

# Corncrake and Skuas

12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014



Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Ed and Marilyn Jones, Janet and Michael McNeill, Rachel and Paul Norris, Richard Horton and Derek Honor.

Despite a couple of wet days and poor winds for seabird passage we caught up with all our target birds and recorded 107 species during the week. This total included all 4 species of skua on the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> when we got decent views of 7 **Long-tailed** and 4 **Pomarine Skuas**. This proved to be the peak day for the whole spring with a lack of strong onshore winds allowing them to pass far off-shore and out of sight. We had some good views of **Corncrake** at Aird and Balranald as well as sightings of both **White-tailed** and **Golden Eagles** on 4 days. Large numbers of summer plumage waders were recorded as usual for this time of year although there were a couple of surprises including an early returning **Red-necked Phalarope** on 13<sup>th</sup> and 2 **Dotterel** on 15<sup>th</sup>. A **Lesser Yellowlegs** on the 17<sup>th</sup> was a great bird to catch up with in spring and showed well on the flooded machair at Daliburgh. Other goodies included a drake **Garganey**, all 3 species of diver in summer plumage; not to mention good views of both **Hen Harrier** and **Short-eared Owl** and 3 sightings of Otter. All in all it was a successful and enjoyable week.

## Daily Dairy:

12<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: Light east to north-easterly winds with lots of sunshine and quite warm.

Much of the day was spent meeting tour participants and getting them to their accommodation although we had some good birding in between. Paul, Rachel and Richard joined me at 9am after I met them at Hestimul. We headed around west Benbecula pausing at Coot Loch where we found one of the few **Coots** left breeding in the Outer Hebrides and a couple of **Snipe**. Nearby Loch Fada / Mor was more productive and we soon spotted **Gadwall**, **Shoveler** and a brief drake **Garganey**. A couple of pairs of **Lapwings** had small chicks close to the road whilst a Corncrake could be heard calling from a patch of iris close to a couple of houses. **Arctic Terns** were also present as was a single **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Snipe**, **Redshanks** and **Dunlin**; the latter seen and heard in display flight.

Moving on we met Janet, Michael, Ed and Marilyn at Benbecula airport in the late morning. We dropped their bags off at the guest house and took a look at nearby Stinky Bay. Here we found good numbers of waders including summer plumage **Sanderling**, **Dunlin** and **Turnstones** as well as **Shelduck** and **Eiders**. Off-shore we spotted a couple of **Great Northern Divers** whilst a male Belted Beauty moth flew past us along the bank.



We moved on to Ardivachar, South Uist for lunch where we had good views of a 2<sup>nd</sup> yr **Iceland Gull** and a hybrid Glaucous x mystery gull. On the shore we found **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover** and **Dunlin** whilst good numbers of **Whimbrel** appeared to be scattered everywhere. We also had a good view of 3 **Golden Plover** in fine breeding plumage in a roadside field. Just before leaving the headland 2 immature **White-tailed Eagles** were spotted circling overhead with one being mobbed by 2 **Buzzards** and providing a great size comparison.

Returning to the main road we paused near Hebridean Jewellery where we got views of a perched **Little Tern**. We moved on to the east side of Benbecula and scanned the bay and surrounding hills at Peter's Port. **Great Northern Diver** and **Black Guillemot** were seen on the sea whilst a **Golden Eagle** was circling over Wiay whilst being mobbed by a **Kestrel**. The eagle was still in view when we spotted an Otter feeding to the north-east; mid-way out in the harbour. We watched it for around 20 – 30 minutes before it swam towards the bank and ran up the shore to follow a trail over the small rise and out of view. **Rock Pipits** were present along the shore and **Twite** were busily feeding around the parking area.

We slowly made our way back towards the airport to meet Derek who was arriving on the afternoon flight. En route we stopped at a roadside loch to admire a pair of **Little Grebe** with very small young that were feeding very close to the road and providing superb views. We had another look at Loch Mor before picking up Derek and heading straight for Grenitote where a Snowy Owl had been reported earlier in the day. A **Short-eared Owl** showed well whilst hunting at the northern end of the Committee Road but unfortunately there was no sign of the Snowy Owl despite scanning a large area of machair. We returned the way we had come and managed to spot a **Greenshank** and another **Short-eared Owl** on our way back to Benbecula.

Our last stop involved a short detour to Aird that proved very fruitful, as we managed to see our first calling **Corncrake** which gave all of us good views before slinking off into longer vegetation.

