



## **SCOTLAND “Highlands and Islands” - June 11-24, 2016**

**Trip Report by Toby Green and Phil Knott**

Leaders: Adrian Binns, Toby Green and Phil Knott

### **Saturday 11th June - Highlands**

We started our tour with a little birding on the way from the pick-up points. We spotted Goldeneye and Common Sandpiper on the Spey with Sand Martins hawking above the river. Lapwing and Oystercatcher were both seen on the journey and Snipe, Mistle Thrush and Lesser Redpoll were also seen just before Nethybridge. The group settled into the Mountview for our next four days birding.

### **Sunday 12th June**

Our first full day saw us heading into Inverlaidnan Estate. The first part of the drive gave us Spotted Flycatcher, Redstart, Tree Pipit and at the top of the hill, very nice views of Common Crossbills. We slowly drove round the tracks and were rewarded with a stunning female Capercaillie showing very close to us; we watched her for some time enjoying the great views before moving off to let her settle down again. What a stunning bird and amazing views - we felt very lucky. We drove back to Carrbridge where we had a walk through the woods. We heard a Crested Tit and it was not long before we were all enjoying great views of this lovely bird. Large numbers of Siskin and Goldfinch were on some feeders, so we stopped and spent some time photographing them in the very nice light. Down by the river we had a very skulky Blackcap pair which some of the group managed brief views of. We spent the rest of the day in Strath Dearn where we enjoyed the most confiding White-throated Dipper ever! Also good numbers of waders with Redshank, Curlew, Lapwing and Common Sandpiper were all well seen. A Common Tern showed well at Garbole Bridge. Good numbers of Red Deer were scattered up the glen and wild Goats; we also spotted a few pairs of Red-legged Partridge. The head of the glen was very quiet for raptors with only Buzzard and Kestrel seen, but we did enjoy a good assortment of wild flowers, which included Small White, Heath Spotted and Heath Fragrant Orchid, Starry Saxifrage, Butterwort, Lousewort, Sundew and Bugle; we also had a patch of Stagshorn Club Moss. The day had come to an end so we headed back down to Strathspey and the Mountview.

### **Monday 13th June**

We had an early start today and enjoyed the sight of up to seven Black Grouse on their Lek site, at this time of year they are a little quieter but we were lucky enough to see several birds engaging in a some lekking. A Short-Eared Owl put on a good display for us and a Curlew family was nice to see. Several Lesser Redpoll were calling and flying round but we couldn't locate one in the trees! We spotted two Mountain Hares to add to our Brown Hare we spotted on the way up and Pheasants were everywhere. After a filling breakfast we had a stroll through a very nice woodland called Craigallichie where we watched a pair of Pied Flycatchers at a nest box, two Wood Warblers sang close by and we had stunning views in the scope of one bird then another came in closer. Spotted Flycatcher was also seen and several Song Thrush. The crags above had an ever watchful Peregrine which sat out in the open for us giving good scope views. The rest of the day we were spent on Cairngorm and despite the forecast saying clear we were plagued by low cloud for most of the day. However, we did get good views of Ring Ouzel on the lower slopes. Up on the misty tops we had two Ptarmigan which

showed well but the mist would not let up! Heading back down the mountain we were treated to very close views of Red Grouse. Botany today included, Lesser Twayblade and Dwarf Cornell on the mountain and Lesser Butterfly and Small White Orchid on the way back.

## **Tuesday 14th June**

Today after an early breakfast we made a bee line for the Aberdeenshire coast and the stunning Troup Head. The journey there gave us the chance to view Yellowhammer with several males showing well, two Corn Bunting and a singing Sedge Warbler. On the walk out to the cliffs we had very close views of Skylark and Linnet, and more Yellowhammer. The cliffs were bustling with activity, with thousands of Guillemot, Kittiwake and Razorbill. We spotted a few Puffin coming and going, but the highlight here were the hundreds of Gannets on view. We settled down on the cliff tops to enjoy and photograph the wonderful spectacle of the colony. Amongst all the comings and goings we did witness a very nasty fight between two Gannets with neither bird giving up - we left before the outcome but it did look like a fight to the death! By now the weather had closed in and heavy rain was settling in. We did get several Tree Sparrows before we left the Troup area. At Banff we scanned the gulls at the mouth of the Deveron adding Lesser Black-backed Gull among the Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, also a gathering of Kittiwake were bathing in the river. At Portsoy we had great views of Rock Pipit. The rain was very heavy now so we didn't spend much time at Bow Fiddle Rock but we did get Black Guillemot, close Razorbill and Shag. A pair of Great Black-backed Gulls had two small chicks on their ledge nest.

