

# Autumn Gold

## 17th - 22nd September 2012



**Trip summary:** The weather was generally kind and mostly dry, if a little cool. Waders featured prominently during the week with most of the more unusual species originating from North America following the gales the previous week. In total we recorded 2 American Golden Plovers, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpipers (on three dates), Semipalmated Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper; an incredible tally for 6 days! Raptors also featured with all 8 resident species recorded including 6 Golden Eagles on 21<sup>st</sup>. The passerines were in generally short supply although we did see good numbers of Lapland Buntings and one or two genuine surprises, not least the 2 Buff-bellied Pipits that we managed to connect with in South Uist. Perhaps the luckiest encounter was a male Quail that wandered around a machair track in front of the minibus providing us with the best views any of us had ever had. It wasn't just birds either, as we had great views of a family of otters in South Uist whilst Steve spotted a few Harbour Porpoise off Berneray and managed to produce a Long-tailed Field Mouse from his pocket! An excellent and entertaining 6 days in the Uists.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Malcolm and Mary Bridges, Lucy and John Roots, Greg and Adele Knight

### Daily Dairy:

#### 17<sup>th</sup> September:

Weather – West, south-westerly force 5, easing to force 3 in the evening; sunny spells and showers

The day began with a quick spin around the west side of Benbecula to Stinky Bay pausing briefly to scan a flock of **Golden Plover** at Torlum and to watch a female / immature **Hen**



**Harrier** hunting by Coot Loch. Stinky Bay itself held good numbers of **Sanderling**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover** whilst 2 **Grey Phalaropes** rode the swell like a couple of corks and gave great views as they did so. We then headed onto South Uist and along the track between Carnan and Hebridean Jewellery. The tide was still high although we did see a few **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Curlew** and **Grey Plover** with one or two of the latter still in summer plumage. The saltings at Balgarva held quite a few

**Redshanks** feeding in the flooded creeks along with a **Pectoral Sandpiper** (our first North American visitor). We drove to the coast at Balgarva and timed our arrival just right as many of the waders were feeding on a recently exposed area of muddy sand. Not long after arriving we spotted a juvenile **Semipalmated Sandpiper** scurrying about amongst the scattering of seaweed. Many other waders were also present with **Dunlin**, **Ringed Plover**, **Turnstone**, **Sanderling** and **Bar-tailed Godwits** all busy feeding away. We all managed to get views of the sandpiper through the scope as it obligingly fed fairly close inshore. We moved on to Ardivachar at the north-west tip of South Uist where a similar array of waders fed along the tide line with a couple of **Knot**. We then drove around the west side of Loch Bee, across the Range and back onto the main road. We hadn't gone far south when a large flock of **Greylag Geese** rose in front of us in a panic. The reason for all the mayhem was revealed once Malcolm pointed out the large raptor over the hillside; an immature **White-tailed Eagle**. We watched this for some time as it floated overhead giving us excellent views until Malcolm

once again drew our attention to another large raptor being mobbed in the distance. We jumped back into the van and 5 minutes later were watching an immature **Golden Eagle** being mobbed by 2 **Ravens** and a **Buzzard**. Not a bad morning's birding!

We had our lunch on the coast at Peninerine whilst **Swallows** and a **Sand Martin** hawked along the dune edge by us. Moving on we took a rough track past Ormiclate Castle onto the machair where we found hundreds of **Golden Plover**. In amongst them we located an adult



summer plumage **American Golden Plover** and 24 **Black-tailed Godwits**. Suddenly the whole machair erupted as birds scattered everywhere and an adult **Peregrine Falcon** came through low and very fast. We returned to the track and a small bird was seen scurrying in front of the minibus; amazingly it was a male **Quail**. It ran into the side but soon came back out onto the track where it provided us all with superb views as it cautiously trotted across the track into a narrow strip of grass running

across the harvested fields. A little further south we drove out to the headland of Rubha Ardvule and walked out to the point. Things were pretty quiet at the point although as we returned to the vehicle we wandered over to get a look at the Grey and Common Seals and flushed a very elusive **Spotted Sandpiper** from the shingle bank that perched, briefly on the rocks before dropping out of view. We returned to the road and began heading back north, stopping in at Stoneybridge where we picked up a **Purple Sandpiper** amongst the **Turnstone** feeding on the tide line. We also got good views of an immature **Glaucous Gull** loafing on the freshwater loch. On returning to the van we spotted 2 **Grey Phalaropes** close inshore a little south of our position and a couple of **Red-throated Divers** off-shore. We returned to the guesthouse after an action-packed day before having dinner at the Stepping Stones.

