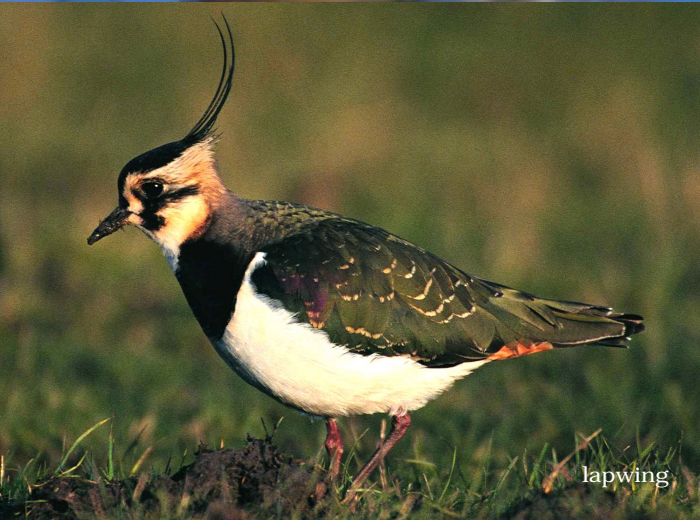




snipe



black-tailed godwit



lapwing



guidance for visitors

Please remember:

- To take care on the cliffs as they can be dangerous
- To avoid disturbing nesting birds
- To keep dogs under control at all times
- To take your litter home with you
- Not to pick wild flowers
- Respect private property

Orkney's
Birds

photographs: RSPB, design and illustration: Iain Ashman

cover images: top black guillemot bottom razorbills



find out more about our rich and varied wildlife

Orkney's birds

seabirds

The rich waters of Orkney along with the perfect nesting ledges provided by the underlying geology make this the most numerous group of birds to breed here. The largest sea cliff colony at the RSPB's Noup Cliffs reserve, Westray holds around 100,000 birds.

The sea cliffs from April to July can be a raucous and fragrant spectacle. Guillemots packed onto tiny ledges compete with razorbills and vast numbers of kittiwakes for the valuable food sources from the sea such as sand eels.



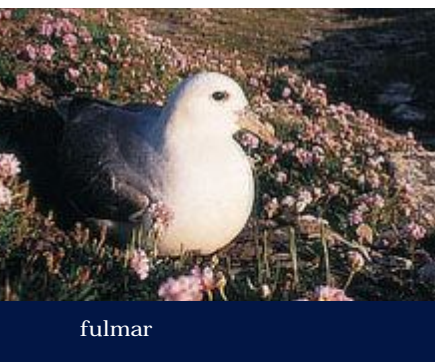
puffin

Many visitors' favourite bird, the puffin, can be seen throughout the islands in small numbers but the best locations for viewing these clowns of the bird world in any number are at the Castle of Burray on Westray **1** and the RSPB reserve of Copinsay off the east coast of Deerness. Small numbers can be seen off the east coast of South Ronaldsay **2** and around Marwick Head and the Brough of Birsay **3**.



guillemot

The last member of the auk family to breed in Orkney, the Black Guillemot or *tystie*, breeds throughout the island in small colonies such as the one on the Holm of Papay **4** or a more accessible and unusual colony on the old pier at Lyness on Hoy **5**.



fulmar

Fulmars can be seen almost everywhere in Orkney and breed on most cliffs and even the odd ruined building; one of the bird world's great success stories these birds only having started breeding in Orkney in the early 1900s



great skua

arctic skua

The great skua or bonxie was unknown in Orkney before the turn of the century. They now number over two thousand pairs (almost 25% of the UK population). The majority of these birds are to be found on the moorland of Hoy.



arctic tern

Arctic terns abound on the RSPB's North Hill reserve on Papa Westray, at times Britain's largest tern colony. The terns can be seen returning from feeding forays being besieged by the arctic skuas that also nest here. This aerial master is one of the bird world's pirates, preferring to steal the food of other birds rather than fish for itself.

passerines

The traditional suite of woodland passerines (perching birds) are absent from Orkney, due mainly to the limited quantity of this type of habitat in the islands. Blackbirds are present throughout the islands whilst song thrushes are present in only very small numbers.



stonechat



twite

Of the finches, only chaffinches are present in any numbers, usually in the woodland areas although greenfinches are on the increase and are now a commoner site in some of the towns and villages.

Twite and linnet breed in small numbers on the moorlands and some coastal areas and flocks gather around the scarce food sources during the winter.

Of the more open country passerines skylark and meadow pipits abound, the latter being by far the more numerous. The meadow pipits greyer cousin, the rock pipit can be seen around most of Orkney's coastline. Pied wagtails are a widespread breeding species although only a few winter here. Grey wagtails also nests although in much smaller numbers and only sporadically.

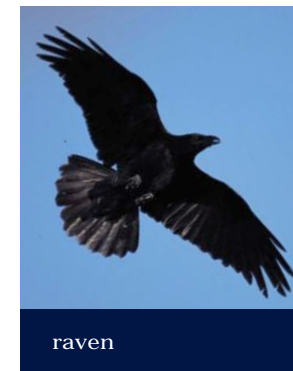


skylark

A bright splash of colour comes in the form of the stonechat, nesting mainly in Hoy and around the Orphir area.

Wheatears are our first long distant migrants to arrive here in late March or early April. Seen commonly around the west coast maritime heath or on the rockier moorland of Hoy, they add a warm touch of colour with their peachy breast and black mask.

