

# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

## OUTER HEBRIDES

14-21 MAY 2011

Leaders: Simon Eaves & Craig Round.

Guests: Val & Wayne Colson, Gillian & David Smith, Sheila Colquhoun & Clement Hindmarsh, Roger & Anne Christopher, Sue Aldam, Vivien Emery, Peter Maddison, Stan Kenyon

Day 1 We all meet in the evening for dinner together on the first night of the holiday in Inverness and enjoy a chat about what birds have been seen over the last week out on the Uists and what we are likely to see over the next few days on our holiday out there. It all sounds very exciting and the weather forecast may not look good for topping up our sun tans but it does look very promising for some seabird passage.

Day 2 Setting off after breakfast we drive through Inverness and turn west to follow the road along the shore of Loch Ness. Beyond here the scenery gets more and more dramatic as the road rises onto higher ground and here we spot a couple of Ravens perched on a deer fence by the roadside. The weather is a little showery and most of the hills are in cloud so we press on towards the west coast.

It's not long before we hit the west and the stunning scenery of Loch Duich where the famous Eilean Donan Castle is. In the village of Kyle of Lochalsh we park by the shore for a leg stretch and from here we have a nice view over the sound and we find a few birds. Some Shags and Cormorants on a small island standing next to each other allow for some direct comparison and a couple of Rock Doves fly past.

Soon we are crossing the Skye Bridge and on to the little village of Broadford where we stop for a cuppa and a bit more birding. Along the shore are Oystercatchers and in the bay a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers. A little further out to sea we find our first Great Northern Diver in full summer plumage which hopefully should be the first of many.

We are soon on the final leg of our drive across Skye and it's not long before we arrive at the little ferry port of Uig. With some time to check the sheltered waters of the bay before the ferry we have lunch and scan for

birds. There are some stunning summer plumaged Black Guillemots diving in the calm water of the bay and a couple of Arctic Terns flying around. Suddenly Craig shouts "Golden Eagle!" and there, right above us with a Raven in hot pursuit a Golden Eagle flaps across the bay, we watch in awe as it gradually disappears into the distance over the hillside.

We board the ship and surprisingly the water is quite calm considering the strong wind as we head out to sea. As we leave the shores of Skye behind a Gannet flies very close to us alongside the ship and amazingly a Great Skua appears and chases the Gannet resulting in a tussle where both birds end up in the sea. A little further out we pass good numbers of Puffins and Razorbills both on the sea and flying around. About half way across the Minch we spot a great hurry of seabirds, as we get closer we see they are mostly Manx Shearwaters, Kittiwakes and Arctic Terns with several auks thrown in for good measure. It must be an upwelling or tide line concentrating some food and we pass right by getting some great views especially of the Shearwaters. Two very distant Skuas flying away from us may well be Long-tailed Skuas but they are just too far away to be sure.

We pass a few more terns and auks and as we get closer to North Uist we scan the hills in search of White-tailed Eagles. There's no sign of any eagles but there are a couple of Red Deer on the hill side. As we land the weather is a little brighter so we set off across the island scanning the lochs along the way to the hotel. Craig spots a diver on a small lochan by the roadside and with some clever doubling back along an old side road we get close to our first Red-throated Diver of the trip.

We drive round to a shallow loch about half way to the hotel and stop for a scan. Several hirundines swoop low over the water including a few Sand Martins and couple of House Martins which are both quite scarce birds out here. A Short Eared Owl appears hunting low over the marsh on the far side of the loch and the sound of a distant Corncrake can just be heard above the sound of the increasing wind! Simon picks out an American Wigeon lurking in some long grass on the shoreline. It's one of a pair that has been reported and when we jump out for a closer look in the scopes we find the female here as well. A nice summer plumaged Dunlin is wandering around in the foreground and a couple of Whimbrel drop into a nearby field as the rain drives us back into the van.

It's getting late so we press on to the hotel and dash through some heavy showers to unload the luggage. After a lovely meal we discuss our plans for the next few days and how many warm layers and waterproofs we will need!

### Day 3

The weather is still “interesting” this morning as we watch it run down the windows at breakfast! The rain has eased as we leave the hotel so we drive back towards the loch where we saw the American Wigeon yesterday. There are a couple of Whooper Swans on the far side and the male American Wigeon is hiding in some reeds with just its bright forehead visible. Driving along the little side road around the loch we get some nice views of some Whimbrel in a field, a Sedge Warbler singing on a fence and a Reed Bunting sat on top of a bush.

A little further on we hear a Corncrake calling from a roadside field so we stop and find it trying to hide behind a clump of dock. We jump out and set up the scopes and this elusive little bird gives us some fantastic views as it rasps away to some neighbouring Corncrakes in the next field. It is amazing how quickly it disappears when it puts its head down and creeps through the grass only showing when it stretches up to call.

