

Holiday Highlights
Canna and Comcrakes
27 May – 5 June 2024

Guide: Sally Nowell and Ailie Brown

Guests: John Duerden, Joan Hunter, Alison Pattinson, Gillian Beckett, Joy Abbott, Penny and Richard Hatfield

Day 1: We all meet in the lobby of our Inverness hotel and then drive to the lovely North Kessock Hotel for dinner. We have a nice meal and chat about the week to come. After dinner we head outside and enjoy the view of the Beaully Firth as we finalise plans for the next day.

Day 2: After breakfast, we meet in the car park and pack the minibuses. We depart towards Fort Augustus where we stop for a comfort break. While out of the minibus we can hear Swifts and a few of us head to the bridge and watch the locks change. We then proceed through some lovely scenery trying to spot birds in fields on the way, we discuss Loch Ness and how beautiful it is, no Nessie unfortunately! We continue and drive to pick up lunch in Fort William.

We stop at a small forestry car park while Ailie and Sally are deciding on a lunch spot, Richard spots a Black Guillemot. It's a bit dreary but the view over the loch is stunning. We all scan a wee bit longer, enjoying a stretch of the legs before Sally suggests it's time to move on. We continue along in search for a lunch spot. We come off the main road and pull into a car park overlooking a bay. It's quite chilly but we sit outside and perch on a wall, we have lunch and Ailie tucks into the tasty snacks Sally has bought for the group, sharing them out of course. Unfortunately, there is not much to see as the weather has turned.

After lunch we head to the ferry terminal through a busy Oban and perfectly time our arrival for the ferry. It is a nice journey across, although a bit drizzly. We all head out to the deck, spotting a Gannet flying just over us, Black Guillemot. We all admire a nice boat called the Hebridean Princess which Sally points out, she knows the guides on it that week. There are some seals, Shags and Great Black-backed Gulls on a small island.

We are soon on Mull and head quickly to the golf course parking area not far from the hotel. Everyone is quick to start spotting things and we get quite a list of excellent birds. Joan spots Arctic Tern all nesting on a shale island, there are also Common Terns and Common Gulls mixed in. John points out a few Dunlins and Turnstone shuffling along the shore. Two Red-breasted Merganser, one possibly a juvenile, float past us in the bay. We head off with a little bit of time before checking-in, towards Salen and have great views of a lone male Eider, which is sitting out of the water. We then pull over briefly once more where Sally and Ailie have

a quick scan, however the weather has got all of us looking forward to a warm hotel room.

Back to the hotel and settled we meet before dinner and share views of Redpoll and Whitethroat we can see from the hotel rooms, in the lovely gardens. We go over the bird list, whilst enjoying the views out to sea and a lovely dinner and talk about the week ahead.

Day 3: We leave our comfortable hotel overlooking Craignure Bay at 9am after breakfast, then off to the south side of Mull. Next, we head towards Duart Castle and we stop beside the cemetery. We watch a singing Whitethroat which Penny points out and then a Stonechat is perched on a telegraph wire, we enjoy some good scope views of it with caterpillars in its beak. There is a Pied Wagtail flitting about.

We continue along the road and Ailie sees a familiar shape on the wire and points out a Cuckoo. Can't really stop so a brief glimpse. We pull over on a verge and park up. We wander up by foot, on a single-track road that goes through some beautiful Oak woodland. Sally can hear a Redstart singing and then a Wood Warbler, Alison spots a small bird on top of a shrubby bush and Ailie gets the scope on it, we have lovely views of Tree Pipit.

Onwards we drive along the edge of Loch Spelve, scanning as we go, we see lots of Meadow Pipits and we look for any movement in the water. We pull over off the road and scan over the ridges. In the distance, Sally sees a Golden Eagle. Then shortly after, a White-tailed Eagle and Ailie and Joy share a scope, really looking at the difference between the two species. Richard has something over the hill in front of us. Another Golden Eagle, we all follow this one over the side of the hill and have great views. A second Golden Eagle appears. Wow. Our first Hen Harrier appears, which starts to mob a Buzzard. What a fantastic stop. We continue round the loch to Croggan, stopping very often to let large vans past. It's very busy and we all wonder where they are all going.

