

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### ISLAY AND SPEYSIDE EASTER

28 MARCH - 2 APRIL 2018

**Guides:** Duncan Macdonald & Craig Round

**Guests:** Marge Wood, Sandra Peel, Dave Thompson, Penny & John Lee, Dave & Iain Elliot, Caroline & Paul Hastilow, Fay Tempest, Adam Moan

**Day 1** After all meeting up at The Steading, we enjoy our first delicious evening meal cooked by Chef Sharon, before Craig and Duncan outline the exciting plans for the trip ahead.

**Day 2** Our first full day dawns sunny, cold and frosty as we head out from The Steading to take a short walk in the pine forest around some local lochans. There are some stunning reflections on the lochs surface in the still conditions this morning and great views to be had looking up to the snow covered hills of Glen Feshie beyond. On our walk we hear a Great Spotted woodpecker drumming distantly and also see Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Meadow Pipit, Mallards and a Curlew is heard as it flies overhead, before we head back to the steading for a welcome warm drink.

After warming up back at base we head out again and drive up into the mountainous Findhorn valley and on our drive up into the glen a Brown Hare is seen in a field near the road and female Sika Deer are found feeding at the edge of the Birch woodland. There are also several Buzzards and Kestrels already up and soaring, and driving alongside the Findhorn river we find several Dippers as well as a pair of smart Goosander on the river, a Bullfinch flies over before we make another stop to scan out over the Glen. From here we manage to pick out a white Mountain Hare and a Red Grouse distantly on the hill opposite, along with flocks of Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers in the fields and a little further on the upland scenery becomes even more dramatic as we make a stop for lunch beside the river to scan the surrounding hills.

During lunch we get great views of a pair of Peregrines mobbing a Buzzard right overhead and a flock of seven Curlew fly over calling before we take a short walk out up onto the hill opposite. There are still some large patches of snow

on the hills and as we walk, we pass a small herd of Mountain Goats by the track and we flush out a Common Snipe. Scanning out over the hillside we find at least eight Mountain Hares dotted about on the hillside, all still in their white winter pelage and giving some great views through the scopes. Another two Peregrines are picked out soaring along with at least four Kestrels and several Ravens. A small group of Red Deer stags watch us from high on the ridge above.

Moving on, a few snow showers start to move in as we drive a little further up into the glen and stop to have another scan out. From here we see at least seven Buzzards up soaring in the distance along with a few more Ravens before we head back to base.

After tea, in the evening, we drive over to our mammal hide on the Rothiemurchus estate, and en route get some great views of a Woodcock sat in the middle of the road, and another Woodcock is seen briefly flying up from the roadside in the headlights. What a night for Woodcock!

At the hide we settle down inside to wait and see what mammals may be tempted in to the bait and as darkness falls, between four and seven different Badgers are seen feeding on the scattered peanuts around the hide including four together and a Tawny Owl flies in and lands on the ground next to the hide briefly, before flying off back into the darkness.

**Day 3** It is another cold and still start this morning, and overnight there has been a dusting of snow at The Steading as we head over to the Moray coast. On the way to the coast we make a stop in Kincaig where we get some great views of two pairs of Goldeneye out on the loch displaying and chasing. As we drive across the moors we see a number of Red Grouse calling and displaying right by the road, as well two Curlew and a pair of stunning Golden Plover calling out on the moor. The first few Meadow Pipits and Skylark are also back on the moors singing, whilst on the loch nearby there are a few Greylag Geese and Tufted Duck as well as two stunning Black-throated Divers in summer plumage, which treat us to a superb fly past before dropping in onto the loch. two Red-throated Divers are also on the loch on the far side and we also see a scattering of Oystercatcher and Lapwing displaying over the fields around the loch shore and pass a large colony of Common Gulls that are nesting on the moorland.

Our first stop on the coast is around at Findhorn Dunes where we see two Magpies and several smart Yellowhammers among the dune slacks. There are good views out to sea from here, and offshore we see a Red-throated Diver in winter plumage close in to the beach, as well

as 8 or more Long-tailed Duck with a larger flock of fifty to sixty Long-tailed Duck further out, three Common Scoter, two Red-breasted Merganser, a few Razorbill, a Kittiwake, four Sandwich Terns and a few adult Gannets also fly by.

