

Tour Report The Shetland Islands with Mike Dilger 21 – 28 June 2025

Red-throated diver



Common guillemot



Otter



Great skua



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Saturday 21 June 2025

Day 1:

Loch of Clumlie & Isle of Mousa

As all six members of the group had made it to Shetland via different forms of transport, from various departure points and even on a range of different dates, it was terrific for Mike Dilger (MD) to bring the group together for the first time in the Sumburgh Hotel's lobby at 6 pm. Whisking the group off to the hotel's lounge, MD then formally welcomed the group to Britain's most northerly outpost. And following introductions from all the group, MD then talked about the plan for the week ahead, along with a quick run-through of the itinerary. He was also keen to stress the need for flexibility during the week, especially given the forecast, which appeared to show an array of weather conditions.

Afterwards, everyone then headed to enjoy a three-course dinner, alongside the group of Dave Fairhurst (DF), who was also running a concurrent group with Shetland Wildlife and whom we'd be linking up with at various points during the week. The chat soon flowed around the dinner table as everyone became acquainted with each other, before we then met up at 9 pm for our evening trip across to the island of Mousa. Following a largely clear day, conditions had deteriorated by the evening, and we jumped into the minibus with fog covering the high ground, a southeasterly wind and intermittent rain. But as it was the longest day of the year, it was still surprisingly bright, and conditions were not poor enough to cancel the boat crossing. MD nevertheless made sure that all members had packed a full set of waterproofs for what promised to be a memorable evening.

The trip to the jetty at Sandsayre was of only 20 minutes duration, so this gave a little time to do a spot of birding on the way, with MD suggesting a stop-off at the Loch of Clumlie. Leaving the hotel grounds, and with the weather damp and misty, it didn't feel like the longest day of the year - or Simmer Din as it is called here. The first bird of the trip was that of a male blackbird, perched on one of the dry stone walls, while herring gulls were additionally picked up overhead. Next up were a couple of curlews on the grassland adjoining the islands' airport. Coming into Dunrossness, a little further north, our first corvid proved to be a hooded crow, while a black-headed gull and an arctic tern were observed as they flew over the road.

Turning off the main road, we then drove along the northerly end of Voe Inlet, where we found both a female eider and four ducklings on the water, alongside a single shelduck. Heading back north towards Clumlie, we observed our first male northern wheatear, with MD explaining that this was one of the commonest breeding passerines on the archipelago. Either side of the road, rabbits appeared abundant too, with plenty of young animals indicating a good breeding season.

Reaching the eastern side of the loch, the resident pair of whooper swans were showing well, along with their two cygnets. Here, MD was able to explain that whooper swans are one of Britain's rarest breeding birds, with only around 30 pairs, of which the vast majority are to be found in Shetland. Lots of skylarks could also be heard singing from the moorland behind, while a few meadow pipits were noted on the small stretch of moorland between the loch and the road. Scanning out, a single arctic tern was observed, with MD talking the group through the key distinguishing features of arctic terns - including an all blood-red bill and shorter in leg than the common tern, which paradoxically is the rarer of the two here. Further out, a great black-backed gull was also noted, along with a few redshank zipping around the far end of the loch.

MD next picked up a single red-throated diver out on the water with his scope, and despite the distance, all were able to pick out the species' distinctive upturned, or 'snooty' bill, which is a key identification feature of this rare breeding bird. Curlews were heard constantly calling across the moorland too, followed by the appearance of a couple of adult birds close to our position. Moving a touch further along the loch side, primarily to gain a better view across the northern end of the loch, we then found a curlew chick running around in the grass, hence the nervousness of the adults. However, most eyes were trained on the terrific views of a much closer red-throated diver just offshore. Here, the species' distinctive red throat, laser-red eye and stripy nape could all be clearly seen despite the murky weather.

While watching there, diver, snipe could also be heard chipping away behind us, but for the time being

Find out more about [The Shetland Islands with Mike Dilger](#) or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

remained out of sight. MD then picked up a single dunlin in summer plumage perched on a rock, while a male mallard was added to the list when it flew into the loch. Finally, before jumping back in the minibus, we picked up a couple of swallows eking out a meagre existence low over the loch-side vegetation. With the arrival of the rain, we quickly sought refuge back in the minibus before heading off to Sandsayre.

Back on the main road, it now appeared fairly dark and miserable, but the poor conditions didn't prevent us from spotting a pair of lapwings en route to the jetty. Here too, we also caught sight of a fulmar when it flew past on characteristically stiff wings. Meeting up at the parking with DF's group, we next headed down to the boat ahead of our 10.30 pm departure time. Still raining intermittently, the short crossing of 10-15 minutes was characterised by quite a heavy swell, but in no time Skipper Rodney was safely mooring us up on the Mousa jetty. Disembarking, we then undertook the 20-minute walk to the broch, with torches still unnecessary. On the way, we could hear both oystercatchers and chipping snipe calling from the moorland, before then stopping briefly to hear our first storm petrels calling from inside a drystone wall. Finally reaching the 2,300-year-old landmark, MD then took a few members of the group up to the top of the 43ft tower, via the steps leading between the double-skinned walls, for a view spanning out and across to southern Shetland's mainland. Joining the remaining members, both back down at ground level and outside, it seemed that the poor conditions would actually work in our favour, as the darker conditions would hopefully see the birds returning from sea earlier than normal.

