

Wild Scotland Cruise | May 27 – June 7, 2024

Trip Report | by Chris Harbard



Guide Chris Harbard with clients Kaye, Carol, James, Alan, Carol, Michael, Annette, Ed, Judy, Amy, Pam, Paul, Suzanne, Peggy, Mary.



Mon., May 27

Meeting at the Marriott

The Naturalist Journeys group met at the Courtyard Marriot, Edinburgh. Chris arranged for a drink together before dinner at the 1802 Grill, at the Marriott. Several of us had arrived a few days before, and a few had literally just arrived, so an early 6pm dinner was welcome. After introducing one another, we enjoyed a delicious meal before retiring. The morning would be an exploration of Edinburgh and we were all excited!

Tues., May 28

Old Edinburgh | Glasgow | Greg Mortimer

Our bags were all left to be taken to the bus before we went to breakfast. After a delicious repast, we boarded the coach and said farewell to the Marriott. We joined the other passengers who would be embarking on the cruise from Edinburgh and headed out on a coach tour of the city. Edinburgh is a beautiful old city and a Unesco World Heritage Site. Its Old Town is still full of 16th and 17th century buildings while the New Town was built in the 18th and 19th century and contains many gardens and green spaces. The old town is dominated by Edinburgh Castle and larger buildings like St Giles Cathedral.



After our tour we were dropped off just below the castle with several hours of free time in which to explore and also have lunch. The weather was a little overcast and rainy but nevertheless we spread out with some going to the National Museum of Scotland, others to see the castle and a few went to the National Gallery of Scotland. From our vantage point near the castle we could see down to the National Gallery and the Sir Walter Scott Monument on Princes Street. Fairly close to our drop-off point was Greyfriars Kirkyard Cemetery and I joined another passenger for a quick tour. It is said to be the place where J K Rowling found many of her character names for her Harry Potter books. One of its most famous inhabitants is Greyfriars Bobby a Skye Terrier who guarded his master's grave for 14 years. Famous people buried there include geologist James Hutton and William Smellie, who was the first editor of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It seemed that gulls and pigeons were among the commonest birds in the city but above the sound of Edinburgh's traffic, Eurasian Wrens could be heard singing, while Common Swifts screamed overhead and Eurasian Magpies chattered from the trees.

We met back on the bus and shared stories. Several of our group had tried haggis for lunch, and seemed to enjoy it! The coach then departed for our two-hour journey to Troon, on the west coast where our ship awaited us. As we were making good time, our driver took us on a short detour through the city of Glasgow on the way. We arrived safely at Troon and there, a short walk from the coach, was the *Greg Mortimer* which would be our mobile hotel for the next 11 nights. We were greeted by the Expedition Leader Daniel and were soon on board, checked-in and enjoying some refreshments before heading to our cabins where our luggage awaited us. Soon it was time to gather in the Lecture Theatre where Daniel introduced the expedition team plus the birding group leaders, myself from Naturalist Journeys, and Rick Wright from VENT. Daniel outlined the activities for the next day and answered questions. Following this introduction came the mandatory Zodiac briefing to explain how these fabulous inflatable boats work to safely transport us ashore to remote island locations. Then came the lifeboat and safety briefing after which we could retire to our cabins until dinner time or have a drink at the bar. In the dining room we spread our group across three or four tables and enjoyed the wonderful meal provided by the chef and his amazing team. We all retired for the night filled with anticipation and excitement for the expedition that was about to begin.

Wed., May 29

Iona | Lunga | Puffins!!

Just before 7am, our intrepid Expedition Leader Daniel announced the new day and welcomed us to the island of Iona. The ship was anchored just offshore and from the dining room came the delicious smell of breakfast. A tremendous buffet spread welcomes us with all manner of cold and cooked delights, which were to be our early

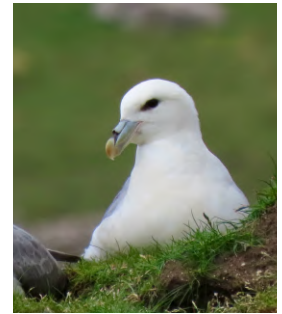


morning treat each day. I checked with the clients at their various tables to make sure their night had been pleasant and then tucked into a full English!

