

Islay and Jura

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th October 2020



Barnacle Geese by Keith Buchanan



Pale-bellied Brent Geese by Keith Buchanan



Roe Deer by Neil McMahon



Curlew by Neil McMahon

Report compiled by Keith Buchanan

Images courtesy of Helen Glenny, Keith Buchanan and Neil McMahon



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Tour participants: Neil McMahon and Keith Buchanan (leaders) with 9 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 22nd October

The group were collected from various locations - Glasgow Central station, the airport and a hotel near Kennacraig - and the journey across to Kennacraig commenced. The autumn colours were stunning, and the views over Loch Lomond lovely, as we left Glasgow behind.

Both vehicles arrived in good time for the ferry across from Kennacraig to Port Askaig on Islay. There was time for a little gentle birdwatching at Kennacraig and the group enjoyed the waders, particularly the Greenshank, which were in the shallow water along with a flock of upending Wigeon. Further out a diver and some Razorbills were visible, though distant, in the calm waters of the loch and a Common Seal watched us with interest from near the shore.

The short ferry journey gave us the opportunity for a briefing about the week ahead and to have some food from the little café on board. Arriving in Port Askaig, it was a 25 minute drive to our hotel in Bowmore. Here we agreed a plan for the following day then turned in early, ready for a busy day to come.

Day 2

Friday 23rd October

An early start today, and we headed out towards the harbour as the light strengthened. A Rock Pipit greeted us as we approached and as visibility improved we started picking out, for example, a large roost of Ringed Plovers on the sea wall. Notable also were the Red-breasted Mergansers feeding along the shore. Climbing into our vans, we made the short journey to the head of Loch Indaal, with a couple of stops along the way. As we left Bridgend we passed large numbers of Barnacle Geese along the shore. Reaching a convenient viewpoint looking out over the Loch, we got our first good look at a Great Northern Diver, while Scaup, Common Scoter and a Slavonian Grebe were also picked up. By then it was time to head back for a well-earned breakfast.

After breakfast we drove towards the southern end of the island, and the RSPB reserve of The Oa. This entailed a drive through wonderful blanket bog terrain, the colour of bronze in the autumn sunshine. A brief early stop on this drive gave views of our first flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese. The road up to the Oa was also spectacular and we parked with magnificent views out over the surrounding sea. Our walk up to the cliffs where the American monument was perched was punctuated by stopping to look at a wild goat grazing unconcernedly on the edge of a cliff. As we reached the monument the cry of 'eagle' went up and we were treated to good, though distant, views of a soaring juvenile Golden Eagle, quickly followed by a pair of Choughs above the nearby cliff.

As we walked back we admired the large flocks of Redwings, interspersed with Fieldfares, feeding in the fields. More eye catching however was the large flock of Twite, with a few Linnets, feeding in a field seeded by RSPB in order to attract these scarce upland finches. On returning to the cars an adult male Hen Harrier quartered the ground in front of us, clearly hunting.

After a comfort stop at Port Ellen we headed east, exploring the little bays along the south coast. At one bay we parked in order to scan the calm water and were almost immediately rewarded with the sight of an Otter, fishing

out in the bay. Later this individual joined another one closer to shore. Preoccupied by this, it was a while before we noticed the adult White-tailed Eagle sitting in a tree!

Moving further east, we found some Red Deer, including an impressive mature stag which, strangely, was in the company of some Fallow Deer hinds. But by then it was time to return to our comfortable hotel in Bowmore, and a delicious dinner.

Day 3

Saturday 24th October

Another early start today found us down at the harbour again. Red-breasted Mergansers were showing well despite the very windy conditions. A large group of Ringed Plover clung to the rocky wall of the harbour, accompanied by a few Dunlin, but the highlight was a small flock of Pale-bellied Brent which flew across the bay, the first for the trip. Stopping at the head of Loch Indaal, we found the strong south easterly difficult but did manage to spot some Knot huddled in the seaweed with Ringed Plover and Turnstones. Driving up a small road overlooking Loch Skerrol, we were rewarded with the sight of a large number of Whooper Swans on the loch. Above, a female Sparrowhawk caused consternation among the many Redwings in the intervening field. Returning to the hotel we again had a splendid late breakfast.

After breakfast we drove north towards the RSPB reserve at Lock Gruinart. As we approached the reserve buildings we could see large flocks of Barnacle Geese in the surrounding fields. Golden Plover and Lapwings were also present in good numbers and Redpoll moved along the fence alongside the road. Arriving at the centre, we used the facilities and enjoyed the interpretive material on offer. Afterwards we made our way down to the hides through the woodland. The first hide offered splendid views of Pintail along with large flocks of Wigeon and other ducks. Whooper Swans and Greenland White-fronted Geese were also a highlight. Out to the side, a Roe Deer buck and hind were grazing. At the second hide, large numbers of Teal and other ducks were present along with Curlew and a solitary Black-tailed Godwit. Loud bangs in the distance caused most of the ducks and geese to rise in a stunning display as thousands flew past and over the hide.