Driving on we reach the RSPB reserve at Balranald and we stop for a cuppa and some shelter as a heavy shower rattles through. There are Snipe and Redshank here displaying in the fields but the rain stops play for a while and even the waders take shelter. This weather with westerly winds and frequent showers looks very promising for skua passage today so we are soon moving on again for the nearby headland which is probably the best place in the whole country to witness spring skua passage.

A wide sweeping bay to the south of the headland has a Great Northern Diver bobbing about in it as we scan the coast for any seabirds. Arctic Terns are all over the place, big flocks gradually moving north and waders like Dunlin and Ringed Plovers are busy feeding along the shoreline. Peter spots a Skua low over the water heading towards us along the coast, it's a Pomarine Skua and we can see its long spoon like tail feathers as it powers past the headland. It's closely followed by another flock of “Poms”, 13 of them and we get some nice views from where we are stood but we decide to walk a little further out to the end of the headland to get even closer as it looks like there is some good seabird passage going on today.

It only takes a couple of minutes to walk out and as we get there another small flock of Pomarine Skuas fly by the headland just over the breaking waves. From here we add Great Skua and several Arctic Skuas to the list and some more small flocks of Poms out to sea. Then we pick out another flock of Pomarine Skuas this time even closer in, heading towards us. Closer and closer they come and we soon realise they are going to pass over our heads. There are Pomarine Skuas over the sea, overhead and overland

all round us, the Common Gulls and Arctic terns go mad as they chase the skuas and for a moment we don't know which way to look, we can see their unique twisted tail feathers with the naked eye what an amazing view.

As the weather brightens and the visibility improves the skuas move further offshore and sightings are less frequent. Simon picks out some very distant skuas flying by the Monach Isles which may be Long Tails but they are just too far away. We decide to head back to the vans for some lunch by which time we have seen a total of 82 Pomarine Skuas!

We can still see across the bay while we have lunch by the vans and Val picks out a Grey Seal bobbing in the surf. Several flocks of Whimbrel are on the move north and fly over head and on the shoreline we pick out a couple of summer plumage Sanderling among the many Dunlin.

Back at the RSPB visitor centre we get some more great views of two Corncrakes together in the little field round the back of the building as they sneak through some nettles. The waders are back up displaying now that the weather has improved and the sound of drumming Snipe, screeching Lapwings and piping Redshanks fills the air.

With brighter conditions we head inland to see if we can find any birds of prey. A Turtle Dove is a scarce bird out here so we are glad to see the one that has been hanging around with some Collard Doves in a little garden is still present. As we drive by it shows well perched on a little bench.

Val spots our first Short-eared Owl of the day, it's perched on the heather and with some speedy reversing we get some nice views as it takes off and flies along the roadside. There then follows another then another Short-eared Owl as we head over the Comity Road through some nice upland moorland it is great to see so many of these graceful diurnal owls. By the time we have almost made it back to the hotel we have seen seven different Short-eared Owls then Craig spots another high above the main road and it's displaying, hovering and wing clapping above us what a great end to an amazing day!

#### Day 4

The wind has eased quite a bit this morning and the rain showers have stopped for now so we drive down towards South Uist to make the best of the fine weather to look for more birds of prey. We pause briefly to look at a couple of Song Thrushes which are much darker in colour out here than on the mainland then a roadside view of a pair of Hen Harriers and a pair of Short-eared Owls stops us on our journey as they perform well over the moorland.

We see three more Short-eared Owls and a Common Buzzard as we continue on to South Uist, they are certainly all making the most of the better flying conditions today. We are just about to turn off the main road onto a side road towards the hills when Craig calls an eagle flying low and straight towards us! We jump out of the vans and watch in awe as an adult White-tailed Eagle flaps heavily directly overhead, any lower and we could almost have touched it! Amazing!

We are just watching the Sea Eagle disappear into the distance when we realise that there are several birds of prey circling over the mountain behind us. Taking a closer look at them we can see four Golden Eagles and another White-tailed Eagle plus several Buzzards all in the air together. They are not that close but through the scopes we get some nice views. Two of the goldies break away and glide in front of a nearer hill and we can make out the golden colour on their heads. Then another one joins the two up in a tight thermal and for a while we watch three Golden Eagles in one scope view!

After this raptor bonanza we drive down to the coast through some open machair which are a vibrant purple and yellow with a mixture of plants. We park near a small bay and despite the wind picking up again we still see several seals on the water's edge and an Oystercatcher creeping along the shore to its very exposed nest. Walking out to the headland we are mobbed by a couple of Redshanks which must have a nest or chicks nearby. There is some good shelter just beyond a little wall on the head so we tuck ourselves in and scan the sea. A Great Northern Diver is riding the waves and Shags fly to and fro. Some Gannets and Fulmars wing by but otherwise it's a little quiet, no sign of any skuas today.