After breakfast an announcement told us when the first Zodiacs would be heading for shore, and our group was on them! Soon we were gathering on the quayside, leaving our lifejackets in the bin, and getting ready to explore. Iona is famous as an early centre of Christianity where St Columba established what is now the famous Abbey where many past Kings of Scotland were buried, including Macbeth! It is where the Book of Kells was produced and is also the home of the Celtic Cross. As we walked past the Nunnery, following the road towards the Abbey a familiar two-note call could be heard ... 'cuck-oo, cuck-oo'! It was, of course, the iconic call of the Common Cuckoo and two birds were seen flying around, being chased by smaller birds, probably Meadow Pipits. One perched on a wire, its long tail cocked, with its pointed wings drooped, while it called. I quickly set up my scope and everyone got a reasonable view before it flew off. Continuing our walk towards the Abbey, we saw a Song Thrush, several Rooks, a Blackbird and a European Robin. As we reached the St Columba Hotel, a sweet descending song could be heard coming from a tree. It was a Willow Warbler, a summer visitor from Africa which is one of the commonest migrants to Europe, Perched on top of the tree it was singing its heart out to proclaim its territory and impress its mate.

Just before the Abbey is a cemetery which looks across a large grassy field. This is a prime location for that elusive bird, the Corn Crake (or Landrail). While some of the group visited the neighbouring abbey, a few of us stood by the wall of the cemetery watching and listening. After about 20 minutes, and as we were about to leave, the strange buzzing call was briefly heard, coming from the far corner of the field. We heard it a few more times and decided to move next to the Abbey, which would hopefully be closer to the bird. It continued to call ... we continued to watch every blade of grass, but with no luck. Although only yards away it was invisible in vegetation just taller than itself. A pair of Northern Wheatears were a lovely distraction, with a nest nearby, but sadly we left with only the sound as a memory. Another bird was reported back near to the quay, by the fire station but this did not even call for us. Back to the ship for lunch, and then on to our next destination.

As we sailed on, we passed the island of Staffa, close enough to make out the huge basalt columns for which it is famous. At one end of the island is an opening into Fingal's Cave which features in Mendelssohn's overture *The Hebrides*. We soon arrived at the island of Lunga, where a 'wet' landing onto a stony beach awaited us. Towels were used to make getting out from the Zodiacs easier and we were soon walking on level ground following the path towards a puffin colony. After climbing a narrow slippery path we arrived at the top of a cliff and there, on



the grassy cliff edge, were dozens of Atlantic Puffins. This delightful seabird lives in burrows and as a bird arrives, it is greeted by its partner who has been incubating their single egg. After some mutual preening, they change places and the other bird flies out to sea to feed. Getting up close to these fabulous seabirds is something quite magical. With their comical appearance they cannot fail to delight. Also on the cliff were Northern Fulmars and a few Razorbills.

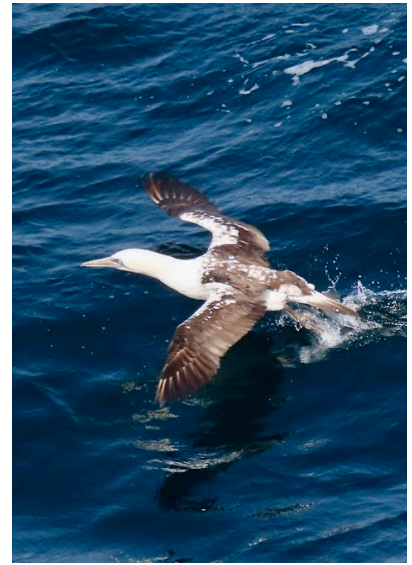
Back on board we were invited to the Captain's Welcome Cocktail Party with cocktails and canapes followed by an introduction from Captain Maxim Makarovskiy, meeting his senior officers. After this Expedition leader Daniel briefed us on tomorrow's plans. Dinner soon followed, and then, after quickly going through the bird list for the previous two days, it was time for some welcome overnight rest!

Thurs., May 30

Lochside walk | Island flowers | People power

The Isle of Skye is the largest of the Inner Hebridean islands and we awoke just offshore. After breakfast, we boarded the Zodiacs and headed for the island. The journey was a little splashy and we passed some waterfalls cascading down the rocky slopes on our way. We landed at Loch Coruisk, where a racing river enters the sea. Several Black Guillemots welcomed us as we came to land. It was another 'wet' landing which meant wearing our rubber boots, and these proved doubly necessary as due to recent rain, the path was a little muddy, crossing several boggy areas. The scenery was truly stunning, and our path followed the river to where it opened out as a small loch. Birds included the ubiquitous Meadow Pipits, a Pied Wagtail and a Common Sandpiper on an island in the loch. Along the path there was a good variety of plants including Foxglove, Common Lousewort and Bog Asphodel, as well as some lovely Common Spotted Orchids. In the boggier areas were Common Butterwort and Oblong-leaved Sundew, both insectivorous plants. On the Zodiac ride back to the ship we stopped to admire some Harbor Seals which were lounging on the rocks.

