

Northern exposure

Shetland's reputation for autumn rarities is arguably second to none, as *Dominic Mitchell* found out first hand on a long weekend last September.



Above: a rare find in mainland Britain, Common Rosefinches are almost bread-and-butter autumn migrants in Shetland. Inset: Arctic Warbler is another Northern Isles speciality, occurring in autumn up to mid October.

PHOTOS: BRYDON THOMASON

As days in the field go, it had already been a good one. The steady September drizzle had not dampened our spirits as we made the ferry crossing from Unst to Fetlar, and some 'Tysties' en route were a welcome bonus to a group which included southerners like me (it somehow seems wrong in Shetland not to be using the vernacular name for Black Guillemot).

Once on the island our engaging guide, Brydon Thomason, prepared carefully for our next encounter, briefing us on tactics and fieldcraft before we set off in search of our quarry. And after a drive and then a long, wet cross-country trudge, we were treated to an amazing spectacle – a family group of Otters just offshore, feeding and playing in the kelp and on rocks as we kept watch from a safe distance. A mother and two cubs, they were well known to Brydon; with his experience and local knowledge, it was no surprise to discover that he had worked closely with Simon King on the BBC series *Shetland Diaries*.

Having sated ourselves with the Otters' extended seashore performance, we relocated to a loch not far from Brydon's

home, and as the skies began to clear, settled down to a welcome lunch amid some spectacular Shetland scenery.

Local knowledge

A native of Fetlar and long-standing birder and naturalist, Brydon knows his home island and its wildlife better than anyone. He also has access to little pockets of habitat, often on private property, that are otherwise unwatched. And so it was that, after lunch, we adjourned to one such garden, belonging to friends nearby, in search of a Red-breasted Flycatcher which had been glimpsed there a few days previously.

What followed is the stuff of birding dreams, and I don't need to recount the full story of Britain's third Taiga Flycatcher here – it has already been told by Brydon himself in this magazine (see *Birdwatch* 209: 53). But being in on the find of such a huge Siberian vagrant certainly managed to eclipse our memorable morning encounter with the Otters.

Although the 'nailing' of this difficult identification was a team effort involving all the group – including Fiona Barclay

from BirdGuides and fellow birding journalist Mike Weedon – it was the leading role played by Brydon and also Martin Garner and Roger Riddington, acting in their capacity as guides for his tour company Shetland Nature, that made the difference. We spent hours stalking, observing and photographing the elusive *Ficedula*, slowly piecing together a convincing case for the identification as the bird lurked and sallied in a surprisingly well-vegetated garden that was to become its home for two weeks. The Barred Warbler that we found nearby afterwards was just the icing on an extremely rich cake.

Migrant traps

That day on Fetlar was undoubtedly the highlight of the trip, but there were many other memorable moments, despite the weather rather than because of it. Arriving in a wet south-westerly and, along with Fiona, being deprived of hold baggage by the airline, we had all met at Sumburgh airport and travelled light up through Mainland Shetland, making judicious stops at migrant traps along the way – Brydon

seems to know all the islands as well as he does his own Fetlar.

A previously 'available' Arctic Warbler at Scalloway was a no-show in the poor conditions. Instead we had to be content having lunch in town while Great Skua, Kittiwake, Common and Black Guillemots and Red-throated Divers performed just a few metres away on the sea outside the window. After a series of further searches at such well-known hot-spots as Loch of Tingwall and Kergord Plantation, we left Mainland for Yell and the onward crossing to Unst, arriving at the end of a long day to settle into the bar at the Saxa Vord Resort for a well-earned drink.

A south-westerly wind howled that evening and had barely abated by morning, so conditions didn't look promising for finding freshly-arrived migrants. But we set out nonetheless and proceeded to check the crops, ditches and stunted copses around Britain's most northerly inhabited island for any sign of migrants and vagrants.

Occasional parties of European Golden Plovers were 'grilled' for possible American and Pacific interlopers, and the specific credentials of every Northern Wheatear were also scrutinised. It wasn't until we called in at Skaw and Brydon flushed a rather pallid-looking *Acro* from a nettle patch that our efforts began to pay off. It's amazing how easily a small bird can hide in a landscape largely devoid of vegetation, but eventually better views and photos confirmed its identity as a Marsh Warbler, a scarcity far more likely here in spring than autumn.

At Lamba Ness a flock of Snow Buntings and an all-too-brief Lapland Bunting foraged on the short turf. After watching Pink-footed Geese migrating overhead and photographing roadside Twite, we spent the afternoon at an excellent migrant trap near Norwick.



PHOTOS: BRYDON THOMASON

Right: Britain's third Taiga Flycatcher was the star bird in a long weekend of rarity hunting last September. Inset: Arctic Redpolls – this is the 'snowball' form *hornemanni* – are nowadays expected annually. Below: croft gardens, such as this one on Unst, are productive migrant traps and always worth checking carefully.

