



SCOTLAND HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS - June 25 - July 8, 2005

Trip Report by Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Saturday June 25 – Aberdeen to Nethy Bridge via Dufftown

Following a ropy flight across the pond and a quick and uneventful flight into Aberdeen we were met by our ever cheerful and wonderful local guide Ian. A few Common Terns were seen in the airport car park while loading the van and before we knew it we were heading west to Nethy Bridge. Carrion Crows, probably the least common of the corvids, were our next species as we began the beautiful drive along colorful roadside verges of Foxgloves, Ox-eyed Daisies and Red Campions, and agricultural fields with barley, wheat, hay and rape. In harvested fields hundreds of Rooks and Jackdaws would be feeding and occasional Oystercatchers, Lapwings and Mistle Thrushes could be seen along side them. The rolling green landscape was sparsely populated with occasional farmhouses and considerable numbers of cows and sheep in the fields. We had a Grey Partridge quickly walked across the road and a Yellowhammer singing on a wire besides the road. We stopped at a layby to stretch our legs, have some tea, shortbread and cake while watching Common Gulls nesting in the hillside heather moor. A Stonechat was singing on top of a small evergreen and a pair of Meadow Pipits were busy feeding their young deep in the heather. We got our first good looks at Common Buzzards as they flew overhead and White Wagtail as it walked across the road. Crossbills were heard in the distance as we looked at a Green-veined White nectaring on white clover and studied the white and purple Heath-spotted Orchids amongst the moss, lichen and heathers. Our next stop before reaching Nethy Bridge was beside a whisky barrel plant where Wren and Goldcrest were singing. Reaching our hotel, the grounds were full of birds with Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Coal and Blue Tits at the feeders, Woodpigeons, Jackdaws and Rooks roaming the grounds and House Martins flying to their nests in the eaves of our beautiful Georgian house. After settling in, we walked down to the hill and into the village and then along the footpath up the Nethy River picking up Willow Warbler, Chiff Chaff, Spotted Flycatcher, Robin and Blackbird. After several hundred yards we heard a White-throated Dipper but it eluded us for some time before Fred finally caught a glimpse of him crossing the boulder strewn waters. He soon showed again working the far edge of the water, where the contrast between his white throat and brownish belly was seen very well. Walking back we had a Common Swift (a larger version of our Chimney Swift) fly over and saw a pair of Long-tailed Tits in a garden.

Day 2 / Sunday June 26 – Tulloch Moor; Cairngorm Plateau

The feeders this morning had two new species – a lone male Siskin that could not get enough fill at the peanut feeder and a beautiful Red Squirrel that used the top of the feeding station as a running board to the peanuts on the trunk of the Scotch Pine. Following what would be the first of many full Scottish breakfasts, we headed through the Abernethy Forest where only 1% of the ancient Caledonian woods (Scotch Pines) now exist and out onto Tulloch Moor where the only trees dotting the grazed heather landscape seem to be birches. A Curlew was heard calling in the distance as well as the ubiquitous Willow Warbler. Stonechat was seen perched up and

Redpolls called as they flew overhead. On the ground we found several Fragrant Orchids amongst Wild Thyme, Birds foot Trefoil, Potentilla and a blanket of heather.

Being our first full day, we took advantage of the beautiful weather and headed up the Cairn Gorms. It was a slow steady climb up the west trail, across heather heaths and two small picturesque running streams with large stepping stones. We paused often to catch our breath as we listened to Meadow Pipits; examined droppings of incubating Red Grouse and took in the stunning scenery that got better the further up we went. There are few birds in this harsh landscape, but 2 of them are Scottish specialties nesting near and on the plateau, the Ptarmigan and the Dotterel, and it is these two birds that will make the strenuous climb a most rewarding one. We often were overtaken by walkers, a good number of them on this beautiful weekend day, some in a hurry, others just strolling along and others even bearing recent wounds from scrapes they suffered no doubt in a moment of carelessness. All of them though seemed to have walked over the plateau in a circular route that must surely have been 12-15 miles in length. We weren't going as far, about 2 miles, but it was to take a good few hours as we stretched it out to make sure all could reach the point where the granite rocks gave way to the barren grassy landscape on the plateau. It gets your heart on the way up and your knees on the way down! Don went ahead and took advantage of the time he had on his hands and began to paint the stunning scenery – the plateau gently sloping away towards the north with Loch Morlich in the distance and only a short distance behind us a wonderful corrie with the remnants of 4 small snow patches remaining. We followed, eventually catching up for lunch on a rocky outcropping. The end was near, though we still had a steep section to negotiate. Fred and I forged ahead continuously looking for Ptarmigan as our goal was to see if the Dotterel was still on the nest that Ian found a week ago. Sure enough, the striking supercilium on the head was just barely visible through the grass. We waited for the others to catch up. Eventually they did, however they found a Ptarmigan and chicks on the way up. Together we watched the male Dotterel come off the nest, stretch its wings and hastily walk down to the pools of water where he proceeded to drink and bathe before eventually heading back to the nest. We left him and began our decent back down, stopping to look for 'chickens' in the spot where it was seen less than a half hour previously. A little searching produced a brilliantly cryptic plumaged female, blending in perfectly with the lichen covered granite rocks and 3 couple-of-days-old chicks. Slowly she moved them further down the hill and eventually out of sight, but not before we all had tremendous looks. By late afternoon we had made it back to the van for a well deserved spot of tea and cakes.

