

Fair isle and Shetland trip report 17th May-24th May 2013/14



Day one 17th May.

I think it would be fair to say I had thought about Fair Isle every single day since departing in 2012. This time round I was joined by my brother John for his first visit to Shetland and Fair Isle, I can remember how I felt the first time I visited, expectation, anticipation and just general excitement. So pretty much the same feeling I still get every time I visit. The only other thoughts are slight unrest until you actually land on the island, such is the unpredictable weather and the risk of getting on and off the island that that brings.

After checking in at the airport the first flight from Manchester to Aberdeen was fine. Then we hit our first stumbling block, the flight to Sumburgh was delayed by a couple of hours which would eat into our time at the south of the mainland before heading up to Tingwall, worst still was the fear of them cancelling the flight. After an anxious wait we finally boarded and subsequently touched down at Sumburgh airport. The weather wasn't great on arrival, but we didn't care as we filled our lungs with Shetland air. On leaving the airport we began birding immediately. The wind was certainly blowing and an icy drizzle of rain

made viewing conditions less than ideal. But we quickly added *Turnstone*, *wheatear*, *meadow pipit* and *Eider* to the trip list having barely left the airports grounds. Then as we headed round towards Grutness we were greeted by the bouncing flight of a few *Arctic Terns*. Superb. Grutness bay held summer plumaged *sanderling* and various gulls flying across the bay including *Herring*, *lesser back backed* and *common*. Another gull drifted by and it had markings neither of us had seen in the field before, the views were brief but it looked good for a 1st summer ***Ring billed gull***. This would be a lifer for the both of us, and what we didn't know at the time is that one had been seen not too far away, we popped it on the back burner and continued onwards towards the bus stop. Whilst waiting for the bus John was able to get his first views of the Shetland form of *starling*, an all together much stockier bird than the ones we are used to seeing. The rain still driving we boarded the bus up to Lerwick where we had a connecting taxi booked to take us to the airstrip at Tingwall. We arrived into Lerwick slightly late but the taxi was there to take us onwards.

I can never truly relax at this point until we touch down on Fair Isle and with good reason. Part of the crew informed us that the weather had taken a turn for the worse over Fair Isle, with thick fog covering the island. There would be a delay for a few hours to see if it cleared then they would make a decision. Whilst anxiously waiting we added *Hooded Crow* and *Snipe* to the list from the waiting room window. Our worst fears were met when after waiting hours at Aberdeen and now again at Tingwall, the flight was cancelled. We were informed that if the weather was ok tomorrow we would fly out in the afternoon from Sumburgh, back down in the south again.

We deliberated our options and I made the decision to pay for a taxi (it was too long a wait for the last bus) to take us down to the south of the island where we would make the most of the turn of events. My thinking was an evening and early morning start around the south rather than travelling around again tomorrow. What a great decision!

After checking in at the Sumburgh hotel we ventured out before tea. Incredibly close views of *Great Skua (Bonxie)*, were by far the best views John had ever had of this fantastic bird close to the hotel as we walked the cliff top. We added *Black Guillemot*, *Fulmar*, *Guillemot* and *Shag* to the trip list as we headed along the cliff top up towards Sumburgh head. The weather hadn't improved much with quite strong winds not helping matters so we headed back to the hotel for tea. We hadn't been eating too long when aside from *Arctic Terns* dancing past

the window, John spotted two larger birds coming in off the sea and heading across to Grutness harbour, as they approached it was clear from their flight and silhouette that they were skuas. John had decent views and confirmed them as ***Pomarine skuas***. The spoon shaped tail was very noticeable. Another birder picked them up at Grutness and subsequently reported them. *Pom Skuas* whilst having a pint and dinner, Shetland at it's best!

Day two 18th May

An early start we set off on a walk to Virkie adding a summer plumaged *Great Northern Diver* to the trip list as it bobbed around close to shore. We enjoyed more views of *Great Skua* as they patrolled the coast. On the way back to the hotel we stopped near the airport to scan the long grass and scrub areas, with not much about we headed back down the hill. Just as we approached the bottom a bird appeared at the path side and ran for cover in the long grass. It had us puzzled for quite a while until we finally relocated it and had better views of a *locustella* warbler. With the mind wandering and it's strange running behaviour we were eventually able to confirm it as a *Grasshopper warbler*. On the walk back I got brief views of an *Otter* as it scampered along the roadside and down into the bay.

