

ORKNEY MAY 4 - 11 2013

Trip Leader: Steve Sankey

with Mark Clay, David Brooks, Jim & Carol Edwardson, Carole & David Jones and John & Susan Harrison

Our week began well by watching a small pod of 3 Bottle-nosed dolphins fishing off the mouth of the River Dee whilst the *MV Hjaltland* crept out of Aberdeen harbour heading for Kirkwall. They made quite a splash.

Our first day in Orkney was spent on Westray, a dry but blustery day, too windy to trust to a walk along the Noup cliffs, so we contented ourselves with views of the Gannetry from afar. Occasional Bonxies patrolled the airspace, always on the lookout for Gannets, or indeed any other birds with fish to pirate. A few early Puffins were gathered offshore at their colony on the sea stack of the Castle o' Burrian, with a few birds investigating their burrows. Waders were also a highlight with Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone and Whimbrel being seen. Kathy at the *Haaf Yok* café took pity on us and provided much needed tea!

The 'bird of the week' was encountered on the following day on South Ronaldsay, a White-billed Diver, seen close in by Barrier # 4. It looked bizarre, with a perfectly moulted back in summer plumage, but a head remaining stoically in winter plumage, giving it a strange appearance. Today's tea room was a stunner – the *Hoxa tea room* overlooking Scapa Flow.

West Mainland is so full of interest that it warrants a couple of days exploration, and the first of our brace saw some sky dancing (displaying) Hen Harriers at the Birsay Moors RSPB reserve, and breeding Red-throated divers at Burgar Hill. Skylark song at the Ring of Brodgar was considered to be one of the highlights of the week. Up on the seabird cliffs at Marwick Head by the Kitchener Memorial the Guillemots were thickly distributed, but patrolling Bonxies and even Puffins were hard to find. We wandered through the Brown Hares to enjoy *Appie's tea room*.

Yet another fine day saw us striding across Hoy to visit the Old Man, all 450 feet of a sandstone stack, by means of the incomparable Rackwick Bay. Bonxies weren't yet on their territories, but there were birds patrolling menacingly overhead. On the return to the ferry we had simply stunning views of not one, but two pairs of Hen Harriers, no doubt engaged in some territorial boundary dispute. Inevitably we found that the *Ben'eth Hill tea room* was open, and extremely welcome after our walk across the moor!

Still the weather held, and we next headed to East Mainland, to Mull Head Local Nature Reserve, where we caught up with Arctic Skuas and Short-eared Owls, and even a couple of migrants: Chiffchaffs and a Reed Warbler skulking in a ditch. Lunch was a picnic by the seabird colony with the crooning of Guillemots a suitable refrain. Seaduck included Velvet Scoter and Long-tailed Ducks, and very many Great-northern Divers. The *Burray community café* was awarded the 'scone of the week'.

Our final morning was a little dull until the day cheered up in the afternoon. It didn't dampen our spirits or luck, however, as we visited Hobbister for displaying Red Grouse, breeding Stonechats and a great view of a male Peregrine. We also found a couple of precocious and beautiful Scottish Primrose flowers at Yesnaby. Guests were agreed that the 5,000 year old stone age village at Skara Brae was a national gem. Lunch at the RSPB Loons reserve was rewarded with a simply stunning drake Garganey, with a drake Pintail running him close. So it was back to the *Merkister Hotel* for a final supper and the boat to Aberdeen.