We get to the end of the road and Sally speaks to a man in a high vis top. He explains they are doing a bit of filming, so it's closed off to the public. We drive back along the way we came and stop briefly as Joan sees a female Hen Harrier, we all pause and look but it doesn't reappear. We pull onto a grassy verge and have the most amazing view of the mountains as a backdrop to the loch, for lunch. We sit on the grass and a couple of beautiful Red Breasted Merganser swim past. We all share our 'Otter' stories of our best sightings; in the hope we might see one here. No such luck but a very lovely lunch spot. As we leave and drive back along, we come across lots of geese and then a White-tailed Eagle soars overhead, giving both minibuses fantastic views.

We take a quick detour back to Craignure for the loos before our drive around to Loch na Keal. Our first stop, a lot of people stop by to say hello and ask if we have seen anything exciting. John is admiring the wildflowers while Joan points at a large bird flying overhead, sure enough it's a White-tailed Eagle. Just great views as it flies

straight overhead. A singing Skylark displays next to us, reminding us that the little birds are just as amazing. A few other species are added to the list, Common Sandpiper and Common Gulls are on the shore. A Cuckoo calls behind us. We can't quite see it though.

We head round to the other side where we get out of the minibus and a boat appears in the middle of the Loch. We realise that two White-tailed Eagles fly towards it and they throw out fish from the back of the boat. The eagles dive down and pick up the fish. There are Gannets fishing in the distance. John finds and shows us some other unique plants. Just one more eagle Sally, Ailie says! Sally says to look behind Ailie and then a White-tailed Eagle appears like magic.

Well, we couldn't have seen more if we tried, so we head back towards the hotel but have a stop at Salen. We start by looking for Otter but don't have any luck. However, there are lots of Waders including Oystercatchers and Ringed Plover. Lots of activity with a flock of Common Gulls and beautiful Red Breasted Mergansers but no Otter. We head back for an earlier dinner and early night.

Day 4: After breakfast, we head off for the day and it's a lovely sunny morning. We head back to Loch na Keal in hope for Otter. Richard sees a Great Northern Diver and it is in breeding plumage. Absolutely beautiful. There is a singing Whitethroat which we all turn around and watch in the shrubbery. Then a flying White-tailed Eagle lands and perches on a branch giving us great views. Sally is still scanning the seaweed and she gets everyone's attention quietly, she has spotted a sleeping Otter and then we watch it groom and eventually after a glorious 15 minutes it disappears.

Feeling refreshed, we follow our tracks back towards Salen and enroute Joan spots a small group of Fallow Deer in the field. We have a comfort break in Salen then make our way north. The scenery is just stunning, and we enjoy the drive. After about 30 minutes, we arrive at Tobermory. Ailie and Sally brief everyone on the little town and to meet back in 30 minutes. Everyone has a lovely wander around the nice shops. Ailie and Sally refuel the minibuses and gather everyone back to continue with our day.

Penny points out Red Deer in the fields as we leave Tobermory. We stop at a quaint little loch, we get out and start scanning, there is a singing Reed Bunting, Ailie admires the Water Avens. Joan and Alison head over to a patch of wildflowers and admire all the different species of Bumblebees. It's rather quiet. Lovely views, a Common Sandpiper and a few gulls are the only things we see. Onwards, we take a lovely scenic drive to a great little bay where we have wonderful views of Greater Black-backed Gull, Gill points out a Grey Heron fishing, Ailie and John identify a Small Copper butterfly next to the minibus. We decide to not stop too long as we are getting a bit hungry. Sally suggests a great place to go for lunch a little further on.

We have lunch on the high road that goes over the hills, it's very peaceful. Everyone enjoys their sandwiches, while we watch a Kestrel and a Buzzard fly by.

The habitat and the landscape here are a bit different to the rest of the island as it feels a little bit more moorland. The narrow road takes us through some beautiful scenery and as we round the corner the spectacular white sand of the bay is before us. We drive down to the beach and spend a pleasant 45 minutes wandering the near empty sand. We see a Red-throated Diver, wander along the beach, admire the machair and flowers which is full of beetles and then flocks of Common Gulls feeding on them. Joan helps Ailie to identify the orchids. We make a good decision and get some ice cream and watch the Sand Martins. Sally asks a nice man to take a group photo.