Once a few petrels had been spotted both arriving over the water and flying around the broch, numbers quickly rose as MD talked through the life stages of this mercurial and hardy little seabird. Additionally, a number of petrels could also be heard calling from within the broch's walls, which only added to a simply unique spectacle. The weather also ended up being nowhere near as bad as had previously been forecast, making for a fine evening's entertainment. Staying at the broch until around midnight, we then slowly headed back, with the help this time of torchlight to guide the way. As the wind had also dropped, the return boat trip was also far smoother. Thanking skipper Rodney for a terrific experience, we all then jumped back into the minibus for the short ride back to the hotel, finally hitting our beds at around 1.30 am after starting the week with a bang.

Sunday 22 June 2025

Day 2:

Sumburgh Head, Loch of Spiggie, Bay of Scousburgh, St Ninian's Bay, Bigton Pool, South Punds & Pool of Virkie

After our late night on Mousa, it was at the somewhat later time of 9.30 am that the group united once more for the short journey up to Sumburgh Head. The weather looked set to be rainy and a little foggy, but with the hope that it would be sufficiently clear to view the seabird colonies. Passing Grutness, MD spotted a female long-tailed duck on the slipway close to where the boat leaves for Fair Isle. Stopping briefly for a scan out into the bay, we could immediately see a number of arctic terns making their way to the breeding colony close by, while a number of razorbills were present on the water. Shags could also be seen in between frequent dives down below. Also, while here, a Shetland wren could be heard singing, with a number of the group commenting on how this bird's song slightly differs from those of wrens singing further south. Finally, a baby wheatear could be seen waiting patiently for food from its parents.

Driving up to the car park at Sumburgh, we took in brief views of the fulmars nesting in the lower quarries, and higher by the lighthouse, the weather looked like it might hold for the duration of our visit. Parking up, we then peered over the wall and across to the seabird colonies, and immediately picked up a number of gannets further out to sea, which had presumably come from Noss. All the auks species were picked up in quick succession too, full in the knowledge that we'd be seeing them much closer a little later on. Despite there being a fresh southeasterly wind, it was not too cold as we saw a raven fly past, which was then followed by our first arctic skua of the trip. This skua was a dark morph bird and easily distinguished from the more prevalent great skua by its rakish wings and distinctive 'pinned' tail.

Looking out over the wall, we also spotted a pair of great skua's, as the fulmars played in the wind - often

hovering right in front of our faces. Lower down, a great black-backed gull stood out on a rock, while a host of kittiwakes flew to and from their colonies further round the corner and out of sight. Also, further down, on the lower cliffs, we were able to observe the first lower colony of guillemots, with MD picking out a few bridled guillemots to show the group. Their bridled form appears more common at the more northerly latitudes, with an estimated 12% of all Shetland's guillemots possessing this peculiar monocle. Walking further up to the lighthouse, we enjoyed lots of close encounters with puffins on the way, enabling the photographers in the group to take that perfect puffin portrait.

Up by the lighthouse, it was a touch foggy and, being exposed, even windier. So we dropped around to the other side of the head, which was far more sheltered, and immediately picked up both a rock pipit on a wall. Also on another wall, we enjoyed watching two Shetland wrens on an adjacent wall with food, suggesting their nest was tucked away somewhere in between the wall's stones. A baby rock pipit then appeared and was promptly fed by one of its parents right in front of the group. While up here, MD also picked up a couple of twite feeding in amongst the Japanese roses, but not everyone managed to get onto this much sought-after passerine before they disappeared out of view. While waiting to see if the twite would return, we all enjoyed super views of a pair of meadow pipits on the grass below, allowing MD to talk about the differences between these two pipit species.

Back down at the minibus, the fog was beginning to creep down to the lowland, but on passing the two quarries, we then enjoyed far better views of a couple of twite. Initially picked up by MD on the telephone wires, they then flew down onto the moorland, singing and calling as they fed in the grass. One then posed beautifully in the middle of the road, giving us the opportunity to see the bird's tiny, yellow bill, white wing-patch and streaky back, before it was flushed by a passing car.

Driving up to Dunrossness, we then turned off towards Loch Spiggie, where visibility appeared to be little more than 100 metres in the mist. Heading around to scan the loch's southern shores, we first spotted a whooper swan feeding in a field, before then linking up with a small colony of house sparrows. Down at the loch, visibility slowly began to improve, permitting us to record a least 20 tufted ducks, including a female with three young. In the vegetation along the loch-side, another pair of whooper swans was located, this time with four healthy cygnets, indicating that it appeared to have been a good breeding season for this species up on Shetland. A mallard and a number of ducklings also bumped our species list up another notch, while singing skylarks and displaying meadow pipits were also enjoyed by all present.

