

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

MULL AND KINTYRE

11 – 21 June 2022

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Tessa & Roger Oliver, Keith & Penelope Chantler, Alan & Judith Savage, Angela Mackersie

Day 1 Julian meets up with us all at 3pm in Glasgow's Central Station, taking us immediately to the minibus in the adjacent car park. It's a grey day in Scotland, however we are soon loaded up and leaving the city, crossing the Erskine Bridge, over the mighty River Clyde and out towards Loch Lomond. As we travel along the western edge of this huge body of water Keith (in the passenger seat) logs a Carrion Crow, Jackdaw, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls. Eventually we reach Argyll and Bute, then at Tarbert we take the road south over the 'Rest and be Thankful' pass dropping down to the head of Loch Fyne. Along this edge we now see a Grey Heron before a few Common Swift and Barn Swallows in the historic town of Inveraray.

It is now a winding drive down to Lochgilphead and it is around 6pm when we arrive at our hotel on the edge of Loch Gilp. We quickly get checked in and have some time before we meet again for our first dinner of the holiday, which is excellent. Tessa has some time outside before the meal and sees our first Oystercatchers, Blackbirds and Hooded Crow. Following this Julian talks us through the next couple of days, which are at the mercy of the weather – with the forecast not being great! Once this is done, we either head off to our rooms for a good night's sleep. Although Alan, Judith, Keith and Penny go for a short walk adding Common Gull, Grey Heron and Cormorant to our first day's list.

Day 2 As the rain has now stopped our pre-breakfast walk is going ahead and we all gather outside (except for Roger) and from the car park we see a Red-breasted Merganser fly past plus Grey Heron and Common Tern.

We set off along the road stopping at the small Common Gull colony where we see young birds still around their nests. Nearer to the harbour we now find a pair of Oystercatchers attending their two bundles of down on legs!

In the bay we find a Black Guillemot, a few Greylag Geese and more Common Terns around the distant rocks. Our time is going surprisingly fast on this grey morning and we start back towards the hotel this time along the canal edge. There are lots of Barn Swallows hawking insects over the water and we find a couple of drake mallard at the request of Judith! We are soon back at the hotel and heading for breakfast at 8am. Being a Sunday, this takes longer than anticipated but we are finished and ready to leave by 09:15, which isn't too bad, sadly though it's raining again! We now drive south down the wonderful Kintyre Peninsular without stopping, (due to the weather) reach Campbeltown and take a comfort break at the local co-op. Roger has decided he would like to spend some time here so we confirm our contact details and leave him to enjoy the highlights of this harbour town.

The rest of us now head out on the minor roads towards the Mull of Kintyre, made famous by the 1970's Paul McCartney song of the same name. The tune is duly hummed as we make our way along the winding single track road, stopping at a couple of places to see Pied Wagtail, Long-tailed and Great Tits plus innumerable flocks of corvids (mainly Jackdaw and Rooks) in the farm fields. Eventually we reach the parking spot with a strong westerly wind blowing, but we still decide to go for a wee walk. It's just showers now and as we drop down towards the lighthouse; we are a bit more sheltered.

We stop and look out on to the Atlantic, with Northern Ireland and particularly Rathlin Island in plain sight. There are lots of Gannets passing the headland, and in the extensive bracken and heather we find a couple of Fallow Deer plus Greater Whitethroat, Stonechat and a Common Cuckoo being chased by a Skylark. There are also some interesting plants with several spikes of Heath Spotted Orchid, Bladderwort and Tormentil. After a while we set off back up the road to the minibuses, where we meet up with Keith, who set off earlier. It is now well after midday (where did that time go?) and we retrace our tracks back to Campbeltown, this time seeing a Kestrel, Common Buzzard and more Stonechats.

In Campbeltown we seamlessly hook back up with Roger, who's actually seen our first Goldfinch of the tour. It is now lunchtime and thankfully the weather has greatly improved so we drive round to the harbour wall for our picnic. We all pick our benches with Judith and Alan being entertained by a Jackdaw and Rook near where they are sitting. The rest of us are looking out into the bay where we enjoy views of Eider, Shag, Black and Common Guillemots in the water and a couple of Arctic Terns fishing above it.

Once we have finished, we climb back into the minibus and we set off back north, turning off towards the coast again after a short while. We drive east passing a couple of lovely coastal villages before reaching another famous ornithological landmark – Machrihanish Bird Observatory. This was run for many years by the late Eddie Maguire who sadly passed away in October 2021 but thankfully his legacy continues. We park and look out to sea where we have Gannets passing by, just offshore and showing beautifully along with more Shags and Guillemots, plus Grey Seals in the sea. On the beach there is another family of Oystercatchers as we head into the observatory cabin for a chat with the new volunteer patrons. Julian stays outside and goes searching for a couple more local specialities finding both – Ringed Plover and Rock Pipit on the rocks adjacent to the car park. Just before we are about to leave we also find our first Wheatear of the holiday, which is a good bird to see here. It is now time to leave.

We head back to the main road past the airport seeing a couple of Roe Deer as we pass by and then north back up the peninsular turning off about halfway up. This is a new site to Julian, and surprisingly easy to find. We park at the end of the sandy track and walk out to the beach, where we look out over to the island of Gigha. It's still very windy and the sea is choppy making it difficult to find any seabirds. We persevere and Angela does really well to spot three Red-throated Divers bobbing around in the water, along with Penny seeing more Ringed Plovers and some Sea Campion on the beach. Julian now sees a duck flying low over the water and it's a drake Tufted Duck, bizarrely unusual here and at this time of year! Although, it's a little bit quiet today we all agree it's a lovely place and has definite potential.

We now leave and back on the main road continue north stopping at the causeway to the Islay Ferry Terminal where almost immediately Julian finds a Little Egret, which he gets quite excited about, being our main target. The tide is out, and we also see a couple of Curlew, Mute Swan and lots of hirundines hawking insects which are mainly Sand Martins and Swallows but also a few House Martins.