Day 3 / Monday June 27 – Isle of Mull / Grass Point, Loch Stridain, Quarry; Loch Linnie

Heading west we drove through some outstanding scenery with ever changing colors and patterns in the valleys and shapes of the hills, past flocks of Greylag Geese on Loch Laggan where Monarch of the Glen is filmed and Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak, just outside Fort William, though cloud cover prevented a clear view of the top this morning. We did see it on our return. Reaching the west coast we took the short Corran ferry across to Morvern where Black Guillemots, with their red legs and mouths contrasting with their black and white plumage, could be seen perched outside their man made nesting sites on of all things a pier! Rock Pipits were seen scurrying about the pebble beach. Morvern consisted of a number of oak woodlands with considerable amounts of bracken as an understory. It was not long before we reached the furthest most western point in mainland Britain at the Ardnamurchan peninsula, from which we took our second short ferry ride across to Mull. There was considerable activity viewed from the upper deck sides of the ferry with small groups of Manx Shearwaters passing besides the boat along with a few Guillemots and numerous Razorbills. Lesser Black-backed Gull and a Kittiwake were also spotted. By late morning we were on Mull and heading towards Grass Point. We quickly found a pair of White-tailed Eagles perched a fair distance away in the same tree as their obscured nest. These majestic raptors with an 8 ½ foot

wingspan eventually took off and flew down to the bay where they landed on a spit to feed on something that was just out of view for us. While watching the eagles, a Song Thrush, sounding very much like a mockingbird, perched up in a shrub and sang non stop for 5 minutes. A Reed Bunting was just as obliging at the top of a birch tree, while Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Whinchats and Chaffinches were all around us. Next to where we parked several Lesser Butterfly Orchids were easily found. Walking towards the ocean we came across Twite, Linnet and Great Tits and when we reached the waters edge Gannets could be seen flying over the ocean while Red-throated Loons, Shags and more Manx Shearwaters were on the water. At Loch Stridain, Lapwings alerted us to the chicks that they had in the field while we watched a Common Seal pup loafing on a rock. Across the road over the moorland, a Buzzard was spotted chasing a male and female Hen Harrier out of their nesting territory as well as a distant Greenshank. We had better luck with another Tringa specie, the Redshank, as several of them flew around the perimeter of the loch. In front of us we watched a Skylark take a dust bath bedside the road. Lunch was spent in a rather scenic spot (aren't they all) at the quarry, though one would not have known that it was one. Here we hoped that Golden Eagles would put in an appearance, and sure enough one was eventually spotted, but it was a considerable ways off, choosing to glide along and over the far ridge. Ravens were just as uncooperative, though one could blame the low cloud cover. The sun did try and peak through, though unfortunately it was not until we were well beyond the western most point where could have seen numerous Western Isles out in the Atlantic had the clouds lifted. We drove slowly looking for Otters along the coast, but only came up with Common Eiders, Northern Wheatears, Twite, Gray Wagtail and a large showing of Moon Jellyfish that had been blown in. Retracing our ferry rides and steps we stopped on the way back at Loch Linnhe, picking up Goldeneyes, Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Seals, before making it back home for a late dinner.

Day 4 / Tuesday June 28 – Abernethy Forest; Darva Moor; Lochindorb

This morning was a continuation of the marvelous weather that we had yesterday afternoon. We spent the morning slowly walking through the Caledonian forest with its stately gnarled Scotch Pines and lush understory of juniper, heather and various low growing berry groundcovers. Coal Tit's, Willow Warbler's and the ubiquitous Chaffinches were calling all around us, but other than the chaffinches it took a while before we saw the others. Mistle Thrushes were more cooperative, as was a Wren, Treecreeper and Goldcrest, though the singing Tree Pipit never ventured near us. A young Great Spotted Woodpecker, oddly our only one of the trip, could be seen on a trunk in a hollow in the woods. The highlight here though was a large party of Crested Tits that showed well as they moved about in several pine trees. For lunch we stopped at the viewing area opposite the farm pond on the outskirts of Boat of Garten and soon located a Slavonian Grebe coming off her nest in the reeds. Teal sat on the edge of the pond preening, while 5 female Eurasian Wigeon, Coot, Goldeneye and Little Grebes swam about. A second Slavonian Grebe also put in an appearance often diving for food.

