

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

OUTER HEBRIDES

5-13 MAY 2017

Leaders: Simon Pawsey and Craig Round

Guests : Evie Malliris & John Beaty, Val Lambert, Chris & Richard Loversidge, Sheila Turner, Helen Brown, Janette Foster, Viv Emery, Angela Woodrow, Janice & Richard Stacey

Day 1 Our first full day of the holiday dawns bright, warm and sunny and after breakfast we load the vans and make our way to..... Tescos (where else?) to get some supplies for the drive west and over to the Outer Hebs. Trolley dash complete we drift along the shores of Loch Ness. One or two of us see a sinuous shape break the dark waters of the loch, but monsters aren't on the species list, so not worth stopping for.

Buzzards are up and soaring as we make our way along Glen Moriston towards Kintail. Wild Goats are grazing by the roadside and small numbers of Red Deer are visible on the sides of the hills. We stop at Kyle of Lochalsh to stretch our legs and cast a glance over Loch Alsh and the Skye Bridge. Our first 'clean' Hooded Crows are in the air as well as some pure Rock Doves.

After a short stop it is time to push on through Skye towards Uig on the Trotternish Peninsula. However, some wind turbine props which are being driven onto Skye had other ideas and we are stuck behind some long and very slow moving transporters complete with Police escort. Thankfully they were only going as far as the airfield at Broadford, so once past we make good time through the island, with a brief mobile sighting of a pair of White-tailed Eagles just south of Portree. We arrive at Uig with time to spare before the ferry sailed. So after a bit of lunch we squeeze in some birding in the harbour which reveals Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and Eiders.

The ferry is running on time, so once on board it is up on deck for the two hour crossing to North Uist. There's always a sense of expectation as to what's to come and we scan the relatively calm seas for anything that moved. It is a lovely crossing with warm and sunny weather. The sea is peppered with flocks of Guillemots, Black Guillemots and Razorbills, with Puffins in pairs proving tricky to get on to, but with persistence we all manage

good views. Gannets are all around throughout the crossing and we see our first pair of Great Northern Divers.

As we approach Lochmaddy a Raven is sat ominously on a skerry and we all see our first Outer Hebs White-tailed Eagle soaring over a distant peak. A cracking start to the Uists and a fitting end to a lovely ferry crossing. We drift south through North Uist taking in the very different landscape and feel of the Hebrides compared to the mainland. For some of us it is great to be back and for others it is to be a completely new experience.

We arrive at our hotel in good time to settle in and some of us go for a walk towards the ruin from which the hotel gets its name. Angela hears our first Corncrake of the trip calling from some Iris beds, but it proves elusive, as they do. Richard sees our first Short-eared Owl which appears briefly.

After dinner some of us go for a short walk and see a female Hen Harrier and a White-tailed Eagle flapping lazily over our heads heading east towards the mountains. A quick "Shorty" as well rounds off what had been a great first day.

Day 2

There is a change in the weather today which is cloudy and overcast with a freshening north easterly wind. Not the direction of wind we are hoping for, but more of that later.

After breakfast we set off heading north towards Balranald, via the loch Paible area. At Loch Paible a pair of Pale-bellied Brent Geese are a good find and there are small flocks of Linnets and some Skylarks singing overhead. We are on the hunt for a small 'trip' of Dotterel which has been seen on the machair at Paible, but they are proving elusive, however a calling Corncrake catches our attention in nettles by some farm buildings and it isn't long before the bird pops it's head up, obligingly next to a yellow bucket, which enables everyone to get onto the bird. The Corncrake is 'crexing' away and scuttling through the nettles, but showing well with some out in the open views. It is lovely to see a Corncrake so early on in the trip and takes a wee bit of pressure off the guides - Corncrake is in the bag! In over twenty years 'we' (Craig) has never failed to find Corncrake on a Spring Outer Hebs trip.

