

The Farne Islands A long-weekend of seabirds Up-close and personal! **Report by Tony Scott**

Photos: John Rogers (JR) and Gerda / Tony Scott (GS/TS)

Saturday 23rd June 2012, wet, very wet in fact, dull and dreich. What a way to start a weekend over on the Northumberland coast. The rain was incessant, but Derek, our cheery driver, steered our group of 26 local birders in the comfort of a new 49-seat Volvo coach along the M77 towards Glasgow. He attempted to brighten the mood by posing a 'Glasgow Quiz' as we passed through the city. "How many bricks were used in the building of Barlinnie Prison? Anyone with the right answer gets a drink from Tony tonight!" A few attempts were made at the answer, but Derek had to say "You're quite safe Tony, they'll never get it. The prison was built out of stone, not brick!" The rain was still coming down as we piled out of the coach for a morning coffee at Harthill Services. By the time we were back on the coach, the rain was easing. On the Edinburgh bypass, we could see a hint of brightness and the sun actually shone as we drove over the scenic Soutra Heights into the beautiful Border landscapes.

Arrival at The Hirsel was in the dry and the sun made sporadic appearances as we walked around the policies hoping to see some mind-blowing species, or even just enjoying the common woodland birds. In the two hours we were here, we saw little grebes, herons, tufted ducks, coot with young birds in tow, moorhen, pochard, both swifts and house martins swooping low over the lake - viewed from a tiny hide which was a great vantage point. Some of those - including Duncan - who spent all of their time here were rewarded with views of an otter. In the woodland the remains of once glorious rhododendron and azalea bushes were to be seen, along with long-tailed tits, blue and great tits, goldfinch, song thrush and blackbirds. After eating our packed lunch at the picnic tables and a visit to the craft shops, we left for the Northumberland coast. On arrival at Amble, the wind was blowing strongly but the sun was shining on and off. I had doubts whether or not our cruise would be able to take place. After chatting to Elizabeth, the wife of skipper Dave Gray, we were assured that it could be managed. So at 16.45 we boarded their two vessels, half of us aboard the MV "G. Fisher" and the other half aboard an old lifeboat - lovingly restored. This was the one-time Eastbourne lifeboat, named "Steadfast". The cruise was lively in more ways than one, the 90 minutes or so that we spent circumnavigating RSPB's Coquet island reserve was rich in bird sightings, with many puffins whizzing around the boat and the noise of grating terns adding to the excitement. Grey Atlantic seals were also numerous and popped their heads out of the water to see what we were up to. There were large numbers of Arctic and sandwich terns and also a few common terns. The island speciality, roseate terns were not many in number and were difficult to spot, mainly because the motor vessels were heaving up and down in the swell. However, John (Rogers) managed to get a couple of good shots, one of which you can see opposite. Other bird sightings included kittiwake, shag, cormorant, lesser and great black-backed gulls, herring gulls, common gulls, black-headed gulls, common guillemots and razorbills. The force four wind was beginning to abate as we made our way back to Amble Harbour for around 18.20. This was the first day with the seabirds of Northumberland's coast, and tomorrow was going to get us even closer to most of the species seen today. We left Amble to drive through historic Warkworth and headed for the A1 which would speed us north to Beal, where our comfortable rooms at the Lindisfarne Inn awaited us. After checking in, we met in the bar before dinner at 20.30 hrs. Ken and Sheila Smith were staying nearby and joined us for dinner, swelling our numbers to 28. A most convivial evening with the food slowly paced, we had ample time to chat about the events of the day.



At The Hirsel, Coldstream TS



House martins skim the lake at The Hirsel JR



All aboard the 'Steadfast' at Amble JR



Roseate tern, Coquet Island JR

Sunday 24th June dawned brightly, and the weather more or less behaved itself for our boat trip out to the Farne Islands today. We were up and about reasonably early and ready for our big Northumberland breakfast at 08.00. Set up for the day with fried, poached or scrambled eggs, local sausages, bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms, fried bread and baked beans, toast, tea or coffee and all the rest - we were ready to leave just after nine. We drove via Bamburgh and on to Seahouses for 09.35, where Derek swung the big coach right down to the harbour, stopping outside Billy Shiel's booking kiosk. We met Sheila and Kenneth once again who joined us for the trip. Derek declined to join us, after seeing the state of the sea - a little choppy but not too bad in fact. Our group, plus another group of birders and photographers from Brittany piled into "Glad Tidings II" - one of Billy Shiel's older vessels - basically an open motor boat, but great for all round vision of course. The famous Billy Shiel MBE (who received his medal for services to tourism) sadly passed away last year, but it was his son William who was at the helm of our boat today. Later in the day, he told us a story about his uncle Jack who is still alive and over 90 years of age. When Jack was in the Royal Navy during WW II he often sent letters home, but could never say (for security reasons) where about in the world they were at any given time. Once, writing a Christmas letter, he got around the problem by saying he was watching Sandwich terns. His family, who knew lots about bird migration, realised he was in West Africa, in Freetown, Sierra Leone in fact, as the terns would be overwintering there! A nice touch without officialdom being any the wiser! As William says, its great to listen to 'a' the crack' from the older members of his large family.

As we ploughed through the swell towards the Farnes group of islands, we started to see lots of common guillemots and puffins. As we climbed the steep steps on to Staple Island (low tide) we realised we were entering an amazing world of wildlife - up close and personal! We were surrounded by colonies of puffins, common guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills and shags. The attendant herring and lesser black-backed gulls were as opportunistic as ever, carefully eyeing the (mainly) guillemot colonies on the off-chance of picking out a tasty, fluffy youngster for a mid-morning snack. The human 'predators' were only here to shoot, digitally that is, and I have never seen such an assemblage of expensive photographic equipment with mightily impressive telephoto lenses anywhere else I can remember. After a few days of poor weather, all the boat companies were doing a brisk trade in ferrying keen birders and family groups across to Staple Island and Inner Farne for what has to be one of the natural wonders of the world. The echoing calls of the kittiwakes and the low grunting of the colourful puffins created an amazingly intense and electric atmosphere. One could almost forget this was the real world - and it truly was the real, natural world, away from the press reporting on the economic woes of our in-your-face capitalist society with its alleged corrupt investment bankers, the worries of civil wars in Africa and the Middle East, and the tales of widespread destruction of pristine ecosystems throughout the world. We did forget it all and we did enjoy being so close to so much wonderful wildlife. It was peace and (relative) tranquillity at its best.

We were able to enjoy just over two hours here and the sea air had given us all an appetite. Just as well we had our packed lunches with us, which kept us going until the evening (after the big breakfasts we really shouldn't have needed it). At around 12.30, we boarded our motor boat once again for a cruise around the whole of the Farne Islands group passing Brownsman and Longstone with its famous lighthouse where Grace Darling lived with her father (the lighthouse keeper). We were told the story of the famous shipwreck when Grace and her father helped to save the lives of the stricken crew. There is a Grace Darling museum in nearby Bamburgh, although time did not allow us to visit this time around. We were now on our way to Inner Farne to meet the Arctic terns.



The Lindisfarne Inn, Beal JR



Booking tickets for the Farne Islands boat JR



Heading out from Seahouses JR



Guillemot colony on approach to Staple Island JR



A successful catch! JR

On arrival at Inner Farne around 13.45 hrs, we had close encounters of a very different kind than those experienced on Staple Island. This time we were eyeballing Arctic terns. The adult birds were incessant in the protection of their young chicks. We were the intruders into tern territory, but it is only the Arctic terns who attack - the other tern residents, Sandwich and common, had breeding grounds a distance away from the designated walkways of Inner Farne. Nests were adjacent to, or actually on the paths and board walks and it was more important to look down rather than up - in case one inadvertently stepped onto a tern nest or heaven forbid, directly on to one of the many chicks! Good headgear was the order of the day, plus a walking pole held above head height also had the desired effect of keeping the adult Arctic terns at bay.

The sun shone for much of our time on this island, although we had one heavy shower which we could see heading over from the mainland. After 'running the gauntlet' through the main breeding areas, we could sit peacefully close to the lighthouse and watch the play of ever changing light across the water and over the brooding outline of majestic Bamburgh Castle. Of course, species other than terns inhabit Inner Farne, and there are large colonies of common guillemots and puffins amongst others. Flocks of starlings and both black-headed and herring gulls were plentiful, as well as shag colonies on the steeper cliffs, together with more kittiwakes.

A few facts and figures. Puffins are the most numerous breeding birds of these islands, with around 56,000 pairs. This is followed by about 33,000 pairs of common guillemots, just short of 5,000 pairs of kittiwakes, 2,500 pairs of Arctic terns, 1,500 pairs of Sandwich terns and well over 1,000 pairs of shags. Cormorants, fulmars, lesser black-backed, herring and black-headed gulls, razorbills and common terns breed in smaller numbers, and there are occasionally one or two pairs of roseate terns, but these are mainly on Coquet Island to the south. Other breeding birds include eider, mallard, ringed plover, oystercatcher, rock pipit, pied wagtail, barn swallow and sometimes - shelduck. The islands of the Farnes group include Inner Farne, Little Scarcer, Knoxes Reef, Megstone, Staple Island, Callers, Brownsman, North and South Wamseas, Big and Little Harcar, Clove Car and the outermost island, Longstone. William Shiel had taken us close to most of these islands and we had enjoyed all of the wildlife sightings including many grey Atlantic seals, particularly on Longstone and close to Staple Island.

After visiting the National Trust information centre and the chapel of St. Cuthbert with its few monastic remains, we passed through the courtyard, packed full of nesting Arctic terns (a particularly difficult area as the toilets were at the far end of the courtyard and virtually all of the visitors had to pass through here at some stage). It is an awesome sight to see lines of visitors making their determined way through this narrow area, heads bowed under attack by Arctic terns, as they desperately seek out the facilities! Lots of interesting photographic opportunities! Dave Britton and John Day's 'Where to watch birds in Northeast England' has this to say: "Although noisy, most of the bird species (on the islands) are reasonably docile if undisturbed, but this cannot be said of the terns. Every visitor following the marked paths between nesting birds on Inner Farne is likely to be repeatedly dive-bombed, with small children being reduced to tears and the more persistent Arctic terns sometimes drawing blood."

At 16.00 hrs we made our way to the jetty for our boat back across to Seahouses. A heavy rain shower was our parting memory of Inner Farne, but we had enjoyed a wonderful day of very close encounters with some amazing wildlife. This evening we had plenty of time to contemplate the marvels of the day as we awaited dinner at the Lindisfarne Hotel. It had truly been a day to remember for a very long time to come.



Kittiwakes with chicks on Staple Island JR



William Shiel collects us from Staple Island JR



"The Terror of the Terns" - filmed on Inner Farne JR



Robin's Nest JR



Monday 25 June and we head back home again today, but not until we have paid a visit to Bamburgh and to Hauxley Nature reserve. First things first, another big breakfast - speedily prepared and served (there is not so much pressure on the chef as during dinner). Next job is to load up the coach with luggage, and Derek has kindly brought it to the front door, where he carefully loads all our cases and Charlie's electric chariot into the massive luggage area.

The weather stays dry today and we have some sunshine too and temperatures up to a reasonable 19 degrees. At 09.15 we're off and heading down to our first stop at Budle Bay. Not a lot about here, although more shelduck than we have seen before on the trip, plus oystercatchers, mute swans and three female eider with five ducklings, oh, and a pied wagtail. So we soon move on to Bamburgh where the group divides into various interest groups. Some of us pay the mighty castle a visit and enjoy glorious views of the Farne Islands and the coastal landscape from the ramparts. Others go with Jim and Ronnie birding, some do this on their own and others walk back into the village itself. What is important is that everyone appears to be happy with their choice. The birders come back with tales of kestrels nesting around the castle, of common whitethroat sightings, buzzard and skylarks. Duncan was overjoyed to find black redstart in the scrubby area around the castle - a great find.

Time for a quick bite to eat, and Derek drives on to Alnwick, a pretty market town with its own imposing castle and gardens. However, time only allows one choice, and ours is to eat. A few of us find Bailey's Cafe-Bar to our liking with many taking the soup and sandwich option, all delicious and satisfying. At 13.45 we are off to the Northumbria Wildlife Trust's Hauxley Reserve and spend a good hour-and-a-half visiting the hides and looking for roseate terns, which we do not find. We do have good sightings of tree sparrows with quite a few young birds around. We also see five black-tailed godwits in fine summer plumage, some shelduck with striped ducklings, curlew, Sandwich terns, Arctic terns, sand martins, (there is an artificial nesting bank to be seen from one of the hides), house martins, tufted duck, greylag, Canada geese, redshanks and more. An injured stoat was found and placed away from an open pathway where it had been injured by a magpie. Its tormentor sat in a nearby tree watching us, and we hope the stoat survived. It was a case of one predator preying another! The views of Coquet Island were enjoyed from the dunes at the reserve and we could see the large amount of tern activity as clouds of birds filled the sky over the island.

At 16.15 hrs, it was time to go, as we had dinner booked for 17.00 hrs at the Station Inn at Hexham. We arrived at 16.57! The staff here were extremely friendly and the food we had was home cooked and hearty. A nice selection of roasts, or a meltingly tender braised beef, plus lots of other traditional dishes. As Duncan said afterwards to us - "that was REAL food we just enjoyed here." They also had real ales too (which is also important) and the 'Auld Hemp' ale from Highhouse Farm Brewery (near Matten, Northumberland) was new for us, and a great taste - especially for a session beer at 3.8% vol. Almost the last lap, leaving at 18.45 and over the A69 to Carlisle and the M6 / M74.

Our final stop was at Annandale Water Services, where Helen was able to get a Costa Coffee fix (as some others did too) before the run up to Douglas and back to Ayr. **It had been an excellent three days and thanks again to Derek for his safe driving. Also to all the participants for being such a great group and good company.** *Jim Thomson, Ronnie Coombes, Deone Finlayson, Ingrid Swanson, Fionna Ferguson, Susan Goode, Eleanora Forrester, Susan Porteous, Morven Cumming, Helen Slater, Henry Martin, Robin Turner, Duncan Watt, Liz Leyden, Ian & Monica Clark, David & Helen Rackham, Anne Dick, Charlie Conner, Jennifer Dudney, Gerda & Tony Scott, Sheila & Kenneth Smith. **RSPB / SOC LONG WEEKEND - JUNE 2012***



Eleanora considers alternative transport JR



Common whitethroat at Bamburgh JR



Young tree sparrow, Hauxley NR JR



Derek & Tony wish the new driver (below) 'God Speed' GS

