

# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

## OUTER HEBRIDES

3rd-11th May 2024

Leaders: Craig Round & Sally Nowell

Guests: Kathleen Lee, Judy & Paul Martin, Catriona Smart, Charles Gordon, Andrew Dodd, Gillian & David Smith, Viv Emery

**Day 1** We all meet up at the hotel in Inverness, and during our evening meal run through our plans for the week.

**Day 2** After loading up our luggage into the vans and making a stop to pick up some lunch supplies for the day, we head West for the Outer Hebrides. Its a lovely sunny day and we get good views of several Red Kites beyond Inverness as we drive towards Achnasheen where we stop again, briefly seeing Willow Warbler as well as a Sparrowhawk, Swallows, Sand and House Martins.

We arrive into Kyle of Lochalsh where we make another quick stop, before crossing over the bridge and onto the Isle of Skye. Its a lovely drive as we cross the Isle of Skye and past the imposing Red and Black Cuillins, before we arrive into a sunny and warm Uig where we have time to stretch our legs and eat lunch before we have to catch our ferry. In the harbour we see a few Black Guillemots, two Common Terns fly over and we also pick out some Eiders and Shags, as well as Sedge Warbler and Grasshopper Warbler which are heard singing by Andrew near the ferry terminal.

The sea is lovely and calm as the ferry heads out, and we get stunning views of two Great Northern Divers in full summer plumage right alongside the ferry. During the ferry crossing to Lochmaddy we get good views of a selection of seabirds, including Arctic Terns, Puffins, Razorbill and Guillemots and small numbers of Gannets and Kittiwakes. The calm sea conditions also mean we manage to spot at least two Harbour Porpoise as they surface several times.

As the ferry arrives into Lochmaddy a few Red Deer are seen on the hillsides and a brief White-tailed Eagle soars over the distant hills, before we disembark and drive towards the hotel on South Uist, though we have only driven a matter of yards before we have to stop as an adult White-tailed Eagle flies low right overhead! A little further on we stop again as another two White-tailed Eagles (one adult, one immature) are soaring together right over the road and giving us some great views!

Arriving at the hotel we have time to settle in and a Short-eared Owl is seen from the hotel before we enjoy the first of many mouthwatering meals here!

**Day 3** It's a cloudy cool and misty start and the plan today is to spend the day exploring North Uist.

After breakfast we head towards Balranald Reserve and get great views of a Short-eared Owl hunting beside the road, before making a stop down at a large freshwater loch. A Sedge Warbler sings and displays over the reed bed as well as a male Reed Bunting singing here. There are lots of waders calling all around including Snipe, Redshank, Oystercatchers and Lapwing and at the far end of the loch a flock of some 30 Whimbrel are feeding in the fields beside the track.

A short distance from the loch we hear two male Corncrakes calling, and after a quiet stake out get incredible views of one of the male Corncrakes as it flies out of cover right beside us and across the road into a neighbouring field! What a great start! Nearby we also find a smart flock of Icelandic Golden Plover in summer plumage as well as more Whimbrel feeding.

From the loch we drive on towards Balranald RSPB reserve seeing another Short-eared Owl, this time distantly as well as getting great views of a lone Whooper Swan close to the road and a male Cuckoo which is perched on power line calling and being mobbed by two very angry Meadow Pipits! As we approach the reserve the fields are full of the calls of nesting Redshank and Lapwing, and we get good views of a pair of Gadwall as well as another five Whooper Swans on a nearby loch as well as picking out three lovely Black-tailed Godwits including two in full summer plumage. What a magical place!

Making a stop at the reserve visitor centre there are several Snipe 'drumming' in display overhead, before we drive out to the nearby headland for some lunch.

Enroute we stop to take in some of the beautiful wildflowers blooming out on the Machair before we park up overlooking the sweeping beach of the 'Traigh Iar'. During lunch a Little Tern is seen fishing just out from the beach and a Great Northern Diver is just offshore, whilst several White Wagtails and Wheatears feed along the tideline seaweed. Arctic Terns fly through and a Corn Bunting sings nearby, and we get some amazing views of two dark morph Arctic Skuas that fly right overhead hunting and chasing a flock of waders up into the low cloud!