We made a final stop to watch the seal colony at Port Gordon with both Grey and Harbour Seal being present and showing well. By now the rain had beaten us so we had a visit to the Walkers Shortbread factory on the way home.

## **Wednesday 15th June**

With the weather once again not very nice we spent the morning trying to clean up on some of the forest species. Our first stop after a drive round Tulloch where we saw Red Deer, was Loch Garten. The centre gave the group a great chance of seeing Great-spotted Woodpecker and we were not disappointed with both male and female showing. Large numbers of Siskin were on the feeders along with Greenfinch and Coal Tit. At Deshar Pool we had Tufted Duck, Little Grebe and Lapwing. We headed up to Lochindorb where we had a Black-throated Diver initially quiet close but then drifting to the far side. The drive round the Dava Moor road we also spotted a Red Grouse pair with six small chicks and a Common Gull colony. With the weather now very wild the decision was made to visit a local distillery. We had lunch and dried out, then headed up to Glen Livet where the group enjoyed a guided tour round the Glen Livet Distillery buildings. The journey home gave us Spotted Flycatcher and a family of Curlew by the road, also a good number of Lapwing and Mistle Thrush. We arrived back at the hotel where we all enjoyed a lovely meal before I took my leave and handed the group over to Phil for the second part of the trip. - Toby

## **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June - Highlands to the West Coast and Inner Hebrides**

We started our west coast adventure under our new guide Phil. We headed west from Nethy Bridge, seeing several Lapwing, Rook and Jackdaw as we went. Our first main stop was after an hour, when we stopped in the small village of Laggan. There had been reports of an Icterine Warbler here, a rare bird from Central and Eastern Europe. As soon as we got out of the bus it was heard singing; a loud and energetic song with good mimicry. It was very difficult to find at first, but it soon got into a pattern, enabling excellent binocular and telescope views for everyone. A great bird and a lifer for many! We continued west from here, heading through Spean Bridge and then Fort William. We were now on the West Coast at Loch Linnhe. We continued down the shores of the loch until we reached the Corran narrows, where we went straight over on the ferry to Ardgour. Here we took coffee and scoped out into the loch, seeing Eider, Shag and some wonderfully close Black Guillemot on the pier.

We loaded up and headed a mile down the road, stopping at Sallachan to admire the Common Seals. Birding was also good here, with Canada Geese, Common Tern, Red-breasted Merganser and Eider. A quarry behind us was good cover for us, but also for a smart pair of Bullfinch. Wonderfully close and prolonged views of one of Europe's skulkiest birds! Great find! We headed down deeper into Morvern and took our lunch overlooking the Black Glen. Red Deer grazed below us, with Siskin and Meadow Pipit calling. We continued on to Lochaline, where we boarded the ferry to Mull. The crossing was quiet, save for a few Arctic Tern. We arrived at Fishnish on Mull and the headed down the coast to Scallastle Bay. Birding really improved here, with an adult White-tailed Eagle perched on top of a larch tree near its nest. Also recorded here was an Otter on the outer rocks, Ringed Plover and Song Thrush.

We continued down into the heart of Mull, stopping for tea and cake at Glen More. We soon drew the focus of a Hen Harrier, who was not happy we were there, despite her nest being a long way off! We enjoyed views of her and beat a retreat, with views of Raven and a brief Golden Eagle before we went. It was time to check in, and we headed north towards Salen to our lovely hotel at the head of Glen Forsa, overlooking the Sound of Mull. A good first day out west, with lots of good birds.