Driving around to the Spiggie inlet close to the hide and to the north of the loch, we looked out to sea, pleased to also note that the fog appeared to be finally lifting slightly. Out on the beach, we observed a couple of turnstones, two ringed plover, a single summer-plumaged dunlin and an adult black-headed gull with a newly fledged youngster in attendance. Out on the water, a couple of female eiders with a single youngster were present, while arctic terns constantly flew past as they returned from fishing expeditions out to sea. Looking back out towards the loch, MD then picked up a single snipe on a post, while this species' chipping call could be heard almost constantly. Also out on the loch, the improved visibility also allowed us to view a single mute swan, while a posse of sand martins flashed past and to a colony presumably somewhere close by. MD then picked up with his scope an immature great northern diver distantly on the loch, with all able to see the bird's characteristically massive bill and large 'double-bumped' head.

Moving a touch further round to Scousburgh Bay, we walked down to the misty beach. Here, one of the guests picked out a couple of common terns feeding close to the water's edge, while sand martins constantly flitted right past our position on this simply gorgeous beach. Further out on the water, a red-throated diver in summer plumage was next to be noted, while a couple of harbour seals played in the water. The calm conditions here also allowed us to pick out both guillemots and razorbills resting on the water's surface. Back both on the road, and to the north of the bay, we then noted a family party of ravens, along with a single great skua. From here, we could look down to the beach at Rerwick, but despite no seals being present, MD still managed to pick out a summer-plumaged great northern diver at the back of the bay. As it was constantly living up to its name of 'diver', it took a while for everyone to enjoy this species through the scope.

Driving next on towards St. Ninian's, we then briefly saw another pair of twite right by the roadside along

with a flock of greylag geese, before dropping down to admire the tombolo from the car park, with MD explaining how this amazing geomorphological feature had formed. Out in the bay, there were also plenty of feeding shags, along with yet another red-throated diver and the usual auks. Back in the minibus, we then drove to Bigton Pools. This is a well-known site for breeding red-necked phalaropes, but on this occasion could not see any, with MD suggesting that he thought the male might be sitting on a clutch. We did, however, manage to locate a single ringed plover, while a female mallard was followed around by three freshly hatched ducklings. Starlings appeared to be common here, too.

Driving around to South Punds, we positioned ourselves on the top road in order to look down at the pools at the best site for 'phals' on the mainland. Eventually, after quite a bit of scanning, MD found two phalaropes in the scope, but they were flighty. We also picked up another red-throated diver, before a single phalarope was present on a small pool, which allowed everyone at least distant views in the scope. We also spotted two photographers in an abandoned croft, with both way too close to the birds, in danger of causing a disturbance and obviously breaking the law. Here, MD contacted DS, who told him to contact Hugh Harrop, so the relevant authorities could be informed. While here, we also noted breeding curlews and a single great skua, in between trying to gain views of the phalaropes.

Moving next down to the Pool of Virkie, it was by now low tide. By scanning the mud, we quickly picked up at least four bar-tailed godwits, along with much larger numbers of curlews. A small flock of around eight or nine summer-plumaged sanderling then flew in, which were either over-summering here or failed breeders returning from the Arctic. Also, while here, we picked up a couple of shelduck on the mud, along with a large creche of eider ducklings. By now it had begun to rain, but we still quickly drove back to South Punds to get pictures of the photographers. Also, meeting the RSPB warden here, they were subsequently apprehended before being given a stern warning as to their behaviour. Our duty done, we then returned to the Sumburgh Hotel in the pouring rain - in the full knowledge we'd been lucky with the weather. After a short break, we enjoyed a fine dinner, before then taking some time to compile both days' checklists in the bar afterwards. As all were tired, due to the late finish the night before, everyone soon retired after an action-packed day.

Monday 23 June 2025

Day 3:

Lax Firth, south Nesting Bay, Bretabister, Dury Voe, Lunna, Vidlin Terminal, Wadbister Voe & Stromness.

Before leaving for what looked to be a wet day, MD made sure that all the guests had packed their waterproofs! However, upon leaving Sumburgh, it appeared to be mostly dark skies and a bracing wind as the group headed off for Lax Firth. Driving up towards Lerwick, the first bird of note was a single whooper swan at Henry's Loch, while Quarry Loch near Brindster held at least half a dozen greylag geese.

Crossing Lax firth, we picked up a single female red-breasted merganser fishing in the water close to the causeway, and upon turning onto the dirt track which leads to the pier, we noted three ravens up to no good in a sheep field. Arriving at the pier, it was cold, windy and with a smattering of rain as we scanned across the Firth, primarily looking for otters. Out in the mussel beds, we could see a few female eider with ducklings and a number of shags, before a red-throated diver flew straight past the group. Otters tend to be harder to find at high tide and on this occasion were were unsuccessful at picking one out. Looking at the sprint pile located at the end of the pier, it also looked like there had been no new deposits made there either.

Back at the minibus, the group then headed off up towards South Nesting Bay. Passing Loch of Houland, we spotted a female tufted duck, a number of common gulls and a couple of redshank that were even more agitated than normal - suggesting they had chicks nearby. A little further on, another roadside loch held two great black-backed gulls, along with a couple of mallards, but the star bird here was a female wigeon with six ducklings. MD explained that despite being a common winter visitor, wigeon only breed in the UK in very small numbers.

