

# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

## OUTER HEBRIDES

6-14 MAY 2016

**Leaders:** Craig Round and Simon Pawsey

**Guests:** Roger Rooke, Valerie & Peter Lloyd, Angela Woodrow, Hazel Pickering, Janice & Richard Stacey, Dave Thompson, Sue Aldam, John Robinson, Don Mills, Viv Emery

**Day 1** Our first full day dawns bright and clear and after a good breakfast we load the vans and leave our hotel in Inverness to make our way towards the west coast and the Isle of Skye to catch our ferry to the Outer Hebrides. We drive along the west side of Loch Ness, and marvel at the sheer size of this iconic body of water. A dark sinuous shape breaks the waters surface before disappearing into the depths - could it have been.....?

We see Common Buzzards circling overhead and feral Goats by the side of the road as we wind our way through Glen Shiel passing underneath the peaks of the Five Sisters of Kintail. We pass Eilean Donan Castle and drive over the bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh and onto the Isle of Skye.

We see our first 'clean' Hooded Crows, a Rook and Wheaters are skipping ahead of the vans from rock to rock. The sea lochs reveal Gooseanders, Oystercatchers and Curlews and a lone Pale-bellied Brent Goose. Meadow Pipits are everywhere and panic ensues as a Merlin darts between the vans with Pipits bursting from the gorse bushes.

We arrive at the port of Uig and check out the bay by the ferry terminal. A Great Northern Diver is 'snorkelling' off the pier and a pair of Black Guillemots or 'Tysties' as they are locally known are in the bay. Craig spots a Great Skua or 'Bonxie' near the ferry terminal.

Once on board the ferry we spend the whole crossing up on deck sea watching. Crossing The Minch the sea is relatively calm and there's a feeling of anticipation as we scan the seas looking for pelagic species.

As we enter open water we begin to see more and more Black Guillemots, Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins flying past the ferry and gathering in small flocks on the sea. Adult Gannets are banking past us and we see Red-throated Divers and more Great Northern. Common Gulls, Kittiwakes and Arctic Terns are flying past and a small pod of Harbour Porpoises surface alongside the ferry and we get brief glimpses of our smallest Cetacean.

The crossing is over too quickly and as we enter into Lochmaddy we scan the ridges looking for Eagles. They remain elusive, but we do see our first Ravens of the trip.

As we drive across North Uist there are birds everywhere and it's difficult to know where to look first. Lapwings are tumbling and turning through the air, Meadow Pipits and Wheaters are flitting around and Starlings are on the overhead wires. Some of the Starlings are very glossy with fewer spots than those on the mainland. We see our first waders of the trip in any number. Redshanks are calling and Oystercatchers are piping as they fly alongside us.

We arrive at Cairinish, check into the Temple View Hotel and receive a warm reception from June and Harvey. Craig has been waxing lyrical about the quality of the food at Temple View and he's absolutely right. We have the dining room to ourselves and enjoy a fantastic first night meal cooked by Harvey. We are amazed how he manages to turn out such lovely plates of food in such a short space of time, considering he's working largely on his own in the kitchen. Our first meal sets the standard which is maintained right throughout the week.

## Day 2

Today dawns overcast and breezy with the winds coming from the east. After breakfast we only manage to drive 300 metres before seeing our first Short-eared Owls of the trip as a pair quarter the moor behind the hotel. Progress is slow as we head north on North Uist simply due to the number of birds that seem to be everywhere. We comment that it's like stepping back in time fifty years to what the UK bird population used to be like. Craig locates a small flock of Goldfinches in a garden by the side of the road which are actually a rare breeding bird for the Hebrides.

All roadside bushes are getting a thorough investigation for migrant species, especially with the easterly winds, in the hope that we may find a rare vagrant. We do find a singing Wren of the Hebridensis variety which is slightly darker and a touch bigger than the mainland variety that we are used to.

