

Uist and Barra Autumn Migration

14th – 20th September 2019



Summary: An excellent trip with some classic, scarce autumnal species including Buff-breasted Sandpiper and American Golden Plover. We also spotted a close Leach's Petrel that unfortunately became a meal for a Peregrine; and a very obliging juvenile Sabine's Gull that showed well in Stinky Bay. As on most trips but typically at migration times you never really know what you might bump into. The star of the show this week goes to the Western Bonelli's Warbler that did the right thing and hung on for our day trip to Barra where we got some pretty decent views of it. A couple of Snow Geese also turned up during the week which we connected with at Balranald whilst a juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper was slightly trickier and although we saw it, the views were a bit distant. Raptors were of course a feature and we saw all the regulars with White-tailed Eagle seen virtually daily and Golden Eagle on 3 dates during the week. Merlins and Hen Harriers were both seen on 4 dates and Short-eared Owl on 2 with 3 seen well on the 15th. Add to that all 3 species of diver, a good selection of waders and Lapland Bunting and you have an excellent selection of birds. Mammals also add some variety to a trip and otters are always a favourite. This week we managed to catch up with them on 3 dates with animals seen at Loch Eynort, Loch Skipport, in Coot Loch and in Northbay, Barra. All told it was an excellent week with lots of good birds and some nice surprises.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Andrea Jackson and Dave Riley

Daily Dairy:

14th September:

Weather: Gale force south-south-westerly winds and constant rain.

The weather conditions were somewhat demanding today although we headed out in the morning and stopped off at Stinky Bay where plenty of Eiders were bobbing about in the swell whilst good numbers of commoner gulls were feeding in the surf. Sanderling, Turnstones, Ringed Plover and Dunlin were feeding on the shore too. Nearby Loch Mor held 4 Shoveler, Wigeon and quite a few Snipe. Moving on we made our way to the north end of South Uist and explored the South Ford where 2 pale-bellied Brent Geese were resting on the sands. Waders here included Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Knot, Bar-tailed

Godwits and Grey Plover including a stunning bird still in full summer plumage. North Bay held a similar array of waders including Turnstone, Sanderling, Redshanks and Bar-tailed Godwits; whilst Wheatears were virtually everywhere we went with single birds found at every stop and at sites in between. We made our way across the Range which was quite extensively flooded and looked attractive for waders although we spotted little on our drive across the area although this was perhaps not surprising in the poor weather.

We continued on to the point at Ardvule although visibility was now severely hampered in the misty conditions. We ate our lunch in the vehicle as a few Gannets passed close in and 2 Red-throated Divers were on the sea. We reached a unanimous decision after lunch to head back to the guesthouse as the weather really was quite appalling. On the way back across the machair we managed to locate 15 Black-tailed Godwits as well as Golden Plover, Lapwings and Snipe by Loch Bornish before re-joining the main road. A brief stop at Coot Loch produced the wished for Coot before Andrea and Dave retired to the guesthouse for the latter half of the afternoon. Steve returned home although in brightening conditions in the early evening spotted a juvenile Sabine's Gull fly past at close range in Balivanich whilst heading back to pick up Dave and Andrea for dinner. We checked Stinky Bay shortly afterwards in the hope that it might be lingering but there was no sign – well at least this evening!

15th September:

Weather: Moderate (force 5 – 6) westerly winds and occasional showers although mostly sunny in the afternoon.

We started in Stinky Bay this morning checking through the large numbers of gulls feeding along the tideline. The usual species were quickly picked up along with plenty of Eiders as well as Sanderling, Turnstones, Ringed Plover and Redshank. We also located a summer plumage Great Northern Diver and a Red-throated Diver on the sea to the south before making our way to North Uist. Our first stop here was Balranald where we parked in the coastal car park although we'd hardly stopped the vehicle before the action began. A young Peregrine was causing havoc amongst the other birds, flushing waders and gulls from the shore. Very shortly after this a Leach's Petrel appeared just to the south of the car park, close inshore giving some very good views even through the binos. It wasn't alone for long though as the Peregrine followed in hot pursuit and

