100	50	50	10	10	
KITTIWAKE ( <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> )		500	1000	500	10	10	
SANDWICH TERN ( <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i> )	2			40	50		
COMMON TERN ( <i>Sterna hirundo</i> )	500	10	2	5	5		
ARCTIC TERN ( <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> )		2	15	250	5	5	5
LITTLE TERN ( <i>Sterna albifrons</i> )	2						
GUILLEMOT ( <i>Uria aalge</i> )		5000	5000	50	10	5000	

Bird species	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
RAZORBILL ( <i>Alca torda</i> )		1000	1000		10	1000	
BLACK GUILLEMOT ( <i>Cephus grylle</i> )		5		5	50	20	
PUFFIN ( <i>Fratercula arctica</i> )		250	250		50	50	
ROCK DOVE ( <i>Columba livia</i> )		25	25	1	5	5	
WOODPIGEON ( <i>Columba palumbus</i> )	5		1				5
COLLARED DOVE ( <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> )	2				5	5	5
CUCKOO ( <i>Cuculus canorus</i> )							2
SHORT-EARED OWL ( <i>Asio flammeus</i> )			1				
SWIFT ( <i>Apus apus</i> )	50	5					
SKYLARK ( <i>Alauda arvensis</i> )	25	10	50	50	5	10	
SWALLOW ( <i>Hirundo rustica</i> )	50	5	5				
HOUSE MARTIN ( <i>Delichon urbica</i> )	50	5					
TREE PIPIT ( <i>Anthus trivialis</i> )	10	1	1				
MEADOW PIPIT ( <i>Anthus pratensis</i> )		50	5	5	5	5	1
ROCK PIPIT ( <i>Anthus petrosus</i> )	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
WATER PIPIT ( <i>Anthus spinoletta</i> )	5	5	5	5	5	5	
GREY WAGTAIL ( <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> )	2	1		5	5	1	
PIED WAGTAIL ( <i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i> )	2	1	5	5			5
WREN ( <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> )	1			2	5	5	5
DUNNOCK ( <i>Prunella modularis</i> )	1						
STONECHAT ( <i>Saxicola torquata</i> )				1		5	
WHEATEAR ( <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> )		2		20	5	5	
BLACKBIRD ( <i>Turdus merula</i> )	10	2	5	5	5	5	5
SONG THRUSH ( <i>Turdus philomelos</i> )	1						
MISTLE THRUSH ( <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> )	2						
SEDGE WARBLER ( <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> )					2	1	
CHIFFCHAFF ( <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> )					5		
WILLOW WARBLER ( <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> )					1	2	5
GOLDCREST ( <i>Regulus regulus</i> )							5
CRESTED TIT ( <i>Parus cristatus</i> )							5
BLUE TIT ( <i>Parus caeruleus</i> )							5
COAL TIT ( <i>Parus ater</i> )							5
MAGPIE ( <i>Pica pica</i> )	5	5	5				
JACKDAW ( <i>Corvus monedula</i> )	10	15	10	10	10	15	
ROOK ( <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> )	15	10	10	15	15	10	10
CARRION CROW ( <i>Corvus corone corone</i> )			15	1	5	2	5
HOODED CROW ( <i>Corvus corone cornix</i> )			1	10	20	20	10
RAVEN ( <i>Corvus corax</i> )	1		10	5	5	5	
STARLING ( <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> )	500	500	500	500	100	100	
HOUSE SPARROW ( <i>Passer domesticus</i> )	10	10	10	10	50	10	10
TREE SPARROW ( <i>Passer montanus</i> )					1		
CHAFFINCH ( <i>Fringilla colebes</i> )				1			
GOLDFINCH ( <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> )						1	
SISKIN ( <i>Carduelis spinus</i> )							1
LINNET ( <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> )				100	5		
YELLOWHAMMER ( <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> )						1	
REED BUNTING ( <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> )	1						