### 13<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: Fine, sunny, mild conditions with light northerly winds.

This morning we drove to our most southerly point on the island of Eriskay where we stopped to admire the scenery and birds from the viewpoint overlooking the Sound of Barra. From here we found around 20 **Great Northern Divers**, **Fulmars**, **Gannets** and 2 distant **Arctic Skuas** chasing **Arctic Terns**. The pier for the ferry to / from Barra provided us with views of **Twite** and **Rock Pipits** as well as **Guillemots**, **Gannets**, **Arctic Terns**, **Arctic Skuas** and **Great Northern Divers**. Still on Eriskay we took a short walk in the Acairseid valley and around the harbour where we found a calling **Cuckoo** and a few **Stonechats**. The harbour held a single Grey Seal whilst a **Golden Eagle** was seen gliding overhead between the peaks both north and south of us.



**Sandpipers** although we did have a **Merlin** hurtling past the vehicle at the turning off the main road.

We left Eriskay late morning and headed for Smerclate for lunch; picking up a singing Whitethroat en route. On the shore here we managed to locate **Turnstones** and **Curlew** whilst a Corncrake calling from the long grass remained well hidden. More Grey Seals were hauled out on the rocks at the south-west point and a couple of summer-plumage **Great Northern Divers** were seen off-shore.

After a short walk we began heading back north, picking up a **Reed Bunting** singing from a fence before we took the turning for Strome. The latter site was quiet apart from a couple of **Common**

After a request for a stop at Flora MacDonald's birth place and views of a small herd of Red Deer behind the café at Kildonan we took the turning for Loch Eynort. This was a very productive site with distant views of 3 **White-tailed Eagles** circling over the hills to the east including a full adult. A **Golden Eagle** was spotted over the ridge on the opposite side of the loch to us with other birds including **Red-throated Diver**, **Buzzard**, **Willow Warbler**, **Goldfinch** (a recent colonist) and **redpolls**. A Blackcap was also heard in song but remained well hidden in the dense undergrowth. We also got more good views of an Otter feeding along the north shore for around 20 minutes which we lost when distracted by an adult **White-tailed Eagle** heading our way.

Continuing north we spotted a **Cuckoo** flying past the bus at Howmore before our progress was slowed somewhat when we came across a team resurfacing the road at Loch Bee. This turned out to be quite fortuitous as we got great views of a **Short-eared Owl** circling over the road at close range whilst waiting in the traffic queue.

Our final stop before dinner was at Loch Mor / Fada where we all managed to connect with a drake **Garganey**. We also found **Gadwall**, **Shoveler**, 2 **Black-tailed Godwits** and 5 **Whimbrel** before the biggest surprise of the day – a female **Red-necked Phalarope**. We got some fine scope views of this stunning female which we manage to locate by accident whilst searching for the disappearing Garganey and rounding off another good day in the field.

Post dinner, whilst dropping people back off at Hestimul guest house Richard and I had brief views of a male **Hen Harrier** shooting past the end of the drive.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: A moderate southerly wind with cloudy conditions leading to patchy mist and drizzle.

Our first stop this morning was at Balranald RSPB reserve. We drove out to the coastal car park and took a short walk onto the headland. Little was seen passing off-shore although we did see a single **Long-tailed Skua** heading north, mid-way to the horizon at 10:30 am following a clear spell after murky conditions. We also spotted **Red-throated Diver**, **Fulmars**, **Gannets** and plenty of **Arctic Terns**. **Sanderling**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover** were on the shoreline whilst 3 **Corn Buntings** showed very well as we were returning to the minibus. Back at the visitor centre we could hear a couple of **Corncrakes** calling and watched as one individual walked across the cemetery road and into the long vegetation. After some time it returned the way it had travelled, showing on the edge of the iris before walking back across the road to where it had started out. We heard another Corncrake calling at nearby Hougharry and spotted a couple of male **Ruff** flying across the loch before dropping in the field to the south. Unfortunately we didn't relocate them although we did spot 6 or 7 **Sand Martins** hawking over Loch na Reivil as well as **Shoveler**, **Wigeon**, **Tufted Duck** and **Little Grebe**.

We continued our circuit of North Uist with a stop at Griminish pier where we had lunch. A **Little Tern** flew up and down along the near shore whilst both **Red-breasted Merganser** and **Red-throated Diver** were on the tidal waters separating us from the island of Vallay. A small flock of **Bar-tailed Godwits** and a few **Dunlin** were also present.

