FAIR ISLE & SHETLAND
6TH - 14TH OCTOBER 2005
TOUR REPORT

CELTIC BIRD TOURS
We arrived at Sumburgh, Shetland bang on time after a very pleasant and smooth flight from Edinburgh. We passed over Fair Isle en route, and also most of Orkney. We soon added Starlings, Wheatears and House Sparrows as our first birds of the tour as we drove from the airport to the famous Sumburgh Hotel. After a brief stop for check in, we assembled in readiness to depart for sites further north on the mainland. Before we had the chance to get into the minibus, Andrew found a Yellow-browed Warbler in the garden. The term garden is used loosely to describe the five stunted sycamores outside the reception area, but the bird showed well as it flitted through and under the bushes.

Offshore, several Gannets and Fulmars played in the breeze and small numbers of Redwings, Sky Larks, Wheatears, Starlings and “real” Rock Doves passed overhead and settled in the stubble field next door.

As we drove north, we encountered several Ravens, Hooded Crows and small numbers of Great Skuas patrolling over the roadside hills.

Our first stop was the garden of the cottage at Quarff, which held an excellent selection of birds. A Greenish Warbler showed superbly as it flitted through a sycamore feeding actively, while another Yellow-browed warbler showed briefly, but well. A male Blackcap and Goldcrest popped into view, along with a Shetland Wren and a couple of Blackbirds. Also present was a rather skulking Red-breasted Flycatcher, but eventually everyone got onto the bird, which spent a lot of time sheltering behind the leaves in the increasing wind.

Next stop was Helendale, where Oystercatchers, Lapwings, Redshank, Turnstones, Mallard and a drake Wigeon and Tufted Duck were present of the small Loch Kickenin. Before long we had our target bird as a European Bee-Eater flew overhead and caught a fly before perching in a dead sycamore in the warm sunshine - superb! At Trondra, we added a breeding plumaged Great Northern Diver, which was close inshore, a few razorbills and a small party of Common Eider, as well as an Atlantic Grey Seal. A grebe that showed briefly was almost certainly a Red-necked Grebe, but we could not refine it in the choppy sea, though an Arctic Tern flew quickly through, and a roadside stop on the way back produced a flock of Greylag geese. Neil, Andrew and Pete took a walk to Sumburgh Harbour upon our return, where a couple of Shag, Ringed Plover and a Rock Pipit were new for the trip. Small numbers of Sky Lark, Meadow Pipit and Wheatear rounded off a tremendous introduction to birding on Shetland!

The evening was spent in Sumburgh Hotel, where we toasted the tour, before bill payment caused utter confusion to the bewildered staff who were trying to deal with the introduction of a new till system that obviously wasn’t working properly! We eventually got things sorted out an retired in anticipation of our arrival on Fair Isle tomorrow morning.

Despite it being a pretty breezy morning and the late arrival of the staff at Tingwall Airport, we arrived on Fair Isle after an uneventful flight. Neil particularly enjoyed it as he was selected to sit up front with the pilot on the seven seater Islander that is used on these trips. It was a once in a lifetime experience and combined with being on Fair Isle, it was hard to get the grin off his face!

Once Hollie had met us at the landing strip, transferred us to the observatory, given us the welcome briefing and dished out the tea and biscuits, we set off for our first birding on the island. By now the wind had increased to gale force from the south, so it wasn’t easy, but we did well. Large numbers of Gannets and Fulmars passed offshore, while several Common Eider and Shag sheltered in both North and South Havens. Small numbers of Sky Larks, Meadow Pipits, Turnstones and House Sparrows fed on the grassy banks and a few Wheatears flitted around on the short turf. Two Atlantic Grey Seals, two Pale-bellied Brent Geese and at least six Black Guillemots were in the North Haven and a couple of Common Gulls flew over. Three Redshank and a Greenshank landed near a small cave and while we were checking a large flock of Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls roosting on Buness, Pete found a white-winged gull, which took a while to identify, but was eventually confirmed as an Iceland Gull. We returned to the observatory for lunch and some respite from the wind, but also to meet up with some of the other residents - there is no set place to sit and the staff sit with the guests, making for an excellent atmosphere with plenty of conversation.

