

Birdwatching in Orkney

SUMMER

Perhaps the most attractive thing about birdwatching in Orkney is the ease with which one can move between different habitats and hence, within the space of just a few kilometres, experience a series of totally different bird communities. Much of Orkney consists of an intricate mosaic of wetland, moorland and farmland, and it is this that gives the islands their unique character.

During the summer breeding season, many folk are drawn to the great seabird colonies on the towering cliffs of localities such as The Noup on Westray, Marwick Head in the West Mainland or Copinsay, off Deerness. Here in these teeming seabird cities, the horizontal ledges of Old Red Sandstone are packed with **Guillemots**, **Razorbills**, **Kittiwakes** and **Fulmars**, all finding their own individual niches on the cliff face. Apart from the existence of ideal nest sites, the major reason for the presence of such enormous numbers of birds is food supply. With the exception of the Fulmar, which is a plankton feeder, most of our seabird species depend on small fish known as Sand-eels. If Sand-eels are abundant, our seabirds breed well and their populations increase; however, if they are in short supply, as in recent years, breeding success is poor and populations decline.

Gannets are spectacular members of the seabird community, and is a goose-sized bird that plunges vertically into the sea to catch fish such as Mackerel. Until recently, they were confined as a breeder to remote Sule Stack, a stark lump of rock 65 km to the west of Stromness. Recently, however, they have expanded onto nearby Sule Skerry but also, and much more conveniently, onto The Noup (Westray) where 14 pairs nested in 2004.

Not all seabirds are cliff-nesters. Most gulls, terns and skuas prefer to nest on flat ground, and the most favoured such areas are areas of moorland and heath, immediately inland from the cliffs. Areas such as the North Hill of Papa Westray, west Westray, western Rousay, and the heathlands around Yesnaby to the north of Stromness can all hold large colonies of these species. Four species of terns nest in Orkney but **Common**



Terns and **Sandwich Terns** are scarce and **Little Terns** decidedly rare. It is the **Arctic Tern** that makes up the great majority of our tern population. Arriving in early to mid-May, Arctic Terns are at the end of an enormous journey that has brought them all the way from the Antarctic Ocean. They stay just long enough to rear their chicks and, by early August, are heading south once more.

Arctic Skuas are very dependent on the terns as they are kleptoparasites, stealing food from the terns in spectacular



aerobic chases as the terns return to their colonies. The larger relative of the Arctic Skua is the **Great Skua** or Bonxie, which also feeds on sand-eels or on discards from fishing vessels but, when both these food sources are in short supply, will turn to attacking other seabirds. The wild moorlands of Hoy hold the second largest Bonxie colony in Britain with some 2000 pairs. When walking through a Bonxie colony, be prepared to take evasive action - they are very adept at defending their eggs and chicks!

In excess of 60,000 pairs of **Puffins** nest in Orkney, but don't expect to find them easily. Well over 50,000 of these pairs nest on Sule Skerry, which is very difficult to access, and one needs to look in localities such as Yesnaby, Marwick and the Brough of Birsay in the West Mainland to find a handful of visible pairs. Westray is more productive, with a few hundred pairs nesting in the south-eastern part of the island, centred around the Castle o' Burrien. More than its Puffins, Orkney is famed for its **Black Guillemots** or Tysties. These dapper, black-and-white birds with bright vermilion feet breed beneath flagstones or in burrows close to the sea in places like North Ronaldsay and Papa Westray but with smaller but more accessible colonies in places like the Churchill Barriers and Orphir's Breck cliffs.

Another species that is usually classed as a 'seabird' is the **Red-throated Diver**. Although it nests on tiny hill-top lochans in the remotest parts of the Orkney hills, this streamlined species, highly adapted for life in the water (but definitely not on land!), feeds almost entirely at sea and like so many other seabirds, prefers to feed on Sand-eels. The hides at Burgar Hill in the West Mainland and at Eday's Mill Loch provide ideal viewing opportunities of this species.

Moving only a little way inland from the sea-cliffs and coastal heaths, it is not long before one stumbles on a wetland or loch shore, another incredibly bird-rich habitat during an Orkney summer. Such areas are home to a rich array of nesting ducks and waders. Spring is the best time for viewing our ducks. It is then that all the drakes are in their breeding finery and species such as **Teal**, **Wigeon** and **Shoveler** are staggeringly beautiful at this time. Rarest and most elegant of all, however, is the **Pintail**. Only about 40 pairs of this stunning duck nest in Britain in any year and Orkney can have 60% of them. The RSPB reserves at The Loons and Loch of Banks and at the Mill Dam in Shapinsay are excellent places for seeing Pintail, as are the Stronsay wetlands.

