# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

# ISLAY AND JURA IN AUTUMN

## 21-28 OCTOBER 2023

### Guide: Sally Nowell

### Guests: Penelope & Richard Hatfield, Heather James, Vivien Emery

Day I After the whole country had been on red, amber or yellow alert following the heavy rain and winds of storm Babet none of us are sure whether we would get to Glasgow let alone Islay, but remarkably we all arrive at Glasgow Central Station, though sadly one of our group is unable to join us due to illness. Viv's train is 90 minutes late so the rest of us take to the streets of Glasgow for a little bit of an explore, and pass the time easily, having a cup of tea in Princes Square.

> Viv arrives looking remarkably cheery after rather an arduous journey and we quickly made our way to the minibus parked 10 minutes away. Richard helps Sally navigate out of Glasgow and we are soon on our way out of the city and towards the lochs and mountains. Over Loch Lomond we admire the high peaks of Ben Lomond and then we continue our way north and westwards. The light is beginning to fade and by the time we reach our hotel it is pretty dark. We are staying just outside Inverary in a lovely hotel over looking Loch Fyne. We quickly change and are enjoying dinner in no time. We discuss plans for the next day and head to bed.

Day 2 We wake to clear skies but it is crisp, the temperature this morning is just 4 degrees but there is still lots of warmth in the sun. After a pleasant breakfast we head down the side of Loch Fyne stopping intermittently to enjoy the stunning views and scan out across the flat calm water in the hope of catching sight of an Otter. We see hundreds of Shag, Red-throated Diver, Eider Ducks, Grey Heron, Red-breasted Merganser and Wigeon. We stop at Lochgilphead where we see Little Egret, Bar-tailed Godwit and further on at a beautiful stop in the morning sun we see groups of Eider and distant Harbour Porpoise and at Tarbet some good views of Black Guillemot in their winter plumage.

> We arrive at the ferry terminal in plenty of time, which passes quickly, and we are soon loading up on the most tightly packed ferry ever and heading up on deck, if we can find our way outside, to start scanning the water. We have our lunch and before we leave dock Sally spots a distant White-tailed Eagle over the hillside. On our way out of the Sound of Jura we start spotting Great Northern Diver, not just one or two but a group of five and several more. We see Common Seals on the rocks and then Sally sees what looks like an Otter on one of the skerries and sure enough it's an Otter enjoying its lunch before sliding back into the water. We continue to watch the water surface seeing mainly Shag but Black Guillemot, Gannet and Red-throated Diver too. As we enter the sound of Islay the Paps of Jura loom high over us and we see Red Deer and Feral Goat on the hillside. We also get a fabulous view of a Golden Eagle and a surprise passing Ring-tailed Hen Harrier. We are all enjoying the boat journey so much we haven't realized two hours have passed and we have arrived at Islay. We disembark and almost immediately take a right turn to what turns out to be Richard's favourite whisky's distillery. We can't go past without calling in so we all end up making use of the facilities and enjoying the very fancy shop where Richard treats himself to a bottle of 12 year old Caol ila malt.

We continue on towards Bunnahabhain Distillery watching out all the time and spotting a handsome Sparrowhawk fly in. Along the way to Finlaggan we are treated to a fall of Redwing and Fieldfare busily feeding in the scrubby woodland. Our first decent look at our winter thrushes though we've been seeing them flying across the road in front of us all day. A pair of loan Tufted Ducks are the main birds at Finlaggan but the water is bubbling with rising fish. Penny and Heather enjoy the historic buildings here and we all admire the reeds reflected in the still and calm water of the loch. We decide we must head straight to the hotel though struggle not to stop at Bridgend where we can see hundreds of birds but we will return to this area tomorrow! We arrive at our hotel and after checking in we decide we need to do a whisky tasting so all have a Caol ila and enjoy a delicious dinner and eat far too much!

Day 3 We are met with a bright but chilly morning again and today we are heading west and then south along Loch Indall. As we drive we see groups of Brent Geese on the loch and then we stop not far out of Bowmore to view a group of swans, most of whom are Whoopers, they are joined by some Mute Swans and Wigeon. We continue round the head of the loch stopping again to scan out across the water. Here we spot Red-throated and Great Northern Diver, an elusive Long-tailed Duck and a delightful flotilla of Red-breasted Merganser. Along the shore a few Oystercatchers and Dunlin busily feed. We continue east along the lochside eventually turning south. We watch a couple of Common Buzzards who are joined by a Peregrine and then continue on past the Bruichladdich Distillery and down through Port Charlotte and to Portnahaven for a comfort stop. As we drive we notice numerous flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare mixed in with Starling.