From here we slowly drove around Darva Moor finding Golden Plovers feeding in a grass field with Lapwings and Curlews, adjacent to the heather moor where they breed. In an area with a small copse, we stopped to look for Redpolls and found a pair sitting at the top of a snag. They both flew off, but one kept returning to the same spot for excellent scope views. A Wren was singing on a post and a group of 25 plus Curlews flew past. While Buzzards could be seen circling in the distance we walked along the edge of a wood and found a Redstart. After a few brief views it ventured out of sight! Margaret found a Common Lizard basking on a rock only to have it slip away as soon as she noticed it. Meadow Browns and a Large Heath were also seen flying about. In a wet area we came across Common Snipe and had a Roe Deer besides the road as well as Ravens feeding on a Mountain Hare. In the center of Loch Lochindorb are the remains of a medieval 14th century castle. On the banks of the island a Black-throated Diver (Arctic Loon) was found sitting on her nest. Her mate was located on

the far side of the loch amongst about a hundred Greylag Geese. A Kestrel and a nudie (not a pretty sight) made up the rest of the exotic fauna. Returning back through the moor we soon found Red Grouse, easily spotted as they look just like periscopes sticking out of the heather. In all there were about a dozen of them dotted about the landscape and probably more as it was tough to make out the chicks

Day 5 / Wednesday June 29 – Drumuillie; Isharn Estate; Carrbridge; Findhorn Valley; Badger Hide

It was just another gorgeous start to the day. We stopped at Drumuillie not far from Nethy Bridge to look along the Spey River for two Temminick's Stints that were reported the day before. We could not locate them, in spite of finding Common Terns, Common Sandpiper, Pied Wagtail, Oystercatcher and lapwings roosting along the flats. This was our allotted morning on the Insharn Estate to look for the 'big one', the horse of the woods, or as he is affectionately known, the Cappa. It has not been a good spring for Capercaille sightings, no doubt due to last year's very poor breeding season. Being too wet it makes it near impossible for chicks to survive the cold conditions. Coupled with the fact that this is really the worst time of year to locate males as they are molting and basically sit tight, we knew that the odds were stacked against us. About a dozen crossbills, no doubt a mixed flock of Common and Scottish, flew over our vans and for a brief second perched in the distance, but the one we were able to get a scope on soon dropped out of sight. We did have luck with several butterflies and dragonflies, amongst them Common Blues, Brown Argus, Golden-banded Dragonfly and Common Hawker. For an hour and a half we drove at a snail's pace along the track through the pine forest keeping our eyes peeled for anything that looked like a Cappa. The van in front of us radioed that they had a female Capercaille besides the van but by the time we got our eyes trained on it, only a few of us saw a head drop out of sight down an embankment. Unfortunately that was our only sighting. A stop in Carrbridge for bathrooms and the obligatory bar of dark chocolate and McVities, produced a Gray Wagtail under the old 'coffin' bridge, named for the coffins that were taken over the bridge to be buried on the outskirts of town.

The Findhorn River stretches along the Findhorn Valley for many miles and we visited both sides that are bisected by the main road. Starting on the east side we went past a colony of Sand Martins that were nesting in a bank besides the road and Kestrels hovering over the fields and even had a Gray Partridge explode from the edge of the field and cross the track in front of us. By the time we reached the end of the road the clouds had started to roll in and the wind was picking up. Here we had a pleasant lunch being serenaded by Gray and White Wagtails and we spotted a lone White-throated Dipper, bathing and feeding at the bend in the river. Headed towards the western end a Redstart and several Spotted Flycatchers were seen amongst the oaks and on the slopes of the valley many Red Deer. At this end we were really feeling the wind, so we did not stay long. The Golden Eagle was a no show though we did get looks at Buzzard. Heading back for dinner we stopped to find Ring Ouzels and were all rewarded with views of as many as three of them.

This evening, well after dinner, we would go to view badgers at a hide near Abernethy Forest. In our first rain, actually a light drizzle, we walked across a mine field of cowpats to reach the small hide on the edge of the woods. Here, with windows all around for viewing we got ourselves organized while Ian put out the magic peanuts that they so dearly love. Looking through the log book we read that on the previous three nights they had been showing up early – good news for us, so we thought! Badgers need not show up at all, and we wondered if that was going to be the case as we waited for an hour and a half with our eyes peeled at all the entrance holes to their sett. A young Otter was heard whistling, no doubt searching for its parents and a Common Sandpiper was often heard calling. At 11pm Ian decided to turn on the dim solar powered lights, though there still was enough twilight to see, and low and behold there appeared 3 Badgers coming down the slope straight for the peanuts. Why did he wait so long to turn on those lights? For half an hour we watched as

they foraged in the open and were joined by 2 others on the other side of the hide. At 11:30pm we closed up and walked back stopping to listen at a male Tawny Owl calling from deep in the woods. On the drive home, the evening rains had brought out the Common Frog babies which were seen hopping their way across the narrow one lane roads. Unfortunately it was only those in the front seat that got to see a Western Hedgehog along the edge of the road.