Driving towards South Nesting Bay, the wind appeared to calm down a touch, and with rain still staying

away, we noted a great skua as it flew high over the road. Stopping at the viewpoint looking across South Nesting Bay, we enjoyed watching harbour seals in the water, before a guest shouted "otter!" And sure enough, an otter which had obviously just woken up, judging by its pale, fluffy pelage, slipped quietly into the water. It was only a brief view of the week's first otter, as it disappeared under the ledge and away, but a good one nevertheless!

After a short detour to retrieve a forgotten item, we headed back along South Nesting Bay before dropping down into Laxo Ferry Terminal to use the facilities. Scanning the harbour, MD found another otter out in the water, as all the group proceeded to watch it constantly diving down, before surfacing for a breather and to eat. It appeared to catch a number of what appeared to be butterfish, and all took delight in watching it from around 50m, before the animal eventually disappeared from view. Also observed here was another red-throated diver, along with a female eider and four ducklings. Leaving the terminal, all were delighted to have spotted no less than two different otters in the space of an hour.

Heading further along the bay, then turned north to travel over the moorland with a sense of foreboding that it would soon be raining. We had a brief and unsuccessful scan for mountain hare and whimbrel before heading onwards towards Vidlin Voe. Here, we noted an arctic tern colony on a small shingle bar and watched with great interest as the terns attacked and successfully drove away a sheep that had patently come too close to several nests where birds were busily incubating clutches.

Now up at Lunna Voe the weather was by now very wet and cold, so after a quick drive up to Hanna Voe, we backtracked to Lunna for a minibus lunch looking out over the bay. Sandwiches consumed, we next headed round to Vidlin Ferry Terminal, where MD thought there might be some more cover. Almost immediately, we picked up the week's first black guillemots, as two in summer plumage were enjoyed at close quarters. Two red-throated divers were also spotted, before MD picked up another adult great northern diver in winter plumage, which eventually came very close to our position before then surfacing with what appeared to be a scorpionfish. It took quite a while to consume this large meal and so presented a wonderful photographic opportunity for the group's snappers! The weather was also slightly improved here.

Heading back south of the moorland to look for hares, we had to slow the minibus down to let a recently fledged redshank cross the road before DF sent MD a message to let him know he'd located a mountain hare close by to our location. Stopping by the roadside, west of Dury Voe, DF kindly pointed out the mountain hare, which was no further than 40m away up on the moorland. And upon putting up the boot, as some protection from the elements, MD was also able to share this great find with his group as well. The hare proceeded to show really well for 15 minutes before eventually lolloping off up the hill. A little further on at West Voe, we all then enjoyed watching a mother and cub harbour seal playing in the shallow water too.

Both MD & DF then received a text about a red-necked grebe in Wadbister Voe, which is a very unusual bird for Shetland. Sure enough, upon our arrival, the bird was easily picked up out on the sea. Constantly up and down as it happily fed, this bird represented a 'tick' for many in the group, and the sighting was made infinitely better as the bird also happened to be in full summer plumage. Also out on the water was a red-throat, but mostly only had eyes for the 'red-necked'!

With time for a visit to one last location, MD suggested a quick visit to Stromfirth to look for whimbrel. This decision was gloriously rewarded when a pair right alongside the road were located. Actively calling and feeding, we then noticed a pair of very mobile whimbrel chicks in amongst the heather. MD suggested that all should stay inside the minibus to avoid scaring the chicks, with our 'mobile hide' allowing the group to get wonderful photos of the adults. Leaving the whimbrel, all declared it to have been a much more productive day than we'd expected, given the poor forecast.

Heading back to the Sumburgh Hotel, all enjoyed a brief break before catching up once more for a three-course meal and the compilation of the day's checklist as a precursor to retiring for the night.

Tuesday 24 June 2025

Day 4:

Loch of Spiggie, Tangwick, Leascole, Eshaness, Braewick & Noss

With our bags packed for our two-night stay further north, we breakfasted at 7.30 am before an 8.30 am departure. En route, we stopped, with DF's group, at Loch of Spiggie to see if we could catch up with the long-staying black-winged pratincole and lo and behold, it was subsequently resting in a small marshy area. Only viewable through the scope, it was nevertheless clearly visible, along with a moorhen and a couple of freshly fledged lapwing. Also present at a cold and windy Spiggie were whooper swans and a couple of lesser black-backed gulls in a field. A temminck's stint was then briefly located at the front of the marsh, before disappearing out of sight.

Heading off to Eshaness, we drove north, passing through Mavis Grind - a small isthmus of land which separates the North Sea from the North Atlantic. A small loch close by produced another pair of whooper swans, this time with five cygnets. Moving slowly northwest across the peninsula, and with the weather now looking a touch better, we stopped at the head of Ura Firth to enjoy two snipe displaying overhead. Taking time to enjoy this unique behaviour, all could see the astonishing way snipe are capable of making their drumming sound, which is achieved by vibrating their two outer tail feathers in the wind, while dropping in height.