After lunch we headed for Bernery in the far north, picking up a couple of **Teal** at Ahmore and a **Whooper Swan** at Oban Trumisgarry. Once on Berneray we began our exploration at Rushgarry where we found good numbers of waders on the machair and beach. Amongst the masses of **Turnstone**, **Dunlin** and **Ringed Plover** we also managed to find a few **Purple Sandpipers** feeding in the seaweed as well as a handful of **Bar-tailed Godwits**. A male **Long-tailed Duck** and a few **Great Northern Divers** were seen off-shore as well as our 3<sup>rd</sup> Otter of the week. **Arctic** and **Little Terns** were busily feeding and calling whilst a **Sandwich Tern** was seen in flight before perching on a sandbank next to the other terns (the latter species is a scarce visitor to the islands). Moving on we paused at the freshwater, Loch Brusda. Lots of **Arctic** and **Little Terns** were also present whilst amongst the small gathering of wildfowl we located a pair of **Gadwall** and a female **Pintail**. 3 **Twite** calling from behind the minibus included 2 males that performed an aerial display in an attempt to woo the female. Our final site on the island was at the south-west tip of Borve. **Ringed Plover** and **Dunlin** were seen feeding on the machair as well as **Skylarks** and a party of 12 **Twite**.

We left Berneray in the late afternoon and began our journey back to Benbecula pausing to admire a Buzzard on a nest, close to the road at Clachan Farm en route.

### 15<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: South-westerly force 6, easing a little in the afternoon; cloudy with misty patches.

We headed back out to Aird an Runair, Balranald this morning in the hope of catching some skua passage. The first hour was rather quiet so we walked out onto the headland where we began to pick up a few skuas late morning with the first being a **Bonxie** north at 10:50. This



was followed by decent views of 4 **Long-tailed Skuas** and 3 **Pomarine Skuas**. 2 more **Bonxies** were seen heading overhead at the same time 3 **Long-tailed Skuas** flew low, north. These were followed by a single **Red-throated Diver** and an adult **Pomarine Skua**. Our final skua of the morning was an **Arctic Skua** close in at around 11:45. Although numbers were small, having all four skua species in a little over an hour was a taste of classic Uist in spring. We also managed a handful of **Manx Shearwaters** off-shore from the headland, heading south and 3 **Whimbrel** heading

north. On our way back to the car park we spotted 4 **Purple Sandpipers** on the beach

amongst the commoner waders and obtained more good views of **Corn Bunting** on the machair edge.

We stopped briefly at the visitor centre where we enjoyed more good views of a **Corncrake** whilst 3 **Black-tailed Godwits** and a couple of **Little Grebe** were seen on nearby Loch nam Feithean.

Heading south we called in at Loch Sandary where we found a drake **Scaup** and 2 **Whooper Swans** whilst the fields around Paible held 3 **Whimbrel** as well as **Turnstone** and good numbers of **Ringed Plover** and Dunlin.



Once on South Uist we picked up 2 **Common Terns** over Loch Bee before driving onto the Range and getting some great views of a couple of **Dotterel**. We watched these cracking birds for around half an hour before we took the machair track to Ardivachar. The usual array of waders and gulls were present at the latter site whilst 4 **Twite** and a fly-over **Little Tern** were seen along the Kilaulay track. A Distant **White-tailed Eagle** was seen over Loch Bee and another **Little Tern** found feeding at the north end of the loch. We returned to the main road via a track running along the south shore of the South Ford where we managed to pick up around

30 **Grey Plover**, resplendent in their striking summer plumage. More **Dunlin** and a few **Whimbrel** were also seen as well as a pair of **Wigeon** on a small freshwater loch.

Our last site of the day saw us in east Benbecula at Uskivagh where we got great views of 2 **Golden Eagles** circling over and then landing on the west side of Wiay. We watched them for some time before an immature **White-tailed Eagle** flew north and drew our attention away. Finally on the way back to Ceann na Pair guest house we got great views of a perched **Short-eared Owl** by Loch Mor rounding off an excellent day.

### 16<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: A strong, near gale force southerly with rain and drizzle finally cleared to sunshine in the late afternoon.

A rather quiet day bird wise started at Balranald with another attempt at sea-watching. Seabird passage consisted of a couple of **Arctic Skuas**, **Kittiwakes** and a few **Razorbills**. A couple of **Red-throated Divers** flew north and lots of **Arctic Terns** were busy in the area. We decided to cut our losses and made our way back to the minibus passing the usual array of waders on the beach including a few **Purple Sandpipers**. A couple of **Corn Buntings**

showed very well again along the dune edge whilst the vocal Corncrake by the visitor centre was still calling and a couple of **Snipe** were seen in display.

