

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

MULL IN AUTUMN

24-31 OCTOBER 2020

Guide: Sally Nowell

Guests: Julie & Malcolm Parker, Sarah Sharland, Andrew Dodd, Patrick Hogston

Day 1 We all arrive from our different bases in the UK at the station in Glasgow, the airport or our hotel car park.

We are spending our first night on the banks of Loch Lomond. Before dinner we have a quick meet up to discuss the plans for the day ahead and then proceed to dinner and then an early night after a long day of travel.

Day 2 After a leisurely breakfast we leave our hotel at around 9.45am. We make our way north initially to Tarbet and then on to Inverary via the often closed 'Rest and Be Thankful'.

Working our way further north still, we take a minor road that takes us south west along the very scenic glen of Loch Awe. The road is spectacularly lined with ancient Oak trees strewn with ferns and lichen. The woodland edges the loch beside us giving us occasional views out across the water where we catch glimpses of Red-breasted Merganser and Goldeneye. We stop briefly to stretch our legs at a waterfall along the way and have an unexpected view of a Merlin dashing across the road, initially mistaken for a thrush but its speed and agility leads Sally and Andrew both to call Merlin! A quick glimpse as the bird dashes away is seen by Malcolm too, but sadly the bird disappears from view. Further down the road we are rewarded with views of a Red Squirrel perhaps visiting the numerous Hazel trees to add to its winter hoard.

Onward to the end of the loch, then turning north again towards Oban. Our task here is to locate a chemist for some sea sickness tablets as the ferry crossing looks like it might be a little rough, no chemists are open but a packet of ginger biscuits appears to do the trick, nobody is sea sick on the crossing which turns out to be quite gentle. At Oban we find a lunch spot overlooking the sea but sadly the rain stops us enjoying our first lung full of west coast sea air. We then make our way to the ferry terminal where we watch a Black Guillemot in its handsome winter plumage and Julie spots a Grey Seal, loafing about in the harbor. The ferry crossing is quite uneventful but a highlight is a Storm Petrel dancing on the water alongside the boat. We also see Gannet,

Common Guillemot and Kittiwake, all well worth staying on the deck for, especially on such a mild day. As we arrive on Mull the light is beginning to fade but we have a brief stop on route to look for Otters. A lone Common Seal is laying on a rocky island but no Otters and it is time to make for our hotel in Tobermory. We arrive at the brightly coloured Mishnish Hotel in time to have a shower and get down for the first bird list and a quick glass of wine in the beer garden in the rain, the Covid rules at this time do not permit the serving of alcohol indoors.

Day 3 We have a holiday highlight even before we leave the breakfast table! Julie spots a "large bird being mobbed", our first White-tailed Eagle of the trip!! That sets the day up nicely.

We head south towards Lochdon promptly after breakfast. A couple of stops on route gives us an opportunity to enjoy brief views of Greenshank, Widgeon, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. At Grasspoint we drive to the parking area and walk a short distance down the road. As we set off we spot a small group of thrushes in the field, a mix of Fieldfares and Redwings. They are in great light feeding on the fields giving us excellent views. Along the road edge a pair of Stonechats, flit up and down perching up right in front of the van whilst we have our coffee.

After getting a bit of air in our lungs we make our way back up this stunning narrow road. Just before passing through the ancient oak woodland, Sally spots a Grey Hen Harrier which rapidly disappears carried by the strong winds but not before some of us manage to get a decent view of its sleek grey wings disappearing into the distance. We continue up into an open area overlooking Loch Don and stop to scan out across the russet glow of the grassland. Patrick picks something up in the distance and Sally confirms it is a Brown Hen Harrier which we are able to watch for several minutes as it moves back and forth some distance away before dropping down towards the Loch.

Further along we spot a small group of Red Deer, our first for the trip, and a small flock of Starlings before we leave Grasspoint in search of Otter! Driving along the Lochside, Patrick spots a diver. We get out of the van for brilliant views of a Great Northern Diver, still showing a lot of its summer plumage. We are able to watch it undisturbed for quite some time before moving off along the road which hugs the loch side. Malcolm and Julie are desperate to see an Otter, they have tried before in other parts of Scotland and hadn't been lucky, so the pressure is on!! Fortunately as we drive along the shores of Loch Spelve, Malcolm suddenly shouts out that he's seen an Otter, he has indeed! An Otter is swimming along not far from the shore. We stop and watch as it worked it's way along the shore, diving down quickly and repeatedly and then we can see that it was eating. We watch the Otter feeding for around 30 minutes.