There are Dunlin on Loch Paible, most of them in summer breeding plumage and stopping off to refuel before some of them head north to their breeding grounds in Iceland and the higher Arctic. As we drive across the machair we come across three Sanderling away from the shoreline, one of them in glorious breeding plumage. These are birds which are truly long distance migrants and again are stopping off in the Uists to refuel before they head north to the high Arctic to breed. Some of these Sanderling may have come from Southern Africa and sometimes even further south.

The Dotterel are proving elusive and there are some other birders looking for them as well. We exchange telephone numbers and through the week some of them keep in touch with us with what they have seen. We head towards Balranald via the hamlet of Paible where we are confronted with another 'elusive and skulking' Corncrake doing his best road runner impression in the middle of the road. We have great views as the bird tears past the vans and into the front garden of a roadside property, where for a brief period he tries to hide in amongst a couple of daffodils. That wasn't really working for him, so it was back out onto the lawn, a quick rest alongside a vehicle parked on the drive before a sprint across the lawn towards some denser vegetation. The bird then takes off and we have great views of Corncrake in flight, which considering they migrate during the night, is quite a rare sight. It is turning into a Corncrake roadshow.

Eventually we make it to RSPB Balranald, which is a jewel of a reserve. We drive across the machair towards Aird an Runair and park with a view of the Atlantic and have some lunch. The beach is covered in scurrying flocks of Dunlin and Sanderling along with Little and Arctic Terns fishing in the bay. A pair of dark phase Arctic Skuas break the peace and put the waders up as they hawk along the shoreline looking for prey in the form of small waders. Of course there are at least three or four Great Northern Divers just offshore - every bay in the Hebs has one!

After lunch we get news of a Glaucous Gull showing well by the tip at Paible, so we make our way over the machair towards Rubh Arnol, keeping an eye out for the Dotterel. We quickly find a cracking Glaucous Gull which is showing very well in amongst a mixed gull flock at the tip. The bird then flies onto the sea where we also find a roosting Iceland Gull. Two white winged gulls in one location, that's the Hebrides in spring! The Dotterel, however, continued to be elusive.

Next stop is the Committee Road, an old favourite and somewhere which doesn't let us down and today is no exception. As we arrive we have very distant views of a male Hen Harrier, a Kestrel and a Short-eared Owl quartering the moor. A Skua shout goes up and we are treated to two dark phase Arctic Skuas flying overland across the moor right past us, giving great views. Possibly birds on migration and taking a short cut overland across the island. A Cuckoo is calling and Simon locates the bird on a fence post by a small plantation, giving good scoped views.

Jan then puts up a shout of "Hen Harrier" and we watch a male over a distant ridge before he disappears. Craig thinks the bird may well drop down to hunt over the moor, so it is into the vans and off we speed along the road. The Harrier has clearly read the script and right on cue he appears quartering

the moor and flying right alongside us giving amazing views of what has to be our best looking raptor.

A fitting end to another great day on these magical isles.

Day 3

We're back to warm and sunny weather today with a fresh wind. After breakfast we head south onto Benbecula and to the 'Hebridean Jewellery' Bay for some wader watching. We find some cracking Grey Plover in summer plumage on the tidal flats along with some equally handsome Knot, in their red summer breeding plumage. The opportunity for photos is too great and some of the group have a wander across the flats to get closer to the Knot. Bar-tailed Godwits are also feeding on the flats. The adjacent fields hold some summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits as well as a small flock of Golden Plover and a flock of fifty plus Dunlin feeding in the short grass. It is a treat to watch them probing through the turf and then simultaneously rising off the ground before re-settling again, always synchronised.

We continue around Benbecula to Dornoch Bay, where we stop for a quick coffee break. Of course, there is a Great Northern Diver in the bay showing well, a Peregrine speeds through briefly and then a "Harrier" shout goes up as a splendid male Hen Harrier quarters over the headland in front of us.

