

Islay and Jura

Naturetrek Tour Report

20th – 26th October 2021



Barnacle Geese



Red Deer



Paps of Jura



Greenland White-fronted Geese

Report & photos by Keith Buchanan



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Tour participants: Keith Buchanan and David Spivack (leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Wednesday 20th October

We picked up the group from Glasgow Central Station, the airport and a hotel near Kennacraig then met the final two at the jetty at Kennacraig. The sun shone as we left Glasgow although there were intermittent showers. However, these produced some great rainbows which added to the lovely autumn light as we travelled.

We arrived in good time for the ferry and the short ferry journey gave us an opportunity to enjoy some on-board hospitality as well as an opportunity to brief the group on the week ahead. Arriving in Port Askaig, it was a 15 minute drive to our hotel in Bridgend. Although most of the group were in the hotel, the leaders and two guests were in a farmhouse overlooking the delightful Loch Skerrols. This was a short drive from Bridgend and took a little finding in the dark in the midst of a heavy shower!

After a long day everyone was content to have an early night and look forward to the week ahead.

Day 2

Thursday 21st October

After a sumptuous breakfast at the hotel we set off in the minibuses towards Bowmore, alongside Loch Indaal. A brief stop to peer out over the flats revealed our first flock of Barnacle Geese, in which a small number of Pale-bellied Brent Geese were also found. Out beyond them, a small group of Whooper Swans were feeding on the mudflats. On entering Bowmore we stocked up on lunch items at the local Co-op then went down to the harbour. Here, the main attraction was a group of Harbour Seals which had adopted their characteristic banana posture along some rocky islands just offshore. Eider Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers were also prominent on the Loch.

Moving back up to the head of Loch Indaal, we pulled off the road at a spot overlooking the beach. Various waders were on the tide line, including Sanderling, moving in their characteristic frantic mechanical toy action. Here we found our first grebe and diver of the trip but the highlight was undoubtedly a small party of male and female Long-Tailed Duck which were feeding just offshore.

After this excellent start we drove round to Loch Gruinart. As we approached the RSPB visitor centre the fields were filled with large flocks of Barnacle Geese, freshly arrived from Greenland, amongst which were smaller parties of the delightful Greenland White-fronted Geese with their trademark black belly streaks. Viewing from the hides was enhanced by bright sunlight and the group enjoyed watching many species of wildfowl along with the three species of geese, as Greylags were also present here. A few Black-tailed Godwit were located among the large flocks of Teal and Wigeon, along with Pintail and Shoveler. Out on the flats in the distance, many thousands more geese could be observed, creating a majestic scene. A Hen Harrier flew through this scene, attempting to catch a Teal but, of course, causing pandemonium amongst everything else.

After lunch, we explored the east side of Loch Gruinart. Here we added Bar-tailed Godwit and Greenshank to our tally, and also our first Grey Seals. On the return journey a Sparrowhawk flew across with other birds in hot pursuit, adding another raptor to our list. By then light was fading and we headed back to the hotel and an excellent dinner.

Day 3

Friday 22nd October

Early rain gradually gave way to sun as we drove down to Bowmore in the morning to get some provisions for our picnic lunch. Then, heading north, we drove up to Port Askaig and the short ferry crossing to the island of Jura. Guillemots and Shags flew by as we crossed the narrow channel to Jura, and by the time we landed it was a beautiful sunny day. As we drove south east we scanned the shoreline for Otter, and the trees opposite for eagles. A Rock Pipit presented us with an opportunity to study the differences with the nearby Meadow Pipits. Climbing away from the coast we began to pick up small parties of Red Deer, mainly consisting of a mature stag with a number of hinds. We walked down to the pier at Craighouse and were rewarded with two Great Northern Divers, still partly in summer plumage. Further in, a small party of Black Guillemot, in different stages of moult, were picked out.