We eventually stop the van and gradually all get out and watch quietly as the Otter approaches us, it watches us but carries on its business, coming out onto the shore for a brief period to eat and then back in the water, as it comes past us it stops, comes onto the shore just 12/15 metres away, nibbles on a starfish and then carries on its way, looking at us, carrying on and then looking again. It is a real magic moment to watch the Otter and to see that it seems relaxed in our company. As we are watching we spot a Golden Eagle across on the far hillside but the Otter is the star of the show and the eagle does not even seem to get a look in.

Eventually we leave the Otter to go about its business as our own lunch is calling us. We continue along the loch and then to Loch Uisg. As we drive, Sally and Patrick notice two large birds high over the Loch, we stop but the birds are nowhere to be seen. Sarah then spots them some distance away and we all jump out of the van. Two birds are circling above us, they disappear behind the hillside and then quickly reappear as the wind moves them on. The birds come close together, at one point they look as though they are talon grappling. One bird is displaying, dropping like a stone from the sky, going up and then returning back down almost as if it is enjoying the experience as much as we are enjoying watching it. Two more birds appear at a distance, which could have been two more eagles but they disappear and we move on to Lochbuie.

The weather is amazing, one second sunshine on the mountain slopes, the next rainbows, then torrential downpours and then next, misty rain is blowing in. It isn't the best weather for a picnic lunch!

At Lochbuie the little post office shop that many guests will remember is now a stylish tearoom with a lovely clean toilet!! We make use of the facilities, spot another Otter in the bay and depart after a filling lunch and make our way to Croggan. A slightly less eventful drive with Patrick spotting a Little Grebe and a Mistle Thrush fly past and perch on a telegraph wire. At the end of the road we take a walk through the beautiful windblown Hazels and Oaks to look out across to the mainland. Looking across the mouth of Loch Spelve we can see Feral Goats on the far shore, a new mammal for the trip.

The light is beginning to fade so we drive straight back towards Tobermory spotting several Red Deer in a field near the road and then finally a stunning stag proudly stands posing for us just over a fence. A fabulous day of wildlife watching on Mull.

Day 4

Oh dear, the forecast is not looking good! We decide to focus on the centre of the island working our way west, south and then east. We start working our way down Glen Aros alongside the beautiful river on a really pretty piece of road. Great excitement breaks out in the back of the van at the sight

of a group of hairy pigs, yes that's right, hairy pigs, Mangalitsa Pigs to be precise. Never had the guests got out of the van with such speed and enthusiasm! The pigs come running along the fence in search of our attention and when Malcolm throws in an offering of some apple they go wild with excitement, the pigs and the guests!! So the pigs are most definitely a highlight of this rather dull day and means that we are off to a good start even if this isn't strictly wildlife.

We stop for 30 minutes to scan across the fields and hills for eagles or harriers and are pleased that it remains relatively dry whilst we do so. Sadly no birds, so we continue along the road passing huge areas of clear felled forest. We pause briefly to watch one of the harvesters in action, within five minutes it has felled and processed around five trees that must have been 40/50 years old, it is mesmerizing watching this incredible computerized machine working its way through some of the vast areas of plantation forest on Mull. We work our way down to Dervaig and pause for a few minutes at the estuary. Here Sally and Patrick have a distant Otter, we have close views of Ringed Plover, Redshank and Greenshank. Behind us in the trees are large groups of mixed smaller birds which include Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and mixed tit species with a few Redwing thrown in too. The next leg of our journey takes us on a high route over a very narrow stretch of road, sadly though the habitat looks great, we see no birds and the rain is starting to become heavier and more persistent.

As we descend to Loch Tuath on the west side of the Island. We turn left at Achleck, stopping on route at beautiful Eas Fors waterfall and then onward past Ulva and Gometra stopping in bays on route seeing Rock Pipit and Lapwing, Teal and distant Great Northern Diver. The rain is uncomfortably heavy at this point and spirits are low. A final stop at the head of Loch na Keal for a stunning group of Golden Plover putting a smile on everyone's face and then an early return back to Tobermory to warm up and browse the shops before dinner.

