

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

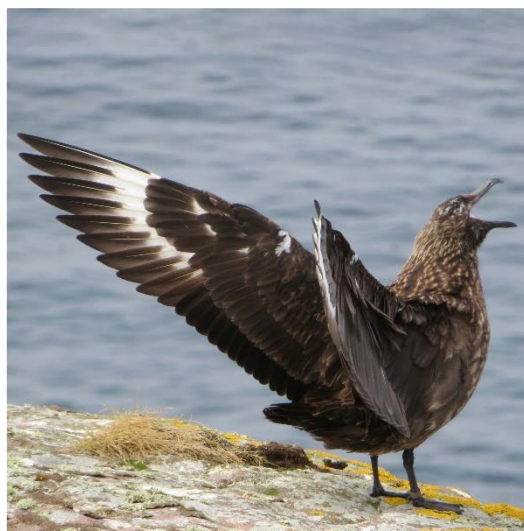
Scotland - The Splendours of Wester Ross

18-23 July 2021

Isle of Skye



Great skua



Handa Island



Yellow mountain saxifrage



Compiled by: Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with five participants

Day 1: Inverness to Badcall Bay

Sunday 18 July 2021

Weather: Low cloud, sunny spells.

Flight delay aside, this morning went smoothly. After an early pick-up from the Courtyard Hotel and a check that the local young common gulls were progressing well, Mike collected two of the group off their flight and headed into Inverness. The remainder of the group joined the gang at the railway station and we all headed to North Kessock (via South Kessock) for lunch.

Heading westwards, our first stop was for a leg stretch in the woodland surrounding Rogie Falls with its diverse ferns and fruit-laden bilberry bushes. Further on again we stopped at Loch Droma to admire its acid bog flora, including sundews, butterwort and the aromatic bog myrtle.

Our last stop at Knockan Crag again revealed a rich flora, but this time a lime-loving one on the exposed Durness limestone. Thyme, alpine lady's mantle and yellow mountain saxifrage dominated. We also read about the historic geological discoveries regarding the 'Moine Thrust' in the display centre here.

Low cloud descended during late afternoon, sadly obscuring the mountains from view as the 'Wildlife Mobile' crossed the dramatic Kylesku bridge. Not long afterwards we completed our journey and arrived at our home for the next three days - the Eddrachilles Hotel. We retired for an early night after a sumptuous evening meal and a few drinks.

Day 2: 'The Mad Wee Road'

Monday 19 July 2021

Weather: Low cloud and drizzle.

There was very little visible out to sea on our pre-breakfast walk due to thick sea mist, but a spotted flycatcher in the hotel garden was a nice consolation prize. Handa Island was our intended objective today but the thick mist shrouding Tarbet harbour persuaded us to postpone it until tomorrow. Tomorrow's route was consequently promoted and off we headed on the Mad Wee Road.

Drumbeg was our first stop with no panoramas today from its famous viewpoint but good sightings of two mature red deer stags browsing close by. Further along the coast, a spring low tide had left us acres of beach to walk on at Clashnessie. There was a dead seal at the far end and photogenic Lewisian gneiss boulders at the near end.

Stoer lighthouse sits on top of sandstone cliffs over 100 feet high and those braving the view over the edge watched fulmars, shags and black guillemots nesting on the ledges below. Gannets passed by, just visible through the mist.

We didn't hang around long in Clachtoll due to the crowds and poor weather, but our short visit did allow a brief but very exciting bird sighting. A flock of starlings taking flight from a roadside field contained one very different individual – starling-sized and coloured on its head, wings and tail but with a body of a pale straw colour. It's a shame that only Mike and one of the group saw it as it was almost certainly a juvenile rose-coloured starling.

Half an hour was allocated to Lochinver for snacks and hot drinks before we moved onto Inverkirkraig for a pleasant riverside walk and views of jumping salmon or sea trout in one of its deep tidal pools.

One last stop was made late afternoon on our way back to Badcall Bay. Just over Kylesku Bridge a, now private, road winds its way down to the old ferry landing at Kylestrome. We parked at the top on the advice of an estate worker and walked a mile or so along the shore to where we had views of a small harbour seal

colony. About 15 animals were hauled out on the seaweed-covered rocks of the sheltered Loch Glendhu with scores of noisy arctic terns nesting on a nearby islet.

Tired legs got us back up the hill to the car and home for good food and a restful evening.

Day 3: Handa Island

Tuesday 20 July 2021

Weather: Dull and drizzly start then warm and sunny.

