

Travels to the Farne Islands, 15th to 17th June, 2018

By Adam Jones

RSPB Geltsdale



I set the alarm for 4am and was on the road for 4.15am. I hate traffic and always like to be onsite early, and besides, it's the best time of day for wildlife.

I decided that I would take the scenic route, not necessarily the fastest. I headed up the M6 through the lakes to Carlisle. First stop, RSPB Geltsdale at 6.30am. This was my second visit here, and although the first visit a couple of years ago was unproductive in terms of anything unusual, I enjoyed it and developed a longing to return. It's very quiet and peaceful and reminds me of certain parts of Macclesfield and the Goyt Valley. Rolling hills, a reservoir, stone walls, Curlews babbling, aerial displays by Lapwing and a rather chilly breeze.

On leaving the car, this time I chose to go anti-clockwise on the Stagsike trail. The fields immediately behind the car park had 3 hares chasing each other around. Always nice to watch and sadly not something I get to see an awful lot in our part of the country. I left them to it and followed the path south.



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STAGSIKE TRAIL

Allow 1 - 2 hours (4.5 kms)

Fairly level, mostly on good tracks around farmland and bottom of Bruthwaite Woodland. Some muddy patches. Allow for a break at Stagsike Cottages, and time to enjoy the woodland edges between Stagsike and Howgill

BRUTHWAITE TRAIL

Allow 2 - 3 hours (3 kms)

Steep and rough ground among the newly planted woodland - add 1 hour to Stagsike Trail

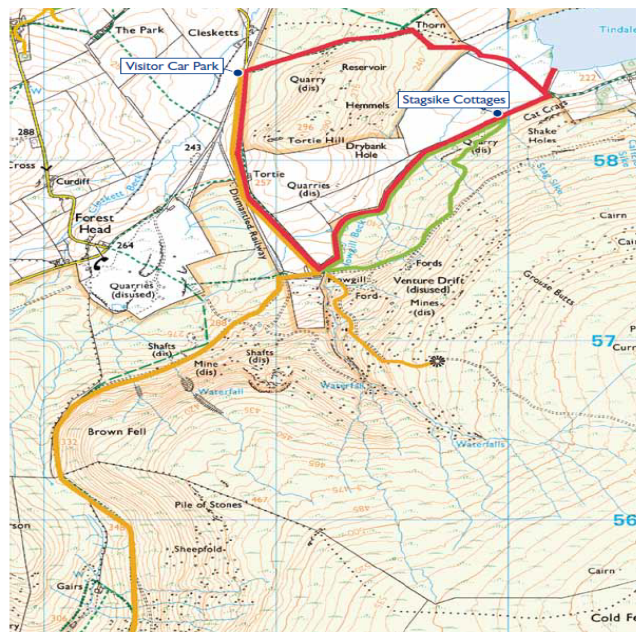
MOORLAND TRAILS

Allow 3 hours

Gairs viewpoint (8 kms)

Bruthwaite viewpoint (4 kms)

Longer walks out to the moorland. Please do keep to trails and footpaths to enjoy wildlife without causing disturbance



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Skylarks were singing and Meadow Pipits kept popping up on the dry stone walls to keep me company, their beaks stuffed with insects. A Pheasant called and fluttered. A large bird in flight, showing black and white, caught my eye in the distance. My binoculars confirmed a Black Grouse! Not something that I was expecting to see on this visit, although they are resident here. Winter months are best for spotting them. What a great start, and a lifer already ticked.



Black Grouse

In the long grass and juncus I heard one or two Grasshopper Warblers, neither of which showed themselves. Knowing that they were there was good enough and so I just stood and listened for a while.

Around the buildings where the path heads east there were plenty of finches, mainly Chaffinch and Goldfinch but there were also House Martins, Swifts and Swallows in attendance. From here I chose to take the Bruthwaite Trail (green on the map). It ascended through ferns up into newly planted woodland. Here the songs of Wren, Blackcap and Willow Warbler could be heard, but the birds rarely seen. A Kestrel hunted over the sloping hillside. Then a bird came into view atop a short tree, close enough to show a nice white supercilium to confirm a male Whinchat. This was one of my target birds, so I stayed here for some time watching as it flitted about the shrubs and trees. It wasn't long before it was joined in its pursuit of insects by a female. Both birds were colour ringed, and the RSPB at Geltsdale have confirmed that it is likely that both were ringed at the site as part of an active 6 year ringing program. Sadly numbers are well down this year with only 20% of the usual number of nests recorded.



Male Whinchat

I carried on my walk towards the visitor centre and some feeders close by. It was here that I had an overflying Lesser Redpoll, which eventually landed on the feeders to give better views. The usual suspects were at the feeders, in the form of Goldfinch with many juveniles, Chaffinch and Dunnock.