After this drama, we drove around the other side of the bay, again passing flocks of White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. A juvenile White-tailed Eagle was the main highlight although a Hen Harrier was briefly spotted on the return journey. A flock of Skylarks briefly detained us before we arrived back at Bridgend where a spectacular sunset was a fitting end to a great day.

Day 4

Sunday 25th October

The day began with a cornucopia of avian delights while we had breakfast, courtesy of the conservatory overlooking Loch Indaal. The female Long-tailed Duck was still cruising the little harbour, while, around the harbour mouth, both Red-throated and Black-throated Divers were seen. Red-breasted Mergansers of both sexes, in varied plumages, fished in front of the windows and flocks of Starlings and finches came and went on the short salt marsh vegetation outside the window. Before breakfast, one of the leaders had found the Rose-coloured Starling reported to be in the area, but it flew off before the rest of the group could be alerted!

After breakfast we drove along the head of Loch Indaal and were just turning south when a Ring Ouzel and Mistle Thrush were spotted in the grass, but it was in a difficult spot to stop, so we drove on down the west coast of the loch. Our first stop was along the rocky shore to look for Purple Sandpiper but only Ringed Plover

were present. We drove slowly south, stopping now and then to admire flocks of Greenland White-fronted Geese in the fields. In one of these fields, three Brown Hares were hunkered down, their ears pressed down against their backs so as to be inconspicuous.

Arriving at Port Wemyss, we walked down to the sea front where we were amused by two Grey Seals, a male and a female, which came within a few metres in order to examine us carefully. Further out, on the beach of an adjacent islet, many seal pups and adults could be seen, with some of the pups still in their characteristic white pelage, which is lost after a few weeks. The wind was so strong that spume could be seen filling the air in waves behind them. A little further round the coast, at our lunch stop, we were able to admire the dramatic waves as they pounded the rocky shore. Brief glimpses of Chough and Merlin were obtained here. We then drove north along the Rhinns, stopping now and again, for example for a Hen Harrier which flew across.

A leg stretch at Port Charlotte produced some small birds and, rather unexpectedly from the shore, two Snipe. Moving on to Kilchoman, we again stopped for geese, but also Roe Deer and when we arrived at the beach we found an albino Common Gull amongst the other gulls. By then it was time to head back, as the light began to fade, after another enjoyable day.

Day 5

Monday 26th October

It was our day on Jura so we set off for the short ferry ride from Port Askaig. A White-tailed Eagle passing near the road detained us briefly just outside Bowmore and then we arrived at the terminal without further hold ups. As we waited at the dock, Red Deer could be seen grazing on the Jura hillside and even on the beach. After the brief crossing, we started to make our way slowly along the only road on this wild and beautiful island.

Arriving in Craighouse, we parked up and went down to the pier, followed by a walk along the bay looking out onto the Small Isles. Periodic squalls of rain were punctuated by sunny spells, sometimes both at the same time, resulting in intense rainbows and ever changing skies. Two Great Northern Divers were present, one still in summer plumage, the other changing to winter plumage. Other highlights were Black Guillemots in winter plumage and fishing Red-breasted Mergansers. Walking back, we picnicked overlooking the bay.

After lunch, we drove slowly northwards out of Craighouse and almost immediately we came across numbers of Red Deer, mostly hinds with a stag, this being the rutting season. Rather unexpectedly, we came across a Common Buzzard sitting on a rock in the sea. A lone Common Seal was perched precariously on a single isolated rock in the characteristic banana posture. We drove further, encountering more Red Deer but by then it was time to retrace our journey back to the ferry. As we approached the ferry, a hovering Buzzard confused us briefly, assuming it was a Kestrel, then we boarded the little ferry, again in the company of the post office van which had also been with us on the earlier crossing.

Day 6

Tuesday 27th October

The day was initially dry as we had a look at the harbour and around the town for birds before breakfast. Small flocks of Chaffinches were still in evidence, and one included a Brambling which we heard although didn't see. By breakfast time the rain had set in and we set off after breakfast in steady rain, but at least the wind had abated. We drove out to have a look at a lake where an American Wigeon had been seen but visibility was not good, so we set off for Finlaggan. A Little Grebe, Goldeneye and Mallard were on the lake and the group enjoyed the

historical links of this site, namely the old seat of the Lord of the Isles. On leaving the site, a male Hen Harrier began quartering the ground near the lake.

We then drove north, parallel to the Sound of Islay, along a small road with spectacular views over the Sound to Jura. This road terminated at a distillery where we used the facilities and some purchased the produce. In the bay beyond, a number of Great Northern Divers were present, at varying distances, and various tit species could be heard in the adjoining trees.

On returning to the Port Askaig road we headed west towards Kilchoman. Greenland White-fronted, Greylag and Barnacle Geese were all encountered on this journey, as well as Roe Deer and Brown Hares. We ate our lunch at the Kilchoman distillery and had coffee in their visitor centre. During lunch, both Buzzard and Hen Harrier appeared along the ridge in front of the vehicles.