As the winds were still strong we made the decision to head back for breakfast. After breakfast a trip to Sumburgh head gave us excellent views of *puffin* at incredibly close quarters. Judging the winds we decided to head towards a sheltered bay by the hotel just below Jarlshof. And what a good decision that proved to be. It was clear there were more birds on the rocky shore sheltering from the wind, with *Rock Pipit*, *Wheatear* and *Swallow* as well as *Chiffchaff* and *Willow warbler* observed at close quarters. We noticed a bird make a short flight to the tide line and we had good but brief views of a female ***Snow Bunting***. It proved tricky to relocate but it was clear there were more birds flitting around further up the shore along the rocks and fence line. A

Whitethroat was fly catching from the wall and we enjoyed fantastic views of a female *Pied flycatcher*. A few yards further along a *Spotted flycatcher* collected food and both flycatchers were in the same binocular view. With all this activity we had almost forgot about the stress about whether the plane would go or not. Those thoughts were quelled further by the next bird. A *Whitethroat* once again hopped along the rocks, but our attention was drawn to the bird that emerged behind



it. A fantastic zesty lemon colour, we had found an **ICTERINE WARBLER!** Superb and this was a lifer for John, a great find.

What a bird. I reported our find and we scanned further with the same birds the only ones present along the shore. On our way back up through the gate from Jarlshof a bird flew in off the sea and upset the smaller birds as it arrived, it landed on a fence post and we enjoyed excellent views of a **Cuckoo!** What a morning and all this would have been missed if our flight had gone the previous day. However we were itching to get onto Fair Isle and our fears were soon washed away as we boarded the charter flight and found ourselves looking down on the Island as we came into land. Finally we were here, Fair Isle. All the anxiety drifted away we were here at last. John was able to enjoy his first views of the island as we walked down from the airstrip to plantation, (a fantastic selection of trees and shrubs over the mouth of Heligoland trap).



On approaching the trap we noticed the observatory van parked up and Will (part of the wardening team) was leaving the trap empty handed. It was good to have a catch up as he drove us to the observatory where he was heading, and he informed us of what was around. He divulged that a female **Red Backed Shrike** was hanging around the obs garden, and a **Red Breasted Flycatcher** was elusive but still present around North Haven harbour. We decided to scan the garden as **Red Backed Shrike** would be a first for John, within minutes of stepping off the plane too!

We didn't have to wait long, it appeared, and flew towards the harbour where we enjoyed excellent views of her hunting. On the way down to where the shrike was feeding a *Snow bunting* emerged on the grass by the observatory. We enjoyed close views until it took off, our attention switched back the *shrike*. It was fascinating to watch a *Shrike* feeding along a beech. With a little patience she slowly worked her way nearer to us, so I was able to get a few photos before it flew back up the hill towards the observatory garden.



Not a bad start at all, welcome to Fair Isle!

We watched in awe before heading a little further on to try and find the *Red Breasted Flycatcher* but there was no sign so we set off down South towards our accommodation at South Lighthouse. There were plenty of *Wheatear* on the way and we observed our first *Tree Pipits* of the trip with plenty of *Meadow Pipits* around too. After showing John a lot of the crofts and where the shop was, we arrived to drop our bags off at South Lighthouse.

We had been informed that a *Wryneck* and an ***Ortolan Bunting*** had been frequenting the South Harbour (right next to South Lighthouse), so



this would be our first port of call once we had dropped the bags off and said hello to Dave and Josie our hosts for the week. There was no sign of the *Ortolan* but the South harbour did hold *willow warblers* and *chiffchaffs* as well as a *spotted flycatcher* and *Rock Pipits* including the Scandinavian form *littoralis*.

We had a fantastic dinner in great company, We met a birder who was also staying at the lighthouse called Tim Cleeves, and he had us in stitches throughout the holiday and certainly added to our trip! After dinner we headed up to the observatory for the bird log at 9pm, a great chance to hear what others have seen throughout the day.

Day three 19th May

After waking very early (in truth I barely slept, with excitement) we were up and about checking South harbour for migrants. We had good numbers of *Purple sandpipers* and *turnstones* as well as more *chiffchaffs* and a *spotted flycatcher* again. Then a stockier looking bird flew past us and landed on the rocks feeding amongst the seaweed. What a bird! A superb *Ortolan Bunting*. Not a lifer for either of us but a superb bird in such a unique setting.





