

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

Scotland - The Splendours of Wester Ross

6-11 June 2022

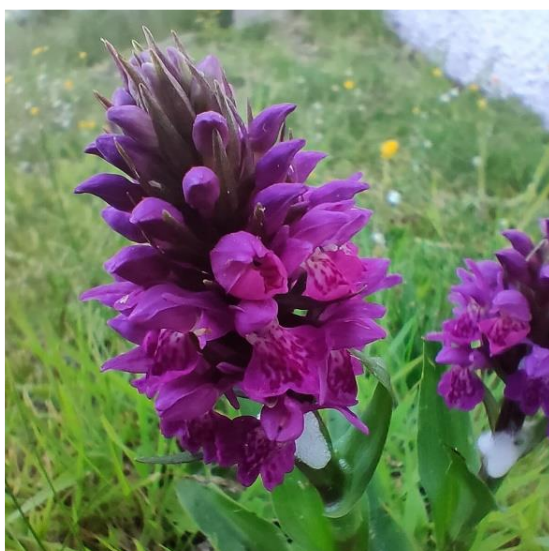
Bottlenose dolphin



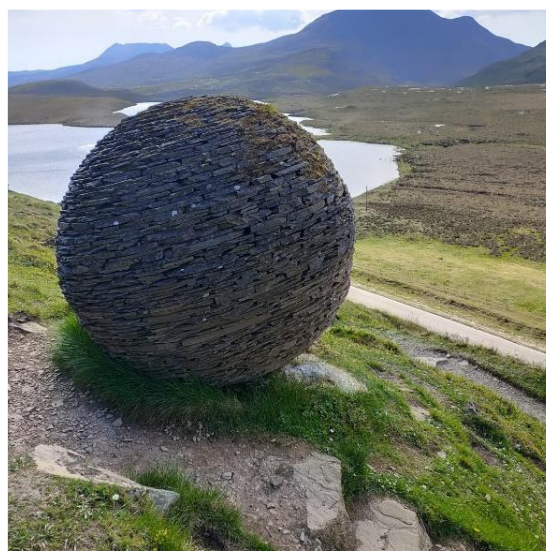
Handa



Northern marsh orchid



Rock sculpture at Knockan Crag



Compiled by Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with 3 participants

Day 1: Inverness - Badcall Bay

Tuesday 6 June 2022

Weather: Dull in the East, sunny in the West. Dry all day.

The week's trip officially started at noon but Mike managed to contact one of the group for an early pickup and drive out for the first birding session at Merkinch local nature reserve. A stroll around the short walk circuit revealed herons, carrion crows (no hoodie hybrids), various gulls, greenfinches, a singing grasshopper warbler and wild celery.

Back at the rail station we picked up the remainder of the group, squeezed our luggage in and set off West. After a pot of tea and a chat at North Kessock, our first proper stop was at Rogie Falls which was quiet from both the human and wildlife perspective – most birds were heard only but a small colony of miner bees was an unexpected delight.

A red kite was soaring overhead as we climbed towards the East-West watershed but Loch Droma, a well-known black-throated diver haunt, was birdless. The usual acid-loving flowering plants were there though including sundews, butterworts and louseworts. The following downhill journey took us past Corrieshalloch (see later), Ullapool and on to Knockan Crag to visit its excellent visitor's geology display. Lots was learnt here about the Moine Thrust and we took the opportunity to search fruitlessly on the loch below for black-throated divers once more. Wheatears were common though and an interesting lime-loving flora including lady's mantle, alpine lady's mantle and birdsfoot trefoil.

After a dramatic drive through the mountains of Inverpolly, we crossed the spectacular bridge at Kylesku and completed our day's journey to the Eddrachilles Hotel. Here we met our host, Richard, checked in and enjoyed the first of three fabulous evening meals. During after-dinner coffee the day's animal checklist was completed before an early retreat to bed.

Day 2: Handa Island

Wednesday 7 June 2022

Weather: Cool am, hot and sunny pm.

