

# Islay & Jura

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 14 November 2013

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Setting sun behind Caol Ila distillery by David Connell



Bowmore Harbour by David Connell



Immature White-tailed Eagle Terry Goble



Otter by Terry Goble

Report compiled by Terry Goble  
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Participants: David Connell  
Judith Leggott  
Pauline Shaw  
John Turner  
Jen King

## Introduction

This trip to Islay and Jura was a beginner's tour seeking out some of Britain's spectacular wildlife against a backdrop of sweeping moorland and rugged hills. The group had a variety of wildlife experience ranging from considerable to very little. However, everyone contributed, and one of the least experienced casually found one of the birds of the trip, an adult Golden Eagle soaring over the cliffs of The Mull of Oa!

## Day 1

**Friday 8th November**

The trip began with a pick up from Glasgow Central at the Gordon Street entrance. We soon loaded up with Jen and Pauline and set off on the drive to Kennacraig. We made good progress and were soon at Stonefield Hotel to collect David and Judith. On the way we had seen some common birds, but our only Jay of the trip. Along the hotel drive we saw the first of many Sparrowhawks, just before we met up. We then got David and Judith onboard and made our way to the ferry port at Kennacraig meeting up with the final member of our group, John.

The ferry trip was uneventful as it was dark and little to see so we all settled down for a welcome coffee and a hot meal. We arrived at Bridgend Hotel about 9pm and a weary group drifted to their rooms after a warm welcome to a lovely hotel.

## Day 2

**Saturday 9th November**

It became light about 7:30am so we did not have a great deal of light for the pre-breakfast walk around Bridgend Woods. However, we did manage a Buzzard, common woodland birds and our first glimpse of the Geese Fest with several hundred Barnacle Geese in the sheep fields and flying over-head. We also picked up our first mammals of the trip with a Rabbit and Roe Deer.

After a hearty breakfast we set off to the RSPB reserve of Loch Gruinart. A brief stop on the way provided a good number of passerines, with two Twite being the pick of the sightings, but they flew into the vegetation and did not re-emerge. The handsome Redwings were enjoyed by the group and Stonechat, Reed Bunting and Chaffinch were some of the supporting cast. Just prior to the reserve three Snipe were picked out in a boggy field. It was lovely to observe these birds out in the open at close quarters. At the reserve the numbers of Barnacle and White-fronted Geese seemed spectacular, however John informed us that the numbers were well down on previous years...

A walk around the woodland trail produced few common woodland birds, but great views over the marsh fields. A substantial flock of Golden Plover wheeled around restlessly. A few wildfowl also emerged but with the sun behind them were difficult to discern. We identified Widgeon, Pintail and Teal.

After a while we decided to head off to Ardnave Point to look for Choughs. On the way Jen spotted a Brown Hare, which all the group enjoyed. We then stopped at Loch Ardnave and found about twenty Whooper Swans, some of which were being harassed by two Mute Swans.

Next we walked to the Point in search of Chough and after a good while we had managed a Common Seal, Raven and a Great Northern Diver. However just as we were thinking about returning to the vehicle, a group of 50 or so Choughs wheeled into view! Eventually the light improved and the blood red feet and bills stood out against the grassy background, illuminated by the sun. We had nice views of Widgeon and more Whooper Swans on our return to the vehicle.

We got news that eagles had been seen over by Loch Gorm. We quickly headed over that way in the hope of finding the two species of eagle on offer. En route across the moors we had our first sighting of Hen Harrier as a female flew low over the heather. Two Roe Deer were also out in the open and we were able to view them well. As we circumnavigated Loch Gorm we had yet to find any of the eagles. This soon changed as a large bird of prey drifted over the hills and low over-head with all the group getting great views of a Juvenile Golden Eagle. The group were thrilled with seeing this magnificent eagle at such close range. The rest of the trip around the loch was less dramatic but new birds were being picked up regularly with Skylark added with some handsome Stonechats.

With only a few hours of light left we opted for a drive down to Port Charlotte and spent time sea-watching out over Loch Indaal. We manage to find a couple of Red-throated Divers and Great Northern Divers. We also found the 'punky' Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Guillemot. Of the waders we again saw many Oystercatchers and fewer Curlew. Others included Ringed Plover and Turnstones.

We ended a very enjoyable day with a walk in Bridgend Woods. The woods remained quiet but in the surrounded fields there were impressive numbers of Barnacle Geese and some White-fronted Geese. As it began to get dark and chilly we decided to head back to the hotel to warm up and get ready for dinner.

