

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

Scotland - Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise

16-22 June 2022

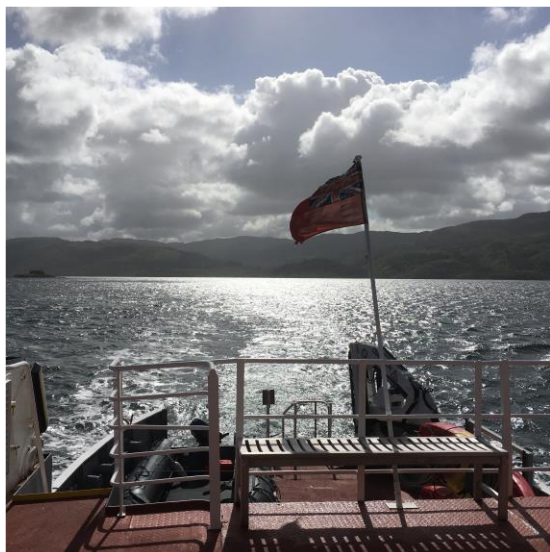
Atlantic puffin



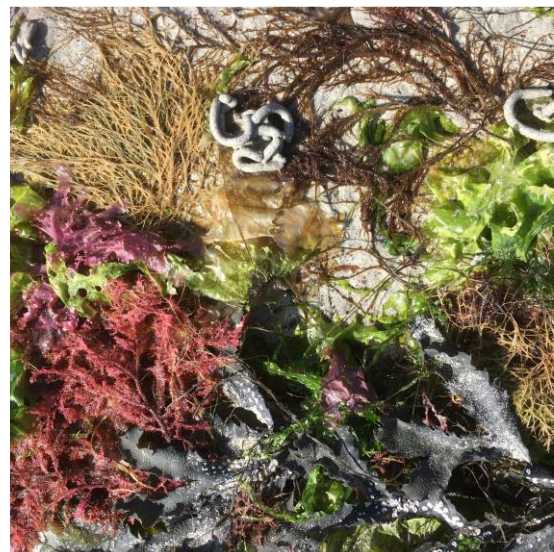
Harp Rock, Lunga



Seahorse II



Seaweed on Scarinish Beach



Compiled by Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with nine participants

Day 1: Dunstaffnage - Tobermory

Thursday 16 June 2022

Weather: Cloudy in the morning, rain afternoon and evening.

Dunstaffnage Marina car park was the inauspicious venue for the cruise team's big meet-up. Cars were parked up for the week and introductions were made between Mike the wildlife guide and all nine wildlife cruise participants. Just before the allotted time of 13:30, Alan the skipper and John the Boatswain arrived to ferry bags to our boat (Seahorse II) while Mike guided everyone through the pontoon maze to the boat itself. Once aboard, bags were allocated to cabins, we all met Sarah the chef and Alan gave an introductory tour of our floating home for the week.

The rest of the afternoon was spent steaming up the Sound of Mull after negotiating the tidal swirls near Lady's Rock and enjoying fine views of Duart Castle. Gannets and guillemots kept us company until we rounded Calve Island and entered Tobermory Bay. Once anchored up, the team enjoyed the first of Sarah's fabulous dinners. Later, our first trip on the RIB (inflatable tender) was to the quay in Tobermory for a rain-soaked evening stroll along the promenade and back. Back at the boat, we settled into our snug cabins after a nightcap.

Day 2: Tobermory - Loch Sunart

Friday 17 June 2022

Weather: Rain in the morning, sunshine and moderate winds in the afternoon.

We met up in the lounge for 7:30 brew followed by 8:00 breakfast (another delicious Sarah creation). Once we were all fully awake and mobilised, John dropped us back at the quay with some spending the morning in town and others opting to walk to the lighthouse in the rain.

Our path, cut into the cliff-side, was a delight and with a particularly rich flora. We noted at least 20 flowering plants including very late bluebells and wild garlic, speedwells, heathers and vetches. On the bird front, in the woods were thrushes and chaffinches and we were adopted by a tame young robin, whilst curlews, oystercatchers and rock pipits were visible on the shore. The weather took a turn for the worse on our return route over the golf course so it was a wet and bedraggled group that made it back to the boat for lunch.