Many gardens here seem devoid of birds at first glance, but patience and vigilance can be rewarded, and in this instance two Common Rosefinches and a 'North-western' Redpoll – probably originating from Greenland rather than Iceland – were our rewards. This same remote outpost also brought brief flight views of Merlin and, bizarrely, Turtle Dove – a species I had not expected this far north.

A weekend, even a long one, is not enough to get the best out of a place like Shetland. The next day brought fleeting views of a Yellow-browed Warbler in the same garden, which still held its rosefinches and redpoll. Next we made that now famous trip to Fetlar. And on the last morning, before heading back to mainland Shetland for the flight home,

a tip-off saw us back at Lamba Ness, watching an American Golden Plover among its European congeners.

Had we been able to stay a week, then Pechora Pipit and Veery would have been added to the list of star birds. And, most bizarrely of all, Brydon went on to refine that same Taiga Flycatcher, individually identifiable by its displaced crown feathers, on another island. Next time I visit I'll certainly make it for a week. ■

Acknowledgements

Birdwatch travelled to Shetland courtesy of Shetland Nature (tel: 01957 733372; email: info@shetlandnature.net; web: www.shetlandnature.net). The company has arranged a special week-long reader holiday in Shetland this coming autumn – see opposite for full details.



DOMINIC MITCHELL

SHETLAND

Pioneering tour for rarities and migrants

This new reader holiday could be one of the most exciting we've ever put together. In partnership with Shetland Nature, the local specialists whose expert guides include ID guru Martin Garner and former Fair Isle wardens Roger Riddington and Paul Harvey, this prime-time autumn break will coincide with arrivals of migrants from east and west, including potentially numerous rarities and scarcities, as well as northern specialities such as Twite and Black Guillemot, other seabirds and a good chance of mammals including Otter, something of a Shetland Nature speciality. Treat yourself to a tour with a big difference!



Anything is possible on Shetland in autumn, from the sought-after Lanceolated Warbler (above) to the increasingly regular Red-flanked Bluetail (below).

PHOTOS: MICHAEL S. MCKEE

Tour itinerary

1-8 October 2010

Day 1: The tour begins at Sumburgh in south Mainland, from where we start exploring Shetland's best hot-spots as we make our way north. We will arrive in Unst, the most northerly island in Britain, late in the day to check into the well-appointed Saxa Vord Resort.

After dinner, your guide will present an illustrated talk to give you a tantalising taste of what to expect during your stay in Shetland.

Day 2: Unst is a spectacular island that serves as first landfall for tired migrants crossing the North Sea in autumn. It is undoubtedly one of the premier rarity hot-spots in Britain, attracting a wealth of species from both east and west, and we will search its key migrant traps for the likes of Richard's Pipit, Barred and Yellow-browed Warblers, and hopefully even rarer species.

Day 3: A visit to neighbouring Fetlar, another stunning island which, as well as boasting an impressive list of rare passage migrants, is famous for its nesting Red-necked Phalaropes. Last autumn's recce trip produced Britain's third Taiga Flycatcher and, in addition to other possible rarities, waders and seabirds, our highlights today could include Otters.

Day 4: Another day, another island as we head to beautiful Whalsay. Its position on the east side of Shetland, with varied habitats and few resident birders, means that there is plenty of potential on this island to find our own rarities,

which in the past have included Pechora Pipit, Arctic Warbler, Veery and Brown Shrike.

Day 5: After two days of island hopping, today we take time to catch up with any new arrivals on Unst. At the end of our second full day exploring the island, hoped-for easterly weather may have produced vagrant chats, thrushes and warblers, as well as scarcities such as Common Rosefinch, Greenland Redpoll and Lapland and Snow Buntings.

Day 6: For our last full day, we visit the mini-archipelago of Out Skerries. These tiny islands are the easternmost of all the Shetland Isles and this, combined with their isolation, explains their record for attracting exciting migrants – even the enigmatic Thick-billed Warbler has been found here. Famed as one of Bill Oddie's favourite autumn birding haunts to 'get away from it all', a day on Skerries is always a highlight.

Day 7: To end a wonderful week of island birding, we travel south to Shetland Mainland again, where we explore some of the prime sites in the north and west. The tour concludes in Sumburgh.

Throughout the week, your guide will be fully in touch with the local grapevine and news of what is turning up throughout the islands, and our itinerary may be juggled to take advantage of the situation. Shetland is larger than many people appreciate, so migrant arrivals are not always uniformly spread throughout the isles. This Shetland Nature itinerary is perfectly placed to adapt rapidly to local conditions.



■ **Tour price:** £890. This tour is operated for *Birdwatch* by Shetland Nature in association with John Leask & Son. The tour price includes full-board accommodation (all breakfasts, lunches and evening meals), all internal travel within Shetland (including all ground transportation and inter-island ferry fares) and guidance. Not included are drinks, insurance, tips and travel to/from Shetland.

For further information about this tour and the itinerary, please contact our operating partner Shetland Nature, Mid House, North Dale, Fetlar, Shetland ZE2 9DJ (tel: 01957 733372; email: info@shetlandnature.net). For advice on travel to/from Shetland and to book direct, please contact John Leask & Son on

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