After lunch we take a short walk out to the headland getting nice views of Eiders as well as great close views of the many assembled passage waders including flocks of Dunlin, Turnstone, Sanderling and at least 20 Purple Sandpipers that we pick out. From the headland we get lovely close views of some of the nesting Arctic Terns as well as seeing display fighting Dunlin and Ringed Plover, whilst offshore a few Gannets go by and we see another Arctic Skua that flies right past us and across the headland.

From Balranald we make our way back down onto South Uist and follow the road along Loch Carnan seeing many Wheatears as well as several Red-breasted Merganser on the loch before heading back to the hotel.

**Day 4** Today starts cool cloudy and breezy from the NW but is bright and sunny later. This morning we drive down onto Benbecula first and get some stunning views of a male Hen Harrier hunting just a matter of feet away next to the road! We continue on and drive around to a sheltered bay on the coast where we see a flock of nine Whimbrel in the fields here. Scanning out across the bay we pick out a pair of Wigeon as well as summer plumaged Great Northern Diver, two Red-throated Divers and best of all a flock of nine Long-tailed Duck including some drakes in summer plumage. A small flock of Sanderling are feeding down on the beach and a flock of Dunlin go over, and we get some great close views of a some Twite perched on the fence line and feeding on Dandelion seed heads, as well as another Short-eared Owl hunting nearby.

After a quick stop at the airport for facilities where we see some recently fledged Ravens on the airport buildings, we make a stop at a large freshwater loch nearby. More Whimbrel are in the fields and some 30+ Sand Martins hawk over the loch, and we see a good selection of wildfowl here including Gadwall, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Little Grebe, though sadly Coot remains elusive!

Heading further south we cross onto South Uist and make a stop on the coast. It's an incredible spectacle here looking down to the distant hills of South Uist. There are large flocks of waders carpeting the beach frantically feeding on the clouds of flies along the strand line just below us, giving us fantastic close views. The flocks of Dunlin, Sanderling and Turnstone are mostly in stunning summer plumage and there is a great flock of some 180 Bar-tailed Godwit further along the beach as well as a single summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwit and three Whimbrel roosting on the rocks. From here we drive across the MOD Rocket range, seeing more Whimbrel as well as lots of nesting Oystercatcher and Lapwing as well as Ringed Plover and Golden Plover. The sky is alive with the sounds of singing Skylark as we take lunch in the sun on the beautiful sandy beach nearby with stunning views down to the south and distant Barra.

After lunch we continue our drive across the machair on the range and see a pair of Raven at their nest before we follow the road along the edge of Loch Bee seeing lots of Mute Swans out on the loch, as well as more waders including Redshank and Dunlin. Driving across to the east side of South Uist we pass through some lovely mountainous scenery and stop at Loch Druidibeg NNR. Here we take a walk through the trees in the lovely warm sunshine with Willow Warblers and Cuckoos calling. Scanning out across to the hills we pick out three White-tailed Eagles and a Golden Eagle that displays high over the distant ridges, before we continue on to the end of the road and take another walk. Looking over the sea loch, here we get fantastic close views of two Red-throated Divers that 'wail' in alarm as two Ravens get up to mob a huge immature White-tailed Eagle that flies very low over the pair of Divers and right over us! Awesome stuff!

**Day 5** This morning starts on North Uist again on the quest for better views of Corncrake. Three Whimbrel are seen in the fields before we park up to stake out the area where had seen the Corncrake in flight a few days previously. At least two Corncrake are heard calling and after a patient and stealthy wait we are rewarded when a male Corncrake wanders out of the thick cover of a bank of nettles and into full view! We get some brilliant views as this elusive 'ginger migrant rasper' slowly walks up the bank before crossing the road into a neighbouring croft garden to begin calling in earnest again. What views of a simply stunning and iconic Outer Hebrides bird!

Moving on, we pass the bizzare sight of a Whooper Swan sat casually in a roadside passing place! Only on the Outer Hebrides!! We drop in briefly to use the facilities at Balranald Reserve, and while here we see another two Black-tailed Godwit in summer plumage and a late flock of 28 Pink-footed Geese fly over calling and drop into the fields to feed.