Time is getting on, so we reluctantly leave and continue. We have another beautiful drive; we stop twice for views and drive through some incredibly scraggly oak trees. There are some cute Highland Cows and an array of farm animals, geese, sheep and lambs. In the minibus, we discuss the sort of habitat we hope to see Corncrakes and look out for the Flag Irises. We drive along Loch Tuith. Our last stop, we find ourselves at Loch na Keal and we watch a diver, a few other shore birds and a seal pops its head up. Back to the hotel for a lovely dinner and lovely last evening at the hotel.

Day 5: Today we leave the Mull hotel and head to Iona. We stop briefly to enjoy the dramatic views of Loch Squabain and Glen More and Red Deer on the hillside. Sally hears a Whinchat and we locate it perched on a layby sign singing away. We continue down the glen to Loch Beg. We have a quick stop here to stretch the legs and have a quick scan.

We are soon on our way to Fionnphort weaving our way along the single-track road, stopping to let traffic pass or hoping they will return the favour. We arrive at the Iona ferry for about 12pm, Sally and Ailie park the vans and we are soon onboard. At the pier we are met by the hotel staff and our bags are whisked away.

We walk to the hotel for lunch and enjoy a couple of hours of down time to wander the village and visit the Abbey. Some of us spend the rest of the day walking and most find their way to the beach. Sally, Ailie, Alison, Joan and John spot Shelduck and ducklings, Ringed Plover and Eider. The machair here is a sea of daisies and Swallows and Sand Martins whizz low over the surface thrilling us with their elegant flight and how close they are coming to us.

We head back to the hotel taking a detour through the beautiful garden of the hotel. After dinner we walk down the road in the hope of seeing Corncrake. We find a field where one is calling intermittently. After 40 minutes we are losing hope. We wander back to the hotel and hear a couple of birds “crex crexing” in the Abbey grounds. We don’t see them; however, it is so special standing in the Abbey churchyard, looking over the fields and out to sea, hearing these wonderful birds just in front of us.

Day 6: We leave Iona and it is a beautiful morning, we enjoy the sunny calm weather and admire the scenery as we wait for the ferry. Once on the road we chat about the day ahead. We head to Loch Beg, Ailie and Sally drop everyone off at the corner of the single-track road and find somewhere safe to park up. There are great views of singing Skylark, Curlews and Redshank. We scan over the rockpools and shoreline for otters and a young couple pull up and inform us of a pair of Otters just along the road. So, we decide to walk along and we are greeted with a glorious 20 minutes of two young Otters, fishing, playing and swimming along the edge.

Onwards we go and head through the sides of the mountains, scanning for Short-eared Owls on the way. We drive on and on the way out of Grasspoint we see lots of signs for road closures, luckily for the next day. Looks like the filming crew again. We manoeuvre into a tight layby and get out to a beautiful spot sitting up above a marsh on one side and the sea on the other. Ailie and Penny point out a few small birds flitting in the brush, a stunning male Reed Bunting sits on the top, Stonechat flits in between. There is a few of them.

We arrive at the ferry only to find out that there have been cancellations in the morning at Craignure, so everyone is here. The queue is very long so Sally and Ailie chat about lunch options and Ailie convinces Sally that it would be a good idea to take everyone round to the picnic benches a bit further back. We count the cars and realise we will be two or three ferries' before we can get on one. Ailie walks round with Joan, Alison, Richard and Penny to the benches and Gill, Joy and John hang back with Sally. As we have our lunch, we watch the ferry come in, Sally has to run back and forth moving the minibuses. Oh dear!

We get back in the minibuses and are off across the water to Lochaline. We pull over shortly after arriving on the Morven peninsula at Blackwater. There is a beautiful Oak woodland and a dark river with two quaint bridges. We look over the river for Wagtail and Dipper when Sally points us in the direction of under the bridge. There are Beautiful Demoiselles all floating in the dappled light. It feels truly magical. We all awe over them for a while and then we move on.

We arrive at Ariundle National Nature Reserve and walk along the track. We are surrounded by bird activity, Siskin, Chaffinches and Willow Warblers. As we move past magnificent fern and moss-covered ancient Oaks of the Celtic rainforest. The Bumblebee and butterfly activity is high. Joan points out the individual species to us and we come across Chequered Skipper. We enjoy the warmth of the afternoon and although we don't see many other birds we have a wonderful walk.

