

Outer Hebrides 2011

Sunday 5th June – Saturday 11th June 2011

Trip Report

Leader

Steve Duffield

Sunday 5th June

We all met up in the ferry terminal at Oban for the 15:40 sailing to Lochboisdale. Sea conditions were pretty calm throughout the crossing although drizzle and some heavier rain persisted for the whole journey. Despite the rather damp conditions those that remained on deck did see the expected seabirds including a large raft of 1,000 strong Manx Shearwaters to the south of Rum.

Other seabirds picked up on the journey included a couple of distant Storm Petrels; Fulmars and Gannets as well as a few Puffins, Razorbills and the odd Guillemot. Both Arctic and Common Terns were seen as well as single Great and Arctic Skua.

At least 7 Harbour Porpoise were picked up in the mirror-calm waters of the Sound of Mull whilst 3 distant Basking Sharks were also spotted between Coll and Rum. The large sickle-shaped fins of 2 dolphins seen quite close to the rear of the ferry turned out to be those of Risso's Dolphins; one of which was seen to leap clear of the sea. Most had given up searching by early evening as it was rather wet and dismal on deck although another two, large breaching cetaceans helped maintain interest until we reached Barra.

We arrived at Lochboisdale in the late evening after calling in at Castle Bay, Barra and headed for our hotel, centrally located on Benbecula.

Monday 6th June

The weather remained calm with light winds and sunny spells making our first day's birding very pleasant until late afternoon when we experienced one or two light showers.

We headed for North Uist this morning although not before calling in at Loch Mor, Benbecula where roadside pools provided excellent views of a fine female Red-necked Phalarope. This exciting area also held a good variety of wildfowl and waders including a drake Garganey, Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeon, Snipe, Dunlin and a splendid summer plumage Black-tailed Godwit. A pale-phase Arctic Skua hurtled through causing pandemonium amongst the Arctic Terns and nesting waders whilst a distant Short-eared Owl and Kestrel hunting the moorland added to the busy scene.

Once on North Uist we began our slow drive across the Committee Road with regular stops to scan the horizon for birds of prey. This proved very fruitful with 2 distant Golden Eagles being mobbed by a Buzzard. Next was a herd of around 40 Red Deer that passed close by our

stationary bus before heading across the road and up the hillside to the east. As they reached the top of the rise a male Merlin was disturbed and came shooting past us in alarm. Next was probably the highlight of the day for many as we were treated to a spectacular display as an immature Golden Eagle was joined by an adult that then proceeded to drive away the intruder in a series of dramatic dives. Finally at the north end of the road we had good views of a perched male Hen Harrier and a hunting, Short-eared Owl.



We took our lunch at Griminish Pier which affords superb views across to the island of Vallay and the hills of Harris in the distance. Birding didn't stop for lunch either with 2 Red-throated Divers found in the channel separating us from Vallay; an Arctic Skua zipped past and a Cuckoo performed very well, being mobbed by an angry Meadow Pipit close to where we were parked. Before we left Griminish we spotted an otter feeding in the tidal channel not too far from the shore but far enough to disappear in the glinting water all too soon.

The afternoon continued in the same vein as the morning with excellent views of a calling Corncrake at Hougharry for around 20 minutes. Nearby Balranald produced a singing Corn Bunting, Bar-tailed Godwits, Arctic Terns and another Arctic Skua. A female Hen Harrier passed over Loch nam Feithean whilst a few miles down the road at Loch Sandary we found a small flock of 9 Whooper Swans happily feeding. Our last port of call was the aptly named, Stinky Bay. Although it might smell quite ripe the birds do like this location and we enjoyed family parties of Eider and Shelduck before heading back to the Dark Island for dinner.

Tuesday 7th June

The wind was a little stronger today, from the east to north-east and accompanied by drizzle and rain showers until the afternoon when brighter spells developed.

The wet weather didn't dampen the spirits as we headed onto South Uist where we started with good views of Little Tern at Balgarva and more prolonged, good views of a calling Corncrake near North Bay. Nearby Ardivachar held an assortment of waders and gulls including summer plumage Turnstone and Sanderling.



