

Islay

Jewel of the Hebrides

Wednesday 22 - Monday 27 October 2008

Leader

Peter Roberts, Scotland

Day 1, Wednesday 22nd October: I drove down from Inverness in the morning and met with the group at Glasgow Central Station and Glasgow International Airport by early afternoon. Once all together, we made our exit from Glasgow, seeing our only Magpie en route (they don't make it to Islay). We drove steadily towards the ferry terminal at Kennacraig, 100 miles away down the Mull of Kintyre, passing alongside Loch Lomond for a while, then along the very picturesque Loch Fyne – a sea loch that took us all the way to Inveraray and beyond. With time to spare, we stopped for a brief coffee break at Tarbert and were in line for the Islay ferry by 5 pm. It had been a wet and windy few days and today was no different! Once aboard the light was too poor to do any birding. The ferry came into Port Askaig on time and once on Islay, we drove directly to the welcoming Bridgend Hotel, got settled into rooms and popped into the restaurant for an evening meal.

Day 2, Thursday 23rd October: The weather was not great today – and the forecast for ensuing days is at times even worse. Rain and wind prevailed, but with a little planning and a few lucky breaks we managed to accomplish a fair bit of the very flexible agenda, albeit in less than optimal conditions.

We met up at the hotel at 8.30am and headed straight off to the Loch Gruinart area to start scanning for geese. We turned up the eastern side towards Killinallan and immediately came across huge flocks of Barnacle Geese out on the grazing fields to our left and right. We slowly made our way up the single track, dead-end road, stopping and searching. Waders on the sand and mudflats were good, with the expected Curlews, Oystercatchers and Redshank joined by odd Bar-tailed Godwits and single Greenshank. Ducks such as Wigeon and Red-breasted Mergansers were present in the channels. A brief view of female Hen Harrier was an added bonus.

We retraced our steps and continued to the RSPB Visitor Centre where the shelter and cups of coffee inside were welcome and the loos were put to good use! With rain and squalls persisting we continued on, passing Loch Gorm as we headed back to Bruichladdich on the coast of Loch Indaal. Brief checks for Purple Sandpipers on the rocky shore were futile as the sea was being wind-driven over all likely roost sites. We gave up and had a pleasant lunch at the new Community Centre in Port Charlotte where their wind-powered electric generator was doing brisk business today.

After this we drove on south around the Rhinns down to Port Wemyss and Portnahaven, trying to admire the scenery from inside the minibus, but venturing out in the drier breaks to walk little coastal paths, scoping the beached Grey Seals and watching intrepid Gannets offshore. Back at Port Charlotte by 3.30pm we made our last stop of the day at the safe and dry haven of the Museum Of Islay Life. This little gem of a place was on its last few days of opening for the season and took up a worthwhile hour, investigating all the old Islay artefacts from Stone Age to the 20th century. We wended our way back to the hotel by 5.30pm and called it a day after doing the bird list in the hotel lounge.

Day 3, Friday 24th October: The prophesied rain continued, but with more bright breaks between, making it a workable day, mostly dodging the worst of things. First we nipped up north to Bunnahabain Distillery - not to imbibe the "Water of Life" but to look for Otters in the sheltered bay. We peered across at the very different island of Jura where The Paps were at times in view between the mist and clouds. Very soon after arriving and setting up scopes we had a superb Otter close inshore which climbed onto the rocks for a while and posed beautifully for us. It was bright and sunny, but unusually cold, and after watching the Otter and finding both Great Northern and Black-throated Divers we turned about and slowly headed back to the main road. We called in at Persabus Pottery where purchases were made while we watched a lovely close flock of mixed Yellowhammers, Reed Buntings, House Sparrows, Chaffinches and other odds and ends. From here we returned south and veered off to Finlaggan. It was blustery but OK for a brisk walk out to the islands with all their historical remains. We did get caught in an icy hail shower, but all were hale and hearty and enjoyed the visit regardless. Difficult to believe that this tiny little place was so important as the centre of a dynasty ruling from Isle of Man all the way up the west coast of Scotland for several hundred years – and where the Clan MacDonald had its origins.

South again we called in at the Islay Woollen Mill. Time was spent looking for Dippers on the stream with no luck. Then into the Mill itself where the owner, Gordon, gave us a good tour and informative talk about the place, its history and what he produces here (top quality tweed and tartan for high-end outlets, royalty and Hollywood!). By lunch time we continued the short distance back to our hotel at Bridgend and had soup and sandwiches in the warmth of the hotel, joined by my partner Yvonne fresh off the ferry from Kennacraig.