Moving on we drive around the coast for some lunch sheltering out of the strong, cold wind in the woods at Roseisle. A Crested Tit is heard calling in the pines here and scanning offshore we pick out some more distant Long-tailed Duck, as well as eight Common Scoter, Razorbill, six Red-breasted Mergansers including five smart drakes, two Red-throated Divers, and a few more Gannets plunging for fish offshore.

From here we move on around to Burghead finding a Rock Pipit in the Harbour, from the shore near the Maltings to see a good selection of waders. There are Redshank on the rocks here as well as Turnstone, Oystercatcher and fantastic flock of one hundred and fifty or more Knot which give us some great views as they wheel around in flight.

At Lossiemouth we find masses of roosting Herring Gulls along with a few Greater Black-backed Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls as well as some big flocks of Wigeon and smaller numbers of Teal, and Redshank on the estuary. There are also a few Bar-tailed Godwit and a single Dunlin here.

Our last stop of the day is nearby at the pig farm at Balormie where we manage to pick out a smart adult Iceland Gull and a first winter Glaucous Gull on the pools here as Lapwing tumble in display overhead.

#### Day 4

It is yet another cold start this morning with more light snow overnight as we head for the West Coast. Our first stop is near Inverness under the road bridge at North Kessock where it's absolutely freezing! However, from here we do see two Goshawks briefly soaring over, so it's not all bad. As we cross the Black Isle several Red Kites are soaring as we press on westwards through the snow showers. The drive takes us through some great scenery which only gets more mountainous as we push on west and we stop for a hot drink looking out to the rugged snow covered mountain of An Teallach and surrounded by snow covered peaks in all directions. What a view! It proves to be a great spot as not only do we have some breathtaking scenery to look at, we also get great views of around six Golden Eagles. It's eagletastic! Everywhere we look eagles seem to be up on the wing today and we see an adult male Golden Eagle 'roller coasting' in display flight, and another pair of adult Eagles soaring right over us being mobbed by a Raven!

Dragging ourselves away from the 'eaglefest' we make a stop on the coast overlooking Gruinard Bay, where we find a few Shags, and Black Guillemot

as well as at least six Great Northern Divers out in the bay and watch as a flock of well over two hundred Barnacle Geese lift into the air from a nearby field as an adult male Golden Eagle flies across from Gruinard Island, sending the geese into full on panic mode! The eagle sightings just keep coming though, as at our next stop at Aultbea we get amazing views of a juvenile White-tailed eagle hunting gulls out over the bay right in front of us! A smart summer plumaged Slavonian Grebe is also seen just offshore here and there are some Rock doves in the village.

Our last stop of the day is on the coast a little further north, with some great views looking to the mountains of Sutherland, and from here we get some nice views of another Great Northern Diver in winter plumage as well as Red-breasted merganser, and a Mink is seen scampering around amongst the rocks along the shore! Sadly it's not an Otter. We also get a good look at two Greenshank along the shore here, before we head back.

**Day 5** Today dawns with more frost, sun and clear blue skies, and our first returning Osprey is seen by Adam, flying along the River Feshie before breakfast. In Kincaig there is a skim of ice on Loch Insh this morning and a skein of fourteen Pink-footed Geese are seen flying over. Overlooking Loch Insh we find three Redshank on the shore amongst the roosting Gulls and there are a few Wigeon and Goldeneye out on the loch as well as four Red-throated divers, and several Oystercatcher and Lapwing fly through. A small flock of Long-tailed Tit and Goldcrest also move through the bushes next to where we are stood.

From here we drive up onto Cairngorm to look for some of the special birds of these high hills. As it's Easter and with great snow cover the mountain is very busy with skiers and we have to take the shuttle bus up to the top ski area car park. After a patient wait and with several Meadow Pipits parachute display flying around us, our wait is rewarded and we get great views of three stunning Snow Bunting that fly over, and drop in right beside us to feed around picnic benches above the car park, giving us some great views, what cracking wee birds!

