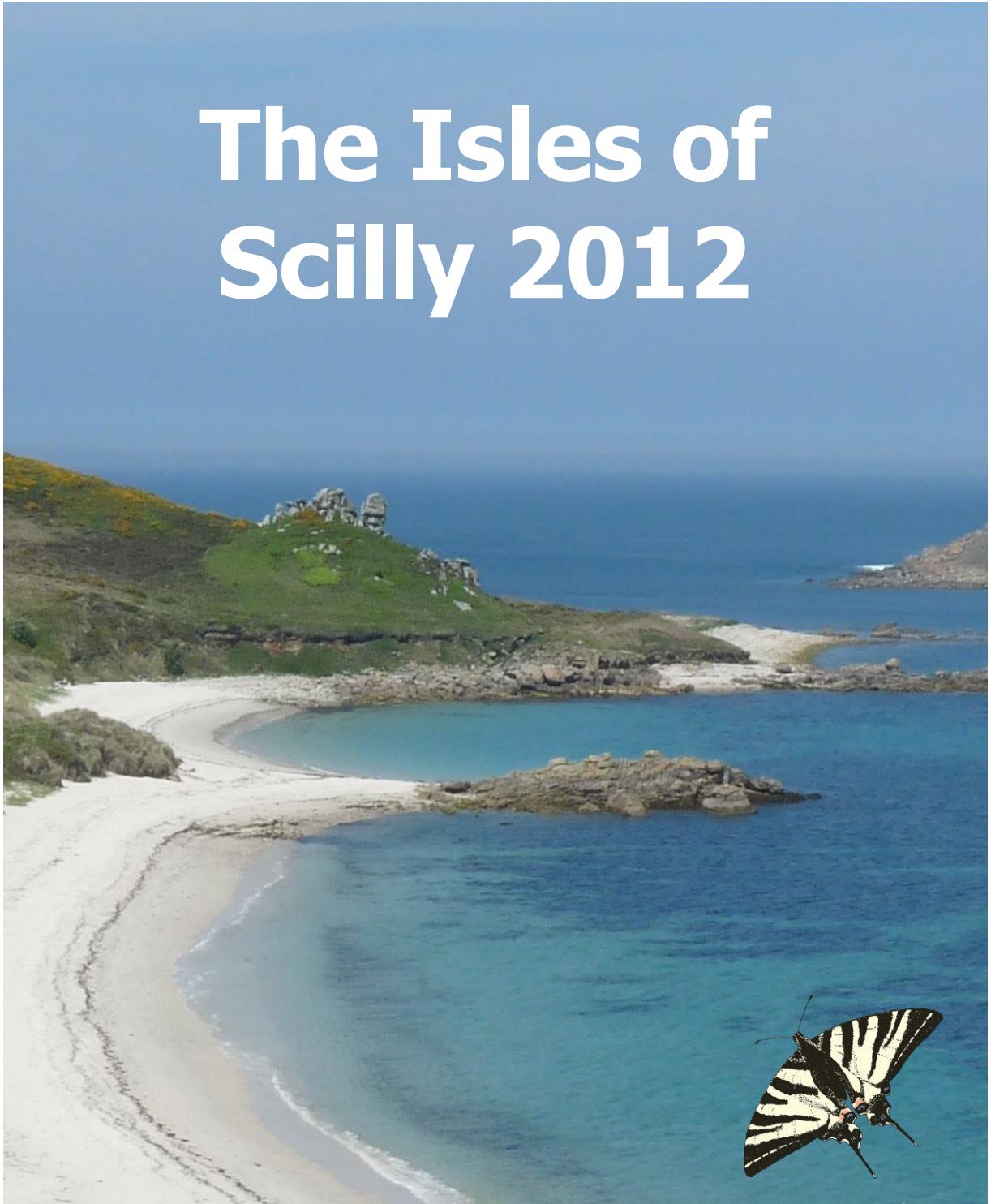


WILDLIFE TRAVEL

The Isles of Scilly 2012



Isles of Scilly trip report, 16th to 23rd May 2012

LIST OF TRAVELLERS

Leaders

Rosemary Parslow: Truro, Cornwall

Claire Roper: Gunnislake, Cornwall

Wednesday 16 May 2012 To Hugh Town, St Mary's on RMS *Scillonian*

Several of the group met up with Rosemary on the deck of RMV Scillonian as we sailed from Penzance to the Isles of Scilly. The weather was good and sea calm so it was a pleasant trip although lacking in many seabirds or cetaceans to enliven the trip - just a few Manx shearwaters and gannets. Rosemary was lucky enough to see a small sunfish but it dived before anyone else could.

Arriving in Scilly, the group gathered together on the quay for the short walk to Lyonesse guest house where all were staying except Jenny and Richard who were staying at the Bylet GH just up the road. A welcome tea and biscuits while the luggage arrived and rooms allocated before all went into town for lunch. At 2pm we all met on Holgate's Green where many of the gig boats were waiting to be transported back to mainland (the National Gig Weekend had just passed). A quick introduction and briefing before a walk up to the Garrison on the promontory above the Town. But before starting we stopped to admire a patch of the unusual Rough-fruited Buttercup growing in the corner of the Green.



From the Garrison hill we could see a panorama of the islands and also begin to see something of the local flora and fauna. Rosy Garlic, Three-cornered Leek, Babington's Leek were found immediately. Near the IOSWT volunteer centre at the Woolpack we saw the rare Wild Leek at its only Scilly location. Both it and Babington's Leek were in the 'candle-snuffer' bud stage. Where the Wildlife Trust had been managing the heathland (using ponies and cattle) we saw Broom, both Western and European Gorse, Lousewort as well as both Bell Heather and Ling. Some of the rabbits here are black or very dark coloured. A female stonechat appeared for a short while although we had to wait for a later view of a male. A walk along the Garrison walls introduced Small-flowered Catchfly, Western and Subterranean Clover, Sea Mouse-ear and other species that grow on the wall-top. At Morning Point besides the native plants such as Black