We take a narrow road north from Portnahaven where the habitat becomes wilder and more open. We start to see our first Stonechat and then are all thrilled as we slow to a stop beside a field full of feeding thrushes and Starlings. We have some wonderful views and particularly are thrilled to see Fieldfare so well, noticing all the different colours on them, some with particularly bright mustard yellow breasts. We rejoin the main road and as we approach Bruichladdich Distillery Sally spots a large bird above the road, it's a young White-tailed Eagle, we stop but the bird has disappeared. Not much further along the road and we see two young White-tailed Eagles just above the road, we are lucky there is a place to safely stop and we are gobsmacked that these two eagles just hang in the air whilst we watch them for 10 minutes. The birds know we are there and are clearly watching us as we watch them, Richard is cockerhoop to get some great photos of these magnificent birds that are allowing us to be so close to them.

We take the turn off to Kilchoman and soon spot a falcon above us, it's a Peregrine again and this time it stays in view for everyone to see. Not far along we see fields full of mixed thrushes, Chaffinches, Crows and Starlings feeding, the next field along seems filled with Skylarks, flitting and singing in a large flock, they land in the stubble and just seem to disappear. We see fields of Lapwing and eventually arrive at beautiful Loch Gorm.

By now its lunchtime so we find a suitable stopping place where we are well off the road and not in a passing area. The views across the loch are stunning. The water is cobalt blue and covered in a huge flock of Barnacle Geese that keep taking to the air, not, it appears, in alarm, but simply they are restless, they look spectacular as they take to the air on mass, a black and white flurry as they move over the loch and land in nearby fields. As we are eating lunch and scanning the area Sally is checking out the ducks and into her scope view flies a female Merlin, the Merlin is flying super fast but everyone manages to catch a glimpse of it as it wheels round in front of us before disappearing. Merlin was one of the things Penny really wanted to see so it's great she saw this agile hunter, albeit at break neck speed. As we leave we see a small pool with a mix of Whooper Swans, Greylag and Barnacle Geese and an array of Teal glowing in the afternoon sunlight. As we continue our drive around the loch we spot another male Merlin speeding across the fields of Barnacle Geese and Whoopers.

We decide its time for a walk and park the minibus and take a track across a field through some dunes and to a beautiful beach where Penny has a brave paddle. Viv stays above the dunes and enjoys a visit from some friendly horses who seem to take a shine to her. Just as we are about to leave a Ring-tailed Hen Harrier flies right over the minibus in front of us, so close, it's a great view. We watch as the harrier heads away from us and continue down the road to another turn off. Shortly we see some birders ahead, we stop and they tell us they have been watching a Lesser Grey Shrike. We are thrilled, we knew one was about but hadn't expected to see it. We continue down the single track road and take a short walk down to a beach but we soon hear the call of Chough and are thrilled to see several flying about, landing on the beach and rocks ahead of us.

After enjoying the Chough and the beautiful beach we travel back up the field and make our way back towards the site for the shrike. We can see that there are two birders looking towards us and and spot the shrike through the scope. We know that there are no more cars behind us now so gradually creep down the road towards the bird which is hopping down into the cattle field and then back on to the fence. Its so busy feeding it seems unaware of us as we approach. We get some stunning views and Richard gets some great photos of this unexpected bird.

We've had a great day so we head back towards the hotel passing more fields of geese and stopping briefly again at the head of the loch where we see good numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot, Ringed Plover and Curlew. We are birded out and we've been promised scallops and langoustines for supper so it's definitely time for home.