The worsening forecast caused a change in itinerary in fact; the planned crossing to Coll would have been so unpleasant that Alan suggested seeking shelter up Loch Sunart and so in the afternoon we headed east instead of west. Our route took us past the islands of Oronsay and Carna with good views of the local harbour seals hauled up on seaweed-covered rocks. Finally, five miles inland, we anchored off the village of Salen and were ferried ashore to stretch our legs.

Half of the shore party sought immediate solace in the pub and a half went for a short forest walk around a water-lily-dotted lochain. We all ended up in the bar of course after a brief visit to a craft workshop with siskins on their bird feeders.

Day 3: Loch Sunart - The Isle of Coll

Saturday 18 June 2022

Weather: Overcast with strong winds all day.

Sleep befuddled brains first had to recall whether our breakfast order was porridge or scrambled egg ... or both. When this vital task had been accomplished and our morning food eaten, the crew raised the anchor and away we sailed.

Our sheltered overnight position belied what the weather was doing and, consequently, sea conditions worsened as Seahorse II steamed back down Loch Sunart. Once beyond the sheltering mass of Ardnamurchan Point (the most westerly bit of land on mainland Britain), our ride was bumpy, to say the least. Groups of Manx shearwaters off our bows made light of the wild weather, gliding effortlessly inches above the white horses, while some of us on board suffered a little 'mal de mer'.

The island of Coll provided some shelter as we approached and its main town, Arinagour, was reached early afternoon. We anchored next to the Calmac pier and those that could face lunch had some. The team went ashore soon afterwards, some heading straight to the village while others went with Mike on a short coastal exploration.

A plant list including three species of heather, sundew and bog myrtle testifies that the route was wet in places. The bog was avoided by walking on the white, shell-sand beach where possible - we were able to identify six species of seaweed and counted 18 seals basking on the rocks.

Back in Arinagour we joined the others for a pint in the newly refurbished Coll Hotel and met Tim, an ex-pat Yorkshire man who arrived on Coll with his wife years ago, penniless and by bike and is now an invaluable member of the Coll community. On the stroll back down the Calmac Pier road, common whitethroat sang to us heartily from gorse scrub as we passed, bound for our RIB pick-up and an evening aboard Seahorse II.

Day 4: Coll and Tiree

Sunday 19 June 2022

Weather: Sunny periods and breezy all day.

As usual, the day started with a familiar routine involving a 7:30 cup of tea to wake up followed by one of Sarah's wholesome breakfasts.

Late morning, the rest of us enjoyed the views of Coll's East coast in vastly improved weather as the crew took us 10 miles south to Beachacha Bay. We dropped anchor close to two prominent castles (a 13th-century one and its 18th-century neighbour) and were ferried into the beach next to the loch-side farm. From here it was a short walk across the fields to the RSPB reserve where who should we meet but Tim from yesterday! He was guiding a small group of naturalists around the reserve and kindly invited us to join him.

The lime-rich machair grassland that we found ourselves on boasted a completely different flora from our bog walk of yesterday. Marram grass dominated on the dunes, common spotted, northern marsh and pyramidal orchids were common and yellow rattle, bloody and doves-foot cranesbill and kidney vetch were notable additions. Feeding on this rich vegetation were a variety of insects including moss carder bees and millions of small dune chafer beetles that had just experienced a synchronous mass emergence. Gulls, skylarks wheatears and lapwings were presumably enjoying the food bonanza.

Tim took us to historically interesting parts of the reserve like an exposed fossil dune and some Iron Age hut circle remains before we enjoyed our lunchtime sandwiches perched atop one of the tallest dunes. Our best bird 'sightings' of the day happened on the return journey to the boat. A splinter group visiting the mausoleum were lucky enough to spot Coll's small semi-feral flock of snow geese and the rest of us heard (but didn't see) the signature bird of the island, the corncrake. We heard at least two males rasping to each other from separate dense nettle beds.

