

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### A HEBRIDEAN ODYSSEY

4-16 JUNE 2023

**Leader:** Simon Eaves.

**Guests:** Wayne & Valerie Colson, David Thompson, Sue Bradbury

**Day 1** The holiday begins in Inverness, arriving in time for dinner together at the hotel. It's lovely to catch up with those that we've met before and equally nice to meet new guests too. We chat a little about the plans for the holiday ahead and take pleasure in the fact that the weather forecast looks fantastic for at least the next few days.

**Day 2** We are up in good time for breakfast and soon after the van is packed with all of our luggage and before long we are heading south west along the scenic shores of Loch Ness. The main road towards Fort William is a very pretty drive especially now the sun is out. We make a quick comfort break and pick up some lunches before heading on to the ferry port at Oban.

We've made good time and the ferry should be sailing in an hour or so. The ship is here but for now we are told it has a technical fault with the rear loading ramp and we have to wait. Unfortunately the wait keeps getting pushed back and each hour we get an update of "We'll let you know in an hour". Oh dear! We have lunch and take it in turns to go for a wander down to the harbour, Dave finds a massive Barrel Jellyfish floating close in and several Black Guillemots drift by in the calm waters.

Several hours and several cups of tea later a great cheer goes up from the ferry queue as they make an announcement for us to board. Normally we should have been eating at the hotel on Barra this evening but we have to dine on the ferry instead but the food is good and Dave even comments how good the lasagne is.

Because the days of June are so long and the evening light over the sea stretches the day length even more, we enjoy a sunset cruise watching hundreds of Manx Shearwaters skimming over the waves close to the Island of Rhum where they nest. A couple of Minkie Whales surface briefly and a small pod of Common Dolphins are leaping in the distance.

It's pretty dark when the ferry docks at Castle Bay on Barra but luckily it's only a one minute drive to the hotel who have waited up to give us our room keys. Sleep comes quickly!

**Day 3** We awake to fabulous views from the hotel out over the picturesque Castle Bay while enjoying a slightly later breakfast after our unexpectedly long journey yesterday.

We are spending the day on Barra and Vatersay so we take a slow drive out of the village and onto the narrow single track roads birding as we go. There is a Red-breasted Merganser in a little bay and we spot our first Hooded Crows on the shoreline. At a high view point we can hear several Skylarks singing and we see a few Rock Doves too.

A causeway links Barra to Vatersay and we make a stop here, it's nice to watch a pair of Ringed Plovers displaying flying up and down the pebble beach, a couple of Shags diving in the bay and a flock of Starlings entertain us with their vocal abilities to mimic several other bird species.

Driving on it's good to see so many Wheatears flitting ahead of us beside the road they must be nesting in good numbers here. The road hugs the coastline and out in the bay on some small rocky islands we spot several Common Seals hauled out.

Reaching what is almost the end of the road we park up and take a walk across some lovely Machir dunes carpeted in wildflowers down to a wide sandy bay. There are some Ringed Plovers and Sanderling here busy feeding along the tideline. We wander back from here to have lunch near the van with the sound of singing Skylarks all around.

Doubling back a short way we return to the island of Barra. We pause by the roadside when a couple of swans on a small Lochan catch our attention, they are Whooper Swans which is a nice surprise and in the same area we find Redshanks, Lapwings and many Greylag Geese. A little further on we jump out the van in a wide roadside lay-by overlooking a huge rocky bay on the coast, we scan the calm waters as it looks a good place for Otters. Simon picks out a Great Northern Diver and soon after a Red-throated Diver, there are several Black Guillemots here too.

Driving on we take a minor road and encounter a lovely male Stonechat along the way. Our target though, is a rare gull and at the end of the road at a sheltered seaweed covered bay we find a number of birds feeding on the beach. Simon picks out the Glaucous Gull which has been reported in this area previously, it's really a winter visitor to Scotland but this young bird hasn't read the rule book! It's a great addition to the list for a summer trip.

We carry on around the island heading north towards the Airport. Barra is famous for its beach landing strip and as we park up at the airport's carpark there's a plane circling around coming in to land. It's brilliant to watch and we have a cuppa here to stay to watch the plane take off again a short while later.