It fed oblivious to our presence before it flew back down the shore and out of sight. A great start to the day. We headed off up north to join the morning trap round adding views of *Whitethroat* and *Lesser Whitethroat* on route as well as small numbers of *Blackcap*.

The trap round only produced one bird, a *Wheatear* of the Greenland race. We headed back down to the South for breakfast, where John had good views of a male *Redstart*, I unfortunately only caught it in flight as it dipped on and off the low fence line. After breakfast we started at South harbour with nothing new of note and confirming the *Ortolan Bunting* was still present. The weather had become quite cloudy with the sun just beaming down on the South West/ West of the island, so we made the decision to head to the sunshine as we felt more migrants would be feeding and foraging over this side of the island. Seven *Whimbrel* flew over calling on our way. We skirted the geos of the South West where a few common migrants flitted about feeding on insects. Our walk took us along to Hill Dyke (A wall that runs across the island south of the airstrip). We approached the wall with *Blackcap* and *chiffchaff* feeding on insects, on the other side of the wall just up from a small puddle John spotted another bird briefly hopping along. We viewed from a distance as it made its way into view. "Not again" were my exact words (minus

expletives) as it became clear we had found a superb male ***RUSTIC BUNTING!***



I had found a male last year on Shetland. Incredible bird. We kept our distance(hence the poor photo) so that others who had been contacted could come and view the bird. It felt like an age waiting for others to arrive, we took it in turns to stay on the bird as it fed amongst some rocks by a small stream. Every time it flitted we held our breath. Thankfully a good number of people were able to connect with it before it made a flight and was lost to view. Still beaming from our find we headed onwards past the airstrip enjoying close views of *Great Skuas* on the way. The rest of the morning was spent ambling around the moorland and we stopped for lunch to take in the views. A *Bluethroat* had been seen in the north of the island at Wrvie burn so we made our way northwards stopping by the mast on the way. We got good views of *Arctic Skuas* on our descent although it is clear that numbers of this superb bird are declining up here. After drawing a blank on the

Bluethroat we headed back down to the southern end of the island stopping to stake out the obs garden on the way. A *Garden Warbler* was particularly showy on the grass verges without anything else of real note added. As we approached the southern half of the island we had our best views of *Grey headed* wagtails with four together in a crop strip, we had only previously had brief views of this fantastic subspecies. Another interesting bird feeding on the ground in the fields was a *Waxwing*, a welcome bird for myself as I had somehow not seen one for the year. Later in the afternoon we opted to patrol the south and scan the gardens around the area. So after crossing paths with Tim we made our way past Auld Haa with a few *Goldfinches* present. On approach to the property opposite I noticed a bird flit briefly by the greenhouse, I quickly informed the others that I had had a very brief glimpse of a prominent supercilium, and it was either a *Sedge Warbler* or a *Bluethroat*. I wanted to just say it was the latter as I was pretty certain it was, but because of that doubt I wanted clinching views. We split up and walked around to locate the bird when a bird was briefly spotted in flight and quickly dropped onto a stone wall. As I reached the others they had decided it was a ***Bluethroat*** after getting good views as I peered over the wall I too was able to confirm. Another great find!



It didn't hang around too long and elusive as ever it flew across the field to the stone wall at the side of Auld Haa. Another lifer for John, and another bird we had found ourselves.

We continued onwards in the company of Tim before heading back for dinner and a few drinks to take in the highlights of the day. John and I went to log in the evening to add our sightings to the list and give a local description and photo of the *Rustic Bunting*.

Day four 20th May

The weather wasn't great over cast with winds increasing. A pretty Un eventful trap round didn't dampen our spirits, although rumours that the transport on and off the island was not looking good for the next few days certainly played on our minds.

As the weather was not ideal we took a more leisurely approach to the day and strolled around the south of the island hoping to unearth a hidden migrant or two. We had great views of a *Wood Sandpiper* at Da Water, a bird that had been around on and off.



Nothing too unusual was noted for the remainder of a quiet day, although it still ticked along nicely with improved views of the lone *Waxwing*.



A host of common migrants were noted although numbers had clearly decreased, the *Grey headed wagtails* continued their stay around the South. The day was rounded off nicely with a couple of unexpected birds. Firstly after passing Lower Leogh an *acrocephalus* warbler flitted up onto the fence giving superb views, it's shape and coloration were all noted a **Marsh Warbler**. There had been one around since the 18th (the earliest spring record) but we hadn't managed to connect until now. A welcome addition to the list and another lifer for John. Just after midway a male *Red backed Shrike* fed along the fence line. A stunning bird, but one we can't take full credit for as apparently the head warden David had found it earlier. Still a fantastic end to the day!



