

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## Tour Report

### UK - The Splendours of Wester Ross

12-17 July 2021

Atlantic puffin



Grey heron



Arctic skua



Sedge warbler



Compiled by Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with five participants

## **Day 1: Inverness to Badcall Bay**

**Monday 12 July 2021**

*Weather: Sunshine and intense showers*

Our first bird record of the week came early – a mew (common) gull nest with two part-grown chicks at the foot of the golfer statue outside a hotel. With one of the group picked up from the airport soon after and the remainder from the rail station, we set off for lunch in North Kessock. No wildlife graced the tidal race below the bridge but, as we ate our sandwiches by the pier, red kites and buzzards soared overhead with cormorants and herons at the water's edge.

Our first stop west was the popular Rogie Falls where we watched heroic Atlantic salmon leaping in their battle to swim up the Blackwater River to spawn. One of the group also spotted a common lizard off the path.

Further west still the team stopped at Loch Droma with its interesting bog flora, including two carnivorous plants – sundew and butterwort. A greenshank was calling from the water's edge but never showed itself.

Our last stop for the day was Knockan Crag where we managed distant views of black-throated divers on the loch below. While sheltering from the rain everyone read about the 'Moine Thrust' geology in the display centre.

After checking into the loch-side oasis of the Eddrachilles Hotel we enjoyed a gorgeous evening meal followed by spectacular views over Badcall Bay, including red-throated divers.

## **Day 2: Handa Island**

**Tuesday 13 July 2021**

*Weather: A sea fret with hot sunshine later*

A pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds produced a comprehensive list of birds including arctic terns, ravens, whitethroats and a dabchick ... but no hoped-for otters.

After being fed we drove 5 miles north to Tarbet (eventually negotiating a broken down campervan) to purchase six tickets and board the ferry. Eiders, guillemots and razorbills dotted the sea during the calm crossing to Handa beach. Following a short but informative briefing from the young ladies from the Scottish Wildlife Trust, the team embarked on the uphill tramp over the middle of the island. This was ritory and the adults of both species, (great and arctic) boldly guarded their hidden chicks. Lizards were very active in the warm sunshine and one of the group proved expert in spotting them dash beneath the boardwalk.

Sea mist came and went on the island's cliffy northern shore, sometimes obscuring views of the huge bird colonies. Everyone was able to get good views of guillemots, razorbills, fulmars and puffins though. The long walk back along the coastal path was hard work in the heat. Mike had to cool off in the sea and even the skylarks were singing from the ground.

After a short wait on the beach the 'white ticket' boat arrived and returned us to Tarbet and from there our hotel in time for afternoon tea – luxury! The rest of the day was spent relaxing and watching the siskins, redpolls, greenfinches, goldfinches and tits on the hotel bird feeders.

## **Day 3: 'The Wee Mad Road'**

**Wednesday 14 July 2021**

*Weather: Dull and breezy - windy later.*

No otters again on our pre-breakfast walk but what drama otherwise! The harsh squawk of an angry heron alerted us to said young bird, with two arctic terns, mobbing a great skua. The skua then turned the tables,

grabbing one of the heron's wings and causing both birds to tumble into the sea. A vicious fight then ensued, with the skua dodging stabs from the heron's beak and then deliberately holding its opponents head underwater in an attempt to drown it. With the heron apparently lifeless, the skua began plucking out its feathers but then gave up and flew off. Miraculously, the heron recovered, slowly struggled to shore and rested on the seaweed – astonishing.

After breakfast we left for our days driving tour on the Wee Mad Road, a narrow, winding and hilly route around the Stoer Peninsula. First stop was Drumbeg with fine views back across Badcall Bay to our hotel. Next, a stroll over the white sand of Clashnessie beach where we found a dead harbour seal, then on to Stoer Lighthouse to watch passing gannets.

At Clachtoll we were treated to the now not-so-familiar sight of a hundred-strong flock of starlings before visiting the impressive ruins of the Pictish broch a short way along the coast. Next stop was Lochinver where the team went in search of coffee to go with the hotel snack pack.

A couple of miles beyond Lochinver is the little hamlet of Inverkirkaig where we enjoyed a pleasant riverside walk down to the pebbly beach with curlews and great-black blacked gulls. Some early fungi were out under the coppiced hazels and last year's nutshells nibbled by wood mice.

Back at Eddrachilles, some managed to stroll by the shore at low tide before dinner (the usual delicious affair) and a relaxed evening followed.

#### **Day 4: Badcall Bay - Gairloch**

**Thursday 15 July 2021**

*Weather: Cloudy and humid with sunny spells.*

This morning's pre-breakfast walk revealed mallards and a heron (alive) at the water's edge and bullfinches in the trees.

After saying farewells to the hotel staff and checking out we took a diversion off the NC 500 to the Coigach Peninsula. The Summer Isles were admired from Rubha Mor viewpoint and ringed plovers and a lone dunlin were seen on Achiltibuie beach.

Following lunch in Ullapool, everyone braved the suspension bridge over Corrieshalloch Gorge to marvel at the Falls of Measach with buzzards mewing overhead. During a short walk around the forest trail we were entertained by a common shrew at close quarters. Shifting clouds allowed brief views of the crags of An Teallach mountain during the drive from Little Loch Broom to Gruinard Bay. At the latter we heard of the unsavoury wartime goings-on on 'anthrax' island. The Arctic Convoy Museum at Aultbea was closed but earmarked for a visit tomorrow.

Half an hour later saw us check-in at the Old Inn, Gairloch. Early evening walks by some of the party included over to the harbour where gulls and terns entertained, or up Flowerdale with its woodland birds. After a hearty evening meal the team retired early as usual.

#### **Day 5: A Torridon and Applecross Circle**

**Friday 16 July 2021**

*Weather: Low cloud, warm and windy.*

A mellow start to a chilly morning saw us leave Gairloch soon after 9:30am to arrive at the Russian Arctic Convoy Museum for its 10am opening time. We all spent a fascinating 40 minutes learning of Loch Ewe's World War II role. One of the group particularly enjoyed his family connection and another relived some wartime childhood memories.

Retracing our steps past Gairloch we stopped next at Beinn Eighe Visitor Centre to stroll round the Pollinator Trail. Long-tailed tits fed in the lower pine branches and common hawker dragonflies hunted blue butterflies in the warm sunshine.

Sadly, the Torridon mountains were hidden in cloud as we passed through and the Shieldaig eagles decided not to show themselves, but we stayed for lunch anyway and watched the shags and great black-backed gulls offshore.

The sweeping beach of 'Sand' (imaginative name) was explored en route to Applecross. Here we stopped at the ancient chapel resting place of Saint Mael Ruba, he who gave his name to Loch Maree. Our route home from Applecross took us over the infamous Beallach na Ba mountain pass. This route is spectacular at the best of times but today, in thick fog, it was hair-raising to put it bluntly. A long drive back to Gairloch followed for a slightly later supper.

## **Day 6: Gairloch – Inverness**

**Saturday 17 July 2021**

*Weather: Mixed sunshine and cloud. Very windy.*

After breakfast at our usual time of 8am we checked out of the Old Inn and loaded up the 'Wildlife Mobile'. First stop for half the team was just down the road at Gairloch Beach where we waited for the other half to join us having walked over the wooded hill of An Ard. A red-throated diver fished offshore as we watched a female red-breasted merganser bravely battle across the choppy bay with three tiny, plucky ducklings in tow.

We were heading west by 11am, stopping again at Rogie Falls, this time just for the toilet, then just down the road to Loch Kinellan. As usual this incredibly productive little lake supported a diverse array of water birds, all three martins and a singing sedge warbler. Stars of the show were the Slavonian grebes with well grown chicks.

After a pleasant lunch in the genteel village of Strathpeffer we went on an unsuccessful golden eagle search up Strathconan and then continued eastwards. Our final cup of tea was had at North Kessock before Mike delivered everyone to their respective Inverness hotels at the end of an eventful week.

# Checklist

	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	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus alor</i>						✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	✓	
4	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						✓
5	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
6	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓		✓	
7	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>						✓
8	Willow ptarmigan (red grouse)	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		✓				
9	Red-throated loon (diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
10	Black-throated loon (diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓			✓		
11	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓				
12	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓			
13	Horned (Slavonian) grebe	<i>Podiceps auratus</i>						✓
14	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓			

16	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓					
18	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓					✓
19	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓
21	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓		✓
23	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓			
24	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓		
25	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓			
26	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓					
27	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓			
28	Black-headed gull	<i>Choicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓					
29	Mew gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓			
30	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
31	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓				
33	Arctic tern	<i>Stella paradisaea</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
34	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓			
35	Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓				

36	Common murre (guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓			
37	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓				
38	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica.</i>		✓				
39	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓				✓
40	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓			
41	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
43	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
44	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
45	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓		✓	
46	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					✓	
47	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓				
48	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
49	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓			✓
50	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓		✓		✓
51	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>						✓
52	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓			✓	
53	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓			
54	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓			



56	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓		
58	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i>			✓		✓	
59	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
61	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>						✓
62	White (pied) wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓			
64	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>						✓
65	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	✓		
67	European greenfinch	<i>Chloasma chloris</i>			✓	✓		
68	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓		✓			
69	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
70	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<b>MAMMALS</b>	<b>MAMMALIA</b>						
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓				
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		✓		
3	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓		✓			