As I was still too early for the visitor centre to be open, I carried on my walk towards the screen that looks out onto Tindale Tarn. A huge expanse of water, and I was grateful of my scope. There wasn't a great variety to see on the water, with mainly Mute Swan and Canada Goose bulking up the numbers. I did see Common Redshank and Oystercatcher on the far side. Most of the activity was around the viewing screen itself with Sedge Warbler and Reed Buntings showing particularly well. Both were busy feeding juveniles.



Sedge Warbler

I completed my walk back to the car with more Meadow Pipits and Skylark. 30 species seen in total and a thoroughly enjoyable two and a half hours. I'll certainly head back here for a third time.

Grindon Lough

My second stop off was about 20 miles away, where there had been reports of an American Wigeon for a number of days. I visited this natural inland pool two years before and watched a Red-necked Phalarope from the road side. The lough is only viewable from the road. There are no paths down to it, so may explain why it turns up some very good birds.

On my first scan of the western end I could only pick out Coots and a Little Grebe, before a Common Redshank and Dunlin flew by. I trained my scope on the eastern end and soon spotted some Wigeon. With this being a quiet road with several areas to pull in, it was easier to drive down a little to get a closer look. It's still not particularly easy looking down as far as it was with sun reflecting off the water, but needs must. There indeed with a male and female Eurasian Wigeon was an American Wigeon. It was a little disappointing that it was so far away, but it's not every day you come across one, so I have to be pleased with that.

Druridge Pools



From scanning the Northumberland area on Rare Bird Alerts for the previous couple of weeks, Druridge Pools and its surrounding area had come up quite frequently. So I made this a definite stop off point.

I was on the lookout for a Glossy Ibis that had been seen here for two or three weeks, but typically it had done a bunk when I turned up, and for the time I was there. It did reappear later that day and seems to commute between a few fields locally. Nice timing. My consolation prize was more than acceptable though, in the form of two Spoonbill. Two Spoonbill not too far away or asleep. Fascinating birds to watch. A dozen or so Black-tailed Godwits on a verge, a few Curlew and a Grey Heron were probably the best of the rest for what was a quiet time here. There was of course the usual fair of Shelduck, Shoveler, Moorhen, Coot and hirundine.



Spoonbills

As I returned to the car I spotted a family of Stonechat along the fence line. I'm always pleased to see a Stonechat, and at this time of year the male looks especially handsome. The young looked to be very healthy too.



Juvenile Stonechat



Male Stonechat

Cresswell Nature reserve

Just a mile or so down the road was Cresswell and its brackish pool. Not far from the car there were Tree Sparrows chirping and showing well on the wall. Along the path to the hide were a few feeders. Tree and House Sparrows were in abundance here and it was great to be able to observe them at close quarters. So few of them to be seen locally now.



Tree Sparrow

On the pool itself, I picked out 3 Goldeneye. Whilst on a sandbank close to the hide there were nesting Avocets that got very vocal as the Shelduck marshalled their young a little too close. There was a single Dunlin working the edges of the sandbank and Reed Bunting flitting back and forth across the reed bed.



Avocet

Coquet Island

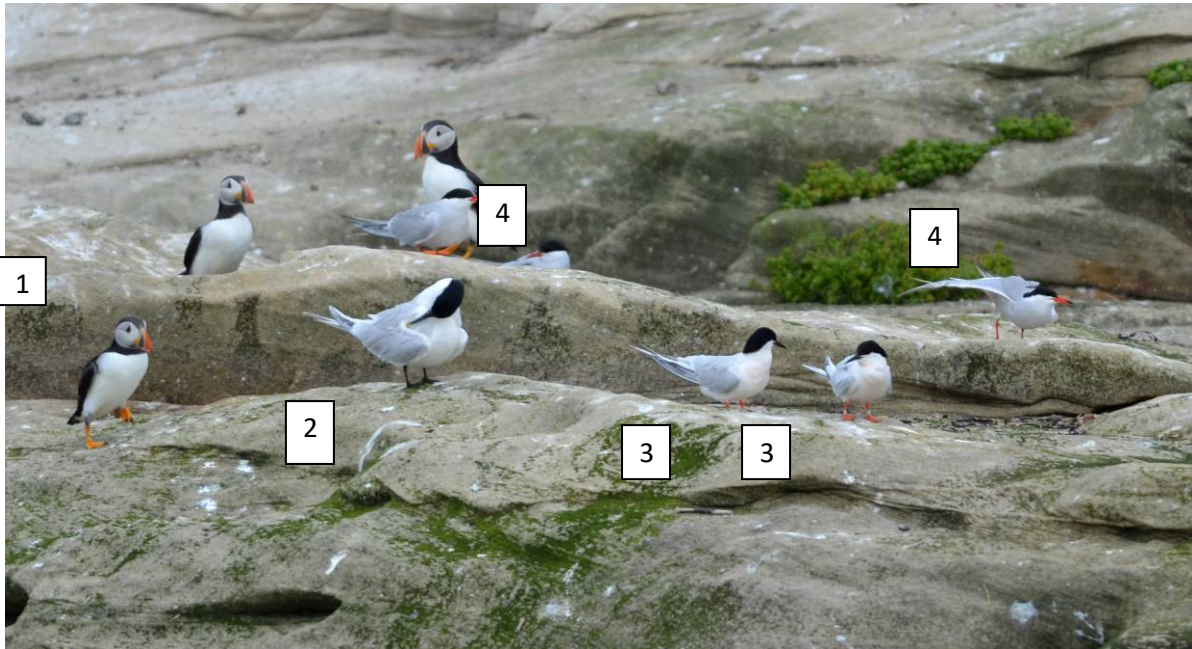
My plan from the outset was to do the Farne Island boat trip on the Saturday, but with the forecast looking so dodgy, I decided to add an insurance policy of a trip out to Coquet Island. This had the added bonus of being able to see the Roseate Tern colony.