### 18<sup>th</sup> September:

Weather – Winds were north-west, force 4 at first, quickly increasing to force 5 – 6; sunny spells with squally showers.

From the guesthouse we headed around the west side of Benbecula taking a quick look at Coot Loch where of course we connected with a couple of **Coots** (surprisingly scarce in the islands) and **Little Grebe**. Stinky Bay had the usual array of gulls and waders whilst off Balivanich we spotted a winter plumage **Black Guillemot** and a distant **Grey Phalarope** bobbing on the sea. After getting some help from the local garage to arrange the rear door of the minibus back in place we moved on to North Uist. Our first port of call was Loch Sandary

where we saw a couple of **Whooper Swans** before we headed for the north-west of the island. St. Kilda could be seen on the horizon, showing just how clear it was at over 50 miles distant. Lots of **Golden Plover** were at the roadside around Balelone / Scolpaig although scanning revealed little else apart from **Lapwings** and **Starlings** amongst them. We had our lunch at Griminish Pier in the hope of connecting with an otter or two but they eluded us and once we were fully nourished and watered we retraced our steps for Balranald. Once at the coast we took a walk onto the headland at Aird an Runair where we spotted a few seabirds including **Kittiwake**, **Gannets**, **Razorbill**, 2 **Great Northern Divers** heading south and 2 **Red-throated Divers**. We completed a circuit which brought us back towards the minibus through some stubble fields where we managed to put up 16 **Lapland Buntings**. We spotted a **Hen Harrier** as we got to the visitor centre before moving on to the Paible area. Loch Paible was quiet whilst we found more **Golden Plover** scattered around the fields and a **Sparrowhawk** belted across the road just in front of us near Bayhead. We took a quick spin on to Baleshare where we spotted a **Moorhen**, a single **Gadwall** and 12 **Black-tailed Godwits** as well as **Dunlin**, **Curlew** and **Bar-tailed Godwits** sheltering in the lee of the island. Finally as we returned to the guesthouse we took a look at Loch Mor and came across 2 female / immature **Hen Harriers** hunting the loch edge. We had our evening meal in the Dark Island.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> Septmeber:

Weather – North-westerly force 5, easing to force 4; mostly sunny with occasional showers and cool.

We spent the day in South Uist and explored the northern half of the island. The tide was high and so we had a look around the South Ford for waders where we found the usual array including **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover**, **Bar-tailed Godwits** and got great views of a **Pectoral Sandpiper**. Moving on we stopped at Ardivachar, at the north-west tip of the island and although it was fairly quiet we did pick up 3 **Red-throated Divers** off-shore. Further south we called in for a second visit to Stoneybridge where we found a summer plumage **Great Northern Diver** and a **Grey Phalarope** on the shore line as well as **Turnstone**, **Sanderling** etc. We moved on to Loch Eynort in our quest for otters and not long after arriving on site spotted a **Golden Eagle**. A walk through Archie's wooded garden took us to a panoramic viewpoint where we could see a considerable area of the tidal loch. Here we had **Red-throated Diver**, **Razorbill** and **Guillemot** whilst the trees held **Chaffinch** and **Goldcrests**. Lots of Common Seals were scattered throughout the loch and finally we found a family of 4 otters (a mother with 3 cubs). We watched them as they fed and played

together bounding in and out of the water for around 30 minutes when we left them still enjoying themselves as we headed back to the bus for lunch.