It is now late afternoon, and our journey back north keeps on, this time stopping to look at Tarbet Harbour where we see a Black Guillemot on the jetty, showing off its red feet. There are lots of gulls loafing around on the mud, which are mainly Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls, along with another Grey Heron in one of the channels. We soon leave and continue north stopping one final time for a group of Eider close inshore, but Alan spots a pair of Bullfinch in the nearby bushes which is an excellent addition to the list. We quickly make the last few miles back to the hotel where we have plenty of time to refresh before meeting for the checklist and then our first tasty evening meal.

Day 3

Ahead of breakfast Julian ventures outside but it's raining, however there's a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers close inshore showing really well. We meet in the dining room and our guide now points out these two birds allowing us to view them through his binoculars. Once we have finished breakfast we arranged to meet outside and before we have left we have added Common Tern, Mute Swan and Grey Heron to the day's tally. Today we head north towards Knapdale where we first stop at the Crinan area, and almost immediately Julian calls out "Whinchat – on the fence" pointing along the road. There is a gorgeous male sat there with a couple of Linnets, but they fly off into the adjacent field. We alight the minibus and search again for this scarce breeding bird, finding it a bit further away, sat sentinel-like on a grass stalk. Great start, and over the next 30 minutes we also enjoy a couple of Raven flying over, Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Stonechat and on the river there's a few Common Redshank, Oystercatchers, Greylag Geese and a distant Shelduck.

We now leave and back on the main road turn off for the village of Tayvallich, where we make full use of the public facilities. In the bay there are some Canada Geese and around the toilet block we see our first

Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Chaffinches and Goldfinches. We now drive on towards the nature reserve of Taynish, stopping at a bird feeder where we get great views of a male Siskin, Chaffinches, Great and Blue Tits.

At the reserve parking area we climb out of the bus to the sound of Blackcap and Garden Warbler singing, getting a brief view of the latter. Once we are ready we set off along the track with lots of Willow Warblers, Wren and Robin in song to keep us company. Angela finds a Treecreeper and as we are all searching for this Penny, Judith and Alan see a Wood Warbler briefly. We now try to relocate this bird but with no luck as the foliage is dense here and sadly it's not singing. Thankfully the rain has stopped but it's still cold and grey, despite being June!

As we walk on, we now find a lovely male Reed Bunting, more Willow Warblers and another one of Julian's targets – Tree Pipit. We initially see it doing the distinctive song flight, but it lands out of sight until we move position and Julian gets it in his telescope, which is superb. We now continue our walk along the track in the hope of seeing or hearing another Wood Warbler but to no avail and around 11:30 Julian decides we should start back to the minibus. We are seeing much the same species as we walk slowly back and unfortunately the cold weather is not conducive with butterflies and the 'hoped for' Marsh Fritillary. As we near the parking area Tessa spots a Garden Warbler and we all now get a good view, along with a good sighting of a female Blackcap found by Keith. A dragonfly flies up and perches on the edge of one of the many oak trees and through the binoculars we can clearly see it's the fabulous Common Goldenring, which is a stunner.

Back at the vehicle we grab our picnic lunches and walk down to the picnic tables next to Loch Sween where we enjoy our sandwiches, etc. Once finished we check the lake but it's quiet although Tessa does really well finding a Common Sandpiper along the rocky shoreline. We now walk slowly back to the van and set off back to Tayvallich, where again we make full use of the facilities. We now drive back out towards Crinan Canal, stopping at the same place to check the estuary but we see pretty much all the same species as earlier this morning. Julian has arranged to meet a friend of his and the local county recorder – Jim Dickson. We drive across the Moine Mhor to the place and get out of the van as the weather now is really nice.

There are butterflies around which are mainly Green-veined Whites and a few Orange-tips around the lovely Marsh Cinquefoil, along with a family of Lesser Redpoll in the nearby Willows. Jim rocks up and as we discuss the afternoon strategy and Julian shouts “Peregrine” and points up as this large falcon flies towards us and away over the trees – good stuff.

We now head off with Jim leading and our first stop produces an Osprey sat in a distant tree, followed by a Lapwing stood in the middle of the road. At Loch Crinan we find another male Whinchat and a flock of Canada Geese as we look out towards the island of Jura with a Cuckoo calling in the background. At Crinan Ferry we now go for a short walk seeing Dunnock and another Siskin at a garden feeder with better views of Shelduck at the estuary. Our guides use their telescopes to check the islets and edge of the estuary with Jim finding a Curlew and Julian finding a Dunlin, which is great.

We now walk back to the vehicles and set off again, saying goodbye to Jim, who we will be meeting again later. We set off stopping first for a Common Buzzard and Kestrel circling together before Julian sees something on the telegraph wire. When we look through the binoculars it's a Common Cuckoo being harassed by a much smaller Meadow Pipit. We stay here for a couple of minutes watching fascinated as the Pipit hops over the top of the Cuckoo, flapping its wings in agitation – just superb!

As we drive along Julian stops to listen and he can (apparently) hear clearly a Grasshopper Warbler reeling, we all strain our ears but struggle, which is really frustrating for our guide. On we now go stopping at a river bridge in the hope of a Dipper but sadly not, so we go for a walk through the woodland to the open area beyond. Here we get another great view of a Common Cuckoo sat in a nearby tree, with Alan seeing a distant female Hen Harrier, while he's away from the rest of us.

We now return to the bus and set off back to the hotel as we have booked an earlier dinner. We get back and whilst we are getting our things from the boot, Julian checks the loch and there just offshore is a stunning summer-plumage Black-throated Diver. He quickly sets up the telescope and we all get incredible looks at what must be one of the most beautiful species breeding in the UK.

We all meet for the dinner at 18:30 as we are going back out once we are finished and ready. We meet up at 20:15 and we drive back up to Knapdale where we stop at a small loch surrounded by trees and scattered vegetation. Julian has warned us that midges could be an issue this evening but initially they don't seem too bad. We walk slowly round the loch with Julian pointing out evidence of our main target – European Beaver.

