

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

Scotland – Wester Ross in July

15 – 20 July 2019

Golden eagle



From Bealach na Ba looking across to Skye



View of Shildaig Island



Stonechat



Compiled by: Louise Hughes

Tour Leader: Louise Hughes with 6 participants

Day 1: Monday 15 July 2019

Weather: Beautiful sunshine

After picking everyone up from Inverness, we made our way to North Kessock. Sitting on the Beaully Firth, it was a nice spot to have our lunch whilst watching the water. As we drove to our next stop, Black Water/Silverbridge, we saw a couple of red kites wheeling around. At Silverbridge we admired the Thomas Telford Bridge and the waterfalls.

At Loch Droma, a few swallows and sand martins were present as was a meadow pipit with food in its beak. Our final stop was Knockan Crag; we were in awe of the geology, where you can see the evidence of old rock sitting on top of younger rock, known as the Moine Thrust zone. Another 25 minutes up the road and we arrived at our accommodation for the next three nights, the Eddrachilles Hotel, which has a beautiful view over Eddrachilles Bay.

Day 2: Tuesday 16 July 2019

Weather: Overcast with some drizzle until lunchtime, when it cleared to become sunny & warm

Today we made for Handa Island, a small private island managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The highlight of the island is the hundred thousand odd seabirds that nest on the high Torridonian sandstone cliffs. Whilst waiting for the boat to take us across to the island we saw a couple of red-throated divers in the bay, a harbour seal and a common sandpiper. Once on the island we were greeted by two volunteers before setting off on our walk up to the seabird cliffs. Great skuas flew around us as well as a number of Arctic skuas: both the light and dark colour morphs. More red-throated divers flew over us, calling as they went.

At the small lochan before the cliffs, a red-throated diver was sitting on the water with two large fluffy chicks while the great skuas bathed nearby. Once up at the cliffs, we saw hundreds of guillemots, razorbills and fulmars plus a few puffins. We gradually made our way up to the Great Stack, where the majority of the puffins are (204 this year) as well as kittiwakes, thousands of guillemots and razorbills. Zac, a volunteer, said that there was a pod of common dolphins out to sea; it took quite a while for some of us to spot them and they were a long way off. We watched a raven eat an egg before we continued our walk around the island. By this time the sun had burst through the cloud and it was getting increasingly warmer. As we walked around the island slowly, more mountains came into view and the scenery was really rather lovely. We spotted a few gannets flying off the coast, plus shags, cormorants and more guillemots and razorbills. Comma and small blue butterflies started to emerge in the warmth as we made our way back to the beach to get the ferry back to the mainland.

Day 3: Wednesday 17 July 2019

Weather: Drizzle to start with; outbreaks of heavy rain.

Today we made our way along single track roads, and it felt as if we were stepping back in time. The winding roads gave wonderful views over sea lochs, and we saw female eider ducks with two ducklings. At Drumbeg viewpoint, Louise managed to spot shags and a seal as well as some harbour porpoise but they were a long way away. From Clachtoll, a crofting village, we started to walk towards the remnants of an Iron Age Broch dating back 2,500 years. Through the first gate we saw twite on a wire, song thrush and juvenile wheatear then, as we got higher, we noticed lots of birds feeding out to sea and causing a commotion. Above the big sliding slab of rock, we again saw some harbour porpoise but this time much

closer. Then further around, a small RIB sat near the feeding birds and we suddenly realised that there was a big pod of common dolphins feeding and throwing themselves out of the water. They were moving north so we got a slightly better view when they came in line with us, still being acrobatic in the water. We also saw a ringed plover before the rain started to get increasingly heavier as we made our way to the broch. We explored inside the broch before being forced back to the car due to the heavy rain. We were all rather wet!

The rain made us change our plans for the afternoon; first lunch in the van then a visit to the Highland Stoneware Pottery in Lochinver, where a number of us bought a little souvenir of the trip. After stopping at Peet's restaurant so we could take a photo, we continued on to Inverkirkaig where we saw lots of red-throated divers together, red-breasted merganser, curlew, oystercatchers and a greenshank. A little further up alongside the river, we stopped for more photos before heading back to Peet's for coffee, tea and a whisky!

Day 4: Thursday 18 July 2019

Weather: Sunshine & heavy showers.

Today we moved hotels, saying goodbye to Eddrachilles, making our way slowly to Gairloch and the Old Inn.

As we journeyed to Ullapool, we stopped by Assynt Kirk to look at some splendid stags in their lovely red summer coats and velvet covered antlers. Whilst we were there we also saw a couple of lesser redpoll flitting about in an ash tree. We then carried on to Ullapool to pick up a tasty lunch, and buy some waterproofs, before visiting the Corrieshalloch Gorge. The gorge is a fine example of a box canyon, formed by glacial meltwater, with a depth of 60 metres. Some braved the suspension bridge over the impressive gorge before continuing the circular walk, where we saw slender St. John's wort, butterwort, sundew, milkwort, young wrens and a large golden-ringed dragonfly. We managed to dodge the showers and didn't get too bothered by midges, surprisingly.

