

OUTER HEBRIDES

Sunday 1 June to Saturday 7 June 2008

TRIP REPORT

LEADER

Phil Read

Sunday 1st June

We were blessed with fine, calm conditions for our five hour cruise from Oban to Barra. The calm water enabled us to see a few Harbour Porpoise as we sailed through the Sound of Mull. As we reached the open sea beyond Ardamurchan Point seabird numbers increased. Manx Shearwater breed in huge numbers on the Isle of Rum, which we could see to our north, and gather in rafts on the sea before venturing ashore at night. We had excellent views of these elegant seabirds alongside the ferry and saw around 2000 in all.

Other seabirds were seen in disappointingly small numbers, the severe food shortages affecting seabird colonies in the north and east of the UK now seem to be affecting the colonies in the northwest.

The highlight of the trip, for those of us on deck at the time, was announced by the ship's tannoy "Basking Shark alongside!" This mighty creature passed just alongside the ferry narrowly escaping being run over.

We arrived on time at Castlebay, Barra before making the short trip to our beautifully sited hotel.

Monday 2nd June

The weather remained glorious for our "five islands day". After breakfast we ventured over to the island of Watersay, nowadays joined by a causeway to Barra, to sample our first taste of glorious white beaches and turquoise sea. We then travelled to the north of Barra stopping en route at a rare Hebridean phenomenon, a woodland nature trail! Goldcrest were very vocal but hard to spot and a Spotted Flycatcher only gave fleeting glimpses.

We enjoyed further vistas of white sand and turquoise sea and briefly stopped at the islands unique airfield, actually a tidal cockle strand, to watch a plane take off.

The afternoon ferry trip to Eriskay was very enjoyable with flocks of elegant drake Eider alongside most of the way. In common with an increasing number of Scottish islands Eriskay is now linked by a causeway to its larger neighbours enabling us to motor to South Uist before arriving at our base for the week on Benbecula.

Tuesday 3rd June

We headed north to North Uist for the day stopping en route at "Stinky Bay" (it's the seaweed not the sewers!). The abundance of food here attracts many bird species particularly gulls and waders and we saw Sanderling, Turnstone and Dunlin all resplendent in their summer plumage. *(As an aside I have investigated the origins of the very large metal tank washed up here. Contrary to our thoughts that it had fallen from space the real story is far less dramatic. Allegedly it is a beer tank, one of five lost from a passing cargo ship. Unfortunately the tank was washed up empty so there was so chance of a "beer galore" saga.)*

We headed for the north coast via an area of moorland where raptors were hard to find. After a short machair walk, to view the "best beach in the world", lunch was taken at a picnic site,

frequented from time to time by a Snowy Owl. Alas no owl, but a gang of mobbing gulls and waders alerted us to a Honey Buzzard. Obviously very lost and seemingly extremely tired the buzzard offered little resistance to the screaming mob.

The afternoon was spent at Balranald attempting to see the elusive Corncrake. Normally very vocal around the visitor centre here they proved very quiet and impossible to see.



The “best beach in the world” North Uist, 3rd June.

Wednesday 4th June

As the day started fine we headed south to one of the most beautiful sea lochs on the islands. Here Archie, the crofter, has planted thousands of trees and created an oasis of green amongst the open moorland. We all enjoyed seeing the “Hebridean” Redpoll, in their striking breeding plumage, singing from the top of the trees.

This is always a good area for raptors and we were not to be disappointed. After a lovely walk alongside the loch we were treated to three Golden Eagles, two of them being mobbed by seemingly diminutive Ravens.

The weather deteriorated as we headed to an exposed headland on the west coast where a summering Whooper Swan was a nice find and an Arctic Skua flew by.

Thursday 5th June

We ventured to North Uist again where on the moorland we found a Golden Eagle and breeding Golden Plover announcing their presence with their plaintive call. At a pleasant lunch spot at an east coast sea loch we were able to watch Red Throated Diver and Black Guillemot at leisure.

In the afternoon we returned to Benbecula for a moorland stroll where two Golden Eagles gave prolonged, if rather distant, views and a male Hen Harrier flew by.