We stand at the edge of the loch and wait; we can see the lodge from where we are and we are advised that it's highly unlikely anything will happen before its nearly dark – oh joy! We stay resolute for the time, but the midges are starting to annoy us before Judith and Alan say “think we've got a Beaver?” and its still daylight. Julian quickly gets on to the object in question and sure enough there is a European Beaver just lying in the water with its head just showing. He gets the scope trained on it and we quickly try to get a view but it's not easy and the Beaver dives under after a couple of minutes and disappears, not to be seen again. It's a bittersweet moment as not everyone has seen a beaver but those who did got a clear view, which is rare here.

We now decide to leave as we need to meet Jim again and set off back down the track, stopping for another 'reeling' Grasshopper Warbler. This time one or two of us can also hear it but not everyone, which just shows how our hearing deteriorates with age! Back at the vehicle we now drive off to where Jim is parked and he now takes us to a private large garden where he shows us an active Barn Owl nest box. We stand in the gathering gloom hoping for a parent to fly out but now the midges are voracious and feeding on us with gay abandon! A Tawny Owl calls from the opposite woodland but there's no Barn Owls before Julian says “let's go” – and there are no arguments as we quickly find the haven of the minibuses. We again say goodbye and thanks to Jim and set off back to the hotel and some very welcome sleep.

Day 4

We have breakfast at 08.00 on this very pleasant morning, and after we have had our final meal here we collect our luggage and make ready to leave. We are on our way by 09:30, having seen the 'usual suspects' of Red-breasted Merganser, Mute Swan, Common Gull and Eider from the car park. We once again drive up to the Crinan area, stopping again next

to the river where we find the male Whinchat, Stonechat and Skylarks in the fields and on the river there's lots of Sand Martins hawking insects plus Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Oystercatchers, Shelduck and Greylag Geese.

After a short while we continue along the road stopping soon as Julian's heard a Sedge Warbler as we are driving along. We get out of the bus and eventually get a look as it occasionally makes a song flight from the centre of a Willow. In the distance there is again an Osprey but now flying out towards Crinan Loch and we can also hear a Cuckoo. We don't have much time so soon move on again stopping at the river bridge where Judith does very well finding a Spotted Flycatcher, not always an easy bird to see here. There is also a juvenile Grey Wagtail in the river, along with a couple of Common Swifts flying round, Chiffchaff, Blue and Great Tit.

It is now time to strike north for Oban and a quick stop again at the Grasshopper Warbler site causes more frustration and Julian is resigned to the fact we need to see one! On the road we now make a comfort stop in Kilmartin before negotiating the winding roads north to this tourist harbour town. We get there a little after noon and quickly check-in, before driving on to the Calmac ferry.

Once parked we grab our gear and head straight up to the observation deck, where we sit and have our picnic lunch. There are Black Guillemots in the bay and as we cross the Firth of Lorn we see our first Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Arctic Terns. The crossing is seamless and we soon arrive into Craignure where we have a few hours to kill before the hotel check-in. We first make a quick visit to the local shop before driving south out of the small town. We are soon turning off the main island road and out along a quiet single track road which overlooks a sea loch. The weather is decent so we get out and scan the area, initially finding Common Buzzard, Shelduck and Mallard but through the scope Julian finds a group of waders roosting which are Curlew, Dunlin and a Common Sandpiper. Tessa sees a Greater White-throat in the nearby bracken and there's a group of five Raven flying over. Just as we are about to leave Julian spots our first White-tailed Eagle of the tour, an adult as we can clearly see it's 'white tail' but it is a long way off and hopefully we will get better views later.

We now leave this site and drive slowly back to the main road again turning off after a short distance and driving another minor road down to the rocky coast where we stop in a small parking area. We are here to look for orchids and we don't have to go far before we are enjoying our first spikes of Northern Marsh and Heath Spotted Orchids.

We walk slowly down to the point finding a Common Goldenring dragonfly, which isn't too well along with Small Heath and Small White butterflies. A Common Snipe flies up from muddy patch next to the track and there are Lesser Redpoll, Willow Warbler, Stonechat and Meadow Pipits. At the point Julian now finds a lovely spike of Lesser Butterfly Orchid and there's also a fourth species with Fragrant too, which is brilliant.

Out to sea, there are lots of Gannets fishing in the blue waters along with a steady passage of Kittiwakes, Arctic Terns, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffins. There are a few Grey Seals bobbing around in the water and on the rocks, we also see Cormorant, Shag and Common Sandpiper. This place can also be good for cetaceans and today is no exception as Roger and then Tessa, get to see a Minke Whale as it passes through the channel. Sadly, these sea mammals don't stay around too long as they are generally migrating past the island and it's not seen again. However, while searching Julian picks out a couple of Harbour Porpoise but they are not easy to see either in the rolling waves. While we are here Julian again sees a distant adult White-tailed Eagle, which is arguably the same bird as before, being around the same location. It is again a long way off and we have requested that the next one be closer please!

It is now late afternoon, and we are keen to check-in to the new hotel so we now slowly walk back to the minibuses and drive back towards Craignure. We are soon at the lovely hotel, who are ready for us and we quickly get our rooms assigned. Dinner is organised and we head off to freshen up ahead of reconvening for the checklist at 7pm – it has been another great day in Argyle and Bute.

Day 5

We are leaving the hotel and heading south by 08:40 turning off the main circular road after a while and almost immediately stopping for a Peacock that's in a roadside field along with several others! We continue along this

road to where a small patch of Oak woodland begins and park sensibly in one of the pull-offs. Julian informs us that this is a site that has been used to promote breeding Common Redstart with nest boxes and immediately points one out but it's unoccupied. Sadly, he thinks they are all like this, but you never know.

We start to walk slowly down the hill on this cloudy but warm day, with light southerly winds. We see and hear the usual species for this type of woodland such as Chaffinch, Wren, Robin, Great and Blue Tit before we hear the very distinctive song of a Tree Pipit song-flighting. We soon find this bird sat on an overhead wire giving tremendous views through the telescope, including the shorter hind claw than Meadow Pipit!