After our leg stretch, we continued on to the viewpoint over Strathmore and Loch Broom whilst eating our lunch, then on to Dundonnell, where we enjoyed a tea or coffee whilst the next shower went over. Next was Gruinard Island, where we learnt about the island's intriguing, if a little scary, history. Around at Mellon Udrigle, we again waited for a shower to pass, watching people rush off the beach back to their cars, then made our way down on to the beach, seeing yet another pod of common dolphins some way offshore! There were also lots of gannets diving, and skuas and gulls around too. We also saw twite, ringed plover and young pied wagtails, as well as beached compass jellyfish on the sand. Before the heavens opened again we made our way to the van and onwards to Aultbea then The Old Inn in Gairloch, our hotel for the next two nights.

Day 5: Friday 19 July 2019

Weather: Overcast to start with, then brightening up throughout the day.

Today we headed to Applecross, firstly via Slattadale on the edge of Loch Maree overlooking the islands. Louise managed to get a black-throated diver in the scope, but it was a long way away from us. Next, we stopped at the Beinn Eighe NNR Visitor Centre, where we went on a walk through the woods spotting chaffinches, spotted flycatcher, coal tit, a young robin and (a brief) treecreeper. We continued through the woodland then up onto the moorland, giving us lovely views over the loch, up towards Kinlochewe, Slioch and Beinn Eighe. We found bog myrtle and oblong-leaved sundew and from there we went up on to the moorland.

Next we journeyed on through the stunning Glen Torridon, with incredible views of Beinn Eighe, Sgurr Dubh and Liathach. We made a brief stop at Annat, overlooking Upper Loch Torridon, where we saw goosander. We dodged a couple of showers before having our lunch (which consisted of some rather over generous mustard or pickle) in Shildaig, overlooking the island. Afterwards, we took a walk up past the primary school to a spot overlooking the back-end of Shildaig Island, where we hoped we might spot the white-tailed eagles that are nesting there. We managed to see some flapping from a juvenile but, unfortunately, that was it. We continued our journey, stopping just outside Shildaig to see two harbour seals basking in the sun, looking a bit like giant slugs. Further up, along the coastal road to Applecross, Louise stopped to see if we could get a different view of Shildaig Island and the eagles. Through the haze we could just make out one of the adult birds sitting with its back to us.

Applecross was just one windy, single-tracked road away along the coast, giving stunning views across to Raasay and Skye, with the Black Cullin ridge being shrouded in cloud (as it always seems to be!).

The view down across Applecross Bay was quite something: with the tide out, the red-coloured sand from the eroded Torridonian sandstone looked beautiful. Out to sea we watched a raft of common scoter whilst enjoying a hot drink.

Next was the Bealach na Ba mountain pass, giving us amazing views to Skye, Rum and Eigg before descending the steep winding road to Loch Kishorn. After a brief stop in Shildaig and one looking back up Glen Torridon, we made it back to the Old Inn for dinner.

Day 6: Saturday 20 July 2019

Weather: A few spots of rain to start with, then a cool wind in Strathconon.

We woke to our final day, which saw us eventually journeying back to Inverness. We started with a trip to see if we could find an otter in the rain. We tried in numerous spots ... but found nothing. We did, however, get views of four black-throated divers and some diving gannets. After breakfast, we made for Strathconon, a dead-end road leading us, we hoped, to see some top species. On the way we stopped to look at an osprey nest; frustratingly, there was a young bird hunkered in the nest making it difficult for us to spot.

Near Scatwell estate, we saw a buzzard sitting in a tree on the edge of the forestry, looking creamy yellow around the neck. Further up, we admired the swallows and house martins sitting on the wires in Dalnacroich.

We continued to a place to eat our lunch, keeping our eyes peeled for the golden eagles that nest in the area. We did manage a brief view of one flying along the horizon and away from us, which was great.

Next, we went on to Strathpeffer and Loch Kinellan where we got lovely views of little grebes, plus a chick, tufted ducks and, amazingly, a sedge warbler! It was then time to drop Sheila in Strathpeffer and then on to Inverness to end the trip.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name
	BIRDS	
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
3	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
4	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
5	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
6	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
7	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
8	Black-throated diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
9	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>
10	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
11	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
12	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
13	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
14	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
15	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
16	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
17	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
18	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
19	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
20	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
21	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
22	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
23	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
24	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
25	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>

26	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
27	Arctic skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
28	Common guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
29	Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
30	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
31	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
32	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
33	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
34	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
35	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
36	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
37	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
38	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
39	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
40	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
41	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
42	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
43	House martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
44	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
45	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
46	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
47	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
48	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
49	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
50	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
51	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
52	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>
53	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>
54	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
55	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
56	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>

57	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
58	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
59	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
60	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
61	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
62	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
63	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
64	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
65	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
66	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
67	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
68	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
69	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
70	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
71	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
72	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
73	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
74	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
75	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>
76	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
77	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
78	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
	MAMMALS	
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
2	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
4	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
5	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
6	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>