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> June**

We headed out pre-breakfast for a turn around the grounds. It started very well, with a fine male Blackcap in the scope – not an easy bird to get! We added Robin and Spotted Flycatcher, before venturing through to a clearing, where we heard Wood Warbler and saw numerous Great Tit, Chaffinch and a brief but good Whitethroat. After breakfast we made a brief stop at Salen, before heading through to Loch na Keal at Killiechronan. It was an excellent spot, with White-tailed Eagle almost immediately, and an Otter not far away too! Magical Mull at its best. Added to that were Sedge Warbler, Red-breasted Merganser and Canada Geese. We moved along towards Ulva Ferry, where we got ourselves ready for the boat trip. From the pier we could see White-tailed and Golden Eagle, and numerous Buzzard. A few of us also had a female Hen Harrier. The boat arrived, alas there were many pushy French photographers who pushed to the front, so we went downstairs for the first leg. Nothing was missed on the water though, and we soon unloaded onto Staffa, after some skilful skippering by our captain Ian to take us into Fingal's Cave. An hour goes quickly on Staffa, with a quick walk to the cave and a quick lunch on the top for most of us. Birds here included Shag, Eider with ducklings and lots of Fulmar.

We took prime position on the boat for the next leg, prime position for a soaking that is. As we headed out into the north-easterly the spray was heavy, so most beat a retreat down to the cabin once again. We were soon on Lunga, and landed carefully using the mobile pontoon. Carefully across the rocks and we were soon climbing up to the low cliffs. Superb seabirds everywhere! Scores of Puffins just yards away, with a walk along giving everyone amazing views of Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwake, with close Shags too. Magical Treshnish! We headed back towards the boat, seeing a pair of Great Skua display on the cliff top, whilst some of us had excellent Twite views. We carefully boarded the boat and were soon on our way home, via Grey Seals on the rocks. We were soon back on dry land and headed back to the hotel with lots of humorous driving by locals and visitors alike. A first class day out – with lifetime views of many seabirds.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> June**

Pre-breakfast saw us head down to the loch for a good look out, with fine Red Deer stags at close quarters. The loch was mirror calm, allowing good views of Arctic Tern, Black-throated Diver and Black Guillemot. Waders included Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper and unusually, three Bar-tailed Godwit that must be summering on Mull – good records! Chiffchaff and Blackcap were singing away in the car park too – but not showing today.

We started our fine day on Mull by heading west into Loch na Keal, overlooking Scarisdale. It was glorious weather, probably too good for our target Golden Eagles! Nevertheless we did very well with close Wheatear, Shelduck and Red-throated Diver. We moved further down the loch, stopping when we saw surface ripples. An

Otter! We parked carefully and were able to scope the animal on a rock as it rolled and groomed. Great light and great viewing. We continued along, seeing thousands of Moon jellyfish in the shallows below us. The scenery improved even more as we headed around the corner, with expansive views to the Treshnish Isles and the cliffs of west Mull. The route took us round to Loch Scridain, from here we hugged the coastline all the way down the Ross of Mull to Bunessan. A few birds on the way, most notably close Common Buzzards. We were soon at Fionnphort, where we took our lunch overlooking Iona.

We then took the next ferry over to beautiful Iona; a wonderful island full of history and spirituality. Here we took a walk through the croftland, seeing numerous Common Sandpiper and Linnet. Corncrakes were then heard calling – but in deep, deep cover. We tried every angle but could not see them. We could see Wheatears though, they were absolutely everywhere! We headed up through the crofts, gaining good views of some of the common garden birds, including Wren and Song Thrush. We then had a bit of time for tourist activities, with the cemetery, the Abbey and the nunnery receiving visits, but some of us just wanted ice cream and more birding! Ice cream fanatics were rewarded with views of an Angle Shades moth that a young girl had found too! We looked once again for Corncrake but alas we were out of luck, though many were heard. We waited at the beautiful slipway for the next ferry, seeing the odd seabird fly through the Sound. We were soon back on the mainland, with more Shelduck views. Taking the long drive back through Mull, we saw a close male Hen Harrier right over us, Mute Swans and Red Deer. We finally made our Duart Castle sign stop too where Pam, our proud Maclean, stood in front of the sign. No rousing chant of the Maclean motto though – ‘Death or Life’. Back to the Glen Forsa for another excellent dinner. A superb day out in the Inner Hebrides.