A little further down Angela now finds a pair of Spotted Flycatchers, quickly followed by a Treecreeper, which is superb, with neither species being easy. On we walk down the steep slope until we reach the bridge where Julian spots our first Mistle Thrush of the tour along with another Spotted Flycatcher and a Red Deer on the hillside found by Judith. We now get told to wait here as Julian kindly walks quickly back up the slope to the minibus, driving back down to pick us up. When he arrives, he asks "did you see it?" as we answer "what?" – looks we missed an immature White-tailed Eagle that possibly flew right over us and clearly closer than the previous two encounters yesterday. We now get into the bus and drive the short distance to another large pull-in where we see a Common Sandpiper before turning round and heading back to the main road.

We now drive on through some extensive moorland to the Glen More Road which is overlooked by the mighty Ben More, which is Mull's highest mountain. We soon pull off this road on to small car park where we get out and set up the telescopes. This site overlooks a couple of lochs and at the head of a couple of valleys with a fabulous viewshed for raptor watching. We break out the hot drinks as we scan the valleys and ridges initially just finding Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Skylark and Meadow Pipits. Julian hears an unfamiliar song but knows what it is and searches the area just below us finding the source – a cracking male Whinchat sat on a thistle, another decent bird to find on the island. With no other raptors appearing we decide to move on just after I am continuing up and over the moor, which

stretches out ahead of us. At the bottom we slow, as Julian has spotted a couple of serious photographers stood on the adjacent patch of moor. We stop at the next available parking place and scan around where these guys are and 'bingo' there's a female Hen Harrier sat on a fence post. We now quickly jump out of the van and Julian sets up his scope getting fantastic views of this scarce breeding bird of prey. For the next minutes we watch as this gorgeous bird gives a bit of an aerial display before sitting back on the fence post, which can only have been 50m from the two photographers but it seems totally unconcerned by their presence!

We do drag ourselves away and turn off on to another single-track road stopping a little further to check out the sea loch as the tide is falling. There are lots of Curlew here along with Red-breasted Merganser, Grey Herons, Oystercatchers and various types of gull. Julian shouts "Greenshank" as he's heard its distinctive tri-syllabic call and there it is flying across the water. In fact there are three of these very rare UK breeding waders chasing around on the opposite shore.

We are close to leaving when Julian now mutters something as he's looking intently with his binoculars – asking the rest of us to check out a rock in the distance as he thinks there's something on it. We are not sure but our guide now has his telescope trained in that direction and sure enough it's a European Otter! We can now see the rock moving through our bins and much better through the telescope as it drops into the grey water and disappears, which is quite annoying as we've not all seen it well. Still, it's our first view of one of Mull's speciality species.

We are now back in the bus and driving round the edge of the loch in the hope of seeing it again but a couple of laybys are tried with no luck apart from several close sightings of Common Sandpiper and a Rock Pipit. We keep going stopping again for another immature White-tailed Eagle which hasn't read the script as it quickly disappears over the wooded ridgeline.

It is now lunchtime, and we pick a lovely spot overlooking a bay surrounded by hills and trees, which now produces our first decent White-tailed Eagle, which drifts past right overhead along with the tiny Chimneysweeper moth

and a few Green-veined White. Once we have finished, Julian suggests a nearby comfort stop and on we drive along a very minor road surrounded by mature woodland.

We reach the buildings, but the facilities are closed, which our guide thinks could be a sad by-product of covid. We start back down the track stopping along the way for a 'bush loo' which is the next best thing being so private here. As we wait we can hear Blackcap in the trees along with a Chiffchaff plus Goldcrest and a couple of Siskin, which is pretty good for an impromptu stop. We eventually make our way back to the main road and continue up and over another extensive bit of moorland seeing our first few Wheatears along the way. We reach the mighty Loch Na Keal and set off along it's edge towards Salen stopping to scan the water without success for Great Northern Diver. The weather is starting to get worse as we travel along seeing more Red-breasted Mergansers, Eider and a couple of Black Guillemots. In fact, it starts to rain as we get near the end of the sea loch, where we get the biggest surprise of the day – Iolo Williams from BBC's Springwatch is running along the edge of the road! They apparently have been filming on the island and are due to finish this week as it's no longer Spring.

We reach the end and stop to scan the bay, but the weather is still very poor, so we decide to head back towards the hotel. Although Julian has one last stop in mind which is on the way and just south of Salen we pull into a large layby. The rain has now thankfully eased so we can huddle under the tailgate of the van and scan the area. On a small offshore island there is an Arctic tern colony and we get some great views of these delightful birds. There are also some small waders running around which are mainly Ringed Plover and Dunlin but there's also something else! Julian soon gets a decent view and confirms his suspicions of a summer-plumage Sanderling which is brilliant, and will get reported to the local grapevine. This is good but not quite as good as seeing Iolo according to Penny! It is now late afternoon and time to leave for the hotel as the weather has again got worse, and within a short while we are pulling into the car park after our first full day on this very special island.

Day 6

It's another very wet start to the day but Tessa and Roger get some great views of an antlered Red Deer stag in the hotel grounds ahead of breakfast. Alan is feeling a little unwell but he perseveres as it's our Trishnish Islands day, although Tessa and Roger have decided to stay behind today as the forecast is poor and they are not great on boats – we wish them well and good luck for the day.

We head north stopping off again at the car park where we see the usual Arctic Terns, Oystercatchers, Common Sandpiper and Dunlin, but no sign of yesterday's Sanderling. The sea today is like a mill pond and out in the water we find a Red-throated Diver, Red-breasted Mergansers, Eider and several Grey Seals with Penny picking out a couple of Gannets. A Greater Whitethroat is singing behind us and it now flies up and lands on a nearby dry stone wall with a beak full of food for it's young. After about 30 minutes we decide to move on up to Salen and then out again to the end of Loch Na Keal, where we park for a while. Here we are seeing a small colony of nesting Common Gulls, more Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Sandpiper and a Sedge Warbler in a nearby bush.