We drive on from here to the northern coastline and bays of the island, the waters are turquoise and clear and we add Little Terns to the list here. It's a lovely spot and we stay for a while finding Sanderling and Ringed Plovers on the shore. We make a short walk back along the road as we can hear a distant Corncrake calling, we get a little closer but it sounds like it's a couple of fields away so not much chance of seeing this one.

We take a different road back hoping to get closer to the Corncrake that we'd heard and we actually find two more Corncrakes calling very close to the road, we stop and stay quiet hoping that the birds will appear from the deep cover. They get closer and for a while we think they might cross the road but unfortunately they live up to their reputation and stay hidden.

We make one last stop on the way back to the hotel at a viewpoint looking down into Castle Bay. We can hear a Cuckoo calling and it makes a very brief appearance as it flies through, a couple of Redpoll fly over and a Snipe is calling from the hillside above us.

The evening light is amazing so Wayne and Simon take a stroll down to the harbour after dinner. A Rock Pipit shows well on a fence post and a couple of Black Guillemots have settled on the castle walls out in the bay. Wandering on we hear both Sedge and Willow Warblers singing and another Corncrake calling from very dense cover near the Church. We make one last scan of the sea from the higher ground near the church and Simon spots a distant Otter swimming across the bay. With the scope we get a pretty good view especially when it comes out of the water briefly onto a little rock. It's a great end to the day.

**Day 4** We are moving on from Barra today heading north by ferry. It's only a short drive in the morning to the ferry terminal and despite a slow moving campervan we are there in good time.

The wind is cool, the cloud is quite extensive and there's some rain in the air as we board the ferry. Setting sail we move out on deck finding a sheltered spot to stand but the rain has mostly cleared up anyway. A group of Shags are diving in the bay and we spot several Black Guillemots on the water as we cruise along. There are a few distant seals hauled out on some rocks and a small flock of Gannets plunge diving. A single dark phase Arctic Skua is a real highlight as it powers by at close range.

Arriving on Eriskay we pull over to let the other ferry traffic go by so that we are soon driving along on some very quiet roads. The little island is connected to South Uist by a causeway and we are soon crossing this. The landscapes of south Uist are different again from what we've seen so far with vast moorland skirting large hills to the east of the main road it looks perfect habitat for raptors. Before long Wayne spots our first Short-eared Owl of the trip flying gracefully over the moors, we pull over off the road for a better look. It turns out to be a good call to stop here as a male Hen Harrier also appears over the same area and we get some great looks at both of these species which are still wonderfully abundant out here.

We take a little side road which skirts some short turf Machir fields which are alive with wading birds, there are Lapwings, Oystercatchers, Redshanks and Ringed Plovers. We add Sand Martin and Little Grebe to the list and a family of fledged Wheatears are lovely to see here too.

Making a move northwards again we aim for a headland on the west coast, a bumpy track leads us there and while driving slowly Simon spots the huge shape of a White-tailed Eagle approaching. The eagle is really low and flapping hard and we have time to jump out the van and watch as it comes almost directly overhead with very little altitude! An Arctic Tern which is chasing the eagle gives us even more of a sense of scale of this huge bird. The track continues across the Machir fields and with the van working as a hide we get some lovely close views of some very young baby Redshanks.

We park up at the end of the track at a rocky headland with seaweed strewn beaches to either side. There are loads of gulls and waders in every direction, Curlews and Whimbrel are resting on the rocks while a multitude of Dunlin and Sanderling are feeding on the beach. Some Eiders are just off shore with young ducklings following on behind and Simon finds a Bar-tailed Godwit. Dave is looking through the gulls and finds us a smart looking Glaucous Gull it's a nice surprise and the second of the trip now. We have lunch here enjoying all the birdlife around us and also add Great Northern and Red-throated Divers to the day's bird list tally.

After lunch we take a walk out to the furthest point of the headland, there are several Red-breasted Mergansers and Tufted Ducks on a small loch and many Arctic Terns buzzing back and forth along the shore. It's a bit breezy at the headland but we put in a bit of a sea-watch with a flock of Common Scoters heading south and a few Gannets passing further out. Simon picks out a Storm Petrel low over the waves then another and another, there are four of them feeding in a loop just off shore and as they linger we all get some pretty good scope views of this tiny seabird that is normally pretty tricky to see.