## **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June**

Phil started the day with the moth trap that he had set. He was delighted, a great range of species and families and three new moths for himself too! Most popular moths were Green Silver-Lines, Poplar Hawkmoth, Grey Arches, White Ermine, Map-winged Swift, Large Emerald, Purple Clay and the dead twig mimics that everyone loves, the Buff-tip and Coxcomb Prominent. 30 species in all, very impressive for a cool night. We had also attracted a few midges too, so escaped for a while! Birdwise we didn't have too much time, but everyone that stayed out saw the Chiffchaff well – not easy in the Highlands so good to get. We also saw baby Robins and Dunnocks too in the garden.

We then headed out to Loch na Keal again, aiming for Golden Eagle on the south side near Scarisdale. Goldies proved tough once again – but good consolation were the two adult White-tailed Eagles that took fish from a nearby boat. We headed back to the east side and drove all the way down to Grasspoint. Here we were again lucky with raptors, with four eagles up simultaneously, with two White-tailed Eagles and two Golden Eagles. Also seen from the viewpoint were Kestrel, Buzzard and a Common Snipe. We took a walk along the road here, gaining views of Tree Pipit, Reed Bunting and the ubiquitous Lesser Redpoll. Rain hit hard and fast though so we beat a retreat, taking lunch in the bus overlooking Loch Spelve. It was time to leave Mull, the weather had closed in! We stopped for a scan at Garmony, just giving us the usual waders including Curlew. We took the ferry over to Fishnish and then did some birding and botany at the roadside. Good views of Common Whitethroat singing away, with excellent botany featuring Greater Butterfly Orchid. We continued on our drive in the heavy rain all the way through to Acharacle and our new hotel.

## **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> June**

We met pre-breakfast and walked down the lane to the shores of Loch Shiel. There was enough of a breeze to keep the midges down – but they were just waiting for a moment of calm! Birding was good, with Willow Warbler, Song Thrush and numerous Meadow Pipits. Best bird was the Lesser Redpoll that we managed to get in the scope. It was flying over us every two minutes, making the rounds, but he only stopped in view once. The loch itself held Red-breasted Merganser and Tufted Duck, with Sand Martins buzzing around us. After breakfast we loaded up and drove the rain, pessimism filled the van – but as we rounded Lochailort it brightened, as did our mood! We had some spare time so took a scenic drive around Traigh and the beaches of Morar. Nothing new here, the waders we recorded were the expected Common Sandpiper and

Oystercatcher. A brood of 3 Lapwing chicks and their parents on a creek were nice though. We headed down to Arisaig, where we got ourselves ready and headed down to the MV Sheerwater, our vessel for the day. We headed out of the sheltered sealoch, gaining superb views of male Eider and numerous Common Seals. As we left the sealoch things became bumpy for a while, but as we left the tidal race it soon calmed down. We started recording seabirds straight away, with superb views of Manx Shearwater in particular. Puffin, Guillemot, Kittiwake, Gannet and Razorbill soon followed. We were soon at Eigg, where we had 25 minutes on the pier. Birds here included Rock Pipit and close Black Guillemot and Arctic Tern.

We headed out from Eigg, enjoying the stunning views of the Atlantic side of this precipitous island, including its main feature, the Sgurr. Great Skua was the only new bird on the short ride to Muck, with good numbers of Grey Seals on the rocks here. We landed on Muck and headed up to the café for a short stop. From here we started birding, and soon had views of Sedge Warbler, Greenfinch and numerous Meadow Pipit. We heard Corncrake calling so quickened our pace to a viewpoint. Just in time too, for a male Corncrake called once then lifted 50 yards away and took a slow flight across the field and landed out of sight. A prolonged view of a Corncrake in late June is a rare thing indeed! We walked a little further and then returned in time for the ferry – a thoroughly enjoyable few hours on Muck. The return ferries to Eigg and then Arisaig were full of the same birds as the way out, excellent views of Manx Shearwater and Great Skua in particular. We arrived back in port and headed back to Acharacle, a super day out all in all.