Day 6 / Thursday June 30 – Milton Pond; Tom Vaigh woods; Spey Bay; Loch Spynie; Lossiemouth

A stroll down to the post office shortly after breakfast produce a pair of Dunnocks foraging amongst the pine litter in a well tended garden besides the river, along with a decent flock of Common Swifts racing down the main road. Our first stop this morning was besides a large pond to watch a Eurasian Wigeon and Common Goldeneye both with chicks; a Moorhen and the late fledging Grey Herons that were nesting at the top of the spruce trees. A lady in a very small car pulled up besides our van and asked us politely if we knew that there was a blind (hide) there. Of course we did as it was very obvious on the far side of the pond. What she meant was that the 15 feet of room that we left for vehicles to pass on the road was not enough room for her to pass. It was amusing to us and the first of several 'vehicle' encounters we would have today. At Tom Vaigh, the open pine woods were as lush as ever and the nuisance bugs were out in full force. The sound of a Wren was ringing through the forest, and the high pitched notes of Goldcrest were heard besides the road. This was another opportunity for us to look for 'cappa', but despite it being seen the previous morning it was a no show today. It was odd to see Sand Martins flying about the forest, but they had taken full advantage of a sand deposit from the last ice age and were nesting in the cut away bank. Several Spotted Flycatchers were busy catching insects, but not enough of them as far as we were concerned, and Siskins and Crossbills could be heard flying overhead. From here we headed towards the Glenlivet distillery only to come across a worker asking us in the thickest of Scottish brogues to turn back as the road was closed, or at least that was what we thought he said. And turn back we did! Unfortunately it was going to be far too long a way around to get in the other way, so we abandoned all hopes of a midday wee dram. However on the narrow one lane road out we came head to head with a car with French number plates and two fishing rods hanging over the driver side windscreen! The occupants obviously enjoying a lovely fly fishing holiday in the highlands, in spite of the perils of driving with a partly obscured windscreen. It was a momentary face off, until the driver realized that we would have to be the one that was going to have to back up, so that we could pass. His car was all over the road in all sorts of angles and it very obvious to us that reversing was not his forte. Would did he do with the money his parents gave him for driving lessons? The car stopped partly off the road, but still without enough room to let us by, and the doors opened! Both occupants got out, and we realized that the elderly female passenger was going to take her husbands place at the wheel, and he, obviously livid with the situation he had been put in, decided to walk back down the lane instead of getting an earful from his wife. She on the other hand was an experienced driver and had no problem controlling the vehicle and in no time was reversing two hundreds yards to a pull off to let us by. Meanwhile his head was down, his hands behind his back, and dreading the conversation that was to come. Our consolation for returning the same way was a Red-legged Partridge and a Peregrine.

Reaching Spey Bay by early afternoon we had lunch while scanning the estuary and sea picking up Arctic and Sandwich Terns, Goosanders and an Osprey. In the tidal pool 2 Black-tailed Godwit were found sleeping and on the sand island in the center of the estuary amongst the usual gulls, a first year Glaucous Gull – a nice find. On the outskirts of town a stop along the main road produced a gorgeous singing male Yellowhammer, Dunnock, Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting, the first and last species sitting on the telegraph wires. While Goldfinches were just a heard only bird, Corn Bunting's were far more obliging and we watched them sing there 'jangling keys' song at close range. A quick stop in a narrow grove of pines where Tree Sparrows nest in nest boxes

produced one cooperative sighting of an individual that posed nicely as he left the box. Loch Spynie was noisy and full of activity, with Black-headed Gulls and Common Terns nesting on the small platform in the middle of the water. Tufted Ducks were numerous and we got to see Great Cormorants, Little Grebes, Wigeon, Coot and an Osprey. Our first stop at Lossiemouth was rather slow, other than a Kittiwake and Lesser Black-backed Gull perched near each other on the jetty. The second stop at West Beach was more productive as we picked up Razorbill, Gannet, Fulmar and a juvenile Black-throated Diver.

Day 7 / Friday July 1 – Castle Grant; Tulloch Moor; Longman Point, Inverness; Loch Ness and Urqhart Castle; Kincardine Church

It was an early start to look for ‘cappa’ in the beautiful Scotch Pine woods of the Castle Grant Estate. We had a good start with Roe Deer and Brown Hare besides the road and Common Sandpiper near the entrance bridge but the woods were awfully still with no movement from the ‘horse of the woods’ and only the song of Treecreeper’s and Goldcrests. From here it was over to Tulloch Moor which had a pair of Pheasants in amongst the heathers; Stonechat perched up and the usual Willow Warblers singing. On the far side of the moor as it rose up the hill 4 male Black Grouse, known as Blackcock were spotted feeding. Though the distance was great there were times when one could see their white rear ends and white on the wings. After breakfast we checked Johnny’s moth trap and found a number of small moths including Coronet, White Bordered, Two-spot Wainscot and a stunning Green Carpet.

Most of the day was spent visiting several historical sites. Beginning at Culloden Moor where Bonnie Prince Charlie lead 5000 Jacobites into an ill-fated battle on April 16 1746 against the Duke of Cumberland’s Government army almost twice their number. Within hours it was over and the dreams of an independent Scotland were gone. In spite of the gloomy reminder of that morning’s tragedy with headstones marked with just the name of a clan we saw several species of birds including a Meadow Pipit; Skylark ‘skylarking’ and two Scottish Crossbills that landed at the top of the trees next to the marker near the center of the battlefield. On our way to Loch Ness we stopped at Longman Point, the sewage outlet in Inverness that flows into the Moray Firth! Here there was the usual assortment of waders along with half a dozen Herring Gulls that were chasing an Osprey with a large fish in its talons. In spite of all their efforts the Osprey got to keep its catch. It was windy on Loch Ness and those that sat at the bow of the boat got a dose of spray on the way to Urqhart castle. The return journey was far more pleasant; though on neither did we even get a look at anything that could have qualified as a ‘nessie’ sighting! The ruined castle, dating back to the 6th century, on the northern shore of the loch has been uninhabited for several hundred year, but during the 13th to 17th century was inhabited by a number of clans that fought for control of the Great Glen.

