

Outer Hebrides 2006

Sunday 4 – Saturday 10 June 2006

Trip Report

Leader:
Phil Read

Sunday 4 June

Three members of the group were making their way independently to the Outer Hebrides. The rest of us gathered at the quay in Oban in flat calm conditions looking forward to the cruise ahead. As always the Black Guillemots which breed around the harbour walls were a delight, allowing a close approach and seemingly oblivious to human presence.



(Black Guillemot Oban Harbour, 4 June)

The cruise through the Sound of Mull was very pleasant with Harbour Porpoises easy to find in the glass-like sea. Suddenly as we approached Tobermory everything went white.

Sea fog, the thickest I have ever experienced in these seas, engulfed the ferry and was to plague us for nearly all the rest of the crossing. This was doubly frustrating as not only could we see very little from the ferry but we realised, with such a calm sea, what we might be missing. About halfway across the Minch the fog thinned for a while and we were able to enjoy the variety of seabirds and then a “fin” spectacular. A pod of forty to fifty Common Dolphins approached the ferry in small groups, leaping out of the water as they came, giving everyone on deck lengthy views of these delightful creatures. Just to cap this off, and before the fog returned for good, two Minke Whales made typically brief appearances as they cruised past the ferry.

We arrived on time at Lochboisdale but having seen frustratingly little of the islands on the way.

Monday 5 June

We headed to North Uist for our first full day on the islands. We paused on the way to look for waders in “Stinky Bay”. The large piles of rotting seaweed which give the bay its name provide abundant food for feeding birds. A

flock of around thirty Sanderling, many in full breeding plumage, was a nice find and these were accompanied by a group of migrating Dunlin, also in their summer best.

Our main target on North Uist was the elusive Corncrakes which we heard but failed to see in the long vegetation. We enjoyed a pleasant coastal walk at the RSPB Balranald reserve with a variety of waders on the beaches and including some very confiding Corn Bunting, one of the specialities of the area.

After a picnic overlooking a splendid bay, where a male Hen Harrier passed by before being chased off by the gulls, we headed inland to the moors and hills of North Uist. A pair of Hen Harriers food passing was a fine site and those who went on a short moorland walk were rewarded with a superb view over the islands and brief views of a Golden Eagle.

After dinner we drove out to one of my favourite areas on the east side of Benbecula. We soon spotted what we were looking for as there, on the rocks, was an Otter eating a fish. The food was obviously more important than running away so we all enjoyed fantastic views as he munched away in front of us. Two more Otters and two Short Eared Owls watched in glorious calm conditions contributed to a splendid evening.



(Otter, Benbecula 5 June)

Tuesday 6 June

One of the most pleasing aspects of our hotel is the adjacent beach. Ideal for a pre-breakfast stroll. Two Arctic Skuas flew over as we set out and two Twite showed well on the grass by the hotel. One of the delights of the beach is the nearby Little Tern colony and we were able to watch these diminutive birds feeding along the coast each morning.

We headed to South Uist for the day first visiting the moorland and lochs of Loch Druidibeg. Singing Willow Warblers were to be expected but a singing Whitethroat was a real surprise. Offshore three Red Throated Divers were resplendent in their fine breeding plumage and a Golden Plover called plaintively on the moors.

Fancying a change of scenery we headed to the west coast where a Great Northern Diver was resplendent in its striking breeding plumage. Plenty of waders were to be seen including flocks of Sanderling and a Bar Tailed Godwit. The white shell sand beaches seem to go on forever on the west coast and we stopped at a number of view points to admire the scenery as well as the birds.

The weather deteriorated during the afternoon and we made an early return to the dry and warmth of the hotel.



(Eider, South Uist, 6 June)

Wednesday 7 June

We headed north again to Balranald in the quest for the elusive Corncrake. On our arrival at the visitor centre one could be heard calling in the adjacent field. A few moments scanning and there he was! It may have been only a head we saw but at least he stayed in view long enough for everyone to see him through the telescope as he continually called from amongst the nettles. A Whooper Swan summering on a nearby loch was a nice if not unexpected find and we headed to the moors well satisfied.

As we drove around the north end of North Uist both Golden Eagle and Short Eared Owl gave prolonged if rather distant views from the road. We stopped for a picnic lunch at an idyllic spot by the shore, hoping that a Snowy Owl, which occasional frequents this spot, would put in an appearance. After a rest, but no Snowy Owl, we set out on a walk over the machair, studying the profusion of flowers as we went, before reaching one of the whitest and most stunning beaches you could imagine.

A comfort break in Lochmaddy was enlivened by the appearance a superb adult White Tailed Eagle sat on a distant ridge. On the way home we stopped at one of the best fresh water lochs for birds on the islands and saw our only Coots and Wigeon of the trip.

Thursday 8 June

We returned to South Uist to one of our favourite sea lochs. A combination of stunning scenery and a tremendous variety of wildlife make a walk here a real pleasure. Amongst the many birds on the loch we were able to study at least four Red Throated Divers in their elegant breeding plumage. This was also the only site on the islands where we saw Hooded Crow. Once very common they are been shot almost to extinction on the Uists in recent years having been branded a pest to sheep.