although the petrel valiantly weaved and jinked about eventually the falcon forced the bird high into the air and caught it over the machair edge to the south. A sad but dramatic end! Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Turnstones and Redshanks were along the shore whilst Wheatears were once again seen in good numbers here and throughout the day. A walk onto the headland of Aird an Runair produced 6 or 7 Red-throated Divers flying south and a couple of close Manx Shearwaters with others further out. We also noted 2 Arctic Skuas, a Great Skua, an Arctic Tern, Guillemots, Razorbills and Shags whilst passerines in the area included Rock Pipit, Twite and Linnet. A walk around the stubble nearby produced 3 Lapland Buntings, 1 of which we managed to get in the scope where it showed relatively well. It was now around midday so we made our way back to the visitor centre where we used the bit of shelter available to have our packed lunch whilst 5 or 6 Corn Buntings were also using some shelter nearby to sun themselves.

After lunch we made our way a little south to the machair around Paible via Loch Sandary where we had a few Wigeon, Tufted Ducks and a couple of Teal. We headed out across the fields towards Rubh' Arnal where we found lots of gulls, including a juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gull; Ravens and Hooded Crows around the fish dump. Lots of Swallows (around 20) were hawking over the standing crop along with a single Sand Martin. The usual selection of waders, were along the shore whilst a couple of Corn Buntings were seen bathing in a puddle on the track near where we'd parked the car. As we were heading back a commotion behind drew our attention and 100's of geese rose into the air, flushed by a White-tailed Eagle flying south. We made our way from here towards Baleshare with a quick diversion along the Committee Road where we had a couple of Kestrels, Ravens and a distant flock of grey geese heading south-east over Sollas. They were almost certainly Pink-feet although they were just too far away. Little Grebe and Tufted Ducks were seen on the Baleshare lochs whilst a Merlin was seen chasing finches and for a short while resting on a fence post. Lots of Golden Plover were on the machair whilst off in the distance we spotted a Golden Eagle perched on a post. We attempted to get closer although the bird moved in the meantime although reappeared once we'd made our way back to a view point. As we were leaving Baleshare a Short-eared Owl dropped onto something at the roadside where we had some stunning views of it on the verge, before it headed off across the fields hunting. Happy, we made our way back to the guesthouse in Benebecula getting great views of

another 2 Short-eared Owls as we crossed Grimsay and rounding off an excellent day; or so we thought. The finale came in the form of a juvenile Sabine's Gull that showed very well feeding with other gulls along the tideline in Stinky Bay in the early evening.



Juvenile Sabine's Gull, Stinky Bay

16th September:

Weather: West-north-westerly winds, force 5/6; showers and sunny spells.

Andrew and Carolyn joined us for the day and after picking them up we made our way to the South Ford off Hebridean Jewellery. There were a couple of other birders already present and they pointed out a roosting Semipalmated Sandpiper although it was distant – and asleep so not the best views! Over 100 Grey Plover were present along with a few Knot although everything took up when a juvenile / female Merlin shot low over the sands dispersing waders far and wide. We decided to move on and headed south. As we were passing Loch Druidibeg a White-tailed Eagle was spotted, low in flight to the east of the main road. We pulled up and actually found 3 White-tailed Eagles perched on small islands in the loch as well as a more distant bird to the south in flight. Whilst watching the eagles we also spotted a ringtail Hen Harrier behind them and a Kestrel. After a good look through the scope we headed for North Loch Eynort and took a walk