I went out with Puffin Cruises from Amble, and at £10 for the one hour cruise it was great value. The marina held Eider duck and there were a few Sandwich Terns diving nearby to pass the time. Not long into the cruise Arctic Terns started to appear, crossing in front and behind the boat. These were joined by Guillemots and Puffins and then some grey seals.

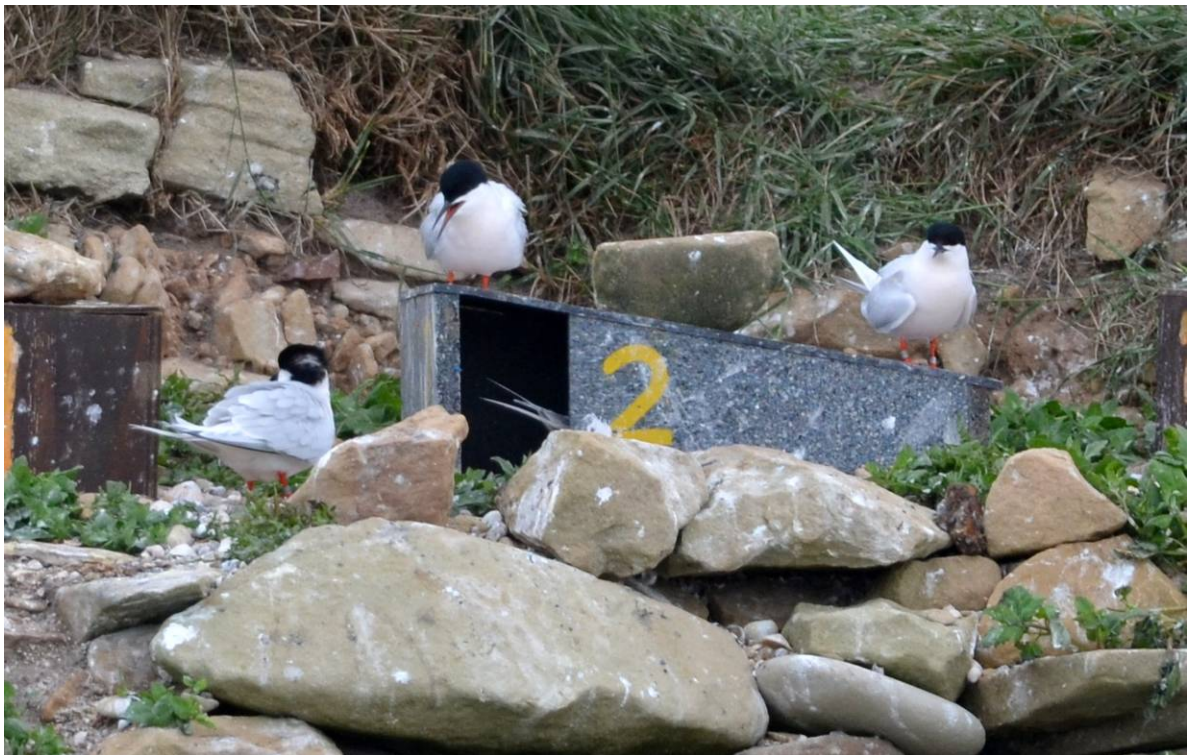


Grey Seal

There are roughly 100 pairs of Roseate Terns on the island this year. Most were on or around their nest boxes, but some were nicely among the other Terns giving a really good comparison on size and colouration. I'd recommend this short but very worthwhile trip to anyone. It's the best opportunity you'll get to see these birds close up and for a prolonged amount of time. (You do not land on the island. It is purely an out around and back trip).



1) Puffins, 2) Sandwich Tern, 3) Roseate Terns, 4) Arctic Terns. Good size comparisons.