Back at the van we drive eastwards now into the mountainous side of South Uist, it's a contrasting landscape with sea lochs and towering hills. From a roadside vantage point we scan the area. Ravens cruise the skyline and a Kestrel hovers way off in the distance. Simon picks out our first Golden Eagle of the trip, it is however very far away over the hills but the two Kestrels mobbing it give a sense of scale. Some Four-spotted Chasers and Large Red Damselflies on a boggy pool beside the road are nice to see here too.

We still have a bit of a drive to get to our hotel so we head north along the main road but always with half an eye open just in case something flies over. We are not disappointed when something does in fact fly over, it's a Golden Eagle! A convenient layby and we are out of the van in an instant, it's almost low enough to hear its wings beating! It's being mobbed by a Raven and so circling overhead and not gaining height, with blue skies and brilliant sunshine it's lighting the eagle beautifully, what a stunning view.

Settled into our hotel for the next few days and after dinner some of us take a little walk along the road. It's a lovely evening soundscape with Starlings, Redshanks, Oystercatchers and Song Thrush all adding to the evening chorus. We spot a Short-eared Owl in flight and it appears to have prey in its talons, a male Hen Harrier spots the same owl and heads towards it in hot pursuit! In an amazing attempt to keep its catch away from the chasing harrier the owl climbs higher and higher and higher keeping just out of reach from the harrier that's not giving up. Eventually when they are almost out of sight high up in the clouds the harrier gives up and glides away leaving the owl with its dinner and what must be a cracking view from that altitude!

**Day 5** It's a little bit midge outside the hotel this morning but hopefully it's just the calm and cool of the morning that these little blighters are enjoying. We are heading towards the coast again and by the time we get to the first stop of the day the temperature has warmed and the breeze increased so no midges in sight, which is good.

The air is filled with the sound of Skylarks, Lapwings, Oystercatchers, Redshanks, displaying Snipe and a couple of Corncrakes too. We concentrate here on the Corncrakes with at least four birds that we can hear as we wander along the road, one in particular sounds pretty close but the tall grass of summer has come on well this year and we can't pinpoint where the sound is coming from exactly. Unfortunately the Corncrakes stay put from where they are calling in deep cover so we decide to return to the van for a cuppa and try again later.

Moving on we take the van along a sandy track to the coast it's a stunning view south along a vast white sandy beach from where we park. We walk out along a coastal trail, the seaweed covered beach below us is alive with waders mostly Dunlin and Sanderling many of which are in full breeding plumage, we spot our

first Turnstones here too. Common Gulls and Arctic Terns are resting on the end of the headland here and with the good weather we can even just make out the shapes of land on the horizon which are St Kilda.

After lunch back at the van with a lovely view and a quick paddle we drive the short distance up to the St Kilda viewpoint which overlooks much of North Uist. We glimpse a couple of Twite on the way and a baby Curlew beside the road on the approach. From the high ground Simon spots a distant male Hen Harrier. A Golden Eagle glides by pretty close but it doesn't hang around as a Raven is giving chase.

A change of scenery again as we drive back to the lower ground to a shallow loch rich in birdlife. It's nice to see a pair of Whooper Swans with chicks it's a pretty rare sight in the UK and something several of us have never seen before.

We make one last stop of the day at a coastal lagoon where we take a short walk. The air is filled with wader sounds, some a little anxious about our presence so we don't linger as we walk. The lagoon is unfortunately very quiet with just a couple of Ringed Plovers but a Little Tern bathing in a shallow pool is great to watch. It's been a full day of birding so we are happy to relax back at the hotel before dinner.

## Day 6

Today we are heading south from the hotel to explore some areas of the islands of Benbecula and South Uist which we had just passed through a couple of days ago. We've not gone far and the first Hen Harrier of the day has us pulling over as it's really close by in flight, so we get some nice looks before it just vanishes into thin air.

Our first stop is overlooking a large shallow loch with a lot of emergent vegetation. There are several Redshanks here, some gulls and a couple of Common Terns. We spend a while here as this is normally a regular spot for Red-necked Phalaropes but so far no luck. Two Short-eared Owls wing by and keep our spirits up while we wait, but sadly after an hour or so we give up on looking for now and move on.