through the wooded garden. Looking back we spotted an otter in the centre of the loch although it started to head to the near bank to the west of where we'd parked. We returned to the car park where Andrea and I spotted it out on the seaweed covered rocks before it headed off, away from us. Although we made our way up the road to a good viewpoint over the water we didn't see the animal again. Bird wise we did see Goldcrest, Chaffinch, Robin, Wren, Dunnock and 5 Red-breasted Mergansers whilst on returning to the car park once again we had a Grey Wagtail, which is a scarce migrant in Uist. After a lunch break at Loch Eynort we made our way to the west coast and Stoneybridge. A walk along the coast produced Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Knot, Eider and Red-breasted Merganser as well as a White-tailed Eagle in the distance to the south. On our return from the short walk Dave and I got a decent look at a juvenile Hen Harrier heading low over the fields inland. We made our way north and down to Loch Skipport where we spotted a very distant Golden Eagle to the south over Druidibeg. The sea loch at Skipport was very quiet although a look into an arm of the loch hidden from the pier revealed another otter which we saw reasonably well from our position above it. It came out on the rocks below us and Andrew managed to grab a few photos before it spotted us and shot into the water where it disappeared. Our penultimate stop was at Peter's Port on the east side of Benbecula where we had another White-tailed Eagle in the distance to the east as well as a few Red Deer on the island of Wiay. Finally we stopped off at Coot Loch where we found 12 Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, Little Grebe, Coot and Moorhen finishing off a varied day.

17th September:

Weather: Light west-north-westerly winds; mostly cloudy with occasional brighter spells. We made our way to North Uist this morning starting with a visit to Loch Paible where we found a couple of Shelducks, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling and Turnstones whilst offshore we had decent views of a couple of Great Northern Divers and 2 Red-throated Divers. We then had a wander over adjacent Paiblesgarry machair where we located around 10 Black-tailed Godwits amongst masses of Golden Plover; a single Ruff (in flight), 3 Bar-tailed Godwits and a Lapland Bunting flying around calling. A message from a visiting birder directed our next move to Loch nam Feithean at Balranald where 2 genuinely wild Snow Geese were resting on the loch edge amongst hundreds of Greylags. We also spotted Tufted Ducks, Teal and Little Grebe on the loch before

moving on to Loch na Reivil in Hougharry. This small freshwater loch also held Little Grebe and Tufted Ducks whilst Eider, Sanderling, Turnstones and Ringed Plover were on the beach. A quick look at Loch Hosta produced a Slavonian Grebe (our only one of the trip) before we settled in for lunch at Grinish Pier.



Snow Geese

After lunch we made our way around the north end of North Uist pausing at Vallay Strand where we found 2 Greenshanks amongst a small flock of Redshanks before driving onto the machair at Sollas. A flock of Golden Plover were in a recently cut field on the inland edge of the machair and we stopped to scan through these which was certainly a good move as we managed to find an adult American Golden Plover amongst them. We also had another Ruff in flight amongst a flock of Turnstones. Moving on we headed over the Committee Road where we picked up a distant, perched, immature White-tailed Eagle before making our way to Baleshare. An earlier text had alerted us to another American Golden Plover on the island and we soon located it amongst Golden Plover feeding in the stubble. This bird showed much better and retained more of its summer plumage making it a pretty stunning individual. We also picked up a Red-

throated Diver offshore and a juvenile Hen Harrier over the fields, rounding off another very good day.



Adult American Golden Plover, Baleshare

18th September:

Weather: Low cloud and drizzle throughout much of the day; eventually clearing a little in the evening.

Today was designated for our Barra trip as the weather earlier in the week, when booking the ferry had looked good although of course in reality when it came to the day it was grey and murky throughout; although we did see some nice birds. The ferry crossing from Eriskay to Ardmhor produced 7 Black-throated Divers, Red-throated Diver, Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemot, Razorbills and Black Guillemots. Once on the island we made our way to Bolnabodach as a Western Bonelli's Warbler had been there for a few days although it had often been elusive. We'd just arrived when another visiting birder, Bob McMillan motioned us over as he'd probably just seen the bird. Sure enough within a few minutes the bird showed although initially briefly on fly sallies it eventually showed very well despite never stopping still, in true leaf-warbler fashion. We hung on for around