The light woke Mike at 3:00 (!) and he was properly up at 06:00 for a cup of tea and then a stroll outside in the sunshine amongst the northern marsh orchids on the lawn. The rest of the team joined him at 07:00 for a pre-breakfast walk along the shore. Birds were a bit sparse although we did see greylag geese with goslings in the bay and heard greenfinches, willow warblers, chiffchaffs, wrens and dunnocks in the dense willows.

After a predictably delicious breakfast, we drove the five miles north to Tarbet to catch the RIB ferry to Handa Island by 9:45. The second boat of the day delivered us to the idyllic, shell-sand beach on its southern shore where we were met by two young ladies from the Scottish Wildlife Trust. They briefed us on the rules and expectations of our stay and then let us loose.

We headed uphill over the middle of the island, entertained en route by great and Arctic skuas jealously guarding territories and hidden nests. Just before reaching the far coast, a red-throated diver was spotted on a small lochan, surrounded by bathing bonxies (the local name for great skuas) – a dangerous place to raise a brood of chicks.

The next mile or so of walking took us along the magnificent Torridonian sandstone cliffs of Handa's northern coast and home to over 100,000 breeding seabirds. We were treated to excellent close-up views of puffins, guillemots, razorbills and fulmars, especially at the Great Stack where the cliffs were at their highest.

With the weather staying clear, warm and sunny all day, views out to sea were excellent. We didn't get the hoped-for sightings of orcas that folk had enjoyed the previous week, but the Old Man of Stoer sea stack was clear as a bell 13 miles away.

With skylarks singing overhead, tired legs made it round to Boulder Bay and the only bench on the island where the team sat and watched an eider duck family on the seaweed and sleeping seals in the bay. A further mile's walk got us back through the willow scrub and village ruins to our start point where the decision was made to make the most of our time on the island and not catch the next ferry back.

Our extra time was spent on the shell beach at Port an Eileen with two of the group watching with amusement as the others 'enjoyed' the bracing swim in the gin-clear sea. Once back on the mainland, a longer scenic route was taken back to Scourie via the hamlets of Fangmore and Foindle on the shores of Loch Laxford. Coffee flasks were emptied at Scourie pier where we also heard a sedge warbler singing in nearby rushes.

After a couple of hours of R&R back at the Eddrachilles Hotel, we all met for aperitifs in the lounge and enjoyed another sumptuous evening meal. Later, the day was reviewed over coffee in the lounge and the following day was planned before an early night.

Day 3: The 'Mad Wee Road'

Thursday 8 June 2022

Weather: Cool and breezy am, warm and still pm.

7:00 saw us all on another very pleasant pre-breakfast walk along the shore but the otters were obviously still in bed. The weather was fine after our delicious fry-ups so the team were eager to be away. Today involved a tour of the tiny, minor road around the Stoer Peninsula that the locals call the Mad Wee Road on account of its extreme bends, hills and narrowness. It certainly lived up to its reputation, but for us nature enthusiasts it was the lush fragments of native woodland that left a more lasting impression.

The first stop for a leg stretch was Drumbeg, with views back across Eddrachilles Bay to our hotel and a lone seal in the sea far below. A group of German motorbike tourers on the NC 500 appreciated our loan of binoculars to view the seal.

Next up on our tour was the broad strand of Clashnessie Beach. Here we stayed a discrete distance from a dead gannet, cautious of possible avian flu, and admired the striped boulders of Lewisian gneiss at the beach edge. Continuing on the Mad Wee Road, and dodging an oncoming MG sports car tour, our next point of call was Stoer Head Lighthouse where great views of black guillemots were enjoyed. We said hello to a German whale-watcher who had shared Handa Island with us yesterday, before embarking on a scenic coastal stroll to the sea stack that gave our venue its name (also seen yesterday).

The wind dropped to virtually nothing as we sat and ate our lunch in the sunshine – a combination which woke the dreaded midges and caused an early retreat two miles back to the lighthouse. From here it was a pleasant coastal stroll to the Iron Age broch (not much to look at from the outside but fascinating inside). We bumped into our friendly German whale-watcher again who quizzed us about twites and lapwings.

