

Autumn on Mull

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th October – 1st November
2021



Otter



Ben More from Ulva Ferry



Iona Abbey



Black-throated Diver

Report and images by Matthew Capper



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Summary

Our tour to Mull delivered an amazing week, full of otters, eagles and stunning autumnal scenery. What is more, we were blessed with far better weather than we had dared hope for and enjoyed great food every evening at our hotel in Tobermory. The group gelled almost immediately, and the sound of laughter was a joyful backdrop to the trip – even if a lot of it was at the expense of the leaders!

Over the course of the week we encountered at least 10 otters, 11 White-tailed Eagle and 11 Golden Eagle. Spending 40 minutes with a fishing Otter, a White-tailed Eagle 20ft from the bus and multiple sightings of Golden Eagles at and around a Red Deer carcass will all live long in the memory.

However, the tour was about more than just these keynote species and we enjoyed a fabulous array of other experiences. The beautiful island of Iona, Great Northern Divers still in their smart summer plumage, a Hen Harrier perched up giving views in the ‘scopes, Slavonian Grebes and the abundant wildfowl and waders along the shore all made for a truly memorable trip.

Day 1

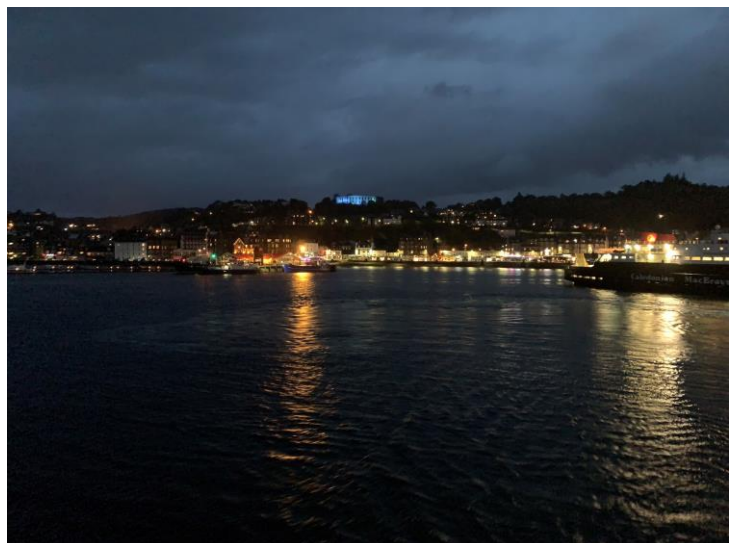
Tuesday 26th October

Arrival in Tobermory

Our trip started at Gilmour Street Railway Station in Paisley with four clients, eager to head north. We were soon out of the city, over the River Clyde and into the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. The weather was decidedly wet and windy but there was still wildlife to be seen. Three Roe Deer were standing in a field and there had clearly been a major arrival of Redwings into Scotland, with several large flocks encountered. We pulled in for a break at the Green Welly Stop where the first Hooded Crow of the trip was logged. Before long we were on the approach to Oban and Bob spotted an Otter on the shore by the bus, a nice bonus for everyone. On the outskirts of town, our last notable sighting of the day was of a rather forlorn Swallow that was being buffeted by the wind and rain.

At the ferry terminal we met up with six more of the group and got to know each other as we waited for our departure time. A few Cormorant were out in the harbour along with a Grey Seal but there were no Black Guillemot today.

It was dark as the ferry sailed through the Sound of Mull, but a few hardy souls stayed on deck for a while. On arrival at the hotel, we checked in and reassembled for a late evening meal. Our final member of the group had already arrived before us and so we were now all present and correct and could do a formal introduction to the tour. And then it was time for bed, wondering what the morning would bring...



