

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

The Isles of Scilly 2013



Isles of Scilly trip report, 7th to 14th May 2013

Tuesday 7th May 2013 To Hugh Town, St Mary's on RMS *Scillonian*

A calm, sunny day so a pleasant but uneventful crossing. Not many birds although gannets followed us all the way across. A fulmar and kittiwake flew across as we neared the islands. As it was low tide the ferry, RMS *Scillonian* took the low water route between St Mary's and St Agnes.

Most of the group had met on board the boat or on the quay on landing. Then it was a short walk to the first guest house 'Shearwater' and somewhat further up the hill to 'Belmont'. After arranging to meet after lunch in the Park everyone went to settle in, wait for the carrier to deliver their luggage and have lunch.

After lunch we had an introductory walk around the Garrison. This gave us panoramic views of the main islands as well as enabling everyone to become familiar with some of the typical plants that grew along the roadsides and heathland. Due to the late season some plants such as the established Cinerarias were only just starting to flower. Crossing the playing field everyone got their first sensation of the scent of chamomile, a feature of Scilly grasslands.

Just past the Woolpack Volunteer Hostel a number of black rabbits were feeding on the grass. There are both normal brown rabbits but also a high proportion of melanistic animals in the area. Continuing down the slope to the Woolpack battery and then walking along the path by the wall we found some of the typical clovers growing on the top of the wall; Subterranean Clover, Western Clover were easy to see at eye level. Further along were a number of pink-flowered Small-flowered Catchfly and the only Smith's Pepperwort plants known in Scilly. Much evidence of the late season was noted with plants such as thrift only just in bud.

The party split up when back in Hugh Town to return to the guest houses. Later we met at the Mermaid Inn for dinner after which some of the group went to hear a talk about the history and archaeology of the islands.



Wednesday 8th May St Agnes

Our first 'off-island' expedition today. We went on the tripper boat 'Sea Horse' to the southernmost inhabited island St Agnes. As we started it was windy and wet but this soon cleared as we walked up the hill from the quay. Our first stop was at a bulb farm where we had permission to look around the fields for arable 'weeds'. The Corn Marigolds and Great Brome were putting on a show and we were able to see many of the typical weeds which are found among the winter-flowering narcissus. This time the Small-flowered Catchfly had white flowers. Another common grass, Squirrel-tail Grass was also met.

Our next stop was on the beautiful heathland of Wingletang Down where we again smelled chamomile and the coconut scent of gorse. The winter storms had swept most of the plants from the white sands of Beady

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Pool where the first shoots of Sea Spurge were just emerging, Rock pipits performing their parachuting song flight, a wheatear and two whimbrel were seen.

Lunch was at the Coastguards Café where some people enjoyed the best crab rolls in Scilly!

From there we walked down the lane, where a fine display of Lanceolate Spleenwort grows on a garden wall. By now the wind was getting up and it was too wild to see much on the coast so we continued over the chamomile-scented meadow passing the Big Pool around to the rocky Porth Killier bay. Here we found that leaning on the convenient sea wall we had good views of birds on the piles of rotting seaweed below. At least three wheatears, a female black redstart, a whimbrel, a shelduck and three turnstones including one in almost full summer plumage entertained us until it was time to catch the tripper boat back to St Mary's. The strong south-westerly gave us a brisk sail back and we later heard the Scillonian sailing had been cancelled.

Dinner was at Shearwater, very nice, very substantial helpings. Clarissa rushed off to join bell-ringing practice at the church.



Thursday 9th May St Marys

The wind was too strong for boating so we caught the bus to near Pelistry for a walk around the more sheltered northern coast of St Mary's. After crossing the twin, white sand beaches of Pelistry we walked a little way along the coast path to see the delightful little Spring Squill in flower on the heathy slopes of Tolls Hill. There were also masses of deep blue bluebells growing as they do in Scilly in the open. Then back along the coastal path over Mount Todden Down where there are a number of chambered tombs. A stonechat was new and later a Little Egret and rock pipits were seen. Until we reached Porth Hellick, the bay where the body of the notorious Admiral Cloudsley Shovell washed ashore after his disastrous return from the battle of Toulon in 1707 when he lost three Men-of-War on the Gilstone reef in the Western Rocks. By now it had started to rain so we took refuge in one of the bird hides to eat our picnic lunch – and watch a few birds. Gadwall, shelduck and other water birds as well as a strong continuous movement of swallows and house martins flew past the hide. A cormorant resting on the waters edge seemed to have no need to go fishing? Deciding it was too windy (heavy squalls made it difficult to keep your feet) to continue around the coast so we walked through the Higher Moors Nature Reserve, pausing to admire the very large Tussock Sedges, Lady and Royal ferns on the way. Back on the road we passed good stands of several fumitories including some handsome, very rare Western Fumitory in full flower. Black Spleenwort grew in the granite hedge (wall) and Balm-leaved Figwort in a gateway. From there we continued into Town and our accommodation before dinner.

