

Barra to the Butt of Lewis

23rd – 30th August 2014



Summary: Some excellent weather during the week allowed us to enjoy some of the islands' spectacular and varied scenery as well as much of the iconic wildlife. We saw all 8 resident species of birds of prey including eagle sightings on 4 days, with in the region of 10 different individuals on 27th. All 3 species of diver were seen during the week with good views of flocks of 23 and 16 Black-throated Divers in Lewis. At Balranald we managed to see, some of the few remaining Corn Buntings including a juvenile being fed by an adult on the coast at Aird an Runair where we also picked up an adult Curlew Sandpiper. The biggest surprise, bird wise was the Melodious Warbler that we got good views of at Ormiclate, South Uist on 24th. Mammals included all the regulars including 2 sightings of otters plus a pod of 15 – 20 Bottle-nosed Dolphins feeding off the Butt of Lewis. All in all we had a very enjoyable week with some great wildlife and stunning scenery.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: John Packer, Tony and Helen Faulkner, Clair Summers, Karol McNeill, Chris Bodfish and Connie Wagstaff.

Daily Dairy:

23rd August:

Weather – Light to moderate north-westerly winds, cool but sunny.

Connie, Chris, Karol, Clair and John all arrived on time with their flight from Glasgow



landing on Barra in lovely weather. After dropping everyone off at their accommodation for a short refresher we then headed out for a walk at Tangusdale. It was fairly quiet bird wise with a few commoner species of gulls, a couple of Ringed Plover and a Great Skua hanging about along the shore. The skua was enjoying a meal of some sort floating in the sea and was seen protecting it from a passing Raven at one point. The sunny weather did

bring out the insects though and we spotted 2 Great Yellow Bumblebees feeding on the Knapweed as well as plenty of the orange-headed Moss Carder Bumblebees too. We also found a trail of fresh otter prints heading across the sand towards the sea.

After our short walk we drove up the west side of the island to the Heathbank Hotel where we enjoyed our evening meal.

Steve later met Tony and Helen off the afternoon sailing from Oban and dropped them off at their accommodation before retiring for the evening.

24th August:

Weather – Sunny and warm with a light south-easterly breeze.



Not normally a problem due to the constant wind, the light breeze today meant that any slightly sheltered spots were alive with hungry midges. Despite their early appearance we managed to avoid the dreaded midge for the rest of the day and had a great morning on Vatersay where we took a walk to the south shore, opposite Sandary. Lots of Twite and House Sparrows were feeding in the weedy field full of Mugwort and Knapweed as well as a few Skylarks. A little further on, we spotted a stand of the locally restricted Rest Harrow that was still flowering before someone spotted a huddle of snails on the top of a fence post. As we gathered to look at the snails things were further livened up when Steve decided to touch the live, electric wire running along the top of the fence. Luckily everyone was on scene to enjoy this most memorable of gestures!

We continued to the shore with our new found companion, a local dog which followed us down to the beach where we enjoyed the unusual sight of a herd of cattle lying on the sands. A Large flock of Shags were feeding in the channel between us and the next island in amongst which were a couple of Red-throated Divers that took flight, heading

over us to the north. As we enjoyed the ambience a Merlin came hurtling past putting up a mass of Pied Wagtails and Meadow Pipits that were feeding in the shelter of the shore. A couple of Curlews and a flock of Lapwings were also noted on the rocks before we turned back towards the vehicle. Once back at the bus we drove a short distance before walking to a stunning beach on the west side of the island. Here we located 2 Red-throated Divers on the sea as well as a few Guillemots, Shags and Eiders.

We returned to Barra and headed up the west side, passing a Dark Green Fritillary butterfly near North Bay where we took the turning for Eoligarry. We enjoyed our lunch by the pier before taking another walk along the sands here. Gannets and Eiders were feeding off-shore whilst around 40 Bar-tailed Godwits flew overhead. A couple of Sanderlings were seen along the sandy beach and a few Eiders off-shore before we returned via the dunes. On the sheltered side of the dune lots of Knapweed was in flower which provided a good food source for both Moss Carder and the rare, Great Yellow Bumblebees.

