

Tour Report

UK – The Farnes & Northumberland in Early Summer

12 – 17 June 2023

American black tern



Atlantic puffin



Comb jelly



Small heath butterfly



Compiled by Martin Kitching

Day 1: Newton Links & the Long Nanny

Monday 12 June 2023

Weather: Clear skies, 21°C, light easterly breeze

After gathering in the hotel, we headed south to High Newton. We were headed for the National Trust reserve at the Long Nanny estuary to see breeding little terns in the strandline on the beach and breeding Arctic terns in the dunes. Nutrient-poor dune systems are an extraordinary habitat. As we arrived, buff-tailed and red-tailed bumblebees and common carder were exploring vast swathes of bloody cranesbill and birds-foot trefoil, while common blue and small heath butterflies dashed around, powered by the afternoon sunshine. Nearby, a common lizard wriggled through the grass.

Stonechats and linnets were a constant feature of our walk, while a skylark was uncharacteristically obliging. For nearly five minutes, the bird preened and fed itself just a few metres away from us and its congeners song-flighted overhead. Meadow pipits parachuted back to the ground at the culmination of their own short song flights, then, as we crossed a short rise in the dunes, there was a tern colony.

Arctic terns were feeding their chicks close to the viewing platform. We could also watch little terns through a scope. Suddenly, an American black tern flew along the dune edge in front of us before settling in the tern roost on the beach and treating us to several fly-bys. It had returned for a fourth consecutive summer to search for a mate in a colony of less-than-welcoming Arctic terns. Walking along the wide grassy track back to the car park, we noticed a dark shape moving around at the edge of the path. Through our binoculars, we identified it as a mole, which we watched for a minute or so before it vanished back into the side of a molehill. We then departed for Seahouses and dinner.

Day 2: Coquet Island, Lesbury, Boulmer & Howick

Tuesday 13 June 2023

Weather: Clear skies, 21°C, light easterly breeze

After breakfast, we headed to Amble for a 10 am sail around Coquet Island. This is always a highlight of any holiday on the Northumberland coast during the seabird breeding season. Once onboard the *G Fisher III*, we were soon making the short crossing to the island, passing eiders along the quayside.

Our first puffins of the holiday soon followed; we saw swirling masses of them as we neared the island. As we passed by, grey seals lifted their heads out of the water to watch us, while a roseate tern flew along the island and others roosted on the rocks below their nesting terraces. Common, Arctic and Sandwich terns were roosting there too, which allowed us to study the differences between them. We were also able to observe the rafting behaviour of guillemots and puffins. Then a tufted duck with a brood of nine ducklings was an unexpected sight.

After walking around Amble harbour and lunch (some opted for the Surf Shack's excellent seafood, while others opted for sausage rolls from the Geordie Banger Co. in the harbour village) we headed north up the coast. Stopping by the river Coquet at Lesbury, we encountered goosander, moorhen, mallard, our second brood of tufted ducks for the day, common buzzards talon-grappling, very confiding blackbirds and robins, and goldfinch, greenfinch, chiffchaff and blackcap all singing.

The tiny fishing village of Boulmer brought further sightings of shelduck, oystercatcher, grey heron and a male reed bunting which was carrying food into a small patch of vegetation in the dunes. Our final destination for the day was the clifftop footpath at Howick. Fulmars were arcing gracefully along the cliff edge, kittiwakes were calling from their nesting ledges, oystercatchers were on the rocky shelves above an azure sea, and speckled wood butterflies were exploring the sun-dappled foliage as we headed back to the minibus and then on to Seahouses.

Day 3: Holy Island & the Farne Islands

Wednesday 14 June 2023

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Weather: Clear skies, 23°C, 10mph south-easterly wind

Our first destination of the day almost epitomises Northumberland. Strait Lonnen has become increasingly popular with visitors but still feels remote if you choose the right spot. We left the hustle and bustle of the main car park and the village and started our walk. The density of northern marsh orchids noticeably increased the further we were from the lush grassland of the south side of the island. We explored dune slacks filled with orchids, and crossed a plateau reminiscent of arctic-alpine tundra, with mats of creeping willow, thyme and bird's-foot trefoil. Soon, the unspoiled beaches of the north of the island were revealed. A little tern was feeding in the shallows, which gave us wonderful views of this delightful diminutive fisher. Eiders were rafting, cormorants and shags were drying their wings, and grey seals were bottling in the sunshine as gannets flew by.

We had an early dinner back in Seahouses, then boarded Serenity for a sunset cruise around the 'Galapagos of the North'. The multi-sensory assault on your eyes, ears and nose is a memory that will never leave you. The air was filled with puffins, razorbills, guillemots and terns - heading out to sea or returning from a successful fishing trip. Kittiwakes were sitting quietly on their nests and the guttural calls of guillemots could be heard out at sea, encouraging their young to join the ranks of the 'jumplings.' One young guillemot took a brave leap of faith right in front of us, before joining its dad and swimming away from the cliffs. Comb jellies were abundant in the remarkably clear sea as we sailed around the islands.

With the sky and the sea taking on a sublime quality as the sun began to set, a harbour porpoise broke the surface in typically undemonstrative manner. It was a delightful sighting, occurring just as we made our way slowly back to the harbour.

Day 4: The Cheviot Valleys

Thursday 15 June 2023

Weather: Clear skies, 23°C, 12mph south-easterly wind

We journeyed inland to the Harthope and Breamish valleys, in the shadow of the Cheviot – Northumberland's highest peak. It felt remote and wild, even though our track was also a driving route.