We head back towards Temple View, sighting a distant White-tailed Eagle soaring high and then onwards to Lochmaddy. Our lunch stop is at Grenitote. The tidal flats here are beautiful and far reaching but not much birdlife, with highlights being Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits. So after lunch and a leg stretch we continue anti-clockwise around North Uist to the spectacular Vallay Strand, a reliable location for Greenshank and as if on cue there is a splendid elegant Greenshank probing in the tidal pools.

We continue around North Uist and stop to look at a gull flock in a roadside field. We find an Iceland Gull wandering around towards the back of the field, but an odd plumaged white winged Gull roosting closer to us causes some debate as to what it might be, with Viking or Kumlein's Gull being possibilities. Our attention is distracted from the gull by Sheila who has spotted a large strange looking bird sat on the ground behind the gulls. This turns out to be a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle, which promptly takes off giving us great views.

With raptors in mind we head up towards the North Uist viewpoint at Clettraval, which is sited on the side of a hill looking across the watery landscape of North Uist towards a very distant St Kilda. It isn't long before a "Shorty" is spotted displaying high over the moor. The owl drops down in front of us and we are able to get lovely scoped views of the bird as it sits

on some heather. A distant White-tailed Eagle is circling on the thermals, possibly the same bird we had just seen. Another Short-eared Owl is then seen flying high and performing an exaggerated display flight complete with wing clapping. We make our way down from the viewpoint hoping to pick up some closer views of owls, which works a treat as we have stunning views of two 'Shorties' displaying right in front of us, with one of the birds perching very obligingly on a fence post, in great light. What a fantastic bird and a real speciality of our trips to the Uists. A small herd of Red Deer as we make our way back to Cailinish rounds off another great day.

Day 4

The warm and sunny weather continues today with little wind. After breakfast we head north towards Loch Sanndaraigh. There is Sedge Warbler flitting in amongst the reeds at the head of the loch. On the water there are Widgeon, Tufted Ducks and Teal. Snipe are 'drumming' overhead, opening their outer tail feathers and then dropping through the sky, allowing the air to oscillate through their feathers creating the drumming noise. Wonderful to watch and to hear. There are a lot of raptors up in the air, including a very distant Golden Eagle spotted by Jan as well as a Peregrine being given a hard time by a couple of Buzzards.

A Glaucous Gull is sat in amongst some other gulls by the shore of the loch and a Redwing with an injured leg is a surprise find by some farm buildings. Linnets are showing well as we make our way through Paible towards Balranald. We stop on the access road to Balranald and scan the lochans there. A single Whooper Swan flies in with two Mute Swans and a Moorhen is a good find for this Highland scarcity!

Simon spots a large perched raptor on the other side of the loch which is a Golden Eagle. It seems strange to see a "Goldie" perched away from its usual upland habitat, but the eagles on the Uists frequent the machair to hunt because of the abundance of prey.

We make our way down through the reserve towards the beach, seeing Corn Bunting and Skylarks on the way down. We have lunch overlooking the sea before walking along the headland towards Aird an Runair. The seaweed higher up the beach is alive with waders. There are Dunlin, Turnstone, Sanderling and a few Purple Sandpipers all busying themselves, feeding up on sandflies and lice in the rotting seaweed. It is quite an experience to watch them so close, with them seemingly oblivious of our presence. Whimbrel are calling and flying overhead heading north to their breeding grounds and Arctic Terns are flying from the sea to small freshwater pools on the headland. White and Pied Wagtails are also feeding amongst the seaweed and Wheaters are hopping from rock to rock.

We come across a Ringed Plover which clearly has a nest nearby as it is displaying and trying to draw our attention away from its nest site. A Great Skua (Bonxie) briefly flies around the headland giving tantalising views before it disappears. The light by now is lovely and we scan the bays and rocks hoping for an Otter. A fantastic summer plumaged Great Northern Diver is a wonderful find in one of the calm bays around the headland. The bird is fishing in clear water and we are able to look down on it, giving great views and good photo opportunities.