Dinner was at Nornour, a small restaurant in Town.

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Friday 10th May Tresco

As the wind had dropped overnight we took the opportunity to go to Tresco. Due to the tides we were able to land at Carn Near in the south of the island and walk over the dunes to the Gardens. Near the landing we found yellow-horned poppy (leaves), Balm-leaved Figwort and along the track Wild Privet, Wireplant, Primrose and a number of new exotic species such as the spiky Tresco Rhodostachys. We also could see the first Lesser Adderstongue ferns emerging from short sandy turf on the dune heath. On the mown turf of the former heliport besides gulls and a few pheasants we were lucky to see a beautiful Golden Plover in summer plumage. Then into the Gardens where everyone wandered off to look around before meeting up for lunch in the tea gardens. Here we were entertained by the tame birds who tried to help themselves to our sandwiches. Blackcap and Chiffchaff were singing in the shrubbery, In the Gardens we located some nice clumps of Orange Birdsfoot growing as a weed in the gravel path so everyone was able to see this very rare plant in case it could not be found in the wild. Fortunately the sun had come out in the gardens so we had a pleasant time sitting outside.

We slowly made our way along the path beside the Great Pool, the lake that splits the island in two. Here we found Wood Veronica, another Ancient Woodland Indicator (species believed to be relicts of former woodland) like the Wood Spurge we saw near Carn Near earlier. A pushy male Golden Pheasant stopped us to check us for biscuits (Clarissa obliged with a bag of crisps!) before we dropped down to a bird hide, one of two we visited. Unfortunately the wind was rising and the water levels were high on the lake so no waders but there were gadwall and tufted duck. A shower sent us on a detour to the New Inn and refreshments. Our boat back was from New Grimsby where the rain continued as we returned to St Mary's. A few auks, guillemot and razorbill, gannets and a sandwich tern seen from the boat before back to guest houses and later another substantial dinner at Shearwater.

Some went off to try to catch the men's gig races, although they missed the actual race as it had been started earlier than expected due to the weather.



Saturday 11th May Bryher

Bryher today. We caught Osprey, one of the newer tripper boats. A warmer day – or seemed so in the shelter of the Harbour! The crossing was a bit windy. A detour was made to the church to see Oriel Hick's lovely stained glass windows, plus a visit to the 'loos where we almost got caught in a sudden flood inside!

Following the coastal path past Green Bay where walls could be seen in the sand, relicts of ancient cultivations. Under a Pittosporum hedge the first coastal form of the parasitic Common Broomrape was just emerging. At Veronica Farm some bought the delicious homemade fudge available on a stall outside. North Devon Ruby cattle were grazing the coastal strip below Samson Hill and clearly making an impression on the vegetation. Wood Spurge was common here, also Ground Ivy (oddly very scattered in Scilly) and

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plenty of Spring Squill that is more common on Bryher than elsewhere in Scilly. A lively female Oil Beetle was found on the path.

Reaching Rushy Bay in the south of the island we first saw emerging Sea Holly before searching for the extremely tiny Dwarf Pansy. It was not long before the first flower was found and once everyone knew what to look for there were clearly many plants. Most of the pansies had gone to seed, hopefully with another flush to come later. Photographing the pansy proved challenging as they hold their heads down. Other tiny plants were found nearby; Lady's Bedstraw, Common Storksbill, and other miniature species. The golden-haired larvae of Grass Eggar and spotted yellow 6-spot Burnet Moths were found in the longer vegetation. On Heathy hill nearby there was a good show of Orange Birdsfoot. And on the lower slopes more Spring Squill. The strong wind sent us to a track between two fields to find shelter for our picnic. A second Oil Beetle narrowly escaped being squashed by one of us! Western Clover was widespread in the short turf. Our route continued around the Pool and leat with the narrow strip of saltmarsh vegetation. The pool is as salty as the sea and the only truly saline lagoon in Scilly. The high water level and waves obscured the water so no crabs or fish were seen. Sea Milkwort grows all around the pool edge but it was not in flower yet.