The walk produced a roe deer and a field full of lapwing and curlew, as well as a confiding yellowhammer. Stopping off at Branton Gravel Pits on the way to the valleys, we were treated to the extraordinary sight of hundreds of blue-tailed and common blue damselflies, many in mating pairs, and blackcap, garden warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff all singing.

The Breamish valley produced common buzzards, including one which was being harried persistently by a common kestrel. Pied wagtails were gathering their lunch as we ate ours by the river, while common sandpiper and dipper called but didn't settle in front of us. One guest also noticed patches of seep monkeyflower.

As we made our way up the Harthope Valley after lunch, red-legged partridges and mistle thrushes crossed the road in front of us, and the eerie cries of curlew echoed across the valley as we arrived at the parking area. Common buzzards soared high overhead and a grey wagtail was busy collecting food as the susurrating buzz of lesser redpoll accompanied us on the walk back to the minibus.

Day 5: South East Northumberland

Friday 16 June 2023

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Weather: Sunny, 25°C

The day started in spectacular fashion for the leader, and the guest who had opted for an early breakfast, as a pod of bottlenose dolphins porpoised rapidly past Seahouses harbour! Not an unusual sight in recent years, but a species that was still scarce here a decade ago.

We headed south on the A1 to Coneygarth, a shallow pond near Ashington, where little and great-crested grebes were sleeping and diving in the morning haze. Then we made our way to the river Blyth in Bedlington, where the trees were alive with bird song and common buzzards were soaring above the valley.

Our pre-lunch destination was Cresswell Pond, a subsidence pond at the southern end of Druridge Bay. We were greeted by avocets, oystercatchers and shelduck, all of which had young with them. We witnessed a young oystercatcher eating worms which were regularly provided by its parents. Reed buntings were singing from the reedbeds near the hide and a sedge warbler appeared briefly in the cow parsley in front of us.

After a lunch stop at the Drift Café, we continued northwards to Druridge Pools, where a panicked flight of teal, mallard, wigeon and curlew was triggered by a marsh harrier drifting over the rushy marsh. Water rails squealed, and a common snipe was seen busily probing the mud at the water's edge.

Our final stop for the day was East Chevington, a former surface mine that was remodelled as a nature reserve in the mid-to-late 1990s. Arctic, common and Sandwich terns were all bathing, a lone black-tailed godwit was roosting with black-headed and common gulls, and a great-crested grebe was dozing on a nest as we returned to the minibus for the journey back to Seahouses.

Day 6: Stag Rock, Budle Bay and Monk's House Pool

Saturday 17 June 2023

Weather: Cloudy, 19°C, 10mph south-easterly wind

For our final morning excursion, we drove north to the mudflats of Budle Bay, then onto Stag Rock at Bamburgh, and finally to Monk's House Pool, between Seahouses and Bamburgh. Budle Bay is at its best in the winter, but it still produced shelduck, little egret, some nice comparison views of great black-backed, lesser black-backed, and herring gull, and curlew stalking along the exposed mud.

At Stag Rock, we encountered a couple of Sandwich terns hunting close to shore, a rock covered in oystercatchers, rock pipit and common whitethroat song-flighting, and eider in the gentle nearshore swell. When we reached Monk's House Pool, a male reed bunting was singing his simple song from the top of the reeds.

The holiday concluded with a magical 20 minutes. We caught sight of a barn owl flying along the back edge of the pool, quartering reedbeds, hedges and fields, before making a couple of unsuccessful plunges to the ground. Finally, it arose with prey, battling through the breeze as it returned to its nest.

It was a wonderful week for birding.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS							
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				✓	✓	
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
3	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓			✓	
4	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>					✓	
5	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓
6	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓	
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					✓	
8	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					✓	
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓	
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓		✓	✓	
12	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓			✓
13	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				✓		
14	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓				

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15	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓		
16	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓	✓	✓
17	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓	
18	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					✓	
19	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					✓	✓
21	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓			
22	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
23	European shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓	✓			
24	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					✓	
25	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓		✓		
26	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					✓	
27	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
28	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓	✓
29	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Pied avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					✓	
31	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓	✓			
33	Eurasian whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					✓	

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34	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					✓	
36	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓			
37	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓	
38	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓		
39	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓		✓	✓
40	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓			
41	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					✓	✓
43	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
47	Little tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	✓		✓			
48	Roseate tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>		✓				
49	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
50	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
51	American black tern	<i>Chlidonias niger surinamensis</i>	✓					
52	Common murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓			

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53	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓			
54	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓			
55	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓			
56	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>					✓	
58	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>						✓
61	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					✓	
68	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>					✓	
69	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
70	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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72	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					✓	
74	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				✓	✓	
75	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
76	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>					✓	
77	Eurasian reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					✓	
78	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Garden warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>				✓		
80	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>						✓
81	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓	✓	
85	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓		
86	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
87	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
88	White-throated dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓		
89	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	

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91	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓		
93	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	European rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓				✓
96	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			✓	
98	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>				✓		
100	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
101	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				✓		
102	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
	MAMMALS							
1	Mole	<i>Talpa europeae</i>	✓					
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓			
2	European roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓			
3	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>					✓	
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓	

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	REPTILES							
1	Common lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>	✓					
	BUTTERFLIES							
1	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>					✓	
2	Common blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	✓					
3	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓		✓	
4	Small heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>	✓		✓		✓	
5	Speckled wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓		✓	
	MOTHS							
1	Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>		✓	✓			
2	Silver Ground Carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe montanata</i>			✓		✓	
	DRAGONFLIES							
1	Common blue damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>					✓	
2	Blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>					✓	

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