Taking the turning towards Eshaness, we noted lots of wheatear while passing over a mosaic of farmland and moorland. Next MD turned south along the minor road to Tangwick, where we enjoyed watching skylarks singing from the ground, before being joined by its mate, while another guest also found a whimbrel resting on the moorland. Driving slowly back to the main road, a pair of red grouse with chicks was then spotted, enabling everyone to spend the time to appreciate the difference between the chestnut male and his more camouflaged mate, while a couple of chicks were also spotted here, too.

Next, taking the northerly road towards Leascole, we had another closer view of red grouse, plus a whimbrel flying past. A touch further along, we picked up a pair of lapwing and yet more grouse, before a golden plover in full breeding plumage then flew past. This same bird was eventually relocated on the ground, as all took a moment to enjoy fine views of this wonderful moorland breeding specialist, complete with its golden back and black belly.

Driving up to enjoy the view and a short walk along the cliffs at Eshaness, we then dropped in for lunch at the car park in Braewick to enjoy the views - this time towards the south and across to the needles. Heading next to St Magnus Bay Hotel in Hillswick, both to drop off our bags and order our evening meal., MD then took his group to quickly see the much sought-after oysterplant close by, along with the shingle specialists of sea campion, sea sandwort and sea plantain.

We then drove straight down to the Wick of Sandsayre to meet up once again with DF's group and board the boat for our trip up to Noss with Skipper Rodney. Heading north in flat, calm conditions, we passed the cliffs at Bresse and took time to enjoy the cave where a few pairs of shags breed annually inside. While here, we were also able to view the roseroot and admire the archway a little further round the corner. There were plenty of seabirds too - including ever larger numbers of guillemot, razorbill, gannet and the occasional black guillemot, puffin and great skua. Next up, we steamed the short distance to the mesmeric cliffs at Noss, before working our way right along the cliff. Noss has to be one of the most impressive places to watch seabirds anywhere in the world, with all blown away by the huge gannetry and auk colonies along these mighty sandstone cliffs. Here, the cliffs are home during the breeding season to over 60,000 birds, comprising 13 species, and host the world's fifth-largest colony of great skuas and seventh-largest colony of gannets.

It was an amazing, visceral experience, and made somehow even better on our return journey when Skipper Rodney threw fish overboard, to see the gannets, gulls and great skuas diving in, to grab the free lunch. On arrival back at Sandsayre, we noticed both a large creche of eider on the water and a single ringed plover. Driving back up north and towards our new accommodation at Hillswick, we also had the pleasure of

listening to England beating India in the summer's first cricket test - a perfect way to end an action-packed day.

Taking dinner at St. Magnus Bay at 6.30 pm, all enjoyed a fine meal, before MD & DF left for their accommodation some 20 minutes away in the village of Brae.

Wednesday 25 June 2025

Day 5:

Unst - Hermaness NNR & Keen of Hamer NNR

Following an early breakfast, we departed at 7.30 am to catch the 8.15 am ferry from Toft on Shetland mainland across to the Ulsta Ferry Terminal on Yell. The conditions were once again grey and overcast, but this time with very little wind, and it looked like it would remain dry throughout the day. While waiting for the ferry, one of the guests found out an otter was fishing out in the harbour, with most of the group getting brief but good views of our third individual of the week.

On the short ferry ride across, the usual range of auks was seen, with black guillemots (or tysties) prominent, but the highlight was provided by arctic skua, when we spotted a pair comprising one of each morph - light and dark. We then drove straight across Yell to give us more time at the ferry terminal on the north of the island. Here, a rock pipit was observed along the shoreline, while waiting for our Unst ferry, along with a harbour seal, a gaggle of greylag geese and another eider duck creche.

Our second ferry of the morning then took us straight across to Belmont on Unst. Upon arrival, we noted both a common tern and a number of black guillemots on the water, while a few pairs of fulmar nested in a small quarry right by the ferry terminal. Disembarking, we then drove straight up to the Hermaness NNR car park, before walking up the short incline and onto the moorland. Almost immediately, we switched into 'plant' mode, as MD pointed out the crowberry, while DF showed both groups a single spike of the orchid lesser twayblade. All three species of heather were present, along with heath milkwort, tormentil and at least three species of sphagnum. MD also showed the group a number of sedges, such as star, flea and glaucous. A little further along, we took a moment to enjoy the insectivorous plants, as flowering round-leaved sundew and butterwort were admired in a wet flush.

Bird-wise, the commonest passerines across the moorland were meadow pipits, skylarks, snipe and great skuas, while a flock of around ten greylags were noted as we headed for the cliffs. A little further on, a pair of great skuas were noted with two chicks, which was excellent to see given how this species appears to have been decimated by the arrival of bird flu to the islands in 2023. Reaching the cliffs, the view was, as per usual, mind-blowing, with large gannetries visible towards the Muckle Flugga Lighthouse, which also represents Britain's most northerly point. Fulmars and gannets were constantly flying past our position, together with all three species of auk. Walking further round to the west, we next looked down on the huge gannetry, with mercifully no sign of the devastation wreaked by the virus a couple of years earlier. Here, MD was able to explain that with the gannet population steadily growing, the flu pandemic had resulted in the earlier than usual recruitment of younger birds to the colony to replace those that had died during the pandemic.