After a quick comfort break in the nearby village we double back a little way to the coast. In a quiet bay the sun is shining and the water is very calm. We linger here for a while and enjoy a hot drink while looking around. Some young Shelducks are sitting on the pier and several pairs of Eider are busy feeding among the rocks really close to us. We make a short walk to get closer to a large flock of waders which turn out to be Dunlin and Sanderling.

Driving on we add a few more birds to the holiday list that we haven't seen already with Shoveler, Gadwall, Coot and Wigeon, all of which are fairly uncommon and localised out here on the Hebrides.

We've made it back to the coast for our lunchtime picnic at another almost deserted white sand beach stretching as far as the eye can see, perfect for an afternoon paddle while Little Terns squeak as they fly across the bay.

Continuing along this little road we reach the end of the track and scan the beaches, a large flock of waders look interesting here but are a bit far off in the hazy sunshine to be sure what they are so we manage to drive a little closer then walk up into the dunes to view the beach. They are Bar-tailed Godwits about 200 of them and Simon also picks out a single Red Knot among them which is another nice addition to the holiday tally.

Returning to the loch where we searched unsuccessfully for phalaropes earlier we pull over for another look, a couple of birders who are already there say that they have not seen any in the last half an hour or so that they have been looking but we don't give up hope. Finding a nice female Ruff gives us hope that there are things to be found and our patience is eventually rewarded when Simon spots a Red-necked Phalarope swimming into view. The bird isn't very close but it's a reasonable view in the scope of this tiny little wader and we soon see a second one too. It's a great way to end the day so we decide to head back to the hotel.

**Day 7** Our first Short-eared Owl of the day is right outside the hotel before we set out for the day and it's the first of many as it turns out. The short drive to our first stop and we've seen two more Short-eared Owls along the way from the van including one perched on a fence post. It's a bit more breezy today and it's pretty open habitat at our first location even the waders are having trouble perching on the fences so although it's a nice place we don't stay for too long.

We return to the area where we had several Corncrakes calling a couple of days ago but although we have a second chance here to actually see one the wind and the Corncrakes have a different idea. There is at least one Corncrake calling but it sounds some distance away from the road. We speak to some other birders who have also not seen any Corncrakes today and after a short walk we decide that in these conditions we probably won't see one.

Continuing along the coast we meet up with some birders that we spoke to earlier today and they flag us down and tell us that they've just seen a Curlew Sandpiper on the beach. We jump out and set up the scopes and find two beautiful summer plumaged Curlew Sandpipers among the other waders on the beach. While we are stopped here we also find a Common Sandpiper which has a tiny chick with it.

We cover a bit of ground driving from here and find some woodland to take a walk, it's out of the wind and quite sunny now too so it's really pleasant walking. Several Goldcrests are singing from the Pine trees but they stay typically hidden from view. A few Willow Warblers, Chaffinches and Siskins are also spotted here in the trees. We wander back to the van and have some lunch. A few Meadow Pipits and a Cuckoo are nice to see while we eat.

Driving on we head inland and up to a vantage point renowned for raptor viewing. It appears a little quiet at first but before long we've seen two male Hen Harriers and our first female Hen Harrier of the trip, we see Buzzard and Kestrel here too.

We see another change of scenery as we take a minor road along the shore of a large sea loch that feeds in from the east side of the island. Birding from the van we get nice views of a pair of Stonechat and a single drake Teal. An adult White-tailed Eagle in flight isn't close but it thermals up into the air showing its brilliant white tail. Parking near the end of the road we view out across the sea loch, a few Black Guillemots paddle across the water and some distant Red-throated Divers swim by. Simon finds a perched Peregrine Falcon and a little flock of Twite settle on the rocky shore below us. As we are about to move on Simon spots an Otter but only Wayne gets a view of it before it swims behind an island. Hoping that it will reappear we drive back along the coast to get a little closer to where it was last seen but despite our best efforts the Otter never reappears.

We call in on route back to the hotel at a little art and craft gallery which is nice and the lady there tells us about the Ravens nesting in a building nearby which we'd seen earlier in the day and had wondered if they were nesting in there.

## Day 8

We are leaving North Uist today but the ferry isn't until early afternoon so plenty of time to explore a few new places. The ferry leaves from Berneray in the north and heading roughly in that direction we drive out along a very quiet side road which winds through an area of coastal inlets and pools. We see two or three Short-eared Owls over the moorland here and on the water are many Shelduck and a couple of Common Sandpipers plus Simon sees a Greenshank briefly before it flies off.