Our resident spotted flycatcher was on show again during a drizzly pre-breakfast walk. Other wildlife of note were three juvenile bullfinches and red-throated divers fishing in the bay and midges.

After breakfast, our drive to Tarbet Harbour wasn't in vain this time as we boarded the second boat of the morning out to Handa. A fabulous early spot were two juvenile great northern divers pointed out by one of the Scottish Wildlife Trust rangers. Apparently, they came here for their first winter and, as they're not ready to breed yet, didn't bother going back to Iceland.

After our customary rules and regs talk we made the long, slow climb to the cliffs on the other side of the island. En route were great photo opportunities of great and Arctic skuas (both colour phases) as they sat tight, guarding territories and hidden chicks. Scores of excellent snaps were taken of them and common lizards basking on the boardwalk.

When we eventually arrived at the cliffs it was to find them clear of mist and cloud with thousands of noisy and smelly seabirds on show. The first stop (Puffin Bay) was particularly good for fulmars and kittiwakes while at the Great Stack a little further on we saw thousands of guillemots and razorbills and enough puffins to keep everyone happy. Mike set up the telescope on the puffins which proved very popular with other island visitors.

On the return coastal path in the afternoon, highlights were very close views of puffins, some well-developed fulmar chicks, sleeping grey seals 'bottling' in Boulder Bay and one of the group managing to photograph a very rare great yellow bumblebee.

Our return boat journey allowed us views of black guillemots and got us back in time to enjoy sumptuous afternoon teas at Eddrachilles.

Day 4: Badcall Bay – Gairloch

Wednesday 21 July 2021

Weather: Cloudy, sunny later, warm.

On another drizzly, pre-breakfast walk, Don's aeronautical engineering insight solved the mystery of the red-throated diver circling the bay. It was gaining height to get from its sea level feeding grounds to its nearby mountain lochan nest site.

After checking out and loading up we headed south towards Ullapool, stopping first by the roadside near Elphin to photograph a meandering river and a local limestone speciality – fragrant orchid. A shortish diversion off the main road explored the Coigach Peninsula but unfortunately low cloud denied us any views of its rugged mountains. Visibility was better at Achiltibuie beach where we watched a lone sanderling at the water's edge and unusual behaviour from a distant flock of commons scoters. As a great skua cruised over the birds they recognised the danger and, probably triggered by a leader's alarm call, they all simultaneously disappeared underwater.

After lunch and hot drinks in the relative metropolis of Ullapool it was a short drive to Corrieshalloch Gorge to brave its wobbly suspension bridge and exposed viewing platform. We also enjoyed a short woodland trail with aspen trees, a common shrew and hunting golden-ringed dragonflies.

The remainder of our day's drive took us down Little Loch Broom then passed the World War II sites of Gruinard 'anthrax' Island and Loch Ewe. A photo-stop was made just past Poolewe to catch the spectacular view of Loch Maree's inaccessible northern end, then it was on the last few miles to Gairloch.

After an interesting self-check-in at the Old Inn, we met for a pre-dinner drinks in the bar followed by a slap-up meal. One of the group entertained us with tales of a trapped red deer stag on her evening walk before we all retired for an early night.

Day 5: A Torridon and Applecross Circle

Thursday 22 July 2021

Weather: Sea mist and hot sunshine.

Besides the usual suspects (mallard, Arctic tern, hooded crow) on our 7 o'clock seashore walk there was the unmistakable sight of a diving gannet out beyond the harbour. After breakfast it was all aboard the 'Wildlife Mobile' for our grand road trip south – first stop at Scotland's fourth largest freshwater lake, Loch Maree. We went for a loch-side and forest stroll seeing few birds but exotic insects galore with scotch argus butterfly being the most notable.

Further along the loch we stopped at the informative Beinn Eighe NNR Visitor Centre then drove over the Glen Torridon pass below the giant sandstone mountains of Beinn Eighe and Liathach. It was lunchtime when we arrived at Torridon village so we enjoyed cake and hot drinks in the café there while watching a family of buzzards soaring around the wooded crags above us.

In the afternoon, Sheidaig was our first stop, just along the coast and home to a pair of white-tailed eagles nesting on an island in the bay. Unfortunately, today the island was shrouded in mist, so we had to be content with glimpses of shags and great black-backed gulls closer to shore.