We catch up with another smart male Hen Harrier on our way back east across the island but our planned lunch stop is a little crowded with people looking for a sheltered part of the island so we decide to double back and drive north a little to find a quieter spot to have lunch. We stop beside a wide sandy beach covered in seaweed which in turn is covered in waders. Dunlin and Ringed Plovers feed along the exposed shore as we feed beside the vans!

After lunch we follow the road along the coast and get some nice views of several Whimbrel feeding in a small field. A big flock of Ravens appear in the corner of the next bay where all the seaweed is piled up on the tide line. There must be a rich source of food and relative shelter here as loads

of gulls and waders and a couple of Shelducks are feeding. Two Arctic Skuas swoop through as we struggle to stand up in the strengthening wind eventually a shower sends us scrambling back into the vans.

As the rain falls we attempt to cross the track across the rocket range to do some birding from the van but it has turned wet and it's tough to spot anything. It can be a good area for waders but with rain soaked windows all we manage to find is a soggy looking Corn Bunting. A Loch at the far end of the range has big numbers of Mute Swans and Simon's van spots a pair of Redshank with some tiny chicks before we rejoin the main road and head back to the dry of the hotel.

## Day 5

The wind is blowing hard again this morning as we drive across North Uist but the direction and frequency of showers looks good for seabird passage again. The Corncrake in a field by the roadside is still calling in the same spot as it was on the first day so we get some nice views of it again before calling in briefly at the RSPB visitor centre where several Snipe are displaying.

We travel out to the headland again and almost immediately two Pomarine Skuas fly by inland of us and very close. Sheltering under the tailgates to get out of the wind we watch several groups of Pomarine Skuas go by with some 42 birds in total. It's not just skuas either, a Black-throated Diver streaks north and loads of Fulmars are passing by today with flocks of waders also joining in the migration. Just as Craig suggests a break for a cuppa Simon picks up some skuas in the distance and even at extreme range we can tell they look quite slight, they may be long tails. Closer and closer they come and we all get onto them but still we are not a hundred percent sure of the identification. They look like they will pass close to the headland though, so we keep following them. Soon through the scopes we can make out their long tails as they rise up against the sky. Five Long-tailed Skuas gracefully fly over the headland and we get some great views from the shelter of the vans, the birders on the headland may be closer but it looks like they can barely stand up let alone lift their binoculars. Now it's definitely time for a celebratory cuppa!

A Peregrine almost makes us spill our coffee as it powers overhead very low before flying down the coast spooking every wader in sight! Another flock of Pomarine Skuas cruise by and a Little Tern shows well hawking over the breaking waves in the bay. Despite the abundance of birds we head back to the visitor centre for lunch and a change of scenery.

After lunch we head back inland up to a high vantage point at the St Kilda view point. It's too cloudy to see St Kilda today but from here we can see over the low ground of North Uist and we can appreciate how many freshwater lochs there really are, there is almost more water than land! Driving on we spot some more Whimbrel in a grassy field and a nice summer plumaged Golden Plover. In a wide sandy bay we add Greenshank and Grey Plover to the days tally of waders and search for the Snowy Owl which was seen last week. Sadly there is no sign of the Owl before we move on.

We take the road over the moors to travel back and get some stunning views of a hunting male Hen Harrier. We drive parallel to the harrier as it cruises along beside the van and as we reach the parking area at the summit we stop and jump out to watch this graceful raptor in its element. We watch as it glides to and fro across the hillside and it is joined by a second male for a while. It's great to watch one of our rarest birds of prey for so long and at such close range it's almost impossible to see a sight like this back on the mainland.

Just when we think the birding is over for the day and we are only a couple of minutes drive from the hotel a huge shape looms over the road, it's an adult White-tailed Eagle, so low it almost touches the roof of a little croft house by the roadside! Stunning! We watch as it flaps heavily off into the distance with every Redshank and Oystercatcher within half a mile in hot pursuit. What a great end to another great day.

## Day 6

It's another breezy day but bright and improving as we leave the hotel after breakfast. We drive south again this time to explore a bit more of Benbecula. A Hen Harrier carrying prey and a close Short-eared Owl interrupt our journey south but it's a very welcome interruption! As we turn off the main road we come across another Short-eared Owl hunting over the long grass in a roadside field. With the side door slid open and the owl hovering just a few metres away Rodger's camera is clicking away like never before as it looks straight at us.