30 – 40 minutes which paid off nicely as we did get some good looks at it and even heard it call on a couple of occasions. We then moved on to check the woodland at Creachan which held one of the rarest birds on the island – a Great Tit. We also had a Blackcap and Grey Wagtail here before taking a look in Castlebay. A Peregrine circled over the houses although we found little else. There was no sign of the Iceland Gull despite it being seen earlier in the day but we managed a Merlin at Eoligarry as well as 2 pale-bellied Brent Geese, Bar-tailed Godwits and Sanderlings on the sands that double up as the runway in the north of the island. We also picked up both Great and Arctic Skua whilst on Barra. We also had decent views of an otter hunting around the creaks in Northbay. The ferry trip back was in slightly better light as the dreich conditions started to lift. 2 very distant Golden Eagles were spotted over islands to the east of the ferry route as well as a White-tailed Eagle flying towards Eriskay from the south. 2 Black-throated Divers were spotted close to the ferry as well as 4 Great Northern Divers, Red-throated Diver, Eiders and Black Guillemot. As we approached Eriskay a Golden Eagle flew low along the west side of the island providing us with some excellent views before we docked. We finished the day with a nice meal in the Politician on Eriskay.



Western Bonelli's Warbler, Bolnabodach.

19th September:

Weather: Moderate south-westerly winds and cloudy; becoming brighter later in the afternoon.

Starting at Coot Loch this morning we found 5 Coots, Tufted Ducks, Little Grebe and 2 otters showing well as they moved around the loch, occasionally coming out on rocks to eat. We carried on to the south stopping off at Hebridean Jewellery once again where the Semipalmated Sandpiper was showing a bit better along with good numbers of Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwits, Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Turnstone. We also had a juvenile Hen Harrier fly over and a Short-eared Owl hunting nearby, before it perched on a fence post allowing us to get some good scope views. A Brent Goose was on the sands and we heard a wagtail in flight that sounded like a Citrine Wagtail although frustratingly we never saw it. Nearby at the north end of Loch Bee we found 2 adult and a juvenile White-tailed Eagle perched on islands at the north end whilst a Lapland Bunting flew over calling. A couple of miles further along the road we spotted another Brent Goose at Ardivachar which also held good numbers of gulls and lots of Pied Wagtails feeding on the seaweed. From here we headed back towards the main road, stopping off at St. Michael's Church at Ardkenneth where a couple of Whooper Swans were found on the loch and a Willow Warbler was feeding in a couple of Sycamores behind the church. We also spotted another White-tailed Eagle perched in the distance. We made our way to North Uist next and used the shelter of the trees at Grenitote Memorial for our lunch break; where we also spotted a couple of Kestrels and Sparrowhawk hunting to the north of the plantation.

In the afternoon we ventured on to the machair at Sollas where we spotted a Buff-breasted Sandpiper although it was always in flight amongst the mass of Golden Plover. There was also 4 Ruff amongst the plovers and Lapwings although many of the birds appeared unsettled and difficult to get a decent view of. An adult White-tailed Eagle was spotted circling in the distance to the west but we decided to try another spot and moved on to Malaclate where we found more Golden Plover resting amongst some rocks and another Ruff as well as a few Bar-tailed Godwits. We also had another adult and a juvenile White-tailed Eagle fly across in front of the car before we moved on to the hilltop at Clettrevall. The views were superb although there wasn't a lot of bird activity so we made our way to Loch Sandary. Teal, Wigeon and Tufted Ducks were on the loch and a few Snipe were hiding along the flooded margins. Finally we called in at Balivanich

beach where we found the usual selection of waders before returning to the guesthouse where a fine Greenland Wheatear was waiting for us along the drive.



Adult White-tailed Eagle, Malaclate

20th September:

Weather: Brisk south-easterly winds, sunny and warm.

We started our final morning on Baleshare where we managed to locate 2 Buff-breasted Sandpipers and a couple of Ruff amongst a flock of Golden Plovers although these temporarily dispersed when a Merlin came shooting over. The sandpipers soon returned to settle into feeding in the field once again although they weren't easily accessible from the road. We also had a distant Hen Harrier before we moved on too. A quick look along the path at Langass Lodge produced a few Goldcrests and a male Blackcap as well as a couple of Common Hawker dragonflies before we made our way to Lochmaddy to meet up with the midday ferry. We said our goodbyes in Lochmaddy before Dave and Andrea returned to pick up their car from Skye and begin their journey back to Burnley.