A pair of Red-breasted Mergansers are seen fishing in a bay and we see our first Turnstones and displaying Snipe. Craig spots a late Redwing which looks dark and probably an Icelandic bird. A shout of 'white winged gull' reveals an Iceland Gull flying overhead. It's an adult bird with pure white plumage and a scarce vagrant to the Islands.

We come across another Short-eared Owl quartering by the side of the road and Craig 'squeaks' the owl closer to the van by imitating a small furry animal on its last legs! The owl flies right alongside the vans looking straight at us.

We make our way to Loch Sandaraigh and come across more Short-eared Owls as they hunt around the houses and crofts. A Whooper Swan is on the Loch along with Mute Swans, Tufted Ducks and a Sedge Warbler

singing from the top of the reed bed. Simon locates some Black-tailed Godwits in fine summer plumage probing the short turf.

We make our way through Paible and come across our first calling Corncrake of the trip. It is calling from a private garden and after a short wait it's seen skulking through some nettles in typical Corncrake fashion.

We head off to Balranald RSPB Reserve and drive across the Machair towards the Aird an Runair headland. Corn Buntings are singing their 'jangling keys' song and Ringed Plovers scurry about on the short grass. We park in the dunes overlooking Traigh Iar Bay with Sand Martins and Swallows hawking overhead. It seems every bay on the Uists has at least one Great Northern Diver and this one is no different, with four birds, some in full summer plumage snorkelling in the clear water. We haven't been here long before Craig spots an Otter swimming just off some rocks. We all manage to locate it and get good views through the scopes.

During lunch we watch small parties of Twite flitting through the dunes and pick through the hundreds of waders feeding on the beach. There are Turnstones, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Redshanks and lots of Dunlin of various races.

After lunch we take a short stroll towards the headland. A shout of 'Skuas' goes up as two dark phase Arctic Skuas fly past us and out to sea. A flock of Dunlin take to the air and the Skuas are in pursuit, displaying some cooperative hunting and trying to chase down the small waders.

A flock of at least 50 Whimbrel fly over heading north to their breeding grounds, with some of the birds splitting and landing in a small freshwater pool on the headland, enabling good views through the scopes. There are also Arctic Terns on the pool with Wheaters and White Wagtails flitting between the rocks, enabling us to look at the identification characteristics compared to Pied Wagtails.

We leave Balranald and make our way around North Uist towards the Committee Road. Before we get there a large Golden Eagle is seen by the road being mobbed by two Kestrels and we get fantastic views as the bird lands on the hillside and then takes off again and soars away from us. This is just the start of a crazy half hour Raptor extravaganza that we are about to experience. On the Committee Road we park up close to where Hazel has seen a Hen Harrier land in the heather. Simon Locates a male Hen Harrier flying over a plantation towards us and then a large juvenile Peregrine puts in an appearance, much to the male Hen Harriers disgust, who promptly sets about the Peregrine and a dog fight ensues right in front of us. A second male Hen Harrier then appears carrying prey and we prepare ourselves for what surely must be a food pass with the female who is still sat in the heather. Sure enough, she takes to the air flying under

the male, and turns onto her back catching the food as he drops it in flight. We all gasp at this stunning display. The female lands nearby and starts eating the prey at which point the male lands on the female and they begin mating. The first time in nineteen years that Craig has seen this and he's jumping on the spot!

But it's not over yet, as the juvenile Peregrine puts in another appearance and starts attacking the female Hen Harrier in flight. It is a thrilling and unforgettable experience seeing all this and we reluctantly tear ourselves away and head back towards the hotel. Yet more Short-eared Owls and another Peregrine finish off a fantastic first full day on the Uists.

