

Islay, Colonsay & Jura

Monday 22 – Saturday 27 June 2009

SUMMER TOUR TO ISLAY, COLONSAY & JURA: JUNE 22nd –27th 2009

TOUR LEADER: Peter Roberts

Monday 22nd June: I met up with the group at Glasgow, picking people up at Queen's Street and Central Railway Stations, then at the Airport. Everyone was gathered in by 1.45pm and we drove the 100 miles around to Kennacraig and the awaiting ferry to Islay. The day was cool and cloudy, the journey was uneventful, but straightforward, passing alongside Loch Lomond for a while, then the very picturesque Loch Fyne – a sea loch that took us all the way to Inveraray and beyond. We stopped for a brief break at Inveraray and were in line for the Islay ferry by 5.10pm. Aboard and away on time, we attempted to watch for birds on deck, but for most folks it was just a bit too cold. Theo and I managed to stay the course and found a few good birds including plenty of Gannets and some Black Guillemots. A single group of 4 Manx Shearwaters was very welcome and a single Minke Whale was probably "best sighting". Once on Islay, we drove directly to the welcoming Bridgend Hotel, got settled into rooms and turned in for the night.

Tuesday 23rd June: The weather today was a total contrast to yesterday, being superbly calm, sunny and warm all day - absolutely glorious! We met up at the hotel at 8.45am and set out for our first excursion, heading north towards the historic site of Finlaggan. On the way we called in at the Islay Woollen Mill, in part to watch for Dippers on the River Sorn and also to pop in to the mill itself for an informal guided tour by the owner. The Dipper didn't show, but Grey Wagtails were a pleasant consolation. In the Mill we were treated to the tour of all the old machinery, from ancient Spinning Jennies to water wheels and clanking, but still used old weaving looms.

Finlaggan was fascinating. This tiny but historically important site was the seat of the Clan MacDonald and "Lords of the Isles" in Medieval times. We had a pleasant walk around the site in perfect weather and with diversions from singing Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings plus a Red-throated Diver on the loch, Sparrowhawk over the forestry and gorgeous male Hen Harrier worrying the breeding Lapwings.

Finishing here, I decided we had time to pop further north to the Bunnahabain Distillery where I've often seen Otters. We arrived and watched to no avail, but settled down to eat our picnic in this lovely bay with Jura across the Sound in clear definition. As I sat I heard a bird song and automatically registered it as Common Rosefinch. Then I woke up and realised where I was - Islay not Central Europe! I quickly played the song on my ipod and had a real Rosefinch (albeit a dull brown 1st year male not a bright red individual) coming in to investigate. This was a remarkable and rare sighting, my book telling me of only one previous record on Islay, curiously on exactly the same date 10 years earlier.

Then to the Loch Gruinart area, for the afternoon. We made our way along the single track, dead-end road towards Ardnave. Theo made a special request to see the old Celtic cross at Kilnave church and we duly turned off the road, past patches of purple orchids to the 1200 year old cross. As we admired this our next bit of serendipity kicked in. Ann heard a couple of notes from a Corncrake and immediately recognised it, despite never having encountered one before. The habitat of damp grasses, nettles, rushes and iris patches was ideal. I played a little call from my ipod and very soon had the bird replying and showing well from the edge of its cover. We watched it for a good while as it called and moved from patch to patch -very satisfying indeed to find such a skulking bird so easily on our first day.

We continued to Ardnave Loch with its nesting Sand Martins, Wheatears and passing Choughs before returning down the road to the RSPB hide. Here in late afternoon backlighting we watched abundant Redshanks, Lapwings, Teal, a couple of summering Wigeon and feeding Roe Deer before calling in to the Visitor Centre at Aoradh for a break and the loos. Then on up towards Loch Gorm crossing the heather moorland trying to lure in Red Grouse with no luck, it was close to 6pm by now and still lovely and sunny.

we headed back along Loch Gorm and Loch Indaal to reach the hotel by 6.30pm, finishing a longish and very productive first day out.

Wednesday 24th June: Another day of bright, sunny conditions for a glorious day trip to Colonsay and beyond. We set off at 8.30am towards Port Askaig, with time to spare for a brief spell looking for Eagles along the back road to Ballygrant. None were seen but numerous Ravens, lots of rare breed free-range pigs and groups of Red Deer stags, plus clear views of Dunosebridge Iron Age Fort made the deviation worthwhile. We were in line for the 10.15am ferry along with a few other birders, with the same idea for a day out on Colonsay. The crossing was calm and sunny but with no outstanding bird sightings. We passed Caol Ila and Bunnahabain Distilleries, then past the tip of Islay at the Rhu Vaal lighthouse beyond the remote coastline of Jura.