Day 4 We begin our day with a brief stop just outside Bowmore overlooking the bay. Here we find Whoopers, Pale-bellied Brent Geese and a large group of incredibly well camouflaged Turnstone rifling through the strands of seaweed. We continue on taking a narrow road that will lead us to Gruinart Bay. We are soon faced with an obstacle, a large Scottish Water lorry is blocking the road, the driver and owner of the cottage its parked beside usher us into the cottage drive to let the lorry pass and after a brief exchange we thank both the driver and cottage owner and are on our way. We are surrounded by mixed thrushes yet again and enjoy the view as we approach Loch Gruinart from the high road. As we drive the fields around us are covered in more and more Barnacle Geese. We know there is a Red-breasted Goose amongst them so make an effort to find it scanning through the birds. Beyond the geese are a large flock of Golden Plover and beyond them Sallly spots a male Hen Harrier, its difficult to get everyone on it and Viv sees it go down. Everyone is soon back on a harrier but not the same bird, this one is a Ring-tail. Penny spots Roe Deer in the field and behind is a majestic Red Deer stag. We continue on enjoying the spectacle of thousands of geese feeding on the fields. They are restless, with groups lifting and then flying off and then settling again, what a lot of energy they must waste doing this.

> We arrive at the visitor centre where we are greeted by the sounds of agitated cattle and a charming little dog who jumps into the minibus hoping to come with us. We then make our way to the hide car park and follow the woodland path to two hides. From the hides we view a range of different species including some new ducks for the trip, Shoveler and stunning Pintail. A couple of Snipe make an appearance and we can see Shelduck and Bar-tailed Godwit further out. On route between the hides we enjoy the ancient hazel

woodland and some beautiful views of the Barnacle geese and Greenland White-fronted geese. We continue exploring the area by working our way up to Ardnaven and the small loch there. This is an ideal place to stop for lunch whilst looking out over the water and surrounding dunes.

After lunch we take a walk and soon spot a small group of finches, they are Twite. A group of around 12 birds are feeding in front of us just 10ft away, when we get too close they just move another few feet and we follow them along the road whilst Richard takes photos. Around us are mixed Starling, Redwing and Fieldfare flocks, feeding busily, they must have just come in off the sea, there are also loads of rabbits too including a few black ones. We are also delighted to see and hear Red-billed Chough again here. A large pool hampers our progress on the walk but perhaps as well as we need to return to the minibus and continue our day. We return briefly to the visitor centre to discover the noisy cattle are in fact youngsters who have been separated from their mothers, they do sound unhappy. We continue back across 'the flat' and check with other birders if they've seen the Red-breasted Goose, nobody seems to have seen it. But we enjoy the geese again and once again try our luck at spotting the Red-breast.

We make our way next around the east side of Loch Gruinart, the afternoon light is beautiful. We see a few waders our on the shore, Whoopers in a field and continue to the end of the tarmac where we stop to admire the view. There are some playful Grey Seals in the bay and on the return journey we spot our first Black-throated Diver of the holiday. Heather has unfortunately lost the eyepiece for her binoculars so all is not well and we retrace her movements and fortunately find the eyepiece in the loos at the Gruinart visitor centre before heading back towards Bowmore. Sally is hoping to catch the geese returning to roost on the water but it's a little early so we take a detour looking for some standing stones and of course more birds. We are not disappointed, we find huge flocks of thrushes again and a stunning line of around 25 Greenfinches on a wire. Our first Linnets flit across and hunker down on the top of a stone wall totally camouflaged against the stone.

We carry on exploring down the road, spot the 'hut circle' and standing stones and then return to Bridgend to see the geese coming in. Of course the best parking spot is taken, but we manage to get in further down and stand and watch the mute swans in the evening light. Sally spots a lone Scaup and a group of four female Goldeneye. A huge wave of Barnacle Geese come in and the sunset just keeps getting better. The sunset takes up all our attention now as it just keeps changing colour. It really is quite stunning. It looks like the geese are going to come in very late and Penny is getting chilled and we've had another great bird filled day so we head back to the hotel for another whisky tasting and dinner.

Day 5 As we leave the hotel this morning the end of the road is just a mass of geese whirling against the morning sky. We leave sharply hoping to catch more geese activity but by the time we are down in the bay they have gone. But along the shore the Whooper Swans are just wakening up and are preening in the morning sunshine, we watch them for a while and Viv is pleased to see a colour ring on one that she wants to try and track down, Richard takes a few photos as the birds pose beautifully for us.