Heading back down the mountain we have a hot drink alongside Loch Morlich. The loch is mirror calm today with some great views back up to the snow covered Cairngorms, and another two Red-throated Divers are out on the loch displaying along with Tufted Duck and Goldeneye. From here we take a walk in the forest nearby and get some good, if brief views, of two Crested Tits in the tops of the Scots Pine trees and a single Common Crossbill flies over calling, before we move on to Nethybridge for some lunch. After a quick look for the Black Redstart reported earlier in the week at Broomhill along the River

Spey, we move on to our last stop of the day and another short walk in the forest, where we see another four Common Crossbill fly over calling but the forest is otherwise very quiet, so it's back to base.

**Day 6** Overnight there is more snow and we have an early start this morning as we leave the Steading behind to head southwest over to the island of Islay. Near Creag Meagaidh NNR we get great views of four Black Grouse feeding in a field beside the road, and the scenery is spectacular as we head via Loch Laggan to Fort William. At Corran ferry we make a quick stop before heading onwards to Oban and finally to Kennacraig, reaching the ferry terminal at lunchtime.

As we wait to board the ferry a few Black Guillemots, and a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers are offshore near the pier as the ferry comes in, and during an increasingly damp, wet and murky ferry crossing to Islay we see over forty Great Northern Divers! We also see at least five Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemots as well a few Gannets, Red-breasted Mergansers, Shags, Cormorants, Kittiwake and a small flock of Common Scoter. The ferry brings us ever closer to Islay and Jura, passing Gigha on the way before we dock at Port Ellen and drive off the ferry.

It's raining steadily as we drive north across the island towards Bridgend and Loch Indaal, and we soon start to see our first small flocks of White-fronted Geese feeding in the fields beside the road and also a ringtail Hen Harrier is seen quartering low over the fields briefly before drifting off. Driving alongside Loch Indaal we see a few Shelduck along the shore as well as Curlew, Wigeon and Oystercatcher and get some nice views of our first flock of Barnacle Geese close to the road which lift into the air filling the sky with their 'yapping' calls, welcome to Islay!

**Day 7** Our first full day on Islay starts grey and wet with light rain falling, as we drive out from the hotel this morning and head up the road, making our first stop a short distance away along Loch Indaal. Here we see a close flock of Teal and Shelduck by the road as well as Rock Pipit, Pied Wagtail and Oystercatcher.

A little further on we stop to look through a close flock of Barnacle Geese near the road and there are a few Ringed Plover and Turnstone along the shore. Great Northern Divers are offshore along with a smart group of six drake Red-breasted Mergansers, Goldeneye and a Common Seal, as more flocks of Barnacle Geese fly over and drop into the fields nearby.

A little further on we come across a stunning first winter Iceland Gull roosting on the shore and manage to get some great views of this scarce winter visitor,

before we head towards Loch Gruinart. We drive slowly over the flat farmland keeping an eye out for any unusual birds towards Loch Gruinart, and Duncan manages to pick out a Redwing which is sub-singing from deep cover beside the road and we also see a Roe buck here.

Driving on, a ringtail Hen Harrier flies through quartering low to the ground and we pass fields full of Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese in the fields beside the road.

On the flooded farmland around the Gruinart Flats the fields are alive with displaying waders, mainly Lapwing, Curlew and Redshank, along with more feeding flocks of Geese, as well as many singing Skylark and Meadow Pipits. After a hot drink at the RSPB visitor centre we have a scan out over the flats from this high vantage point. The fields below us are literally full of waders here with more Redshank, Lapwing and Curlew and we also pick out some Pintail as well as flocks of Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler out on the marshes as well as a few Snipe, a female Red-breasted Merganser and Ravens. The first male Wheatear of the spring is also seen in a field below the visitor centre!

