

Barra to the Butt of Lewis

15th – 22nd August 2015



Summary: The weather was typically mixed during the week although it started with some very fine conditions when it could even perhaps be described as hot (locally speaking). Many flowers were still in full bloom which added many splashes of colour on the machair and roadsides throughout the trip whilst mammals seen during the week included Harbour Porpoise, 3 Otters at Loch Eynort, both seals and Red Deer. The birds and more specifically, the birds of prey were perhaps the real stars with good views of Short-eared Owl, Merlin and Hen Harrier. White-tailed Eagles were seen on 3 days whilst the views of Golden Eagle on Benbecula were sensational. We also picked up a decent variety of waders and a local rarity – a Black Tern in Lewis on our last full day. All in all it was an excellent week's trip through the Outer Hebrides.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Mike Keeley, Martin and Jo Meredith, Huw and Teresa Jenkins, John and Caroline Hill

Daily Dairy:

15th August:

Weather – Moderate southerly wind and sunny.

Teresa, Huw, John and Caroline arrived on the morning flight from Glasgow where we met up before heading to Castle Bay to pick up Mike who had arrived the previous day on the ferry. Once we were all on board, we drove a short distance to the south-west end of the island and took a walk at Tangusdale. Lots of flowers were in bloom on the machair including Wild Carrot, Knapweed, Red Clover and masses of eyebright. A pair of Mute Swans had three cygnets whilst a few Greylags were lurking in the marshy ground. Off-shore we spotted Gannets, Shag and a Grey Seal before heading back towards the van. Other birds included Wheatears, Meadow Pipits, Rock Pipit, Swallow, Redshanks and Oystercatchers. As we headed across the beach we spotted a trail of otter prints which we followed for a while as they headed into the dunes before they disappeared in the Marram Grass. From here we continued south to Vatersay where we enjoyed our packed lunch near the community hall. After lunch we took another walk at the south end of the island to a stretch of water separating us from the neighbouring island of Sandary. On route we noted Rest Harrow, Corn Marigold and Wild Carrot which were all in full bloom whilst birds included good numbers of Twite, Linnet, Skylark, Pied Wagtail and Meadow Pipit. A handful of Kittiwakes were resting on rocks by the shore along with Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls; whilst a little further off we could make out a flock of Cormorants and Shag resting on another rock and allowing us to compare the two species. A Great Skua was harassing a Gannet in the channel between us and Sandary, attempting to steal its last catch. We also spotted a couple of Golden Plovers, flying over and a few Ravens before we headed back to the van. We returned to Barra and as we were nearing Castle Bay, Teresa spotted two large birds circling over the hills

to the north. We made a sharp stop and jumped out of the van in time to get some good views of a pair of Golden Eagles which drifted off to the north.

After settling into our accommodation we had a fine evening meal at the Craigard Hotel in Castle Bay.

16th August:

Weather – A moderate southerly wind continued to blow throughout the day although it was warm and cloudy with it getting generally brighter as the day progressed.

After picking everyone up in the morning we stopped to scan the sea at Traigh Hamara at Borve. Lots of Eiders were bobbing in the bay and further off-shore we could pick out both Gannets and the odd Fulmar gliding past. A little further north we took the side road to Claid where we found more Gannets and Fulmars as well as Shag, Rock Pipit, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Twite, Wheatear, Curlew, 2 Sanderling and 3 distant Manx Shearwaters. We next stopped at North Bay where we took a walk through the community woodland which was generally quiet although we did have a couple of Goldfinch and heard Goldcrest calling. It was fast approaching mid-day so we went to meet the last two participants, Jo and Martin at the airport although their plane was delayed so we continued on to Eoligarry Pier for lunch. A walk along the shore and then through the dunes produced lots of Pyramidal Orchids as well as Lesser Meadow-rue, masses of Wild Carrot and Red Clover which attracted a number of insects including Meadow Brown butterflies. Birds included Great Skua, Gannets, Cormorant, Shag, Twite, Wheatear, Eiders and a distant flock of 11 Whimbrel. Back at the pier we saw the plane was approaching so we returned to the airport to meet Jo and Martin. Once safely on board we headed for the very northern tip of Barra and Eoligarry where we took a walk along the road. The roadside fields were full of flowers, especially Pyramidal Orchids whilst birds included a brief male Hen Harrier, Buzzard, three Great Skuas, Gannets, Cormorant and Shag. We returned to the bus and headed for the afternoon sailing to Eriskay.

The crossing was fairly quiet although we did spot a distant White-tailed Eagle shortly after setting off as well as plenty of Gannets, Eiders, Cormorants and Black Guillemots.



