

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE

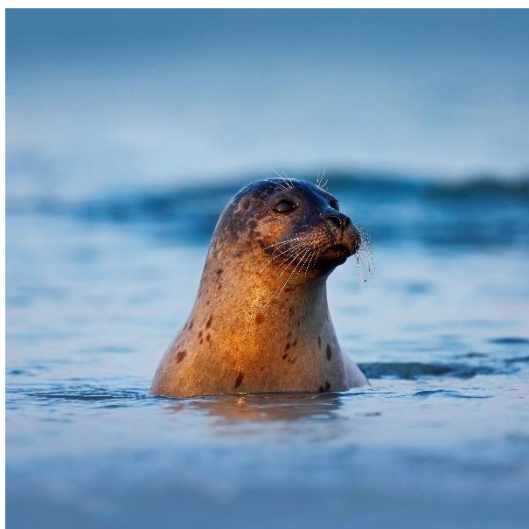


Tour Report

UK - The Splendours of Wester Ross

7-12 June 2021

Grey seal



Slavonian grebe



Red deer stag



Handa Island



Compiled by: Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with five participants

Day 1: Inverness to Badcall Bay

Monday 7 June 2021

Weather: Warm sunshine with light winds all day. A still evening with midges.

The trip started with the pick-up of two of the group from Inverness airport and the first bird of note was a red kite seen on the journey back into Inverness city. After picking up the remainder of the group from the railway station off we went to North Kessock. The tidal narrows below the bridge here are often a magnet for wildlife but the once resident local family of bottlenose dolphins have apparently moved on, we were too late in the day for otters and even all the birds seem to have gone somewhere else for lunch. We decided to do the same.

Moving west, Rogie Falls was better with blackcaps, chaffinches, robins and various flowers brightening our stroll through the woods. Later on, Loch Droma was devoid of birds but did have excellent plants - carnivorous sundews and butterworts and semi-parasitic lousewort.

Fabulous mountain views were enjoyed as we continued westwards, with lots of red deer by the roadside. The next stop was the geological mecca of Knockan Crag where we admired displays about the famous 'Moine Thrust' and finally saw a black-throated diver on Lochan an Ais with pied wagtails and wheatears flitting around the car park.

With the final 30 miles to Badcall completed we arrived at the Eddrachilles Hotel at 6:30 pm, a little later than planned. After a delicious meal an idyllic evening followed with lesser redpolls in the trees, northern marsh orchids on the lawn, mirror calm seas and ... uh oh ... midges. We retreated to bed well after 10pm with the northern sky still light.

Day 2: Handa Island

Tuesday 8 June 2021

Weather: Light cloud and a gentle breeze.

As expected, breakfast this morning was superb and afterwards we packed, collected lunches and left for Tarbert by 9:30 am. The small harbour was busy so we had to wait about half an hour for a free RIB – no big deal. After paying cash for our tickets the ferry crossing into the wind resulted in a bit of spray but nothing we couldn't handle. Eider ducks were also sheltering from the choppy sea.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust's rangers met us on the beach, led us to their base and gave an interesting introductory chat which included details of new, New Zealand-designed rat traps. The walk across the island's interior revealed great and arctic skuas galore (both colour phases of the latter) all quite happy for us to be up close. Once at the far side, the spectacular sandstone cliffs dropped away precipitously, 300 feet down to the sea and were thronged with breeding sea birds. Guillemots dominated but there were also large numbers of razorbills, shags and fulmars with a few puffins if you looked carefully.

As we walked westwards along the cliffs to the Great Stack, then south, other birds that made an appearance were great black-backed gulls, ravens, a male wheatear, a male stonechat and numerous skylarks and meadow pipits. Sandwiches were consumed whilst gazing over the sea at the quirkily named Pol Glup before a lone grey seal popped its head up in the surf.

Notable plants were creeping willow, rose root, heath spotted orchid, bluebell, primrose and, most unexpectedly, royal fern. A tiring trudge along the boardwalk brought us back to the old village, with fleeting glimpses of two common lizards. With the circular walk completed it was over the dunes to the beach again to board our return boat. A drier sail downwind accompanied by arctic terns soon had us back to Tarbert for welcome toilets and a short drive home via the paper shop.

Afternoon tea revived some of the group sufficiently to go for a local seashore stroll from the hotel amongst the carpets of sea pink and ragged robin.