Finally we had a quick walk along the road by the North Bay Community Woodland where we spotted a couple of Willow Warblers, Goldcrests and a Wood Pigeon before we caught the ferry across to Eriskay. Whilst we were still in dock on Barra we spotted a couple of otters clambering about on an island to the east. We watched them as they hunted along the edge of the small, rocky island, occasionally getting out of the water until one brought a meal ashore as the ferry was leaving its berth. We had decent views but soon lost sight of them as the ferry sailed north and the 2 animals fed on the south side of the rocks. We also spotted a few Grey Seals “bottling” near the ferry route as well



as a number of seabirds including Black Guillemots, Razorbills, Shag, Gannets, Eider and a couple of Red-throated Divers.

Once back on solid land we headed north for our base for the next 3 nights in Benbecula, diverting to Ormiclate to have a look at a reported Icterine Warbler. We parked near the garden of 17 Ormiclate and soon spotted the

warbler on the fence to the rear of the house. Luckily for us it flew towards the road and showed well on and off as it fed from a fence allowing us to secure a number of photos. At the time we noted that the wings appeared a little short for an Icterine Warbler and once the photos were examined it became apparent that it was the rarer, Melodious Warbler that we had been looking at.

We enjoyed an evening meal in the Dark Island before retiring for the night.

25th August:

Weather – Sunny and warm throughout the day with a moderate south-easterly wind.

This morning we headed for North Loch Eynort, picking up 2 Buzzards on route. Once at this tidal loch we took a walk through Archie's garden to a viewpoint overlooking the surrounding hills and loch. From here we spotted numerous Harbour Seals, 3 or 4 Red-throated Divers and a juvenile Hen Harrier over the hillside above us. We returned to the car park after a while and whilst getting ready to move on had a Golden Eagle fly directly overhead to the north. We returned to the main road, picking up a Greenshank on a tidal area near the head of the loch before turning south, onto the main road. From the main road we headed west to the headland at Ardvule across Bornish machair where we spotted another 2 juvenile Hen Harriers over the dune edge with one engaged in a tussle with a Buzzard. We had our lunch overlooking the shore at Ardvule where we picked up both Ringed Plover and Turnstone before a Merlin came hurtling past everyone, low over the rocks.

Post lunch we began heading back north, stopping off at Howmore for a short walk around the machair. The river held Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal and 2 Red-breasted Mergansers as well as Redshank, whilst on the coast at the mouth of the river we came across lots of Pied Wagtails feeding on the sands.

Continuing north we headed across the Range to Ardivachar Point which had Bar-tailed Godwits, Turnstone, Ringed Plover and Sanderling whilst nearby at Hebridean Jewellery we spotted 2 Black-tailed Godwits feeding in a small lagoon.

Finally we took a spin out to Peter's Port on the east side of Benbecula, made famous by the escape of Hercules the Grizzly Bear back in the 1980's; although today it was very quiet. After 20 minutes or so we decided to head back across the island to our

accommodation near Torlum where we found large flocks of Lapwings and Golden Plover feeding in the freshly cut fields and nicely rounding off the day.

Steve's partner Johanne picked up the group for the evening meal at the Dark Island Hotel.

26th August:

Weather – Light easterly winds, sunny and warm all day.

Today we explored North Uist stopping briefly at Stinky Bay on route, where we spotted



a few waders including Turnstone, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Redshank as well as a few Eiders. From here we drove to Lochmaddy and took a walk across Spanish Suspension Bridge from which we got a bird's eye view of 2 Lion's Mane Jellyfish floating at the surface. We continued across the now decidedly, dodgy looking bridge to a view point where we could scan the bay. A Red-throated Diver flew over calling and a White-tailed Eagle flapped its

way across the outer edge of the bay as it flew south. Shortly after this we spotted an otter feeding to the east of our position where we were able to watch it through the scope, in the distance for around half an hour as it fed, occasionally coming out on to the islands. From here we moved on to the far side of the bay to Loch Portain and Cheese Bay. A walk along the road produced a Great Skua in the distance over the Sound of Harris whilst on returning to the vehicle we noticed a Golden Eagle sat on the ridge to the south. A Second bird appeared in flight but soon disappeared whilst the original bird stayed in place whilst we enjoyed our lunch and 5 Red Deer that also occasionally were seen along the same ridge.

After lunch we headed to the west side of the island, pausing as we passed a little closer to the Golden Eagle to have another look through the scope. At the north end of the Committee Road we got good views of a Greenshank feeding in a tidal creek with Redshank.