Where the road ends we stop and take in the view, it's a large open water sea inlet with several rocky islands, it looks a good place for Otters and as the water is calm we spend a while searching. A juvenile White-tailed Eagle takes us all by surprise as it flies over us very low appearing almost out of nowhere and disappearing almost as quickly.

Back on the road to the ferry we explore a site for Hebridean Orchids, it's a bit of a walk and tricky to find but we do find some very dark leaved individual



plants which look good for this rare localised species. We don't linger long as a couple of Oystercatchers are not too pleased by our presence.

While we wait for the ferry we have our lunch in the van and scan the shore a bit for the chance of an Otter sighting. No mammals this time but a Little Tern is nice to see.

The car ferry isn't that big and has a nice viewing balcony facing the direction of travel which is great for viewing wildlife and watching the world go by on what must be one of the most scenic ferry rides in the whole country. There are countless Shags and Black Guillemots on the water as we cruise along, Gannets are fishing and Seals are hauled out on several little rocky islands. We count many Red-throated Divers on the crossing both on the sea and flying by. Two dark phase Arctic Skuas are really close as they keep up with the pace of the ship. It's all very pleasant and before long we realise that we are arriving at Harris.

Landing on Harris we take a minor road to view some of the small inlets and coast which all looks good habitat for Otters. It gives us the chance to have a cuppa too but the area is pretty quiet and we have a reasonable journey ahead to Stornoway so we soon move on.

The scenery of Harris is breathtaking and as the road winds its way across the island we make a couple of photo stops to take in the atmosphere with its sweeping golden beaches and turquoise waters and steep rocky hillsides. We just drive on north from here, crossing into Lewis almost seamlessly with a few Red Deer beside the road being the only wildlife we encounter. Arriving in Stornoway our hotel is welcoming and a great location to base ourselves for the next part of our trip.

## Day 9

Another day dawns bright and sunny, we have been so lucky this trip with the weather! We are driving north across the open, almost featureless moors of Lewis when Simon spots an eagle sat on a pile of rocks not too far off. A very convenient road junction allows us to get off the road and set up the scope. It's an adult White-tailed Eagle and it's an incredible view in the telescope. We watch it for some time but it's getting some grief from the local Oystercatchers and before long it takes to the air and lumbers off on heavy wings into the distance.

Arriving in the little villages near the north coast of Lewis we check a couple of ploughed fields where yesterday a Black-headed Yellow Wagtail was reported. There's no sign of it now so we guess it has moved on, so we move on too.

We drive down to a village with a tiny harbour and look out across a mirror calm sea, it's sunny and there's hardly a breath of wind, the only sound to be heard is that of many calling Guillemots in the bay, it's idyllic. Reports of a White-billed Diver in this area recently make us scan carefully through all the birds in the bay and we can see many Shags, Red-throated Divers, a multitude of auks plus many Fulmars and Gannets flying by so there's a lot to look at but no big divers just now.

Moving on we drop in to another little harbour and as we pull up it's obvious that people there are looking purposely out to sea, guessing it might be a cetacean we look and almost immediately a Minkie Whale surfaces! We jump out and scan the sea but unfortunately the whale never appears again. The bay here is similar to the last spot with calm waters and also alive with auks and gulls including a bit of a feeding frenzy over what must be a Sandeel bait ball. A Sandwich Tern is a nice addition to the list as they are not that common around here.

Up to the Butt of Lewis lighthouse for lunchtime and some close up views of nesting Fulmars and Shags. It's a lovely day and place to just watch the seabirds coming and going for a while before we have our picnic lunch. Simon spots a very distant pod of Risso's Dolphins from here just as we finish lunch.

Driving south from the lighthouse we make our way to an RSPB reserve which has had breeding Red-necked Phalaropes in the past. It's a nice walk from the carpark and there are lots of wildflowers along the trail. From the official viewpoint we soon get eyes on a single phalarope which is nice but it's a bit distant so we continue down the path to another way marker which is somewhat closer to the pool. There are a couple of phalaropes now and they take flight and mingle with more, now we are watching five Red-necked Phalaropes noisily chasing each other over the wetlands.