We wander slowly along Traigh nam Faoghailean beach. The water in the bay is crystal clear and we could have been in the Caribbean - (I think I prefer the Uists though, at least on a good day)

On the way out of Balranald we come across another Corncrake next to the road. The bird leaves cover and seems to panic as it scuttles across open ground desperately seeking some refuge in longer vegetation. The bird is running and crouching and very nervous - more like typical Corncrake behaviour.

Day 5

Today dawns overcast and cool with a freshening north westerly wind. These are the sort of conditions which might bring in some Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas currently migrating north out in the Atlantic. Balranald is justly famous as the best location in the UK to watch migrating Skuas, but the weather conditions need to be right. Although the wind today is potentially not strong enough it is worth a go to try and witness this once in a lifetime spectacle.

So with Skuas in mind we head back to Balranald for a session at the beach. On the access road to the reserve we find a handsome second summer Iceland Gull showing well whilst sat on a rock and a Corncrake rises out of an Iris bed and scuttles away through the grass. Scanning across the reserve we pick up a female Goldeneye and a handsome male Shoveler. An odd looking bird flies towards us across the water which turns out to be a male Ruff, with a black ruff. He perches in the open and we all get scoped views of this very distinctive wader, but unfortunately he doesn't hang around and flies off and out of sight.

A quick stop to use the facilities at the visitor centre reveals yet another Corncrake which is found by Sheila skulking along a shallow ditch, amazing how they can disappear even in short grass.

Once at the headland we settle in along with some other birders for a sea watching session. The winds are blowing in the right direction but just aren't quite strong enough. There are squalls coming in off the sea around the Monach Islands which keep our hopes up, but the Skua passage isn't

to be. However, there are still some great birds around. Richard has a flock of over one hundred Red Knot, Dunlin and Sanderlings are on the tideline and in the rotting seaweed and two dark phase Arctic Skuas put in an appearance hunting along the beach. There are scores of Gannets offshore plunging into the water and Arctic and Little Terns are fishing in the bay. A flock of migrating Whimbrel come in off the sea and there is a steady passage of birds including Auks, but no Skuas - maybe next year.

We pull ourselves away from Balranald and head south towards South Uist. Richard puts up a shout of male Hen Harrier and we have stunning views of this wonderful raptor as it quarters low over both sides of the road. We keep track of the bird and follow its progress along the roadside at speeds up to 30mph as it is mobbed by an angry Lapwing.

We stop for lunch at Ardivachar and watch the waders on the beach and the usual Great Northern Divers on the sea. A dark phase Arctic Skua puts up the waders momentarily as it chases a Dunlin flock off the beach and out to sea. Some Twite are showing well by the graveyard close to the point, with one bird displaying a lovely pink rump, much to Angela's delight as this was on her wish list. You just can't beat a pink rump!

After lunch we drive across 'The Range' which is an MOD firing area and can be good for Dotterel, but they continue to evade us. Craig comes across a Peregrine 'plucking post' with the remains of a Snipe amongst other birds which a Peregrine has taken. A flock of Golden Plover are showing well and Simon finds a female Ruff (a Reeve) in amongst the flock, giving good views of this elegant wader. We head back to Cairinish via Loch Bi which has hundreds of Mute Swans on it along with large numbers of Dunlin in the shallows and some Shoveler.

Day 6

The weather today is cooler, slightly overcast but generally fine with good visibility. After breakfast we head north through North Uist and onto the Langass estate. It isn't long before we find a Short-eared Owl quartering the open moorland at Barpa Langass. Simon finds a very distant Golden Eagle which is initially perched on top of a hill and we all manage scoped views before the eagle takes off and disappears behind a ridge.

We take a walk past Langass Lodge hotel and up to Fin'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 Langass. We catch up with some of the commoner passerines here including Wren (sub species Hebridensis), Robin, Willow Warbler and Linnets, and there are Tiger moth and Drinker Moth caterpillars on the track up to the stones.