Our luck with Otters continued as we watched two youngsters “playing” and grappling in the water whilst mum looked disinterested nearby. After a spot of retail therapy and a tea break we visited a nearby peninsula in the hope of finding some migrant waders. We were not disappointed as a flock of over forty Bar Tailed Godwit contained a few birds in their gorgeous rich red summer plumage.

Brian and Mary then found a Knot nearby which gave close views but was sadly in non breeding plumage.

We then met the showiest Corncrake on the islands! Having just avoided being run over by the minibus and proudly stomping up the middle of the road back to his field he then proceeded to stand in full view on top a tussock and call to his hearts content. If only they all behaved like that!.

As we hadn't seen an Otter for a few hours we decided to pop out after dinner to our favourite spot on east Benbecula where we once again had close views on the rocks in front of us.



(Redshank, South Uist 8 June)

Friday 9 June

Our last full day and as we were all feeling fit, and the sun had at last appeared, walking on the moors was the agenda for the day. Major road works on North Uist had carved a big hole through our normal walk so we adjusted the route slightly but still managed to visit the ancient burial chamber at Ben Langass and the stone circle nearby. A passing male Hen Harrier was a fine site but the surprise birds of the walk were two Swifts, uncommon visitors from the mainland driven over by the warm, strong southeasterly winds.

In the afternoon we returned to Benbecula for a moorland walk on the east side of the island. We managed to find a few of the passerines we had been struggling with including Stonechat and Reed Bunting but a pair of Twite was rather elusive.

Saturday 10 June

Our return ferry wasn't until the afternoon so we made our way leisurely south stopping off at Loch Druidibeg on the way. The male Whitethroat was still in full song but sadly there was no sign of a mate.



(Enjoying the sunshine, Loch Skipport, 10 June)

There was a fresh but warm southeasterly wind for our crossing back to Oban. Birdwise the crossing was relatively disappointing, rather like England's World Cup performance showing on all the TV's on the ferry. At least it wasn't foggy, and we were able to enjoy sailing past Canna, Rum, Eigg and Muck and experience close views of Manx Shearwaters as they glided alongside the ferry.



(Manx Shearwater near Rum, 10 June)

BIRDS

Red Throated Diver: We enjoyed prolonged views of this elegant bird in breeding plumage.

Great Northern Diver: Three were seen during the week, two in full summer plumage.

Little Grebe: Seen at Balranald and on "Coot Loch" Benbecula.

Fulmar: Seen on both crossings and from the shore, at times extremely closely.

Manx Shearwater: Only a few seen on the outward crossing due to the fog but we all enjoyed the close views alongside the ferry on the return trip.

Gannet: Seen well from the ferry. A few offshore most days.

Cormorant: Seen daily.

Shag: Seen well on crossings. Seen in small numbers during the week.

Grey Heron: A relatively common breeding bird. Birds observed nesting on a small "cliff" on Benbecula.

Mute Swan: Very common breeding bird.

Whooper Swan: One summering bird at Balranald and another on Loch Bee, South Uist.

Greylag Goose: Very common breeding bird, reportedly the only resident truly wild Greylags in Britain.

Common Shelduck: Seen daily. Some birds with young families on the sea.

Wigeon: A male on "Coot Loch" was the only sighting.

Teal: A male on South Uist was the only sighting.

Mallard: Seen daily.

Shoveler: Two males were seen at Balranald.

Tufted Duck: Seen daily.

Common Eider: Common breeding bird. Some parties of young seen.

Red-breasted Merganser: Seen daily. These birds breed in the rocky edges of lochs on the east side.

White-tailed Eagle: One adult seen perched on a ridge near Lochmaddy. Another adult seen both in flight and perched on South Uist.

Hen Harrier: An excellent series of sightings of ten birds, including food passing on two occasions.

Common Buzzard: Seen daily.

Golden Eagle: Four sightings in all on the Uists including one giving prolonged views alongside the road on North Uist. Two seen distantly over hillsides in the Sound of Mull from the return ferry.

Kestrel: Three sightings in all.

Merlin: One briefly from the minibus on North Uist and one seen by a few of the group near the hotel.

Corn Crane: Heard frequently. After prolonged if rather limited views at Balranald we came across an extremely brazen individual at Ardivachar who performed admirably.

Coot: Only seen on "Coot Loch".

Pheasant: A great surprise was to see a female with three young on North Uist. I was not aware this species had been introduced to the islands.

Oystercatcher: Very common and vocal breeding bird.

Lapwing: Abundant and very active breeding bird.

Golden Plover: This delightful bird was seen on its breeding grounds on South Uist and heard making its plaintive call which sounds so evocative on the wild moorland.

Ringed Plover: Common breeding bird. Flocks of passage and non breeding birds also seen on the beaches.

Bar Tailed Godwit: One at Bornish on 6th. A flock of around forty-five at North Bay, South Uist contained a few birds in breeding plumage.

Whimbrel: Two over the South Ford on 6th.

Curlew: A few seen around the coasts. Breeding birds with young seen on North Uist.

Common Redshank: Very common breeding birds. Excellent views of birds perched on fence posts alongside the road.