From here we drive out to Ardnave point to see if we can find some Chough. This is a large area of grazed sand dune and is perfect for these charismatic members of the crow family. As we drive along the road we see our first Chough fly quickly past, and Adam and Paul also see another Chough while we have our lunch beside the loch. After lunch we make our way along the sandy track through the dunes with great views across Loch Gruinart and walk out to the point, where we find more flocks of Barnacle Geese feeding out on the headland. We also see a large flock of around 4 hundred Golden Plover flying over as well as lots of Lapwing, and another Wheatears are found feeding amongst the flocks of migrant Meadow Pipits here. The weather by now is starting to take a turn for the worse as heavy rain rolls in, so we make our way back to the RSPB visitor centre to dry out and get a hot drink.

After lunch we take a walk down to one of the hides with a great view overlooking the reserve. The pools here are full of birds and Whooper Swans are on a pool right in front of the hide as we arrive. There are also masses of displaying Lapwing and Redshank calling all around and also Little Grebe, Pintail, Shoveler, and Wigeon and Teal feeding in front of us. It really is a fantastic sight and sound with the air full of the cries of displaying waders and just as we are about to leave a lovely grey male Hen Harrier flies past the hide and low over the marshes, a great end to the day!

**Day 8** Today dawns wet, cold and windy! Nice! Undaunted by a little soft Islay weather however, we head towards Loch Indaal seeing a pair of Eider,

Great Northern Diver and Red-breasted Mergansers offshore, as well as more Shelduck, Teal, Oystercatcher and Ringed plover along the shore. After yesterday's Iceland Gull, we complete the set of scarce wintering Gulls with a huge Glaucous Gull roosting on the shore and giving us some great views!

Cutting inland from here we head towards Loch Gorm and make a circuit of the loch and surrounding fields seeing more large flocks of Greenland White-fronted Geese and Barnacle Geese feeding in the fields close to the road and also finding five late Redwing. We also find more waders in the fields with Lapwing and Curlew and a huge flock of around six hundred northern race Golden Plover, with most by now, in stunning summer plumage! Ooof! What a golden spangled sight to behold!

Our next stop is at Kilchoman Church, to take a look at the fantastic medieval Kilchoman Cross which dates to the early 1300's when the medieval church was built, and is carved with very intricate and complicated scroll work in the Iona style. We also drop in at a fantastically appointed hide nearby 'thanks Ian!' seeing both Linnet and Goldfinch here, before we head around to the Kilchoman Distillery to warm up with a hot drink! From here we head back towards Loch Indaal, and as we drive depart the distillery a Merlin shoots through and over the distillery building, panicking a flock of Starlings in its wake!

We pick up the Glaucous gull along the shore of the loch again as we head towards Bruichladdich where we have some lunch along the shore, and seeing a few Ringed Plover, Great Northern Diver, Rock Pipits and a single Sandwich Tern here.

Our next stop is further along the coast at Port Charlotte where we have a quick visit to the Islay Natural History centre, before we drive further south down to Portnahaven, where we enjoy some great views of Common Seals in the harbour, looking across to the lighthouse on Orsay.

From Portnahaven we drive back north through 'The Rinns' where we get some lovely views of a hunting male Hen Harrier beside the road, and a little further on get fantastic views of an adult Golden eagle soaring right overhead as Chough fly over calling at the same time! We also find a huge flock of over a thousand Barnacle and Greenland white-fronted Geese in the fields here and looking just a little nervous as the eagle flies high overhead!

## Day 9

It is a sunny but cold start as we head out from the hotel, and drive down towards Bowmore where we make a brief stop for whisky shopping! We also have a scan out across the loch from the pier and find Razorbill,

Red-breasted Merganser and a flock of Curlew fly over. From Bowmore we make our way inland on a quiet road that crosses some moorland habitat and watch as a Raven flies over and drops a dead Brown Rat it is carrying into a nearby croft garden! At Loch Tallant a male Hen harrier is seen hunting in the distance, before we move on again and drive south via Port Ellen and out to the Oa.