The afternoon proved to be quite a contrast as we visited the island of Eigg. The landing was at a concrete quay, and we were greeted by some island guides who would be taking us on a nature walk. The island is owned by the community, unlike most Scottish islands which are usually owned by 'lairds'. This self-sufficient community manufactures its own energy from solar, wind, and hydro power, with one of the other excursions going to see how they did this. Another visited the community orchard which grows some of the island's food. The nature walk took us along Eigg pier, which juts out forming a shallow bay. Here there were Eurasian Oystercatcher (the commonest shorebird of the trip), Common Ringed Plover, and a distant Redshank. Over some nearby woodland a Common Buzzard was seen being dive-bombed by a Eurasian Kestrel. A path around the other side of the bay



took us through the edge of some woodland with Willow Warbler, Coal and Blue Tits, Chaffinches and a small group of Eurasian Siskins. Beautiful flowers lined our way, and we could smell the Wild Garlic as well as enjoy the Bluebells, Water Avenas and some beautiful Northern Marsh Orchids. The hawthorn bushes were in flower and attracted both bees and birds. Back at the quay we thanked our guides and donned our lifejackets before boarding the Zodiacs back to the ship. Back on board there was a recap which covered puffins and photography, followed by a briefing about tomorrow's exciting visit to St Kilda. Dinner followed, then the bird list, then bed!

Fri., May 31

Deserted village | Seabird heaven | Gannets galore

Early birds who were awake before the morning announcement were able to watch us arrive at the island of Hirta, the main island of the St Kilda group. Tucked on the east side of the island, protected from the predominantly westerly winds, is Village Bay where we arrived in very good sea conditions. Not every ship which arrives can disembark there, and so we were very lucky. After breakfast, the island warden Sue from the National Trust for Scotland came on board to tell us about the islands and what to expect there. Soon the Zodiacs transported us to the quay, where we disembarked. No-one lives year-round on the island anymore, and the last residents left in 1930. Their old houses still exist, along with some new military buildings which house a tracking station, designed to 'blend in' with native turf roofs.

Our group began to explore along the back of the 'high street'. The most obvious birds (apart from Northern Fulmars and gulls) were Starlings, which had nests in all the stone walls. A loud song drew our attention to one of the most interesting birds on the island, the St Kilda Wren. This subspecies of the Eurasian Wren is only found on St Kilda and is larger, more strongly barred, and greyer. The singing bird was flitting along a stone wall, perching occasionally to sing. Soon we all had good scope views of it. A fine male Northern Wheatear was also on show and a Common Snipe was calling but not visible, and not displaying with its 'drumming' flight. Meadow and Rock Pipits, and a pair of Collared Doves (native, not introduced) were the only other landbirds seen. On top of some of the 'cleits' or stone storage buildings, were the nests of Northern Fulmars. In many of the fields were Soay sheep, named after one of the islands, and a distinctive breed, similar to the ancestral sheep from Europe and Asia. Walking back along the front of the houses, we were able to explore a little, and enjoy the small museum which told the sad story of how the inhabitants virtually starved before they were evacuated. Previously the islands had been inhabited for about 2,000 years.

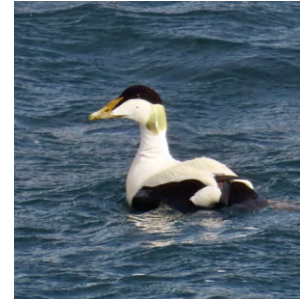


Back to the ship for lunch, and as we ate, the ship began to explore the coast, heading for the seabird colonies at Boreray with its surrounding islands. Captain Maxim skillfully steered us close to the huge Northern Gannet colony on Stac Lee, and around the larger island of Boreray, as well as Stac an Armin which was where the last British Great Auk was caught in 1840. Apart from thousands of gannets, one highlight was a group of seven Great Skuas feeding on a dead gannet. Soon it was time to head east, towards Lewis, our island for tomorrow. Afternoon Tea offered delicious sandwiches and cakes (and of course tea) and we were also treated to a talk by historian Carol, telling us more about St Kilda and the Outer Hebrides. Daniel gave us a briefing about our time on Lewis tomorrow and before we knew it, it was time for dinner.

