

Corncrake and Phalaropes

27th May – 1st June 2013



Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Harry Livesey, Christine and Roger Smith, Nick Rutter and Faye Messervy

The week went well with great views of **Corncrake** on three occasions and three sightings of **Red-necked Phalarope** including four on the first day and a nice close female on roadside pools on May 30th. We had views of all eight species of diurnal raptors including up to seven **Golden Eagles** in one day and a couple of sightings of **Peregrine** with one in hot pursuit of a **Turnstone** at Balgarva, South Uist. In addition we had good views of **Red-throated**, **Black-throated** and **Great Northern Divers** in full summer plumage and a handful of uncommon migrants including a brief **Redstart**, a **Spotted Flycatcher** and a very fine male **Whinchat**. We also got some great views of Otter to round off a very fine tour.

Daily Dairy:

27th May:

Weather: Strong southerly winds, force 6 and reaching force 7 at times; mostly sunny.

I picked up Harry off the late morning ferry from Harris - Berneray and drove south calling in at one or two spots after a packed lunch at Clachan Sands. As we headed for Benbecula and the guesthouse a female **Merlin** shot across the main road, south of Lochmaddy giving us brief but good, close views. Whilst Harry settled in to his room I met the remaining four participants off the afternoon flight to Benbecula. After a little time settling in we headed out for an hour before dinner to see what we could catch up with. First we called in at Loch Mor where we had scope views of 4 **Red-necked Phalaropes** plus a couple of **Shoveler** and displaying **Snipe**. We followed this with a short visit to Stinky Bay where we found good numbers of waders including **Dunlin**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover**, **Sanderling**, **Curlew** and **Whimbrel**, plus plenty of **Eiders**. En route to the hotel we paused to scan Coot Loch which produced **Little Grebe**, **Moorhen** and of course **Coot**; a locally scarce species.

28th May:

Weather: Strong south-easterly winds, easing in the afternoon and evening to force 4; low cloud on the hills, clearing to become mostly sunny.

This morning we headed for South Uist calling in at Kilaulay first where we heard the distinctive rasping call of a male **Corncrake**. As we searched from the van we spotted a bird creeping through the vegetation heading towards the area that we thought the calling bird was located. Luckily for us the non-calling **Corncrake**, which was presumably a female crept across an open track and into the field adjacent to where we were parked providing us with great views until disappearing once again into denser vegetation. Heading back to the main road we paused by Loch an' t-Saile where we spotted a singing **Reed Bunting**, **Sedge Warbler** and heard another **Corncrake**. Before reaching the main road we stopped at Balgarva to see if there were many waders pushed up by the high tide. On an inlet choked in seaweed we had good numbers of birds including **Turnstone**, **Sanderling**, **Dunlin** and 2 **Whimbrel** showing well amongst the mass of gulls. As we watched, sudden panic broke out as a **Peregrine** appeared from virtually nowhere and made a dash at a **Turnstone** that plunged into the water. As the **Peregrine** waited for the wader to re-emerge it was pursued

by numerous angry **Oystercatchers** and **Redshanks**. This was enough to distract it, allowing the Turnstone to take off once surfaced with the falcon in hot pursuit. We were then treated to an aerial display of the two birds towering and diving about the sky for around 5 minutes until the Peregrine eventually gave up and we breathed a sigh of relief for the Turnstone. Heading back a **Little Tern** was found feeding by the roadside and provided good views as it fished a loch near Hebridean Jewellery. Continuing south we called in at Peninerine and Stoneybridge where we located around 8 summer plumage **Great Northern Divers**, **Red-throated Diver** and numerous waders including plenty of **Sanderling**. A few **Sand Martins** were also seen hawking along the coast where a couple had made their nest burrows. From here we headed towards the east side and the acidic moorland around Loch Eynort. En route a **Golden Eagle** flew over as we made our way to a parking place at the end of the road and a sheltered spot to enjoy our packed lunch.

Post lunch we took a walk through Archie's wooded garden which held good numbers of **Willow Warblers** and various Hebridean subspecies such as **Dunnock**, **Song Thrush** and **Wren**. Once in the open we scanned the loch and hillsides for bird activity picking up a more distant **Golden Eagle** this time as well as **Red-throated Diver**, **Buzzard** and **Black Guillemot** amongst others. After an hour or so looking we began our journey back north, spotting another **Golden Eagle** from the side of the main road close to Snishival. We stopped here to scan the edge of a plantation and picked up a superb, male **Whinchat** feeding along a fence by the small river and a calling **Cuckoo**. Our next stop was Loch Druidibeg / Loch Skipport where we got views of a male **Hen Harrier**, **Kestrel**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Cuckoo** and **Twite**. Finally we returned to Benbecula and took a look at Loch Mor / Fada where we spotted a distant **Short-eared Owl** hunting over the moorland whilst the loch held **Shoveler** and various common, breeding waders.

29th May:

Weather: Light north-easterly to northerly winds, sunny and warm.