Day 3: 'The Wee Mad Road'

Wednesday 9 June 2021

Weather: A dull, dry start followed by rain and a dull, dry finish.

A pre-breakfast short stroll through the garden and down to the shore didn't produce the hoped-for otters but did reveal lots of cuckoo activity with various birds calling to each other and one giving us an excellent close view as it flew past.

After breakfast we piled into the 'wildlife mobile' and set out on the incredibly hilly and windy single-track road that the locals call 'The Wee Mad Road'. Our first stop was at Drumbeg viewpoint where a tame red deer stag, with its antlers in velvet, posed for pictures. Various passengers were suffering with car sickness so a stroll along Clashnessie beach came as a welcome respite despite the rain. A couple of herring gulls provided handy size comparison for a lone common gull on the sand.

Next up was Stoer lighthouse with ravens, fulmars and a passing gannet before we motored on to Clachtoll to walk to its Iron Age Broch. The route took us through the croft of Bill Smith, self-proclaimed polymath and character who waylaid us and gave a thorough (and knowledgeable) lecture on all things Clachtoll. As he spoke, a stoat scuttled along the wall behind him. The grass sward up to the broch supported curlews and lapwings.

Our lunchtime arrival in Lochinver was later than expected so the famous pies from the 'Mucky Pheasant' went down well. A potter around the shops followed with a red-breasted merganser spotted in the bay.

Inverkirkaig nestles in a small bay 5 miles up the coast, and from here we followed the River Kirkaig upstream searching unsuccessfully for dippers. We did however find an impressive hazel wood with willow warblers and blackcaps and a horde of dor beetles busily burying dung. Time caught up with us so a shortcut back to Badcall was taken, leaving Stac Pollaidh to be visited tomorrow.

Day 4: Badcall Bay – Gairloch

Thursday 10 June 2021

Weather: Breezy with sunny intervals. Rain late afternoon.

Another early but fruitless otter search this morning but with cuckoos again and also two herons stood on an offshore skerry.

Our change-of-hotel journey today took us southwards with a first stop at Achiltibuie – not officially on our route today but left over from yesterday. The journey there took us right below the flanks of Stac Pollaidh, a modest sized hill with a proper mountain feel.

A family of oystercatchers (mum and dad with a number of small chicks) were there to welcome us to the pebbly beach, but the kids were quickly told to make themselves scarce. The resident ringed plovers were much more difficult to find but once we did, the team got some great photos. Herring gulls and a lone great skua patrolled the shore on the lookout for an easy meal.

An hour or so was spent exploring the fleshpots of Ullapool with a team lunch stop in the aptly named 'Frigate (bird) Restaurant'. Later, just beyond the head of Loch Broom we stopped to visit Corrieshalloch Gorge, a very impressive national nature reserve. We took the longer circular forest trail, hearing willow warblers and blackcaps en route and watching a buzzard soar overhead. One dead birch tree sported horses hoof fungi and had a mystery bird probably nesting on its far side. We finally identified it as a spotted flycatcher. Close views were also had of a very tame (or shortsighted) bank vole.

What had been a breezy but dry day turned to rain late afternoon so we admired Gruinard ('anthrax') Island from inside the car and read about Loch Ewe's World War II connections through rain-spattered windows. A short hop took us to Gairloch to check-in at The Old Inn and enjoy a late but delicious evening meal.

Day 5: A Torridon and Applecross Circle

Friday 11 June 2021

Weather: Early rain clearing. A sunny and breezy afternoon.

With one eye on the weather forecast we changed today's published itinerary to take advantage of better conditions in the afternoon. The plan was to drive through the rainy morning without stopping and call in everywhere on the way back. We immediately broke our rule of course by briefly diverting to Slatton to see if Loch Maree's divers were visible – they weren't but a great spotted woodpecker flew along the road in front of us. Another short stop in a layby at Loch Clair to look for otters also had none, but ironically we had good views of two black-throated divers through the telescope.

After unexpectedly clear views of the big Torridon mountains of Beinn Eighe and Liathach we arrived in Shildaig for welcome toilets and a sandwich shop. Shildaig Island's famous white-tailed eagles weren't on show so we drove around to the other side of the bay to see if we would have more luck there. Sure enough, there was one of the pair, perched high up in a pine tree around the back of the island. It was a distant view but a definite eagle all the same.