As we headed off around the Applecross peninsula it became obvious that the mist was only at sea level so climbing higher gave tantalising glimpses of distant mountains on the Isle of Skye appearing like nunataks through the mist. We stopped to stretch our legs at 'Sand' Beach where two of the group became plant detectives, identifying sea pearlwort and sea sandwort in the dunes.

Busy crowds persuaded us not to stop at Applecross Village but continue up the road to visit Applecross Photographic Gallery in the old Coast Guard station and admire the landscapes of local photographer Jack Marris.

Our route back to Gairloch involved crossing the famous Bealach na Ba mountain pass, at over 2000 ft, the highest in the UK. The views from the top of the mountains emerging from a sea of white mist were absolutely spectacular and a fitting end to the day. All that remained was the long drive back to the Old Inn for a welcome dinner and lazy evening.

Day 6: Gairloch – Inverness

Friday 23 July 2021

Weather: Warm and sunny morning, cloudy afternoon.

We couldn't leave Gairloch without visiting its fabulous beach so, after checking out and loading up the car, that's just what we did. Rather than drive there we walked from the harbour over the wooded hill of An Ard, getting good views of hooded crows on the way and hearing a singing blackcap. We also saw what we thought was a common darter dragonfly but later learned that it was a sub-species known as the highland darter and quite special.

Back in the car, our route eastwards took us past Loch Maree again so we stopped at Slatterdale to look for the black-throated divers we had missed yesterday. Sure enough, there were two of them not too far offshore.

After a brief toilet stop at Rogie Falls, enquiries revealed that water levels were still too low for the salmon so we continued on to Loch Kinellan. This rich little lochan is most famous for its breeding grebes and we saw both little and Slavonian here along with numerous other water birds and flowering marsh cinquefoil.

Strathpeffer, a genteel old spa town, was just down the road so we took lunch there, at the Deli on the Square, before heading into Inverness. With two of the group delivered back to their car and another two back at the airport for their flight south, the remainder of the group made the most of the end of the day by visiting the RSPB reserve at Nairn. The expansive beach at Culbin Sands had cormorants, arctic terns, golden plovers and black-headed gulls to finish off a superb trip.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

| | Common Name | Scientific Name | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6 |
|----|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | BIRDS | <i>AVES</i> | | | | | | |
| 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 scoter | <i>Melanitta nigra</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 7 | Red-breasted merganser | <i>Mergus serrator</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 8 | Red-throated loon (diver) | <i>Gavia stellata</i> | | | | ✓ | | |
| 9 | Black-throated loon (diver) | <i>Gavia arctica</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 10 | Common loon | <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> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |

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|----|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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 | Northern lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 23 | Sanderling | <i>Calidris alba</i> | | | | ✓ | | |
| 24 | Black-legged kittiwake | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 25 | Black-headed gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| 26 | Mew gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 27 | Great black-backed gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 28 | European herring gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 29 | Lesser black-backed gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 30 | Arctic tern | <i>Stella paradisaea</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 31 | Great skua | <i>Stercorarius skua</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 32 | Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua) | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 33 | Common murre (guillemot) | <i>Uria aalge</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 34 | Razorbill | <i>Alca torda</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 35 | Black guillemot | <i>Cephus grylle</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

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|----|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 36 | Atlantic puffin | <i>Fratercula arctica.</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 37 | Common wood pigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| 38 | Eurasian collared dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 39 | Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 40 | Carrion crow | <i>Corvus corone</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 41 | Hooded crow | <i>Corvus cornix</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 42 | Northern raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 43 | Coal tit | <i>Periparus ater</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 44 | Blue tit | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 45 | Great tit | <i>Parus major</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 46 | Eurasian skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 47 | Common house martin | <i>Delichon urbicum</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 48 | Barn swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 49 | Sedge warbler | <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 50 | Eurasian wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 51 | Common starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 52 | Rose-coloured starling | <i>Pastor roseus</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 53 | Common blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 54 | Song thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| 55 | Spotted flycatcher | <i>Muscicapa striata</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |

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|----|----------------------|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 56 | European robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 57 | Northern wheatear | <i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 58 | House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| 59 | Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 60 | White (pied) wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 61 | Meadow pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 62 | Common chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 63 | Eurasian bullfinch | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 64 | European greenfinch | <i>Chloris chloris</i> | ✓ | | | | | |
| 65 | Lesser redpoll | <i>Acanthis cabaret</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 66 | European goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 67 | 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 shrew | <i>Sorex araneus</i> | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |