

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## Tour Report

### Scotland – The Splendors of Wester Ross

10-15 June 2019

Merlin



Black-throated diver



Otter



White-tailed eagle



Compiled by: Louise Hughes

Tour Leader: Louise Hughes

### **Day 1: Monday 10 June 2019**

*Weather: Overcast with bursts of sunshine*

After picking everyone up from Inverness, we made our way to North Kessock. Sitting on the Beauly Firth, it was a nice spot to have our lunch whilst watching the water, and some of us managed to catch a glimpse of a male otter swimming towards the bridge. Our next stop was Black Water/Silverbridge, where we admired the Thomas Telford Bridge and the waterfalls.

At Loch Droma, a black-throated diver was visible but kept diving for fish. We made a brief stop in Ullapool to scan the water, seeing a bottling grey seal some way offshore. Our final stop was Knockan Crag, where we not only admired the geology – where you can see the evidence of old rock sitting on top of younger rock – known as the Moine Thrust zone, but also saw a male ring ouzel that perched on the rock face before flying right over the top of us. We also had a lovely view of a male wheatear as well as another black-throated diver on the loch below the Crag.

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 11th June 2019**

*Weather: Drizzle on & off through the day with strong winds!*

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 pink-footed goose with a few greylags, a common sandpiper and a great view of a male wheatear. Once on the island we were greeted by the ranger and two volunteers before setting off on our walk up to the seabird cliffs. Great skuas flew around us and we saw a number of Arctic skuas, both the light and dark colour morphs. In amongst these we managed to spot the rarer long-tailed skua. Louise also pointed out some of the flora, including lousewort, milkwort, tormentil and the insectivorous sundews.

Once up at the cliffs, we saw hundreds of guillemots, razorbills and fulmars plus a few puffins. Making our way further up we were suddenly buffeted by strong gusts of wind! We decided that it would be best to turn back and walk around the path in the opposite direction. This meant we got more great views of Arctic and great skuas before branching off towards the west side of the island. Along the next part, we could hear snipe chirping, then one very loudly, which happened to be preening under a willow bush oblivious to us being close by. Further along we spotted a pair of red-throated divers quite a way off, plus a male and two female eider ducks. Beyond Boulder Bay two grey seals were bobbing in the sea.

We gradually made our way up to a high point where we had views of puffins, before taking shelter from the wind whilst we ate our lunch. Here we watched gannets fly past, thousands of seabirds bobbing on the water and a male wheatear singing close by.

Unfortunately, the drizzle got heavier as we walked back to the rangers' hut, then eased off as we journeyed back across to Tarbet, although a few got a bit splashed by the waves!

Around the garden back at Eddrachilles, we saw siskin, common redpoll, common tern and another red-throated diver.

### **Day 3: Wednesday 12th June 2019**

*Weather: Drizzle to start with, then outbreaks of sunshine. Quite windy at times!*

Today we made our way along single track roads, stepping back in time. The winding roads gave wonderful views over sea lochs, the first with views of a harbour seal sunning itself, whilst willow warbler and wren sang close by. One of the members of the group was brilliant at spotting deer throughout the day! Drumbeg was very windy so we didn't stay long. From Clachtoll, a crofting village, we walked to the Iron Age Broch, which dates back 2,500 years. From here we managed to see gannets, razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes. On the way, we managed to see greenshank and a pair of noisy redshank, clearly with a nest close by, plus lots of meadow pipits and an elusive golden plover. On reaching the Broch, a lady told us about her undergraduate course in geology and how she was mapping the geology here. After stepping back in time, we walked back to the van, spotting a ringed plover with two fluffy chicks that hid under her en route.

We lunched at Achmelvich beach, which was quite quiet due to the inclement weather. In the bay we watched a pair of red-throated divers, the best views we'd had so far. We saw red-breasted merganser in Lochinver and got close to a young stag at Inverkirkaig.

The views across to the mountains of Suilven, Cul Mor, Stac Polliadh and Cul Beag were incredible as we drove south towards Achiltibuie. We went for a blustery walk at Achnahaird beach, where the sea thrift was like a big pink carpet. Journeying back to Eddrachilles, under Stac Polliadh, we stopped to look at a beautiful whinchat.

### **Day 4: Thursday 13th June 2019**

*Weather: Showery & cold.*

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

We journeyed to Ullapool to pick up a tasty lunch before visiting Corrieshalloch Gorge. The gorge is a fine example of a box canyon, formed by glacial meltwater, with a depth of 45 metres. It is quite impressive and we enjoyed the circular walk, seeing a goldcrest and wren in between the showers. After our leg stretch, we continued to Dundonnell and Gruinard, where we learnt about the island's intriguing, if a little scary, history. Around Mellon Udrigle, walking to the far right peninsula, we saw a ringed plover with four chicks running across the sand, then a common sandpiper with a chick near to us, so we made a hasty retreat. On walking back across the sand, Louise found an oystercatcher nest with two eggs; again we made a hasty retreat to the van for a cup of tea and then made for The Old Inn, our home for the next few nights.