We decide to look inland and scan the ridges as the rain has stopped, where we first see a Common Buzzard circling round followed by a male Hen Harrier following the ridgeline. Incredibly though, Penny and Keith are watching a second bird as they both fly out of sight. Soon after this the rain starts again so it's back in the bus and on, we go, stopping just a few hundred metres along the road, but the weather is atrocious, so Julian decides to move on.

We continue this drive on towards Ulva Ferry taking the very winding scenic road north, but the rain spoils the experience initially. After a few miles the rain stops again and now Julian sees a White-tailed Eagle above the ridgeline, so we stop to look before it disappears. This place is stunning and exemplifies this island's beautiful topography as we look now down to Eorsa on Loch Na Keal with some dramatic sea and skies beyond. We are soon back in the bus and driving on to the car park at Ulva Ferry with Julian seeing another male Hen Harrier, which is incredible. It's raining again so we stay in the minibus until its time to go to the quay and in good time to use their facilities.

It is still fairly inclement as we board the small boat with the other passengers and get our jovial safety briefing from our captain as we chug slowly away from Ulva seeing a few Common Seals hauled out. The rain shower now passes and it's fingers crossed for the rest of this special tour as we head towards open water and the island of Lunga. We are mostly out on top on the viewing deck apart from Alan and Judith who opt for the more comfortable interior. As we go, we see more Arctic Terns, some Grey Seals in the water and a large flock of Eider. The skipper now informs us that there is an adult White-tailed Eagle sat on a rock and as we get closer we get some fabulous close views followed by our fourth male Hen Harrier of the morning – quite bizarre.

We are now into open water, which is quite choppy with the Treshnish Isles rising ahead of us as we start to see Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Razorbills and our first Puffins all of which breed on Lunga. In fact, there are lots of Puffins, everywhere. We now come across a feeding group of Gannets and watch as they drop beak first into the water looking for the fish below. Soon enough we reach one of the smaller islands and our captain points out some of its natural and man-made features with ruins dating right back to the Viking era. There are lots of seabirds and Grey Seals as expected but we also spot a few pair of Great Skua, which now breed on the islands. As we move slowly towards the mooring place at Lunga we see a large flock of Kittiwakes on the rock, which fly up in unison as we go past, looking fantastic.

We reach Lunga and with the use of an attached pontoon we close in on the rocky beach where we have to negotiate the slippery stones before we reach the safety of the path. With great care and attention we get to the path and now need to walk up a 30m steep incline, which isn't easy for Keith, but he also perseveres to the 'cricket pitch' where we are surrounded by nesting Puffins. It is such a privilege to be around these beautiful and iconic seabirds going about their daily business of feeding their young on sand eels.

We have carried our picnic lunches up here and the weather is actually pretty good, so we enjoy being sat having our lunches in this wonderful place. It's not just Puffins as hordes of Guillemots and Razorbills fly by, along with a few Fulmars, which are also breeding and the ever-attendant

Great Black-backed Gulls looking for an easy meal. Our ever-vigilant guide also spots an Arctic Skua, which is not an easy bird to find here but getting more regular.

After the picnics Julian makes sure we all know the time we need to be back at the beach, and we all go off to do our own thing. The next 90 minutes are spent in several places with Julian going in search of Corncrake which he hears but does not see, despite being only metres away from him in the low bracken! Keith and Penny hang around the cricket pitch while Angela, Alan and Judith start out towards the seabird stack along the edge of the island but are stopped by an incident with Judith. Our guide is back at the beach and sees that Judith is holding her suspected broken wrist, which doesn't look good. He, and Angela who has medical training, help sort her out with a sling before getting her safely back on to the boat then assistance is given to the rest of us. We make sure that Judith is okay to continue and not in too much pain before we now set off for Staffa.

We again set off into open and now deeper water with lots more seabirds around as we roll our way along. A couple of Manx Shearwaters fly past, and we get some great views as it skims along the surface of the choppy seas. Around 40 minutes later we are slowing now as we reach Staffa and the incredible basalt formation of Fingal's Cave made famous by Mendelsohn. His beautiful piece of work plays over the tannoy as we near the entrance to the cave, but we cannot go inside as its too rough. We spend a little time here before landing at the jetty which makes our egress so much easier.

We all manage to get off the boat with Julian and Angela climbing up the steps to the moorland above, Keith and Penny taking the track out to view Fingal's Cave from land, Alan and Judith being rightfully careful and sitting on the jetty for an hour. We all enjoy our time, with Angela and Julian gets some good looks at Great Skuas, Common Snipe and a couple of Twite briefly before returning to the jetty. Around 5pm we are back on the boat and heading back to Ulva Ferry where the heavens open as we are halfway back which drives us down below to where Judith and Alan are sitting comfortably. We get back to the quay for 6pm and once we use the facilities, we set off back to Craignure where Julian drops most of us off

at the hotel and now takes Judith round to the medical centre. It's not great news for her having to go over to Oban hospital on the mainland. Julian starts to prepare for this...

Day 7

Julian has been away overnight with Judith but is back on the first sailing back to Craignure where he meets us in the restaurant for breakfast at 08:20. Incredibly we are ready to leave by 09:00 with our guide feeling a little jaded but still okay – thankfully Judith is fine, sporting a cast and heading back to Mull later today so Alan's staying behind – we wish them well.

It is pouring with rain again today and it's a tough drive down to Pennygheal in these conditions and then on to Fionnphort, arriving at 10:15. There is a ferry to Iona due so we quickly grab our lunches and provisions for the day and head down to the quay, making the next crossing with ease. The weather now is greatly improving as we make the 15-minute journey to Iona where we alight the small ferry and head straight for the public conveniences.