Roseate Terns on the nest boxes provided for them by the RSPB.

Day 2

Staple Island

I had been constantly checking the met office forecast on my phone, and it didn't improve no matter how regularly I did that. Dark cloud and rain seemed to be the order of the day. I wasn't convinced that I'd get the full 6-hour trip in but turned up at the desk on time all the same.

First stop was Staple Island for a two hour visit. I think this is my favourite of the islands. It's more open and you can pitch up and sit right in the heart of the action. Puffins flying overhead and the din of the Guillemots and Razorbills all around you. My only previous visit was at a similar time two years before. My visit today was visibly different in terms of numbers of birds still on eggs or with very young to feed. Previously, the rocks were half bare with lots of birds already on the sea with the juveniles. I'm guessing this is in keeping with 'everything being later' this year and that Beast from the East that kept turning up and making life difficult. There may of course be a completely different reason.

Either way, this made it good for me in that there were plenty of birds to focus on. Puffins were obviously the main attraction for most, but this just created a bottle neck in certain places. I wandered round to see the Guillemots, Razorbills and Shags on the opposite side of the island. Being in amongst birds like this is the pinnacle of what birding is about for me. I'm entering their world. They have jobs to be getting on with and are not fazed by our close proximity.



Guillemot

There were a pair of Great black-backed gulls with at least one juvenile. When it ventured too close to some people they would take off and swoop at them. They make quite a noise too.



Great Black-backed Gull

A little further round there were some Lesser black-backed gulls on eggs. Surprisingly, people thought it okay to have pictures taken pointing at the eggs of the bird that had just been disturbed (by them) from its nest. It meanwhile was making a hell of a racket and swooping above them. They were totally oblivious.

I often wondered why some Puffins, with bills full of sand eels, would just stand around for minutes on end on the rocks. Not near a burrow or nest. I thought it might be so that they didn't have to run the gauntlet of the gulls that would mob them as they came in to land. Whatever the reason, it allowed me to capture these pictures.







There were not great numbers of **Razorbills**, but I always like to watch these Auks. Smart looking birds.



A good-looking **Shag**. These are one of the highlights of the trip for me. I look forward to seeing them. It has a bit more elegance about it for me than the Cormorant.

Our two hours was up soon enough, and we boarded our boat once again for the journey to Inner Farne, stopping on the way to view the seal colony that was beached up on the rocks, but also with plenty around the boat for close viewing.



Some **Fulmar** were a nice addition to the trip list. This one just resting on the water.

The first thing that hits you at Inner Farne is the noise of the Terns. It's incessant. The second thing that usually hits you, is an Arctic Tern. Right on the head, as you make your way up the path from where the boat landed. It's comical to watch others try and evade them, but then at some point it's your turn. Be sure to wear a sturdy hat. These birds have sharp bills and they do draw blood.



That said, I feel a little uncomfortable that every day they are having their homes invaded, and at the most important time of the year. I'm sure the National Trust make good money from the landings, but these birds are quite clearly stressed. Maybe something to think about for the future.

I hot footed my way up towards the lighthouse, where everything is just a touch calmer.

I spent a good amount of time watching over the cliffs at the Fulmars gliding on the thermals, and the Kittiwakes hanging in the air and generally enjoying the birds over the sea and coming in to land.



Kittiwake



Sandwich Tern.



Shag

I thought 2 ½ hours on Inner Farne was a bit too long. Just my opinion, but it was warm, and I was starting to flag. So, I took a seat and just enjoyed everything around me. It was fun watching the Puffins running around and heading down into their burrows, while also being entertained by so much in the air. It's a trip I recommend everyone does at least once.



Arctic Tern



Arctic Tern



Bridled Guillemot

Day 3

Druridge Pools

Time to head home, but not before another attempt at finding the Glossy Ibis at Druridge pools. I'd also seen reports of a Wood Sandpiper here, so my hopes were high of a productive morning. Unfortunately, the Glossy Ibis had flown just ten minutes before I arrived and not been relocated. The Wood Sandpiper had also relocated and not yet been

found. I hung around in the hide for a bit just seeing what I could see, when I spotted a Snipe well hunkered down. So tricky to spot from a distance, near on impossible without binoculars.



Snipe

Then out of the blue, flying low from left to right of the hide went a Cuckoo. The shock of it made me say the name out loud whilst pointing towards it. It landed on a fence post just yards from the hide. I managed one decent shot of it, but I was more than happy with the result.



Cuckoo

After all that excitement I went off in search of the Wood Sandpiper and was eventually guided to it by some very helpful birders. It was in a small pool of water a few hundred yards up the road. Too distant for anything other than record shots, but I enjoyed watching it with my scope. A very good finish to a productive weekend.



A very distance **Wood Sandpiper**

Adam Jones, January 2019

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