

# Isles of Scilly

8–15 October 2011

## Participants

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## Northern Waterthrush

**Day 1:** After meeting at the heliport in Penzance, our helicopter left on time at 12.05 and after a short transfer from the airport to our guesthouse, we were able to check into our rooms around 13.00. Leaving time to purchasing sandwiches and drinks, we met again at 14.00 to formulate our afternoon plans. The star bird on the island was a Northern Waterthrush, present for over two weeks but showing only erratically. With several other good birds also to be seen however, we took the decision to try for them in the limited amount of time left during the day. So off to Lower Moors we headed and were soon watching a **Lesser Yellowlegs** at ridiculously close range from the hide (too close to photograph!). The resident Common Greenshank was not too pleased with this American intruder however and was regularly seen to try to drive it out of its territory. The **Wilson's Snipe** was loitering at the back of the pool giving us two excellent birds to start the tour with. With still no news on the whereabouts of the waterthrush we decided to explore the Porth Hellick and Holy Vale area of the island. Enjoying small numbers of Eurasian Swallows and House Martins our attention was suddenly grabbed by a report of an Upland Sandpiper in a bulb field at Maypole. We weren't a million miles away so headed in that direction. After some initial difficulty seeing the bird (despite it being in a bare ploughed field!) as it moved in deep furrows with a Northern Wheatear for company, we eventually enjoyed excellent views of a very confiding first winter **Upland Sandpiper** giving us a three American wader day! Returning towards town, several of us decided to visit the 'project pool' behind the rubbish dump near town. We picked our way carefully down a rather muddy path and stood there in eager anticipation but it was not to be, there was no sign of the waterthrush. It had been an excellent first afternoon however, with some of the group picking up three lifers. After a quick wash and change, we headed into town to the Bishop & Wolf for our evening meal followed by a visit to the Scillonian Club for the bird log.

**Day 2:** Today we decided to visit Treco to look for the **Least Sandpiper** which had been present for some time. We arrived at Carn Near, which was fortuitously close to South Beach where we quickly found the bird in company with a number of Common Ringed Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones and Dunlins. We spent some time enjoying views of the bird before moving on to Abbey Pool where we found a couple of Mediterranean Gulls. Continuing past Abbey Crossroads we were unable to locate the Red-backed Shrike although a stop at the south end of the Great Pool gave us nice views of a Water Rail. Moving on up pool drive we saw many introduced Red-legged Partridges and several Eurasian Curlews until we arrived at the Swarovski hide where we saw our second Lesser Yellowlegs of the tour together with roosting Common Greenshanks, Common Redshanks, two Black-tailed Godwits and a single Common Sandpiper. We decided to take the early boat back to St. Mary's so we headed along the coast to New Grimsby. Little Egrets, two Sandwich and a single Arctic Tern were seen on the return journey and we arrived back on St. Mary's at 15.00. As the airport was closed today, the **American Golden-plover** which had been present on St. Martins for over a week had decided that it would be a good day to day trip St. Mary's so we headed there next to enjoy our fourth American wader of the tour. Large numbers of

Northern Wheatears were present on the airport but we couldn't see the Short-toed Lark that was being reported by the terminal building. Although the locals walk across the airfield on a Sunday birders don't so we had to walk back down to Old Town then up the hill to the airport to look for it. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived there was no sign so we headed back down again to walk around Old Town Bay and back through the 'Dump Clump' where several of us decided to try our luck at the 'project pool' to look for the waterthrush. It was a lovely evening but after 30 minutes of exchanging pleasantries with other birders it didn't look like it was going to fly in. All those in the group present drifted off back to the guesthouse leaving just me talking to 'Higgo' who was the brains and brawn behind this new pool. Eventually I started my return journey to the guesthouse only to meet another birder by the incinerator just taking a phone call from a friend saying that the bird had just flown in. I radioed the news out and rushed back to the pool to enjoy some excellent views of the **Northern Waterthrush**, which was even a British tick for me! Fortunately, two of the group got the message and returned to see the bird as well.