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Spleenwort, are drifts of the introduced Pale Dew Plant and Wireplant. Nearby we were fortunate to find a patch of the tiny, elusive Suffocated Clover. Just offshore a young cormorant and a razorbill could be seen.

Returning via the 'sally port' hidden access between the Garrison walls took us back into town. Then group gathered in the lounge at Lyonesse for a brief introduction to the holiday before dinner. As usual we were soon enjoying one of Melanie's delicious, if substantial meals! Later some people went out for a stroll or to a vantage point to watch the Ladies Gig Race.

Thursday 17 May Round trip to St Agnes via Annet

After overnight rain we awoke to a grey, overcast day. But soon the clouds cleared to give us a sunny day. After breakfast the group met on Holgate's Green to hear the plans for the day. Then down to the Harbour to catch the boat to St Agnes. The group had voted for the trip that took us around the bird sanctuary of Annet first. Everyone had excellent views of puffins both on the water and flying past. The sea was calm and the birds very obliging! Other seabirds, shag, fulmar etc also seen.

Arriving on St Agnes we stopped for coffee at the Turk's Head pub before walking over the hill to the rocky bay at Porth Killier. The tide was low so we were able to see shelduck, oystercatchers and other birds on the beach. Perhaps the highlight was a very cryptic turnstone in summer plumage. A peregrine also snatched a bird from the beach, but so quickly not everyone saw it. Our route then took us past Big Pool, across the cricket field (part of an SSSI) with chamomile scenting the air as it was trampled, passing the beautiful little Periglis Bay up the hill to the Coastguard's Café where we had lunch.