Steve spotted a winter plumage Great Northern Diver and we all got good views of lots of Grey Seals loafing around a small island that the ferry passed close to. Once on Eriskay we headed straight to Benbecula to settle in to the guest houses before an evening meal at the Dark Island Hotel.

17th August:

Weather – A rather cloudy day with light – moderate southerly winds. It was generally brighter in the north-west of the island where it also became cloudier later in the day with an occasional shower.

North Uist was looking better weather-wise today so we headed north, picking up two Short-eared Owls by the road as we crossed Benbecula. We stopped to admire them as one hunted close to the road before disappearing over a small hill. Leaving Benbecula we drove through North Uist, taking the turning for Baleshare where we picked up a third Short-eared Owl which perched on a post allowing us all to get good views. A little further along the road we spotted a Buzzard on a chimney pot and a distant White-tailed Eagle, heading north. We took a walk along the north-west tip of the island where we picked up a selection of waders including Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Knot and Redshank as well as Gannets, Eiders, Ravens, Skylark, Rock Pipit, Wheatear and Twite.

We left Baleshare and continued around the west side of North Uist calling in at Loch Sandary which held two Whooper Swans, Tufted Duck and Little Grebe as well as 16 Ruff feeding in the marshy ground close to the road. A little further north we reached Balranald where we took a short walk onto the headland of Aird an Runair. Along the shore we found Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone, Ringed Plover and Redshank whilst off-shore we scoped a winter plumage Great Northern Diver with both Gannets and Cormorants passing. On the way back to the visitor centre we spotted a juvenile Hen Harrier hunting over the machair and a distant Corn Bunting singing from the fence to the south of the access track. Once at the visitor centre we tucked into our lunch during which we also had another sighting of a juvenile Hen Harrier that went on to flush 5 Snipe from the marshy area as it hunted low over the ground.

Post lunch we continued our circuit of the island calling in first at nearby Hougharry and Loch na Reivil where we noted Bar-tailed Godwits, Redshank and Curlew whilst on the freshwater we found Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Little Grebe. At the north-west end of the island a single Golden Plover was feeding amongst a flock of Lapwings whilst a short detour to Griminish Pier produced a White-tailed Eagle perched in the distance on a small hillock. Our next brief stop was at Claddach Vallay where we got good views of 2 Greenshank alongside Redshank and Ringed Plover for comparison. Our final stop on North Uist was Lochmaddy Bay where we found a couple of Grey Herons feeding as well as a Kestrel and a female Hen Harrier. As we returned to the vehicle 2 Red-throated Divers flew over calling heading down to the bay to feed. We returned to Benbecula and before heading to the guesthouses to refresh before dinner, had a look on the machair at Torlum. The recently cut fields were alive with Starlings and waders including 20+ Ruff, around 50 Black-tailed Godwits, plus Golden Plover, Lapwings and a few Whimbrel rounding off another good day.

18th August:

Weather – Light northerly winds, sunny and hot with sea fret along the west coast in the afternoon.

We headed for South Uist this morning pausing at Creagorry to scan through the Bar-tailed Godwits, Curlew and Redshank roosting in the tidal creek here. Our first main stop

was at Peninerine where we spotted groups of Eiders off-shore and a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers sat on a rock. Nearby at Stoneybridge we took a walk along the shore which produced Shelduck, Eiders, 15 – 20 Knot, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Redshank, Curlew and a fly over Great Skua. A Red-throated Diver flew over, heading inland carrying a fish and both Grey and Harbour Seals were present off-shore. From here we headed towards the east coast at Loch Eynort where we got great views of 2 Buzzards by the road on the approach to the north side of the loch. Once here we scanned from the car park whilst enjoying our lunch. Steve spotted a distant Golden Eagle but it dropped out of sight before others got on it. A couple of Red-throated Divers were calling from the loch and both Chaffinch and Goldfinch were around the parking area. We also spotted Buzzard, Kestrel and Grey Heron whilst large numbers of Harbour Seals were present with some seen “porpoising”. A Red Deer was spotted on a distant hill top although for many the stars were the family of 3 Otters that were showing on the south side of the loch. Although rather distant the scope views were pretty good as they repeatedly climbed out onto the rocks and grass where they spent much of their time before disappearing in the bracken.