On Popplestone bay we could see lots of Sea Kale as we made our way to the path across the island from west to east. We found more small clovers; Lesser Trefoil, Slender Trefoil and Birds-foot Clover. A kestrel was new for the group and a stonechat was seen on the gorse bushes. After a quick refreshment break at Fraggle Rock we caught the boat to St Mary's. Some made a quick detour to photograph Prickly-fruited Buttercup growing on Holgate's Green with gig boats parked over them!

Dinner later was at the Kavorna Café. The group had to forgo their desserts as we were booked to see Will Wagstaff's popular wildlife talk. And we were running late!

Sunday 12th May. Exploring St Mary's

No boats were sailing to the Eastern Isles today, probably because there was a cruise ship in and some of the tripper boats would be busy off-loading passengers. It was also very foggy so our alternative was another day on St Mary's.



By bus to the Maypole triangle –or as the bus driver announced 'to the pole dancing'! Our way took along the narrow road to the hamlet of Borough where we found that many of the old farm buildings (the farmer died last year) had been demolished & new houses were being built. Previously the farm had some very good bulb fields with an unusual weed community. We discovered one field was still looking good, although only able to look over the gate, we could see plenty of Prickly-fruited Buttercups.

Around the corner the ditch that forms the Watermill Stream was flowing fast. The newly rebuilt wall looked fine and the relocated Cornish Moneywort seemed to still be alive. This is the last site for it in Scilly so it is hoped it will survive. Further up the lane a buzzard was glimpse briefly over the trees. Passing the new Wildlife Trust office we walked through shelterbelts of large Monterey Pines where we heard the thin calls of Goldcrests, to see the twin chambered tombs at Innisidgen with their species-rich turf surrounds and roofs. Picking our way along the coastal path it was still quite misty, even so we saw a number of birds, whimbrel, curlew and a winter-plumage Great Northern Diver. At Pendrathen Quay we found a nice, sheltered bench to eat our sandwiches. Then off to Halangy Down.

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Before we reached the ancient village another small Scilly speciality was found on the ruts in the path – Scilly Pigmyweed. Around the village there are a range of heathland species so John could try to get a better photo of Changing Forget-me-not. The splendid Bant's Carn monument was also photographed before walking up to the main road and to Juliet's Garden for lunch. Waling back along the coastal path we paid a quick visit to another ancient monument. Harry's Walls – an unfinished fortification from the time of Henry VIII. Once again the mown turf was full of chamomile and tiny clovers including Slender Trefoil. A 'gone-wild' patch of Echiums (Perennial Viper's Bugloss) was in flower and attracting many bumble bees. Then it was back to Town.

Monday 13th May St Martin's

A strong wind was blowing as we set off for St Martin's so the sea was a bit choppy. On the way there were guillemot, razorbill, fulmar and kittiwake. The skipper of 'Guiding Star' wove around the islands of the Eastern Isles so that we had excellent, close views of grey seals both on the rocks and bobbing around the water. Everyone should have good photographs!



At mid-day we were landed at Higher Town on the south of St Martin's. After a quick look at another chamomile-rich grassland – the island cricket field. We found just a few flowers of Seaside Crowfoot in the pool there. Then the steep walk up the hill to the long concrete road that stretches all along the top of the island. The views across to the Eastern Islands and across the flats to Tresco and St Mary's are superlative.

Although it was sunny the wind was still cool so we walked down the north side of the island to The Plains where we could sit on the grass to eat our picnic with a great views over the sea and Great Bay, On the huge white sand beach of Great Bay we saw five whimbrel as well as the ubiquitous oystercatchers and another wheatear. Our route back took us up through the dunes and heathland. Then down past the pub (sadly closed) to the concrete road. A suite of fields near the campsite was full of more arable weeds including the rarity Shepherd's Needle, as well as Small-flowered Catchfly, Babington's Leek and both Great and Lesser Quaking Grasses. Behind the Hotel we found some really good specimens of Suffocated Clover. A rest in the warm sun gave a taste of the sort of weather we usually expect in the Isles of Scilly. Then back on the boat to St Mary's and later another excellent dinner at Shearwater.

Tuesday 14th May Final day in Hugh Town

News that gales were forecast meant we had to change our plans as the ferry would be making an immediate turn-around, so we had to be on the quay at mid-day. Most people paid a visit to the Museum or the shops as there was no time for a longer walk. We all met again on Scillonian, except for Pauline and John who were staying on for a few more days. Although it was a choppy crossing none of the group was ill so a good trip to Penzance. Luggage collected everyone went their way.