We moved on in the hope of finding the Snowy Owl at Grenitote; pausing at Hosta to look at a couple of **Sand Martins** that have begun nesting at the top of the small sand quarry here. There was no sign of the owl between Malaclate and Grenitote although the strong wind didn't help the search. Moving on we took the road to Loch Portain and Cheese Bay where it was also quiet although we did see 8 **Swallows** sheltering from the wind on the fence in the lee of a wooded garden. On the way back to the main road we came across 2 **Whimbrel** actually on the road.

The weather was hampering bird finding so we tried a walk in the Langass plantation although here again we had little apart from **Buzzard, Chaffinch** and Hercules; a Grizzly Bear (well, at least a life-size wood carving of a Grizzly Bear). This was followed by a message about a probable Snowy Owl at Grenitote. After some discussion with the observer we began heading back towards Grenitote until a further message revealed that it was no longer a probable owl but a white rock. Somewhat disappointed we adjourned for refreshments in the local café in Lochmaddy.

Post tea, coffee and cake we moved on, calling in at Langass Lodge where we took a short walk to the shore. Here we picked up a **Short-eared Owl, Wood Pigeon, Willow Warbler** and **Red-breasted Merganser** as well as a herd of Red Deer. A few miles further south we stopped at Carinish where found a **Moorhen** and drake **Gadwall** on a small loch opposite the school whilst another **Short-eared Owl** was picked up on a side road in the village.

We finally took a look at Loch Mor as the conditions that had hampered us throughout much of the day had slightly improved as the rain had stopped although there was still a strong wind. We didn't pick up much fresh for the day with **Wigeon, Shoveler, Dunlin, Curlew, Ringed Plover** and **Grey Heron** the only birds of note. It's a shame that the wind hadn't been more from the west as it could have been a good skua day.

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

Weather: Cloudy with moderate south-westerly winds; drizzle then rain from early afternoon.

The day began well with a pair of nesting **Black-throated Divers** at a site in Benbecula where we also found at least 4 **Short-eared Owls** and a female **Hen Harrier** in the distance. This was followed by another pair nesting at our second site; Loch Druidibeg although these were much more distant. A **Common Sandpiper** was also present and a **Golden Eagle** flew over being mobbed by a **Kestrel**. Slightly further along the road to Loch Skipport we had a good selection of raptors with another **Golden Eagle, 2 Kestrels, 2 male Hen Harriers** (including one briefly sky-dancing) and a **Merlin** chasing a pipit. Moving on to the end of the road we managed to locate 2 distant **White-tailed Eagles** from the pier.

As we were heading back to the main road we received news of a Lesser Yellowlegs at Daliburgh so without further delay we headed south. As we approached Daliburgh a **Merlin** shot across the road in front of the bus giving typically brief views to those looking out the

front at the time. Once on the machair we took a short walk in the wrong direction although further details had us quickly at the right site and soon enjoying great, scope views of a superb, summer-plumage, adult **Lesser Yellowlegs** feeding in flood pools. A small flock of **Golden Plover** and a few **Redshanks** were also present; the latter providing a good comparison with the yellowlegs We had our lunch nearby, overlooking Loch Hallan before heading back north.

The weather had begun to deteriorate once again although we did spot 2 **Red-throated Divers** in flight over the road at Stoneybridge. Nearby at Peninerine we pulled up overlooking the beach which held masses of commoner waders including **Sanderling**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover**. A couple of **Great Northern Divers** were off-shore whilst 4 **Sand Martins** hawked the dune edge, close to the vehicle.

We paused at the Howmore River to look for Otters once again although heavy rain and a football match on TV prompted a request for an early finish. Since the weather was pretty wet this seemed like a sensible option so we stopped slightly early, meeting again for dinner.

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

Weather: Light southerly winds with cloud clearing to become sunny and warm.



Our last morning dawned quite calm compared with last couple of days and a visit to Loch Mor seemed the best option before we parted company. This certainly turned out to be a good choice as we had 2 or 3 **Red-necked Phalaropes** very actively feeding, including a showy female giving great views on a roadside pool. She entertained the group for a short while allowing a couple of photos before she scooted off once more and rounded off an enjoyable and successful week nicely.