As we headed down the west side we spotted a juvenile Hen Harrier near Hougharry plus 3 Corn Buntings on the fence. Little Grebe, Tufted Duck and Shoveler were on Loch na Reivil, Hougharry whilst Steve spotted a Ruff in flight as well as 6 Black-tailed Godwits roosting at the back of the loch. The shoreline here had a small flock of Bar-tailed Godwits feeding along the edge as well as 2 Knot.

Nearby at Balranald we drove out to the coast and took a short walk onto the headland of Aird an Runair. A Corn Bunting (increasingly rare) was feeding a juvenile by the path whilst other small birds



along the coast included Twite, Linnet, Wheatears, Skylarks and Rock Pipits. The seaweed covered bay held Knot, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Turnstone, Snipe and an adult Curlew Sandpiper. Off shore Gannets flew by searching for shoals of fish whilst the odd Manx Shearwater could be picked out gliding low over the waves.

Finally we called in at Loch Sandary on our way back to Benbecula picking up 4

Whooper Swans along with Mute Swans, Tufted Duck and Little Grebe.

Our evening meal was in the Dark Island again today.

27th August:

Weather – A light to moderate south-easterly became lighter the further north we travelled; sunny and warm throughout the day.

This morning we were on the move again up to Lewis via Harris and the 10:25 sailing from Berneray to Leverburgh. The crossing was fairly quiet although we did pick up both,



Common and Arctic Terns as well as Shag, Cormorant, Gannets, Red-throated Diver, Black Guillemot and Razorbills.

Once on Harris we slowly picked our way north pausing at various spots along the way with a quick stop opposite Northton where a group of 8 Grey Herons were resting on the sands whilst waders here included Curlew, Lapwing and Dunlin. A little further north we

stopped at Horghabost at the Sound of Taransay. We made good use of a couple of picnic tables here before scanning the sea where we picked up around 60 Common Scoters, a distant summer plumage Great Northern Diver, Red-throated Diver, Common Tern, Kittiwakes, Razorbills and Eiders.

Our final stop in Harris was at the south side of the Clisham where we scanned the hills from the main road. Before long we spotted distant Golden and White-tailed Eagles over



the peaks so without further delay we jumped back into the bus and headed off along the Huisinish Road. First we came across an immature Golden Eagle circling near the lonely tennis court, which was followed by a high, adult White-tailed Eagle that was heading south. We moved a little further on and stopped at a vantage point again to scan. From here we spotted at least 5 Golden Eagles

including a displaying bird and a skirmish between a pair and an interloper. Eagle activity was really at a peak and in the half an hour we watched, there was always at least one Golden Eagle in view.

Our eagle tally wasn't quite finished as we stopped again near Bowglas on the border between Lewis and Harris, above Loch Seaforth. Within moments of stopping we noticed another White-tailed Eagle. This individual was perched on the hillside to the west of us where it remained whilst we had a cuppa; staying put and regally scanning the countryside below even as we left to head on to Stornoway and our accommodation.

A fine evening meal was had in the Cabarfeidh Hotel.

28th August:

Weather – Rather a breezy day in the south-easterly wind with rain in the morning clearing to become more showery in the afternoon with a light southerly wind.

We headed across the Pentland Road in rather dull conditions this morning noting little apart from Snipe, Grey Heron, Raven and Red-breasted Merganser. As we arrived at the broch in Carloway the rain eased and we enjoyed a dry visit to this impressive structure. Below the broch in a recently cut field we noted a Buzzard with a Rock Dove caught in its tight grip and about to become breakfast. We left the raptor to its meal and after a look around the small visitor centre moved on to the Calanais Stones to complete our cultural morning. The site was fairly quiet with visitors which made this ancient monument much more atmospheric and allowed us to obtain some nice photos in the low cloud.



The day was brightening as we drove towards the west side and it was getting close to mid-day so we turned off at Valtos and had our lunch above the Berie Sands. Off-shore were good numbers of divers including 23 Black-throated Divers and a few Red-throated Divers as well as Black Guillemots and a few waders on the beach including a single Sanderling and Golden Plover with Ringed Plover. A short walk along the beach allowed

us to get good scope views of the divers when we noticed a Herring Gull mobbing something on an island opposite which turned out to be an adult Golden Eagle. We moved a little further along the road and pulled over to get some great views of the eagle in flight and then through the scope, perched on the south side of the island.