After dinner we went for a stroll along the woods near the school to look for Tawny Owl chicks that were seen the night before, but could not locate them. Along with a good dose of no-see-um bites there was the briefest of glimpses of a Woodcock as it flew over the road. A slight consolation was that it called 4 or 5 times as it flew above the woods though of sight.

Day 8 / Saturday July 2 – Nethy Bridge to Aberdeen; Jarlshof; West Voe; Grutness Beach

Yet another Osprey being chased by gulls was seen this morning on the way to Aberdeen and yet again this one got to keep its catch. It was a short flight over to the Shetlands with a great view of Fair Isle, some 24 miles south of Sumburgh. After settling in to our hotel we walked out the door and onto the grounds of Jarlshof dating back to 3000 BC and layered with settlements from Neolithic dwellings to a 16th century laird’s house. Fulmars

were nesting on the grassy tops of the walls, occasionally tilting their head back and cackling at their mates while a Great Skua flew over the ruins and was immediately escorted out by a Curlew, frightened that the 'bonxie' would make a meal of its chick. A Black Guillemot and Common Eiders were on the water and a dark morph Arctic Skua was seen resting on the rocks on the edge of the loch. It was wonderful to see Arctic Terns flying back and forth out to sea and returning with a sandeel in their mouths, especially as last year's sand eel crash meant that they did not get to breed. We walked past the airstrip to the Grutness Beach and watch them return to their nest site in amongst the boulders. Common Gulls were also nesting here and two well grown well camouflaged chicks were seen being harassed by the terns as they wondered about. By the small pond a pair of Rock Pipits were chasing each other landing on the lichen covered wall to give us a great view. A bit of a surprise for here was seeing 2 swifts flying low over the mowed field, one of which was definitely a Common Swift. We found out 2 days later that a Pallid Swift was located on an island off north Mainland along with a Common Swift.

Day 9 / Sunday July 3 – Sumburgh Head; Scatness; Dalsetter; Loch Spiggie; Pool of Virkie

By the time breakfast was over the front was through and it turned out to be another gorgeous though windy day. Driving the short distance to Sumburgh Head we encountered a Rabbit at top speed being chased for a hundred meters by a Meadow Pipit a sight which none of us had ever seen before and which all of us thought was hilarious. We passed a Ringed Plover with a newly hatched chick walking along the edge of the road. At the car park we had a wonderful view of the cliffs at the base of the Head, with a plethora of activity below us. Great Skuas were constantly passing overhead, while Fulmars were flying at head height and Gannets in small squadrons could be seen flying just over the water. In between, Shags and Guillemots were resting on the rocks, the latter in large numbers. Kittiwakes had just hatched their first chicks of the season and we did see a young Guillemot. There were a few Razorbills but Puffins were far more numerous and conspicuous as they landed near the top of the cliff where they utilize the rabbit burrows in the soft soil. At one stage a youngster was seen as it ventured to the entrance of its burrow. On the lime green and orange lichen covered field stone walls that are used to delineate the fields in this treeless landscape we had a very obliging Shetland Wren singing for us. This is a distinctive subspecies of our Winter Wren, larger, darker and with a noticeably different song to those on the mainland. Small family groups of Northern Wheatears, flashing their white arses as they flew were evident in the fields. At Scatness, the narrow peninsula adjacent to the Head, Grey Seals watched us watch them and a small Arctic Tern colony, with one fledged juvenile spent considerable time around a small pool bathing.

Following lunch in Hoswick, we walked the track through the heather moor and peat bog at Dalsetter where the continuous song of Skylarks was with us for most of the journey. It is here on the higher ground that Great Skuas nest, and they could be seen in pairs dotted amongst the heather or flying around the area and landing next to a mate, showing off their white wing patch as they raised their wings to greet their mate. Arctic Skuas or Parasitic Jaegers also nest here, mainly in the lower areas. About eight were seen of which at least 2 were light morphs. From time to time several of them would gang up on a Great Skua if it got too close to their chicks and force it away. Whimbrels, Curlew and Snipe were also seen in small numbers, the latter two species far more vocal than the Whimbrels. We watched another marvelous encounter as a Whimbrel and Arctic Skua chased a Great Skua around for a minute or so, at times twisting and turning on a dime. As we pulled into Loch Spiggie, a number of Ravens were in the air in a group along with Great Skuas and a female Common Shelduck, a rare breeding bird on the Shetlands was in the bay. We were here to look for Britain's rarest breeding bird, the Whooper Swan, but could only locate Mute Swans. Our final stop was at the Pool of Virkie, where on the mudflats Curlews were joined by Redshanks and early returning Bar-tailed Godwits, no doubt failed breeders at this time of year. Molting male Red-breasted Mergansers were seen amongst several female Common Eiders

and a lone Great Cormorant was swimming about in the deeper water. Along the edge of the pool a Northern Wheatear was busy chasing small flies and Ringed Plovers and Dunlin walked the wet mud feeding as they went and finishing up with a bath in a very shallow depression filled with water.

