

Autumn on Mull

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th – 14th November 2021



White-tailed Eagle & Otter by
Simon Beckwith



Loch Torr & Kilmore by Julie Clarke



Report by Keith Buchanan



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Tour participants: Keith Buchanan (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Monday 8th November

Despite some trepidation about the coincidence with COP 26 in Glasgow, most arrived in Glasgow without mishap. However, one individual's flight was so delayed that they had to travel the following day. The pick ups at Paisley Gilmour station and the airport went smoothly and we were soon on our way over the Erskine Bridge. The weather was not kind and it rained the entire way; this and the tight timing to catch the ferry to Mull precluded any stops.

Arriving at the ferry terminal, there was time for a visit inside the terminal while some of us watched a Herring Gull and a Hooded Crow arguing over who should claim a fragment of crab on the quayside.

At Craignure we headed north towards Tobermorey and proceeded in a line of ferry traffic along mostly single-lane roads, made more difficult in the dark and the heavy rain. A series of hair pin bends in Tobermorey itself brought us to our hotel and we unpacked the vehicle with relief after a long day. Everyone was content to have an early night and look forward to the week ahead.

Day 2

Tuesday 9th November

After a delicious breakfast at the hotel, we boarded the minibus and corkscrewed our way down the steep access road to the main street in Tobermorey. After picking up lunch at the Co-op, we started heading south down the east coast of the island. Stopping at a convenient point next to the coast, the sun came out and we enjoyed fine views of a fishing Goosander. A little further on another sunny stop produced a range of waders, including Bar-tailed Godwit, as well as our first Redwings of the trip.

In Craignure we picked up one of our party who had been delayed the previous day then we proceeded further south. On a minor road near Duart Castle we disembarked and did a thorough scan of the surrounding landscape. A ring-tailed Hen Harrier showed briefly over a nearby ridge, unsettling the Greylag Geese which were grazing there. Some smaller birds were also in evidence – a Grey Wagtail flew over and a Stonechat observed us from a fence line, as did a flock of Chaffinches from telegraph wires. Scanning the shore revealed a Greenshank amongst the Redshank and Oystercatchers.

Our next stop was overlooking the shore at Loch Don. A flock of Wigeon were feeding amongst the seaweed, with Teal a little closer. Further out, a single male Goldeneye was caught in the emerging sun. Driving slowly down towards the coast again revealed the first Red Deer of the trip and a number of Buzzards sat obligingly on the ground or on fenceposts. After parking the vehicle, we had just started our walk when a large bird of prey was spotted over a ridge. It was an adult White-tailed Eagle and, as it started to rain, it settled in a distant tree but could not be picked out because of the declining visibility. However, on reaching the coast the weather cleared again, allowing us excellent views of a Great Northern Diver in the loch. Just before leaving we also spotted a juvenile White-tailed Eagle sitting on an offshore island.

After a picnic lunch where we were joined by a group of curious cattle, we proceeded around the southern part of the island, eventually stopping alongside Loch Spelve. Almost immediately we spotted several photographers, and then the Otter that they were photographing. After this we had a magical half hour in which we followed a female Otter and her well-grown cub as they hunted and play-fought along the shore line. Particularly interesting was when they emerged onto the shore to eat larger prey items. Further out in the channel, we managed occasional glimpses of the male also. A fantastic end to an enjoyable day.

Day 3

Wednesday 10th November

Today we decided to concentrate on the northern part of the island so, after our visit to the Co-op, we drove west from Tobermorey. Our first stops were alongside the Mishnish Lochs, where we encountered both Kestrels and Buzzards. Stopping shortly afterwards, overlooking Loch Tor, we first picked up several Ravens over the ridge opposite. Buzzards also appeared from time to time, and then a larger raptor appeared in the far distance. It stayed tantalisingly far away but eventually it flew in our direction, allowing us to identify it as a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle. Our final stop before Dervaig was at the viewpoint, where we admired both the round tower of the church and a splendidly vivid rainbow.