After lunch we called in at Kildonan where we spotted a perched Golden Eagle that we then watched circling over the hill to the east of the café along with a couple of Kestrels. A short drive took us across Bornish machair where we spotted a Sand Martin hawking, before the sea fret stopped us in our tracks and we headed north to Ardivachar. The sea fret was close in here too although we did see Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Turnstone, Redshank and Bar-tailed Godwits on the shore as well as Eiders bobbing on the edge of the sea. Recently cut fields nearby held around 100 Golden Plover along with the Lapwings and we also got great views of both a juvenile Ruff and a Whimbrel.

To avoid the poor visibility we headed to the east side of Benbecula where we found Red-throated Diver, Black Guillemot, Grey Heron and Twite at Peter’s Port. We then took a spin out to a viewpoint at Uskivagh where we found a distant, perched Golden Eagle that joined a second individual eventually with both circling around over the moorland. We began to head back to the guesthouses pausing on route to check out a perched raptor near the road. Quiet incredibly it was a Golden Eagle and only about 100 yards away. We cautiously got out of the van and began taking photos of this

magnificent bird until someone else came along the road which we were unfortunately blocking. A second more impatient vehicle came along behind and started blaring on their horn. We hopped in the van and moved forward to a passing place and remarkably the eagle stayed put. Not only that but now we could see a second bird perched nearby. We enjoyed some absolutely stunning views for around half an hour with sensational scope views until eventually both birds began circling and drifted off to the north.



19th August:

Weather – A moderate east to south-easterly wind, sunny and warm. It began to cloud over in the late afternoon from the south with rain in the evening.

This morning we headed north to catch the 10:25 sailing from Berneray to Leverburgh. The crossing was fairly calm and we got some great views of Gannets, especially as we passed through a feeding frenzy on the Harris side with birds diving all around us. Other species spotted include a Red-throated Diver, Great Skua, Shag, Cormorants, Eiders and Black Guillemots. Once on Harris we headed up the west side stopping at Northton to scan the tidal sands from the main road. 2 Knot could be seen feeding along with Golden Plover and Lapwings. Further north still we pulled in at Horghabost where we enjoyed our lunch on the picnic tables whilst three of the group went for a quick dip in the Sound of Taransay. Other species spotted in the Sound of Taransay included 98

Common Scoter, Eiders, 2 Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Buzzard, Swallow and a Merlin heading across the sea to the south.



After lunch we continued into North Harris where we took a short detour along a couple of miles of the Huisinish Road, past the loneliest tennis court in the World. We stopped by the road with a view looking up a north-south valley and within 20 – 30 minutes managed to spot 7 different Golden Eagles, a perched Buzzard and John had views of a Merlin that shot past the rest of us as we were staring skyward. We returned to the main road and over the Clisham where Teresa spotted another Golden Eagle over the hills to the west which quickly became 2. We paused again for a scan near Bowglas on the border between Lewis and Harris. Jo soon spotted an eagle overhead that turned out to be an immature White-tailed Eagle. This glided over to the far side of Loch Seaforth where it was joined by an adult which were then on view for the rest of our 20 minute break. To the west of the road a Golden Eagle showed well on a couple of occasions as it kept low over the nearby hills. Finally as we drove through Liurbost our last eagle was spotted perched on a hillock bringing the daily total to 11 Golden Eagles and 2 White-tailed Eagles!

We enjoyed a fine evening meal in the Cabarfeidh Hotel.

20th August:

Weather – The wind was a moderate – strong southerly and mostly cloudy with occasional sunny spells and warm.

This morning we took the Pentland Road which cuts through the Lewis moorland to Breasaclate on the west side. It was mostly quiet in the windy weather although we did see 2 Golden Eagles over a rocky exposure on the west side before we dropped down into the village. Once in Breasaclate we turned south, stopping to scan the tidal loch to the west which happened to hold 2 Black-throated Divers in breeding plumage. We got some great scope views as the divers gradually drifted further out and we continued on our way. The first stop was at the Calanais Standing Stones which we enjoyed before the crowds descended on the site later in the day. After our archaeological interlude we took a look at the river at Garrynahine which held a couple of Teal and Mallards. We returned to the main road and headed north, turning off at Tolsta Chaolais where we spotted a couple of Mute Swans, Twite and Wheatear. A little further north we stopped for a short walk up to the Carloway Broch; an impressive sight balanced on a small hill. As we were admiring the 2,300 year old structure another Golden Eagle was spotted circling over the hills to the west. Finally this morning our last archaeological site of the day was the Gearannan Blackhouse Village which provided us with more raptors with a Merlin spotted shooting low over the fields adjacent to the van on approach to the village and a Sparrowhawk near the car park. As some waited for others to return from their brief tour of the village 2 more Golden Eagles were spotted circling over the hills to the south-west.