The afternoon was spent heading to the south of the island and checking the crofts in what was now a severe gale. Huge numbers of Redwings had arrived, and Starlings and Meadow Pipits were also present in good numbers. A mixed flock of shorebirds included European Golden Plover, Lapwing and Turnstones and a couple of Brambling were seen around Setter. Another mixed flock - this time of geese held large numbers of Greylags and Pink feet, along with three Barnacle Geese, but observation was difficult and we were unable to find the Greenland Whitefront said to be still present. We stopped at the Puffin Hostel for a much needed cuppa and some shelter. A Dunlin was present on the grass opposite with a flock of Turnstones and Redshanks, and more Sky Larks and Wheatears were also here. Three Twite posed briefly on a fence and a further five were later seen in Bull’s Park; an area of cabbages planted by the observatory especially to hold birds. We broke our raptor duck with a female Kestrel and a drake Tufted Duck dropped into a small stream. Up to ten Common Snipe were seen at various points and a Fair Isle Wren showed briefly in a stone wall. The day ended well with good, if brief views of a female Lapland Bunting firstly in a field and then sat on the road, where it sat calling, before flying back into the field.
The day began wet and got wetter, but thankfully, the wind had died away to virtually nothing, leaving us hopeful of a fall of birds in such favourable conditions. We decided to walk south again despite the torrential rain. Good numbers of Common Snipe were in the Gilsetter mire and around the Double Dyke, and we also flushed four Jack Snipe from this area, as well as several hundred Redwings and a couple of Redshank. A party of three Common Teal and a Eurasian Wigeon flew overhead, going south and later the numbers of these ducks were reversed as others appeared. A Rock Dove flew out towards the sea and the Golden Plover flock remained in the Chalet area. A walk through Bull’s Park produced several drenched Twite, along with our first Chaffinches and Siskin. We also had excellent views of five Lapland Buntings including a splendid male that perched on the stone wall. A flock of 27 Lapwings came in off the sea from the south west and small numbers of Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Sky larks were noted as we walked down to the shop. We bought postcards and dripped all over the floor for five minutes, before heading back outside, where we immediately saw a Snow Bunting perched on a pile of rubble before it flew off east, calling. The walk back was uneventful until we reached the double dyke heligoland traps. A few more Common and a single Jack Snipe came up as we trudged through the sodden Gilsetter. A cry from Fiona, who had sensibly taken the road option, saw Neil and Andrew investigate the heligoland trap, as we thought she had called warbler. Our surprise was total and complete as we watched a Cornrake scramble around the wall and between it and the trap before it flew off onto the heather on the hill above. Thankfully, Pete and John heard our call and managed to get the bird in flight as it flew away. We managed to relocate it briefly, but despite extensive searching by others in the afternoon, it was never seen again - shame….. Another Snow Bunting flew over as we arrived back at the obs for lunch; soaked through, but happy! Unbelievably, the afternoon was gloriously sunny! A female Blackcap flitted around the obs garden as we set of after lunch to the north of the island. More large numbers of Gannets and Fulmars were noted and some very impressive numbers of Redwings were feeding on the heather covered hills. Several Blackbirds were present and up to 50 Song Thrushes were also with them. We had excellent views of a male Snow Bunting that flew over our heads, calling loudly and a House Martin was near the North Lighthouse and a female Wigeon was on the tiny Easter Lother Water. Following a quick coffee stop, Neil, Pete and Andrew decided to head south again to look for a Bluethroat at Setter, while the others sensibly stayed behind! Unfortunately, we couldn’t hear those shouting to us, while watching the bird away from its favoured spot and it was never seen again. A further two Jack Snipe, vast numbers of Redwings and a flock of nine Brambling including some beautifully marked males were the highlights here, along with a small flock of showy Twite. We rounded off our first full day with a male Blackcap in The Plantation, a Kestrel flew over and a few Great Skuas overhead.

Following dinner, Deryk, the warden released a European Storm Petrel that had been found wrecked by the South Lighthouse earlier in the day. Later on a cold, clear evening, we were treated to an amazing sky with Mars clearly visible, a clear Milky Way and occasional bursts of the Aurora Borealis - a magical experience!
10th

After heavy overnight rain and a southerly gale, Neil and Pete took the pre-breakfast walk down to the Havens and were rewarded with an immaculate drake Long-tailed Duck very close inshore. Two Purple Sandpipers were also present on the jetty and the two Pale-bellied Brent Geese were still on the sea. Thankfully, the rain stopped, but it remained very windy, so we took our breakfast. Once again Paddy and Don went their own way, and this was the case for the rest of the trip - they enjoyed some more leisurely birding and managed to stay dry most of the time!