Once back aboard we island-hopped a short distance to the neighbouring island of Tiree, anchored off Scarnish and went ashore to explore the village and harbour in glorious sunshine. Entertainment in the pub beer garden involved feeding tame black-headed gulls and watching the Tiree Junior Surfer award ceremony. Back on board, the good news was that it was salmon for tea, some of the team drank malt whiskey late into the evening to celebrate.

Day 5: Lunga and Staffa

Monday 20 June 2022

Weather: A sunny morning and dull and drizzly afternoon.

After last night's excesses, it was a slow start and a relatively quiet breakfast before Seahorse II steamed Southwest bound for the Treshnish Isles, two hours away. The journey was significantly enlivened when a pod of common dolphins joined us for a short while, leaping and surfing on the bow wave – wonderful.

At the Treshnish archipelago, Lunga Island was our precise destination and our approach to anchorage required Alan to virtually circumnavigate the whole thing. In the process, we had close views of rafts of feeding sea birds, puffins in particular, and an Arctic skua on the prowl for a stolen meal. Our RIB drop-off on a shingle spit marked the start of a wonderful three-hour stay on this incredibly wildlife-rich island. The first stop for everyone was 'Puffin Terrace', an elevated grassy bank where sandwiches could be eaten almost within touching distance of nesting puffins. Lots of brilliant close-up portrait photos were taken of the birds, completely at ease with us humans. Some of the party also ventured along the more challenging path to Harp Rock, a sea-stack home to thousands of breeding guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes. The din and stench of the colony close-up had to be experienced to be believed.

Our departure from Lunga was well timed, just as the weather began to deteriorate and other boats full of visitors were arriving. They had probably just come from Staffa because, when we arrived there an hour later, we found it deserted and had Fingal's Cave to ourselves. John expertly edged the RIB right to the back of the cave, giving us privileged sea-level views of the famous hexagonal columns, and then dropped us off at the small quay to walk in along the roped shore path for a dry-land view.

Once back on board, the crew made way for our nearest sheltered anchorage on the North side of the Ross of Mull. We settled in for the evening in the lovely environs of Loch na Lathaich, ate like kings and queens yet again and had an early night after a busy day.

Day 6: Iona and Lochbuie

Tuesday 21 June 2022

Weather: cloudy with a light breeze all day.

It was back to the usual morning routine today – 7:30 cup of tea, 8:00 breakfast, meaning Seahorse II was underway relatively early. Despite Iona being very close, it was two hours before we were anchored in the sound as submarine obstructions required us to sail right around the island and approach from the other end.

The whole team finally stepped ashore at the village quay at 11:00 and split up to explore the sights. The extensively renovated abbey was most people's first port of call before the large cruise ship's crowds arrived. The swallows nesting on the porch didn't seem to mind the hordes of people and the sandwich-begging jackdaws and gulls in the gardens positively welcome them.

Various splinter groups found relative peace and quiet in cafés and bars while others walked to the summit of Dun Auchabhaich, a small hill overlooking the abbey. At the arranged time of 15:00 we boarded the RIB by walking across a beautiful Danish sailing trawler and left Iona to return to our boat. The long steam eastwards against the tide was brightened by the appearance of more dolphins (common bottlenose this time) and spectacular cliff scenery along the southern shore of the Ross of Mull.

At 17:30 we reached Lochbuie where five enthusiastic walkers were dropped off to take an inland shortcut via Loch Uisk to our last anchorage of the trip at Loch Spelve. Our route took us past the impressive Castle Moy and through forests of alien rhododendrons with buzzards and drumming snipe calling above us. One other wildlife encounter of note was a procession of tiny froglets crossing the road between their nursery pond and the big, wide world.

Once back at the seaside, the RIB picked us up a little later than planned at 20:00 and we joined the others for a delayed evening meal. Bedtime followed not long afterwards.

Day 7: Loch Spelve - Dunstaffnage

Wednesday 22 June 2022

Weather: Overcast but calm.

Today saw the usual morning routine unfold with the addition of bag-packing as this was our final day of the trip. The weather may have been overcast but it was calm and that, coupled with Loch Spelve's extreme shelter, gave us the flattest seas of the week as we motored towards the open sea.