After lunch we just had time to walk down to Wingletang Down, an area of heathland with extraordinary granite tors and sandy beaches. We stopped at one of these, Beady Pool to see Sea Spurge, Yellow-horned Poppy (not flowering) growing in the gravel-like, crystalline white sand. The rare fern we hoped to see was over, but its slightly bigger brother Lesser Adder'stongue Fern was found and perhaps surprised people with its diminutive size and very simple fronds. Retracing our steps to the lane we passed fields with masses of arable weeds growing among the rows of narcissus. The brilliant colours of Corn Marigolds, Whistling Jacks, with fumitories, Small-flowered Catchfly and other flowers soon attracted the photographers in the group.

Arriving at the quay we just had time for a comfort stop and a cup of tea at the Turk's Head before taking the launch back to St Mary's. By now a stiff breeze had blown up and the ride back was a little lively with Rosemary shipping a wave in her face!

After dinner there was a botany session in the lounge.

Friday 18 May Tresco and the Abbey Gardens

Tresco today. The day started overcast but became sunny later in the day.

We landed at Carn Near on the southern end of the islands and then walked along the track across the dunes and helicopter landing area to the Abbey Gardens. A few new plants included Balm-leaved Figwort, Portland Spurge, Wood Spurge and Wild Privet. More Lesser Adder'stongue Ferns were seen growing in a sandy area on Appletree Banks. Some of the exotic plantings in the dunes were noted, white-flowered Watsonia lilies, Tresco Rhodostachys for example, the thousands of Agapanthus plants were not yet in flower but their lush green leaves were everywhere.

At the Gardens the group split up to explore on their own, meeting up again at lunchtime. It had been planned that anyone wanted a more energetic walk could go off to see more of the island. At lunch the tame song thrushes, blackbirds, robins and other birds that tried to help themselves to our sandwiches caused some amusement – and photographic opportunities. A pair of blackcaps fed on the flowers of a bottlebrush tree nearby.

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Some people elected to go on an earlier boat rather than a longer walk. Malcolm and Janet were treated to a buggy ride back to the New Grimsby Quay and an earlier boat. Then the remainder set off along the south of the Great Pool looking at some of the water plants along the edge of the reed bed before turning onto the long track along the north of the lake that virtually splits the island in two. We popped into the two bird hides but disappointingly there were few birds to be seen, just a few gadwall, shelduck etc. Reed warblers were heard singing. Our route took us up the west side of the island to the quay at New Grimsby to catch the boat back to St Mary's. An unexpected 'extra' on the return was the boatman detouring to check out some of the small islands in the channel between Tresco and Bryher in hope of locating a rare tern. No tern was seen but we had close views of a small flock of whimbrel, a dunlin in summer plumage and many shag s and oystercatchers.

Tonight there is the opportunity to watch the Men's Gig Race or sort through more plants.

Saturday 19 May Eastern Isles and St Martin's

A sunny, calm day gave us the opportunity to take the boat going to the Eastern Isles with a later landing on St Martin's. The launch sailed up the west side of St Mary's giving excellent views of the Romano-British village on Halangy Down as we passed.



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As it was quite a low tide many seals were basking on the rocks so we had very close views. We sailed around among the small islands and could see how heavily vegetated they are on this side of the archipelago with even plants such as Hottentot Fig on some steep slopes. These plants have been taken there originally by gulls who take pieces of plants to build their nests. There were Fulmars flying stiff-winged around the cliffs as well as other seabirds on the rocks. Due to the calm sea we were able to sail out to the furthestmost of the Eastern Islands, an isolated granite stack called Hanjague before sailing along the coast of St Martin's to Lower Town quay on the west of the island. St Martin's is a long, narrow island on a west/east axis (the other islands are all north/south). The later pick-up point was to be at Higher Town half way along the island further east. So after a stop at the Seven Stars pub we started the long walk along the concrete road admiring the fantastic, panoramic views as we went. A small diversion was made to look out over the back of the island and the Great Bay and White island, Jenny called in at Churchtown Farm, while the rest continued looking at plants and views along our way. Gervase had elected to go off on his own but we had occasional glimpses of him in the distance! The pattern of tiny fields that originally grew winter-flowering narcissus can be seen particularly well on the steep slopes of the island. Many fields have been abandoned and have reverted to bracken fields with foxgloves and red campion at this season. Rosy Garlic was common along the roadsides. At Higher Town there was just time for ice creams and a detour to look at some of the plants growing in the field behind the bakery, before continuing down the steep hill to the quay. Here there was still time enough to cross the chamomile-scented cricket field to a small pond to see the lovely Brackish Water Crowfoot, formerly a common plant but now quite rare both on Scilly and the mainland. Then back on to the launch to St Mary's, where Rosemary would be available for the pre-dinner botanical session later! After dinner almost everyone repaired to the promised talk by local birdman Will Wagstaff. This very professional show, mainly about birds, but some plants and other natural history subjects – with stunning photographs was enjoyed by everyone.