The wind switched to the south west and it seemed like a lot of birds had moved on, as there were fewer Redwings, Sky Larks and other migrants present. We walked towards Hjukni Geo via Setter, but there was no sign of either the Great Grey Shrike or the Red-breasted Flycatcher this morning. At least 16 Common Snipe were flushed and the usual Ravens, Golden Plovers and Turnstones were noted in that general area. At Hjukni, a few Eiders were close inshore, along with a female Red-breasted Merganser and a sleeping Red-throated Diver, along with a magnificent view and at North Reeve a couple of Rock Pipits and a male Blackcap were present. Thirteen Teal were counting as well as a Grey Heron came in off the sea over South Reeve and a male Brambling showed beautifully at the base of a muddy mound.

We decided that the only thing for it was to spend time sea watching as by now the wind was so strong that we could barely stand up! We met up with the ladies at the South Lighthouse, which thankfully offered some shelter and spent an hour or so watching the mountainous seas. Fair Isle is not particularly noted for its sea watching, as there is no land mass to funnel birds into a particular area of the island, and despite the vicious gale, in reality we saw little. As ever, large numbers of Pulmars and Gannets were passing east and small numbers of Shags were also present. Four Great Skuas passed close inshore and single Razorbill, Black Guillemot and an adult Kittiwake were noted briefly ever, large numbers of Fulmars and Gannets were passing east and small numbers of Shags were also present. Four

Moving back inland, two Reed Buntings were feeding on the track at The Haa croft and our first Whinchat of the tour was at Lower Stoneybreck. The Stonechat was seen again, this time at the Shop, and a flock of 26 Snow Buntings flew over giving superb views. Large skeins of geese and Wigeon were seen heading out to sea at Houll and our first Eurasian Curlew disappeared down into the rocks. A Short-eared Owl came in off the water at the south and headed over Neder Taft croft and the Common Redpoll was again at Utra.

We continued down to the southernmost part of the island at Skadden, where a Purple Sandpiper was sheltering underneath an overhang, along with two Dunlins, a Guillemot and a large flock of Turnstones. A late Willow Warbler was seen flitting along the tide line and a skein of 27 and then another of 13 Barnacle Geese flew over to sea.

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Following an early alarm call caused by a faulty fire alarm, we got back to bed in what seemed like the early hours of the morning, but was in fact just before midnight! We awoke to heavy rain, but with no wind.

We decided to head north, but first the observatory garden had to be checked, and this produced the Great Grey Shrike as well as two Great Skuas overhead and a Wheatear. A further two Wheatleys and a Grey Heron were in the Gulley. The walk up the Hill Dyke was taxing in bad weather and was very wet underfoot, and to be honest was pretty
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over Setter and a Merlin was seen briefly before it dropped behind a ridge and out of sight. A Snow Bunting was feeding on a dung heap at Field and another flew over heading east, and a small flock of Lapwings flew north. At Lower Stoneybreyck, The Stonechat showed briefly and skeins of 28 Pinkfeet and 72 Barnacle Geese came in from the south east. As we headed to South Harbour it began to rain hard again. A Slavonian Grebe gave very brief views as it drifted offshore and our first Ringed Plovers on Fair Isle fed amongst a large flock of Golden Plovers on Meoness. Two Curlews flew overhead and a steady stream of incoming migrants included Sky Larks, Redwings, Meadow Pipits and five Snow Buntings. A single flock of 23 Common Snipe were joined by four more rising up to meet them as they flew overhead and 75 Turnstones were on the rocks, along with a Purple Sandpiper and 17 Shags. We found a little shelter from the howling wind on the beach and three Brambling dropped in to feed on the tide line and another party of eight Whooper Swans were seen coming in from the south, but pride of place went to the incoming Woodcock that shot straight between us as it came in off the sea.