As we drove away from Loch Eynort a call came through that there was a **Buff-bellied Pipit** at Rubha Ardvule which was only a short drive from where we were and so off we went. It took a while to locate it but eventually we got reasonable views although it was pretty jumpy and readily vanished. We also managed to spot 11 **Lapland Buntings** and a **Willow Warbler** before heading back across the machair at Bornish. Not far from Loch Bornish a **Merlin** came

dashing over the silage bales, narrowly missing the minibus before landing on the machair. Not for long though, as soon it was off and chasing a wader that we hadn't seen. This proved to be a **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** that towered into the sky as the aerial pursuit saw them both twisting and turning until they were specks in the blue yonder. Eventually the Merlin gave up and began to fall back to lower levels and you could almost hear the sigh of relief from the sandpiper! All the excitement brought a thirst to the group and we called in at Kildonan Café for tea and cake which went down very well. Our last site was the nearby coast at Kildonan where we spotted a **Peregrine** perched on a rocky island just off-shore whilst a **Lapland Bunting** was seen in flight and an immature **Hen Harrier** hunted over the fields.

Another exciting day and dinner at the Dark Island.

### 20<sup>th</sup> September:

Weather – North-easterly force 2, gradually increasing to force 4; sunny with a very occasional shower.

This morning we headed for our most northerly point of Berneray and took a walk across the machair to the Sound of Pabbay. As we arrived, a flock of 30 **Pink-footed Geese** flew east overhead. Once on the coast we spotted flocks of **Eider**, passing **Gannets** and 15 **Whooper Swans** were seen heading south-east over the sea in the distance. The beach to the north of Port Ludaig on the opposite side of the island held good numbers of **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover** as well as **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Redshank** and **Dunlin**. A **Peregrine** made a sweep above us causing pandemonium amongst the birds shortly before a **Golden Eagle**



flew south, overhead. We moved to the southern side of Berneray and had our lunch on the machair at Borge. Whilst having lunch we could see a number of waders feeding on the tidal sands including **Knot**, **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Sanderling** and **Ringed Plover**. 4 **Lapland Buntings** also flew overhead after being disturbed from the stubble where they were feeding with **Skylarks**. Once fed and watered we took another walk, this time to the south-east tip

of the island, to Rubha Bhoisinis. En route we encountered 2 more **Golden Eagles** over the hills of North Uist followed by 2 more catching the thermals and circling very high over the southern end of Beneray. Once at the point we managed to pick up **Red-throated Diver**, **Eiders** and a record count of at least 43 **Common Scoters**. Steve spotted a couple of Harbour Porpoise again briefly as he had in the Sound of Pabbay. Returning to the vehicle we drove back across the machair and on leaving flushed a small flock of **Common Redpolls** from the gateway.

For the rest of the day we headed around the north side of North Uist calling in at Clachan Sands, Griminish Pier and Loch Sandary amongst others. Good numbers of **Golden Plover** were evident at Clachan Sands whilst Vallay Strand produced **Grey Plover** and a couple of **Greenshanks**. 150 **Pink-footed Geese** flew east over Vallay Island whilst we were at Griminish Pier.

Finally we headed back around the southern side of the island stopping briefly at Coot Loch before returning to the guesthouse to freshen up and enjoy our evening meal at the Stepping Stones.

### 21<sup>st</sup> September:

Weather – Northerly force 3, increasing to force 4 then decreasing again in the evening; mostly sunny with occasional showers.

We headed in the opposite direction today, to our most southerly point on Eriskay. From the ferry terminal looking across the Sound of Barra we spotted good numbers of **Gannets**, around 30 **Kittiwakes**, **Eider**, **Shag**, **Red-throated Diver** and **Razorbills**. In the good light we also managed to pick up a distant **Golden Eagle** heading east over the north end of Barra! We moved on to the small valley of Acairseid on Eriskay where we encountered 2 more **Golden Eagles** circling over the highest point on the island. The harbour area had **Hooded Crow**, **Eider** and **Rock Pipits** as well as both Common and Grey Seals. After a short walk we

had yet another sighting of **Golden Eagle** to the south of the island where it perched on a small hill top briefly, next to a **Hooded Crow** creating a stunning size comparison before it



hopped out of view and the wind. Moving on we stopped at the causeway although very little was present so we headed for Smerclate. As we were driving down the road to our parking spot Steve's phone went with news of another **Buff-bellied Pipit**, only this one was a few hundred yards down the road in front of us at Smerclate! This individual was much more obliging and gave excellent views as it fed high on the shore on the seaweed. There were also plenty of **Rock and Meadow Pipits** around for

comparison as well as **Twite, Reed Bunting, Razorbills, Shag** and **Red-throated Diver**.