After lunch in the bright afternoon sunshine we proceeded to drive north east. Again we passed numbers of Red Deer while, on the coastal side, Common Seals lay hauled out on rocks. Buzzards drew our attention as we gazed at the wonderful Paps of Jura, glowing in the autumn sunshine. We moved slowly through the breathtaking scenery and dropped down to a small bay, above which two Buzzards had been circling. Scanning the water ahead produced two more Great Northern Divers. A little further on we were just planning to turn back when a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle flew leisurely across the road, dwarfing the Buzzards which were flying nearby.

As we drove back, Hen Harriers and, briefly, a Merlin were the highlights. However, as we headed across on the ferry, we all agreed that the stunning scenery in the autumn sunshine had been the real highlight.

Day 4

Saturday 23rd October

The morning was wet as we made a brief call to the pier at Bowmore. Three Red-breasted Mergansers were feeding in the harbour itself while a line of Ringed Plovers observed us from the top of the seawall. Out beyond the harbour, a Red-throated Diver fished in the heavy swell.

At the head of Loch Indaal we made a brief stop on the shingle overlooking the beach. The tide was well in and Oystercatchers were calling noisily just above the incoming waves. A lone Curlew stalked the beach and, further out, Common Seals could be seen on the rocks. Moving on, a brief stop at Bruichladdich did not produce anything new and we proceeded south. At Port Wemyss we parked near the harbour to watch the pups of Grey Seals on the offshore islands. The newest pups were still white and, opposite us on the island of Orsay, older pups could be seen resting in a big group on the beach. Shortly after, north of Portnathaven, we found a sheltered spot overlooking the coast to have our lunch.

As we made our way up through the Rhinns the autumn colours were again stunning. Ravens frequently crossed our path, along with the occasional Buzzard and small flocks of Goldfinches. Near Port Charlotte we were fascinated by the acrobatic interactions of Buzzards and Ravens as they tumbled together in the strong winds blowing off the sea.

Our final leg took us to a viewpoint overlooking the RSPB reserve at Gruinart, although no harriers were in evidence. Arriving at the north coast, the rain had become heavy again so we decided to call it a day, after an enjoyable exploration of the Rhinns area.

Day 5

Sunday 24th October

Our first stop today was just before entering Bowmore. Scanning revealed numbers of Pale-bellied Brent. A pale winter plumaged Black Guillemot caught the eye and numerous Red-breasted Mergansers were scattered across the Loch. A brief visit to the harbour was followed by picking up lunch at the Co-op and then we set off past the lovely round church to take minor roads down to Port Ellen.

The sun shone as we climbed up towards the Oa and we arrived in the car park to a windy but delightfully sunny scene. We walked up towards the farmhouse, pausing briefly to watch a Redwing hopping along the lane in front of us. At the top we were able to pick out a number of wild goats, some on the tops, some on precipitous slopes and some foraging near the beach. On reaching the American Monument we took a well-earned breather and enjoyed the wonderful views – both The Mull of Kintyre and Ireland could be seen across the sea. Coming down by a different path we paused to scrutinise a field which still held a crop, planted to attract birds. Our first Chough was spotted, foraging along the base of a fence and a number of others were subsequently seen both in the field and beyond. Small birds caught our attention and these turned out to be Twite with quite a large flock eventually forming. In the midst of this activity chaos was suddenly introduced by the appearance of a Peregrine Falcon. It struck one of the feral pigeons circling the area, causing a waft of feathers to puff out and then proceeded to chase this bird until we lost sight of both behind the farm. A dramatic sight!

After a picnic lunch in Port Ellen we proceeded east, stopping at likely places for Otter although none were seen. A stop was made at Kildalton Cross, a magnificent 8th century Celtic Cross, before we drove slowly on to Claggain Bay. Here the highlight was a small party of two adult and one juvenile Great Northern Diver out in the bay. But time was getting on and we had just got back in the vehicles when the heavens opened and torrential rain fell for 20 minutes or so. A narrow escape indeed. As we drove back we saw two young Fallow Deer, our first of the trip, quickly followed by a male Hen Harrier which flew across our path. As the rain cleared, an intense rainbow followed us up the road to Bowmore, so forming a fine ending to an eventful day.