The crow family in Orkney is represented by four species; the raven, rook, jackdaw and hooded crow. Ravens can be seen performing their spectacular tumbling display flight in the early part of the year and jackdaws can be seen along many of the islands' seacliffs, such as at the large colony at Costa Head **6**. Rooks nest throughout the Mainland woods such as Woodwick in Evie **7** and Binscarth, Firth **8**.



raven

wintering birds in Orkney

During the winter, the islands are home to large numbers of waders, wildfowl and other species. Scapa Flow **9** is an important wintering area for great-northern, red- and black-throated divers, Slavonian and red-necked grebes and long-tailed ducks. Great northern divers and Slavonian grebes are here in internationally important numbers.

The islands are also home to several goose species for the relatively mild winter months. Several small populations of Greenland white-fronted geese occur in the islands, The Loons RSPB reserve holding over one hundred every year. Around one thousand barnacle geese winter in South Walls **10**. The Harray loch, along with some of the smaller lochs, hold large numbers of wintering wildfowl including thousands of wigeon, pochard, tufted ducks and scaup.



Greenland white-fronted geese

Some of the wintering waders in Orkney include the ever-present curlew, turnstone, purple sandpiper, bar-tailed godwit, redshank and dunlin. The best place to see these birds in large numbers is on the east coast of Sanday but any area of accessible coastline in Orkney will hold its share of winter visitors.

migration

For the spring migration, late April to late May is the best period. This can also be a good time to see some of the winter visitors that have not left Orkney's waters yet, such as the great northern divers and long-tailed ducks.

Autumn migration is at its peak during September and October. North Ronaldsay is the best of the islands for spotting rare migrants, being the most northeasterly of the Orkney Islands. Stronsay is another excellent island for witnessing migration and almost anything could appear on these islands.

One of the best things about bird watching in Orkney is the possibility that just about anything could show up at any time. With its location off the northeast coast of Scotland and with such a variety of habitats in such a small space, it has the potential to turn up something unusual at almost anytime of year. So, wherever you are bird watching in Orkney, keep your eyes and mind open and above all ENJOY!

Orkney's wildlife year

	january	february	march	april	may	june	july	august	september	october	november	december
seabirds												
passerines												
divers												
waterfowl												
raptors and owls												
waders												

■ best time to see wintering species

□ best time to see breeding species

Orkney's breeding birds

Your first impression of Orkney's bird life is its sheer abundance and diversity. This is evident even before setting foot on the islands, with all manner of seabirds that can be seen from the ferry as it crosses the Pentland Firth.

The large variety of habitats in a relatively small area provides many different feeding and nesting areas for numerous species. The local geology (mainly Devonian sandstone) provides perfect nesting ledges on the sea cliffs at colonies like Noup Cliffs, Westray and Marwick Head, Mainland. These features along with the rich food source provided by the mixing of the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean provide ideal conditions for breeding and wintering seabirds.



short-eared owl

The moorlands of Orkney such as Birsay Moors on Mainland and the hills of Hoy and Rousay provide perfect breeding grounds for the striking red-throated diver and birds of prey such as the hen harrier, merlin and short-eared owl. The evocative display call of the curlew can be heard on an early spring Orcadian morning, this species breeding here in higher densities than anywhere else in Britain.

Orkney's wetland areas provide nesting and feeding habitat for a remarkable number and diversity of waders and wildfowl. Eleven species of waders breed in the wetlands and on the moorland; along with a remarkable twelve species of duck including pintail and gadwall.

The farmland of Orkney, along with the rest of the country, has undergone dramatic changes over the last fifty years but it is still an important habitat for many species and can provide an essential source of both food and shelter over the crucial winter months.

divers

Orkney holds around 130 pairs of red-throated divers (or rain geese as they are known locally). They breed on many of the remote hill top lochans and can be heard flying overhead on foraging trips out to sea. Good views of these birds can be had from the RSPB hide at Burgar Hill overlooking Lowrie's Water.



red-throated diver

shoveler

waterfowl

An incredible assortment of ducks, geese and swans breed in Orkney. As well as the graceful mute swan, a few herons, and an increasing population of greylag geese, at least twelve species of duck breed in Orkney. Some of the more unusual are pintail, gadwall and the eye-catching red-breasted merganser. Other species include the ubiquitous mallard, teal, wigeon, shoveler, eider, shelduck, pochard, tufted duck and very occasionally garganey.

raptors and owls

The most conspicuous and arguably most beautiful of Orkney's raptors is the hen harrier. This magnificent bird breeds on the remote moorland areas and can be seen performing its spectacular sky dance display in the early spring and quartering the rough grassland margins hunting for voles and small birds throughout the year. Short-eared owls are commonly seen hunting over areas of taller vegetation throughout the day. Both of these



hen harrier male

merlin female

species are strongly dependent upon the population of the Orkney vole, a unique subspecies of the European vole. Merlins inhabit the more remote areas of moorland and a certain amount of luck is helpful in seeing these impressive masters of the air. Their larger relative the peregrine is present throughout the islands but in only in small numbers. Other birds of prey in Orkney include the kestrel, which, unusually, may nest on the ground; a few pairs of sparrowhawks nest in the small areas of woodland around the islands and buzzards are present in small numbers on Hoy.

waders

Orkney is home to a vast range of waders from the most numerous and recognisable curlew to the shy and more elusive golden plover. Eleven species of wader breed here regularly. The best places to see these are at The Loons RSPB Reserve, West Mainland and Mill Dam RSPB Reserve, Shapinsay. Few spectacles compare to the noise and activity of the morning wader displays in the spring. Other wader species include redshank, oystercatcher, snipe, lapwing, dunlin, whimbrel, ringed plover, common sandpiper and the rare black-tailed godwit.



redshank

curlew