From Balranald we drive up to a high viewpoint looking over North Uist, there are lots of Wheatears in the fields beside the road here as well as Lapwing, Redshank and Oystercatcher and the views from the viewpoint with virtually the whole of the Uists spread out below us, across to the Monarch Isles, and even way out to St Kilda are simply breathtaking today! As the we drive back down we get good views of no less than three Short-eared Owls hunting near the road, before we stop overlooking a freshwater loch nearby where a drake Garganey has been reported recently. Whilst here, we get lovely views of two Arctic Skuas that fly past us being mobbed by Lapwing, and a Whooper Swan also flies over, and our luck is in, as just as we are about to leave the Garganey flies right past us with a small group of Tufted Duck!

From here we drive south again and across to the east side of South Uist, as we go we see another male Hen Harrier hunting near the road and get great views of a male Cuckoo flying right down the middle of the road and being mobbed by a cloud of Meadow Pipits in hot pursuit! Driving through dramatic mountain scenery and past long indented sea lochs we head towards the end of the loch road for some lunch in the sun. There are Common Seals hauled on the rocks below us and a pair of Common Sandpipers are calling, and we also get good views of at least six Red-breasted Merganser here. There are great views looking out over the loch and hills from here and we have a scan picking out at least four Golden Eagles and two White-tailed Eagles soaring over the ridges!

Moving back along the road we make another stop to get good views of a Greenshank on the loch nearby, before we drive back out to the coast on the west side of the island. The weather is simply glorious and sunny here on the coast with stunning views right down the west side of South Uist all the way down to Barra! Whilst here, a Great Northern Diver is out in the bay along with Common and Grey Seals, and some flocks of waders are feeding along the shore, including Dunlin and Turnstone. A superb flock of migrating Whimbrel come in off the sea and fly past calling before continuing due North back out to sea, next stop Iceland!

Another four Whimbrel are roosting on the rocks here and on a short walk out to the headland we find two summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwit, and a late Barnacle Goose.

**Day 6** Today's weather starts bright and dry, but soon clouds over to increasingly heavy rain with strong S/SW winds. We start off this morning on North Uist and have a walk out on the coast before hopefully the worst of the weather comes in. Redshank and Lapwing display overhead and scanning out across a large tidal bay we see a few Dunlin and Ringed Plover along with a lone Pink-footed Goose with a flock of Greylag Geese.

Walking out to the beach at the mouth of the estuary there are masses of Waders gathered feeding close by along the shore including hundreds of summer plumaged Dunlin as well as Turnstone and three Knot including one in summer plumage. A Whimbrel flies over calling, and we get lovely views as a pair of Little Tern land on the shore nearby. At one point an immature male Peregrine dashes through hunting and panicking the masses of waders on the beach into the air, making for a brilliant spectacle!

As the rain starts to set in earnest we head around to Balranald RSPB Reserve and out to the headland for some lunch. Gannets and Arctic Terns pass by close offshore in the wind and rain, and several Bar-tailed Godwits go over calling whilst a good selection of waders feed along the shore and a Great Northern Diver is just out from the beach.

With the weather not improving we decide to warm up, dry out and head for some shelter and a hot drink at the welcome Claddach Kirkibost Centre. Afterwards we call in at the new North Uist Distillery to look around and sample and buy some of the lovely island gins they craft there!

The weather by now is pretty ropey to say the least! With heavy squally rain coming in off the sea with strong winds, so we decide to use the vans as mobile hides and head around to the shore on Benbecula. From the shelter of the minibuses we get fantastic close views of the masses of waders sheltering and feeding here just below where we are parked. There are hundreds of Dunlin and Turnstone along with Sanderling, and best of all a simply stunning flock of 30+ 'fully red' Red Knot in summer

plumage just a few feet away, frantically feeding along with a summer plumaged Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit! Such special views of some stunning birds!

**Day 7** Starts misty and foggy but the winds are thankfully much lighter from the SW. As we drive out to the west side of North Uist we get good views of two Short-eared Owls perched on fence posts beside the road, and a herd of Red Deer are down near the shore in the mist.