**Day 3:** Before breakfast one or two tried their luck again for the waterthrush but it flew in shortly after they had returned to breakfast. We started the day with a visit to the Garrison where we easily found the **Rose-coloured Starling** that had arrived the previous day in Sally Port. It was feeding with a large flock of Common Starlings and showed very well. We then spent a pleasant few hours walking around Old Town Bay and Porth Minnick to Giants Castle where we watched a Eurasian Hobby heading out over the sea towards Penninis Head. There was no sign of the Eurasian Wryneck around the Giants Castle area so we continued on down to Porth Hellick where a Peregrine Falcon showed well then up Holy Vale to Maypole where we enjoyed even closer views of the Upland Sandpiper. After visiting the 'Strudelhaus' in High Lanes for a welcome coffee/tea and apple strudel break, we returned to Maypole then continued on to Normandy followed by a walk down Porth Hellick Down to Porth Hellick Pool where we found the Wilson's Snipe. A rather quiet but pleasant day.

**Day 4:** Today we decided to visit St. Agnes. Taking the first boat of the day, we enjoyed close up views of European Shag and Northern Gannet on the 20-minute boat journey. Rather than heading straight to the Parsonage to look for flycatchers, we headed first for the 'Big Pool' to look for the **Pectoral Sandpiper** that had been in residence for some time. We weren't disappointed and immediately on arrival all enjoyed excellent views of the bird at close range. Shortly afterwards on Periglis Beach, a **Snow Bunting** was found and also performed well. Two excellent birds and we had only been on the island for 20 minutes! Heading to the camp site (for the most westerly bathrooms in the UK!), impressive numbers of Eurasian Oystercatchers and Eurasian Curlews were roosting on the rocks in Periglis Bay together with several Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Moving on up to the Parsonage, it didn't take us long to find the stunning male **Red-breasted Flycatcher** resplendent with its red throat. Although rather flighty at first as it was busy feeding, eventually everyone enjoyed fantastic views together with both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers making it a three flycatcher day. Our next port of call was Castello Down where a **Lapland Bunting** had been reported. The down was fairly devoid of people so we decided to eat our lunch whilst enjoying the glorious views in wonderful weather. Duly finished, we heard that the bird had flown towards us so we started to look for it in the nearby fields. No luck, so we continued on to the maze which was its favoured feeding spot but again no luck. It was then re-found in the fields we had previously checked so we headed back and had brief views before it headed back to the maze giving us a good run around! Fortunately, back at the maze, it finally decided to give us all excellent views! As we scanned over the sea towards Annett and the Bishops Rock, Western Marsh-harrier and Peregrine Falcon were both picked up. Heading back through the centre of the island, we dropped down to the quay and took the boat back to St. Mary's where some of us headed to 'Higgo's Pool' again to look for the waterthrush. We were not disappointed as over the course of the next 15 minutes we enjoyed excellent views of the Northern Waterthrush again in much better light than on the previous occasion. One of the group decided to go on the pelagic today and enjoyed an excellent day seeing Northern Fulmar, **Great Shearwater**, Manx Shearwater, **Sooty Shearwater**, **European Storm-petrel** and Atlantic Puffin.

**Day 5:** Our first stop of the day was Lower Moors when close to Shooters Pool blind we found two **Yellow-browed Warblers**. After checking the hides, we retraced our steps and with a Bluethroat having

been reported at Porth Hellick the previous day, we were working our way towards this part of the island to look for it when there was a report of a **Red-throated Pipit** on the Golf Course. We therefore diverted and made our way to the golf course where, after a short delay, we managed to relocate the bird which promptly flew over our heads calling to confirm the identification. Fortunately, it landed nearby and we were all able to enjoy telescope views. We also enjoyed nice views of a Merlin hunting pipits in a spectacular fashion but hoped that it didn't catch the Red-throated Pipit! Very satisfied with this, we headed to the nearby ancient Bronze Age village of Bants Carn to enjoy the views and scan for the **Eurasian Spoonbill** which was seen at great distance (3 miles!) on Bryher. We then headed around Newford Duck Pond to Maypole, Normandy and eventually down Porth Hellick Down to look for the Bluethroat on Porth Hellick Beach. Sadly no sign of it but our attention was drawn to other birders on the opposite side of Porth Hellick Bay who had found the **Eurasian Wryneck**. The bird performed extremely well for over an hour whilst we took a (belated) lunch break. Heading back up towards Salakee Farm then along Salakee Lane, we had almost reached Parting Carn when we heard that the Bluethroat had been refound in the horse field at the Porth Hellick end of Carn Friars Lane. As we still had time, we decided to retrace our steps and eventually arrived back on Porth Hellick Beach to see birders watching the **Bluethroat**. Opening the gate to the lane, we joined the crowd and were soon enjoying excellent views of the first winter male bird of the red-spotted race as it fed around the docks and dung in the field. Whilst enjoying the bird however, the horses of varying sizes in the field became more and more curious even resorting to trying to remove things from people's pockets and rucksacks, a scene right out of 'Mr Bean'! By now we had walked around most of the island during the day so we headed back to the guesthouse at the end of another great day.