Day 5

Our day today starts with a stop at Salen, the rain has stopped (almost) and we jump out of the van to see what is out on the mouth of the river at low tide. We are just focusing our bins when Sally shouts "Otter". There on the shore on an area of seaweed an Otter is rolling around endlessly, presumably to look after its coat in some way. The Otter seems to be enjoying itself and we watch for 15 minutes or more before it decides to go into the sea and start fishing. Malcolm spots another Otter which Sally thinks may have been its mate, this one is fishing also, and eventually catches quite a large fish before it swims away to find a suitable place to eat its catch.

Onward towards Craignure, a quick drive down to Duart Castle to take photos of the castle and Highland Cows, and then on with our journey, which is to take us through Glen More. The weather changes from one minute to the next,

raising our hopes that we would pass through the valley and be able to enjoy the colours and the views, but then dashing them as a heavy downpour covers the mountain tops. We are able to stop and scan for eagles and the mountain tops are revealed as we pass through this spectacular Glen.

At the bottom of the road we turn west, and shortly after turning, Andrew spots a Hen Harrier. We park up and are all treated to a spectacular display of aerial agility as this harrier hunts in front of a white farmhouse, wheeling and turning giving us views of the wonderful markings of a Ring-tailed Harrier as the light lit the bird from below. The wind is quite strong and the harrier is being blown across the open moorland, eventually we lose sight of it and move on but Sarah picks it up further down the road, again we have good views but eventually lose sight of the bird.

We park up to scan the area at the head of Loch Scridain for waders, ducks and Otters, a single Little Grebe and a few Mallard are all we see before the weather beats us and we return to the van. Malcolm and Sally hatch a plan to explore new ground and we set off towards Carsiag. Carsaig is at the end of a very narrow road. As we explore this new route the road gets more and more narrow with more and more grass down the centre, and the sides of the road get steeper and steeper, everyone loves it but Sally is wondering where she is going to turn round at the bottom, it is all quite an adventure. Thankfully at the bottom of the road is a small car park before a stone built pier.

The sea is spectacularly rough, with a couple of Cormorants and a Great Northern Diver taking shelter here. Andrew stays on to do some photography whilst the rest of us eat lunch and see an Otter. There, we see some gannets out to sea but nothing else is braving the stormy sea in this remote and spectacular spot. We finish lunch and, as it is dry, take the coastal path along a wooded track to get more views out to sea but the mud and some rather precarious looking stepping stones lead to us deciding to return to the van. We retrace our steps up the steep road and are rewarded with a Golden Eagle fly over just before returning to the main road at Pennyghale.

We continue with our plan to drive round the southern half of the island returning via Loch Na Keal. We take a slow drive and as we start to look west the sky is clearing and has a definite hint of blue to it! Onward we go and begin dropping down to the bank of Loch Na Keal. Two Golden Eagles are spotted on our way down a steep and winding road where we cannot stop, one bird appears to continue down the cliff edge. The two birds come into view where we can safely stop, we stop the van and then hear Ravens, as two Ravens mob an eagle the birds come back towards us against the cliff, giving us the best views of Goldies of the trip. We stand and watch as this magnificent bird battles against the two Ravens dwarfed by the eagle. The eagle's plumage

is clearly visible against the dark cliffs and we get great views before continuing with our journey back toward the hotel.

We stop briefly again looking for Otters and then finally just before Tobermory to do the birdlist in the van, with great views across to the sunlit Ardnamurchan peninsula. Sally takes us a quick driving tour round the upper town of Tobermory before returning to the hotel.

Day 6 Today we are heading to the beach. We start out towards Dervaig, across some beautiful moorland scenery past Loch Torr and to a high point above Dervaig where some of us take some photos of the scene unraveled below us. We can see the unusual shaped church spire below us, apparently a 'pencil' shaped design that can be seen from all around. We decide a visit to the church later in the day is in order. We continue on down into Dervaig, stopping briefly to look out over the small estuary there, and then on to Calgary Beach. Surprisingly the beach is quite sheltered and we enjoy a gentle (dry) stroll for an hour walking across the sands, scanning out to sea but only seeing Herring Gull and a single Great Northern Diver.