Here we take a walk out to the American Memorial on the headland, with the sounds of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits displaying all around and some lovely clear blue skies and spring sunshine today, it really is a fantastic spot. As we get to the cliffs below the Memorial a pair of Peregrines soar high overhead calling and Duncan hears a Golden Eagle calling briefly from the cliffs below us. The views are stunning from here looking out to sea and even the coast of Northern Ireland is visible on the horizon! We take some time out here enjoying the stunning views and seeing Raven and Hooded Crow as well as a female Wheatear which flies past along the cliff top and a brief male Hen Harrier and very distant Golden Eagle. On the walk back we come across a flock of five Twite which fly over calling and while having lunch a Peregrine flies right over!

After lunch we drive around to Loch Kinnabus where we find a good number of Greenland White-fronted Geese and Barnacle Geese in the fields and a large flock of Twite are perched in the trees around the farm buildings here. From the Oa we head along the south end of the island to have a look for Otter. We drive past some of the famous distilleries before stopping near Ardbeg where we find a rocky cove covered in Common Seals that looks perfect for Otter. We put in some time and scan along the rocky shore and the nearby shallow water in the hopes of finding an Otter but sadly none show up. We do, however, get excellent close views of the Common Seals hauled out on the rocks, as well as several Curlew, Red-breasted Merganser and a close Great Northern Diver.

From here we take a look at the fantastic 8th century AD Kildalton Cross, often considered the finest surviving Celtic cross in Scotland, and also briefly see a Golden Eagle soaring over the hills in the distance. As we head back to the hotel, alongside Loch Indaal a huge roosting flock of some four to five thousand or more Barnacle Geese are out in the bay along with a flock of eleven Whooper Swans, what a sight!

**Day 10** Today we have to leave Islay sadly and it's a very wet and windy start as we load up the luggage at the hotel and head off to catch our ferry off Islay. Near Port Ellen we pass a large flock of Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese beside the road and Sandwich Terns roosting on the beach in Port Ellen.



During the ferry crossing four Common Scoter are seen as well as Shag, Gannet, Kittiwake, Eider, Sandwich Tern, Slavonian Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Razorbill, Guillemot and Black Guillemot. We also see lots more Great Northern Divers, Black-throated Diver and Red-throated Divers, before finally landing at Kennacraig to begin the drive back to The Steading.

**Species of the Trip:** Golden Eagle, Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese

**Place of the Trip:** The Oa walk

**Magic Moment:** Watching a Golden eagle soar over on the Rinns of Islay as Chough fly over

## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Greenland White-fronted Goose  
Pink-footed Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Pale-bellied Brent Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Pintail  
Shoveler  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Long-tailed Duck  
Common Scoter  
Goldeneye  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
Red Grouse  
Black Grouse  
Red-legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Slavonian Grebe  
Little Grebe  
Fulmar  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
Osprey  
Golden Eagle  
Red Kite  
Hen Harrier  
Sparrowhawk  
Goshawk  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Merlin  
Moorhen  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Turnstone  
Dunlin  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Woodcock  
Common Snipe  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Iceland Gull  
Glaucous Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Sandwich Tern  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
Rock Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Skylark  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Grey Wagtail

Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Wheatear  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Redwing  
Mistle Thrush  
Goldcrest  
Wren  
Long-tailed Tit  
Crested Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Trecreeper  
Magpie  
Jay  
Jackdaw  
Chough  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Twite  
Redpoll sp  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Bullfinch  
Common Crossbill  
Snow Bunting  
Reed Bunting  
Yellowhammer

**Total Birds: 122**

## **MAMMALS**

Badger  
Common Seal  
Short-tailed Vole  
Bank Vole  
Wood Mouse  
Brown Rat (Deceased, dropped by Raven!)  
Red Squirrel  
Rabbit  
Brown Hare  
Mountain Hare  
Mink  
Weasel  
Pine Marten  
Badger  
Pipistrelle Bat  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Fallow Deer  
Sika Deer  
Mountain/Feral Goat  
Common Seal

**Total Species: 143**

## **Misc Addenda/Moths**

Yellow Horned  
Micro sp

**Total Misc 2**