Julian now gathers us all together and informs us that we can spend the time on this historic and spiritual island to ourselves or with him looking for wildlife out towards the north. Penny and Keith opt for doing their own thing, with Julian, Angela, Tessa and Roger heading off along the only proper road on the island. We walk up through the churchyard to the fields where we stop to look at the Linnets, Starlings, Goldfinches and a family of Blue Tits. There are lots of Jackdaws flying round this area and a little further near it's famous abbey we see some Rooks which are our first ones for a few days.

As we continue north Julian is constantly checking the sea and finds a small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins, which is great as they are showing really well through the telescope. On we go and towards the end of this concrete road we hear one of the island's specialities – the distinctive and rasping call of Corncrake. We stand next to this weedy field trying to get a glimpse of this incredibly secretive bird, now realising there are two, both equally impossible to see but still great to listen too.

We are 'flogging a dead horse' and after about 30 minutes decide to try our luck elsewhere, heading out on to a more open area where Angela finds our first Wheatear of the day along with a few Linnets. We now walk slowly out to the extreme north end of the island with the sun now shining, blue skies and scattered cloud above – it is a wonderful situation. As we walk the sandy tracks, we notice there are several lovely snails crossing our path before we reach the rocks and settle down to do a seawatch.

A Great Skua (Bonxie) flies past almost immediately and we think this is going to be good but for the next hour we only log Kittiwakes, Shag, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin. Roger decides he would like to go off for a walk while we are sat here and investigates one of Iona's famous white sandy beaches just round the corner. We keep looking out to sea and now find a couple of small flocks of Manx Shearwaters, which is great in this fantastic light.

After noon things start to go very quiet and we decide to move on around 1pm. Roger has returned singing the praises of the adjacent beach, so we decide to all head in that direction. Julian spots a Common Sandpiper, which is alarm calling on some coastal rocks – there's a mammal climbing out of the water, which isn't an Otter? It's an American Mink! It quickly disappears between the rocks and appears twice more briefly before not being seen again. Angela now spots a (potentially) genuine Rock Dove, while Tessa is quizzical about some small brown finches just in front of where we are standing. They are in fact Twite and it's a family party with the young birds still being fed by their parents, which is superb. This has been a crazy and eventful half hour and now we walk on to 'Roger's beach' and it is stunning, with beautiful white sand and blue sea beyond. The only downside its busy with people visiting the island so we keep walking. Eventually we get back to the main road and again we can hear the Corncrakes but sadly no sightings.

It is now getting near 3pm and we slowly walk back towards the quay where we meet up with Keith and Penny who have also had a great time hearing at least five Corncrakes on their travels, which is brilliant. We join the queue for the next ferry which is on a few minutes later and soon head back to Fionnphort.

Once we are back, we first make full use of the facilities and Julian kindly gets us all a very welcome ice cream. Once ready we are back in the minibus and set off back towards the hotel. The drive back to Pennygheal is quiet, stopping on occasion to scan the bays as the tide is now out. We reach the road junction and the photographers are there again so we stop and watch the same Hen Harrier as before. It now starts to rain so we get back into the minibus and continue round to the sea loch where we pull into one of the laybys and find Common Redshank, Curlew, Red-breasted Merganser and Grey Heron. Penny now says, "what's this?" with Angela responding, "I think it's a Short-eared Owl" and it certainly is! We are now quickly out of the minibus and watching our first owl of the tour quartering the area, hunting for small mammals – just brilliant. After a few minutes it disappears, and we are straight back in the van as it's still raining and set off back along the Glen More Road. We are searching for eagles (particularly Golden Eagle) but we see nothing in this poor weather.

We drop down out of Glen More and take a quick detour to another 'good eagle' place in a last-ditch effort to find one or even an Otter, which are regularly seen along the loch edge. We don't get a sighting of either of these, but Tessa spots a couple of Lapwing with chicks along with more Common Sandpipers, Red-breasted Mergansers and a couple of Common Buzzards plus some more stunning scenery. Around 5.30pm we set off back to the hotel arriving 30 minutes later and in time to freshen up before the checklist at 7pm.

Day 8

Our last full day on Mull and it's breakfast again at 07:30, with Tessa having already been out around the grounds and see's a Chiffchaff along with the usual garden species here. We are ready to leave just before 9am and today the plan is to explore the north of the island. We drive up along the main coast road beyond Salen, stopping at the estuary where we see a couple of Goosander at the river mouth. We drive on up the glen where we make a stop for a short walk down to the Aros river. The weather is not great again, being a mixture of sunshine, heavy showers and strong winds! It starts well with a female Hen Harrier quartering the glen, heading up the valley and away. We continue to walk slowly down to the river but its pretty quiet, just seeing the usual Meadow Pipits and our first Greater White-throat of the day.

At the river we look for Dipper but with the recent rains it's higher than hoped for, with any available rocks now covered. There is a Common Sandpiper flying upstream and in the nearby conifers we see family parties of Willow Warbler and Great Tit. It is not long before we are walking back up towards the minibus stopping to look at the lovely Butterwort in the trackside channel.

Back at the van we set off again north, driving up through this winding road, stopping occasionally for Lapwing, Mistle Thrush and a Common Buzzard. Eventually we reach the quaint village of Dervaig which is on the island's north coast, now turning west along the main circular coast road. We soon turn off again and this takes along another minor single-track road to an upland moor. Skylarks are song-fighting all over here, which is lovely to hear, and we also stop for another couple of Common Buzzards and a Kestrel – but still no eagles!

We carry on this road back down the steep hill to the main road at Achleck, where again we turn north. We are on the main coast road which winds its way through some absolutely stunning scenery, with views today right out to the Treshnish Isles and the very distinctive shape of the 'Dutchman's Cap'

We stop to look at a couple of roadside Northern Wheatears before reaching the equally stunning Calgary Bay with its beautiful stretch of natural 'rana', long white sand beach, and dramatic sea. A comfort stop is our initial priority here but sadly they are 'out of use' – so it's plan B. We now drive to the far end of the beach where we pull into the car park with a café but that's sadly closed too – so it's plan C! We now drive a little further north to another café Julian knows which is thankfully open. As well as the great facilities we enjoy sitting with a hot drink sat in the warm sunshine, chatting - something we haven't done much of during this tour.