Sunday 20 May Bryher

Our last visit to an 'off-island'. Due to the tides this week this was the first chance to get to Bryher in the morning. However the landing would be 'wet' as the quays would both be inaccessible until much later. We sailed into Rushy Bay on the south of the island where the launch decanted us, about a dozen at a time into a rubber dingy for the short distance as close as possible to the shore, then it was a paddle through the icy cold water to the beach! As soon as everyone had got their boots back on we walked through the dunes, admiring a patch of Sea Holly on the way, to the area of short turf that was the object of our visit. A promise of a chocolate bar to the first person to find a Dwarf Pansy had honed the competitive edge of the group and within seconds Dorothy had found the first diminutive flower! To our delight there were hundreds of the tiny flowers and everyone had seen or photographed them. Other tiny plants in the close turf were identified including Thyme-leaved Sandwort while we all shared Dorothy's chocolate!

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From Rushy Bay our route took us onto Heathy Hill nearby where we soon located plenty of the rare Orange Bird's-foot in flower as well as Common Bird's-foot and the tiny green Allseed. Again many of the rare plants today had been very small! Lunch was on the sheltered side of the hill with views across to Samson and the Norrad Rocks. A seal popped up later for a mutual inspection.

After lunch our walk took us along the bank of Great Par bay where Claire located a few plants of Sea Knotweed among the dune plants – an exciting find as there are few records of this plant in Scilly. Then a quick look at the saline Pool and its narrow strip of saltmarsh vegetation. A short detour up the side of Gweal Hill where we were lucky to find several large patches of Spring Squill still in flower and some small Eyebrights in the grass. The grassy path past Popplestone beach revealed more tiny plants, mostly clovers, including more of the red-flowered white clover – a Scilly speciality, Fenugreek, Slender Trefoil etc. Just time for tea at Fraggie Rock pub before we had to get to the quay for a boat – most people managed to get a very quick look in the church to see the lovely stained glass windows by a local artist -- then the boat came in.

After dinner some people went to the candle-lit service in Old Town Church.

Monday 21 May. Exploring St Mary's

Another perfect sunny Scilly day. A slightly later start as we were staying on St Mary's and did not have a boat to catch – just a bus! Everyone piled on to the Community bus for the ride to half-way around the island at Maypole. From there we walked down the hill, past a beautiful garden full of amazing exotic plants to the tiny hamlet of Holy Vale where we reached the start of one of the Nature Trails. The Holy Vale Trail picks a path between tall elm trees beside the stream with enormous plants of Watercress, Fool's Watercress and Hemlock Water Dropwort. Eventually the path comes out further along the (only) road which we crossed into the Higher Moors Nature Reserve. The amazing Greater Tussock Sedge are a feature here, many are about 2m tall. Close by the first crosiers of Royal Fern were emerging. The track eventually came out at the sea at Porth Hellick, the bay where the infamous Sir Cloudsley-Shovell's body washed ashore after he had led his fleet to grief on the Western Rocks in 1707 losing some 2,000 men and four ships (leading to the search for a clock to record longitude accurately).