Returning to the vehicle for lunch a shower set in so we decided to head up the road to Kilpheder. We parked by the coast and had our lunch on the machair. We watched as 2 **Golden Eagles** circled to the east of us for around 20 - 30 minutes with one being mobbed by a **Buzzard** followed by a gallant **Kestrel**. We also watched as 5 **Buzzards** rose on a thermal together before we left them circling and ventured onto the shore where we found **Red-breasted Merganser, Guillemot, Turnstone, Sanderling** and both Grey and Common Seals. Back in the minibus we started back along the bumpy machair track north when a thin-winged wader went scooting off in front of us and over a bank. Steve went to investigate and found a juvenile **American Golden Plover** in a hollow although before we could walk round to see it, it took flight again. This time it landed in a more open area with a single **Golden Plover** and gave good scope views to the whole group. Whilst watching the plover 4 or 5 **Lapland Buntings** also made their presence felt, flying around and calling. Once fully satisfied with the views we drove north to Loch Hallan getting good views of a ringtail **Hen Harrier** as it hunted the machair. Our next and final stop was on the coast at Kildonan where we found a number of waders including **Sanderling, Turnstone, Dunlin, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwits** and a calling **Whimbrel**. A short walk along the dune edge produced around 16 **Swallows** and a flock of 10 **Corn Buntings**.

Our evening meal was at the Stepping Stones in Balivanich.

## 22<sup>nd</sup> September:

Weather – Southerly force 2 increasing to force 5 by mid-day; cloudy and cool.

We took a walk on Torlum machair / Borve Point and almost as soon as we stopped had a **Peregrine Falcon** hurtling past us over the machair. On the coast we found **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Dunlin**, **Ringed Plover**, **Eider**, **Shag** and **Red-breasted Mergansers**; whilst on the shore we found a lone **Lapland Bunting** amongst the hordes of pipits and **Skylarks**. We checked a flock of **Golden Plover** at Liniclate before moving on to South Uist. Once on the island we took a road / track along the south shore of the ford where we encountered good numbers of waders feeding close in. Amongst the usual array of **Dunlin** etc. an adult **White-rumped Sandpiper** was spotted bathing in some fresh water. A couple of people managed to see the bird before it and a whole lot of **Dunlin** then flew west and out of sight. Further along the track the South Ford also held lots of **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Redshank**, **Grey Plover** and **Curlew**. We paused at Balgarva to enjoy a cuppa and spotted a **Golden Eagle**, this time over Loch Bee where it was flushing flocks of **Greylag Geese**. It later headed over the South Ford in the general direction of Benbecula. 3 pale-bellied **Brent Geese** were feeding in North Bay and another **Peregrine** gave great views as it circled over the minibus as we made our way across the Range. A **Pectoral Sandpiper** was found amongst the **Golden Plover** and Loch Bee held both **Wigeon** and **Teal**. We returned to Benbecula and took a look at Peter's Port. Although quiet at this location apart from a few **Rock Pipits** we had a ringtail **Hen Harrier** as we returned to the main road, plus another individual hunting the marshy ground around Loch Mor.

Greg and Adele had a booking for the 16:00 sailing from Lochmaddy to Uig so we all said our goodbyes at the guesthouse around 14:00 after a very successful and eventful week's birding.

## Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen daily in small numbers
Great Northern Diver	Single birds seen on two dates
Little Grebe	Fairly common
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common
Mute Swan	Common
Whooper Swan	Small numbers of over-summering birds seen as well as a flock of 15 from Berneray, 20 <sup>th</sup>
Greylag Goose	Very common
Pink-footed Goose	Two flocks on 20 <sup>th</sup> with 30 over Berneray and 150+ over Vallay
Brent Goose	3 in North Bay, South Uist, 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	A single on Baleshare, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Wigeon	Fairly common and seen on four dates
Teal	Fairly common with sightings on 3 dates
Tufted Duck	Common
Eider	Common
Common Scoter	43+ off Rubha Bhoisinis, Berneray, 21 <sup>st</sup> was a very good count
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen almost every day in small numbers
White-tailed Eagle	A single immature over Rueval, South Uist, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Golden Eagle	Seen on 5 out of 6 days with 6 on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Hen Harrier	Seen virtually daily in small numbers
Buzzard	Common
Kestrel	Fairly common and seen daily
Merlin	Seen on 2 dates
Peregrine Falcon	Seen on 4 dates with 2 on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Sparrowhawk	One over the road near Bayhead, North Uist, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Quail	A male gave unbelievable views at Ormiclate, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Coot	Seen at their regular site in Benbecula
Moorhen	Noted on 2 dates
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common