Careful scanning of the loch below us reveals a pair of Red-throated Divers and a scattering of Red-breasted Mergansers snorkelling in the water. Buzzards are soaring overhead and a small herd of Red Deer are grazing on the opposite bank. It's a beautiful location giving a great vista of the landscape of North Uist.

We head south again and drop onto the island of Baleshare which is linked to North Uist by a causeway. A pair of Pintail on a small pool is a good find as well as a Gadwall there and some fine Black-tailed Godwits in breeding plumage. A scan of the sea reveals the usual Great-northern Diver - every bay.....you know the rest !

From Baleshare we make our way south and onto South Uist where we stop for lunch at Ardvule Point. Great Northern Divers are in the bay (of course) and Dunlin and Sanderling are foraging along the beach. Craig finds some Otter spraint outside a Rabbit hole which Otters may well have converted into a holt and there are dozens of Ringed Plovers scurrying around the machair.

After lunch we drive to Loch Eynort and the wonder that is Archie's Garden. It's a stunning location with views of the mountains of South Uist across the loch. Angela spots a White-tailed Eagle soaring over a distant hill as we arrive. Down on the loch Common Seals are hauled out on the rocks and Black Guillemots are fishing. We make our way through Archie's Garden, which is just that, a large plantation of mixed trees which Archie has planted over a number of years giving an oasis to passerines. At the viewpoint beyond the garden we briefly see a Golden Eagle before it disappears behind a ridge, but then a White-tailed Eagle appears and soars towards us giving amazing views of this huge raptor right over our heads and in stunning sunlight. We track the progress of the eagle as it heads towards the distant hills and watch it land on what is clearly a nest site, with a second bird perched on the nest. This other eagle then takes off and stretches its considerable wings as it soars across the loch towards us. Eventually we prise ourselves away from Loch Eynort and head back to Caillinish.

Day 7

Our final day on the Uists is overcast and cooler with some drizzle. After breakfast we load the vans up and head towards Lochmaddy to catch the ferry via (due to popular demand) the Committee Road for a last chance of some raptors. Although the weather is not ideal for raptor watching some ever reliable Short-eared Owls don't disappoint and we get good views of one looking bedraggled perched on a fence post. A fitting end to a wonderful weeks birding on the Uists, but it's not quite over just yet - as we sail away from Lochmaddy across the calm waters of The Minch a White-tailed Eagle is sat like a sentinel on one of the skerries watching us drift past. I dare say it will be perched in the same spot next year.

We have a very calm crossing and see our first Manx Shearwaters banking across the sea as well as Harbour Porpoises breaching here and there. Flocks of auks are scattered across the sea and Gannets follow the ferry as we head back towards Uig on the Isle of Skye. Back on the mainland we head towards Inverness via Loch Carron and Achnasheen arriving in Inverness in time for our 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 has been a wonderful week with fantastic wildlife in a stunning location, generally great weather, lovely food and great company.

Species Of The Trip: Comcrake

Place Of The Trip: Archie's Garden And Balranald

Magic Moment : Comcrake Roadshow

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Fulmar
Manx Shearwater
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Pale-bellied Brent Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Gadwall
Mallard
Shoveler
Tufted Duck
Goldeneye
Pintail
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Red Kite
Golden Eagle
Kestrel
Sparrowhawk
Peregrine
Corncrake
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Dunlin
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Curlew
Redshank
Common Sandpiper
Ruff
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
Lesser Redpoll
Reed Bunting
Corn Bunting
Pheasant

TOTAL BIRDS: 106

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Red Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Wild Goat

BUTTERFLIES & MOTHS

Green-veined White
Small White Tortoiseshell
Emperor Moth
Brimstone
Drinker Moth Caterpillar
Woolly Bear caterpillar

TOTAL SPECIES: 118