### Day 3

Today is the start of a period of very settled warm and dry weather which stays with us for the rest of the week. 'Operation Corncrake' commences and we drive to Balranald stopping to look at three summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits on the way. We coast along the access road into Balranald with engines switched off listening for Corncrakes. We can hear them calling in the Iris beds but they remain elusive. After about twenty minutes of searching Richard whispers "Simon, stop. Just here by the van." Sure enough a Corncrake is skulking through the daffodils alongside the road. It's so close we can't focus our binoculars. We get great views as the bird moves out into the open and begins calling. A second bird then appears in the same small field and some debatable mating appears to take place with the original bird displaying with lowered wings. It's debatable because we can't actually see the female, although we know she's somewhere under the male concealed in long grass. We continue to watch as both birds skuttle between clumps of grass and Iris following each other around the field. The male bird continuing to give his rasping call.

We drive to the reserve centre and find an immature first winter Glaucous Gull in the field next to the reception building, another good find and a scarce vagrant bird. We see this bird a number of times through the week as it remains in the same field. Now that we've got our eye in for Corncrakes we locate another two birds heading away from the reserve along the access road, both showing well, with a male bird calling from the top of a ditch. A celebratory ice cream is called for and we stop at Bayhead Stores. The local paper is running the headlines "Ice cream and Sun lotion shortage grips Islands." It is a close call but we manage to get the last ice creams on the Uists, so the Speyside Wildlife admin team are able to stand down the helicopter which they had on standby loaded with ice cream.

We then head south over the causeway and onto Benbecula. A shout of 'Eagle overhead' from Craig causes us to stop in the middle of the road and everyone jumps out as a Golden Eagle drifts low over our heads, giving great views against the clear blue sky. The postman waiting to get past is only slightly delayed and he's probably used to it anyway. We carry on to Ardivachar Point for lunch. The usual Great Northern Diver is in the

sea (every bay's got one in the Uists) along with flocks of Eider and Dunlin, Turnstones and Sanderling on the beach. Peter sets up his astronomical telescope and some of us are able to witness the spectacle of the solar system's smallest planet, Mercury, passing across the face of the sun, an event that will not happen again until 2019.

After a leisurely lunch in the sun we drive across the MOD rocket range looking for Dotterel on passage and Golden Plover. The Dotterel are elusive but we find a single Golden Plover in summer plumage close to the track giving us good views. We stop at Loch Bee as we leave the range and scan through the flocks of Dunlin. Two male Shovelers are chasing after a female and competing for her attention giving us good views as they twist and turn over the loch and a pair of Wigeon are on the water with Mallard. It is then a steady and for some sleepy drive back to the hotel before another veritable feast delivered by Harvey.

#### Day 4

Today dawns fine and warm - this is getting predictable and we're off to Loch Sandaraigh again to try and catch up with a pair of Garganey which have been seen there. Some of the guests have seen a stunning male Hen Harrier flying across the pastures in front of the hotel before breakfast, as well as being woken up by a Cuckoo on the lines outside the hotel. Angela manages to get a cracking photo of the Cuckoo being mobbed by a 'ninja' Meadow Pipit. A great start to any day and what is likely to be the same male Hen Harrier is seen regularly in the early morning and evenings right through the week.

At Loch Sandaraigh a Sedge Warbler is singing from the top of the reeds giving good scope views. Simon sees some movement in the reeds on the far bank and finds two Otters, probably a mother and cub playing in the fresh water. We watch the Otters for a while and they come out onto the bank giving great views out of the water, before disappearing into the reeds. A Red-throated Diver is on the loch, but looking a bit forlorn and holding it's neck in an uncharacteristic position.

We move on to Loch Paible as the temperature starts to rise to look for waders. Simon briefly sees a single Great Skua flying over the dunes, but it doesn't put in another appearance. However, the shallow shores of the loch are full of waders. We estimate that there must be around a thousand Dunlin, as well as Sanderlings and Redshank. Surely there must be something special in amongst all the birds, and there is, as Craig spots a single Little Stint in summer plumage. A great find and a scarce bird for the Outer Hebrides with only two or three records a year. Little Terns are fishing over the loch and we spend a good hour here enjoying the weather and the flocks of waders.