## Species List:

Mute Swan	Common and seen every day
Whooper Swan	1 or 2 seen on 3 dates
Greylag Goose	Common
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Pintail	A female was on Loch Brusda, Berneray, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Gadwall	Regular sightings of small numbers
Shoveler	Fairly common and seen every day
Wigeon	Fairly common breeding species, seen every day
Teal	Fairly common although only seen on two dates
Garganey	A drake was seen on Benbecula on the first 2 days
Tufted Duck	A common breeding species
Scaup	A drake was on Loch Sandary, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Eider	Common
Long-tailed Duck	A drake was off Rushgarry, Berneray, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen every day in small numbers
Red-throated Diver	Seen almost daily in small numbers
Black-throated Diver	2 nesting pairs were seen, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Great Northern Diver	Common and seen most days
Little Grebe	Fairly common
Fulmar	Seen off-shore whilst sea-watching
Gannet	Very common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common, breeding at Loch Eynort
White-tailed Eagle	4 sightings during the week with 3 on 13 <sup>th</sup>
Golden Eagle	Seen on 4 dates during the week
Hen Harrier	Seen on just two dates with 2 males together at Druidibeg, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Buzzard	Common
Kestrel	Seen on two dates only with 1 mobbing a Golden Eagle
Merlin	2 sightings during the week
Corncrake	Seen well on 3 dates with many more heard
Moorhen	Seen in Carinish only
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch' where numbers are very small now
Oystercatcher	Very common

Ringed Plover	Very common
Grey Plover	30 summer plumage birds on the South Ford, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Golden Plover	Seen on 3 dates
Dotterel	2 were seen well on the Range at West Gerinish, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Lapwing	Common
Sanderling	Common with many in breeding plumage
Purple Sandpiper	A few birds in summer plumage were seen on 3 dates
Turnstone	Common
Dunlin	Common passage migrant and breeder
Common Sandpiper	Seen on just 2 dates
Redshank	Very common
Greenshank	1 seen at the north end of the Committee Road, 12 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Yellowlegs	An adult in breeding plumage was at Daliburgh, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Black-tailed Godwit	Small numbers seen on 3 dates
Bar-tailed Godwit	Non-breeding birds were seen at a couple of sites
Curlew	Fairly common
Whimbrel	Good numbers seen early in the week in particular
Ruff	2 males were seen in flight at Hougharry, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Snipe	Common and seen daily
Great Skua	Seen off Aird an Runair, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Pomarine Skua	4 were seen off Aird an Runair, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Arctic Skua	Seen on 3 dates with 3 off Aird an Runair, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Long-tailed Skua	1 heading north off Aird an Runair, 14 <sup>th</sup> and 7 on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Iceland Gull	A 2 <sup>nd</sup> year bird was at Ardivacahr, 12 <sup>th</sup>
Kittiwake	Small numbers seen on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 16 <sup>th</sup>
Little Tern	Fairly common
Common Tern	Common
Arctic Tern	The commonest tern, seen daily
Sandwich Tern	1 was off Rushgarry, Berneray, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Black Guillemot	Only seen on 12 <sup>th</sup> at Peter's Port
Guillemot	Seen off Eriskay, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Razorbill	Seen off-shore on 1 date

Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	Seen on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Cuckoo	Often heard and occasionally seen
Short-eared Owl	Seen on 5 dates with some good views
Skylark	Common
Swallow	Fairly common
Sand Martin	Seen on 3 dates
Rock Pipit	Seen on 3 dates
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen every day
(White Wagtail	Noted on the 12 <sup>th</sup> only)
Hebridean Wren	Common in certain areas
Hebridean Dunnock	Common in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on 3 dates
Wheatear	Very common with some Greenland migrants passing through
Stonechat	Common and seen most days
Hebridean Song Thrush	Not uncommon around gardens
Blackbird	Common
Blackcap	A male was singing at North Loch Eynort, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Whitethroat	A male was heard at Ludag, South Uist, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Sedge Warbler	Common and seen on 5 days
Willow Warbler	Common but localised
Goldcrest	Heard on 2 dates
Hooded Crow	Fairly common
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations
Linnet	Fairly common
Twite	Common
Common Redpoll	Redpolls were seen on 13 <sup>th</sup> only
Goldfinch	Seen at Loch Eynort
Greenfinch	Fairly common
Reed Bunting	Seen on 2 dates only
Corn Bunting	This declining species was seen on 3 days

Mammals:

Otter	Seen on 3 dates
Grey Seal	Common and seen most days
Harbour Seal	Common in more sheltered bays / lochs
Red Deer	Seen on 3 days
Rabbit	Common in certain areas
Brown Rat	Seen on 12 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup>
Short-tailed Vole	1 seen on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Minke Whale	A freshly dead young animal was washed up at Aird an Runair

Insects:

Small Tortoiseshell  
Green-veined White  
Belted Beauty  
Emperor Moth  
Common Heath  
Large Red Damselfly

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