The final stop of the day was the small town of Lochinver where we made a quick call in on the Highland Stoneware factory shop. Having seen the prices we vowed to be much more careful with the crockery at our hotel from now on. Back at said hotel, our usual evening routine unfolded – another gorgeous evening meal followed by the day's species list compiled over a coffee and an early night to follow.

Day 4: To Gairloch via Kylesku and Corrieshalloch

Friday 9 June 2022

Weather: Warm and overcast with sunny spells.

Our final pre-breakfast Badcall Bay coastal stroll revealed the usual mixture of warblers and thrushes with an inquisitive harbour seal offshore. After breakfast, we checked out and said our farewells to Richard and his team and drove South.

With arrangements made yesterday, our first stop was a mere eight miles down the road at Kylesku. Here we boarded a small, inshore fishing boat for the skipper Steve to take us on a trip up the 'fjord' of Loch Glencoul to see its rich wildlife. Steve took us close (but not too close) to breeding harbour seals, explained the ancient geology of the surrounding mountains and pointed out the distant Eas Coul Aulin – the highest waterfall in Britain.

Despite seeing Arctic terns, oystercatchers with chicks and eider ducks, our return to the jetty was tinged with disappointment at not seeing eagles when, suddenly, Steve shouted something unintelligible and opened up the throttle of the boat. We roared off towards the big modern bridge and realised the reason for all the excitement – dolphins!

A pod of 10 - 15 bottlenose dolphins had corralled a shoal of fish through the narrows and was now indulging in a feeding frenzy right by our boat, torpedoing around at incredible speeds and occasionally leaping out of the water. We continued to watch the dolphins from the shore while enjoying our lunch after our boat trip ended.

Back on tour, we continued south, with a minor road detour around the Coigach peninsula, a route that took us below the impressive castellated peak of Stac Pollaidh. Beyond the mountains, where the land flattened considerably, a pair of red-throated divers gave a good showing on Loch a Chaorainn. Just beyond here was a designated viewpoint with magnificent views of the Summer Isles scattered below us, and a cuckoo calling nearby.

A loop road via Altandhu and Achiltibuie returned us to Stac Pollaidh to retrace our steps back to the main road south. The team voted against the fleshpots of Ullapool so we continued past the head of Loch Broom to where a road junction marked the position of Corrieshalloch gorge. This spectacular ravine and attendant waterfall merits National Nature Reserve status for its ancient forest, ferns and bryophytes but most of the group will remember it for the spine-tingling views down from the suspension bridge and elevated platform.

After we all completed a short circular walk through the woodland it was back into the 'Wildlife Mobile' for the last leg of our journey to Gairloch. This took us around the bulk of An Teallach mountain and along the shores of a little Loch Broom to Gruinard Bay with its infamous wartime 'anthrax' island.

Once the Arctic Convoy inlet of Loch Ewe was left behind, we arrived late afternoon at Gairloch and our home for the next two nights – the Old Inn. We settled into our rooms above the bar before eating a well-earned dinner and retiring for the evening.

Day 5: A Torridon and Applecross Circle

Saturday 10 June 2022

Weather: Sunshine and showers. Windy.

7:00 saw the team out of bed for the usual pre-breakfast wildlife walk on a very windy day. In the shelter of the trees of Flowerdale, we were treated to two new birds for the week – siskin and blackcap. Due to a national shortage of hotel staff, our breakfast involved walking up the hill to a neighbouring hotel but the journey was worth it.

Today's circular driving tour started with the short trip south to Loch Maree, Scotland's fourth largest loch, and arguably its most beautiful. Black-throated divers are a speciality bird here and we started our search for them at Slatterdale and continued (unsuccessfully) at various scenic drop-off points down the loch shoreline.

Just before the end of Loch Maree we called in at Beinn Eighe Visitor Centre to learn about the ecology of this magnificent mountain area from displays and a particularly helpful member of staff. A short walk around the Caledonian pine forest here revealed a tree-creeper and siskins before biting midges had us scurrying for the car again.