Common Sandpiper: Breeds in relatively small numbers. Excellent close views at Loch Druidibeg.

Turnstone: Small groups of migrant birds seen daily. Many resplendent in full breeding plumage although this species does not breed in Britain.

Red-necked Phalarope: Three seen well at a traditional site.

Common Snipe: Excellent views of birds perched on roadside fence posts. The characteristic “drumming” display heard on a number of occasions.

Knot: One, in non breeding plumage, at North Bay on 8th.

Sanderling: Flocks of migrating birds, many in breeding plumage, often gave excellent close views.

Dunlin: A common breeding bird. Flocks of migrating birds in summer plumage seen on the beaches often in association with Sanderling.

Curlew Sandpiper: One, in partial breeding plumage, was unfortunately only seen briefly at Aird Runair on 5th.

Great Skua: One, sat on the sea rather distant from the ferry, was the only sighting.

Arctic Skua: Only a disappointingly few sightings although two were seen well flying past the hotel during one of our pre-breakfast walks.

Common Gull: Very common breeding bird. Frequently harassing the breeding waders.

Herring Gull: Very common breeding bird.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Only a few sightings. An adult in full breeding plumage perched on the ferry for a considerable time on the return trip.



(Lesser Black-backed Gull, Ferry 10 June)

Great Black-backed Gull: Seen daily.

Black-headed Gull: Common breeding bird.

Kittiwake: Seen well from the ferry.

Common Tern: Seen daily. Commonest tern on the eastern side of the islands.

Arctic Tern: Seen daily, most common tern on the west coast.

Little Tern: Seen regularly from the beach adjacent to the hotel.

Common Guillemot: Seen well on both crossings.

Razorbill: Seen well on both crossings.

Black Guillemot: Always a delight to see the birds in Oban harbour. Scattered sightings around the Uists.

Puffin: Relatively few seen from the ferry.

Rock Dove: These truly wild pigeons were seen well.

Collared Dove: Scattered sightings.

Cuckoo: Heard most days, a few sightings.

Short Eared Owl: We all enjoyed good views of these lovely owls on a number of occasions.

Common Swift: A burst of warm southerly weather brought two of these uncommon visitors to Langass on 9th. Another Loch Skipport on 10th.

Skylark: Extremely common breeding bird.

Swallow: Ever increasing numbers appear to be summering, and breeding, on the islands. Up to six seen daily.

Pied Wagtail: Seen daily around the hotel.

Meadow Pipit: Seen daily.

Rock Pipit: Seen around the rocky shores.

Wren: Surprisingly few sightings but seen well in their favoured moorland habitat.

Duncock: Only seen at Loch Eynort.

Blackbird: Seen daily.

Song Thrush: Seen and heard daily around the hotel.

Robin: Only seen at Loch Eynort.

Common Stonechat: Four seen on moorland on Benbecula. Only a few other sightings.

Northern Wheatear: Common breeding bird.

Willow Warbler: Heard singing at Loch Druidibeg, Loch Eynort and a few other sites around the islands.

Common Whitethroat: The surprise find of the trip. A singing male at Loch Druidibeg on 6th and 10th. (*A first for the Travelling Naturalist trip to the Outer Hebrides*).

Hooded Crow: Two at Loch Eynort was the only sightings on the islands where they are heavily persecuted.

Raven: Seen daily in small numbers.

Starling: Seen and heard daily. Mimicry included Corn Crake, Curlew and Buzzard.

Corn Bunting: We enjoyed excellent views of this species on the machair of North Uist. This is a resident relict population.

Reed Bunting: Seen well on the moorland on Benbecula.

Greenfinch: Only seen round the hotel and at Loch Eynort.

Twite: Two were occasionally seen around the hotel. Only a few other sightings.

Linnet: Seen daily around the hotel.

House Sparrow: Common particularly around the crofts.

MAMMALS

Western Hedgehog: The only live example of this well documented island pest was seen by Brian near the hotel.

European Otter: A tremendous series of no less than eleven sightings including extremely close views of one feeding and prolonged views of youngsters "playing".

Common Seal: Mainly seen in the eastern sea lochs.

Grey Seal: Seen on the crossing and daily around the islands.

Harbour Porpoise: The mirror like sea on the outward crossing enabled us to see at least twenty five in and around the Sound of Mull.

Common Dolphin: The highlight of the outward trip as forty to fifty approached the ferry in small groups leaping clear of the water and giving everyone on deck excellent and prolonged views.

Minke Whale: Two were seen briefly in the Minch on the outward crossing.

Red Deer: Mainly seen on moorland on North Uist. Three were watched indulging in a spot of swimming in Loch Langass.

Short tailed Field Vole: One seen by Mary.

Rabbit: Seen daily.

BUTTERFLIES

Green-veined White

Red Admiral

Painted Lady

DRAGONFLIES

Four-spotted Chaser

Highland Darter

Common Blue Damselfly

Blue-tailed Damselfly

Large Red Damselfly

*I would like to thank the group for their tremendous company and enthusiasm during the week.
I hope they all enjoyed visiting these wonderful islands as much as I do.*

Phil Read