Species List:

Mute Swan	Common and seen daily
Whooper Swan	3 were seen on 17 th and 2 on 19 th
Pink-footed Goose	1 was noted on 17 th although a flock seen in flight heading south-eastwards on the 15 th in the distance were almost certainly this species
Greylag Goose	Very common
Snow Goose	2 were seen on Loch nam Feithean on 17 th
Brent Goose	2 were seen on 14 th and 19 th
Shelduck	Uncommon at this time of year with 2 at Loch Paible, 17 th
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	Noted on 16 th only
Shoveler	4 on 14 th and a single on 19 th
Wigeon	Common and seen daily
Teal	Noted on 3 dates
Tufted Duck	Common
Eider	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Common and seen every day
Red-throated Diver	Seen on 4 dates during the week
Black-throated Diver	A few were seen in the Sound of Barra from the ferry, 18 th
Great Northern Diver	Small numbers were seen on 3 dates
Little Grebe	Fairly common
Slavonian Grebe	1 was seen on Loch Hosta, 17 th
Manx Shearwater	A few were seen off Balranald, 15 th
Leach's Petrel	A single seen well being chased along the shore at Balranald before being caught and eaten by a Peregrine, 15 th
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common

Grey Heron	Common
White-tailed Eagle	Seen on 5 dates with 6 on 16 th
Golden Eagle	Noted on 3 dates during the week
Hen Harrier	Spotted on 4 dates during the week
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	Seen on 19 th only
Kestrel	Fairly common
Merlin	Seen on 4 dates
Moorhen	Localised and seen on 2 dates
Coot	3 or 4 were on Coot Loch.
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Very common
Grey Plover	Seen on 3 dates during the week
Golden Plover	Common and seen daily in good numbers
American Golden Plover	2 adults were seen on 17 th
Lapwing	Common and seen daily
Knot	Seen almost daily
Sanderling	Very common
Turnstone	Common
Dunlin	Common
Semipalmated Sandpiper	A juvenile off Hebridean Jewellery
Redshank	Common
Greenshank	Noted on 17 th
Black-tailed Godwit	15 were seen on 14 th , 10 on 17 th and 3 on 20 th
Bar-tailed Godwit	Common
Curlew	Fairly common
Snipe	Common and seen daily
Ruff	Small numbers were seen on 3 dates
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	1 was seen on 19 th and 2 on 20 th

Arctic Skua	Seen on 15 th and 18 th
Great Skua	As above, seen on 2 dates
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Seen on 15 th only
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Seen in Sound of Barra
Sabine's Gull	A juvenile was seen well in Stinky Bay, 15 th
Arctic Tern	1 was seen on 15 th
Black Guillemot	Seen in the Sound of Barra
Guillemot	Seen on 15 th and 18 th
Razorbill	As above seen on 2 dates
Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	Seen at Grenitote, 19 th
Collared Dove	Seen every day
Short-eared Owl	3 were seen on 15 th and 1 on 19 th
Skylark	Common
Swallow	Seen every day in small numbers
Sand Martin	1 was seen on 15 th
Meadow Pipit	Very common
Rock Pipit	Noted every day
Pied Wagtail / White Wagtail	Seen every day
Grey Wagtail	1 was seen at Loch Eynort and another on Barra
Wren	Seen virtually every day
Dunnock	Noted on 4 dates
Robin	Seen on 4 dates during the week
Wheatear	Common, especially at the start of the week with sightings decreasing rapidly as the week progressed

Stonechat	Seen daily
Song Thrush	Noted on 18 th
Blackbird	Common
Blackcap	Seen on Barra and at Langass Lodge
Willow Warbler	Seen on 19 th
Western Bonelli's Warbler	1 was at Bolnabodach, Barra on 18 th
Goldcrest	Seen on 4 dates
Great Tit	1 was seen on Barra
Hooded Crow	Common
Raven	Common
Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Noted on 2 dates during the week
Linnet	Common and seen almost every day
Twite	Common
Common Redpoll	1 was seen on 19 th
Goldfinch	Seen on a couple of days
Greenfinch	Seen on 3 dates during the week
Corn Bunting	Seen on 15 th
Lapland Bunting	3 were at Balranald on 15 th with singles also noted on 17 th and 19 th

Mammals:

European Otter
 Harbour (Common) Seal
 Atlantic Grey Seal
 Red Deer
 Rabbit