### **Day 5: Friday 14th June 2019**

*Weather: Showery through the day (mainly when we got out!); some sunny spells.*

We started the day early, making our way to look for an otter. The search began at Gairloch Harbour with the water relatively flat; however, we didn't see anything other than a seal, hooded crows and gulls. Further along at Gairloch beach, with the midges around, we waited and scanned the bay, to no avail. We made our way towards Gairloch town and, as we passed one of the hotels, Louise spotted something on a rock out of the corner of her eye, and another member of the group noticed something too. We stopped abruptly and dashed across the road and, after a bit of scanning, one of the group pointed the otter out. We then watched it go out and fish, bringing its prey back to a rock to eat before going back out to continue hunting. We watched it for 10 minutes then jumped in the van to go further on as it went out of sight. We watched it scamper over a rock before disappearing out of sight. A great start to the day!

Today we headed to Applecross, with our first main stop overlooking a black-throated diver nest on a small island in Loch Maree, the male bobbing on the water close by. We finally heard a cuckoo before we went off to the Beinn Eighe NNR Visitor Centre, where we went on a walk through the woods and up on to the moorland. We found a queen white-tailed bumblebee and oblong-leaved sundew as well as enjoying amazing views.

Later 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 two shelduck, a male and female. On reaching Shildaig, we took a walk up past the primary school to a spot overlooking the back end of Shildaig Island.

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!). A brief stop found us a whitethroat, plus a gannet out to sea; we also passed some obliging highland cows.

The view down across Applecross Bay was quite something: with the tide out, the red-coloured sand from the eroded Torridonian sandstone looked beautiful. Around by Shore Street, we spied a heron and eider flying past, while we enjoyed a few sweet treats, before scaling the steep Bealach Na Ba mountain pass. Near the bottom of the Bealach, suddenly Louise shouted 'Merlin!'. And a merlin crossed in front of us, with a raven carrying something in its beak.

A brief stop in Lochcarron meant we spotted some sleeping red-breasted merganser on the small island across from us and some harbour seals further along. The day finished with a stop to admire Loch Maree from the top of Glen Docherty.

#### **Day 6: Saturday 15th June 2019**

*Weather: A few spots of rain throughout the day; overcast with some sunshine towards Inverness.*

We woke to our final day, and journeyed back to Inverness. We drove slowly down Strathconon, a dead-end road leading us, hopefully, to see some top species. There were numerous stags in velvet along the riverbanks, as well as a few closer to us. We made a stop near the golden eagle eyrie to see if there was any activity but were joined by two cuckoos, busy flying between fence posts and being mobbed by stonechats and meadow pipits.

At loch Beannacharain, we saw a greenshank at the head of the loch, and near the car park a beautiful black-throated diver close to the shore.

We ate lunch keeping our eyes peeled for eagles but, unfortunately, were not lucky enough to see them, so we made our way to Loch Kinellan, our final stop of the trip. Along the lane up to the loch we saw two red kites wheeling around, then tufted duck, little grebes and reed bunting as well as hearing the scratchy call of the sedge warbler close to the loch. A little further along, we spotted a single Slavonian grebe, with its stunning orange ear tufts and red eyes. We managed to get quite close views and also watched it chase off a little grebe chick.

# Checklist

THE TRAVELLING  
**NATURALIST**

	Common Name	Scientific Name
	<b>BIRDS</b>	
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	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
13	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
14	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
15	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
16	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
17	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
18	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
19	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
20	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
21	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
22	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
23	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
24	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
25	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
26	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>

27	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
28	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
29	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
30	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
31	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
32	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>
33	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
34	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>
35	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
36	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
37	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
38	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
39	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
40	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
41	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
42	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
43	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
44	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
45	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
46	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
47	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
48	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
49	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
50	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
51	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
52	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
53	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
54	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
55	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
56	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
57	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>



58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
59	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
60	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
61	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
62	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
63	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
64	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
65	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
66	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
67	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
68	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
69	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
70	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
71	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
72	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
73	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
74	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
75	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
76	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
77	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
78	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
79	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
80	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
81	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>
82	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
83	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
84	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
85	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
	<b>Mammal Species</b>	
1	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>

2	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
3	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
6	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
7	Wood Mouse (eating a banana skin)	<i>Apodemus sylaticus</i>