With the cobwebs blown away, we visit the Calgary Café for a coffee and cake and then spend an enjoyable half hour in the gallery. We next make our way south along the winding road that hugs the coast before cutting north at Fanmore. Almost as soon as we turn off we hit trouble! A 'cow jam', the road is covered in Highland Cattle who are not looking prepared to move for anyone. The car in front of us is surrounded by Highland Cattle who are obstinate to a fault, not even shifting when the car horn is sounded. Eventually they do start to move, but we are all treated to very VERY close up views of these magnificent beasts, some of whom look to be in calf. It is most certainly the highlight of a very, very wet afternoon.

The rain gets heavier and more incessant, sadly there is no point in driving further as raptors will not choose to fly in this weather and Speyside Wildlife guests would not choose to birdwatch in it either. We stop in at the Mull Cheddar shop, somewhere that many other folk have decided would be a good port of call on a wet Thursday afternoon. We load up with cheese and go back to our hotel for tea and a rest before a pre dinner glass of wine in the beer garden and another lovely dinner at the Mishnish.

Day 7 The forecast for the day is the best we can wish for so we make the most of our final few hours on Mull by getting a prompt start and saying goodbye to the hotel staff who have looked after us so well.

Our first stopping point is at Scallastle where we spot a White-tailed Eagle sitting in the top of a Larch tree. As we watch it, a rain shower grows heavier and as we retreat to the van the eagle looks to have decided it wants

to be somewhere more sheltered too, it takes to the air and is joined by another bird, they both fly back towards the shelter of the plantation on the hillside disappearing in the rain shower until all we can see is the outline of their white tails.

Our hope for the day is that having been grounded by the bad weather, Eagles will take advantage of the better weather of the day and take to the air. Thirty pairs of Golden and 22 pairs of White-tailed Eagles have bred on Mull this year, that's a possibility of 104 adults and their young, so we are hopeful. Of course Mull is a large island with lots of wild habitat so there is an element of luck, hoping that birds are where we are looking, at any given time.

We work our way slowly through Glen More, the weather still a little unsettled. Another White-tailed Eagle is visible but distant. As we near Loch Scridain we spot a Brown Hen Harrier, presuming it is the same bird we had seen a few days earlier. We stop to scan for Otters and then on the hillsides for eagles, two Golden Eagles appear on the sky line which we watch for a while relieved that the change in the weather has given us a chance for a bit more eagle watching. We have a long drive ahead, so make our way back to the ferry at Fishnish before heading back to the mainland and the Morvern Penninsula for a spectacular drive along Loch Linnhe. We cross the Loch on the short Corran ferry and make our way through yet more the spectacular scenery of Glen Coe before arriving at our Loch Lomond hotel for dinner.

As always on our final day we spent the last few minutes reflecting on the week.

Day 8 After our farewells we leave the hotel promptly, returning guests to the airport to collect cars and to the station to catch a train south.

Favourite Species

Sarah	Otter and Great Northern Diver
Julie	Otter
Malcolm	Otter
Andrew	Otter
Patrick	Storm Petrel
Sally	Otter

Favourite Place

Sarah	The Highland Cow Jam road
Julie	South bank of Loch Na Keal
Malcolm	Calgary Beach
Andrew	Glen More
Patrick	Loch Na Keal
Sally	Carsaig and Loch Awe

Magic Moment

I think we all felt that we had an extraordinary experience watching the Otter on our first day on Mull, so in many ways that almost went without saying for some that it was our groups magic moment but here are some others.

Sarah	Watching the Otter going about its business
Julie	Seeing the White-tailed Eagle from the breakfast table on the first morning on Mull
Malcolm	Seeing the Ravens mobbing the Golden Eagle
Andrew	Golden Eagles displaying and finding the Hen Harrier, and watching it flying against the white house
Patrick	The Highland Cow jam
Sally	The Otter getting on with its daily business while keeping an eye on us watching it

Our group also asked that the 'hairy pigs' get an honorable mention, they were great value and a talking point throughout the trip!

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Mallard
Eurasian Teal
Eider
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Goldeneye
Pheasant
Great Northern Diver
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Storm Petrel
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Peregrine Falcon
Merlin
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone
Common Redshank
Greenshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Common Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Greater Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove

Tawny Owl (H)
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Redwing
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Eurasian Treecreeper
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Greenfinch

Total Birds: 73

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Otter
Red Deer
Fallow Deer
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Red Squirrel
Feral Goat

Total Species: 81