## **Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> June**

No morning walk today – it was to be a long day with an evening excursion offered. We headed down the long and winding road of Ardnamurchan, twisting and turning through the Atlantic Oak Woods that make up the last fragment of the European Temperate Rainforest. We stopped for a few small birds then made a bigger stop opposite Ben Hiant. It was a stunning view, and thankfully the rain held off for us looking at Mistle Thrush, Yellowhammer, Linnet, Stonechat and Lesser Redpoll. Moving up the valley, we were rapidly approached by a very low White-tailed Eagle – it flew right over us. Alas a timber truck had just pulled tight behind us and we had to move a little further down. When we got out we had at least another two White-tailed Eagles that quickly dispersed. Good viewing!

We headed down to Kilchoan Ferry, looking out over Maclean's Nose. A few Rock Pipits were noted here, but the highlight was scoping a White-tailed Eagle hanging in the air with the remains of a lamb tangling from its talons. An extraordinary sight! We then headed up towards the lighthouse, finding some superb Whinchat and Lesser Redpoll. We were soon at the lighthouse, where we took a seawatch. Lots of the now familiar birds, including Kittiwake and Manx Shearwater. No cetaceans today though! We took a look in the visitor centre and enjoyed an obliging Toad before returning back down to Kilchoan. For the afternoon we headed down to lovely Sanna, seeing more Whinchat and Stonechat as we went. We took a walk in the sanddunes here, enjoying close views of Ringed Plover and Skylark, with a beautiful perched Snipe too. We retraced our steps back up the road and then returned towards Acharacle, making only one quick stop to scan for raptors.

After a slow dinner, the intrepid few then went out looking for Pine Martens down at Polloch. Unfortunately the rain hit hard, and stayed in. Anna Marie got a brief Marten view of one scurrying across the road but nothing for the rest of us – a frustrating evening, but that can be wildlife watching at times. We headed back to Acharacle, seeing many Red Deer on the way.

## **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> June**

An early breakfast to make our dash for the ferry a little more enjoyable. It was a beautiful run, with the rain in the same place as on Monday – Phil was confident that we would have a dry day on Skye so wasn't worried. Not much wildlife en route, aside from a fine Red Deer stag enjoying his breakfast. We were soon in Mallaig, where Adrian lead a masterclass in large gull ID, looking at all the ages of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. We soon boarded the ferry, which very slowly trundled across the Sound of Sleat. It was a calm crossing, perfect for spotting wildlife. We started with some superb Harbour Porpoise, at last some sealife!

They surfaced repeatedly in front of the boat and cut across the bow. We then found the seabirds, scores of Manx Shearwater, with lots of Razorbill and Guillemot too. We arrived in Armadale on Skye and immediately headed north.

Our route then took us inland, down towards Ord. Phil was taking us to his local Golden Eagles, birds he knew well. Could we finally get good Golden Eagle views? On arrival we enjoyed the Wheatear, drumming Snipe and Cuckoo, before the male Eagle appeared behind us and soared and then glided in to a perch. Great viewing! He then relocated towards a new nest site – clear signs that this years attempt had failed. We were warned to stay vigilant – good job, as the female appeared low behind us, again giving a great view. She was carrying a branch, taking it into the same new nest site. Both eagles together in the scope! Delighted, we moved on down to the coast at Tokavaig, looking over at Dunscaith Castle. We made another stop at the next bay, Tarskavaig, where we had Raven, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard and Ringed Plover. We returned inland, and whilst looking at Stonechat Ron spotted a dragonfly. We had to stop for our first! We wandered down to the stream to get the good views of Golden-ringed Dragonfly – Britain's second largest species. We also enjoyed a Common Toad, that was very obliging.

We headed back to the ferry terminal for a pit-stop before driving up to the Kinloch forest for lunch. After lunch we took a walk out and back along the track, which was fairly quiet for birds in the afternoon lull. A few insects and flowers kept us entertained, with superb views down to Isleornsay through the trees. We closed the day at the Dubh lochans, top target Odonata (Dragon and Damselflies!). Despite the wind, we managed two new species, the Common Blue and the Blue-tailed Damselfly, much to Sheila and Ron's delight. We had yet more good views of Golden-ringed Dragonfly too. A good end to the day on Skye.