Walking back across the moorland and down to the car park, we enjoyed very close views of a great skua and heard golden plover calling, before then heading down for lunch at the beach by the Viking longboat and longhouse. En route, we passed some wet fields, where breeding lapwing and redshank were chasing away a hooded crow. While enjoying our lunch, we also spotted both arctic and common terns feeding out in the bay, along with a single red-throated diver, a number of razorbills and a lone grey seal.

Heading over to Keen of Hamar, we walked across to this unique reserve, which represents a scrap of arctic tundra and immediately spotted a frog orchid, amongst plenty of mountain everlasting. Walking further up this bizarre and superficially barren landscape, we also noted moss campion, slender St. John's, fairy flax and a peculiar version of sea plantain. Walking still further up, MD then hit the jackpot with a single plant

each of Shetland mouse-ear and northern rock-cress. Talking to DF and his group, who were in the process of coming down, MD then found a single plant of Arctic sandwort - the rarest of the lot - and the only one located all day!

Walking yet further up, three more Shetland mouse-ear plants were successfully located, while the northern rock-cress appeared particularly abundant this year. We could also hear the calls of a pair of breeding ringed plover, while skylarks serenaded us above our heads. Black on plants, we then managed to locate moonwort and heath-spotted orchid before heading down.

Jumping back in the minibus, we then retraced our steps as we drove across both Unst and Yell, punctuated by the ferry trips. Arriving back at Hillswick, after a terrific day dominated by seabirds and rare plants, we enjoyed a fine three-course meal before retiring for the night.

Thursday 26 June 2025

Day 6:

Fetlar - Mires of Houbie & Loch Funzie

Following our usual 7.30 am breakfast and with all the bags packed once more, we headed for the 9.15 am ferry across to Yell. Once on the 'Friendly Island', MD then drove up to the beach at West Sandwick. The weather looked to be another grey, cold and windy day, with both fog across the moorland and the threat of rain later, but the beach was stunning.

Out in the harbour at West Sandwick, plenty of shags could be seen feeding, while arctic terns constantly ferried food to a breeding colony close by. A few puffins and black guillemots were also logged while fishing further out. Just to the south of the beach, everyone enjoyed terrific, close views of a ringed plover, while MD pointed out the important hemiparasitic plant of yellow rattle on the way back to the car park.

Heading up and across to the Ferry Terminal at Gutcha, we encountered a single mute swan at the Loch of Scattlands, while two more mutes were seen at the ferry terminal itself. While waiting for our second ferry of the day, a single harbour seal was picked up right alongside the jetty, along with terns and oystercatchers. Taking the next direct ferry over to Fetlar, we noted all four species of auk, gannets and a few kittiwakes during the 30-minute crossing.

Arriving on the island, we headed straight for Mires of Houbie and parked up to wait for a phalarope to hopefully appear. While waiting, we took a hot drink and enjoyed watching redshank, curlew, oystercatcher and lapwing, before a guest picked up a female at the back of the horsetail. This individual bird then proceeded to show gloriously, on and off, for the next five minutes. It then promptly disappeared, only to be relocated even closer to our position, until it flew over to the rear pond and out of sight.

While waiting to see if any more would appear, we were fascinated by a male wheatear which was constantly hovering, while presumably looking for food. Suddenly, MD spotted a pair of phalaropes doing a display flight around the marsh and overhead, with both birds calling. It was an enthralling moment and certainly the first time MD had seen such behaviour from surely Shetland's star bird. After around a minute, they dropped back into the horsetail and out of sight, with all agreeing we'd been treated to a marvellous show. Also, while waiting for the phalaropes, we'd managed to log a couple of swallows, along with the constant backing track of snipe drumming in the background.

By now it had begun raining, so we jumped back in the minibus and headed east towards the Loch of Funzie. On the way, and now in the pouring rain, we watched a flock of around 15 golden plover fly past, before spotting one on the ground. Close by, a tiny loch produced terrific close-up views of another red-throated diver. This bird appeared to almost submerge itself in the rain, while another pair were located at Funzie itself when taking a 'minibus lunch' out of the rain. During our lunch break, we also spotted a number of arctic terns, with gull interest provided by a number of herring, common and black-headed.

Driving the short distance back to the small lochan, all then took the opportunity to photograph the red-throated diver, before then heading to the island's shop, to both use the facilities and buy a couple of souvenirs. Back at the ferry terminal, a juvenile great northern diver was picked up before heading back across to Yell, via Unst.

After our fourth crossing of the day, we raced across Yell, only to miss the ferry by no more than a minute, so we spent 30 minutes waiting time birding around the terminal. By the time we reached the mainland, the weather had finally begun to clear, enabling us to see Mousa and Sumburgh Head with real clarity as we headed south. Back at the Sumburgh Hotel, we then enjoyed a full hour-long break to rest and refresh, before then reconvening for dinner. The day's activities then ended with the compilation of the day's wildlife sightings, before all retired for the evening.