Our next stop is a hide overlooking Loch Moidart. From here we see a group of basking Common Seals, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Terns fly over the offshore islands. We take the opportunity to have a snack. It's getting to that point in the day and some biscuits and crisps from Sally's stash don't go a miss. We get on to the main road to Mallaig and arrive at our hotel for check-in just before 7pm. We have a lovely meal and look forward to the next two days on a boat!

Day 7: Well today is a bit dreary, but we are excited about heading to Canna. We leave the hotel at 8.30am and arrive at the Arisaig pier 20 minutes later ready to board Orca III. The skipper Andrew meets us and introduces us to his friend who is looking after us onboard. We are soon leaving Arisaig and working our way through the skerries in the sheltered bay. Common Seal lie out on the rocks Black Guillemots are everywhere as we gently move out into the Sound of Sleat. The weather is rather misty, so we make the decision to sail around the islands first before getting off the boat onto Canna.

We move round Eigg then onto the side of Canna where the abundance of birds becomes clearer. The cliffs come into view and there are hundreds of Puffins and Razorbills flying overhead, Kittiwakes too. The misty weather makes the atmosphere magical and out of the mist you see birds flying in every direction. We watch the birds arrive and leave from their nesting sites for the best part of an hour and then move to the pier at Canna.

As we get off the boat, Ailie sees a couple of familiar faces. Two friends of hers are working on the new Visitor Centre. Scott and Bob say hello to everyone and tell us about the new building and when it should be open. We wander along to a secluded beach where we perch on some rocks and picnic. A Wheatear picks up insects on the shore and there is a displaying Meadow Pipit parachuting down from the cliffs to the dark sand. Just as we are about to leave the beach a White-tailed Eagle flies over and behind the cliffs, circling round and showing us it's enormous size a second time.

We agree on a time to meet back at the boat and all go in different directions for a walk and explore the island. Eider Ducks and chicks are using the bay as a nursery and are feeding in the shallows. As we walk along the path around the bay, we come across a few honesty boxes selling wild garlic sea salt and jams. As we pick through the jars, a flock of Dunlin and Ringed Plovers land on shore in front of us and feed. We continue along the shore path and there is an option to go up into some fields and a small woodland. We decide to investigate, as we walk along, we hear Corncrake in the field we are passing. We stop and scan, every time we hear it we move along the path with the call getting louder. It gets to a point we need to head back so we do so, but Ailie and Richard decide to take a quick detour through the woods. As they do they come across more Corncrakes calling, this time right in front of them! After as long as they can wait, they move on as they need to make the ferry back. Shame but that was an amazing experience!

The boat ride back is straight forward and we head back to Arisaig. Enroute, we have views of hundreds of Manx Shearwaters. We can't believe how many we are seeing! Back on dry land, we go back to the hotel for a nice dinner.

Day 8: We awake to clear blue skies and calm seas which we see the minute we wake from our bedrooms overlooking Mallaig harbour and out to Rhum, Eigg and Skye, what a view! We make our way straight to Arisaig for our boat and a relaxing day of sea watching. Andrew is ready to greet us with his friend who is helping us for

the day. We sail towards Eigg and just enjoy the lovely weather on the back of the boat. Again today we come across masses of Shearwaters and we are as excited the tenth time we see them as the first time. We pass sea cliffs of Rhum, this time with it being beautiful weather we can see the tops of the cliffs. The water is almost green with the reflection of the island and we all are enjoying the stories from Andrew and his friend about the history of the islands. We cut over towards Skye and we scan for cetaceans on the way. The scenery is stunning here, with the low-lying island of Soay on one side and the Cuillins of Skye rising above us on the other. We sail into a natural harbour leading to Loch Coruisk and down anchor for an idyllic lunch spot.

We sail back round Soay and Eigg. While we are sitting out in the sunshine chatting away, a group of Common Dolphins start to follow the boat, we slow down and then they almost join us and break the waves, almost surfing the front. We all beam with excitement. The skipper stops for a minute and the boat circles round and suddenly someone shouts 'Minke' and we have the most wonderful encounter of a Minke Whale diving and coming up near the boat for a good 15 minutes. We head back to Arisaig elated.