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Our route then took us up the hill to join the coast path at Salakee Down with its impressive areas of 'waved heath' and promontory fort of Giant's Castle. A few wheatears and singing Rock Pipits as well as a hiccupping cuckoo were here. A momentary excitement when crossing the end of the airport runway –not the place to hang about when the buzzer sounds and lights flash as there are only seconds before the plane lands –almost skimming the path! Our picnic lunch was taken on the deep grass on the cliff side among wild flowers and fantastic views. A rose chafer beetle flew past and was caught so everyone could admire the beautiful metallic green of the carapace. Many six-spot burnet moth larvae were around (although I think I said they were blue butterfly larvae). We only saw one adult moth that had just emerged.



Walking on, past an extraordinary patch of the jelly bean like succulent *Disphyma crassifolium* on the Cliffside we were able to also see another established alien, House Holly fern among the rocks at Porth Minick where it has been known for decades. Later on the beach we saw flowering Sea Kale plants and a large patch of Sea Pea. This is another recent arrival, perhaps from as far away as the West Indies, that had arrived just a few years earlier and is spreading. A refreshment stop was made at Old Town café for tea and ice cream before most of the group walked round to the pretty little church on the other side of Old Town Bay. This is in a sheltered spot and attracts migrant birds at times besides being home to many wild and gone wild plants including multi-coloured Cinararias. Beside the simple grave of Harold Wilson there are many gravestones with poignant inscriptions and two tall obelisks to commemorate Augustus Smith the former Lord Proprietor of the islands and a sad memorial to a young wife who died in the wreck of the Schiller in 1875, with the loss over 335.

A field near the church was a delight for the botanists with four species of fumitory including the rare Western Fumitory and many other arable species. Our route home through Lower Moors Nature Reserve added the final excitement of the day – a pair of garganey on a small pool. The news of these quickly drew in birdwatchers before the ducks apparently flew a short while later.

Tuesday 22 May St Mary's

Another fine and sunny day. We set off on the bus again to the north of the island. Our walk this time took us near to Bar Point, the northern tip of St Mary's, then to Halangy Down. Another tiny plant was found in profusion along the path, Scilly Pigmyweed, a long established alien that at this time of year is red coloured so easy to spot. Plenty of time to explore the ruins of the Iron Age and Romano-British village with its small, 'courtyard houses' and then the impressive Bronze Age Entrance grave called Bant's Carn. Around the monuments are areas on mown grass and heathland studded with flowering Tormentil, Bluebells and many heathland flowers. We then walked back along the track, passing the golf course to almost where we had got off the bus. Along the main road we saw the Coastguard tower and the huge aerials at Telegraph, the highest point on the islands (just under 50m). Our destination was Juliet's Garden for lunch; on the way we saw both Hairy Tare and Smooth Tare in flower, Sheep's Bit and other plants on the hedgebanks. Lunch was enlivened (at first) by the tame birds but when an excessively bold blackbird started landing on the tables –even making off with a whole slice of Jenny's bread we tried bird-scaring instead.

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Our walk back to town was along the coast taking in another ancient monument at Harry's Walls, a half-built fort surrounded by the usual chamomile scented lawns. To our delight we were able to find the basal rosettes of Autumn Lady's Tresses in the turf.

After dinner some people went to a talk on the history of the islands by a local archaeologist.

Wednesday 23 May Final day in Hugh Town

A free day and a chance for people to catch up of things in Hugh Town; visit the shops, the excellent little local Museum and for several a walk out to the headland of Pendennis with its fantastic rock tors. Jenny and Richard left by helicopter earlier, then the rest of the group boarded the *Scillonian* for the return journey, a calm sea and sunny day promised a pleasant trip. Rosemary waved as the ship sailed with some of the group also keeping their hankies waving until they were out of sight.