## Day 3

## Sunday 10th November

After breakfast we all set off to drive to the Mull of Oa. The first stop was shortly after we left to look over the Bridgend Flats. There were a good mix of birds including Whooper Swans, Red-breasted Merganser and three goose species. Bowman Pier proved a productive stop and our first and only Long-tailed Ducks were seen with a Great Northern Diver as well as more Red-breasted Mergansers. On the road down we crossed through mixed moorland and grazing lands. We had a lovely sighting of three Roe Deer and further on had our first Red Deer, which are substantially larger animals. We then drove down the peninsular to the Mull of Oa RSPB site. We parked at the RSPB car park and were greeted with a large female Sparrowhawk on arrival. This was shortly followed by a striking male Peregrine Falcon flying just past the car park.

We set off on a circular walk around the peninsular, taking in the 'American' monument. After a short while David called a distant raptor over the cliffs, we were soon enjoying an adult Golden Eagle, following the contours of the cliff tops, a great start to our walk! Further on a small wader flew out of the tussocks of coarse grass. A second sighting confirmed it as a Jack Snipe as it flew off in the low characteristic manner dropping back into the tussocks. A few Stonechats were also seen along the way, but generally the walk was quiet in regards to further bird sightings. It was however an enjoyable walk along spectacular coastal cliffs, with some feral goats for company.

Back at the van, John had stayed behind to rest his knee and added a female Hen Harrier to our raptor count. We all then drove on to Loch Kinnabus. Here there were plenty of birds in the shape of large flocks of geese and some waterfowl. We added Goldeneye to our list and enjoyed some lovely views of the males in good light. There was also a large flock of Teal pressed up against the far bank. En route back, a large flock of smaller birds were seen next to the Starlings. A quick investigation revealed that there were about 200 Twite feeding on the stubble fields. We watched these for a while before setting off to Arbeg Distillery for our first attempt at finding Otters.

On the way John suggested a cultural detour and we diverted to a ruined church at Kildalton. We went to see the Celtic Cross and the decorated graves in the church. There were some depictions of Celtic knights and some traditional Celtic designs to admire. A very interesting detour that the group thoroughly enjoyed and had to be persuaded to leave in search of wildlife! We then made our way to the distillery, but were unable to locate any Otters. After a while it was time to head back to the hotel and we decided to drive the back route over the moors. We were rewarded by a fine male Hen Harrier, which Jen spotted from the bus. We arrived back and got ready for dinner and the evening roll call after another exhilarating day.

## Day 4

## Monday 11th November

Today was a move on day so we all were packed and ready to go before enjoying our last Islay breakfast. Before we set off for the ferry we had time to explore the Rhinns, still hopeful of a White-tailed Eagle. Our first stop was at Bruichladdich where we watched for seabirds and had a few in the form of R.B mergansers and a Great Northern Diver and a few smaller birds, including Rock Pipit. We also picked up our first Grey Seal, with its diagnostic bulbous nose. John spent a few moments catching up with some old friends who lived close by and David and Pauline had a quick tour of the Distillery, while the rest of us searched for birds to add to our tally. With not a lot of action we were soon underway and off towards Portnahaven.

A woodland stop proved productive as we added Goldcrest and a late (or wintering?) Chiffchaff to our list and had yet another Sparrowhawk en route. Both Red Deer and Roe Deer were enjoyed in the morning sun, including one magnificent stag. We soon arrived at Portnahaven and drove down to the lighthouse island. As we approached the island we flushed our first Merlin, which flew off rapidly, giving only a fleeting glimpse. Down at the shore David flushed a Woodcock to everyone's surprise and we watched it fly off. We had soon great views of Grey Seals and a few Common Seals. Over on the island itself Red Deer could be seen with the occasional Buzzard putting in an appearance. We then moved on to the harbour but did not see anything new and so made our way back to Port Charlotte across the upland moors. It was pretty quiet and we just relaxed and enjoyed the stunning scenery.

We then stopped at a farm, which John recommended for Grey Wagtail. We eventually found it but it was elusive and not many of the group got good views. Back at the van we were soon watching a flock of Whooper Swans fly elegantly by and then a flock of Starlings flying around like a 'bait ball' caught my eye and we soon found the Sparrow hawk harrying them. A Peregrine then flew close by for all to enjoy. Back on the road a male Hen Harrier put in an appearance but remained distant. After this purple patch we headed off to get lunch at Port Charlotte Hotel.