North Uist was on the cards today and a visit to the RSPB reserve at Balranald. En route we picked up a fine male **Hen Harrier** before driving out to the coast and taking a walk down the beach to Traigh Iar in search of the Harlequin that had been present. Unfortunately this was not to be seen although we did pick up a flock of around 20 **Knot**, numerous **Sanderling** and **Dunlin** feeding along the shore. A dark-phase **Arctic Skua** flew north, whilst off-shore we spotted both **Red-throated** and **Great Northern Divers**. Numerous **Arctic Terns** fished the coastal waters whilst both **Turnstone** and **Whimbrel** fed along the strand. On the walk back

to the vehicle we found a couple of singing **Corn Buntings**, a species in rapid decline and only just holding on in the islands. Back at the visitor centre we had a **Snipe** drumming before we took off for Griminish Pier and our packed lunch. Whilst here we picked up 4 **Whimbrel**, 2 **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Little Tern**, **Great Northern Diver**, **Red-throated Diver**, **Gannet** and **Red-breasted Merganser**.

After lunch we retraced our route back towards Balranald collecting a **Whooper Swan** at Loch Scolpaig and 3 **Sand Martins** at Hosta. At Hougharry we found another **Great Northern Diver**, plus **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover**, **Sanderling** and **Dunlin** feeding on the beach. Nearby whilst passing Loch nam Feithean we spotted a **Corncrake** in flight with a **Lapwing** and **Redshank** in hot pursuit. It's unusual to see them in flight but the crake had obviously agitated the waders enough by its presence to stir them into an aggressive defence of their young. Another male was calling nearby and showed on and off whilst a **Black-tailed Godwit** was seen by the loch. We moved on to Loch Sandary which was quiet so we carried on to the Committee Road. Here we found a male **Hen Harrier** hunting and had a distant **Cuckoo**. We stopped at Carinish briefly where we found 2 splendid, male Emperor Moths in a greenhouse, apparently in search of females. Another male **Hen Harrier** was seen near Market Stance, Benbecula and a female **Red-necked Phalarope** was seen flying across from Loch Fada to Loch Mor where it was relocated distantly on the water.



30th May:

Weather: Fairly light, west to north-westerly winds, easing in the evening; sea mist on the west coast, brighter towards the east.

Our first port of call was Loch Mor this morning where we got great views of a female **Red-necked Phalarope** in pools by the roadside. From here we continued south to Loch Eynort where we had a leisurely walk picking up a brief **Redstart**, darting across the path; a singing **Blackcap**, **Willow Warbler** and **Goldcrest**. We continued south to Smerclate where we had our lunch by the minibus. A **Corncrake** was heard constantly calling and gradually making its way towards our position where it eventually showed providing us with good views through the scope. In the Sound of Barra we had another couple of summer plumage **Great Northern Divers**, as well as **Gannets**, **Cormorant** and **Shag**. The shoreline held more **Turnstone**, **Dunlin**, **Ringed Plover**, **Sanderling** and **Whimbrel**.

After lunch we continued on to our most southerly point on the isle of Eriskay and the relatively sheltered valley at Acairseid. We took a walk around the harbour picking up **Rock Pipit** and a couple of **Whitethroats** singing. A distant bird fly-sallying from a small patch of conifers proved to be a **Spotted Flycatcher** which some of the group went to investigate. As we were approaching the spot a large, dog Otter was seen climbing up the bank and onto the road. We lost it around a bend in the road and assumed it had lumbered off. As we approached the corner the dog Otter was rolling around on its back on the grass by the roadside. He spotted us as we did him and he ran down the bank to the harbour where he snorted at us from behind a rock. He then swam off with some prey and began consuming it on some seaweed covered rocks. At the same location 2 **Cuckoos** were also seen briefly mating on the fence before heading their own way. We returned to South Uist and took a walk along the road at South Glendale. The valley here provided us with our only **Sparrowhawk** of the trip and another **Cuckoo**. Last but not least we took a walk along the west side of Loch Hallan where we located a singing **Reed Bunting** and **Sedge Warbler** whilst the loch itself had **Teal**, **Wigeon** and **Shoveler**. On the slightly boggy ground adjacent to the loch we found some Common Twayblade just coming into flower.

Despite being the end of the day the action still hadn't finished as on our return from the evening meal at Stepping Stones we noticed a brown dart flushing waders and Starlings from the fields. This proved to be a female **Merlin** that shot past at high speed, low over the fields at Nunton; a fine way to end the day.



31st May:

Weather: Force 4 – 5 westerly winds; cloudy but becoming sunny and warm.

Back on North Uist today and a trip along the road at Loch Euphort produced 3 **Short-eared Owls** with one scoped on the ground consuming its last catch whilst being mobbed by 2 **Common Gulls**. We also spotted 3 distant **Golden Eagles**, **Common Terns**, **Red-breasted Merganser** and **Eider**. From here we travelled to Loch Portain where we had good views of 2 or 3 **Golden Eagles** and a **White-tailed Eagle**. The latter bird was found perched on an island top appearing like a large sentinel before it flew off, over the Sound of Harris. Later we spotted this huge bulk of a bird returning south along the coast, carrying something off towards Lochmaddy. Other birds we saw in the Cheese Bay area include 2 summer plumage **Great Northern Divers**, **Black Guillemots**, **Cuckoo**, **Twite**, **Stonechat** and 3 **Great Skuas**. We had our packed lunch at Cheese Bay / Loch Portain before retracing our route to Lochmaddy. No sooner had we reached our observation point to look for Otters than two popped up just off the camera obscura. They showed well briefly before they separated with one animal heading north to fish before coming ashore amongst the seaweed covered rocks.