As we cut out to the coast, the fields are full of breeding waders including Lapwing, Redshank and Oystercatcher and we also see a large passage flock of migrant Dunlin feeding in the fields with Ringed Plovers. The sky is simply full of the calls of displaying waders and Skylarks overhead and it really is a magical place out here! Two Black-tailed Godwits are also seen and Craig points out a regular nesting Oystercatcher that chooses to nest some 5ft off the ground in the top of a fence post! From the beach here it proves quiet for birds, though we do find a sadly long dead stranded Common Dolphin on the shore! From here we drive around for a quick facilities stop at Balranald, before heading further south crossing onto Benbecula. Along the coast we stop to have a look for a reported Iceland Gull which sadly seems to have moved on when we get there, though we do get nice views of the assembled waders feeding here along with a large flock of Eiders. The single Black-tailed Godwit from yesterday is still 'off passage' along the shore here along with three Whimbrel feeding in the fields nearby.

We move on again in an attempt to find some clearer weather on the west side of South Uist, but sadly even here further south the weather is still quite foggy and cool. Whilst here on the coast we do pass a stunning and close Short-eared Owl hunting right by the road and perched on a fencepost for some time drying its wings out! Again there are good numbers of waders in the fields and along the shore including many Dunlin and Turnstone and we see another Short-eared Owl hunting on the way back. A little further on we get good views of a perched Cuckoo before we drive further south to have a hot drink and look around the fascinating Kildonan Museum. As we come out of the museum a pair of Hen Harriers are seen and we are lucky to witness a mid-air food pass! On the drive back north to the hotel, the incredible run of Short-eared Owl sightings continues, as we see yet another three birds hunting near the road!

## Day 8

Its a bright and sunny start today, and sadly today we have to leave the Outer Hebrides. After loading all the luggage we head off to catch our ferry back to Skye and the mainland, but we have some time before our ferry departs later this morning, so head up across a high moorland road that crosses the island. As we drive up the road we see three Short-eared Owls hunting over the moor before we make a stop at the highest point of the road with fantastic views back down to the coast. Whilst here get some great views of at least four Hen Harriers including three ghostly males, as well as a male Stonechat, Raven and three Common Buzzards. A Cuckoo is calling here from the nearby plantation and as we drop down along the road an Arctic Skua flies through, mobbed by gulls as it goes, and another male Hen Harrier is seen.

Arriving into Lochmaddy we are all too soon it seems boarding our ferry for our crossing back to Skye, and as the ferry cruises out we see more Red Deer on the hillsides as well as two White-tailed Eagles over a distant ridge. During the ferry journey a good selection of seabirds are seen, including Guillemots, Razorbill, Puffins, Kittiwake, Arctic Tern and Gannets as well as a single Great and Arctic Skua, before we finally land back on Skye and drive back to Inverness, at the end of another fantastic week on the Outer Hebrides!

### Birds of the Trip

Corncrake, Short-eared Owl, Great Northern Diver

### Places of the Trip

Balranald, Loch Eynort, Ardvule, Loch Druidibeg, Loch Paible, Carinish

### Magic Moments

Whimbrel, Sky dancing male Hen Harrier, White-tailed Eagle flying over Red-throated Divers, Corncrake emerging from cover, stunning Red Knot, seeing and hearing Cuckoos, Cuckoo chased by Meadow Pipits, Red-throated Divers.



## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Pink-footed Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Shoveler  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Garganey  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Long-tailed Duck  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Corncrake  
Pheasant  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Little Grebe  
Fulmar  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Hen Harrier  
Sparrowhawk  
Red Kite  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Moorhen

Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Sanderling  
Purple Sandpiper  
Turnstone  
Dunlin  
Common Sandpiper  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Whimbrel  
Snipe  
Great Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Little Tern  
Puffin  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
Rock Dove  
Collared Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Cuckoo

Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Short-eared Owl  
Skylark  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Sand Martin  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Pied/White Wagtail  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Wheatear  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Sedge Warbler  
Willow Warbler  
Wren  
Jackdaw  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Linnet  
Twite  
Goldfinch  
Redpoll sp  
Reed Bunting  
Corn Bunting

## **MAMMALS**

Otter  
Hedgehog (Dead)  
Rabbit  
Grey Seal  
Common Seal  
Harbour Porpoise  
Common Dolphin (dead)  
Red Deer

## **BUTTERFLIES/INVERTS**

Green-veined White  
Peacock  
Large White  
Drinker Moth  
Emperor Moth  
Large Red Damselfly