After enjoying our sandwiches at Inverbane, away from the crowds and by a delightful river, we took the coastal route to Applecross. Windy single-track roads took their toll on delicate tummies so a few fresh-air stops were taken, the longest at an aptly named beach called simply 'Sand'. The lime-rich dune soil supported a rich flora including eyebright and thyme whilst the beach at low tide revealed thousands of razor clamshells. Meadow pipits sang over the dunes and a pair of ravens flew inland from over the adjacent MOD submarine tracking station. Excellent photos were taken of a 'woolly bear' caterpillar which subsequent research indicated to be a larval fox moth.

On arrival in Applecross village, long-anticipated cups of tea were enjoyed in the pub before we detoured a mile and a half to visit the Applecross Photographic Gallery. Clear, sunny weather allowed glorious views as we crossed the spectacular Bealach na Ba mountain pass and returned to Shildaig via a different route. Retracing our steps got us back to Gairloch with enough time for a walk before dinner.

Chaffinches, songs thrushes and wrens provided the soundtrack as we followed the woodland path over An Ard hill to Gaineamh Mhor beach where a small flock of red-breasted merganser sheltered from the choppy seas. Once across the golf course a short road walk back took us home, armed with information about where and when to see red deer and otters. After another delicious evening meal, some of the team returned to the golf course to see the promised deer but they never turned up.

Day 6: Gairloch - Inverness

Saturday 12 June 2021

Weather: Cloudy, dry and humid with sunshine in the afternoon.

7:30am saw the team meet in a last attempt to see those elusive otters. Our first try was over the road from the Old Inn on the quiet side of the harbour – no luck, but we did see our first common sandpiper of the week. A drive to the Myrtle Bank shore also proved fruitless for otters but there were ringed plovers. We negotiated the 'Celtman' triathlon cyclists to return home for our last breakfast.

After yesterday's long drive, a team decision was made to spend the morning not in the car but walking from the Old Inn up Gairloch Estate's waterfall walk. Two hours and four delightful miles later we had seen wild celery, a violet ground beetle and a variety of the week's common woodland birds. One of the group taught

us how to play a tune on a lime leaf and another finally spotted the siskin he'd been hoping for. Three big red deer stags posed for photos as a nice finish to the morning.

Armed with sandwiches and a copy of the Guardian our route east was quick and efficient, stopping for lunch and toilets at our old friend Rogie Falls. A short detour off the main road then took us to the last bird venue of the week, Loch Kinellan ... and what a gem of a place it turned out to be. From the Lochside we ticked off all three martins, black-headed gulls, mallards, mute swans, a little grebe, tufted ducks, coot and, the star of the show, Slavonian grebes. One of the group questioned the identification of a tatty tufted duck which on closer inspection it turned out to be a male scaup! With only one or two breeding pairs, this is the UK's rarest breeding duck so, although we didn't see any females, the BTO county recorder was very excited by our sighting.

Time allowed a brief stroll around the loch to view its crannog, find some flowering marsh cinquefoil and hear a sedge warbler singing in the reeds.

Later, successfully checked into our various Inverness hotels, we had our final bird experience of the trip. On emerging from a restaurant on the banks of the River Ness, the sky was full of wheeling and screaming swifts. What a lovely way to finish the trip.

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	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
5	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</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	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓					
18	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				✓	✓	
19	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albica</i>					✓	
20	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓
21	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓			
23	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						✓
24	Common redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		✓				
25	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓				
26	Black-headed gull	<i>Choicocephalus ridibundus</i>						✓
27	Mew gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓			
28	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓			
29	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</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	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica.</i>		✓				
36	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				✓		
37	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓		✓	
38	Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
39	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>						✓
40	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					✓	
41	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓					
42	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
44	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓			✓
45	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓			
46	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						✓
47	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓			✓
48	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						✓
49	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common chiffchatt	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>						✓
51	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>						✓
52	Eurasian blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓		✓			
53	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓		✓	
54	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓			✓	

55	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓		✓	
56	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				✓		
57	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓				
58	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓					
59	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
61	White (pied) wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
62	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
63	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓			✓	
64	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓			✓	✓
65	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				✓		
66	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓					
67	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		✓		✓
68	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓					✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA						
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓				
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓			
3	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
4	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>						✓
5	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>			✓			

6	Bank vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>				✓		
---	-----------	-------------------------	--	--	--	---	--	--