We leave the swans hoping to catch the 10 o'clock ferry to Jura and no sooner have we arrived than we are boarding and on our way. The morning is bright and fresh and we are soon driving along the narrow single road around Jura. We stop and scan for Otters in the water and along the shore and enjoy the beautiful warm sunshine. We gently make our way along the road spying Red Deer on the moorland as we go. We arrive in Craighouse where the Jura whisky distillery is. We park up and explore the village again looking for Otters. We make our way to the loos and on the way back come across a busy flock of small birds, including Treecreeper and Goldcrest and at least a dozen Long-tailed Tits. Nearer the car park Sally spots what she thinks is a Blackcap and sure enough its female Blackcap, quite a surprise to find one on Jura at the end of October. We continue on and stop at a beautiful beach where there a number of Blackbirds, as Viv put it, doing a good job of being Turnstones, flicking the seaweed for insects, they are joined by Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtail and Stonechat. From the beach we watch a Hen Harrier harassing a Buzzard and a Kestrel joins them over the nearby hillside.

We continue along the road stopping at a high point looking down on Loch Tarbert for lunch. A couple of stags eye us up but seem unperturbed by our presence. The scenery is beautiful and the Paps of Jura are simply stunning in their autumn colours. We come to a junction and see the sign for Lussa Gin, we want to stop here, but instead continue along an ever more rough road. It passes small lochans and goes up and down through some stunning old oak woods. Eventually we come to a gate way and a turning point and decide to walk up the road for a short distance. The fields are covered with busy feeding Blackbirds mixed in with thrushes too. But here Blackbirds seem to dominate, there must be 50 in this field. We discuss George Orwell who stayed several miles further up this remote road many years ago and wondered how he got there and what he ate.

We return along the road and stop at Lussa Gin where we are all given a small sample, its delicious and we all decide to buy some gin. Excited by our purchases and having enjoyed meeting one of the creators of the gin we venture down to Inverlussa where we happen upon a very posy stag and then we wend our way back via Craighouse for another look for Otter and then gradually back to the ferry. We enjoy waiting and watching for the small ferry to leave Islay and meet us on Jura, a jolly ferryman chats to us asking what we have seen and before long we are off the ferry and heading to Bridgend. The best parking space is free for watching the geese come in but despite our wait, only a few geese arrive before dark so we decide to try again in the morning.

**Day 6** We start the day early in the hope of catching the geese leaving their roosting grounds. We manage to get into the parking space just before Bridgend whilst its still dark and there is no sound of geese at all. We sit patiently in the dark and quite quickly it starts to get lighter but still no sight or sound of the geese. We decide to drive to Gruinart and park up expectantly, we can hear the geese on the loch. Soon though, we see some wheeling Jackdaws, we get out of the minibus and as the daylight develops the Jackdaw numbers increase. The sound is deafening as they form murmurations over the visitor centre building, we estimate there must be 4000 or more birds, its an incredible spectacle and though we don't see geese in the numbers we hoped the Jackdaws more than make up for it. As they wheel above us, they get noisier and noisier then suddenly fall silent and as they turn above us we can hear the wind rushing through their feathers and their wings beating, we are thrilled.

Some of the Jackdaws blacken the field as they settle, then suddenly we hear a different sound, it's a Merlin flashing past us just feet away, rushing through the air like a little torpedo, what a sight and it immediately puts the Jackdaws back up to join the others overhead. Slowly the birds disperse, whilst some from dense flocks then return to the trees only to lift and whirl together again seconds later. We eventually leave the Gruinart reserve as we are getting late for our breakfast but as we pass the head of Loch Indall we see a White-tailed Eagle and then another, we stop and watch and then move on hoping to get another glimpse as the birds hunt the estuary. We stop again and see a distant bird land and join two other birds in the distance. We watch them through the scope, two of the birds seem acquainted but the new bird doesn't seem to be quite so welcome. We need to press on but wonder what the eagles will do when the geese lift from the mudflats to return to their feeding grounds in the fields.

After breakfast we top up with fuel and enjoy the fact that we are at an 'attendant only' single pump fuel station. We set off south today and no sooner are we on the road than Sally spots a small raptor perched on a fence post, she hopes it's a Merlin and reverses a few yards back along the road and yes it is a Merlin perched up for a minute or two for us all to get a good view especially Penny who really wanted to see one, and Richard is delighted with his photographs, especially the one he gets just the moment the bird takes flight. At Port Ellen we stop in the bay and look out along the shore seeing Ringed Plover feeding amongst the weed. After a quick comfort stop we are about to go and a White-tailed Eagle flies across the bay and disappears behind some trees. We try to find a way of seeing where it went but no luck.

We drive to the east passing three distilleries on route, we have tried whiskies from all of the distilleries in our evening whisky tastings at the hotel. Penny particularly wanted to go to Kindalton Church and Cross and we call in here spotting what looks like a Swallow as we approach. Everyone admires the ancient cross from 1300 and wanders the graveyard whilst Sally searches for the Swallow. After a short stop here we continue down the road past beautiful inlets and through some glorious autumn colours especially the Beech trees. We eventually come to Claggan Bay, the weather has deteriorated a bit and it's spitting with rain, so we don't stray far from the minibus. We scan out looking for Otters and Sally is hopeful for a Golden Eagle but the weather isn't looking very encouraging as the hills are shrouded in mist. We decide to retrace our steps and pile back into the minibus, just a few yards after we see a large bird in front of us along the shore, it's a Golden Eagle!!!! It dips and dives down to the track along from us and into the small woodland where its joined by a Sparrowhawk and a couple of Hooded Crows, its being harassed by the other birds and gradually moves down the track. By this time we are all out of the minibus and enjoying the spectacle of the eagle not far away from us, soaring over the shore and low sea cliffs. Two Common Buzzards join in and the eagle looks to be getting impatient with them.

We watch the eagle for 10 minutes or so and then as it drifts away we get back into the minibus, as we are about to move off Sally spots some activity in the water, lots of splashing, its dolphins' not far off shore, the minibus gathers speed to keep up with the dolphins and then we all get out again and watch as they make their way along the shore. There are several of them, quite active, leaping out and we can see them through the scope, they look like Common Dolphins, fast, active and small.

After all the excitement we drive back towards Port Ellen and then towards the Mull of Oa. The weather looks to be clearing and we stop in a car park overlooking the sea towards the Rhinns of Islay and the sea cliffs of the Oa. We eat our lunch watching the Twite on the feeders here but there isn't much sign of anything else. We decide to walk to the American monument on the cliff top but as we set off the weather really does deteriorate, but we press on against the wind and rain to the impressive monument where we find a bit of shelter from the impressively strong wind, we read the story of the lost sailors and their rescuers that the monument commemorates and as Penny reads to us a Peregrine appears behind her, it soars past giving us a wonderful view before disappearing into the wind. We make our way back seeing a couple of Feral Goats as we go.

Once back in the minibus, we are all a little chilled and very wet, Thorntons millionaire shortbread brings us back to life and then a warm drink in the Islay Hotel to follow are just

the ticket. We start to head home watching as we go in the hope of a Hen Harrier. The fields beside the road are yet again filled with winter thrushes and as we take a small side road we are exited to see a Dipper disappear just as we arrive down a river. We get out and spot the Dipper far down the river, unfortunately Richard misses it despite a further search. On the hill we hear stags roaring for the first time and spot some splendid stags in a nearby field. We've had a full day so it time to return to our hotel, pack for tomorrows journey and savour our final dram, this time an Ardbeg.

Day 7 We leave our hotel this morning, which we've really enjoyed. Catherine and her team have provided us with excellent breakfasts and we have felt very welcomed by the whole team at the Bowmore Hotel. We travel to the ferry at Port Askaig and are soon aboard and on deck in preparation for our cruise to the mainland. We scan the coastline as we leave and are surprised that the skyline reveals a Red Kite, this seems unusual but we hear these birds have been appearing on Islay more frequently of late. On the water once again we see a lot of Shags and as we near the mainland increasing numbers of Kittiwake, a few Gannets and Great Northern Diver.

On the mainland we decide to take a circuitous route to Lochgilphead. We wend our way along the shores of the Sound of Jura and along to Kilberry. The autumn colours here are stunning and the ancient oak woodland is glorious dripping in mosses and fern in its autumn tones. We struggle to find a place to view the waterside edges to look for Otter and eventually after passing several cars clearly on route to a wake, we find the perfect lunch spot with huge rocks to provide some seating whilst overlooking a huge bay. We have our first Rock Pipit here and enjoy views of Red-throated and Great Northern Divers. We can see a large distant flock of Eider and after lunch we drive round and get some great views of gorgeous Eider Duck cooing and calling in the afternoon light. As we watch them we have several Ravens calling behind us.