Once ready we are back in the bus and back down to Calgary Bay as our guide has promised us some time in this beautiful location. At the car park we get out and have an hour to wander round the area, with us all initially heading down to the beach. Tessa has the right idea, having a wee paddle in the cool waters of the Atlantic, being so nice at the moment. There are several Eider on the sea, but not much else so some of us head on to the

area of 'rana', where we find some lovely examples of Early Purple Orchid and some gorgeous Thyme. We are all back at the minibus at the agreed time and sad to leave this wonderful place. It is now lunchtime and Julian wants to get back to Dervaig to have our picnic lunch overlooking the estuary as the tide is now falling. There are plenty of Common Redshanks around along with a couple of Common Sandpipers, Rock Doves and gulls, including a lesser Black-backed, which isn't common here. Julian spots an interesting bird flying over the trees and it's a Great Skua which is also very unusual both in place and occurrence.

Once we have finished our lunches, Julian is keen to move on as he is still wanting to get a good sighting of Otter. We head now towards Mull's main town Tobermory stopping off at a roadside loch where we find a pair of Little Grebes, which are the first of the tour but not much else. We soon carry on dropping down into this harbour town where we park next to the bay. It is now mid-afternoon, so Julian gives us some time to look round these iconic coloured buildings surrounding the harbour made famous by the children's tv series – Balamory. Our guide stays around the car park, first looking for a Dipper, but without luck, but he does find a Grey Wagtail which is a nice edition to the day's list.

With just a couple of hours left before we need to be back at the hotel, Julian now takes the main coastal road back south of Tobermory, stopping at a few places to look for Otter until we reach Salen, without a sighting. Our guide has two sights left in mind but we don't have time for both so he, takes a chance and now heads across to Loch Na Keal. We get to a parking area where he's had success previously and checks the seaweed-strewn rocky shoreline. There's a shape in the water – OTTER! It's heading to the rocks and sure enough it climbs up and starts to devour a crab about 200m away – just brilliant and Julian cannot believe our luck. It is not easy for everyone to get a good view in the van but we don't want to disturb it, however we carefully and quietly climb out and now set up the telescopes, its completely unaware of our presence, which is fabulous.

The Otter has finished its meal and gets back in the water swimming behind the rocks, and we assume that's it, but two minutes later it reappears with another and returns to exactly the same place – we just cannot believe this

as we are now getting point-blank telescope views of it again feasting on another crab – Penny is absolutely beside herself, being the one thing she really want to experience on this tour. We now relax and as Julian's scope is occupied, he checks the rest of the surrounding area and is stunned when he finds an adult White-tailed Eagle in the trees just behind us. In fact, when he mentions this, some of us think he's joking. Now we have the telescopes trained in both directions as this beautiful Otter has got another crab to eat but now is a little further away, but we're not complaining! This goes on for about 30 minutes before the Otter disappears back into the loch, and the rain starts to fall heavily, so it's back in the minibus with massive smiles on our faces. It is a little later than planned as we head back down to our hotel in Craignure, but we still have enough time to freshen up before we are due to go to dinner for our final evening meal here.

Day 9

We awake to a glorious morning with sun streaming through our bedroom windows and we head to our last breakfast here at 8am in good spirits, despite being a travelling day. We return to our rooms and by 09:15, the luggage is packed in the minibuses, keys are returned to reception and we are driving away from this excellent hotel. We drive north towards the ferry quay, stopping off on the way to start to scan the calm water, exposed rocks, and coastline initially seeing a Mute Swan, Greylag Geese, Eider and Mallard. There are several Arctic Terns flying around above their island and some Common Seals on an offshore islet. A couple of Shelduck fly past north, then Julian spots a small group of birds flying low over the water in the opposite direction – Manx Shearwaters! This is a great sighting for this coastline of Mull and possibly a by-product of the recent strong winds pushing them into this relatively narrow channel.

We watch these birds as they fly round in big circles trying to reorientate themselves back into more open water which is more their natural environment. After a while, Julian says it's time to leave for Fishnish and the ferry scheduled to leave on the one at 10am. We jump back into the minibuses and drive further north along this beautiful coast. We arrive at the ferry port with 10 minutes to spare so we go to use the facilities. Tessa now finds a family of Goldcrests with the tiny young being fed by their parents, which is superb. At the allotted time, we board the car ferry to Lochaline, and 20 minutes later we are back across on the mainland.

This is the Morvern Peninsular and we set off up and over to Gleann Gael, stopping briefly to scan the ridges and valleys for raptors on this now cloudy day. We now turn off on a very minor road with passing places at Lochuisge and drive along to Kingairloch. At the edge of Loch Linnhe, we pull in and Julian suggests a drinks break as he would like to spend some time here being our last real chance of Golden Eagle on the trip. Angela is checking the bay and spots a few Red-breasted Mergansers and more Eider, along with a handsome male Reed Bunting, Lesser Redpoll and Stonechat in the adjacent bracken. Julian is continually checking the skies and spots a Common Buzzard overhead but there's also a second bird higher up – adult Golden Eagle and gets really excited as he shouts to the rest of us. He need not have panicked as we have time to find this bird and watch as it circles round, almost above our heads. It is now joined by a second adult, which is slightly larger and we assume this is the female of the pair, as they follow each other away over the opposite ridgeline. We are all thrilled, not just for ourselves, but also for our guide who was quite concerned we would not have seen a Golden Eagle on this tour, which is almost unheard of! We stay for a while longer before Julian suggests we continue our journey along the edge of Loch Linnhe.