Arriving at Calgary, we parked beside the beach and made our way down to the sea. The way down was over an area of machair which, although obviously over for the winter, was clearly species rich. The beach itself had much storm washed seaweed and we spent a little time looking at the seaweed and shells. As we approached the end of the beach, we again began to see Ravens and Buzzards active over the hills but they were soon dwarfed by a magnificent full adult White-tailed Eagle which flew right over our heads. The sea was choppy and a Great Northern Diver was the only diver located. As we headed back along the beach to the vehicle, we stopped to watch some Rock Pipits searching through the seaweed for insects.

Our next significant stop was at Laggan Bay, where we had our lunch. On the way, a passing Merlin had been the highlight. Again, both Ravens and Buzzards were active and noisy but an adult Golden Eagle was the star of the show. Following this, we stopped at a number of locations along the shores of Loch na Keal. A group of four Great Northern Divers was a highpoint here. As we approached the head of the loch, we added Ringed Plover to the list of waders seen. We stopped briefly to look at a significant flock of Greylag Geese before turning off towards Salen.

Our final stop of the day was at Salen. In the gloaming the wind had dropped and the sea was very calm as we picked out, for example, Greenshank amongst the seaweed of the shore. Several Harbour Seals watched us with interest from the rocks as we absorbed the atmosphere at the peaceful end of the day in that beautiful location.

Day 4

Thursday 11th November

The weather was pleasant as we set off on the long journey down the island to catch the ferry to Iona. Along the Ross of Mull we stopped briefly from time to time to scan for divers and Otters, locating several Great Northern Divers in the process. As we approached the ferry terminal some Linnets flew across in front of the vehicle; surprisingly the first of the trip. Parking up, we made our way down to the jetty in the pleasant morning sunshine. So it was not surprising that we were dismayed to be told that we would not be able to cross because a storm was forecast and they would not be able to safely dock on Iona because there was no pier to provide shelter. After a quick coffee at the terminal we set off on an alternative plan.

We drove east back along the Ross of Mull and made our first proper stop at Pennyghael. Greylag Geese were studded here and there on the islands and an elegant Greenshank stalked the shallows. A Red Deer stag with his group of hinds crossed the road nearby.

Moving on a short distance we stopped to have our picnic lunch. Scanning revealed a small head bobbing about near an islet and the Otter obligingly came out onto the seaweed covered rocks and proceeded to eat its prize. It went back into the water to hunt again and we watched this procedure several times. A second incident of particular interest was when a buzzard landed on a rock nearby and proceeded to half spread its wings as if it was 'mantling' prey. But it had no prey item. It continued to stand on the rock with its wings partially extended, rather like a cormorant drying its wings.

Moving on over to Loch na Keal brought us back to the shore for another Otter feeding along the tideline. This individual also came out periodically to consume its prey items on the rocks. Eventually it ceased feeding and curled up on the seaweed, occasionally stretching and rubbing itself against the bladderwrack on which it lay. By this time the light was beginning to fade and after one further stop at the head of the loch we departed for the hotel in a strongly strengthening wind.

Day 5

Friday 12th November

The weather forecast for today was dire and indeed we woke to driving rain against the windows of the hotel. Hoping that it might provide some shelter we drove, after breakfast, to a nearby forest. However, with no let up in the severity of the rain we retreated to a farm where local Mull cheese is made, and made a number of purchases there. Back in Tobermorey we repaired to a local café and dried out with a refreshing cup of coffee. Thus reinvigorated, we went to the visitor centre of the Tobermorey distillery and those who weren't driving sampled some of the local malts, and made some purchases.

The rain had lightened a little by now so we set off to the coast. We had a picnic lunch in the van at the first stop and managed to spot several Mistle Thrushes which were congregating in a Rowan tree which had a good crop of berries. A large flock of Redwings flew across as we proceeded to the next stop. Clearly their numbers were building up.

We then stopped briefly at Salen and added a Black Guillemot to our list, under the watchful gaze of the Harbour Seals on the rocks.