Day 6

Monday 25th October

Today, we began with brief stops to look out over Loch Indaal near Bowmore. The normal range of species was present and a Common Seal came to the mouth of the harbour to get a good look at us. A Rock Pipit also observed us from the seawall. We then drove round to Loch Gruinart. Pausing briefly at the visitor centre, we drove up to Ardnave Loch and parked beside the water. In the bright sunshine we walked north along the track but before we had even commenced our walk we began to see Chough flying restlessly around the dunes and feeding on the vegetated slopes. Excellent views were obtained although they were so active it was difficult to get scopes onto them. Just as we were reaching the point to turn back, a flock of Twite flew down onto the path in front of us, affording excellent views with the sun behind us. Returning to the vehicles we had a picnic on the edge of the loch before returning once again to the visitor centre.

We proceeded down to the hides from the visitor centre, this time splitting into two groups, one to each hide. Greenland White-fronted Geese were present among the many thousands of Barnacle Geese which were grazing and periodically flying around the reserve. On the horizon, two soaring birds caught our attention and the telescope confirmed these to be Golden Eagles; two young birds which were interacting with each other and giving much entertainment. As this was happening we heard that the other group had located a White-tailed

Eagle and, by moving to a raised viewpoint, the whole group was able to admire this bird. As we drove away from Gruinart two further White-tailed Eagles flew across the road in front of us.

As the light began to lose intensity in mid-afternoon we drove north towards Finlaggan. However, this journey was interrupted by the appearance of a male Hen Harrier which flew parallel to the vehicles. After enjoying this sight we proceeded to the wonderfully atmospheric Loch Finlaggan, seat of the Lords of the Isles in the 13th to 15th centuries. We soaked up the atmosphere of this magical place in the setting sun, then reluctantly left to return to the hotel.

Day 7

Tuesday 26th October

Our final day, and we left our cosy accommodation in Bridgend to catch the ferry at Port Ellen. The crossing gave us an opportunity to admire the passing groups of Kittiwake. Further on, numbers of Great Northern Divers were seen but the highlight was two White-tailed Eagles sitting together on a rocky islet. A fitting end to an enjoyable and eventful trip.

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Checklists

Birds

	I=Introduced		October 2021					
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Pale bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>	✓			✓	✓	
2	Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				✓		
3	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓				✓	
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓				✓	
10	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓			✓	
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓				✓	
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
15	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓					
16	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	✓					
17	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
19	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
20	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
21	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓			✓		
22	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	✓					
23	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				✓		
25	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓		✓			
26	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓	
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓					
30	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
31	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓			✓	✓
32	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
33	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
34	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓				✓	
35	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
36	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓	✓			✓	
38	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓					
39	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
40	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					✓	
41	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓					
42	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓				✓	
43	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓		
44	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						✓
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	I=Introduced		October 2021					
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
47	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
48	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
49	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓				
50	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓		✓	✓	
51	Feral Pigeon - I	<i>Columba livia</i> var. <i>domestica</i>	✓			✓	✓	
52	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓		✓	
54	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓				
55	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓			
56	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓					
57	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				✓	✓	
58	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Carriion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓			✓	✓	
61	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓		✓			
64	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	✓		
65	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
66	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓				✓	
67	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
68	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓			
69	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
70	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓					
71	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
73	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>					✓	
74	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓			✓	
76	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
77	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓		✓	
79	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓	
80	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
81	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					✓	
85	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓				
86	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>				✓	✓	
87	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓			
88	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Other species

	I=Introduced		October 2021					
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>				✓	✓	
2	European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
3	Water Vole	<i>Arvicola amphibius</i>					✓	
4	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	

	I=Introduced		October 2021					
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
5	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓			
7	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓		✓		
8	Fallow Deer - I	<i>Dama dama</i>				✓		
9	Wild Goats	<i>Capra aegagrus</i>		✓				
10	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>		✓				
11	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓				