Sat., Jun. 1 Hebridean stones | Zodiac cruise | Island visit

This morning we found ourselves off the coast of Lewis, the most northern of the Western Isles in the Outer Hebrides. After breakfast came a Zodiac landing at a quay, near the Callanish Stones (Calanais in Gaelic). To reach them we had a short walk along the edge of a small bay. The tide was out and there were plenty of birds. In the bay Arctic Terns were diving for fish, and on the far shore were some Graylag Geese with goslings, plus a few Common Shelduck. Eurasian Oystercatchers and a distant Eurasian Curlew were spotted. The standing stones form a cross shape and were erected 5,000 years ago. From the entrance to the stones we could stand and look over the countryside. In a nearby damp valley were several Northern Lapwings and a few pairs of Common Redshank. Eurasian Skylarks were singing and Barn Swallows swooped by. A couple of Hooded Crows were on the look out for anything edible and as usual European Starlings were everywhere. A European Golden Plover flashed by and a few minutes later we discovered one in a nearby field - rather flighty to begin with but eventually we all managed to get a look at it. People gradually started to walk back to the quay, and two of the group watched a White-tailed Eagle fly past, missed by the rest of us but a Gray Heron posed nicely in the bay for everyone.

Back at the ship there was time for lunch while we moved a short distance to Pabay Mor (Pagaigh Mòr in Gaelic) a small offshore island. Here those who wished to kayak could do so while the rest of us enjoyed a Zodiac cruise around the island followed by a wet landing with time to explore. While our Zodiac was making towards the shore, Adrian, the ship's photographer radioed from a vantage point on the island, that he was watching an eagle. We scanned around and soon spotted a large shape a little distance away. We watched it fly towards the ship and disappear. Subsequently Adrian's photos showed that it was an immature Golden Eagle. Common Eiders and Black Guillemots were seen along the coast, and a couple of Ruddy Turnstones fed along the rocky



shore. Good numbers European Shags were also seen on many of the rocks. When we reached the beach we disembarked and many went to visit the remains of a mediaeval church, and some shallow Victorian ponds, where live lobster were stored before sale. On the grassy slopes of the island Meadow Pipits were singing and a pair of Northern Wheatears were watched taking food to their young in a hidden nest beneath a large rock. Back by the ship and Common Loon was seen by several of the returning Zodiacs. After a briefing and dinner we lifted anchor and headed away from the west of Scotland, sailing north towards the Orkney Islands.

Sun., Jun. 2

Morning at sea | Bird reserve

As there was no rush to reach our destination for the day, we were treated to a 'lie in' with breakfast an hour later than usual. The morning at sea meant we could have a talk from the ship's geologist about how Scotland was formed. Some of the keener birders were up on deck but there were few birds to be seen. As we began to near the Orkney Islands the ship announced a citizen science eBird count of birds which brought many more people out on deck where in about an hour, nine species were seen, including our first Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua in the UK), many Northern Fulmars and Gannets, as well as several Atlantic Puffins. Lunch then beckoned.

Soon after this we arrived at Papa Westray, one of the most northern Islands of the Orkney group. Papa Westray is just offshore from the larger island of Westray and the flight between islands is the shortest scheduled passenger flight in the world – the fastest time being a mere 53 seconds. We took a little longer in our Zodiacs and not only was it a wet landing but the weather threatened to be wet as well. The first Zodiacs ashore were taken on an archaeological walk, while the birders were driven up to North Hill RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) nature reserve at the north of the island where we were joined by the warden, James. Wind and rain made the birding difficult, but we set up scopes overlooking a bay and found a nice group of Dunlin, many with their black-bellied breeding plumage. Eurasian Oystercatchers, Eurasian Curlew and Common Redshank. A group of Northern Shoveler were the only ones seen on the trip. James took us up towards the seacliffs, across several fields as the wind and rain swirled around. Common Snipe could be heard drumming overhead and at the cliff edge we were greeted by Common Murre (Guillemot in the UK), Razorbill, Puffin, Black Guillemot and European Shag. In one of the fields James pointed out the diminutive Scottish Primrose, and rare endemic plant. We were driven back to the quayside, and there was just time for some to pop into the local pub where a warming drachm of Scotch or a local ale could be enjoyed to the strains of a house band playing waltzes and reels. Soon we were all back on board and enjoying a Barbecue, moved inside because of the weather.