Day 10 / Monday July 4 – Loch Tingwall; Loch of Freester; South Nesting; Boat to Noup of Noss

It was another gorgeous start to the day, with calmer seas and bright sunshine. At breakfast one could see Gannets patrolling the bay and diving for fish. In astonishment we watched a dark morph Arctic Skua chase an Arctic Tern returning to its colony with a sandeel, until the tern dropped the fish and the skua descended into the field to pick it up. The tern then gave a half hearted attempt to chase the skua before admitting defeat. After dropping Don off for a round of golf outside Lerwick we visited the Loch at Tingwall where a pair of Whooper Swan had raised 4 cygnets. At one stage a Great Skua flew over them, causing them to face each other with their cygnets between them, and make their extraordinary barking calls to distract the skua. Several species had nested here including Black-headed Gulls, Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. Tingwall means a meeting place, and in days of yore the small peninsula on the northern end was where the powers that be met. Not too far away on the Loch of Freester we came across a Whooper Swan which allowed us to get relatively close, even at one point coming towards us as if to confront us. We took lunch amidst glorious scenery on a stone beach at South Nesting where the star attraction was an Otter. Otters are freshwater mammals that feed in the sea and come to freshwater to wash off salt water. As we arrived, the otter was busiest finishing off a fish before swimming over to a very small island and climbing up over the rocky section on the east end before going out of sight. Of great amusement was a black ram that was standing atop the island. How did it get there?

After walking through some of the streets of Lerwick, the capital of the Shetlands, we boarded the Dunster III (Scottish for Eider) and headed out to the Noup of Noss, passing Grey Seals, Turnstones and numerous Black Guillemots before having Fulmars and 4 Great Skuas follow us behind the boat. Nearing Noss we could see Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins and Gannets flying back and forth from the colony. We would go past sandstone cliffs that jutted out with marvelous names such as The Cletters, Whiggie Ness, Point of Heogatoug and Rumble Wick before reaching the highest point in the Shetlands, the 600' tall Noup of Noss. Here an estimated 80,000 seabirds nest with Guillemots making up over half the population along with 20,000 Gannets. Watching the activity from below there were large groups of Guillemots on the water along with a splattering of Razorbills, and Gannets seemed to be everywhere with Great Skuas always close behind them. Near the base of the cliff on a platform we watched a pair of Great Skuas feed on a dead Gannet. Did the skuas actually make the kill? More than likely. On the cliff face we could easily locate from bottom to top, Shags, Guillemots, Razorbills, Gannets, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Puffins. The latter seen wheeling off the cliff tops in groups. Actually looking up the activity, the coming and going, looked as though it was an air traffic controller's nightmare.

Day 11 / Tuesday July 5 – Mainland to Unst via Yell and Fetlar; Funzie Pool; Mires of Funzie; Airstrip; Haroldswick; Baltasound Harbour

Overnight we had our first rains of the trip but by daybreak the rains had stopped and the islands were covered in low clouds and strong winds, yet it remained warm. We transferred from the southern tip to the northern tip of Shetland over the course of eight hours, catching the morning ferries from Mainland to Yell, Yell to Unst and Unst to Fetlar before returning to Unst mid afternoon. In between we watched Rock Pipits with insects in their mouth come in to feed youngest amongst the boulders at the first ferry dock. Here, as is the case in most coastal harbors, there were numerous Black Guillemots along with Gannets. Arctic Skuas would chase terns and Great Skuas would chase Gannets, the later more successful this morning than his smaller cousin. Nearing Fetlar the

winds picked up and the journey into the wind was considerably rougher than the return. Nevertheless we got onto the island in one piece and headed straight for Loch Funzie. Isn't it funny that Funzie is pronounced finnie? Skylarks were singing and a few Golden Plovers were sighted and Hooded Crows and Starlings seemed to be very common. On the edge of the loch were 4 Red-throated Loons (Divers in Europe) no doubt happy to rest out of the wind. We walked down to Mires of Funzie where there was a blind overlooking several polls and the marsh. Here Snipe were very common, with one winnowing as he went around 'his circuit' above the blind for 10 minutes and wisps of them chasing each other around the marsh. It was not long before a male Red-necked Phalarope flew in and proceeded to work his way around the edge of the pool frantically picking off midges and insects from the stalks of vegetation before disappearing into the grasses where he likely had a nest. A female was next to fly in and she was far more relaxed, happy to slowly make her way around occasionally pausing long enough in the open for us to get excellent views of the more colorful of the pair. There were 4 sightings in all. On the way out a pair of Red-throated Loons flew off the loch and over us laboriously into the head wind which allowed for good views.