For lunch we drive back to Balranald and park at the reserve centre. The immature Glaucous Gull is still in the field and we walk towards the headland with lunch in our backpacks. There are fewer waders on the beach at Traigh Iar this time, as we have a leisurely lunch, some of the Dunlin probably having flown north to their breeding grounds. After lunch we walk around Aird An Runair watching Arctic Terns, a small flock of Bar-tailed Godwits, White and Pied Wagtails and Wheatears. A Skua shout goes up and this time two light phase Arctic Skuas fly over the headland chasing a flock of Dunlin. It's great to see Skuas even if it's not in the number that we are hoping for. Still, if the winds blow right, there's always next year!

We meander slowly back towards the vans and along Traigh nam Faoghailean beach. The water is clear and blue and caribbean like and we have the beach to ourselves. The temptation is just too great so it's off with the socks and boots and into the water for some paddling. The shallows are like bath water and it's a fitting way to end what has been a lovely walk. Craig hears a Little Tern and we soon locate the bird fishing in a shallow lagoon right in front of us, giving great photo opportunities. We watch as he catches small silvery fish and takes them up the beach to a female who is remarkably camouflaged on some shingle.

After another fantastic evening meal some of us go for a short walk to watch the sunset. Angela sees a Short-eared Owl take off from behind some Pampas Grass in a private garden. The male Hen Harrier is quartering the ground behind the hotel and two other Short-eared Owls are twisting and turning after each other in front of a setting sun. What an end to a great day.

## Day 5

Today's weather - well what else could it be, but fine and warm. We head through Benbecula and onto South Uist and make towards Ardvule Point. There is the standard Great Northern Diver in the bay and a group of Cormorants crammed onto a rock just offshore. We take a short and slow stroll down to the headland, scanning the freshwater lochan which stretches towards the point. There are Black-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel and Craig locates a single Knot on the lochan. Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtails and Wheatears are flitting around the headland and adult Gannets are banking across the sea offshore. We spend a bit of time at the headland sea watching in the hope of picking up some Skuas on passage, but the winds are not blowing in our favour.

For lunch we stay on South Uist and head to Loch Eynort and 'Archie's Garden.' It's a stunning location with views of the mountains across the loch. Common Seals are lying banana like on the rocks in the loch and Black Guillemots are diving just below us. After lunch we take a stroll through Archie's Garden, a lovely and large stand of mixed trees and plants. Because South Uist is barren of trees, Archie's Garden is a magnet for migrants and Willow Warblers are singing from the tops of the trees. Craig

hears Redpolls and soon locates four Meally Redpolls just above us, giving us good views of their paler plumage when compared to Common Redpolls. The garden opens up to a magnificent viewpoint with a vista of the loch below and mountains all around us. With a clear sky and warm sun, visibility is excellent and we scan the ridges looking for eagles. It is only a matter of time and before long we find a White-tailed Eagle soaring above the peaks across the loch. Craig locates one perched on the skyline, giving good distant scope views and Simon picks up a pair of Golden Eagles. Viv spots a pair of Otters fishing in the loch below and it is tricky to find them as they are actively diving and mixed in amongst some seals. A male Hen Harrier is displaying over the far peaks and we pick up a female Hen Harrier which flies towards us across the loch, giving great views. Suddenly a male Harrier appears and begins his roller coaster display for the benefit of the female (and for us), dropping like a stone and then rising almost vertically before repeating the performance. It is a great display and once again the Uists have delivered a spectacular show of raptors for our benefit.

On the way back we stop at Loch Fada and Loch Mor to try and find Red-necked Phalaropes. As suspected it is still a few days early for the Phalaropes and they haven't yet arrived, but a lovely male Garganey makes up for it. The bird flies over the vans and is then relocated in some long grass at the edge of the loch. He is elusive but we manage to get good scoped views of his head.

After another lovely dinner some of us take a short stroll to watch the sunset. Of course our resident male Hen Harrier is quartering the ground and we have distant views of a White-tailed Eagle drifting over Baleshare.