Lunch was taken in the Puffin Hostel, where we lit a fire and stretched it out for as long as we could before going back out. For half an hour or so, there was the merest hint of east in the wind and things began to happen immediately. A first winter Kittiwake was sat on some rocks and three White wagtails and 20 Wheatears were on the beach at Skadden, while two Guillemots, a female Red-breasted Merganser and a small party of Black Guillemots were offshore. Nine Brambling dropped into the crop behind the Puffin Hostel, three Snow Buntings flew over and visible migration of Redwings, Song Thrushes, geese and shorebirds was much in evidence at South Lighthouse. A Tufted Duck flew east, a first winter Common Gull and 11 Pink-footed Geese, along with good numbers of Redshanks and Golden Plovers were around the wader scrapes. Back at Utra, a Goldcrest, three Blackcaps, a Common Redpoll and our first Chiffchaff were in the garden of the croft. We returned to Skadden, a female yellowhammer dropped into the crop, a Merlin dashed through and 24 Snow Buntings, 30 Twite, a Chaffinch and a Dunlin were noted. At Lower Leogh croft, a Whinchat was present, another Merlin and an Oystercatcher flew over and at Neder Taft, a spectacular flock of 35 Brambling including several stunning males dropped in as we passed. At The Haa, a Reed Bunting and two Siskin were seen before we left, as the local cat demolished an unfortunate Meadow Pipit. At Upper Stoneybreyck, a Yellow-browed warbler perched on the stone wall of the observatory and skulked in the long grass.

Back at Setter, 14 Whooper Swans flew in from the south and then landed on Vaaseter Hill and were joined by a large mixed skein of geese. Finally, we increased the Goldfinch flock to four and a further 15 Brambling were seen flying towards the observatory.

Another overcast start to the day, but thankfully dry and with a gentle westerly breeze. The pre-breakfast walk to the Havens produced a close inshore Slavonian Grebe, a Razorbill, Guillemot and the two Pale-bellied Brent Geese, but sadly we found the corpse of the drake Long-tailed Duck. Sixteen Whooper Swans flew overhead and a male Brambling and three Blackcaps were in the observatory garden.

As we left, two Whooper Swans flew over going north and three Snow Buntings dropped down towards the Havens and a further four Whooper Swans flew over Holmesdale. A further two Blackcaps were in The Gulley and a walk through Gilsetter produced six Common Snipe and a single Jack Snipe. At Setter, 14 Brambling showed at very close range including a full breeding plumaged male, and several flocks of Redwings were around the croft. A walk through Bull’s Park produced a few Twite, Sky Larks and Meadow Pipits, as well as flocks of Golden Plover, as well as a mystery passerine that was seen by Neil and Pete for the briefest of views - it was called as a warbler, but not even assigned to a genus, as views were so poor and it was not relocated, but more of that later..... At Pond, we had brief views of two Lapland Buntings, a Jack Snipe and a few skeins of geese, one of which contained a Curlew. At Hoini, 14 Twite perched on a fence and showed well, Pete, John and Andrew saw a Woodcock and approximately 200 Redwings came in off the sea. There were no birds at all at Hjukni, while Upper Stoneybreyck produced 11 Pink-footed geese feeding in a field at the back of the croft, Ten Rock Doves were at School; the largest single flock of the trip, and a Willow Warbler was feeding on a dung heap at the back of Barklands. Close inspection revealed this bird to be of the race yakutensis owing to the very cold colouration noted in the upperparts and very clean white underparts with only a hint of any green or yellow tones in the plumage. We arrived back at the observatory in sunshine and heard news of a Hawfinch that had been trapped earlier in the day. A walk down to the Havens saw Neil relocate this bird perched on top of the heather on the hill above the observatory garden. The bird quickly flew and a Goldcrest was in the garden. During lunch, the Hawfinch returned to the garden and caused a mass desertion of the tables for spectacular views as it fed and perched openly. A second mass desertion was caused by a female type Ring Ouzel that perched on a ringing pole in the garden before flying off towards the Havens, but was not relocated. A walk down after lunch produced further views of the Slavonian Grebe and while walking back to the observatory, the Hawfinch was found in the Heligoland trap and seen in the hand before being released.

We walked south and on reaching Bull’s Park noticed that all three wardens were walking through the crops very slowly, eyes to the floor. Neil commented that they must either have a Lanceolated or Pallas’s Grasshopper Warbler! We stopped and waited and saw a warbler fly onto the stone wall. It was obviously a locustella and at one stage both Neil and Fiona saw it well enough to claim it as a Lanceolated, despite neither having seen one before! The bird then flew into some long grass where it was scoped and the majority of the now gathered crowd suspected it was a Grasshopper warbler, as the throat was unstreaked. The bird then flew back into the cabbages and it was decided to trap it. This took four attempts, but eventually, the bird was caught and pronounced by Warden Deryk Shaw to be a Lanceolated - the relief for Neil & Fiona was tangible and great excitement followed as the bird was taken back to the observatory for processing. The bird was released and spent some time on the window sill of the wardens flat before flying down into the garden - our first BBRC rarity on Fair Isle, and one of the islands “Big Five” It was a lifer for Neil & Fiona, but the others had all seen one on previous trips. Sadly Odette and Paddie could not be found and the bird had disappeared by the time we found them on the airfield later.