**Day 6:** After breakfast we headed up to the Garrison to look for a Subalpine Warbler. It was definitely the day of the two bird theory however, because after an hour of brief views it turned out that the bird we had been watching was a **Common Whitethroat**! Moving around the Garrison to Sally Port, we looked for the Rose-coloured Starling again and enjoyed a number of good views. We then spent some time looking for a European Turtle-dove that was present with Eurasian Collared-doves but unfortunately the bird eluded us. As we were still in town and it was late morning, we picked up some food and returned to the guesthouse to make drinks and eat in comfort. The afternoon was spent enjoying walking around the island with no particular agenda except to look for our own birds and at birds we had seen before. On a beautiful day with wonderful scenery and good birds this is Scilly at its best. A very obliging **Water Rail** and the 'resident' Common Greenshank was a nice bonus at Lower Moors on the way back.

**Day 7:** After, breakfast, a quick visit to Porth Mellon Beach gave many of us our first **Black Redstart** of the autumn. With the prospect of an extremely confiding **Spotted Crake** on Tresco, we then headed to the quay and took a boat to Carn Near the island. It didn't take long to find the bird at the east end of the Abbey Pool and we were soon enjoying excellent views of this normally shy species. Next, we visited the south end of the Great Pool where we enjoyed very close views of the Least Sandpiper. Further along Pool Road the Lesser Yellowlegs was again present with the Common Greenshank and Common Redshank flock but very little else was noted on the Great Pool. Returning to the Abbey Pool, we enjoyed even closer views of the Spotted Crake before checking out the bathing gulls which included several first winter **Mediterranean Gulls**. On our way back across the heliport, we found a nice **Whinchat** before catching the early boat back to St. Mary's from Carn Near. Back on St. Mary's, we heard about a small influx of **Ring Ouzels** on Penninis so headed round Porthcressa Bay, through the allotments and Health Centre car park to Penninis Farm where a nice adult male bird performed well for us. By now it was late afternoon so we headed back to the guesthouse to prepare for the end of the tour tomorrow.

**Day 8:** With just under three hours after breakfast before the airport bus arrived and nothing we had missed during the week to specifically look for, members of the group did various things before meeting up at the guesthouse again at 11.15. The return helicopter flight was on time at the end of one of the best birding weeks for many years on Scilly.

**Footnote:** 8–15 October 2011 was one of the best weeks on Scilly for rarities for many years although there was a shortage of common migrants. The following week, 15–22 October, was equally good with Upland Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson’s Snipe, Eurasian Wryneck, Red-throated Pipit, Bluethroat, Northern Waterthrush and Lapland Longspur all remaining from the previous week whilst new birds included **Black Kite**, **Olive-backed Pipit** and **Radde’s Warbler**. Regarding the best time to go to Scilly, that really is the \$64,000 question. In 1998 I arrived on 10 October, two days after one of the best birds of the autumn had departed (Eastern Olivaceous Warbler) and left on 24 October two days before the arrival of another of the best birds of the autumn, American Robin! This year, the day the second group left a **Scarlet Tanager** was found just 15 minutes before the airport bus arrived. There was the option to change the return flight to a later one and anyone who did managed to connect with the bird. Any time in October is therefore good for birding but with some rarities turning up in late September or early November, unless you can spend six weeks on the islands you will always miss something and need to return!