Heading south we called in at Howmore where no sooner had we parked on the dune edge over-looking the dramatic sea-scape when a Peregrine Falcon came hurtling over in an attempt to catch an unsuspecting Dunlin or Sanderling. An Arctic Skua flew past us and 2 summer plumage Great Northern Divers showed well, just over the water breaking on the shore. Our next stop was on the main road as an adult male Hen Harrier performed well, hunting close by for a while near Bornish.

As things were still a little wet we took our lunch at Kildonan Café where we not only enjoyed the delights of some home cooked food but also a Short-eared Owl hunting from the windows and a couple of Red Deer on the hillside.

The afternoon gave us another couple of Great Northern Divers off Smerclate but the biggest surprise was to be found on Eriskay. Unfortunately it wasn't one the lost bottles of whisky that were stashed away when the Politician ran aground many years ago but a dashing Hobby that came speeding over the hills and overhead before shooting off to the north. More normal fare from Eriskay included Rock Pipit, Razorbills and a lone Great Skua in the Sound of Barra. From here we began our trip back north calling in at the sheltered valley of South Glendale. A mature garden here gave us Spotted Flycatcher, a female Siskin and a singing Whitethroat. A couple of juvenile Stonechats were spotted nearby and a Short-eared Owl

performed in the valley itself. Another male Hen Harrier was seen at East Kilbride and a summer plumage Golden Plover was feeding in a roadside field.

Our final stop of the day was to the south of Daliburgh where we had great views of a hunting Short-eared Owl that quartered the rough grassland for around 15 minutes giving us all a fine display. The rough grassland also provided us with a real bonus of an early flowering Lesser Butterfly Orchid putting an end to another excellent and varied day.

Wednesday 8th June

A fine, if cool day with north-westerly winds and sunny spells.

We headed south again this morning to the excellent sea-loch at Loch Eynort. As soon as we pulled up we started adding birds to the list with a pair of Whitethroats, 3 Siskin and Lesser Redpolls showing intermittently. Red-throated Divers could be found on the water and a Golden Eagle was spotted perched on a distance ridge. The good path through the wooded garden here is probably the best in the islands and allows easy access to a viewing area over the surrounding hills and sea-loch. 2 adult White-tailed Eagles could be seen in the distance on their eerie where they remained for an hour or so before heading out east over the Minch. We returned to the car park area where we had a Cuckoo fly in to the trees and start calling. An immature Golden Eagle was seen on the opposite side of the loch where it was mobbed by a Buzzard. This was followed by a further 2 Golden Eagles circling to the west before gliding north and taking our total eagle count to 6 for the day so far.

The sightings continued into the afternoon with brief but close views of an otter in a tidal channel close to the road. The beastie was sat on a rock with a large fish but was a little too close to the road and quickly slunk off out of view. Another Golden Eagle was spotted to the south so we drove round to get closer. We had excellent views of this bird which eventually dropped low and shortly re-appeared chasing an immature bird away to the west. In contrast to the morning we explored the west coast and machair at Bornish where we enjoyed the rich, colourful display of machair flowers. A summer plumage Golden Plover flew over and Dunlin, Lapwing and Redshank added to the busy atmosphere. We headed north following a look at Rubha Ardvule and to the east side of Benbecula. Twite and Rock Pipit showed quite well opposite the heronry at Uskivagh although our attention was soon drawn to the otter spotted feeding in the tidal loch to the east. We enjoyed it through the scope although once again it disappeared all too quickly in an area of the loch we couldn't see. We had a wonderful, relaxing end to another very productive and satisfying day.

Thursday 9th June

Today the winds were again from the north-west backing south-west later in the day; with sunny spells and showers.

We began our day by calling in at Coot Loch, Benbecula where the initially quiet, peaceful scene soon livened up when a couple of alarming Redshanks drew our attention to a thick patch of iris. After a short wait a large otter emerged and began fishing in the centre of the loch for a while before continuing to hunt in semi-emergent vegetation on the loch edge. This caused further alarm amongst the birdlife as 2 Shovelers flew from cover and a female Wigeon flapped around apparently attempting to distract the beastie from young hidden in the area. Leaving the otter to its business we continued north to Lochmaddy and across the Spanish suspension bridge. From our vantage point we spotted a couple of distant Golden Eagles over hills to the north and 4 Golden Plover on the short turf nearby. Otter remained elusive here so we moved to the ferry terminal where an otter was spotted feasting on prey that it had brought out onto a small tidal island. We watched as it returned to the water and continued hunting close to the shore, frequently accompanied by a small entourage of gulls before disappearing from view.

The morning passed quickly and we enjoyed a packed lunch at a superb spot on the coast at Clachan Sands. A Little Tern flew past and 2 Great Skuas gave great views as they headed along the coast close to our picnic site. A short walk took us to the very rare a localised Hebridean Marsh Orchid site where we enjoyed an excellent display of this endemic species along with Early Marsh, Northern Marsh Orchid and Common Twayblade.



Our final destination was the lovely, compact island of Berneray nuzzled in the Sound of Harris. On the machair to the north-west we located a small group of 7 Barnacle Geese apparently intending to stay for the summer rather than return to their breeding grounds in Greenland. Other late migrants included a number of waders including Turnstone, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Dunlin on the shore to the north-east. From here a feeding

party of gulls could be seen over the sparkling blue waters to the north and amongst them was a rather small, pale bird that disappeared around the headland at the northern tip of the island. As we headed out to investigate the mystery gull an adult Artic Skua passed close by giving us more excellent views of this exciting species but the biggest surprise was still to come. After some time searching and almost at the point of giving up those remaining at the northern end finally found the gull in question – an immature Bonaparte’s Gull! This rare visitor from North America has been almost annual in the Outer Hebrides in the last few years but to find our own during the tour in a glorious setting was most rewarding and exciting.



On the way back to the hotel we paused to enjoy the sight of a couple of small Buzzard chicks; their tiny, fluffy heads just peeking out from the bundle of twigs viewable from the roadside at Clachan Farm.

Friday 10th June

Brisk southerly winds today, eased a little in the afternoon with just occasional showers and some good, long sunny spells.

We began the morning with a short walk at Langass Lodge on North Uist. The trees here attracted a number species scarce over much of the islands such as Chaffinch, Greenfinch and a singing Chiffchaff. We had good views of Hebridean Wren and brief views of a Sparrowhawk shooting off through the dense conifers. At nearby loch Euport we spotted a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Terns and Buzzards although it was fairly quiet so we headed south but before we reached the main road once again we had excellent

views of a male Hen Harrier hunting. A Short-eared Owl flew off a roadside perch as we crossed Benbecula on our way to the very scenic and very productive Loch Eynort.

We enjoyed our packed lunch at the road end at Loch Eynort with 2 superb, summer plumage Black-throated Divers for company. The next couple of hours here provided a variety of birds including Red-throated Divers, Shag, a brief Golden Eagle, Hebridean Song Thrush, Black Guillemot, Twite, Lesser Redpoll, juvenile Wheatears and Willow Warbler. We also heard a Cuckoo and had good views of Red Deer on the hillside above Archie's - the industrious individual that had been instrumental in the planting of the trees at North Loch Eynort.

We headed back north in the afternoon and took the road along the northern side of Druidibeg National Nature Reserve to Loch Skipport where we spotted a number of Buzzards, Kestrels and what was almost certainly another brief Hobby hawkling over the moorland where there was a large emergence of Fox Moths and Northern Eggars. We also enjoyed scope views of a pair of Golden Plover with 4 small chicks feeding in a re-seeded area near the end of the road. Another excellent day was had with one or two additional birds to the list bringing the total to 100 species for the week.

Saturday 11th June

The winds were light today with occasional showers providing ideal conditions for the sail back to Oban this afternoon.