As we made our way through the moorland towards Loch Gruinart, a Peregrine Falcon flew over the road in front of the vehicles, in dramatic fashion. We drove on up to Loch Ardnave and stopped just before reaching it to admire the flock of Choughs that were sitting on the roof of an outbuilding. This was quickly followed by a Buzzard and a Hen Harrier over the Loch. As we walked, we stopped to look at a large flock of Twite, as well as enjoying further views of the Choughs. Large flocks of Barnacle Geese were also restlessly flying on the other side of the loch.

But by now the light was fading and, reluctantly, we started heading back. We hadn't gone far when a hunting Barn Owl was seen quartering the ground in the fading light, presumably having just emerged after the recent heavy shower. A great end to a great day.

Day 7

Wednesday 28th October

Our final day, and we left our cosy accommodation in Bowmore to catch the ferry at Port Askaig. As we walked down to the harbour we were met by the rather startling sight of a Grey Heron standing on a picnic table looking, for all the world, like it was waiting to be served lunch. In the distance, over the tip of Jura, three White-tailed Eagles were flying, two of them talon grappling – a dramatic sight!

Although there was a stiff wind, the crossing was not bumpy, and most of the group spent the time on deck bird watching. Regular flights of Kittiwakes were punctuated with sightings of Black Guillemot and Razorbills, and brief glimpses of Harbour Porpoise added further variety. From Kennacraig, the group drove to the nearby hotel where some of the group had stayed prior to the trip, where we said our goodbyes; sorry to part after such an enjoyable trip.

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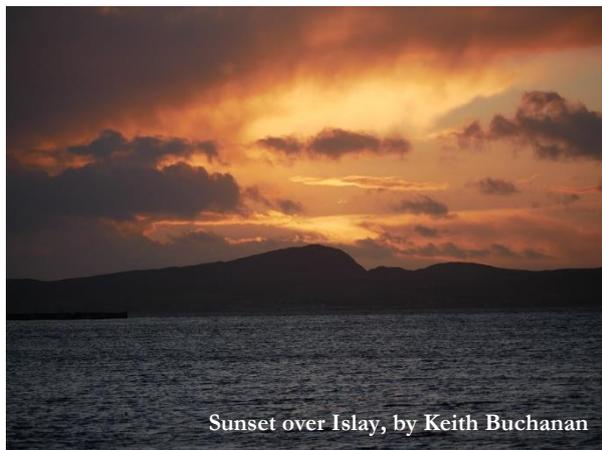
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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; + = approximate count; H = heard only)

	I=Introduced		October 2020						
	Common name	Scientific name	22nd	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th
1	Pale bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>			✓	24	✓	✓	✓
2	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓		c100	✓		✓	
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
8	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓				
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓				
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓		1	✓	
13	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓			✓	
14	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		12					
15	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		3					
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		1	1	3	3	1	
18	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			4			1	
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	3		3			
22	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				1			
23	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1			9	2	14
24	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓					1	3
25	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		2		1			
26	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>							1
28	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					1		3
29	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1 juv					
32	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1/2	1	2/3	1	
33	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2	1	1	1	3	1
34	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1 ad	1 imm		2	1	3
35	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓	✓		✓	
38	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓				
39	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			✓				
42	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			1				
43	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
44	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			✓	✓			
45	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	✓			
46	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				2			

	I=Introduced		October 2020						
	Common name	Scientific name	22nd	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th
47	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2		5				
48	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
49	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1	12		✓
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>							✓
55	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓			1			✓
56	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓		1		2		✓
57	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>						1	
61	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1					
62	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1			
63	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1	
64	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓						
65	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓						✓
66	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		2		✓		25	
67	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
70	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		H	H		✓	✓	
73	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			H		✓	✓	
74	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓		H	
76	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓		
77	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H	✓		✓	✓	
78	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		✓	H		
80	Rosy Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>				1			
81	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>				1			
83	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	2					
87	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓			1		1	
88	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
91	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			1		1		
92	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		
94	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	✓	✓		✓	
96	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	I=Introduced		October 2020						
	Common name	Scientific name	22nd	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th
98	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>						H	
99	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			H				
100	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			✓	1	1
101	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		c100		2		50	
102	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	✓			1	
103	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		H	3			4	
104	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
105	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	1				1		
106	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓				

Mammals

	I=Introduced		October 2020						
	Common name	Scientific name	22nd	23rd	24th	25th	26th	27th	28th
1	European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		1		6		6	
2	European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓				
3	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		2					
4	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>				1			
5	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓			
6	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
7	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>							✓
8	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	2		3	3		4	
9	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓		5	✓		✓
10	Fallow Deer - I	<i>Dama dama</i>		✓					
11	Wild Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus</i>		1			6		



Sunset, by Helen Glenny