The next stop found us encountering mixed flocks of finches moving restlessly through the loch side trees. Goldfinches and Chaffinches were the main constituents, but several Brambling were mixed in, and Song Thrushes were enjoying the Rowan berries here. Moving on down to the loch shore, we began scanning with the telescope. A Harbour Seal was 'bottling', one way in which they rest. Great Northern Divers were again in evidence, along with Red-breasted Mergansers and the occasional Little Grebe. However, quite far out in the bay, a small disturbance revealed a swimming Otter. It swam and dived continuously and then reversed direction before we lost sight of it again.

By this time we were all wet and decided to make our next stop the last of the day. Across the road, the field contained a surprising number and diversity of birds, with Flocks of Oystercatchers jostling with Geese, Starlings etc. Out in the loch Turnstones and Ringed Plover were active on an offshore spit and an aggregation of Great Black-backed Gulls seemed to have found something interesting but whatever it was was not visible to us! Then it was time to return to the hotel, with the hope of better weather the next day.

Day 6

Saturday 13th November

Although a rather gloomy start, we headed off to have another go at crossing to Iona, in high expectation. As we progressed on our journey the weather improved steadily and by the time we arrived at the terminal the day was bright and, even more importantly, very calm. Crossing without mishap, we first briefly explored the nunnery before walking towards the abbey. On the way, a Chiffchaff was encountered in the Sycamore trees, a late presence for this species.

Most elected to explore the abbey given its rich and influential history, although the church was closed for renovations. At the back of the abbey a little bird watching was also conducted as there was a terrific view of the Sound, separating Iona from the rest of Mull. In the calm water, many Great Northern Divers were feeding.

Finishing in the abbey, we started to walk north, eventually reaching the lovely beach at the northern tip of the island. Here we had our picnic lunch with breathtaking views out to Staffa and the Treshnish Islands. One of our party braved a swim and claimed the water was surprisingly warm! Great Northern Divers, in various plumages, were again feeding in the bay but further out a Red-throated Diver was spotted. By then it was time to start making our way slowly back towards the ferry.

On the drive back, we stopped at a number of locations in Glen More, hoping to see eagles. However, we drew a blank until the last stop when two Hen Harriers were spotted, quartering the ridge in their characteristic fashion. Progressing down towards Craignure we stopped again to admire a fine Red Deer stag by the side of the road before completing our journey back to the hotel.

Day 7

Sunday 14th November

Being in good time for the ferry on our last day, we did a little gentle birdwatching at Craignure. The main feature of interest were two Rowan trees with numerous berries. A succession of birds were flying in to feed on the berries – Redwings and Blackbirds mainly, but smaller birds were also searching the bark for insects. Most notable was a Chiffchaff. The subsequent crossing was calm, with one Harbour Porpoise spotted, unfortunately only by the group leader. Back in Glasgow, the breakup of COP 26 did not cause any hold ups for the drop-offs at the airport and train station – a satisfactory end to an enjoyable week on Mull.

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Checklist

Birds

	I=Introduced		Nov-21					
	Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14
1	Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			✓	✓		
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓					
4	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓		
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>					✓	
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓		✓	✓		
9	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓					
10	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓					
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>					✓	
14	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
16	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓					
18	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓				
21	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓				✓	
22	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	✓	✓			✓	
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
25	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓		
26	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓					
28	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓		✓		
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓		✓		
30	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓	✓		✓		
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>				✓		
36	Rock Dove/feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
38	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					H	
39	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓			✓	
41	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
42	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓		✓		✓	
43	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓		H	
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓		✓	✓
46	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓			✓

	I=Introduced		Nov-21					
	Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14
47	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					✓	✓
48	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	✓		H	✓	
49	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓			✓		
52	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓	✓	
53	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓		
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓				
56	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓					
57	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓			✓	
59	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓					
60	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			✓		✓	
61	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	H			H	
62	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
63	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				✓		
65	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓			
66	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓			✓	✓	

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓				
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	3		2	1	
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