The rest of the day was quiet wildlife wise with little seen on a short walk at Ardroll Sands although the tide was well out and the rain put the walk to an abrupt end. This remote site in west Lewis was the location where the Lewis Chessmen were found in 1831 although much mystery surrounds the discovery and origin of the pieces. From here we took a drive out to the odd settlement at Gallan Head which also produced little apart from good numbers of Fulmars on the impressive cliffs and a Sparrowhawk.

We returned to Stornoway via Linshader before heading out for an enjoyable evening meal in the Thai Café in town.

29th August:

Weather – Light east to south-easterly wind with cloud soon breaking to become sunny.

We started with a visit to Bragar this morning, turning off just after the whalebone arch and heading down to the coast and Loch Ordais. A walk to the loch behind the shingle bank produced 2 Common Sandpipers, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Redshank, Greenshank, Curlew and a juvenile Curlew Sandpiper. Wigeon and Teal were spotted on the loch whilst Rock Pipits, Pied Wagtails and Wheatears were feeding along the rocky shore.

Leaving Bragar we headed for Ness noting a Sparrowhawk near Swainbost, until finally we reached our most northerly point and the lighthouse at the Butt of Lewis. The dramatic cliffs made a superb backdrop as we walked along the short turf to a couple of small pools. 3 Golden Plover and a Redshank were the only birds present although Clair spotted a raptor in the distance that proved to be a ringtail Hen Harrier which is quite a scarce bird in Lewis. We returned to the vehicle and enjoyed lunch, looking out to sea with local birder Tony Marr. Whilst enjoying the good weather a pod of around 15 – 20 Bottle-nosed Dolphins were spotted fairly close in to shore. Luckily they hung about allowing us to watch as they regularly surfaced whilst feeding off-shore during the next half an hour. Although they began to drift further out we could still clearly see them

through the scope up to our departure from the site. From here we moved on to Loch Stiapabhat where we enjoyed the confines of the new hide, a real luxury in the Outer Hebrides. On the water we found 4 Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Moorhen and a pair of Mute Swans with 5 cygnets. A Black-tailed Godwit was seen with a flock of Curlew to the rear of the loch whilst raptors included a Sparrowhawk, followed by a Merlin and finally a large juvenile Peregrine that created havoc amongst the local birds. The day had passed very quickly and we began heading back south, calling in at Loch na Muilne, Ness which held a few Teal and the odd Shoveler.

Finally whilst dropping Tony, Helen and John off at the Braighe we spotted 15 Black-throated Divers feeding close in-shore.

Our final meal together was in the Boatshed Restaurant.

30th August:

Weather – The winds were light and from the north-west today with low cloud and patchy rain.

John left on the early flight to Glasgow whilst the rest of the group had a look around the Stornoway area for the morning. We started at the Braighe where we had 16 Black-throated Divers, Red-breasted Merganser, Shags, Kittiwakes and Razorbill. We continued across this narrow strip of land onto Point. We drove to the northern tip, checking Loch Tiumpan on the way which had a few Wigeon and Tufted Ducks before scanning the sea off Tiumpan Head for a while. A flock of Manx Shearwaters flew south whilst Razorbills, Gannets, Kittiwakes and an Arctic Skua were also spotted.

The weather appeared a bit brighter so we returned to Stornoway and ventured to the end of Sand Street to scan the estuary. Curlew, Knot and Redshank, plus lots of gulls and Greylag Geese were present although many of them took to the air when a juvenile Peregrine Falcon shot over. A calling Pink-footed Goose flew past with a couple of Greylag Geese and a Great Skua flew in from the open sea to land on a sandbank where we obtained good scope views.

Finally we moved on to Tong where we found 4 Red-throated Divers and a Great Northern Diver off-shore whilst both Redshank and Turnstone were on the beach.

Most of us said our goodbyes at the airport around mid-day when Connie, Chris, Clair and Karol all caught their flight from Stornoway to Edinburgh. Helen and Tony returned to Uist with Steve for a couple of nights in Lochboisdale before catching their return ferry to Oban early on Monday morning concluding a great week in the Outer Hebrides.

Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen virtually daily in small numbers
Black-throated Diver	23 were off Berie Sands, Valtos and 16 were off the Braighe, Lewis.
Great Northern Diver	A distant adult was in the Sound of Taransay, 27 th and a winter plumage bird off Tong, 30 th
Little Grebe	A few were seen in Uist and 2 at Loch Stiapabhat
Fulmar	Common off Lewis
Manx Shearwater	Seen from North Uist and off Lewis
Gannet	Very common off-shore
Cormorant	Common and seen daily
Shag	Common with large numbers in the Sound of Harris
Grey Heron	Common and seen daily
Mute Swan	Common in Uist, plus a pair with young at Loch Stiapabhat
Whooper Swan	2 in Barra and 4 at Loch Sandray, N. Uist
Greylag Goose	Common
Shelduck	Small numbers seen in Uist
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	4 were on Loch Stiapabhat, Lewis
Shoveler	Seen on North Uist and in Lewis
Wigeon	Sightings in South Uist and Lewis
Teal	Seen on three dates during the trip
Tufted Duck	Recorded on three dates
Eider	Common
Common Scoter	60+ seen in Sound of Taransay, Harris
Red-breasted Merganser	Recorded on 3 dates
White-tailed Eagle	1 in flight at Lochmaddy, 26 th and 3 in Harris / Lewis, 27 th
Golden Eagle	Sightings on four dates with a maximum of 6 on 27 th
Hen Harrier	Seen in Uist and Benbecula, plus 1 at the Butt of Lewis
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	Sightings at various sites in Lewis
Kestrel	Only noted on one date

Merlin	Three or four were seen with birds in Barra, Uist and Lewis
Peregrine Falcon	Two were seen in Lewis, 29 th and 30 th
Moorhen	Two sightings
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common
Golden Plover	Common with good sized flocks seen at a few sites
Lapwing	Common
Knot	Small numbers were seen on 26 th and 30 th
Sanderling	Seen most days
Turnstone	Seen on three dates during the week
Dunlin	Common passage migrant
Curlew Sandpiper	An adult at Balranald, 26 th and a juvenile at Bragar, 29 th
Redshank	Common
Greenshank	Seen on three dates
Black-tailed Godwits	Small numbers seen on three dates
Bar-tailed Godwit	Non-breeding birds were seen at a couple of sites
Curlew	Fairly common and seen daily
Snipe	Fairly common
Great Skua	Small numbers seen regularly with sightings almost every day
Arctic Skua	One from Tiumpán Head, 30 th
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Small numbers were seen most days
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Fairly common in certain locations, especially Lewis
Arctic Tern	Seen on 27 th in Sound of Harris and off the Braighe
Arctic Tern	Seen in Sound of Harris and off the Braighe
Black Guillemot	Common
Razorbill	Small numbers seen on three dates
Guillemot	Small numbers seen on two dates
Rock Dove	Very common

Wood Pigeon	Seen at North Bay, Barra
Collared Dove	Seen virtually every day
Skylark	Small numbers seen
Swallow	Fairly common
Rock Pipit	Seen on two days in small numbers
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen daily in small numbers
Hebridean Wren	Regularly heard and occasionally seen
Hebridean Dunnock	Sightings in North Uist
Robin	Seen on just one date
Wheatear	Small numbers seen most days
Stonechat	Small numbers seen on the moorland most days
Blackbird	Noted on a couple of occasions
Willow Warbler	Seen on Barra and South Uist
Melodious Warbler	One at Ormiclate, 24 th (a very rare bird in the islands)
Goldcrest	Seen in North Bay, Barra
Hooded Crow	Common
Rook	Only seen around Stornoway
Jackdaw	Seen around Stornoway
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Noted on two dates
Linnet	Fairly common in Uist and Barra
Twite	Common and seen on five dates
Goldfinch	Seen on two days
Greenfinch	Occasional sightings
Corn Bunting	Seen well on North Uist

Mammals:

Bottle-nosed Dolphins	15 – 20 were off the Butt of Lewis
Otter	Two were seen from the ferry between Barra and Eriskay and one was seen in Lochmaddy, North Uist
Harbour (Common) Seal	Farily common, especially Loch Eynort
Atlantic Grey Seal	Common
Red Deer	Seen on three days

Insects:

Green-veined White	Common
Dark Green Fritillary	Seen in Barra
Silver Y	One noted on Vatersay

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