The narrow channel that links the loch to the Firth of Lorn experiences strong tidal currents at times. Consequently, it is rich in marine wildlife, with otters in particular regularly seen here. Many pairs of hopeful eyes scanned the seaweed-covered rocks through binoculars as we ran with the ebb tide through the channel.

Ironically, it was the other unseen red letter species that caught our attention first as Mike shouted 'eagle alert!' and a lone white-tailed eagle soared over the trees of the eastern shore. The icing on the cake came a few minutes later when some of the team had a brief but definite glimpse of an adult otter fishing close to shore, its tell-tale tail disappearing below the surface as it dived.

Gannets, guillemots and shags tried hard to impress on our short trip past Oban back to Dunstaffnage but they couldn't really compete with eagles and otters. 10:30 saw Seahorse II dock back at its home port and we all stepped ashore for the final time. Bags were unloaded and we said our farewells to our wonderful crew; thank you Alan, John and Sarah for a great trip.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

| | Common Name | Latin Name | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6 | Day 7 |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | BIRDS | AVES | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Canada goose | <i>Branta canadensis</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 2 | Snow goose | <i>Anser caerulescens</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 3 | Greylag goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 4 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ |
| 5 | Common eider | <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ |
| 6 | Common pheasant | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 7 | Northern fulmar | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 8 | Manx shearwater | <i>Puffinus puffinus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 9 | Grey heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 10 | Northern gannet | <i>Morus bassanus</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 11 | European shag | <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 12 | Common buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 13 | White-tailed eagle | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 14 | Corncrake | <i>Crex crex</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 15 | Eurasian oystercatcher | <i>Haemotapus ostralegu</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |

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|----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 16 | Northern lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 17 | Eurasian curlew | <i>Numenius arquata</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 18 | Common snipe | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 19 | Common sandpiper | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 20 | Common redshank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> | | ✓ | | | | | |
| 21 | Arctic skua | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 22 | Black-legged kittiwake | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 23 | Black-headed gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 24 | Mew (common) gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 25 | Great black-backed gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 26 | European herring gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 27 | Lesser black-backed gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 28 | Common tern | <i>Sterna hirundo</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 29 | Arctic tern | <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 30 | Common murre (guillemot) | <i>Uria aalge</i> | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 31 | Razorbill | <i>Alca torda</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 32 | Black guillemot | <i>Cepphus grylle</i> | ✓ | | | | | | |
| 33 | Atlantic puffin | <i>Fratercula arctica</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 34 | Rock dove | <i>Columbia livia</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 35 | Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |

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|----|----------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 36 | Barn swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 37 | Sand martin | <i>Riparia riparia</i> | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 38 | House martin | <i>Delichon urbica</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 39 | Western jackdaw | <i>Corvus monedula</i> | | | | | | | |
| 40 | Hooded crow | <i>Corvus cornix</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 41 | Northern raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 42 | Common whitethroat | <i>Sylvia communis</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 43 | Willow warbler | <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 44 | Eurasian wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 45 | Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 46 | Common starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 47 | Common blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 48 | Song thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 49 | European robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | | ✓ | | | | | |
| 50 | European stonechat | <i>Saxicola rubetra</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 51 | Northern wheatear | <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 52 | House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| 53 | White (pied) wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 54 | Meadow pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 55 | Eurasian rock pipit | <i>Anthus petrosus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | |

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|----|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 56 | Common chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | ✓ | | | | | |
| 57 | European goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 58 | Siskin | <i>Spinus spinus</i> | | ✓ | | | | | |
| 59 | Common reed bunting | <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| | MAMMALS | MAMMALIA | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Common dolphin | <i>Delphinus delphis</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 2 | Common bottlenose dolphin | <i>Tursiops truncatus</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 3 | Grey seal | <i>Halichoerus grypus</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| 4 | Harbour seal | <i>Phoca vitulina</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 5 | Otter | <i>Lutra lutra</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 6 | Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 7 | Brown hare | <i>Lepus lepus</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 8 | Fallow deer | <i>Dama dama</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |
| 9 | Feral goat | <i>Capra aegagrus</i> | | | | | | ✓ | |