

## A Given Day by Alistair Montgomery

“You’re lucky, for the last 2 weeks it’s being blowing a gale” Angus said in Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands when we signed up for membership in the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). That came as welcome change from “you should have been here last week, the weather was beautiful” that I had become accustomed to when I lived in Glasgow. Such is the weather in Scotland.

In fact, rain or shine, north of the industrial belt between Glasgow and Edinburgh, Scotland is a vast and empty area of mountains, glens and misty islands. The principal occupants of this land since the clan chiefs evicted their tenants in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in favor of sheep walks are, you guessed it, sheep. I spent the early years of my life wandering through these highlands at every opportunity. Now I had returned to photograph and write about the Orkney and Shetland Islands that lie like giant stepping stones from the mainland into the North Sea. Orkney, the closest to the mainland, served as a major (and famous) Naval Base in both world wars and now is largely agricultural. The best wildlife viewing is in the remote outer islands. Shetland to the north has more of a Scandinavian flavor than Orkney and species are more generally distributed among its scattered islands as dictated by habitat.

Spring and summer are never overly warm in the Northern Isles, except on a “Given Day” when the sun shines and there is no wind. Today it was pleasant with scudding clouds and periodic bursts of sunshine as we boarded the car ferry for Westrey, the northernmost island in the group in search of seabird colonies. Castle of Burrian within 10 minutes from ferry landing hosts a colony of Atlantic Puffins. A



*Puffin Colony at Castle of Burrian*

short walk, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from the road, brings you the rocky outcrop. Early morning (and I mean no later than 5.30 am) is the best time to see Puffins before they take off in a mass to hunt for sand-eels at sea. In the evening they start to return in small groups. The sunset can be spectacular I’m told, although the light was slate gray and flat when I was there. Puffins

spend the entire winter at sea, so their return is a welcome sign of spring for the island residents.

A prime area on Westrey for photography is Noup Head at the very north end of the island where the land ends abruptly and drops in sheer cliffs into the sea. It's a haven for colonies of Razorbills, Guillemots, Fulmars, Puffins, Arctic Terns, Kittiwakes, and Herring gulls perched on the narrow ledges. Flight for soaring birds is effortless in the high winds. Just spread the wings and they're off. Gannets will ride the updraft close to the cliff walls giving a perfect shot with a moderate focal length



*Soaring Gannet at Noup Head*

(200 mm) telephoto. But if your hat blows off it's gone! Papa Westrey to the east is a short 10-minute flight away, the shortest flight in the world they say.

Sumburgh Head, south of the Lerwick airport, is a prime area for Atlantic Puffins, even more so than



*Squabbling Puffins at Sumburgh Head*

Westrey. The puffins live in abandoned rabbit burrows at the top of cliffs and ferociously protect them from invaders. In the spring and summer the grass is speckled with flowering Sea Thrift adding a splash of vibrant color to the scene. Here you'll see nesting Fulmars at the top of the cliffs and vast colonies of Guillemots at the bottom.

To the east of Lerwick is the Island of Bressay reached by ferry. Further

east yet is the Noss Island Nature Preserve reached by inflatable dinghy. Noss Island is a wildlife paradise made even more so since we were there on a Given Day. The Great Skua, locally known as the "Bonksie" because of its habit of attacking walkers who get too close, is predominant here. The defense, they say,



*The Great Skua on the prowl*

is to carry a walking stick and wave it over your head to fend off attacks. The Great Skua and the Arctic Skua are ferocious predators and have been known to devour chicks in a nest when a photographer got too close and chased the parent off. It was nesting season when we were there so we stayed well back. On this day the seals were basking in the sunshine and the Ruddy Turnstones were probing the seaweed. It was idyllic.

The islands we visited to the north of Lerwick, all connected by ferry, were Yell, Fetlar and Unst. We used Yell as a base to visit Fetlar and Unst. To the east of Yell, Fetlar has more moorland habitat suitable to upland

birds such a Whimbrel, Golden Plover and Lapwing. The quest here was to photograph the Ruby-throated Diver and the Red-necked Phalarope. A Phalarope whizzed by the window of the RSPB blind from where I was shooting, but an Arctic Tern working its way towards the blind hovered graciously over a series of ponds in compensation. Such is bird photography.



*Hunting Arctic Tern*

Unst is most northern land mass of Britain ending at the Muckle Flugga Lighthouse. The northern tip is a designated National Park and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty as is much of the lower part of the Shetland west coast. Unfortunately we were told at the Hermaness Visitor Centre that bird photography was not permitted during nesting season without completing an undefined training course, but we did hike to the top of the hill to see Muckle Flugga.

But the jewel in the crown was tiny island of Fair Isle. It was On Fair Isle that we had our second and last Given Day where the shimmering heat waves blurred the horizon. The island is part of Shetland, about halfway to Orkney and has a tiny population of about 35 souls. It can be reached by air from Lerwick or by sea on the *Good Shepherd IV* ferry which can carry one small car. Fair Isle is a “must see” destination for ornithology enthusiasts. Some of the residents will take in visitors or you can stay at the South



*Heligoland Trap*

Lighthouse, where we did, or at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory which has been renovated. Migrating birds that have been blown off-course cause a major sensation. A general call came out to see a rescued Great Reed Warbler that had become lost migrating from Africa before it was released. The Observatory also allows visitors to accompany staff doing the rounds of the Heligoland traps that dot the island to capture, band and release birds. The traps, developed on the island of the same name in the Baltic Sea, blend into the landscape to lure birds into a small catchment. We were graciously invited to join Jack, a junior staff member one misty morning where he collected and banded a Chiff Chaff at one of the traps on the high moorland.