Spring is also the time to see (and hear) our breeding waders at their best. An early April morning at any wetland site will supply the delight of hearing **Lapwings**, **Redshanks** and **Snipe** at the peak of their powers and it is an even greater delight to be able to enjoy such birds not just on reserves, but in the so-called 'wider countryside' from which, further south, they have been almost entirely eliminated. **Oystercatchers** are even

commoner and, with a population of over 12,000 pairs, are almost everywhere one looks. **Curlews**, although they do nest on wetland areas, are far commoner on our lower moorlands, where over 5000 pairs breed each year and fill the sky with their bubbling calls.

These lower moorlands are usually only a short distance further inland than the wetlands and as one climbs a little further along one of the Mainland's moorland roads or peat-cutters' tracks, one encounters yet another assemblage of nesting birds. This is the domain of Orkney's birds of prey, the king of which is the **Hen Harrier**. The names of 'Orkney' and 'Hen Harrier' have been synonymous for more than 50 years, because it was here that a population managed to survive when, elsewhere in Britain, they were being decimated by game-keeping interests. It was also here that an Orcadian ornithologist, Eddie Balfour, began an intensive study of their breeding biology, a study that was to continue for well over 30 years. The ghost-like, dove-grey males drift over the moors as they hunt for food to support their females, of which, as they are polygamous, they may have as many as six, although two or three is more normal. Both males and females often perform a spectacular display flight known as 'sky-dancing' when a bird will plummet towards the ground, only pulling up at the last moment and repeating the performance time and again over a period of several minutes. Having gone through a period of major decline during the 1990s, Hen Harriers are now recovering, and there were over 60 nests in 2004.

Other moorland breeding raptors are the **Kestrel** and the **Merlin**. Kestrels nest on small crags or ruined buildings but, uniquely in Orkney, they also nest on, or even under, the ground. These latter nests are often at the end of long tunnels in the heather or in desiccation cracks in the peat and can be incredibly difficult to find. Merlins, too, are ground nesters but unlike Kestrels, which feed on small mammals, especially Orkney Voles, Merlins feed on birds, the most important of which is the Meadow Pipit, an abundant prey item on the Orkney hills. **Short-eared Owls**, Orkney's only nesting owl, also utilise the moors for breeding. Like Kestrels, they are very dependent on Orkney Voles and their numbers seem to fluctuate according to

vole availability. In a good year, the moors may support as many as 60 pairs and the spectacular display flight of the males, when they dive from a great height clapping the tips of their wings beneath their bodies, can be seen over the breeding areas.

Whereas sea-cliffs, coastal heaths, wetlands and moorlands can all be classed as natural or, at least, semi-natural habitat, Orkney is dominated by a more anthropomorphic habitat, improved grassland. The Orkney economy is very dependent on agriculture and agriculture is dominated by beef cattle. Almost the whole rural economy is geared towards providing enough food for these cattle in the form of good grass for the cattle to graze in summer and silage production to provide enough winter keep for the animals when they are indoors from November to early May. This form of agriculture has been intensive enough to put one species under great pressure. **Corncrakes** have declined from untold numbers during the 19th and early 20th Centuries until, in 1993, there were only six calling birds. Operation of the Corncrake Initiative by the RSPB (and supported by SNH) has enabled the species to maintain a toehold in the islands but, at present, there are not usually more than 30 calling birds in any summer; Papa Westray has been a stronghold in recent years.

WINTER

Three habitats stand out as attracting large numbers of birds during the winter months, the sea, the shore and our inland lochs.

It is the shallower, inshore sea areas that support important numbers of divers, grebes and sea-ducks. Scapa Flow can hold almost 800 **Great Northern Divers** and 120 **Slavonian Grebes**, both being concentrations that make the Flow internationally important for these two species, while eleven other species, for example **Black-throated Diver**, **Long-tailed Duck** and **Red-breasted Merganser**, are present in numbers of national importance. Other sea areas with good numbers of such birds are the sounds around the island of Wyre and the bays off the north side of Tankerness and Deerness, the latter being especially good in late winter/spring when pre-migration gatherings of Great Northern Divers may exceed 300.