Departure from Oban

Day 2

Wednesday 27th October

Craignure, Kilpatrick, Loch Spelve, Loch Buie and Grass Point

After the first of our hearty Scottish breakfasts, we were out on the road and heading down the east coast of the island to our first stop. The weather was dry and much better than the forecast. En route we took time to watch the mouth of the Aros River and spotted a Dipper on a rock under the bridge. With the tide being low, there were plenty of birds around. Grey Herons were standing sentry at regular intervals, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Redshank and Bar-tailed Godwit were on the tideline and Red-breasted Merganser, Wigeon and Mallard were offshore. Harbour (Common) Seals were loafing on one of the islands.

Craignure Golf Course was our first actual stop and had lots of Greylag and Canada Geese along with plenty of starlings, a flock of Linnets and plenty on the sea, including a smart Slavonian Grebe in winter plumage.

We stopped for a short comfort break in Craignure where we picked up an Otter out in the bay, but it had sadly disappeared by the time the group had crossed over the road to look. We drove round to the far side see if we could pick it up but there was no sign. So instead, we were off to Kilpatrick where a Peregrine sat in a tree gave good 'scope views until it was displaced by a Buzzard and our first two White-tailed Eagles of the trip cruised slowly southwards further back.

Stonechat, Meadow Pipits, Chaffinches, Robins and various other small birds were abundant around the adjacent farm, more Redwings were zooming about and there were also lots of Blackbirds. The abundant thrushes would become a regular backdrop to every day of the week although there was a complete absence of Fieldfare which were yet to arrive in any numbers across the UK.

At Loch Spelve we saw the first of what would be, over the course of the week, many Red Deer and soon picked up two Golden Eagles to add to the two earlier White-tailed. Distant at first, over the course of the next 30 minutes they gradually made their way closer until they eventually passed overhead and crossed over to the south side of the loch.

Things got even better shortly after as we drove alongside the loch. The question "what's that?" brought a shout of "White-tailed Eagle!" from Bob and we watched, slightly in awe, as we kept pace with a young eagle and it gradually converged with the bus until it was just 20 feet away. At this point it flew across in front of us, turned to look over its shoulder and we found ourselves literally eye to eye with it. Amazing! After banking briefly back out over the loch, it swept back across us and up the neighbouring hillside where it drew up several Buzzards and a couple of Kestrels to mob it.

Somewhat elated, we continued down the road to Lochbuie and our lunch stop at The Old Post Office Café. We took our time, sitting at the picnic benches to enjoy the scenery, Great Northern Divers, another White-tailed Eagle and a female Otter that was fishing in front of us and climbed out onto an offshore rock to eat a fish.

After lunch we headed round to Moy Castle, picking up several Rock Pipits and stopping to look at some fungi on the way. There was plenty of Yellow Brain fungi on the gorse and several Waxcaps – mostly Scarlet, Meadow and Snowy. From the castle, we scoped the nearby hills, picking up a number of Red Deer and our only Feral Goats of the trip. There were a few woodland birds around including Treecreeper and Goldcrest and as we left, we picked up another mammal with some Fallow Deer out in the scrubby grassland.

We decided to end the day at Grass Point, taking the narrow track down to the car park and walking to the cottages at the end. As we pulled up, there was a Stonechat on the fence next to us and there were a few Shag fishing in the mouth of Loch Don along with a several Harbour Seals hauled out on the rocks. At this point, the

rain which had held off all day, started to fall and so we wandered back up to the vehicle and headed for the hotel, the first of our evening logs and a nice three-course meal.

Day 3

Thursday 28th October

Iona and the Ross of Mull

After closely following the forecast, we had decided that today would be the best day to visit Iona. Our usual scan of the Aros river mouth produced a Dipper and three smart Goosander. Yesterday's Slavonian Grebe was still north of Craignure, and we then took the long scenic route down the Ross of Mull, heading through Glen More on the way, pointing out some of the glacial features and explaining the geology of the island. There were no Otters en route despite a thorough search although we did tick Iolo Williams in his winter plumage.