Day 5 21st May

It wasn't looking good for getting off the island via the boat as planned, so we made provisional plans that we might leave by the plane the next day and have an extra day on the mainland instead, but even the plane wasn't guaranteed. Putting those worries to one side we opted to head for the cliffs at the east of the island, starting in the south east and hugging the superb coastline.

We were pleasantly surprised to find some migrants flitting along the cliffs and highlights included a female *Redstart* and *Mealy Redpoll*. It was great to watch the sea birds gliding up and down and we stopped for a while to enjoy them before cutting back in land.

We arrived at plantation where a familiar "tacking" sound greeted us. *Ring Ouzel*, trip and year tick!



It landed on the trap box and we were able to note that it was unringed, so a new bird than the one ringed at the obs!

We enjoyed great views before leaving it and headed up towards the observatory. We met Tim again and all decided to go and try and look at the male *Red Backed Shrike* reported up at Wrvie Burn. Although it was windy the sun tried to break through and it was a pleasant walk in good company. There was no sign of the reported *Long tailed ducks* at Furse but we did get brief views of the male *Red backed Shrike*. On the way back down we got much better views as it fed along the verges and posts. It was a much paler male than the previous one we had seen, so definitely two males were around and two different females had been reported too.

The remainder of the day was spent ambling back down to the south of the island, with *pink footed goose* and *Tufted duck* added to the trip list. A small flock of *Golden Plover* roamed around the crofts in the south and 3 *Grey headed wagtail* were still present to round off the day.

Day 6 22nd May

A grey day, with light drizzle greeted us. Although we had worries about whether any flights would be going we put them to one side and headed out. On our walk up to the obs for the morning trap round we got great views of a male *Red backed shrike* although we would get better views later in morning. A female *Yellowhammer* was another new bird for the trip, and our list had ticked over quite nicely. Upon approaching some pens by the road side we noted a bunting feeding on the grain. Excellent views of a female *Lapland Bunting*! This had been found the day before so it was nice to connect with it, and easily my best views of a *Lapland Bunting*.



After enjoying great views we headed on to the trap round. We arrived at the observatory where out of the sky a very bedraggled *Acrocephalus* warbler dropped from the rain briefly onto the fence then onto the ground in the garden. It gave a very brief flutey note which i haven't heard before, before sheltering low in the garden to regain its energy. It had a long primary projection and was quite non descript other than that. It went unidentified but I was favouring *Marsh warbler*. The trap round didn't produce anything of note, as due to the rain the traps weren't checked. With the wind and rain subsiding slightly we made our way to chalet, where the *Long eared Owl* was finally in view enough to get a half decent photo.



After returning to the lighthouse the news came through that we wouldn't be leaving the island today. And with the weather looking worse for the next few days we were looking like we were stranded.

There wasn't much we could do but make the most of it. After all stranded on Fair Isle is not exactly my worst nightmare. In fact if I'm honest I have hoped this would happen, if it wasn't for the extra cost for new flights. After breakfast and lengthy discussions about alternate plans. We headed back out and got fantastic views of the *Red backed shrike* it made its way towards us, seemingly oblivious to our presence.





As we made our way to the north of the island, we were informed that a *Long tailed duck* had relocated to North haven. So we headed there to try and add a summer plumaged *Long tailed duck* to the trip list. The crystal clear waters were ideal for great views, both on the water and under.



The weather had kept breaking and we actually enjoyed some nice spells of sunshine. And just as we were making our way from the harbour Susannah came hurtling down in the obs van to herd us in. The plane was on it's way. The break in the weather had been enough to signal the plane to come in, so we we're rushed up to the airstrip. I checked my phone and had missed calls off Tim, Dave and Will. It wasn't the good bye to the island we had envisaged but we were heading off. Our bags were rushed up to us too, along with Tim who would be on the same flight. After a short wait whilst it poured down again, it finally cleared to allow us to depart to Tingwall. We made plans to stay for the night in Lerwick at the highly recommended youth hostel. But before then we went for a few drinks with Tim and were introduced to Peter Ellis from the RSPB for Shetland. We parted ways after some tips on places to visit the next day with our extra day on the mainland.