There was a great atmosphere with music and party hats for all and a delicious selection of BBQ fare for everyone to enjoy. Our last activity was the bird list before retiring for the night.

Mon., Jun. 3 Neolithic village | Ancient Broch

We awoke to strong westerlies and quite some swell but our ever- resourceful captain found a sheltered spot and we were soon anchored, with the expedition team scouting the landing while we enjoyed breakfast. The morning was to be an exploration of the Jarlshof archaeological site and also a birding walk for those so inclined! We wet-landed onto West Voe beach, only a short distance from the Sumburgh Hotel, next to the entrance to Jarlshof. The birding groups set off along the edge of Sumburgh airport where a single Eurasian Curlew was briefly seen along with a couple of Eurasian Oystercatchers. Eurasian Skylarks were singing and a Twite flew over. Fields by the road revealed Eurasian Blackbirds, Meadow Pipits plus lots of European Starlings. At the back of one field a Eurasian Curlew showed well. We reached Grutness beach where the tidal wrack held a few Ruddy Turnstones and some lovely summer-plumaged Sanderling. A pair of Ravens battled with Hooded Crows in the air, the latter looking small by comparison. We returned to the Sumburgh Hotel where there was time to enjoy a cup of tea and a biscuit before taking a tour around Jarlshof. The site was occupied for about 4,000 years through to the 1600s with Bronze Age, Iron Age, Viking and medieval buildings. The only occupants now are House Sparrows, Starlings and a Eurasian Wren (Shetland race).

Another lovely lunch with irresistible desserts was enjoyed by all while the ship sailed around Sumburgh Head towards the tiny island of Mousa along the east coast of mainland Shetland. An RSPB nature reserve, it also boasts the best-preserved Iron Age fortification in Europe – Mousa Broch. It stands nearly 50 feet high and is made of two concentric stone walls, with a staircase in between. European Storm-Petrels nest in burrows within the walls but only come in at night, so we could not see them. The walk there was pleasant, with Eurasian Skylarks singing, several Northern Wheatears seen, as well as a couple of Twite. A Eurasian Oystercatcher was guarding a chick, and Common Snipe were heard drumming, while Great Skuas flew overhead. Two Red-throated Loons (called divers in the UK) flew overhead. The journey back to the ship in the Zodiacs was rather splashy and disembarking at the side gate took some time! A recap briefing was very informative, followed by dinner and the bird list.

Tues., Jun. 4 Isolated island | Tea, cakes and knits | Helicopter visit

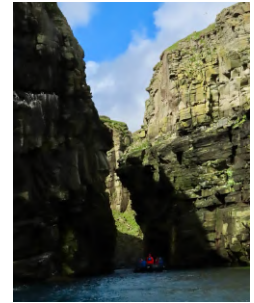
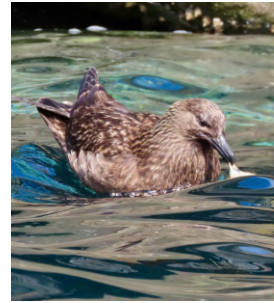
The morning was windy. Near the ship was the shore of Fair Isle and a small bay with waves crashing onto it ... the ship, left and headed north. The wind and swell were considerable but we hoped a harbor to the north



would be more sheltered. It was ... and as we enjoyed our breakfast the expedition team prepared to check the landing conditions. Soon we were heading ashore to be greeted by a warden from the nearby Fair Isle Bird Observatory who explained the options open to us. He would take one group to look for Puffins along the nearby cliffs while those wanting a hike could follow a different path. All options led to the Community Center where tea and cakes, scones, biscuits and other sundry sweetmeats awaited. As we had already seen Puffins well, our group decided on a slow exploratory walk along the road to the Community Centre allowing time to stop and look at whatever was seen. In the small bay with waves crashing on it, as seen from the ship, there were some Common Eider, and Ruddy Turnstone on the rocks. Looking back to the nearby cliffs we could see Puffins on the grassy slopes. We walked past the Bird Observatory, still being rebuilt after a fire which destroyed it in March 2019, and nearby a Eurasian Wren was singing but not seen – the Fair Isle subspecies. In fields by the road were a couple of Eurasian Curlews and several Northern Wheatears were seen. Two brown birds in one field revealed themselves in the scope as Parasitic Jaegers (known as Arctic Skuas in the UK), one clearly sitting on a nest. Meadow Pipits and Skylarks were plentiful, and every wall had noisy young Starlings within, calling for food.