## Day 6

By now there's no need to comment on the weather and it's business as usual today! We make our way towards Langass and locate another male Hen Harrier ghosting across the moor. We watch him quartering the ground and then dropping into the heather to catch a large vole which he carries away and across the moor, no doubt towards his mate. A Stonechat and a Cuckoo are found sitting on the telegraph wires as we approach Langass Lodge and a Whitethroat is singing in the gardens of the hotel. Some of the group take a walk out to Finn's People, the only stone circle on North Uist. It is believed to date from the second millennium BC and was constructed on a man made platform dug into the hillside overlooking Loch Langais. We then visit the burial cairn at Barpa Langass. With an age of 5,000 years it is one of the earliest standing constructions in northern Europe. A pair of Golden Eagles are quartering the ground over the distant hills and the male Hen Harrier is seen again drifting over the road and back to his hunting grounds.

We then drive to Lochmaddy for coffee and a chance to do some shopping before making our way north towards the island of Berneray. The weather is amazing and the sea is aquamarine as we take a coastal road looking down

onto beautiful bays and deserted white sand beaches. The opportunity for another paddle is just too great for some in the warm and clear water. Great Northern Divers are giving their sad and wailing call of the wild from across the bay whilst Little Terns fish in the shallows. It is a truly beautiful location and it feels like we have the place to ourselves.

On our way back to the hotel after a quick ice cream stop and due to popular demand, we drive along the Committee Road, and before long pick up a male Hen Harrier quartering the moor and a Golden Eagle displaying high in the sky doing 'golden ball' dives.

Harvey does us proud again with our final evening meal and a short stroll after dinner produces a male Gadwall on the local lochan.

## Day 7

Our final day on the Uists dawns overcast and cooler with a freshening wind, good going home weather. We head towards Lochmaddy via Baleshare for a look over the sea and along the beach. Once on board the ferry it's up on deck for some sea watching during the crossing back to Uig on the Isle of Skye. We see Gannets, Auks and very distant Manx Shearwaters banking on the horizon. As we approach Skye there are a pair of Bonxies and an Arctic Skua harassing a tern, which is giving them a run for their money and will not give up its catch, and a pair of distant White-tailed Eagles over the sea cliffs.

We are delayed slightly whilst driving down through Skye, but the weather starts to improve and we enjoy a scenic drive back through the glens to our hotel in Inverness in plenty of time for evening meal and the important business of reminiscing over the highlights of the trip, and casting our votes for species of the trip, place of the trip and magic moment. It's been a wonderful week, with some fantastic wildlife in a stunning location, beautiful weather, lovely food and great company.

**Species of the Trip:** Corncrake

**Place of the Trip:** Berneray

**Magic Moments:** Hen Harrier food pass, Short-eared Owl fly by, Peregrine mobbing Harrier and Harrier then mobbing Peregrine and of course the beaches.



## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Fulmar  
Manx Shearwater  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Pink-footed Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Pale -bellied Brent Goose  
Shelduck  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Garganey  
Gadwall  
Mallard  
Shoveler  
Turfted Duck  
Eider  
Red-breasted Merganser  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Golden Eagle  
Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
Red Grouse  
Corncrake  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Little Stint  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Sanderling  
Dunlin  
Snipe  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Whimbrel  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Common Sandpiper  
Turnstone  
Arctic Skua  
Great Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Iceland Gull  
Glaucous Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Little Tern  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
Puffin  
Rock Dove  
Collared Dove  
Cuckoo  
Short-eared Owl  
Swift  
Skylark  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Sand Martin  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
White Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Wren  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Wheatear  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Redwing  
Mistle Thrush

Sedge Warbler  
Whitethroat  
Willow Warbler  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Twite  
Meally Redpoll

Reed Bunting  
Corn Bunting  
Pheasant

**Total Birds: 107**

#### **MAMMALS**

Rabbit  
Red Deer  
Otter  
Harbour Porpoise  
Grey Seal  
Common Seal  
Wild Goats

**Total Species: 114**