We watched a Red-breasted Merganser in the bay and a couple of Great Northern Diver off the ferry, one of which was in stunning summer plumage, as we crossed the Sound of Mull, arriving on the other side to explore Iona. We walked up the street and through the nunnery, learning a little about the island from Bob who used to work for the National Trust for Scotland and whose patch included the island. Birds such as Rook and Jackdaw were common, along with plenty of House Sparrows and there were Chaffinches feeding on the seaweed that had been collected to spread on the allotments as fertiliser.



Our picnic on Iona

After passing the Abbey, we headed to the north of the island and had our picnic lunch overlooking the sea and the Treshnish Islands. A feeding frenzy of birds offshore consisted mostly of Gannets but there were also Guillemots and Shags in amongst the throng.

The sun was shining and both Iona and the Ross of Mull looked stunning, especially with the light on the distinctive pink granite. Birds were relatively few and far between, but the Ravens were enjoying tumbling in the sunshine,

Greylag Geese were grazing in the fields and a lucky few had three Twite in with some Goldfinches. We had pre-booked tickets to the Abbey and enjoyed the fact that limits on numbers meant we had the place largely to ourselves. After a good explore we potted back down to the ferry rampway, stopping at the odd gift shop along the way and catching the 3.30pm ferry back to Fionnphort. We watched the waders in the bay for a while - Oystercatchers, a flock of Ringed Plover and a couple of Dunlin were the main species along with several Rock Pipits.

We retraced our steps back along the south shore of Loch Scridain, stopping for a short scan in Glen More where we immediately picked up a ring-tail Hen Harrier that was subsequently joined by a Golden Eagle and a Buzzard. It slowly drifted off down the Glen and we did the same, continuing on our way back to the hotel for the evening, reflecting on another superb day.

Day 4

Friday 29th October

Loch Tor, Dervaig, Calgary Bay, Laggan Ulva and Ulva Ferry

Today we decided to go around the north of Mull, starting with a stop in Tobermory for provisions. After driving past the Mishnish Lochs, we stopped for a woodland walk at Loch Tor. Bullfinches gave superb views and there were plenty of Coal Tits all around us. A Sparrowhawk soared low over the loch and perched up on a telegraph pole allowing us to get the 'scopes on it.

Next it was on to Dervaig where we spent a good while watching the estuary. There was plenty to see with an Otter fishing, Goldeneye, Little Grebes and Red-breasted Mergansers out in the bay. Redshank, Snipe and Greenshank were on the mud close by, and the birds were spooked at one point by another Sparrowhawk.

Calgary Bay is a stunning spot, with a white sandy beach and area of machair grassland behind. Our toilet stop produced a flock of Twite and out in the bay we spotted a close-in female Common Scoter along with a couple of Great Northern Divers and two very smart Black-throated Divers.

Lunch was taken at the picnic benches whilst feeding the Hooded Crows and an impromptu digiscoping demonstration for those who were interested.



Hooded Crow waiting for leftovers...

The drive over the north of the island was both remote and dramatic and included a brief view of Merlin. We kept going until we reached Laggan Ulva where we got out to stretch our legs and see what we could find. A couple of winter-plumage Black Guillemot were nice, as was our third Black-throated Diver of the day. And our only Great Spotted Woodpecker of the week bounced overhead.

We walked down to the ferry ramp at Ulva Ferry, seeing Stonechats and another Black Guillemot. But with no toilets open and little else to see, we wandered back up the hill to the car park. A Hen Harrier flashed past, and we scanned the hills for further signs of birds of prey. Five buzzards were floating in the blue sky and then one, then two and then three Golden Eagles joined them. Things were about to get even better as one of our group tracked the eagle along a hillside and it landed on a large rock. We got the scope on it and watched as it dropped down onto a Red Deer carcass, that had got caught on a fence, and began to feed. Soon it was joined by another eagle, and we spent the next hour enjoying rare and privileged views of the birds feeding. It was so good, we even started to invite passers-by over to share the 'scopes with us!