We continue our drive admiring the views on this relatively remote road. We reach Lochgilphead and then head towards the Crinan Canal. At the river the tide is very high and there are few birds about. Penny, Richard and Heather decide to take a walk whilst Sally and Viv scan out for birds, but there is a new species, Goosander! Sally and Viv pick everyone up and we continue our quests for the day to find Otter! On route we have a surprise Red Squirrel in the road but despite our efforts none of our stops provide any Otters. We decide to make our way to our hotel for our final night and continue our scenic drive down by Loch Fyne always casting an eye out on the water hoping for a glimpse of the elusive Otter. We arrive at our hotel, we are all feeling pretty tired after a week full of fabulous wildlife watching and glorious sights and sounds. We've had a great group and we've chatted throughout the week about every conceivable subject, we've never been short of things to talk about. What a great week in some truly wonderful places.

**Day 8** We leave our hotel on Loch Fyne and make our way slowly towards Glasgow. It's a nice clear morning and so we enjoy the drive. We stop at the head of Loch Long to stretch our legs and spy a distant Dipper. Richard manages to see it so it's on his list for the holiday but its far off and not very accommodating. We scope across the water and make use of the toilets here before moving on to Loch Lomond. The Erskine Bridge is closed so we have to take a different route. Between Richard and Heather we navigate our way to the car park not far from the station and say our final goodbyes before Viv gets on her train and the rest of us get something for lunch in preparation for our onward journeys.

### Favourite Species

Richard	White-tailed Eagle
Viv	White-tailed Eagle
Heather	White-tailed Eagle
Penny	White-tailed Eagle
Sally	Merlin

# Favourite Place

Richard	Saligo Bay
Viv	The swan stop just outside Bowmore
Heather	Saligo Bay
Penny	The woodland on Jura, the ancient oaks and Atlantic Rainforest remnant
Sally	Loch Gorm

### Magic Moment

- Richard The perched Merlin and being able to photograph it and the Jackdaw murmuration
- Viv The Jackdaw murmuration
- Heather The Jackdaw murmuration and all the Fieldfares and Redwings in the fields wherever we went.
- Penny The Jackdaw murmuration, especially when all the chatter stopped and you could just hear the air going through their wings
- Sally Seeing the Golden Eagle so close and then in the next breath the Common Dolphins in the bay.

#### BIRDS

Mute Swan Whooper Swan White-fronted Goose Greylag Goose Canada Goose Barnacle Goose Brent Goose Shelduck Mallard Pintail Shoveler Wigeon Teal Pochard Scaup Tufted Duck Eider Common Scoter Long-tailed Duck Goldeneye Red-breasted Merganser Goosander Pheasant Red-throated Diver Black-throated Diver Great Northern Diver Little Grebe Gannet Cormorant Shag Grey Heron Little Egret White-tailed Eagle Golden Eagle Red Kite Hen Harrier Common Buzzard Sparrowhawk Kestrel Peregrine Merlin Oystercatcher **Ringed Plover** Golden Plover Lapwing Knot Sanderling Turnstone Dunlin Redshank Bar-tailed Godwit

Curlew Snipe Black-headed Gull Common Gull Herring Gull Great Black-backed Gull Kittiwake Black Guillemot Guillemot Razorbill Rock Dove Woodpigeon Collared Dove Swallow Skylark Rock Pipit Meadow Pipit Pied Wagtail Dipper Dunnock Robin Stonechat Song Thrush Redwing Mistle Thrush Fieldfare Blackbird Blackcap Goldcrest Wren Great Tit Coal Tit Blue Tit Long-tailed Tit Treecreeper Lesser Grey Shrike Jay lackdaw Chough Rook Hooded Crow Carrion Crow Raven Starling House Sparrow Chaffinch Linnet Twite Goldfinch Greenfinch

MAMMALS

Rabbit Brown Hare Otter Red Deer Roe Deer Fallow Deer Harbour porpoise Common Dolphin Grey Seal Common Seal Red Squirrel Feral Goat