An evening attempt at Otter watching was rather frustrating with only fleeting views but a small group of Twite gave excellent views on the fence alongside the road.

Friday 6th June

The glorious weather continued, in fact the weather was far too good with hardly any wind, and this encouraged the infamous midges to appear at the start of our moorland walk on North Uist. However they diminished as we gained height. The effort to reach a small summit was well rewarded as below us three Otters did what Otters do best; play. They were rather distant

but at least this meant we didn't disturb them and enjoyed prolonged views of this charismatic creature. A couple of Short Eared Owls and an Arctic Skua added to the variety of birds and we all enjoyed the stunning views.

Lunch was taken overlooking a typical stunning white Hebridean beach before we admired the extremely rare and localised Hebridean Marsh Orchids growing on the machair. After lunch we ventured over to Berneray in the Sound of Harris before touring the northern part of North Uist.



Hebridean Marsh Orchid, North Uist, 6th June.

Saturday 7th June

Our lunchtime ferry departure from South Uist gave us time for a morning at one of the attractive sea lochs on the east side of South Uist. Two Red Throated Diver, in full breeding plumage, alongside the road enabled us to appreciate the subtle plumage of this elegant bird. The weather was glorious for the return ferry trip although seabirds were disappointingly few in number.



Loch Bee, South Uist, 7th June.

BIRDS

- Greylag Goose** *Anser anser*
This wild goose is a common breeding bird on the islands.
- Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor*
A very common breeding bird with a large non breeding flock on Loch Bee.
- Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus*
Summering birds were seen on Loch nan Feithean.
- Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*
Seen daily. Some birds with young families seen on the sea.
- Gadwall** *Anas strepera*
Only seen on “Coot Loch”, Benbecula.
- Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope*
Breeding birds seen with young on Loch Aongais, North Uist. Despite being a very common wintering bird in Britain this is a rare breeding bird.
- Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*
Seen daily.
- Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata*
Only seen on “Coot Loch”.
- Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca*
A male at Howmore, South Uist and a pair on Loch Aongais were the only sightings.
- Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*
Relatively common breeding duck.
- Common Eider** *Somateria molissima*
Common breeding bird. Many creches of young on the sea.
- Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*
Seen daily. These birds breed on the rocky shores of lochs.
- Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*
Superb views from the vehicle at Loch Druidibeg.
- Great Northern Diver** *Gavia immer*
One from the outward ferry. One in full summer plumage on Vatersay.
- Northern Fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*
Seen in disappointingly small numbers from the ferry.
- Manx Shearwater** *Puffinus puffinus*
Approximately 2000 seen from the outward ferry. Very few from the return ferry.
- Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
Two on Loch nan Feithean. One on Loch Aongais.
- Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*
Common breeding bird.
- Northern Gannet** *Sula bassana*
Seen well from the ferry and offshore most days.
- Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*
Seen daily.
- European Shag** *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*
Seen well on crossings.
- Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*
A male at Loch Eynort, South Uist and a male at Loch Eport, North Uist were the only sightings.
- Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*
Two flew over “Stinky Bay” on our pre-breakfast visit on 6th.
- Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*
Far less sightings than usual. Was there very little food due to the extremely dry moors?
- European Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*
One flew past the minibus near Middlequarter, North Uist on 3rd.

Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Common breeding bird.	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Eight sightings during the week including some prolonged views.	
Corn Crake	<i>Crex crex</i>
Frustratingly only heard and not seen despite concerted efforts.	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Only sighting was one on a small loch at Carinish.	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Only seen on “Coot Loch”.	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Very common and vocal breeding bird.	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Very common and visible breeding bird.	
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Two migrants, of the northern race, seen on Barra on 3 rd . Local birds seen in their moorland breeding habitat on North Uist.	
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Very common breeding bird.	



Ringed Plover, North Uist, 3rd June.

Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Seemingly far less breeding birds than in the past. Very few sightings of “drumming” birds.	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
A flock of thirty migrant birds were at North Bay, South Uist on 3 rd .	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Breeding birds seen well on North Uist.	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Very visible, vocal and neurotic bird. Frequently seen perched on territorial fence posts alongside the road.	