Orkney's shoreline is also a Mecca for wading birds during the winter months. In excess of 50,000 waders have been counted during shore surveys in the past, with **Curlew** being the most numerous species. Two other species, **Turnstone** and **Purple Sandpiper**, occur in very important numbers with up to 6000 of each present on rocky sections of the coast. Species like **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Sanderlings** prefer mud flats and sandy shores respectively, and are more common, in Orkney's north isles. The best locality of all is Sanday, the eastern half of the islands shoreline being designated as a Special Protection Area because of its large concentrations of wintering and passage waders.

The inland lochs hold large numbers of ducks in winter. The commonest species is the **Wigeon**, enormous concentrations of which arrive from Iceland from October onwards. During an outbreak of an alien waterweed, Canadian Pondweed, on the Harray Loch in the late 1980s, as many as 10000 Wigeon fed in the wake of 1000 **Whooper Swans** and 1000 **Mute Swans**, picking up the pieces of weed left after the swans had uprooted it. Such enormous numbers are a thing of the past but winter wildfowl can still provide a major spectacle, especially during hard weather when icing can force birds into smaller and smaller areas such as the Brig o' Brodgar, where the movement of water between the Harray and Stenness Lochs always keeps an area of water open. At such times many hundreds of **Tufted Ducks**, **Pochard**, **Goldeneyes**, **Long-tailed Ducks** and **Red-breasted Mergansers** as well as the occasional **Goosander** and **Smew** can gather in an area of just a few acres.

Another major feature of an Orkney winter nowadays are geese. From being quite scarce only 20 years ago, **Greylag Geese** from the Icelandic breeding population have been arriving in the



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islands each autumn in ever-increasing numbers so that today we have over 43,000 present. Almost everywhere one looks, one can find Greylags but one has to look a bit harder to find other goose species. The East Mainland holds an increasing wintering flock of **Pink-footed Geese**, with over 500 counted in November 2004, while an important **Barnacle Goose** flock of up to 1600 winters in South Walls flying to roost each night on Switha. Two small flocks of **Greenland White-fronted Geese** also winter, one of about 100 in Birsay and another of about 40 on Stronsay.

MIGRATION

During the spring and autumn, the peak times for migration, birds from many corners of the globe can turn up in the islands. Numbers of migrants are greatest in autumn when there are large numbers of young birds on the move as well as the breeding adults; it is also these young birds that are the most likely to go off track and appear in places that they are not meant to be! Spring migration is, however, the opportunity to see unusual birds in their full breeding regalia and is when species from the Mediterranean area often overshoot their nesting grounds and come too far north.

Classic migrant-watching conditions in autumn are when the weather over Scandinavia is fine and is allowing birds to leave on their way south. If they then run into conditions of rain and poor visibility, such as those produced by a depression moving up the Channel and into the North Sea, they will then drift with the wind that, around the top of such a depression, is easterly or south-easterly. It is then that a classic migrant 'fall' occurs, the species involved varying according to the date. In the latter part of August or early September, **Wheatears, Whinchats, Willow Warblers** and **Pied Flycatchers** will dominate the scene; a little later in September then it may be **Redstarts**, while in October, along with the normal arrivals of **Redwings** and **Fieldfares**, it will be **Robins** and **Goldcrests** that will catch the eye. Scarcer, but still regular migrants include **Barred Warblers, Icterine**

Warblers, Bluethroats, Red-backed Shrikes and **Wrynecks**, while a long list of vagrants includes species such as **Pied Wheatear** and **Isabelline Shrike** from central Asia, **Dusky, Radde's** and **Pallas's Warblers** and **Siberian Blue Robin** from central and eastern Siberia. Even American species occasionally make it across the Atlantic to arrive on Orkney shores. We might not be surprised that ducks such as **Green-winged Teal** or **Ring-necked Duck** or even waders such as **Pectoral, White-rumped** or **Baird's Sandpipers** have the strength to survive the crossing but the ability of tiny waifs such as **Yellow, Yellow-rumped** and **Tennessee Warblers** to undergo such a journey almost takes the breath away.

An article such as this only really manages to scratch the surface of Orkney's bird-watching world. To get the full picture, the only thing to do is to come and see for yourself – and stay for as long as you can!

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