We crept round and got great views as it groomed on the rocks before quietly slipping back in the water to continue fishing. In all we watched it for around 45 minutes before leaving it in peace. We went into Lochmaddy and the arts centre at Tigh Chearsabhagh whilst Steve waited outside spotting another **Golden Eagle** to add to the day's tally.



1st June:

Weather: Moderate westerly winds; rain at first, clearing mid-morning to become sunny although cool.

Our last half a day before saying our goodbyes dawned rather wet and although it remained so whilst at Peter's Port we still managed 2 **Arctic Skuas**, **Common Tern**, **Red-throated Diver**, **Shag** and a family of **Rock Pipits**. Moving on we stopped at Stinky Bay which still held a good number of waders including **Sanderling**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover**. Nearby we stopped off close to Balivanich and were delighted to find a pair of **Black-throated Divers** in their best summer dress bobbing on the water whilst a **Short-eared Owl** hunted to the rear of the. To finish off and make it a three diver day, we stopped off at airport beach in Balivanich and managed 2 **Great Northern Divers** close in-shore as well as the usual variety of waders to round off a great last morning in Benbecula.

Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen on four dates in small numbers
Black-throated Diver	Two were seen on the last day
Great Northern Diver	Small numbers seen almost every day of the trip
Little Grebe	Fairly common
Fulmar	Small numbers seen off-shore
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common with birds breeding at Loch Eynort
Mute Swan	Common
Whooper Swan	One was at Loch Scolpaig, 29 th
Greylag Goose	Common
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	Seen on 28 th May and 1 st June
Shoveler	Fairly common and seen daily
Wigeon	Seen on two dates
Teal	Seen on two dates in small numbers
Tufted Duck	A common breeding species
Eider	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen almost every day in small numbers
White-tailed Eagle	An adult was seen well at Cheese Bay, 31 st
Golden Eagle	Three were seen 28 th and 7 on 31 st .
Hen Harrier	Seen on two dates
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	One was in South Glendale, 30 th
Kestrel	Seen on two days only
Peregrine	One chasing a Turnstone at Balgarva, 28 th
Merlin	Females in flight were seen on 27 th and 30 th
Corncrake	Seen well on three dates
Moorhen	Seen at Coot Loch on the first day
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch'
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common

Golden Plover	Seen on 28 th and 29 th
Lapwing	Common
Knot	20 at Balranald on 29 th only
Sanderling	Seen on every day of the tour
Turnstone	Small numbers seen every day
Dunlin	Common passage migrant and breeder
Common Sandpiper	Common on moorland lochs
Redshank	Very common
Bar-tailed Godwit	Two at Griminish Pier, 29 th
Curlew	Fairly common
Whimbrel	Seen every day in small numbers
Snipe	Common
Red-necked Phalarope	Seen on three dates with 4 on the first day
Great Skua	Seen on two days
Arctic Skua	Seen twice during the tour
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Seen on 28 th only
Little Tern	Fairly common
Common Tern	Common
Arctic Tern	The commonest tern
Black Guillemot	Seen on two dates but not uncommon
Razorbill	Occasionally seen off-shore
Rock Dove	Very common
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Cuckoo	Often heard with regular sightings
Short-eared Owl	Much scarcer than normal although sightings had on 3 dates
Skylark	Common
Swallow	Fairly common
Sand Martin	Seen on two dates
Rock Pipit	Fairly common in the right habitat
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen regularly in small numbers

Hebridean Wren	Common in certain areas
Hebridean Dunnock	Common in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on 3 dates
Redstart	A male was seen briefly at Loch Eynort, 30 th
Wheatear	Common
Stonechat	Noted on two dates
Whinchat	A striking male was at Snishival, 28 th
Hebridean Song Thrush	Seen almost daily
Blackbird	Common
Blackcap	A singing bird at Loch Eynort, 30 th
Whitethroat	Singing birds noted on Eriskay, 30 th
Sedge Warbler	Seen on three dates
Chiffchaff	One was heard singing on 28 th
Willow Warbler	Common but localised
Goldcrest	Seen on 30 th and 31 st
Hooded Crow	Seen every day and increasing in the islands
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations
Linnet	Seen almost daily
Twite	Seen well on four dates
Lesser Redpoll	Seen on four dates with birds in guesthouse gardens
Greenfinch	Occasional sightings
Goldfinch	Noted on 28 th and 30 th
Reed Bunting	Sightings on 28 th and 30 th
Corn Bunting	A few birds seen on 29 th May at Balranald

Mammals:

Otter	A dog on Eriskay, 30 th and 2 in Lochmaddy Bay, 31 st
Grey Seal	Common
Common Seal	Common
Red Deer	Common and increasing
Rabbit	Common

Insects:

Small Heath
Green-veined White
Small Tortoiseshell
Emperor Moth



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