We were feeling lucky with the weather as increasingly large patches of blue (enough at least to patch a Dutchman's trousers as Theo could testify) produced vibrant rainbows and gave us the hope of a good walk this afternoon. So we drove to Loch Gruinart RSPB area and turned up the side of the Loch we'd not explored

yesterday to Ardnave Loch. Huge throngs of geese were present in the fields and looked fine in the brighter light. At Ardnave we admired migrant groups of resting Whooper Swans before committing to a good hour or more of hiking the circular route out onto the Machair, farmland and sand dunes. It was still very windy and walking was a challenge at times, but we did an "invigorating" walk and found our two target birds, both seen surprisingly well. Lovely scope views of feeding Twite were followed by loud groups of Chough, all against a backdrop of geese throughout. By now it was late afternoon and further sporadic showers and cloud dulled light conditions. We began our return to the hotel and had one of those memorable encounters as we trailed along at walking speed behind the RSPB's cow herd being walked a mile along the road to pastures new.

Day 4, Saturday 25th October: The weather was appalling with gales and driving rain at times - not typical of Islay in October, but what we had to work with. We delayed setting out by catching up on the bird list, then I called to confirm a Distillery Tour at Bowmore for 10am. So we set off up Loch Indaal and made a couple of brief birding stops along the way, with some nice looks at Bar-tailed Godwits for our efforts. Bowmore Distillery did the job for a nasty wet morning, with a very good tour of the entire process, finishing of course with enthusiastically large offerings of a wonderful variety of fine Bowmore Single Malts. After inevitable purchases it was late morning and time for a quick look around the town of Bowmore itself. The group popped into the unique Round Church while I set up lunch in one of the local cafes.

The afternoon's weather was, at times, slightly better (or so we tried to convince ourselves). We carried on to Port Ellen and up past the three famous distilleries of Laphroaig, Lagavullin and Ardbeg. Our main stop was to admire the ancient Celtic cross at Kildalton. We duly paid our respects to this antiquity and checked out the splendid carved grave slabs here, before heading to the end of the road at Claggain Bay. This is a very pretty part of the island with small sheltered bays with common seals, mixed woodland and opening out to the hilltops inland. It is of course even more lovely in sunny weather, but we used our imagination and took advantage of occasional breaks in the rain to venture out to look for birds and take a short walk along the road and shoreline. We spied Black Guillemots, Great Northern Divers, Red-breasted Mergansers and Shags before heading for home. On the way back home we pulled in for a fine group of Barnacles with our first Pink-footed Geese included. While paused here a fine male Hen Harrier was a further bonus. At the top of Loch Indaal in the fading light, the Barnacle Geese were gathering for the night-time roost – the first time they've been able to for a few days as the previous southerly winds have kept the whole roost site under water.

Day 5, Sunday 26th October: Our final day on Islay was spent successfully dodging the showers and having a generally productive time. It was too "iffy" to risk a long walk on the Oa cliffs – we'd probably have been blown off the tops! So we started with a few unsuccessful twitches: in Bowmore itself for a reported Rosy Starling, then on the Mulindry road for Crossbills – none again, but a fine Peregrine was fun. After this we had a delightful walk to the well-preserved and quite impressive Dunosebridge Iron Age Fort, with its ramparts and terracing giving us an idea of life 1500 years ago – cold, uncomfortable and short! We continued up the Mulindry road – a wild back road cutting through prime Golden Eagle territory. The weather was OK – perfectly good for eagles to be flying anyway. We watched and waited to no avail.

I phoned ahead and arranged a lunch at Port Charlotte. With the clocks gone back last night it was going to be an early finish tonight, so we didn't waste too much time before heading back onto the Rhinns and the RSPB Loch Gruinart reserve. Brighter conditions meant better and longer lasting light – ideal for a spell in the bird hide with gorgeous back-lighting onto assembled varieties of ducks, geese and waders. As light gradually gave out, we headed back towards the hotel and paused for half an hour at the goose roost on Loch Indaal where a few noisy skeins did show up in the gloom, as a late evening Merlin dashed past. A try for owls in the Bridgened woods didn't produce anything other than an urge to be in the warm and preparing for a hearty supper!