Our final morning gave us time to enjoy a couple of the best sites in the island in a relaxed manner and these certainly didn't disappoint. Loch Mor came up trumps with 3 Red-necked Phalaropes showing from time to time including a close female. Also present were 3 Black-tailed Godwits, displaying Dunlin, Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeon and Arctic Terns. These were accompanied by 2 Short-eared Owls hunting in the distance over the moor. Heading south we called into one of our favourite spots at Loch Eynort. This also produced the goods with an adult White-tailed Eagle flying in from the east and perching on a hill top for a while before returning back towards the Minch and its usual more distant loafing spots. 3 Siskins were busy flying back and forth whilst Chaffinch and Lesser Redpoll also kept us entertained.

Finally a request for a short visit to Flora MacDonald's birth place took us in the direction of the ferry and our parting in Lochboisdale. We said our goodbyes as Steve was staying on his (now) home island of South Uist as the group took the ferry back to Oban.

Birds

Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

Birds that were released on North Uist 3 years ago can still be found around Lochmaddy.

Greylag Goose

Anser anser

Common and widespread breeding resident

Barnacle Goose

Branta bernicla

7 late (possibly over-summering birds) were seen on the machair in the northern part of Berneray.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

A common breeding and resident species found on fresh-water lochs throughout Uist and Benbecula.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus Cygnus*

9 over-summering birds were seen on Loch Sandary.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Seen daily and frequently with ducklings in tow.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

A few birds were seen in the Loch Mor / Loch Fada area on Benbecula.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas Penelope*

Small numbers were seen most days.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Seen daily.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Regular sightings on Benbecula and at the north end of South Uist.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

A drake was seen on Loch Fada, Benbecula, 6th June.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

This common breeding duck was seen daily and with new ducklings 10th June.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

A common breeding bird that was observed at many sites around the coast, including numerous small crèches.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

Seen daily in small numbers.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellate*

Seen on east coast sea-lochs where the adults come to fish.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*

2 immaculate summer plumage birds were seen on the sea at Loch Eynort, 10th June.

Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*

4 birds were seen off South Uist, 7th June with 2 summer plumage adults off Peninerine and 2, 1 showing very well off Smerclate.

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

Seen on the crossing from Oban, 5th June.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

A large raft of at least 1,000 birds was seen on the ferry crossing from Oban, 5th June.

European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*

A couple of distant birds were spotted from the Oban ferry.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Small numbers were seen on 3 dates.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Seen daily with many birds around the colony in east Benbecula and recently fledged young at North Loch Eynort.

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*

Seen well from the ferry and off-shore most days.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Seen on every day of the trip.

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Seen virtually every day.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Sightings on 4 different dates during the week.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

A male was seen alarm calling along the Committee Road, North Uist, 6th June.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

One flew north over Eriskay, 7th June and what was almost certainly another was seen near Loch Skipport, June 10th (2 were reported from here 2 days later). This a rare bird in the Outer Hebrides.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

1 was seen hunting waders at Howmore River mouth, 7th June.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

Adults were seen at Loch Eynort, South Uist, 8th and 11th June.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

We had great views of Hen Harriers on 3 dates with 3 males and 2 females seen on total.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

1 was seen briefly at Langass Lodge, 10th June.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seen daily, sometimes in quite large numbers with chicks seen at a nest site on Benbecula.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

Seen on 4 days during the week with some excellent and prolonged encounters, including very good views on our first full day, whilst on Committee Road. 4 birds were seen on 6th and at least 7 on 9th!

Corncrake *Crex crex*

Regularly heard and seen well at Hougharry, 6th June and North Bay, 7th June.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

The only sighting was on Coot Loch, Benbecula.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Common and noisy; especially when with young as many pairs had.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Common on the machair and adjacent ground. Despite the poor weather in May it appears to have been a good breeding season with young seen on many occasions.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

A few birds were seen during the week including a pair with 4 young near Loch Skipport.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Common on the machair and coastline.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Only seen on a couple of occasions during the week although widespread in boggy areas adjacent to the machair.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Up to three birds were present at Loch Mor, Benbecula including 2 fine summer plumage birds.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

A flock on non-breeding godwits were seen on the shore at Balranald, 6th June.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Quite common and regularly seen during the week.

Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus*

Common and widespread in suitable habitat.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Birds were seen on three dates although common on moorland lochs and regularly heard.

- Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*
Small groups were seen at various locations along the coast on 3 days.
- Sanderling** *Calidris alba*
Quite a few flocks remained in North and South Uist with birds being seen on 4 different dates.
- Dunlin** *Calidris alpine*
A common breeder and migrant; seen on most days during the trip.
- Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus*
Up to 3 birds were seen at their favoured site on Benbecula with good views of a female on at least 2 separate occasions.
- Common Gull** *Larus canus*
A very common and widespread species.
- Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus*
Small numbers were seen every day.
- Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus*
A common breeding bird.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*
Small numbers were seen most days.
- Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*
A common breeding species.
- Bonaparte's Gull** *Larus Philadelphia*
A 1st yr. immature was a real surprise find; feeding amongst a mixed flock of Black-headed and Common Gulls at the north-west tip of Berneray.
- Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*
Only seen during the ferry crossing between Oban and Lochboisdale.
- Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo*
Quite common and seen most days in small numbers.
- Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea*
The commonest species of tern; seen every day of the trip.
- Little Tern** *Sterna albifrons*
Small numbers were seen on a couple of occasions with excellent views obtained at Balgarva, South Uist.
- Great Skua** *Stercorarius skua*
A single bird was seen from the Oban – Lochboisdale crossing but 3 other birds were seen whilst on Uist.
- Arctic Skua** *Stercorarius parasiticus*
1 or 2 birds were seen on 4 different dates.
- Common Guillemot** *Uria aalge*
Small numbers were seen from the Oban – Lochboisdale ferry.
- Razorbill** *Alca torda*
Seen from Oban – Lochboisdale ferry as well as off Eriskay.
- Black Guillemot** *Cephus grille*
Seen most days in small numbers.
- Puffin** *Fratecula arctica*
A few were seen on the outward trip between Oban – Lochboisdale.
- Rock Dove** *Columba livia*
The genuine article; common and seen every day.
- Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto*
Seen at Grogarry, South Uist.
- Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus*

Heard most days but also seen well, especially one being mobbed by Meadow Pipits at Griminish Pier, North Uist.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

Some great views were had during the week with up to 3 in a single day.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Seen on 4 different dates; an increasing species in the islands.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Common and seen every day.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

2 were seen on 8th June.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Fairly common and seen virtually every day in small numbers.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Still a common species in Uist with birds seen every day.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Individuals were seen on 6th and 7th June although also heard on many other occasions.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Easily seen at Loch Eynort where freshly fledged juveniles were noted.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Single birds were heard singing at Clachan Farm and Langass Lodge.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Birds were seen in South Glendale and at Loch Eynort, South Uist.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Common and widespread although mostly heard birds were seen on 4 dates.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Very common with many juveniles seen.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common and seen on most days.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

This Hebridean sub-species was seen every day whilst on the islands.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Locally common.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Last winter had reduced numbers drastically although juveniles were seen in South Glendale.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Common and widespread with many juveniles seen.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

A single bird was seen in South Glendale, 7th June.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Good numbers still survive in the islands with sightings every day.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Quite common in suitable habitat with bird picked up on 4 dates.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrelli*

A common bird in the summer months with birds noted every day.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Very common.

Rock Pipit *Anthus petrosus*

Quite common on rocky coasts.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Some very friendly birds found us at the end of the road at Loch Eynort.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Common and seen virtually every day.

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

A female was seen in South Glendale and up to 3 were at Loch Eynort.

Lesser Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*

Birds were seen at Loch Eynort and Langass.

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris*

Fairly common and easiest to see in the Loch Eynort area.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

This species has started breeding in the islands recently with numbers increasing each year.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Seen and heard singing at Balranald.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Small numbers were seen at scattered locations.

Mammals

European Otter *Lutra lutra*

Common Seal *Phoca vitulina*

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phoceana*

Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis*

Risso's Dolphin *Grampus griseus*

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Fish

Basking Shark *Cetorhinus maximus*

Flowers (select list)

Hebridean Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza ebudensis*

Northern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza purpurella*

Early Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnate coccinea*

Heath Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*

Lesser Butterfly Orchid *Platanthera bifolia*

Common Twayblade *Neottia ovata*