Grey Plover	Fairly common on the South Ford but also seen on Berneray
Golden Plover	Good numbers seen throughout the week
American Golden Plover	An adult at Ormiclate, 17 <sup>th</sup> and a juvenile at Kilpheder, 21 <sup>st</sup>
Lapwing	Common
Knot	Seen on 3 dates in small numbers
Sanderling	Very common
Turnstone	Common
Dunlin	Common
White-rumped Sandpiper	An adult seen briefly at Carnan, South Uist, 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Purple Sandpiper	One seen on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Semipalmated Sandpiper	A juvenile was at Balgarva, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Spotted Sandpiper	The juvenile at Rubha Ardvule was seen briefly, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Redshank	Common
Greenshank	Fairly common and seen on 4 dates <sup>t</sup>
Bar-tailed Godwit	Common
Black-tailed Godwit	Small numbers seen on 3 dates
Curlew	Common
Whimbrel	One at Kildonan, 21 <sup>st</sup>
Snipe	Common
Grey Phalarope	Seen on the first 3 days with 4 on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	One on 19 <sup>th</sup> at Bornish had a lucky escape from a Merlin
Pectoral Sandpiper	Singles were seen on 3 dates
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	An immature was seen on 17 <sup>th</sup> only
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Glaucous Gull	Immature birds were seen on 17 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> in South Uist
Arctic Tern	4 off Rubha Ardvule, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Black Guillemot	Recorded on 18 <sup>th</sup> only
Razorbill	Small numbers seen on 4 dates
Guillemot	Individuals seen on 19 <sup>th</sup> and 21 <sup>st</sup>
Rock Dove	Common
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Short-eared Owl	2 seen hunting near Eochar, South Uist, 19 <sup>th</sup>
Skylark	Common

Swallow	Fairly common
Sand Martin	Noted on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Rock Pipit	Seen every day
Meadow Pipit	Common – very common
Buff-bellied Pipit	Singles seen at Rubha Ardvule, 19 <sup>th</sup> and Smerclate, 21 <sup>st</sup>
Pied Wagtail	Seen regularly in small numbers
Hebridean Wren	Fairly common and seen on 4 dates
Hebridean Dunnock	Recorded on 20 <sup>th</sup> only
Robin	Seen at Loch Eynort, South Uist
Wheatear	Fairly common and seen every day in small numbers
Stonechat	Noted on 3 dates
Hebridean Song Thrush	Seen on 2 dates
Blackbird	Common
Willow Warbler	A juvenile at Rubha Ardvule, 19 <sup>th</sup>
Goldcrest	Seen at Loch Eynort
Hebridean Starling	Very common
Hooded Crow	Seen on 4 dates
Raven	Common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Recorded only at Loch Eynort
Linnet	Seen on 4 dates in small numbers
Common Redpoll	Seen on one date
Twite	Common and seen every day
Greenfinch	Fairly common and seen almost every day
Reed Bunting	Sightings on 2 dates
Corn Bunting	10+ at Kildonan
Lapland Bunting	Recorded on 4 dates with a maximum of 16 on 18 <sup>th</sup>

**Mammals:**

Otter	A family of 4 seen well at Loch Eynort, 19 <sup>th</sup>
Grey Seal	Seen on 4 dates
Common Seal	Recorded on 4 dates
Red Deer	Noted on 20 <sup>th</sup> only
Rabbit	Seen most days

Brown Rat	One on 19 <sup>th</sup>
Long-tailed Field Mouse	One appeared from Steve's pocket. 21 <sup>st</sup>
Harbour Porpoise	Small numbers seen to the west of Berneray, 19 <sup>th</sup>

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