After a lovely relaxing lunch we set off for Port Askraig to board the ferry for Jura. This went smoothly and we were soon on the ferry picking out some handsome Eiders at close range. On Jura we drove slowly to the hotel and picked up a ringtail Hen Harrier and had many views of Red Deer. At the Jura Hotel we dropped off David to check in and chill out, whilst we set off again in search of Otters. We drove north on the only road in Jura and despite extensive searching we were still struggling for our first Otter. At the Jura Forest we finally spotted an Otter's head poking out of the water. Most of the group got some sighting of it, but it was brief as it dived again and did not come back into view. We drove on but the road turns inland and we had to content ourselves with two Rabbits and a slight panic as we got bogged down by the side of the road after letting someone through. Luckily they stopped and returned the favour by helping push us back onto the road/path. We were soon on our way, and eventually returned back to Craighouse as the light was now fading.

Back through the Jura forest we watched a few more Red Deer, before John spotted a tail sticking out of the water. We all climbed out and enjoyed watching an Otter eating a fish about 75 metres away! Poor Pauline struggled to see over the vegetation and missed out on this occasion, however for the rest it was the best sighting yet. We drove back to the hotel to find two huge Red Deer stags feeding on the lawn. By now it was getting dark and we all went in to settle in our rooms prior to dinner.

## Day 5

## Tuesday 12th November

Only Jen and later John braved the morning air as we got up at first light in search of Otters and birds. We enjoyed watching first one, then two, Dippers bobbing in the stream, clearly having something of a 'domestic'. Out on the pier an Otter was briefly sighted running along some rocks before disappearing into the sea. Sadly it did not reappear in view. Other birds around included; Rock Pipit, Redwing and common garden birds. We went in for breakfast at 8:30am to meet up with the others.

After a leisurely breakfast we set off again this time heading north to the end of the road. On the way we drove through some splendid scenery with the back drop of 'The Paps' and other rugged hills. Most of the habitat consisted of moorland and occasional plantations with some ancient woodland. Some of the Red Deer stags looked magnificent enhanced by the spectacular surroundings. Birds were few and far between, but the journey was made all the more worth it by a prolonged sighting of a hunting Otter at Tramaig Bay. It swam within about 30 metres before heading off to the edge of the bay. We watched it for about 15 minutes before heading on our way again. We reached the end of the road about mid-day and decided to head back to Craighouse for lunch.

Back at Craighouse we found most of the village closed (1pm till 2pm), so most settled on a bit of shopping at the distillery and lunch at the hotel. We met back at the minibus for 2pm and this time headed off towards Feolin in the hope of sea eagles. We again saw little in the way of bird life on the drive with only the usual Buzzards, Stonechat and Meadow Pipits for company.

Just as we approached the ferry terminal, Pauline spotted a large raptor overhead. We all jumped out to watch an immature White-tailed Eagle just overhead soar over the cliffs and out of view. Soon after, we parked the minibus and walked along the cliff tops to an estate on the beach. Here was an ancient forest being preserved from the deer as best it could. Although there was little bird life it was an interesting 'spooky' forest complete with apparently large witches! After returning to the minibus we drove back to Craighouse in the gloom hoping for Short-eared Owls, but alas we dipped on the Owls. We got back to the hotel at 5pm having enjoyed a gorgeous day.

## Day 6

## Wednesday 13th November

Only Jen got up for the walk around Craighouse Bay, all was quiet only for a few of the commonly seen birds. However as we returned to the hotel a large raptor over a distant island turned out to be a immature White-tailed Eagle. As it landed on the beachfront it was lost from view, by the time I alerted the others it was not re-found and all but myself and Jen missed it. However most got to see an Otter as it swam through the bay.

After breakfast we drove to Lowlandman's Bay, on the way a quick stop provided us with two new birds in the shape of a female Scaup and a immature Slavonian Grebe. At Lowlandman's Bay the walk did not provide much in the way of wildlife (Grey Seal and a few wildfowl) but was a bracing walk in spectacular scenery. The wind whipping across the bay added to the drama.

On the way back a female Hen Harrier was a pleasant diversion and great views were had as it quartered in front of a near-by farm. Its barred tail and white rump readily visible. A few common woodland birds were seen along the road. However whilst the leader was messing around watching a Rock Pipit, Jen was doing some proper wildlife watching and shouted out as two Otters playfully chased each other over the rocks. The group watched enthralled as they swam out into the sea. We eventually dragged ourselves away to head for Craighouse for lunch. Whilst at lunch yet another Otter was sighted making his way across Craighouse Bay. The Otter swam to shore and was enjoyed down to about 20 feet! Jen and John were the only two not 'Ottered out' who came to watch it.