At Colonsay I'd arranged with my good friends Mike & Val Peacock, the RSPB Managers on the little low-lying offshore island of Oronsay that it was safe to drive across the sand-flats to visit them – the tides being in our favour. He came across to guide us over and by midday we were standing on the tiny island of Oronsay listening to Corn Crakes in the lush wet meadows. As we'd seen Corncrake so well yesterday we were happy to spend our time in other pursuits and went off for a pleasant walk with Mike guiding us. He took us around some of the marvellous fields of pasture recreated into beautiful and productive flower meadows and Machair habitat that is so flower-rich, good for Corncrakes and excellent for fast diminishing bumble-bees. Back at the Priory, the group sat out in bright sunshine to have their picnic, while I caught with Mike and Val whom I'd not seen for over a year. The tides were with us and there was plenty of time to explore the ruins of the old Priory with its excellent collection of medieval gravestones before heading back to Colonsay by 3pm for the remainder of our day. There was a brief excitement when another day visitor went into an allergic reaction to bites from Horse Flies, but that all ended happily and we were on our way back to the main island of Colonsay in good time. We drove a circuit around the island's roads, stopping to watch whatever came our way and admire the lovely views of this pretty island. We called in briefly to the scenically perfect Kiloran Bay after a visit to the gardens of Colonsay House. We boarded the ferry for a delightfully calm return to Islay at 6.30pm seeing a few Common Porpoises, close Manx Shearwaters and several Great Northern Divers. We were back at Bridgend by 8pm.

Thursday 25th June: Although there were some clouds and it felt a little cooler this morning, it turned into another beautifully sunny summer's day for our visit to Jura. We were at the front of a short queue for the ferry by 9am and once we'd made the brief journey across to Jura we stopped by the ferry to make our first checks on likely Otter sites. It wasn't to be despite a good long search here and further along the coast, but Ringed Plovers were seen well. We continued around the one road towards Craighouse (the only small village on the island), checking various sites on the way. At Craighouse we made use of the loos and some ventured into the Jura Whisky Distillery shop for "special purchases" before heading up the long, dead-end road north up the eastside of the island. The Paps of Jura showed in all their glory and we began our scanning of Jura's rocky, hilly hinterland for eagles. We continued our scanning to no avail all the way up and back along this one picturesque road.

We had a short hike to walk off the lunch while admiring the stunning scenic views of mountains and seascapes. It was fine scenery, great weather and a "new" island to explore. We passed Lagg Bay with its old stone jetty and pier which would have been an immensely important life-line for moving cattle on and off Islay to the mainland a couple of centuries ago and paused at Loch Tarbert which nearly cuts the island in two. Despite the lack of eagles and otters it was another very pleasant day out. We were back on Islay by 6pm and tried a last time at Bunnahabain again for Otters – still no luck.

Friday 26th June: The weather was looking good again today, with a bright, sunny day, but with more of a breeze for our visit across to the other side of Islay. This was our last day and we'd decided on a good walk around the scenic, cliffy areas of the Mull of Oa. We set out at 8.30am checking briefly for birds around Loch Indaal - finding a group of Bar-tailed Godwits before arriving in Bowmore. Continuing along the straight road passing Duich Moss and the airport we then turned on to the Mull of Oa, heading to the RSPB reserve at Upper Killeyan. This is a fairly straightforward walk out to the American Monument (dedicated to two US troop ships sunk close offshore in the 1st World War), then around in a circuit back to the vehicle via lots of good cliffs. Golden Eagles were our prime goal here today, with two pairs known to be breeding, but despite much scanning and searching it was not to be. We did find a fine Peregrine with prey (probably a

Jackdaw), saw lots of Gannets offshore and Fulmars on the cliffs, plus 6 migrating Swifts. We sat on the cliffs overlooking the fine scenery and the distant form of Northern Ireland to the south and enjoyed this welcome exercise, which took us towards lunchtime. We headed to Port Ellen for loos and a lovely picnic overlooking the white sandy bay here by the Maltings that produces the basic ingredients for so much of the marvellous Islay Single Malt Whisky!

In the afternoon we continued up the long road past the ruins of Dunyveg Castle – another left over from the days of the Lords of the Isles. We passed the three most famous of Islay’s Whiskey Distilleries – Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg – producing the most peaty tasting Scotch – then further up the road as far as Kildalton to pay homage to the splendid 8th century Celtic Cross. It was mid afternoon by now and we had time to continue to the end of yet another of Islay’s dead-end roads at Claggain Bay on the Ardtalla Estate. Here we encountered fine groups of Red Deer stags with splendid antlers in velvet. We also did our “decent citizen” bit by firmly pointing out the error of his ways to a particularly insensitive tourist walking through Arctic Tern nesting areas taking photos of the birds mobbing him overhead.