We return to Stornoway from here and drop into the hotel for a quick pit-stop and then we continue on to Tiumpan Head, a site well known for its cetacean sightings. It's lovely to catch up with Kate at the viewpoint as she used to work for Speyside Wildlife and with extra eyes looking we are soon onto some sea mammals. A pod of Common Dolphins splash in the distance and a few Harbour Porpoises surface close in but briefly. A Minkie Whale, maybe even two surface a few times but frustratingly a bit briefly also. A Great Skua flaps by which is a new addition to the list and pleasing to see as the population has been hit hard last year with avian flu.

On the return journey we stop on Kate's advice that there are often Black-throated Divers in the bay nearby and on a flat, calm sea we find five stunning divers right where she said they'd be, it's a brilliant way to end the day.

**Day 10** Today we are driving back to the south end of Lewis and onto Harris to the areas which we had just driven through a couple of days ago. The weather is amazing with calm winds, blue skies and really warm temperatures.

Another little side road which apparently goes to the middle of nowhere is always a good way to start the day. At first things are a bit quiet with just a few Meadow Pipits but we find a Black-throated Diver on a small lochan and when we have to pull over for Simon to answer his phone it turns out that it was a good place to stop as Wayne spots a White-tailed Eagle perched on the hillside nearby, we also get good looks at Curlew and Golden Plover here too.

We drive on a short way to a steep sided valley looking down to the head of a sea loch which is in truth actually miles away from the sea. There's another White-tailed Eagle sat on a rock above us but it doesn't stop for long. Sue spots another large raptor over the opposite side of the valley and it turns out to be a Golden Eagle in fact there are two birds soaring and occasionally perching on the high cliffs.

Continuing along this narrow road it climbs a little and onto some more open moorland where right beside the road we see a Golden Plover and even better it has some tiny chicks with it too. We don't linger too long and the chicks soon wander away from the road anyway. At a wide spot we manage a three point turn but not before jumping out to watch yet another Golden Eagle this time a bit closer and in better light good enough to see this individual has a satellite or radio tag on its back.

By the time we make it back to the main road its getting close to lunch time so when we happen on a suitable view point layby with picnic benches we stop for lunch with a view. In the heat of the mid-day there's not a lot of wildlife around just a couple of Red Admiral butterflies and a Hooded Crow keeping an eye out on the picnic site for any leftovers. We drop down from this high ground into the village of Tarbert and have a bit of retail therapy at the Harris Tweed shop and Gin Distillery.

Driving over Harris we head to one of its most famous beaches and quite a few other people have also had the same idea with it being such a warm and sunny day. Busyness is all relative though and it's hardly "Blackpool beach busy". Out on the sea we spot a small flock of Common Scoters, a couple of Red-throated Divers and a single Great Northern Diver. All that's really missing from this afternoon at the beach is an ice-cream and fortunately we find some at a little shop on the way back out along the road.

It's a fair drive back to Stornoway from here so we break the journey with a short stop in a roadside car park which is part of an eagle watch point trail.

Sue spots our first eagle here almost immediately, it's a White-tailed Eagle that flaps along the skyline and away into the distance. We make a short walk up the trail just a couple of hundred metres to get a better view and find two perched Golden Eagles on the ridge, we linger a while and both Goldies take to the air with one of them circling right above us, it's a wonderful end to the day.

**Day 11** It's hot and sunny today which is amazing but could make the birding a little slow but no matter as we have plans to do a few historical sites along the way to which fine weather is a rather nice thing.

Crossing Lewis westward along the narrow peat road takes us through some barren looking moorland habitat where there is birdlife but it can be bit of a needle in a haystack to find things. After much slow driving and scanning we come across a pair of Golden Plovers with well grown chicks and get some nice looks at a Wheatear and a Stonechat.

Nearing the western side of Lewis we call in at Dun Carloway Broch a remarkable Iron Age dwelling and it is one of the best preserved examples of such a structure. It's a short walk to explore and enter the broch and along the way we find a couple of recently fledged Wheatears. After a cuppa back at the van it's not much of a drive to continue our cultural tour with the world famous Callanish Standing Stones. With another short walk we explore the history and evolution of the site which dates back to the late Neolithic era.

After lunch we drive a short way back up the coast to a fascinating little museum which includes some preserved traditional Black Houses. There's a Harris Tweed weaving demo on an old loom and a time capsule Black House that was last lived in back in the 1970's.