We were elated and after spending time with 12 Snow Buntings at the airfield, news of an Olive-backed Pipit broke at Sma’ trinked Geo in warm sunshine, but no-one could relocate the bird, giving us the highs and lows of birding this fantastic place all in the space of an hour or so. The observatory was a happy place that evening and we enjoyed a superb slide show on Birds of Antarctica and Falklands Islands by Paul Jeffery as our final evening came to a close. We all spent a few pounds in the shop and paid our dues to the tick box before turning in
Our final walk down to the Havens was bathed in sunshine and still, but the only birds of note were the two Pale-bellied Brent Geese. All too soon it was time to catch our flight back to Mainland and there was a real tinge of sadness as the island disappeared below us. The flight was smooth and Pete got the privilege of sitting up front this time around. We decided to check Trondra again, but no sign of the King Eider. We did pick up an Arctic Tern plus a pair of Long-tailed Ducks and a few Black Guillemots before we departed for the airport and the flight south. We arrived in Edinburgh half an hour early due to the superb flying conditions. Our first Rooks of the trip were noted at the side of the runway as we waited for a bus to take us to the terminal building!

We said our farewells as we checked in for our various flights home, except Andrew who lives in Edinburgh who successfully twitched a nearby Paddyfield Warbler!

**SYSTEMATIC LIST**

1 Great Northern Diver  
2 Red-throated Diver  
3 Slavonian Grebe  
4 Northern Fulmar  
5 European Storm Petrel  
6 Northern Gannet  
7 Great Cormorant  
8 European Shag  
9 Grey Heron  
10 Whooper Swan  
11 Mute Swan  
12 Pink-footed Goose  
13 Greylag Goose  
14 Pale-bellied Brent Goose  
15 Barnacle Goose  
16 Eurasian Wigeon  
17 Mallard  
18 Common Teal  
19 Tufted Duck  
20 Common Eider  
21 Long-tailed Duck  
22 Common Goldeneye  
23 Red-breasted Merganser  
24 Common Kestrel  
25 Merlin  
26 Peregrine  
27 Corncrake  
28 Water Rail  
29 Oystercatcher  
30 Ringed Plover  
31 European Golden Plover  
32 Northern Lapwing  
33 Ruddy Turnstone  
34 Dunlin  
35 Purple Sandpiper  
36 Eurasian Curlew  
37 Common Redshank  
38 Common Greenshank  
39 Woodcock  
40 Common Snipe  
41 Jack Snipe  
42 Great Skua  
43 Black-headed Gull  
44 Common Gull  
45 Black-legged Kittiwake  
46 Herring Gull  
47 Great Black-backed Gull  
48 Iceland Gull  
49 Arctic Tern  
50 Common Guillemot  
51 Razorbill  
52 Black Guillemot  
53 Wood Pigeon  
54 Rock Dove  
55 Collared Dove  
56 Short-eared Owl  
57 European Bee-eater  
58 Skylark  
59 House Martin  
60 Rock Pipit  
61 Meadow Pipit  
62 Pied Wagtail  
63 Grey Wagtail  
64 Wren
65 Dunnock
66 European Robin
67 Whinchat
68 Stonechat
69 Northern Wheatear
70 Ring Ouzel
71 Blackbird
72 Fieldfare
73 Redwing
74 Song Thrush
75 Lanceolated Warbler
76 Blackcap
77 Willow Warbler
78 Common Chiffchaff
79 Greenish Warbler
80 Yellow-browed Warbler
81 Goldcrest
82 Red-breasted Flycatcher
83 Great Grey Shrike
84 Common Starling
85 Common Raven
86 Hooded Crow
87 Rook
88 House Sparrow
89 Chaffinch
90 Brambling
91 Hawfinch
92 Siskin
93 Goldfinch
94 Common Redpoll
95 Twite
96 Yellowhammer
97 Reed Bunting
98 Lapland Bunting
99 Snow Bunting