The drive now continues, and we start to hug the coastline of the loch seeing lots of Common Sandpipers, Black Guillemot, Gannet and Rock Pipits along the route. We are transfixed by the scenery on offer here with views right over to Ben Nevis, which is surprisingly visible! A movement is seen in the water as we drive slowly along and Julian stops quickly and says “Otter”, pulling over safely into a layby. We again climb out and with directions we locate the Otter diving for prey about 100m offshore. We all remark how unusual it is to see one so far from the coastline. While we are enjoying this Julian decides to scan the adjacent ridges and now announces he's found an adult White-tailed Eagle and again we don't know which way to turn. Although the eagle is moving away quite quickly and soon disappears.

After about 30 minutes Julian says we must go as we still have a good drive to our next ferry, and he wants to be at a certain picnic spot for lunch. We again continue our journey and have an uneventful drive through to our

next ferry port at Corran. We have a short wait now and make full use of the facilities, along with seeing a couple of Black Guillemots in the channel.

We now board this small ferry and cross the Corran Narrows to the other side of Loch Linnhe, going now to a lochside parking area for lunch. We sit out, enjoying our picnics but not seeing too much wildlife before setting off again around an hour later. We now head south towards Glen Coe, passing the village of the same name and the impressive visitor centre on the edge of this famous historical site.

Our drive now continues through this very scenic upland glen with steep-sided mountains, either side of the pass. The weather is again lovely for most of our journey to Loch Lomond, but we are slowed by heavy traffic as we move down along its shoreline, but there's nothing to see apart from a couple of Carrion Crows. Eventually we think we have reached our hotel for our last night, which looks very impressive looking out over the iconic Loch Lomond. We go inside and try get our rooms, but they don't have a booking. Julian comes into reception, who they know from previous visits, and looks puzzled until he checks his notes - we are not staying here! The receptionist says our hotel is 3 miles further on so it's back to the minibus, reload the luggage and off we go. It doesn't take long to get to the right establishment, and they are ready for us. We soon get our rooms and still have plenty of time before we reconvene for the checklist and our 'magic moments' of the tour. This goes well, with some fabulous highlights to remember although the 'Otter and Eagle' event of the previous day got some special mentions, and rightly so. Around 7:30pm we head to the dining room for our final evening meal, which is excellent but we are all very tired after the travelling and once finished we head to our rooms for some rest.

Day 10 Breakfast is at the very relaxed time of 8am, with plans to set off just over an hour later. We leave on time with Julian taking us all back to Glasgow's Central train station, ending this interesting holiday around Mull and the Kintyre Peninsular.

Species of the Trip

Roger	White-tailed Eagle plus Black-throated Diver
Tessa	White-tailed Eagle plus Corncrake
Keith	Puffin
Penny	Otter plus Redpoll
Alan	Wheatear
Judith	Otter
Angela	Hen Harrier plus Black-throated Diver
Julian	Black-throated Diver

Place of the Trip

Roger	Strathcoil Wood
Tessa	Iona
Keith	Calgary Bay
Penny	Lunga/Loch Linhe
Alan	Staffa
Judith	Lunga
Angela	Add River/Moine Mohr
Julian	Grass Point

Magic Moment

Roger	Otter sighting/Cuckoo with Meadow Pipits
Tessa	Twite parents feeding young
Keith	Otter dining
Penny	Otter dining
Alan	Beaver sighting
Judith	Afternoon with Jim at Add Estuary/Moine Mohr
Angela	Sitting on Iona watching Twite
Julian	Otter and White-tailed Eagle event

BIRDS

Mute Swan	Common Snipe
Greylag Goose	Great Skua
Canada Goose	Arctic Skua
Shelduck	Black-headed Gull
Mallard	Common Gull
Tufted Duck	Herring Gull
Eider	Greater Black-backed Gull
Goosander	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Red-breasted Merganser	Kittiwake
Corncrake (heard only)	Common Tern
Red-throated Diver	Arctic Tern
Black-throated Diver	Puffin
Little Grebe	Black Guillemot
Fulmar	Guillemot
Manx Shearwater	Razorbill
Gannet	Rock Dove
Cormorant	Feral Pigeon
Shag	Woodpigeon
Grey Heron	Collared Dove
Little Egret	Cuckoo
White-tailed Eagle	Short-eared Owl
Osprey	Tawny Owl (heard only)
Golden Eagle	Common Swift
Hen Harrier	Skylark
Common Buzzard	Sand Martin
Kestrel	Barn Swallow
Peregrine	House Martin
Oystercatcher	Rock Pipit
Ringed Plover	Meadow Pipit
Lapwing	Tree Pipit
Dunlin	Pied Wagtail
Sanderling	Grey Wagtail
Common Sandpiper	Dunnock
Common Redshank	Robin
Greenshank	Northern Wheatear
Curlew	Whinchat

Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Greater Whitethroat
Blackcap
Garden Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Grasshopper Warbler
(heard only)
Willow Warbler
Wood Warbler
Chiffchaff (heard only)
Goldcrest
Wren
Spotted Flycatcher
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Eurasian Treecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Twite
Lesser Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Otter
American Mink
European Beaver
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Fallow Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenose Dolphin
Minke Whale
Common Seal
Grey Seal

BUTTERFLIES

Green-veined White
Small White
Orange-tip
Small Heath

OTHER SPECIES

Common Frog Tadpole
Large Red Damsel
Common Goldenring
Red Underwing
6-spot Burnet
Common Heath Moth
Chimney Sweeper
White-tailed Bumblebee
Common Carder Bee
Iona Snail

NOTABLE PLANTS (thanks to Tessa Oliver)

Eyebright
Silverweed

Lousewort
Butterwort
Figwort
Red Campion
Sea Campion
Thrift
Foxglove
Buttercup
Spearwort
Tormentil
White Clover
Red Clover
Ragged Robin
Speedwell
Dogrose
Herb Robert
Yellow Iris
Oxeye Daisy
Cow-wheat
Bugle
Honeysuckle
Greater Stitchwort
Yellow Rattle
Fox and Hounds
Chickweed
Marsh Cinquefoil
Bluebell
Marsh Thistle
Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Northern Marsh Orchid
Heath Spotted Orchid
Fragrant Orchid
Early Purple Orchid