We moved on to the scenic bay at Dalbeg for lunch before taking a walk onto the dramatic cliffs and coastline. A Shag was perched at its nest which still contained a couple of downy young balanced on the cliff edge in a sheltered bay. Off-shore we spotted Gannets and a few Fulmars whilst on the return walk back to the car park a Whimbrel scuttled down the hillside providing some great views as it preferred to run rather than fly away in the strong breeze. Our next stop was at Shawbost where we found a flock of Eiders on the shore as well as at least 80 Golden Plover and a Redshank sheltering amongst the rocks. 2 Red-throated Divers also gave some decent scope views as they bobbed about on the waves in the bay before our final stop at

Bragar. A walk along the edge of Loch Ordais produced Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Redshanks and around 80 Golden Plover along the shore and loch edge although sudden panic ensued when a Merlin came flashing past providing us all with good views and rounding off another good day.

21st August:

Weather – Today was rather breezy with a strong south to south-easterly wind and mostly cloudy with occasional showers.

We headed straight for our most northerly point today; the Butt of Lewis. From the headland we took a walk along the dramatic cliffs before sheltering in the shadow of the lighthouse where we scanned the sea for birds and cetaceans. Gannets, Fulmars, Shags and Cormorants were easily found whilst below the lighthouse we spotted a Black Guillemot carrying food and obviously still feeding dependent young. Great Skuas frequently past by and a single Arctic Skua along with a few distant Manx Shearwaters were also seen. Steve spotted a Storm Petrel which unfortunately no one else managed to get on. The biggest surprise though was the number of Swifts that appeared to be arriving off the sea from the north. At least 18 flew past us whilst at the Butt although there could well have been more. We also spotted various waders apparently coming in from the north including Turnstone, Ringed Plover, 2 Sanderling and 2 Whimbrel; whilst other birds present included Wheatear, Raven, Buzzard and Snipe. We moved on to Port of Ness where we met Tony Marr (the semi-resident bird man of the area). After Tony kindly let us use his facilities we took our lunch to the new hide at Loch Stiapabhat. On the water we could see the Mute Swans with 3 cygnets, a juvenile Moorhen, Tufted Duck and Teal whilst 17 Black-tailed Godwits, 2 Snipe, Redshank and a Grey Heron were along the edge.

After our lunch we said goodbye to Tony and headed south calling in a Loch Barvas. Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Knot were on the sandy shore of the loch whilst off-shore we saw more Gannets and Fulmars. A distant Red-throated Diver was also watched flying off inland, presumably back to its nesting lochan. Our last stop was at the Braighe, just to the east of Stornoway. 9 Black-tailed Godwits and a Ruff were by Loch Branahuie

whilst over the sea to the south we found lots of terns feeding in the swell. Most of them were Common Terns with the odd Arctic amongst them although the main excitement was the juvenile Black Tern that cruised up and down amongst the others – a rare bird in the Outer Hebrides. We also managed to spot Kittiwakes, Shag and as we were leaving a Red-throated Diver low over the van.

Our final evening meal was a buffet at the Caladh Inn, Stornoway.

22nd August:

Weather – The morning was mostly cloudy with sunny spells and accompanied by a moderate southerly wind.

John, Caroline, Huw and Teresa left on an early flight from Stornoway whilst the rest of us had a look around the habitat close to the town. On the shore at Tongue we got good views of 3 Whimbrel before we took another look at the Braighe where we found much smaller numbers of Common Terns compared with the previous day along with the odd Great Skua and both Cormorant and Shags. From here we headed up Point to Loch Tiumpan which held a few Tufted Ducks and Wigeon. Nearby Tiumpan Head was breezy but productive with large numbers of Gannets and Kittiwakes feeding off-shore and in Broad Bay. Manx Shearwater, Great Skua and Arctic Skuas were also noted whilst below the lighthouse we got good views of Black Guillemots. It was time to get Jo and Martin to the airport for their flight so we left Tiumpan Head for the short drive and said our goodbyes at the terminal before finally saying fair well to Mike who was staying in Stornoway for a couple of nights before heading home via the ferry.

Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen almost daily apart from on Barra
Black-throated Diver	Two in summer plumage were seen at Breasaclate
Great Northern Diver	One was seen by Steve from the Barra – Eriskay ferry and another was off Balranald, 17 th
Little Grebe	A few were seen in Uist
Fulmar	Seen off Barra and Lewis
Storm Petrel	Steve saw one off the Butt of Lewis
Manx Shearwater	Small numbers were seen in Barra and Lewis
Gannet	Very common off-shore
Cormorant	Common and seen daily
Shag	Common with large numbers in the Sound of Harris
Grey Heron	Common and seen daily
Mute Swan	Common in Uist with small numbers in Lewis and Barra
Whooper Swan	A few were seen in Uist including a pair with two cygnets in South Uist
Greylag Goose	Common
Shelduck	Small numbers were seen in South Uist
Mallard	Common
Wigeon	Noted on North Uist only
Teal	Seen on two dates in small numbers
Tufted Duck	A common breeding species
Eider	Common
Common Scoter	98 were seen in the Sound of Taransay
Red-breasted Merganser	Recorded on just one date
White-tailed Eagle	Seen on 16 th , 17 th and 19 th
Golden Eagle	We had sightings on four dates with a maximum of eleven on 19 th
Hen Harrier	Seen in Uist and Benbecula
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	One was seen at Gearanean Black House Village
Kestrel	Seen on two dates

Merlin	Noted in Harris and Lewis with good views at Loch Ordais
Moorhen	One sighting at Loch Stiapabhat
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch'
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common
Golden Plover	Common and seen almost every day
Lapwing	Common
Knot	Sightings in four dates
Sanderling	Seen most days
Turnstone	Seen on four dates
Dunlin	Common passage migrant
Redshank	Common
Greenshank	Seen well on 17 th
Black-tailed Godwits	Small numbers seen on two dates
Bar-tailed Godwit	Sightings on three dates including the odd bird in summer plumage
Curlew	Fairly common and seen most day
Whimbrel	Seen regularly with sightings on 5 dates
Snipe	Noted in two dates
Ruff	Good numbers and seen on three dates
Great Skua	Small numbers seen regularly with sightings almost every day
Arctic Skua	A couple of sightings with most birds off Lewis
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Small numbers were seen on five dates
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Fairly common in certain locations, especially Lewis
Arctic Tern	Small numbers noted on two dates
Common Tern	Seen in Lewis with good numbers off the Braighe, 21 st
Black Tern	A juvenile was off the Braighe, Lewis, 21 st
Black Guillemot	Fairly common

Razorbill	Small numbers seen on 19 th
Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	Seen on two dates
Collared Dove	Seen almost daily
Short-eared Owl	Three were seen well in Benbecula / Uist 17 th with a couple of other birds noted
Skylark	Small numbers seen
Swift	18 were seen at the Butt of Lewis, 21 st
Swallow	Fairly common and seen daily
Sand Martin	Small numbers seen on two days in Uist
Rock Pipit	Seen on five days in small numbers
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen daily in small numbers
Hebridean Wren	Occasionally seen
Robin	Seen on two dates
Wheatear	Small numbers seen daily
Stonechat	Small numbers seen daily
Hebridean Song Thrush	Noted one day only
Blackbird	Common
Sedge Warbler	Seen on 18 th
Goldcrest	Heard on a couple of occasions
Hooded Crow	Common
Rook	Only seen around Stornoway
Jackdaw	Seen around Stornoway
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations
Linnet	Fairly common in Uist and Barra
Twite	Common and seen most days
Goldfinch	Seen in Barra and South Uist
Greenfinch	Only noted on one date
Reed Bunting	Seen on one day only

Corn Bunting Seen on North Uist

Mammals:

Harbour Porpoise Two were seen in the Sound of Harris (from the ferry) and three were off the Butt of Lewis

Otter Three were seen at Loch Eynort, 18th

Harbour (Common) Seal Farily common, especially Loch Eynort

Atlantic Grey Seal Common

Red Deer Seen on two days

Insects:

Common Blue Small numbers seen on two dates

Meadow Brown Common and seen almost every day

Green-veined White Common

Large White Noted on 17th only

Red Admiral Seen in Port of Ness, 21st

Small Tortoiseshell Seen in first couple of days in sunny weather

Large Yellow Underwing Port of Ness

Great Yellow Bumblebee

Moss Carder Bumblebee

Garden Bumblebee

White-tailed Bumblebee

Flowering Plants:

Great Willowherb

Amphibious Bistort

Sneezewort

Heath Spotted Orchid

Thrift

Scentless Mayweed
Rest Harrow
Frog Orchid
Harebell
Knapweed
Corn Marigold
Mugwort
Lady's Bedstraw
Long-headed Poppy
Pyramidal Orchid
Common Spotted Orchid
Lesser Meadow-rue
Tansy
Field Gentian
Lesser Burdock
Common Storksbill
Sun Spurge

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