Our drive continued along the flanks of Beinn Eighe and Liathach down to Loch Torridon (the sea) and its extended bay of Loch Shildaig. Shildaig Island, just offshore, is famous for its breeding white-tailed eagles but in recent years they have tired of all the attention and nested out of sight around the back of the island. We scanned the skyline during lunch but to no avail.

Our afternoon route hugged the coast on the main road to Applecross with stunning views over the sea to the islands of Raasay and Skye. At the quaint village of Applecross, we refuelled the vehicle and called in at a small photographic studio in the old coastguard's lookout. After a free coffee and pleasant chat with Jack Marris, the photographer, and his wife we braved the dramatic mountain pass of Bealach na Ba (Pass of the Cattle) back to Shildaig.

Acting on top information from the nice lady at the visitor centre this morning we called in again at the Eilean Ghruididh viewpoint on Loch Maree and braved the 'danger hidden crevasses' signs to approach the shoreline. We were rewarded with fantastic close-up views of an adult pair of black-throated divers sheltering from the wind behind a small island. We even got to watch them performing a pair-bonding head-shake display to each other – brilliant.

Evening meals were calling so a shortish drive back along the loch took us back to the Old Inn after a long but enjoyable day. Evening entertainment was provided by the local fishing boat crew who knew they wouldn't be on the water the following day so were making the most of an evening in the pub.

Day 6: Gairloch - Inverness

Sunday 11 June 2022

Weather: Heavy rain and strong winds in the west, clearer in the east.

Last night's fishermen had obviously heard the Met office's weather forecast for today which was bang on; they said "gales and heavy rain for the west" and that was exactly what faced us this morning. The 7:00 walk was cancelled and, such was the horribleness of the conditions, we drove next door for breakfast.

Inverewe Gardens, eight miles away at Poolewe, stepped in as an admirable bad weather option – especially as we were all able to get free entry by one means or another. A couple of hours were spent sheltering from the ferocious wind in walled gardens, groves of exotic trees and the shortbread and tartan shop.

During a surprisingly short drive over to the east coast, the weather improved dramatically, as predicted, and late morning saw us arrive at the small town of Strathpeffer. The first stop here was a brief call at Loch Kinellan, a very wildlife-rich, small Lochan. Here we added coot, moorhen and Slavonian grebe to our week's bird list, the latter a rare local speciality.

Lunch was had just down the road in the genteel environs of Strathpeffer before we delivered two of the group to Inverness rail station at the appointed time. Just enough of the afternoon remained for the final group member and Mike to revisit Merkinch nature reserve and follow the Caledonian Canal to its terminus. Mute swan became the final bird species to be added to the week's list.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS	AVES						
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
3	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
4	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓		✓	✓
6	Willow ptarmigan (red grouse)	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		✓				
7	Red-throated loon (diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓		✓		
8	Black-throated loon (diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>					✓	
9	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓			
10	Horned (Slavonian) grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>						✓
11	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓			
13	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
14	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				
15	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓					

16	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						✓
18	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓
19	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
20	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓			
21	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓				
22	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓		
23	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓				
24	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
25	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓					
26	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓			
27	Mew hull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
28	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓	✓		
29	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓		✓
31	Arctic tern	<i>Stella paradisaea</i>		✓		✓		
32	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓				
33	Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓				✓
34	Common murre (guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓			
35	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓			

36	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓				
37	Rock dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>		✓	✓			
38	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓			✓		
39	Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
40	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				✓		
41	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>				✓		
42	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓					
43	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	✓		
45	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓	✓	
46	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					✓	✓
47	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>					✓	
48	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓			
49	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
50	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
51	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓		
53	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓				
54	Eurasian blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					✓	✓
55	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			✓	✓		

56	Common grasshopper warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>	✓					
57	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>					✓	
59	Common starling	<i>Sterna vulgaris</i>	✓		✓			
60	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓		
62	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓					
64	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
65	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
66	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓			✓	✓
67	White (pied) wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
69	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓				✓
70	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						✓
72	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
73	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓	✓	

	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA						
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	Common bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				✓		