Day 7 23rd May

An early morning start saw us boarding the bus down towards the South of the island where we were aiming to visit Hillwell and Loch of Spiggie. The weather wasn't great, strong gusts of wind a plenty of rain too. We walked towards Hillwell and took a wrong turn and found ourselves at RSPB Loch of Spiggie. The loch shores held a Pair of *Whooper swans* with one on a nest. Aside from a few windswept *Tufted ducks* and a group of *Mallard*, the loch was quiet. We retraced our steps and finally figured out where Hillwell was. Viewing the small loch from a distance it was clear there was plenty of *Wigeon* and a drake *Scaup* really stood out. Within a few minutes Tim and Pete arrived and they drove us to the best spot to scan the loch, at a safe distance without upsetting the local farmer. A scan of the gull roost revealed a **Ring billed gull** that had been present and myself and John got much better views than the one we had seen on the first day. In amongst the *Wigeon* was an **American Wigeon** that had also been around for a while. But we drew a blank on the other long staying American duck *Green winged teal*. After a good scan of the loch we headed down to Sumburgh head picking out an *Iceland gull* at Sumburgh farm on the way. It was great to get shown around by Peter and Tim and we stopped at the pool of Virkie, but there was little sign of any notable migrants. We eventually said our goodbyes and myself and John returned to the Sumburgh hotel where we would be staying.

Before long we headed back out to scan the harbour at Grutness, which held a summer plumaged *sanderling* and a stunning *Red throated diver* bobbing around in the bay. We made our way past Sumburgh farm via the cliff top walk, carefully checking the sheltered walls on route. We managed to relocate the *Iceland gull* from earlier.



After some further views of *Puffin*, *Black guillemot* and *Great Skua* amongst other expected seabirds, we returned for overnight stay at the Sumburgh hotel.

Day 8 24th May

The following morning we had time for one last early morning jaunt before our flight back home. We headed out to Scatness, where amongst the expected birds we found a *Snow Bunting*.



News of a ***Buff Breasted Sandpiper*** at the Pool of Virkie would of rounded things off nicely but there was no further sign.

The flight home was a feeling of relief at not having to endure too much extra expense. But the main conversation was just how fantastic Fair

Isle and Shetland are, and when the next visit would be. The list of species from the trip are listed below. Thank you for reading and I have already booked 2 weeks for the coming October! I can't wait!

Thanks as usual to all Dave and Josie for their first class hospitality, and thanks to the observatory staff who always add to the experience. And of course to Tim for his humour!

Trip list

Whooper Swan.	Common Sandpiper
Pink- Footed Goose.	Great Skua
Greylag Goose.	Pomarine Skua
Shelduck.	Arctic Skua
Wigeon.	Common Gull
Mallard.	Ring-Billed Gull
Teal.	Great Black-Backed Gull
Tufted Duck.	Iceland Gull
Scaup.	Herring Gull
Eider.	Lesser Black-Backed Gull
Long -Tailed Duck.	Black-Headed Gull
Pheasant.	Kittiwake
Red-throated Diver.	Common Tern
Great Northern Diver.	Arctic Tern
Fulmar.	Guillemot
Gannet.	Razorbill
Shag.	Black Guillemot
Peregrine Falcon.	Puffin
Sparrowhawk.	Rock Dove
Moorhen.	Wood Pigeon
Oystercatcher.	Collared Dove
Lapwing.	Cuckoo
Golden Plover.	Long-Eared Owl
Ringed Plover.	Swift
Knot.	Red-Backed Shrike
Sanderling.	Jackdaw
Purple Sandpiper.	Rook
Dunlin.	Carrion Crow
Turnstone.	Hooded Crow
Snipe.	Raven
Whimbrel.	Skylark

Curlew.
Redshank.
Wood Sandpiper.
Willow Warbler.
Chiffchaff.
Blackcap.
Garden Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Whitethroat
Sedge Warbler
Marsh Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Grasshopper Warbler
Waxwing
Wren
Starling
Ring Ouzel
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Robin
Bluethroat
Redstart
Wheatear
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Dunnock
House Sparrow
Yellow Wagtail (Grey headed)
Pied Wagtail
White Wagtail
Meadow Pipit
Tree Pipit
Rock Pipit
Chaffinch
Brambling
Siskin
Goldfinch
Common Redpoll
Lesser Redpoll
Twite

Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Reed Bunting
Lapland Bunting
Snow Bunting

Yellowhammer
Ortolan Bunting
Rustic Bunting. 111