With the afternoon drawing to a close we began to think about leaving, only for another, or the same, Harrier to (re)appear and drift over to the hills from the grassland to our right. A magical way to spend an afternoon.

We drove back along the north shore of Loch na Keal and the light over the little island of Eorsa and over to Ben More was stunning. We gave the loch a good scan but with nothing else of note, headed on to Salen and back up to Tobermory for a short break before enjoying another delicious dinner.

Day 5

Saturday 30th October

Loch na Keal (south side), Fishnish, Ulva Ferry & Loch na Keal (north side)

The forecast for this morning was for heavy rain but we had planned ahead and spent the morning on the south side of Loch na Keal, largely in the vehicle. Our usual stop at Aros bay brought us incredibly good views of a pair of Dipper, stood on a gravel bar and hunting in the shallows. The usual array of waders, Grey Heron and ducks were all present and an Otter popped up briefly, further on. However, by the time we had been able to allow the traffic to pass and drive closer, it had gone.

The weather was relatively dry for a while, allowing us to get out and spend a little time at the eastern end of Loch na Keal. Here, we picked up a White-tailed Eagle perched up on the shoreline. It was eating something, and we watched it in the 'scopes for a while, before picking out a second bird a little closer to the right.



Butterfish for lunch..

The predicted rain was soon falling but we took a slow drive, following the shore and seeing a couple of Slavonian Grebes and plenty of Great Northern Diver. We were rewarded with a male Otter that gave us an incredible show for the next 40 minutes. Luckily, with us being in just one larger 17-seater vehicle, we could all watch it easily and comfortably without the need to get wet or

disturb the animal. A definite win-win. Three times it caught a large Butterfish and brought them to shore to eat in front of us, devouring every last bit and then pausing to clean, scratch and wipe its face clean.

With rain still coming down, we headed to the Forestry Commission hide at Fishnish and had our lunch there, watching the Rock Pipits on the shore and finding a very late Red Admiral that was still on the wing. Thankfully, the rain stopped, and the sun decided to make a reappearance, making things far more enjoyable for the afternoon.

After yesterday's amazing experience with the eagles, we decided that it would be rude not to pay a return visit and so gradually headed back to Ulva Ferry. As with yesterday, we were soon onto eagles with a Golden and White-tailed in the same view and then a repeat of the three birds of yesterday and two birds again at the deer carcass. It was great to see their behaviour and how cautious they were when approaching the carcass, knowing that they would be potentially vulnerable when feeding on the ground.



One eagle on the rock and another on the carcass

After both ourselves and the eagles had had our fills, we drove round to a pull-in on the north side of Loch na Keal and spent the last hour of the day watching from here. Things were relatively quiet at first with just Kestrel and Buzzard to keep us company but eventually we were rewarded with a pair of White-tailed Eagles that came soaring round the side of the nearby hill.

Day 6

Sunday 31st October

Loch Spelve, Croggan, Loch Buie and Grass Point

Our last full day but another good one. As with yesterday, it was a day of rain in the morning and sunshine and clouds in the afternoon. We headed back to Loch Spelve to start things off and found an Otter fishing just offshore that gave good views. This time we headed for Croggan and took the narrow track down to the parking area by the Old School House.

The woodland walk here was lovely and gave us some good shelter from the wind and rain. Redwing were moving through in large numbers and Siskins were buzzing overhead. But it was another Otter that stole the show, running across in front of us, leaving some spraint on a rock and then sitting on the shore for a scratch and groom, completely unconcerned by the 13 people just yards away. It was a moment that just had to be viewed through the telescopes and everyone got to see a close up of the whiskers and as one of the group eloquently put it, “you can tell it’s a male!”.

Our next encounter was with a Buzzard and Hen Harrier engaged in an aerial dual and we saw two, maybe three, ‘ring-tails’ over the next half an hour including one that sat on a fence post and posed very co-operatively for us.