We wended our long way back towards the hotel now, calling yet again to the picturesque little bays of this coastline in search of Otters. There were plenty of cute Common Seals basking close by on the rocks and brief looks at Hen Harrier and Merlin – but still no Otters. Our final bid for this sought after species was a quick stop at Loch Skerrols, close to the hotel. No joy, but it was a lovely tranquil evening scene to finish our final bird list of the tour.

TSaturday 27th June: I picked the group up at 8.30am for the return journey homewards. We joined the 9.45am ferry from Port Ellen back to the mainland at Kennacraig. The sea crossing was calm, fairly bright and sunny – and really quite productive! Common Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Gannets were encountered throughout in clusters around good fishing spots. Here too were occasional Manx Shearwaters and even a single European Storm Petrel at one point. Amidst the feeding groups we also spied the long sloping back and small falcate dorsal fin of a Minke Whale. On a slightly late arrival at Kennacraig, we set out as directly as possible for our drive back to Glasgow as Ann had a 2.40pm train she hoped to catch. What with roadworks and generally slow traffic, we didn’t make it – arriving at about 3pm, but there was a later connection at 3.40pm. We said our farewell to Theo at Glasgow Airport, dropped Catherine off with Ann at Central Station, then Alison and Bill at Queen’s Street Station. I returned on to Inverness arriving by 6.30pm.

Note: The following Checklist gives details of the bird and mammal species seen on the tour. Numbers are approximate only. “*” indicates a species seen commonly, but not counted; “h” indicates heard but not seen.

	SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		1				
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			4			
3	Diver sp.	<i>Gavia spp.</i>			2			
4	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	4		20			35
5	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>					*	
6	Gannet	<i>Morus bassana</i>	25		10		*	*
7	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1			6	
8	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	*	10	*	*	*	*
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	5	5	10	*	*
10	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	*	*		*	*	*
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	10	20				
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			25			
13	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				15	10	
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	*	*		*	10	*
15	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		2				
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		15				
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		10				
18	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	10	3	1		40	20
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1				2	
20	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		3	1	2	3	
21	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	5	2	10	6	4
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1				
23	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1	
24	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	1	1	1	
25	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1	
26	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		*	1	*	*	
27	Corn Crake	<i>Crex crex</i>		1	h			
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2				
29	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
30	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	*	*	10			
31	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				2	6	
32	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1	1			
33	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2	4		2	12	6
34	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponicus</i>					12	
35	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	5	*				
36	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2	10	2	*	*	2
37	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
38	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			1	5	5	3
39	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
40	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		5		*	*	5
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		5	5	*	*	
42	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			50			*
43	Arctic/Common Tern	<i>Sterna sp.</i>			5			
44	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisea</i>				4	6	10

45	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					10	
46	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			10			*
47	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	4		15			5
48	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	5		10	4	2	10
49	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
50	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		2	h		1	5
51	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			h	*	*	5
52	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				2		
53	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>					6	
54	Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
55	White (Pied) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
56	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2	1		1	
57	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
58	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			2	1		
59	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		20	5	5	2	
60	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
61	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		2				
63	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
64	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	h	1		1		
65	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		10	5		2	
66	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		h		1	1	
67	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1				
68	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		*	h	*	*	
69	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
70	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		*	5	*	*	
71	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					1	
72	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			1	*	*	
73	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			h	6	4	
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		6	4	2	4	
75	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		*		*	*	
76	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		*	2	*	*	
77	Coal Tit			*		*	*	
78	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>						5
79	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
80	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
81	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>			5	*	*	*
82	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	20	4	4	
83	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		10				
84	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
85	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*
86	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		5	*	*	*	4
87	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		2	5	*		
88	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		10			*	
89	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		h	h	*	*	
90	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		6		6	6	

91	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>					1	
92	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		10	15	*	*	2
93	Common Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>		1				
94	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2	h			
	OTHER WILDLIFE	SCIENTIFIC NAME	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>			1	1	1	
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		*	*	*	*	
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		5				
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elephas</i>			40	*	15	
5	Feral Goat	<i>Capra capra</i>			6		20	
6	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	2	1			25	5
7	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			20	10		4
8	Common Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			2			
9	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acotostrata</i>		1				1
10	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>		1				