Following a marvelous lunch of a wide assortment of sandwiches, lentil soup and biscuits we drove up to the deserted airstrip, where in spite of the howling wind Arctic Skuas and several Whimbrel showed off their flying skills. The smooth ferry ride back to Unst produced Gannets diving off the stern, one of which was very successful with at least five consecutive meals. For the past 3 weeks a Common Crane has been seen on and off between Yell and Unst, so we drove to Haroldswick where it had been reported the day before. After some searching of the open fields, Shawn spotted it in a recently cut field in the distance. Driving to the edge of the field, we had great looks at it as it worked its way around the perimeter. We finished up driving along the edge of the Baltasound harbor where we came across an Otter and Red-throated Loon.

Day 12 / Wednesday July 12 – Hermaness Nature Reserve; Keen of Hamar; Baltasound Sound; Haroldswick Bay and Marshes

The 7:30am forecast called for a clear morning followed by afternoon showers. Sometimes they are wrong. Hermaness Nature Reserve sits at the very top of the British Isles and consists of a bleak rolling moor landscape. By the time we had begun our walk fog was rolling in and visibility was beginning to diminish. Nevertheless, as we climbed the steepest part of the trail we came across Arctic Skuas and the first of many close pairs of Great Skuas, this after all holds the world's largest breeding colony; a female Northern Wheatear with a juvenile, which could be seen waiting along the peat banks to be fed and a Dunlin. The whistle of Golden Plovers could be heard as they flew out of sight over a ridge and circled around the path to land within view. The nearer we got to the western side cliffs the bleaker the conditions looked and the thought of not being able to view one of Britain's most picturesque landscapes or the Gannet colony was looking increasingly likely. In places boardwalks have been installed to keep us off muddy sections, but the recent rains had meant that the path in places was muddy and often we had to walk off the trail, though it wasn't that much better as it meant crossing shallow bogs. At least the chance of slipping was diminished. Shawn found a Common Frog on one of the boardwalk but it soon slipped through the gap in the planks. As we approached a Great Skua only meters off the path we found a pair of week-old chicks huddled together on the lee side of a tuft of grass. By the time we reached the path that runs along the top of the cliff, it looked as though the fog was beginning to thin out, and as we neared the Gannet colony to our south we could hear the sounds and smell of the colony as a sliver of the sun's rays peaked through and lit up the area below us. Looking down we could see an estimated 12,000 gannets, most of which were evenly spaced apart as they sat on their nests on the sloping rock face while others could be seen as white dots floating on the smooth ocean water and still others circling around the cliffs well below us. Fulmars nesting on narrow ledges were considerably closer as were a few Puffins that could be seen in front of

their burrows as the top of the cliff. In this particular area one could only see about several hundred Guillemots on ledges towards the base of the cliff. Turning around we noticed that it was clearing and Muggle Flugga, the lighthouse at the northern most point of the British was in view, so taking advantage of the light we walked back to view the stunning coastal landscape with waves crashing against the headland and a handful of rock outcroppings, some white with gannets and white wash which make up the small islands at the very tip off of Hermaness's headland. We now turned our attention to the Puffins that were resting just along the edge of the cliff. Finding safe viewing areas, we got within feet of them, some just happy to pose for pictures and others without a care in the world, nodding off. Every once in while one would return from the seas with fish. With the exception of one bird that returned with several foot long Pipe Fish they all had a beakful of Sand eels. Landing they would make their way in front of us to their burrows, sometimes trying to decide whether we were in their way. The deep moaning call of an adult could be heard coming from a burrow so we all listened to the amusing sounds of puffins making contact with the outside world.

The afternoon was spent on the serpentine barren known as the Keen of Hamar, only a short distance from our hotel. Amongst the oldest and poorest soil in Britain the Hamar, meaning 'rocky outcrop on the hillside' is covered in small fragments of rocks known as 'debris', as a result of weathering following the retreat of the last ice age some 10,000 years ago. Amongst the tiny rocks one could find an assortment of plants including Spring Squill, Wild Thyme, Kidney Vetch, Norwegian Sandwort, Thrift, Northern Rock Cress, Moss Campion, Frog Orchid and the rarest of plants found only here, Edmondston's Chickweed. We then proceeded to go around Baltasound harbor where an assortment of the expected species were seen. While having ice cream we watched Hooded Crows pick up muscles and drop them on the kelp covered rocks in the order to help break them open. A final stop was to the Haroldswick Marshes and Bay where Grey Seals were basking on the rocks.

Day 13 / Thursday July 13 – “Halligarth”; Small Waters to Westing; Uyeasound; Unst to Mainland; Moussa