Lunch was a return visit to the popular Old Post Office café at Lochbuie. We were some of their last customers of the year as this was the owner’s final day before closing for the winter and heading back to Northamptonshire. We felt very fortunate, given the lovely food and setting in which to eat it.



This time we walked to the right, round the north side of the loch. As ever, Great Northern Diver were present, and we lingered over them knowing it was our last day. There were plenty of small birds to be seen and we watched a couple of Golden Eagles above Beinn nan Gobhar, one of which conveniently perched on a rock for us. They were soon joined by a pair of White-tailed Eagle that disappeared over the adjacent hillside. We walked on in the hope of picking them up again and had one return and drift directly overhead, allowing everyone to confirm the distinctive profile and differences with the earlier Golden Eagles.

We wandered back to the cars, hearing a Brambling along the way and said goodbye to Flora in the café. As we left, we saw a few Fallow Deer and our Otter from first thing this morning was still out in Loch Spelve, albeit rather distantly. However, a Guillemot was diving right next to the bus – a great view, if a little worrying for such an oceanic species. We then got our second Autumnwatch tick of the week, one Megan McCubbin and headed for Grass Point where there was a large stag Red Deer with nine hinds near the bridge. With the rut now over, he was sat in the grass looking rather tired.

Grass Point looked nailed on for a Harrier or an Owl. The weather was just right - cold but clear – but we drew a blank. Instead, we wandered back down the cottages, examining an otter spraint on a rock and taking in the distinctive smell. As we left, Pipistrelle bats were flitting in the last light of the day, the clocks having gone back that morning. At 7pm we reassembled for our last log and evening meal and added Tawny Owl to the trip list – a bird calling constantly for a while near the car park.

Day 7

Monday 1st November

Journey home the long way round!

The weather, that had been incredibly kind to us all week, today decided it had a sting in the tail. We woke up to find that two of the scheduled ferry crossings had been cancelled due to strong winds and that ours was under threat. Richard, our independent traveller, was already a victim of the cancellation and so left us early in order to try and find an alternative route off the island.

The rest of us had our last breakfast together, packed our gear into the bus and drove, somewhat nervously, down to the ferry terminal at Craignure. On arrival, we had good news – the ferry had set off and was attempting the crossing. Excellent! We sat patiently and soon spied the ship on its approach into the jetty. The captain was on deck, closely monitoring things as the wind buffeted the boat sideways. Alas, he decided things were unsafe, the propellers went into reverse, and we heard the inevitable tannoy announcement that started with the words “we regret to inform you...”



Luckily, we had a plan B and Bob was quick off the mark, driving off before everyone else and arriving at Fishnish in time to roll up and onto the Lochaline ferry before anyone else had sorted themselves out. However, we were now faced with the prospect of a journey through the Morvern Peninsula, up to the Ardnamurchan and back down the coast to Oban, a two-hour journey we had not been banking on. Still, we looked on the bright side and enjoyed seeing a stunning part of the world that we had not been expecting to.

We made good time, even seeing some wildlife along the way. Jay was new for the trip and a couple of Otters were seen, albeit only briefly and by a few as we passed by. Eventually we reached Oban, pulled into the car park and said goodbye to the six who were leaving us at this point. Those who were left were all heading back to the train station, and we made a prompt getaway to ensure we were back in Paisley in good time. Alas, that was not to be either. As we left Loch Lomond behind us, a 20-minute arrival time suddenly jumped to 50 minutes on the Sat Nav and kept on rising. The problem? Well, with it being the first day of the COP26 Summit, the Erskine Bridge had been closed to allow Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior safely through the Clyde.

So, instead, we diverted and hit the COP26 traffic, watching as the clock ticked ever closer to the first train time needed by two of the group. It is fair to say the end of the tour was a rather nail-biting affair, but we pulled in to the station and got bags assembled on the platform with a minute to spare. Phew!

And that was it. The end of a fabulous week. We’d had superb wildlife, some sunshine, laughter and stunning landscapes. Just exactly what Naturetrek trips are all about.

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