A large freshwater loch along this road is a regular spring stop off for Red-necked Phalaropes but none have been reported yet this year. The weather has not been very spring like this May and it seems the birds are late retuning this year, however, we take a good look around as today could still be the first day they arrive. It's a big area to look for a tiny bird and the wind doesn't help matters much so we eventually have to give up and move on. The Coots on Coot Loch are a new addition to the list just around the

corner before we start to drive back towards North Uist. Another Hen Harrier and another Short Eared Owl as we drive are added to the days tally, we can't believe how many we have seen this week.

Close to the edge of the RSPB reserve a Corncrake breaks cover to cross the road in front of us but it has nowhere to hide on the other side. It makes for a clump of half a dozen dead daffodil plants which offers almost no cover before striding off across an open field so we get some amazing views of a whole Corncrake!

Tea and coffee is very welcome as we plan to take a good walk from here around the headland. Refreshed we head out with picnic in hand as the sun shines down. Linnets flit from post to post as we wander out across the machair. We get some really nice views of Dunlin and Purple Sandpipers among the seaweed at the top of the beach as we follow the coastal trail. Finding a sheltered rocky beach we enjoy lunch watching the many Gannets and Fulmars effortlessly riding the winds as they fly by.

Around the headland a small pool holds a White Wagtail and a fine summer plumaged Purple Sandpiper. The scenery is stunning as we walk on with huge waves crashing over a jagged coastline the landscape is so different from anywhere else in the UK. An Arctic Skua flies low overhead as we start to head back. Another cuppa back at the van then we make one last stop beside a beach where we sift through a few gulls on the shore line before struggling to get out of the van in the wind and do a little beach combing.

## Day 7

After breakfast we drive over to the ferry port at Lochmaddy where a tiny bit of low woodland sees us add Robin, Dunnock and Wren to the list of which all are quite scarce out here with so little tree cover. We scan the bay for the elusive Otter but our luck is not in before enjoying a hot drink in a cafe as the rain comes down.

Before long we are back on the ferry and watching Puffins and huge numbers of Manx Shearwaters again, we also pick out one or two Common Guillemots among the more numerous Razorbills.

The coldness of this May is evident as we cross Skye as the hills are white with fresh snow on our drive back to Inverness. We are nearing the end of our journey where the road hugs the shore of Loch Ness but is surrounded by woodland, when a Pine Marten crosses the road in front of Simon's van, everyone in this bus gets a brief but good view of this elusive mammal as it dashes across the road and scurries off up the hillside. Amazing!

It's not long before we reach the hotel in Inverness and then wander over to the pub for our last dinner together and chat about all the amazing wildlife we have seen this week.

**Bird of the Trip:** Short-eared Owl

**Place of the Trip:** Aird an Runair

**Magic Moments:** Low flying White Tailed Eagles, Pomarine Skuas overhead, Displaying Dunlin, Hunting Hen Harriers, Short-eared Owls and many more.

## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	Greenshank
Black-throated Diver	Common Sandpiper
Great Northern Diver	Turnstone
Little Grebe	Pomarine Skua
Fulmar	Arctic Skua
Manx Shearwater	Long-tailed Skua
Gannet	Great Skua
Cormorant	Black-headed Gull
Shag	Common Gull
Grey Heron	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Mute Swan	Herring Gull
Whooper Swan	Great Black-backed Gull
Greylag Goose	Kittiwake
Shelduck	Common Tern
Wigeon	Arctic Tern
Mallard	Little Tern
Shoveler	Guillemot
Tufted Duck	Razorbill
Eider	Black Guillemot
Red-breasted Merganser	Puffin
White-tailed Sea Eagle	Rock Dove
Hen Harrier	Collared Dove
Common Buzzard	Cuckoo
Golden Eagle	Short-eared Owl
Kestrel	Skylark
Merlin	Swallow
Peregrine	House Martin
Comcrake	Meadow Pipit
Coot	White Wagtail
Oystercatcher	Pied Wagtail
Ringed Plover	Wren
Golden Plover	Dunnock
Grey Plover	Robin
Lapwing	Wheatear
Sanderling	Blackbird
Purple Sandpiper	Song Thrush
Dunlin	Sedge Warbler
Snipe	Willow Warbler
Bar-tailed Godwit	Jackdaw
Whimbrel	Rook
Curlew	Hooded Crow
Redshank	Raven

Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Twite  
Reed Bunting  
Corn Bunting  
Sand Martin  
American Wigeon  
Turtle Dove  
Goldfinch  
Pheasant

**TOTAL BIRDS: 98**

## **MAMMALS**

Common Seal  
Grey Seal  
Red Deer  
Rabbit  
Pine Marten

## **FLOWERS**

Yellow Field Pansy  
Sea Campion  
Charlock  
Bog Bean  
Northern Marsh Orchid

## **INSECTS**

Garden Tiger Caterpillar

**TOTAL SPECIES: 109**