Friday 27 June 2025

Day 7:

Dale of Walls, Melby Beach, Sandness, Lax Firth, Banna Min & Pool of Virkie

For our final day, the plan was to head up to the west mainland, while taking in the delights of East and West Burra on the return down south. Leaving the Sumburgh Hotel at 8.30 am, MD directed the minibus north, before then taking the A971 westwards. Passing the hamlet of Tresta, the group picked up the first collared dove of the week. While the day had started beautifully sunny, it was now overcast, with the group possessing a fervent hope that the sun would return later.

Stopping briefly at the short causeway marking the northern end of Effirth Voe, our first grey heron of the trip was briefly noted, before it promptly flew out of sight, followed by a fly-by from another red-throated diver. Back in the minibus, we carried on our drive until reaching the turn-off for Dale of Walls. Right next to the road, and with moorland on both sides, we took great delight in watching a ringed plover, while a pair of whimbrel showed really well close to the road. Oystercatcher, curlew and lapwing were also noted here, before MD then picked up a mountain hare, which was unfortunately flushed by one of the whimbrel before most of the group managed to gain a good sighting. While at this spot, we could also hear the distinctive two-note whistle of golden plover, but this species did not reveal itself to us on this occasion.

We then drove a loop across the moorland, via Dale of Walls, before returning to the main road via Walls. Stopping again briefly at Stanevatstoe Loch, we picked up a single calling common sandpiper, with this being one of the few places where this otherwise common species breeds on Shetland. Driving onwards, we noted three ravens upon reaching the Ness of Melby, with the hamlet's stunning beach arcing away to the east in front of us. We took the opportunity here to both use the facilities and take a hot drink while scanning this productive site for otters. With conditions not perfect, due to the high state of the tide, we were unable on this occasion to locate our fourth otter of the week, but this was more than rectified by the presence of an excellent selection of waders along the beach. Almost immediately, we picked up three of four dunlin in full summer plumage, six or seven ringed plover, a couple of turnstone and a single sanderling.

Driving a touch further round the beach, we pulled off in front of a group of waders which had just flown in and were able to count at least 30 turnstone, with lower numbers of dunlin, ringed plover, and now three sanderling. It was also possible to watch the birds interacting with each other, with a couple of juvenile ringed plovers being constantly harassed by older and patently less tolerant adults. So enjoyable was this wader interaction that MD declared this fascinating behaviour to be one of his highlights of his week so far.

Taking the short drive to the car park at Sandness, the weather had finally turned in our favour, and we enjoyed amazing views of the cliffs to the south and views of Papa Stour to the north while taking our lunch on the small peninsula jutting out into the north Atlantic. On the cliffs to the south, we were able to spot fulmar, along with low numbers of all three auk species, while black guillemot appeared common on the water. By contrast, away to the north produced a good number of gannets and the occasional kittiwakes. It was also the first time the guests had felt genuinely warm all week!

Returning back to Melby briefly to use the facilities, we then headed back eastwards, noting a single mute swan and a pair of whoopers on the Loch of Melby, and another couple of mute swans on the Voe of Browland. We also dropped into Lax firth for a second time and, though once again were unsuccessful in finding any more otters, we did manage to boost a list total by spotting a flock of at least 20 rooks in a newly-mown field.

With time now against us, MD then drove the group to Banna Minn on West Burra, where we all walked down to admire the stunning beach linking Ketla Ness with the rest of West Burra. In the bay, a very confiding red-throated diver was present, while to the south, a sub-adult great northern diver was also noted, along with a single male red-breasted merganser just going into eclipse. Walking next up and onto Ketla Ness, we were then treated to a fly-by from a pale phase arctic skua before walking over to Fugla stack. Here, MD was able to point out the single sheep isolated on the stack. Originally one of two sheep, as one had either died or fallen since MD's last visit in 2024, the last remaining member almost resembled a polar bear due to the vast fleece it had accumulated since having been cut off. This sheep is even famous for being on the satellite image of the island on Google Maps!

Retracing our steps, and with the weather closing in once again, we just had time to pop into Pool of Virkie, in a last attempt to bump up what had turned out to be a bumper day for wader species. Noting a couple of shelduck, we also added bar-tailed godwit to our list, with the discovery of a couple of individuals amongst the curlew, redshank and oystercatcher. This final addition made for a very impressive list of 13 species of waders recorded during the day. By now it was 5.30 pm, so MD covered the short distance back to the hotel, enabling the guests to enjoy a short break before reconvening for our last dinner at 6.30 pm. Taking time to exchange emails, and with the group going there separate ways the following morning, we then bid goodnight after a terrific week, which had seen the group gel beautifully and where we'd also managed to see virtually everything this wonderful archipelago had to offer, despite the weather proving to be frequently challenging on a number of occasions.