Trees are easy to spot in the Shetlands, and a small copse of Sycamore Maples surrounded by a stone wall, sticks out like a sore thumb, and certainly well worth a look. Alas, there was little of interest at Halligarth, though it felt different walking under wind swept trees with a rich lush green understory. A fungus was very intriguing; looking like a miniature kingdom and in the walled cemetery there was a profusion of Red Admirals nectaring. As we exited, walking past the front of the abandoned house we heard a rather sweet song coming from low in the garden trees. At first it sounded like a Blackbird, then a Swallow. It turned out to be a Marsh Warbler, obviously blown well off course from Eastern Europe. The looks were rather poor as it flew across the path and into a hedgerow along the stone wall, rarely revealing itself. We drove around looking at pools for Black-tailed Godwits but could not locate any. At Small Waters, there was the usual suspects all seemingly crying about something, but it was the Whimbrels that caught our attention, noisily moving about on foot and in the air, obviously unhappy that we were around. We took a pleasant walk along the road towards the coast and the small holding of Westing, passing numerous stands of Yellow Iris, Ragged Robins, derelict farmhouses without their roofs, a reminder of the taxes imposed on landowners in the 19th century when farmers were evicted in favor of sheep. Don elected to walk ahead to find an ideal picturesque spot to paint – it wasn't hard. The bluff to the north was constantly checked for any signs of a Merlin, but all we could come up with were distant Hooded Crows and Ravens. At one point we walked near a colony of Arctic Terns and courting Oystercatchers that flew in unison over our heads. The setting was idyllic, the scenery stunning, the weather simply gorgeous, in all very serene, yet the news we were about to receive was devastating. Even in this remotest of remote locations, seemingly a million miles from nowhere, the terrorist attacks in London were a shocking blow to us. As one should, we carried on; reaching Westing Bay where somehow Don sitting on the

rocks on the edge of bay had already heard the tragic news. The colors here were something to behold with deep blue waters, green grass, dark rocks, bright blue sky it was a magnificent setting, which Don captured on paper. Preening and feeding a short distance away was a Common Loon, certainly a good find for this time of year.

Following lunch we headed to Uyeasound where a pair of Red-throated Loons showed really well with one taking off once it had finished preening. Another Shetland Wren was seen singing from a stone wall that divided the loch from at outflow. Just before we reached the Bluemull Sound Ferry, 4 Whooper Swans were spotted resting along the banks of a loch. We reached the hotel in Sumburgh in time to rest up for dinner and our night jaunt to Moussa. We left the hotel at 10:30pm and reached the ferry a short while later. It was a calm evening, still bright enough to see and with a nice reddish glow to the sky that never gets completely dark – the locals call this ‘simmer dim’. At 11pm we were on Moussa and making the ½ mile walk following sheep paths around the southern side of the island towards the 45’ tall Iron Age Broch, built about 100 years BC of local Old Red Sandstone, as that has certainly withstood the test of time. Nearing the broch, Arctic Skuas could be seen trying to settle in for the night on higher ground besides the boardwalk while we could hear the eerie hiccupping and churring of Storm Petrels from inside the stone walls and boulders, as they tried to ‘guide’ their mates back to the nest. It reminded us of an old 33 1/3 gramophone record being stuck. As luck would have it, we found a bird just inside the broch wall sitting on an egg. It was midnight before several birds showed up, flying around the broch very much like bats. The numbers began to build, and there could have been as many as several hundred by the time we left, it was tough to count. Eventually one would land on the dry laid stone wall and work its way into the crevices to its calling mate. One landed long enough for me to pick up this swallow sized bird, where we could see the tiny tube-nose, webbed feet and white stripe on the underwing. It certainly was an experience that no one here was going to forget anytime soon. By 1pm we were back on the ferry watching a stunning sky. Yes this was now dawn in the land of simmer dim.

Day 14 / Friday July 14 – Northmavine; Gluss Isle; Ronas Voe; Urafirth; Eschaness; Moo Stack

We got to sleep in this morning! Refreshed, we headed north onto Northmavine in the north west corner of Mainland. At Gluss Isle we had good looks at an Otter feeding on fish just off shore and a pair of very noisy Common Gulls. A Curlew was pacing between fields on either side of the road as we stopped to watch its two chicks walk away into thicker grasses. A Red-throated Loon flew over calling or rather grunting. We had another encounter with a colorful Shetland Bumble Bee, which we saw each day we were on the island and a Shetland Wren again very vocal. We had lunch at Ronas Voe, with the red granite cliffs of Ronas Hill in full view reminding me of a small fjord. Unfortunately the tern colony had moved on and all that remained were a pair of Arctic’s. 4 Red-throated Loons flew in; a Ringed Plover was on the shingle beach and an Eider and her chicks were on the water. On the sand we found tracks belonging to shorebirds and possibly more interestingly to an Otter. The remains (two wings) of a Razorbill were also found which enabled us to look at the grey first primary shaft which separates it from the Guillemots that have a white first primary shaft, which we did find later. At Urafirth the church was busy with a wedding. Standing in the doorway was the well groomed groom in his kilt and sporran waiting for his bride and happy to have his portrait taken, much to the amusement of everyone in the van. A short distance away we found the rare Oysterplant, Sandwort and Sea Campion on the pebble beach along with a Northern Wheatear busily feeding on gnats. Our final stop was at Eschaness, a beautiful point of land protruding into the Atlantic with rocky coastlines and outcropping with wonderful names such as the Dronges, Moo Stack and the Hols o’ Scradda. Here we walked towards Moo Stack watching Fulmars glided gently effortlessly around the coves; Grey and Common Seals could be seen resting at the base of the cliffs; Puffin’s entertained us on ledges near the grassy top and we came across out first Fulmar chick restless beneath her mother, a perfect ending to a wonderful 2 weeks.