After lunch we set off again to explore brave new worlds. For our first adventure we checked out the pier at Ardfin. There was not a lot of wildlife around as the wind had got up and the squalls made viewing a little uncomfortable. Widgeon, Teal and a Grey Seal were amongst some of the wildlife on offer. We decided to have a last attempt at eagles and drove towards the cliff overlooking Feolin. We again drew a blank contenting ourselves with Red Deer stags and 'beach deer' (Red Deer grazing on seaweed). On the return leg we did spot our first Kestrel and another female Hen Harrier, although this one was not so obliging. We then embarked on our last Jura adventure setting off to find Market Loch. On the way the roads became a little hairy, so we drove back to the hotel to get ready for our last dinner together and a little surprise for Judy.

## Day 7

## Thursday 14th November

We all got up early for a 7am breakfast and were ready to go by 7:30am, to make the ferry at Feolin. The drive was uneventful although the Red Deer were always a welcome sight. We boarded the ferry and set off at a steady pace once we landed back on Islay.

The drive to Port Ellen went smoothly with little in the way of bird life to distract us although John added Red-legged Partridge to our list. On arrival at Port Ellen we were informed that the ferry had broken down and that we would have to drive back to Port Askraig to catch a later ferry at 12:30pm. Luckily this did not seriously effect anybody's travel arrangements, although it did mean people getting back much later. We decided to make the best of the extra time and drove to Loch Gruinart for a look around. Besides the birdlife there we were able to watch four Hares in a cow field. It was soon time to make our way to the ferry, stopping for a welcome coffee, whilst the leader booked the party in. The ferry arrived on time and we set off promptly making up a little bit of the lost time. The bird life at sea was sparse but Kittiwakes were seen in good numbers and all three Divers were seen. A cetacean was observed 'rolling', this was probably a Harbour Porpoise.

The rest of the journey progressed without any further delays and we headed back to Glasgow in good time after dropping off John, David and Judith (Happy Birthday!). We then set off for the station at the end of a relaxed and enjoyable trip.

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; I = Islay, J = Jura)

	Common name	Scientific name	November									
			8	9	10	11(I)	11(J)	12	13	14		
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2								1
2	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>							1			1
3	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		4	2	4	1			1		1
4	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>								1		
5	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>										1
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	1		6			20	20		✓
7	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3	1	4	10	6		30	10		5
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		20	✓	24	6		15	15		10
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		16	6	6						
11	Greenland White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓						✓
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		50	✓	✓	20		30	60		✓
13	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓	✓	✓						✓
14	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	110	2								
15	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		✓		✓					✓	
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		2	✓					20		
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
18	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		20								
19	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>									1	
20	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			20	✓	✓		20	20		20
21	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			3							
22	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			10				1			
23	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		6	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
24	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							1	1		
25	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2	2	2	2			2		
26	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	4	2	1						
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
28	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1	1							
29	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>									1	
30	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	1					
31	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	1						
32	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
	Peacock!	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>									2	
33	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	20	✓	✓	✓			8	10		10
34	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	10	✓						✓
35	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		200	100							
36	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		20			2		5	2		
37	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>				1						
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3								3
39	Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>			1							
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		20	50	✓	2		3	1		2
41	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1		2		3	5		
42	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		4	2							
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓						✓
44	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>										✓
45	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	1	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
46	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2	2	100			10	20		✓
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				1						
48	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓



	Common name	Scientific name	November									
			8	9	10	11(I)	11(J)	12	13	14		
49	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		3								10
50	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	✓				✓
51	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓									
52	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		20								5
53	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			10	10						
54	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		1								
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	2	3	1	6	10	5		
56	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		20	✓	✓		4	1			
57	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>				1						
58	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				!						
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		10	✓	2		3	2	1		
60	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>						2	1			
61	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		2	4			3				
62	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	1	2		10	5			
63	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓		6	✓	10	10		
64	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			3			6	5			
65	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	2		
68	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				1						
69	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				6			1			
70	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	1			2	1	3		
71	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		20				1	1	1		
72	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1									
73	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓									✓
74	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		70								
75	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓									✓
78	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus c. cornix</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
79	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		20	10	✓	✓	✓				4
80	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	10	✓		
81	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	2	✓		✓	10	✓		
82	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	30	10		
83	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		10		10						
84	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>		2	200							
85	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		2								
86	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>										5
87	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		10	1	1			1	1		

## Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus Cuniculus</i>		1			2		20			
2	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus carpensis</i>		1								4
3	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					2	2	4			
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			8	20	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		7	5							
6	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		2	30	10	1	3	2			
7	Grey Seal	<i>Halicoerus grypus</i>			1	3			3			