We soon reached the Community Center where a wonderful spread of scones and other delicious fancies were laid out, along with tea and coffee. Fair Isle knitwear, with its unique patterns, was available for sale, as were drawings from the local school and other various mementoes. Meanwhile Chris and Rick (VENT leader) snuck out to find the local, post office – not to send mail, but to check it out as a birding locality, as a rare Icterine Warbler had been seen there the day before. It was there ... so we headed back to the center to tell the others. Soon a small group of us was watching it over the wall of the post office. This tiny vagrant had been blown across the North Sea by easterly winds which had displaced it from its usual migration path to Scandinavia. Our going to see it could be officially described as a ‘twitch’! We said our goodbyes to the islanders and walked back to the quay where our trusty Zodiacs awaited. Back on-board ship it was nearly time for lunch ... for those not filled with scones, Scotch pancakes and biscuits!

An announcement alerted us to an impending visit from a helicopter. The Coastguard had asked for permission to perform a drill, and our captain had agreed. Soon we were all gathered on deck as it approached the stern of the ship and hovered. A door in the helicopter opened and a crew member was winched down to the deck of the ship. Where he stood and waved, soon being winched back up again to complete the drill! Our history lecturer, Carol, then gave us a talk about Vikings followed by Vicky who told the story of the traditionally built Viking longship which she sailed on for an epic voyage from New York to Norway! A briefing on tomorrow’s activities was followed by recaps and our NJ leader Chris Harbard was invited to give one about birds and



birding, and after explaining about the Heligoland traps used on Fair Isle, he entertained us all with a revealing personal look at birdwatchers, birders and twitchers. Dinner and bird list followed.

Wed., Jun. 5

Seabird cliffs | Capital visit

One of the huge benefits of cruising on an expedition ship is its flexibility and the ability to change plans in the face of adversity. So when we arrived to large waves and blustery winds on the western side of the Shetland Islands it was time for Plan B. When we awoke, the sight of land on the port side as we headed north meant that we had moved to the east side of the mainland, which was much more sheltered. Our landing on Papa Stour had become a visit to the cliffs along the Isle of Noss. An announcement before breakfast alerted us to this change and we were told to prepare for a Zodiac cruise along the cliffs, with kayaking for those that wanted to. This split the group up into more than one Zodiac, but the ship's guides who drive the Zodiacs are all good naturalists.

Conditions looked great and we were soon heading towards the towering red sandstone cliffs of Noss which reach nearly 600 feet on the east side of the island. The erosion of the layered rocks has formed incredible ledges which are used as nesting sites by thousands of seabirds. Our small Zodiacs are incredibly maneuverable and safe, so we were able to explore right up the cliff face. As we got close to the white-stained ledges we could see the residents there – hundreds of Common Murres packed close together on the narrow ledges, Northern Fulmars taking advantage of larger ledges and slopes, and as we ventured along we came to areas covered with hundreds of Northern Gannets. At the base of the cliffs, on the water, were rafts of auks – murres, razorbills and Atlantic Puffins. Several Great Skuas were feasting on birds which had perished and were floating on the water. A few Great Black-backed Gulls were patrolling the cliffs watching for a careless parent to leave eggs or chicks unguarded. In some of the Gannet nests we could see colored fishing net fragments, picked up instead of seaweed and incredibly dangerous as they cannot break and get entangled with birds' feet. Our Zodiac drivers steered into narrow chasms, and dark caves and in one we all jumped as a European Shag splashed noisily into the water in the gloom ahead. Gray Seals watched as we floated by and a small Rock Pipit was seen high up on pink-colored slope, covered by flowering Sea Pink or Thrift. Sadly this thrilling boat-ride had to end and we made our way back to the ship for what was a trick disembarkation due to the swell. All the fresh air and sea spray had given us an appetite and luckily it was time for lunch.