Redshank, North Uist, 6th June

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| Common Sandpiper | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> |
| Seen well on South Uist. | |
| Turnstone | <i>Arenaria interpres</i> |
| Two at Stinky Bay on 3 rd . | |
| Sanderling | <i>Calidris alba</i> |
| Migrant birds, many in their fine summer plumage, seen on west coast beaches. | |
| Dunlin | <i>Calidris alpina</i> |
| Common around the sandy shores. Many birds in breeding plumage. | |
| Red-necked Phalarope | <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i> |
| Only one sighting of a very distant bird due to the very low water levels in their favored loch. | |
| Common Gull | <i>Larus canus</i> |
| Very common breeding bird. | |
| Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> |
| Very common breeding bird. | |
| Lesser Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> |
| Seen daily but in relatively small numbers. Excellent views of one perched on the return ferry. | |
| Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> |
| Seen daily. Breeds. | |
| Black-headed Gull | <i>Larus ridibundus</i> |
| Common breeding bird. | |
| Kittiwake | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> |
| Seen well from the ferry. | |
| Common Tern | <i>Sterna hirundo</i> |
| Seen daily. Most frequently around the eastern coasts and lochs. | |
| Arctic Tern | <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> |
| Seen daily but far fewer breeding birds than in the past. Are food shortages to blame? | |
| Little Tern | <i>Sterna albifrons</i> |
| One on North Uist on 3 rd . Two on Berneray on 6 th were the only sightings. Some former breeding colonies seem to have disappeared. | |
| Great Skua | <i>Stercorarius skua</i> |
| Four seen from outward ferry, some close alongside. | |
| Arctic Skua | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> |
| Some excellent views during the week including three flying over the minibus whilst we were parked outside the Spar shop on Benbecula. | |
| Common Guillemot | <i>Uria aalge</i> |

Seen well from the ferry but considerably fewer than in the past.

Razorbill *Alca torda*

The comments for the last species apply here as well.

Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle*

As always, excellent views of this delightful bird in Oban harbour. Seen on a few days around the islands.

Puffin *Fratercula arctica*

Only twelve seen on the outward crossing and a few on the return. This is a very worrying drop in numbers of this species over recent years.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

This is a truly wild and wary dove on the islands.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Seen around the islands in small numbers.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Seen well on Barra and at Loch Eynort. Numbers appear to be declining, as elsewhere in UK.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

We enjoyed excellent views of this delightful daytime owl.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Seen well on the southern islands. Heavily persecuted and therefore only a few sightings on the Uists.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Seen daily in ever increasing numbers.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

A few sightings during the week. This species breeds in small numbers.

Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

Delightfully common and vocal.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

A very skulking bird was present throughout the week in the bushes alongside the hotel.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Heard singing at Loch Eynort, South Uist and Lochmaddy, North Uist.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Seen in Northbay wood, Barra and at Loch Eynort.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen daily.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Seen daily.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Seen daily.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Seen daily, mainly around the hotel.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Seen on Barra and at Loch Eynort.

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus*

A few seen around the islands, usually perched on fences alongside the road.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Breeding bird.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

One elusive bird in Northbay Wood, Barra.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Only seen at Loch Eynort.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba*

One by the hotel on 6th.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrelli*

Seen daily in small numbers.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Common breeding bird.

Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Seen around the rocky shores.	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Only seen at Loch Eynort.	
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Seen in small numbers around the hotel and in some of the plantations.	
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>
We all enjoyed the birds in superb breeding plumage at Loch Eynort.	
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>
Excellent view of birds perched on roadside fences.	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
The birds at Balranald gave excellent views as usual.	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Only sighting was of a male on the moorland on Benbecula.	

MAMMALS

European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>

FISH

Basking Shark	<i>Cetorhinus maximus</i>
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BUTTERFLIES

Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Large Heath	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilius</i>

DRAGONFLIES

Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>
Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>

I would like to thank the group for their company and enthusiasm during the week and trust they enjoyed seeing these magical islands, in such glorious weather, as much as I did.

Phil Read

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