We arrive back at the pier, have a quick loo stop and then drive down the old back road to Morar and Loch Morar. It's a beautiful drive. At the end of the road we get out and walk down to the shore past some magnificent old Oak trees. At the shore we take some group photos and Ailie asks Sally if she can get us one more eagle and before Ailie finishes her sentence a White-tailed Eagle flies past. We are all gobsmacked. Good job Sally! Ailie investigates some lichen on the tree's which is called Lungwort and only grows on the West Coast. This place feels very special and it is a lovely end to our West Coast days.

We return along the loch side and back to the hotel in time for a shower before dinner. What a wonderful day, we are all aglow with fresh sea air and sunshine.

Day 9: We pack up the minibuses after breakfast and Ailie and Sally send everyone into the village for a wander and a shop for some souvenirs. Just 30 mins, while they head to get some fuel and finish up at the hotel. The petrol station isn't open today, so we park up in the agreed meeting point and get the bino's out. As we scan the very rough sea's we start to notice a few Gannets, then a few more, then some Shearwaters, then we realise there are birds every direction we look, sea conditions are terrible, so they have come close to shore to feed. It's an amazing sight and as everyone filters back from the shops we get the scope on this spectacle.

We get organised for our journey back and make our way, we stop at the side of road looking out towards a couple distant bays. Not much to see but we stretch the legs. We get to Fort William with some interference with some jokers on the radios which makes us laugh. We get fuel here and our lunches.

We continue towards Inverness and turn off at Fort Augustus. We take the road that follows the Loch Ness trail over the hills. We pull over at a viewpoint and have

lunch in the minibuses. It's rather windy outside. It's a great view of the hills, Loch Ness and the tourists having a photoshoot. This all gives us a giggle.

We continue our journey toward Loch Ruthven seeing Red Kite on the way. We finally see Black-headed Gull which has escaped us so far. We park at the Reserve and walk down to the beach and soon see Slavonian Grebes out on the loch, but they are distant. We enjoy the Swallows and Sand Martins swoop over the loch. We make our way through the small scraggly woodland to the hide on the Reserve. Here we bundle in, being the only one's here which is a bonus. Some visitors have just left. Inside everyone sees something, with a few small birds appearing close by, then Slavonian Grebes in the reeds! Very close views. A bird we have not seen is an Osprey and it's something we are hoping to see here and then one comes into view, it goes by quick and we don't quite see it. Joy missed it so Ailie sits next to Joy and they patiently wait for it to circle back around, which it does. We have a little bit of time, but Sally has one last stop in mind. We make our way back to minibus, stopping to look at fungus on the way back.

We take the back road towards Inverness, passing Loch Duntelchig, Ailie's minibus stops briefly to see a small group of Bullfinches. Once we catch up with Sally, we all pull into a parking area next to the loch. Within the first few minutes we see Mistle Thrush in the fields behind us and a Cuckoo flies over us. It is the best view we have had so far of one. John say's there is a Brown Hare down at the loch and we all look for it but can't see it, only we are all looking far away. It is only a few metres from us. Just grooming itself and taking no notice of us. The clouds are coming over and we feel a spit of rain. We end there and head back to the hotel for our final dinner.

We meet in the lounge and do our magic moments and species of the trips, everyone has something different and some people have two, it's just been a great week for magic moments. We get into the minibuses and head to North Kessock where we have another wonderful view over the Beaully Firth and finish with a fantastic dinner. Some of us say our goodbyes before bed as we are all leaving at different times in the morning.

Day 10: We have a quick breakfast and say our goodbyes. What a wonderful week it's been and we all hope to meet again on another holiday.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Corncrake (H)
Pheasant
Red-legged Partridge
Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Manx Shearwater
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew

Whimbrel
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Greater Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Puffin
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Common Cuckoo
Swift
Skylark
Swallow
House Martin
Sand Martin
Rock Pipit
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Wheatear
Whinchat
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Whitethroat

Sedge Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long -tailed Tit
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Bullfinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Otter
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Fallow Deer
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Dolphin
Minke Whale
Feral Goat