For the afternoon Captain Maxim had managed to find a berth free at Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Islands, and so, unusually we came alongside and could walk down a gangway to get ashore. There was a nearby museum to visit, and a slightly longer walk into town, with many interesting buildings and shops. A check among



the clients showed that most wanted to explore than town, but a few would go birding and so five of us headed out by taxi to Clickimin Loch at the edge of town. At the loch there is a small, ruined broch which is a good watchpoint, so we stood there scanning as the dark clouds massed overhead. One new bird for the trip was immediately visible at the back of the loch – Tufted Duck. There were several pairs diving, and close by a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers and a Mute Swan. Arctic Terns were landing on a small island where they were clearly breeding and Eurasian Oystercatchers piped from the far shore. As we walked towards the south side of the loch the heavens opened. Luckily, we were close to a covered bus shelter and so were able to stay dry while drenching rain, then scouring hail, fell from the sky. On the walk back to town we saw the usual European Starlings and Hooded Crows. There was time to look in the local shops, or sample a beer in a local pub, before it was time to be back at the ship. On board we had our final recap briefing, followed by group dinner in the Tuscan Dining Room. Immediately afterwards the ship was holding a trivia quiz, which included a game called 'How Big Is It?' which involved guessing the length of various things from a Puffin to a Zodiac! We entered a team called 'Bird Brains' and guess what ... we won!!

Thurs., Jun. 6

Walking in circles | Ancient Cathedral

The last day of the trip dawned and we breakfasted as the ship docked alongside at Kirkwall, the capital of the Orkney Islands. Coaches awaited to take us on two differing tours. Most of us had opted for the historic tour with a visit to St Magnus Cathedral, but a few of the group selected the other tour which visited neolithic ruins at Skara Brae, as well as some WWII sites. On the first tour we stopped at the standing stone circle at Stenness and while the group took a tour of the stones, I checked out the birds on the nearby water. Lots of Mute Swans, but wait a minute, one looks different. A single Whooper Swan was visible at the back of a field and I set the scope up for all to see. Further on we reached the Ring of Brodgar, a large circle of standing stones with the RSPB Brodgar nature reserve next to it. Common Redshank called from the neighboring fields and on a small pool there were Common Shelduck and Graylag Geese. On a bush near the parking lot a lone male Red Bunting was singing away. The coach took us through the green countryside of Orkney while the guide talked about WWII and whisky distilleries. We stopped in town of Stromness briefly and were soon back in Kirkwall. Last on the itinerary was a tour of St Magnus Cathedral, the northernmost cathedral in Scotland, founded in 1137. Our guide told of the history of the building while we marveled at the architecture and beautiful stained glass



windows. Lunch could be taken on board ship, or in a local pub or restaurant and by mid-afternoon we were all aboard and sailing away from the fabulous Northern Isles.

We were given a disembarkation briefing to prepare for leaving the ship the following day and all of the passengers assembled up on the back deck for a photograph. Later came the Captain's farewell Cocktail Party in which Captain Maxim thanked his officers and rest of the crew, followed by our last dinner.

Fri., Jun. 7 Aberdeen

Cases were placed outside our rooms before breakfast and it wasn't long before we were being called to board various coaches to the airport, train station or elsewhere. Goodbyes were said and we all waved goodbye to the *MV Greg Mortimer* which had been our wonderful home for the last ten days.

Thanks to all of the staff on *MV Greg Mortimer*, especially the Expedition Team and their leader Daniel who helped to make sure we had the best possible time ashore. Thanks also to Rick Wright and the group from VENT with whom we liaised when ashore via walkie talkie radios.

Group Photo (Chris Harbard - CH), Walking along Loch Coruisk (CH), Atlantic Puffin (CH), Common Eider (CH), Northern Gannet (CH), Edinburgh skyline (CH), MV Greg Mortimer (CH), Group of Atlantic Puffins (CH), The Nunnery, Iona (CH), Northern March Orchid (CH), Yellow Iris (CH), Razorbills (CH), Harbour Seals (CH), Loch Coruisk (CH), Eurasian Oystercatcher (CH), Northern Fulmars (CH), Cliet (CH), Boreray (CH), Zodiac Cruise (CH), Callanish Stones (CH), European Shag (CH), MV Greg Mortimer, Pabay Mor (CH), Atlantic Puffin (CH), Ruddy Turnstone (CH), Sheep on Mousa (CH), Natural sea arch (CH), Fair Isle (CH), Isle of Noss (CH), Great Skua (CH), Northern Gannets (CH), Ring of Brodgar (CH), Common Redshank (CH), St Magnus Cathedra (CH), Harald Hardrade, St Magnus Cathedral, Orkney (CH), Group (CH)