

Autumn migration in the Northern Isles

Dr W Eagle Clarke first visited Fair Isle in 1905 and quickly realised that the island offered almost unrivalled opportunities for the study of migration. Study of the island's birds continued and an observatory was officially opened in 1948. The name Fair Isle has become synonymous with the occurrence of wind-blown vagrants from all directions and has hosted more new birds to the British List than any other location in the British Isles. The island has some magnificent scenery and is endowed with a very special charm. On this holiday we will hope that we are blessed with favourable weather conditions for observing bird migration and that we might encounter species such as Citrine Wagtail, Lanceolated Warbler and Yellow-breasted Bunting, which have become regarded as Fair Isle specials. Whilst we will hope for winds from an easterly quarter, winds from other directions can produce some amazing birds. On Fair Isle almost anything can and does turn up. In addition to our time on Fair Isle, we also spend a few days on mainland Shetland where we have further opportunities to search for interesting migrants and visit a range of other habitats not present on Fair Isle.

Day 1: From Shetland (you should arrive in Shetland on the evening of September 5th) we take a morning flight to Fair Isle. The island is situated 24 miles southwest of Sumburgh Head, Mainland. The total land area of the island is approximately 765 hectares and is around three miles by 1½ miles in size. The main habitats are sandstone cliffs that reach almost 200 metres in places. In the northern half of Fair Isle there are sheep-grazed areas of heather and grassy hillocks. In the southern part it is mainly small crofts which in turn have patches of land given over to the production of root vegetables and oats. All these habitats regularly attract migrants as cover on the island is very limited. Fair Isle has recorded well over 345 species, which is more than any other location in the British Isles. As with most migration hotspots, we hope for winds with an easterly element that inevitably brings migrants from Scandinavia and points further east. During our stay on the island, we should, with luck, locate scarce species and the commoner migrants which have bred in Northern Europe over the summer months. On arrival in Fair Isle, we transfer to the bird observatory and take an early opportunity to birdwatch around the building and nearby crofts. The resident wardens will keep us informed during the week of any interesting species that have made landfall on the island.

Dates

Friday September 6th - Saturday
September 14th 2019

Leader: Simon MacLaughlin

Group Size: 8

Birds: 90-110

Days 2-5: We will be based at the recently redeveloped observatory situated on the eastern side of the island, overlooking the picturesque North Haven. The island has some magnificent scenery with towering cliffs and coastal stacks and an interior of crofts and moorland. Each day we explore the island in search of migrants and, hopefully, some of Fair Isle's rarer visitors. There will also be opportunities to observe the work of the observatory and see some of the more interesting species being ringed.

Commoner birds that feature on a daily basis will be the residents and lingering breeding birds. These include Northern Fulmar, Northern Gannet, European Shag, Great Skua, Black Guillemot, Rock and Meadow Pipits, Northern Wheatear and Twite. The local Wrens are of the endemic Fair Isle subspecies *fridariensis*. Although not blessed with extensive wetland habitats, Fair Isle does attract some waders. Common Snipe occur in good numbers whilst Jack Snipe,

Knot and Sanderling are regular. Although not a notable place for sea-watching, a scan offshore is always worthwhile and may produce species such as Great Northern Diver, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters, European Storm Petrel and Common Eider. Flocks of geese pass south over the island and significant movements of Pink-footed Geese are sometimes in evidence.

All this is wonderful, but it is, of course, the migrants that will be the primary focus for our birding. Almost anything can turn up just about anywhere on the island. You are almost as likely to bump into something unusual along the roadside as you are in one of the sheltered Geos or on one of the crofts. Winds with an easterly element in them are most favourable and it is then that commoner migrants are likely to include Whinchat, Common Redstart, Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, and Pied and Spotted Flycatchers. Scarcer migrants that are regular in such weather conditions include Eurasian Wryneck, Bluethroat, Barred, Icterine and Yellow-browed Warblers and Little Bunting. Over the years, Fair Isle has developed a reputation for being *the* place to see a number of national rarities that have become known as 'Fair Isle specialities'. These species include Great Snipe, Citrine Wagtail, Pechora Pipit, Lanceolated and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler and Yellow-breasted Bunting. Our visit is timed to give us excellent chances of encountering these sought after birds. Amongst the scarce and rare species our group in 2013 encountered were Red-backed Shrike, Common Rosefinch, Subalpine and Arctic Warblers and American Golden Plover.

Day 6: We catch the afternoon flight back to Tingwall, from where we will begin our exploration of mainland Shetland.

Day 7-8: Our precise plans for these two days on Shetland will be shaped by the prevailing weather conditions and news of recent arrivals. We will certainly visit a number of sites in the southern part of Shetland mainland. Places such as Scatness, Sumburgh Head, Quendale, Exnaboe and Toab are all locations likely to be on the agenda and locations where we will search

for interesting migrants. Many of the species associated with Fair Isle are possible, and mouth-watering rarities often appear at these locations during the autumn. Rarer species seen in this area at the time of our visit in previous years have included Pallid Harrier, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Citrine Wagtail. The Pool of Virkie is good for waders with Black-tailed Godwit and Curlew Sandpiper amongst the species our 2013 group saw here. Nearby gardens attract passerine migrants and another species seen by our 2013 group in this area was Western Bonelli's Warbler. Loch of Spiggie attracts wildfowl including Goldeneye, Wigeon, Whooper Swan and Greylag Geese.

We will also explore other locations further north on the mainland with the plantations of Kergord and Vidlin and Voe being amongst our likely destinations. These sites have some more substantial cover than much of Shetland and hence often encourage tired migrants to linger a little longer. Once again, commoner warblers and finches are the most likely possibilities but scarce migrants such as Yellow-browed or Barred Warbler are always on the cards and there is always the chance of something even rarer.

Day 9: Flights out of Shetland.

Prices

Ground Price: £1,695

Single room: £150

Deposit: £150

*Air Fare: £100 (Fair Isle flights only)

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, complimentary transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: travel to and from Shetland, accommodation in Shetland on September 5th, drinks, insurance, and items of a personal nature.

*Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights