



Words and photos: Mike Weedon

Shetland

If it's a wild weekend filled with rarities that you're after, then you'd better head north. Far north...

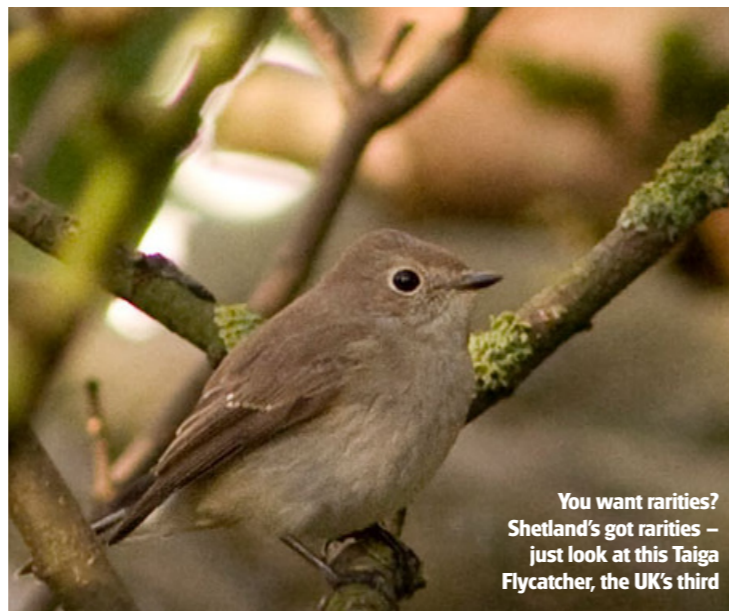
REMEMBER when I had my first sip of Guinness my father told me it was an acquired taste, and one sip later that taste was acquired. For me, Shetland is another acquired taste. This time it took me two sips, but I now think I've got it. On my first trip there, I was struck by bleakness and emptiness and thought that the long, endless days of summer had to be filled and the endless nights of winter endured.

On my second trip there, though, I started to fall in love with the place – the wildness, the strangeness, the very bleakness. In a nutshell, Shetland is one great wildlife playground, and the whole place is jammed full of wildlife action to discover. It was this autumn just gone and I was a part of a group spending a long weekend searching for rarities. And if it had just been rarities we were after, it would have to rank as a success.

Against the odds racked up by high westerly winds, we found Marsh Warblers, relocated an American Golden Plover, had a few rosefinches, North-western Redpoll and identified the UK's third Taiga Flycatcher. But, the rest of the time, when we weren't scoring the rares, and took the trouble to look around us, there was intense action and thrills all around.

Take the sea, for instance; a quick glance at the surface revealed Shags, mergansers, Black Guillemots, Eiders and both species of seal. Plunging through the surface were diving parties of Gannets. And wherever there were Gannets with food there were Bonxies (Great Skuas) bullying them with a tug on the wing here, a tail there, until they puked up the Bonxies' favourite: sashimi and sick.

We spent most of our time on the northernmost main island of Unst. Head north and a bit west from here and you hit Iceland and Greenland. It was the last week in September, and there were times when whenever we looked up it seemed there was a new skein of Pink-footed Geese coming in from the sea. There is something magical about knowing you are seeing birds which have just spotted land after flying hundreds of



You want rarities? Shetland's got rarities – just look at this Taiga Flycatcher, the UK's third

miles across the North Atlantic.

And the movement wasn't just high up. One day we used our minibus to shelter from the wind and dedicated a bit of time to seawatching. There were thousands of Fulmars moving through and, with them, a smattering of blue-morph birds, a real thrill to pick up.

When we weren't scouring tiny patches, laughably called 'cover', for rare birds, we watched dancing flocks of Snow Buntings, the odd Lapland Bunting, enjoyed watching familiar waders and pipits.

But for me the highlight (yes, even more of a thrill than that flycatcher!), was the great, close views I got of that most charismatic of all creatures, the Otter. On his home island of Fetlar, our guide and host Brydon Thomason's passion for Otters came to the fore. He showed us secret signs and indications like some frontier scout. Here a patch of squashed grass, there a narrow pathway and here again a small pile of Otter poo that we were offered to sniff and were promised smelled sweet and lovely!

Then with a wave of the hand he signalled us to drop behind a boulder and we watched a lone female Otter working the shore and turning uphill along one of those narrow paths to bathe in freshwater.

If this wasn't thrill enough, only a few hundred metres along the shore we saw a family of three... mother and two nine-month olds. They were incredibly efficient at catching fish, then treaded water with their heads above the surface, spinning in circles as they munched their catch, grasped between front paws.

They even came out onto some rocks and cleaned themselves, constantly playing and nibbling at each other: little aquatic monkeys, full of intelligence, play and fun.

There is a joke among bird guides that the best bird of the day is a mammal, and this was the case for me. But all over Shetland there is stiff competition, because the birdlife is abundant and superb, the rares are exciting, the common birds are thrilling – it is a challenge even for an Otter to outperform them.

Shetland has acquired my taste and I will be back to sample more of its superbly distilled essence. ☺



A Great Skua attacks a Gannet...



...trying to get it to sick up a tasty snack

Mike travelled to Shetland courtesy of Brydon Thomason and Shetland Nature: www.shetlandnature.net and Saxa Vord Resort: www.saxavord.com. For further information about tourism in Shetland and other companies

...serving wildlife tourism, see adverts in this magazine

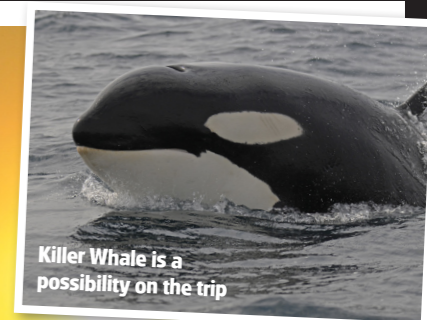
Getting there

Daily flights from Scotland's major cities and twice weekly flights direct

from London Heathrow land at Sumburgh Airport on the southern tip of Shetland Mainland. The other major islands are reached via a network of regular ferries. Alternatively, you can take the car ferry to Lerwick,

Shetland's county town, either from Aberdeen or from the North Coast of Scotland via Orkney. **Websites** www.saxavord.com www.shetlandnature.net

BIRD WATCHING READER OFFER



Killer Whale is a possibility on the trip

All images by Brydon Thomason



An exclusive week of birding with Shetland Nature

TARGET SPECIES
Red-throated Diver, Puffin, Storm Petrel, Arctic and Great Skuas, Red-necked Phalarope, Whimbrel, Otter, Grey and Common Seals, Harbour Porpoise (with the chance of other cetaceans, in particular Killer Whale), Mountain Hare and many, many more!

SHETLAND in spring and summer is a special place. A heady cocktail of breathtaking scenery, isolation and tranquillity, a rich cultural heritage, and a wealth of stunning wildlife-watching opportunities; all of which combine to enthrall and delight visitors to the islands.

The reward for travelling this far north is a dazzling combination of wildlife: some of Britain's rarest and most enigmatic breeding birds (such as the Red-necked Phalarope and Red-throated Diver); the highest density of Otters anywhere in Europe; breathtaking sea cliffs, home to more than a million seabirds; spectacular displays of wildflowers; a realistic chance of rare and unusual migrant birds at the tail end of spring migration; a magical late-night adventure to a world famous Storm Petrel colony and much more! And add to that regular summer sightings of Killer Whales and you can see why the islands feature in so many natural history documentaries and why so few people visit Shetland only once!

All Shetland Nature trips are meticulously planned, but this exclusive *Bird Watching* reader holiday has been designed to showcase the full spectrum of Shetland's late-spring wildlife. Our fully bonded holidays are carefully balanced to offer wildlife encounters not possible with larger groups. Limiting our group sizes to six clients per guide permits not only a much more personal rapport between our guides and their group but, most importantly, increases our opportunities, including a day spent exploring the secret lives of an Otter family.



You could get remarkable views of an Otter family



Will you see a dazzling Bluethroat?

Your holiday

This holiday is fully bonded and ATOL protected through a locally based travel agent, guided by Shetland Nature founder and owner, Brydon Thomason.



Dates: Friday, May 28-Friday, June 4 (with seven nights and eight in-the-field days, and small group sizes, this holiday offers high quality and value!)

Price: £990

Included in the price: Six nights at the three star Saxavord Resort on Unst (spacious and modern three-bedroomed houses, no single supplement); one night at the three star Orca County Inn on Shetland Mainland. Breakfast, lunch and three-course evening meals. All transport within Shetland. Boat trip to Noss National Nature reserve with Seabirds-and-seals. Boat trip to Mousa with Mousa boats, late-evening trip to see Storm Petrels.

Not included: Transport to and from Shetland. Flights or ferries can be booked through Christine at John Leask & Son Travel Agents on 01595 693 162

HOW TO BOOK

Bookings: Christine on 01595 693 162
Enquiries: Brydon on 01957 733 372
Information: www.shetlandnature.net