Cover images by ©Dominc Singleton

Sign up to our e-news

Sign up to our e-news to find out more about our tours, events, late availability, offers and tour reports at <https://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/subscribe>

Checklist for The Shetland Islands with Mike Dilger



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS								
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
2	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
3	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
4	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓					✓
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓
10	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓				
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓				
13	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
16	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓				✓
18	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
20	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
21	Storm petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	✓	✓					
22	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>							✓
27	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓				
36	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				✓			✓
38	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓		✓	H
41	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓					✓
43	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Find out more about [The Shetland Islands with Mike Dilger](#) or [contact us](#)
 01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

44	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓	✓			✓
46	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓					✓
48	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓					✓
50	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓					✓
51	Red necked phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓				✓	
52	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							✓
54	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Snipe	<i>Gallinago Gallinago</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
58	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓		✓	
59	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓			✓		
67	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Arctic skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
71	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>							✓
77	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>							✓
89	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
92	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓					
94	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	House martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓			
102	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓					H
103	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓

112	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓					✓
117	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
122	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓					
130	Red-necked grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>			✓				
131	Black-winged pratincole	<i>Glareola nordmanni</i>				✓			
132	Temminck's stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>				✓			
	MAMMALS								
3	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>			✓			✓	
4	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			✓		✓		
9	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓		
10	Common seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	

	Plants		
1	Meadow buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Everywhere
2	Creeping buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Everywhere
3	Red campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>	Everywhere
4	Sea campion	<i>Silene uniflora</i>	Everywhere
5	Ragged Robin	<i>Silene flos-cuculi</i>	Wet grassland
6	Moss campion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Keen of Hamar
7	Common chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	Everywhere
8	Common mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Everywhere
9	Shetland mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium nigrescens</i>	Keen of Hamar
10	Sea sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>	Hillswick
11	Curled dock	<i>Rumex crispus</i>	Hillswick
12	Common sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosa</i>	Everywhere
13	Sheep's sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	Everywhere
14	Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Everywhere
15	Slender St. John's wort	<i>Hypericum pulchrum</i>	Keen of Hamar
16	Round-leaved sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>	Hermaness NNR

17	Northern rock-cress	<i>Arabidopsis petraea</i>	Keen of Hamar
18	Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Wet grassland
19	Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Hermaness NNR
20	Bell heather	<i>Erica cinerea</i>	Hermaness NNR
21	Cross-leaved heath	<i>Erica tetralix</i>	Hermaness NNR
22	Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>	Everywhere
23	Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Everywhere
24	Lady's mantle	<i>Alchemilla sp.</i>	Everywhere
25	Kidney vetch	<i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i>	Everywhere
26	Birdsfoot trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Everywhere
27	Red clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>	Everywhere
28	White clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	Everywhere
29	Tufted vetch	<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Roadside verges
30	Fairy flax	<i>Linum catharticum</i>	Keen of Hamar
31	Heath milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	Hermaness NNR
32	Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Roadside verges
33	Scot's lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>	Sumburgh Head
34	Creeping forgetmenot	<i>Myosotis secunda</i>	Roadside verges
35	Monkeyflower	<i>Mimulus guttatus</i>	Fetlar
36	Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>	Hillswick
37	Germander speedwell	<i>Veronica chamaedrys</i>	Everywhere
38	Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia spp.</i>	Hermaness NNR
39	Ribwort plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Everywhere
40	Buckshorn plantain	<i>Plantago coronopus</i>	Everywhere
41	Sea plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>	Keen of Hamar
42	Common butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Hermaness NNR
43	Heath bedstraw	<i>Galium saxatile</i>	Hermaness NNR
44	Sheep's bit	<i>Jason montana</i>	Sandness
45	Coltsfoot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>	Roadside verges
46	Sea mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	Roadside verges
47	Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Sandness
48	Spear thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Banna Min
49	Marsh thistle	<i>Cirsium palustre</i>	Everywhere
50	Catsear	<i>Hypochoeris radicata</i>	Everywhere

Find out more about [The Shetland Islands with Mike Dilger](#) or [contact us](#)
01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

51	Heath-spotted orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Acid grassland
52	Northern marsh orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	Roadside verges
53	Frog orchid	<i>Coeloglossum viride</i>	Keen of Hamar
54	Bog pondweed	<i>Potamogeton polygonifolius</i>	Hermaness NNR
55	Rough meadow-grass	<i>Poa trivialis</i>	Everywhere
56	Cock's-foot grass	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>	Everywhere
57	Crested dog's-tail	<i>Cynosures cristata</i>	Everywhere
58	Wavy hair-grass	<i>Deschampsia flexuosa</i>	Everywhere
59	Sweet vernal-grass	<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>	Everywhere
60	Yorkshire fog	<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Everywhere
61	Marram grass	<i>Ammophila arrenaria</i>	Scousburgh
62	Lyme grass	<i>Elymus arenaria</i>	Scousburgh
63	Common cotton-sedge	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Everywhere
64	Star sedge	<i>Carex echinacea</i>	Hermaness NNR
65	Heath rush	<i>Juncus squarrosus</i>	Hermaness NNR
66	Soft rush	<i>Juncus effusus</i>	Everywhere
67	Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	Many lochans
68	Lesser twayblade	<i>Neottia cordata</i>	Hermaness NNR
69	Arctic sandwort	<i>Arenaria norvegica</i>	Keen of Hamar
70	Mountain everlasting	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Keen of Hamar