Day 6, Monday 27th October: I picked the group up at 8.15am and headed for the last time around Loch Indaal towards the Ferry Terminal at Port Ellen. Sod's Law of course meant it had now calmed into a pleasant sunny morning with a calm sea and shoreline full of birds. We had time to stop en route and scoped up the huge flock of Greater Scaup off Bowmore. With them were at least a dozen Slavonian Grebes, a few Eiders, divers, and (on the shore) our first ringed Plovers and Dunlin. The sea-crossing back to Kennacraig was calm and pleasant with lovely intense rainbows ahead of periodic cold rain showers. Some good birds were seen including lines of Razorbills and Guillemots and scattered Kittiwakes. As we entered Loch Tarbert for our sail up to Kennacraig we began noting Great Northern Divers in good summery plumage.

Thereafter, it was a steady drive back to Glasgow in bright weather. We had time for a quick soup and roll along the way before dropping folks off about on time at the Airport and central Station in Glasgow in time for flight and train connections.

Note: I hope you had safe journeys home and enjoyed Islay (despite the weather), its wildlife, scenery and the tour as much as I enjoyed showing it to you. The following Checklist gives details of the bird and mammal species seen on the tour. Numbers are approximate only. "x" indicates a species seen commonly, but not counted.

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	22	23	24	25	26	27
Divers		Gaviidae					
1 Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			2			2
2 Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		1				
3 Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1	2		2	7
Grebes		Podicipedidae					
4 Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			3		4	
5 Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>						15
Gannets & Boobies		Sulidae					
6 Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		3	1			5
Cormorants		Phalacrocoracidae					
7 European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns		Ardeidae					
8 Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1	2	2	5
Ducks, Geese & Swans		Anatidae					
9 Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		2	*	*	*	*
10 Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		15	25	*	10	6
11 Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		*	*	*	*	*
12 White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		*	*	*	*	*
13 Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				3	2	
14 Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		*	*	*	*	*
15 Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		2			60	25
16 Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					1	
17 Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		*	*	*	*	*
18 Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		*	*	*	*	*
19 Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		*	*	*	*	*
20 Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					25	
21 Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					35	
22 Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			2			
23 Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			10			
24 Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		3				350
25 Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		5		10	5	10
26 Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			1		1	
27 Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		6		20	10	*
Hawks, Eagles & Kites		Accipitridae					
28 Northern (Hen) Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2	1	1		
29 Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	2	15	6	4
Falcons		Falconidae					
30 Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				1		
31 Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1	
32 Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1	
Pheasants & Partridges		Phasianidae					
33 Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		*	*	*	*	
Oystercatchers		Haematopodidae					
34 Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
Plovers & Lapwings		Charadriidae					
35 Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					250	
36 European Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			40			
37 Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						15
Sandpipers & Allies		Scolopacidae					
38 Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		25		20		10
39 Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						
40 Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
41 Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1			
42 Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
43 Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1				
44 Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		15		*	*	*
45 Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						5
Gulls		Laridae					
46 Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
47 Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
48 Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
49 Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
50 Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						15
Auks, Murres & Puffins		Alcidae					
51 Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						40
52 Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						50
53 Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			1			10

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	22	23	24	25	26	27
Pigeons & Doves		Columbidae					
54 Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
55 Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		10		2		
Swallows		Hirundinidae					
56 Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica`</i>		3		2	2	
Larks		Alaudidae					
57 Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				1		
Wagtails & Pipits		Motacillidae					
58 Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		*	*	*	*	*
59 Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	h		2	
60 Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			h		2	2
61 Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		5		4	2	4
Kinglets		Regulidae					
62 Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				2		
Wrens		Troglodytidae					
63 Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				4	2	2
Accentors		Prunellidae					
64 Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				5	2	4
Thrushes & Allies		Turdidae					
65 Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		*	*	*	*	*
66 Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				3		
67 Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		*	*	*	*	*
68 Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		*				
Old World Flycatchers		Muscicapidae					
69 European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>				3	2	2
70 Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		1				2
Chickadees & Tits		Paridae					
71 Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				*		
72 Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				5		6
73 Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				*		
Crows, Jays & Magpies		Corvidae					
74 Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
75 Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
76 Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
77 Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				1	5	10
78 Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				6		
79 Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	1					
Starlings		Sturnidae					
80 European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
Old World Sparrows		Passeridae					
81 House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				*	*	*
Siskins, Crossbills etc.		Fringillidae					
82 Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				*	*	*
83 European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				4		h
84 European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					1	
85 Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>				15		
86 Linnnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>					2	
Buntings & Sparrows		Emberizidae					
87 Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				10		
88 Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				15		
MAMMALS		SCIENTIFIC NAME					
1 Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		*		*	*	
2 Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>					2	
3 Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		1			2	
4 Red Deer	<i>Cervus elephas</i>				10	3	5
5 Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					2	4
6 Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		*				5
7 Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1		