#### **Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> June**

We started by heading through to Drumfearn, a small township south of Broadford. Star bird was sat on a fencepost – a Common Snipe allowing breathtaking views and photographs as it sat on the roadside post. We moved up to Phil's croft and looked at the moths he had trapped the night before. Some real stunners yet again, with Drinker, Buff Ermine and Beautiful Golden Y stealing the show this time. Birding was also good with Redpoll, Greenfinch and Siskin. We said our goodbyes to the croft (and Sammy the dog) before heading down to the road again, with even better Snipe on the return leg! We headed for Ardnish cemetery, where we spotted Curlew, Buzzard, Wheatear and lots of Skylark. Out in the bay we had lots of Common Seals on the rocks and the now regular Red-breasted Merganser.

We worked our way north on Skye, taking the turn off for the minor road to Moll. We had Twite pretty quickly, so opted to walk back to look for them, scoping them briefly, with better views of Stonechat and a pair of Greenshank and their chick – a new trip bird. We continued bumping along the minor road, seeing lots of Willow Warbler and Stonechat, with Eider and Cormorant down below us. We stopped off at the Aros centre for a bit of retail therapy, before taking the Struan hill road to the west side of Skye. A close Buzzard and several Goldfinch were the highlights here. We dropped down for lunch on the inlet, enjoying close Twite, Lesser Black-backed Gull and more Greenshank. Everyone loved seeing the Goosander with her chicks too! We headed further south now, stopping at a viewpoint for the superb Cuillin Ridge of Skye. Phil spotted a Golden Eagle being mobbed by Hooded Crows, which looked tiny next to the Eagle. As we moved on another Eagle was closer, so we stopped and enjoyed this one being bravely mobbed by two Buzzards, talons shown on both sides! We then headed down to Talisker, taking a walk in the sunshine through the valley. New butterflies included Large Heath and Small Heath, with a new damselfly being Large Red Damselfly. We continued down to the lodge, and took a walk out to the bay, seeing a stunning Golden Eagle as we went. Birds at the bay included the ubiquitous Common Sandpiper, Shag and Black Guillemot. Highlights though were the fledged Wheatears, hopping around just yards away. Alas, the rain struck so we beat a retreat, saying hello to the Peacock on our return to the car park. Our last stop of the day was at the bridge at Slighacan amid breathtaking scenery. We had spent a whole day away from the tourist hoardes until now! A great day out on Phil's home island.

## **Friday 24<sup>th</sup> June - Return to the Highlands**

Our last day started with a torrential downpour on Skye – typical weather, which Phil felt guilty about as he had mentioned his potatoes needed a good soaking! We loaded up in good spirits and dropped Char off for her coach ride back to Inverness. We then headed off Skye, driving through Lochalsh in the pouring rain. It cleared up perfectly for us to stop off at the iconic Eilean Donan castle – a truly magnificent Highland view. We enjoyed the scenery and had a nice walk over the bridge. No rain and no midges too! We continued east, driving up the side of Loch Ness, stopping in at another iconic landmark, Urquhart Castle. We headed down for a look but the rain hit hard – some of us made it down but others just enjoyed the coffee and cakes! Birding was limited, but Phil had heard a Garden Warbler but couldn't get any views.

We headed up the hill for lunch at Loch Laide. The weather broke perfectly for our arrival, giving us great views of Slavonian Grebe in full breeding plumage – superb! A few damselflies and butterflies were out too, including Emerald Damselfly which was flighty. Botanists were delighted with Globeflower and Bugle too. Alas the rain hit, so we trundled on, stopping for some Highland Cattle that had so far proved as elusive as Long-tailed Tits. We had our fill of all three colours of these iconic beasts before dropping down on to the Black Isle. Near Beaulieu we lucked out – a Red Kite flying ahead, with a pull in ideally placed. A great view of the bird just over us. Not only that, but more Highland cows and world class strawberries – perfection! We loaded up and headed into Inverness, saying our goodbyes at our respective accommodations.

Thank you all for your wonderful company and good humour and I hope to see you in Scotland again! - Phil