A dense fog had set in the day we were scheduled to leave. It was doubtful that the flight from Lerwick would arrive and the sea was too rough for the *Good Shepherd*. So we prepared to wait it out and accept the disruption to our schedule.

Then it cleared, just as suddenly as it descended and the flight showed up on time. We said goodbye to Josie, our hostess at the lighthouse, and started our journey south to London where we would return home.



*Harbour Seal enjoying a Given Day on Noss Island*

### **If You Go...**

The Northern Islands have the softest and purest air you'll ever breathe and the friendliest people that are hospitable to a fault. There is so much to see and photograph besides the wildlife. In Orkney alone, there is the annual folk festival in Stromness in late May, the Ring of Brodgar standing stone circle, Neolithic Scara Brae that was occupied 3,000 years BC, and St. Magnus Cathedral built in 1137 by the Norse Earls of Orkney.

Signing up for an annual membership in the RSPB gives you access to the society blinds, which I found to be a great advantage and well worth the fee since it includes a magazine subscription full of photos and information on birding sites in the U.K. You can buy a local or national monthly or annual subscription online. You can find out more at:

<http://www.eastberksrspb.org.uk/how-to-join/>

The best and perhaps only way to get around the remote islands is by car and ferry. For Americans that means driving on the left with manual transmission on roads that can be single track with passing places, which isn't as hard as it sounds. Cars should be rented separately in the Orkneys and Shetlands travelling between the two Island groups by air or sea. If you are on a schedule, Northlink ferries need to be booked at least six months in advance, which you can do on the internet. If you have a small car and a lost or missed reservation, they'll squeeze you on anyway.

<http://www.aferry.co.uk/northlink-ferries-uk.htm>

Most of the accommodation is in small hotels or private homes that will provide breakfast and evening meals in remote locations. There are several booking agencies listing Bed and Breakfast homes on the internet. *Visit Scotland* is a good place to start:

<http://www.visitscotland.com/en-us/accommodation/bandbs/shetland/>

There's a URL for Orkney too. Another alternative which is less confining is to rent a self-catering cottage for a week or so. This makes it easier to photograph at odd hours in the long summer days without the restriction of meal times. *Visit Scotland* has web sites for those too.

From a wildlife perspective I prefer the Shetland Isles, including Fair Isle, which is a "must do" experience. An enterprising lady on Fair Isle keeps a few cars for rent and outlets the famous Fair Isle wool "jumpers" (sweaters). They are incredibly warm, light and colorful with intricate designs made by the island residents over the long winter nights.

Oh yes, and take wet gear ("wellies" if you have them) and a big umbrella. I bought a Black Watch tartan golf umbrella in Kirkwall to keep from drowning and it has been sitting in my closet in Denver, Colorado ever since. It will be a trip of a lifetime. I promise. Slainte.

## PHOTO GALLERY



*Starling in Nature's Sea Thrift Garden at Castle of Bunnian*



*Atlantic Puffin at Sumburgh Head*



*Head-waving Fulmars at Sumburgh Head*



*Guillemot colony at Sumburgh Head*



*Great Skua on Noss Island*





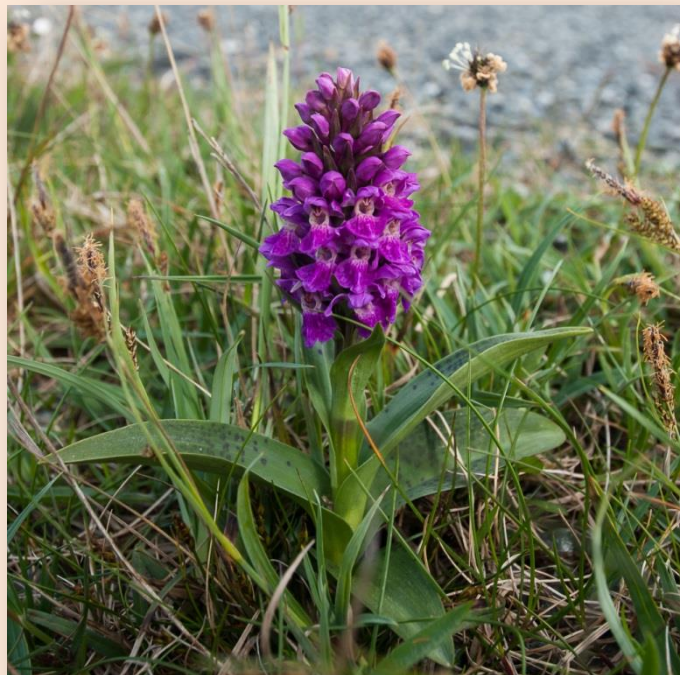
*Whimbrel on Fetlar Island uplands*



*Wading Dunlin on Fetlar Island*



*Heath Spotted Orchid on Unst*



*Northern Marsh Orchid on Unst*



*"A Given Day" on Fair Isle*



*The South Lighthouse on Fair Isle*