The day is pressing on so we drive back towards Stornoway on the same narrow moorland road that we'd been on this morning to try and find a Red Grouse which is one thing we've missed so far. Not too far onto the moors Simon spots the distinctive shape of a Red Grouse poking out of a clump of heather, it shows brilliantly and in the same spot near a small boggy pool we also find a pair of Greenshanks with a young chick. It's a great end to another full day.

**Day 12** Today we have to leave the islands on a ferry at lunchtime so we still have plenty of time for a bit of local birding around Stornoway before then. The weather is incredible again too as it is warm and sunny with hardly a breath of wind.

Driving out of town a wide sweeping coastal bay is absolutely mirror calm and can see some divers close in on the water. Pulling up in a layby and getting out

with the scopes we have extraordinary views of three Black-throated Divers. They are diving and feeding just a few metres off the beach and we spend a while enjoying this lucky encounter.

We make a walk along the coast to view another bay but it is pretty quiet here apart from some distant seals, we decide to drive closer to where the seals are and we count 50 animals hauled out on the rocky shoreline.

We continue by road to explore another coastal bay and at the end of a quiet track we are almost the only people around, the calm sea is dotted with auks and Shags plus at least two pairs of Red-throated Divers which are feeding just off shore. We have a cuppa and enjoy watching and listening to all the seabirds in this tranquil location.

We are not too far from Tiumpan Head now and so drive out to the viewpoint to do a bit of a final sea-watch. There are several people watching as we arrive and they tell us that they have seen a few Minkie Whales already. We spend a while scanning the seas and spot a distant pod of Common Dolphins and a total of four Minkie Whales, Dave even finds a Great Skua which he had missed up until this point.

We have our picnic lunch while waiting in line for the ferry which soon departs on time taking us out into the calm waters of the Minch. The crossing is good and we spot several Harbour Porpoises, a few brief Minkie Whales and some distant Common Dolphins. The Sea birds are pretty good too with many Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters. There are an incredible number of Barrel Jellyfish to be seen too.

Landing in Ullapool it's only an hour or so drive to the hotel for our last evening together, it's nice to reflect over dinner on some of the highlights of the trip. Being so lucky with the weather and having some incredibly good, close up, views of some of the key species has been a stand out feature of this holiday, and being able to see all the main islands of the Hebrides and their contrasting colour palette of habitats, we can return home taking many memories of a very special part of the British Isles.

## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Shoveler  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Common Scoter  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Red Grouse  
Corncrake (h)  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Little Grebe  
Fulmar  
Manx Shearwater  
Storm Petrel  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Sanderling  
Turnstone  
Dunlin  
Curlew Sandpiper

Common Sandpiper  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Whimbrel  
Snipe  
Red-necked Phalarope  
Ruff  
Great Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Glaucous Gull  
Little Tern  
Sandwich Tern  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Puffin  
Black Guillemot  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Rock Dove  
Wood Pigeon  
Collared Dove  
Cuckoo  
Short-eared Owl  
Swift  
Skylark  
Sand Martin  
Swallow  
Rock Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied Wagtail  
White Wagtail  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Wheatear  
Stonechat

Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Blackbird  
Blackcap (h)  
Sedge Warbler  
Willow Warbler(h)  
Chiffchaff  
Goldcrest (h)  
Wren  
Blue Tit  
Jackdaw  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Twite  
Redpoll  
Goldfinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin (h)  
Reed Bunting

### **MAMMALS**

Otter  
Harbour Porpoise  
Red Deer  
Rabbit  
Common Dolphin  
Minke Whale  
Common Seal  
Grey Seal  
Risso's Dolphin  
Brown Rat

### **BUTTERFLIES**

Green-veined White  
Small Heath  
Large Heath  
Red Admiral

### **MOTHS**

Common Carpet  
Fox Moth  
Boarded White

### **PLANTS**

Yellow Rattle  
Water Forget-me-not  
Bog Asphodel  
Twayblade  
Giant Hogweed  
Heath Spotted Orchid  
Northern Marsh Orchid  
Milkwort  
Lousewort  
Sea Mouseear  
Marsh Cinquefoil  
Crowfoot  
Changing Forget-me-not  
Marsh Arrowgrass  
Sea Milkwort  
Hebridean Orchid  
Butterwort  
Brookline