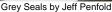
The Magic of Mull

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 12 July 2013







Puffin by Jeff Penfold



Scarisdale by Jeff Penfold



2013 Group by Janice Penfold

Report compiled by Dave Pierce Images by kind courtesy of Jeff & Janice Penfold

England



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

Alresford

Hampshire SO24 0NG

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Report The Magic of Mull

Tour Leader: Dave Pierce

Participants: Valerie Butt

Jenny Wilson
Derek Mills
Heather Mills
Jeff Penfold
Janice Penfold
Richard Kemp
Elizabeth Kemp
Sylvia Woods
Ian Woods
Chris Carter

Dennis Sewell

Day 1

Saturday 6th July

It was a dreich afternoon as the Cal-Mac ferry headed for the cloud shrouded Isle of Mull. The group had gathered a little earlier in Oban where some delightful Black Guillemots were feeding in the bay. Reassembled on the upper stern deck of the vessel we endured the drizzle and low cloud to observe the passing birdlife which early on included Cormorants, Shags and a couple of Common Terns. Further out into the sound the occasional Gannet was seen plus the odd Razorbill & Guillemot and we were pleased to record 2 Manx Shearwaters flying low over the sea.

After demarcation at Craignure we drove the short distance to the Glenforsa Hotel which was to be our base for the next 6 nights. Soon after checking in we took our first exploration of the island. We cut across the isthmus from Salen to Loch na Keal. En route several mammals were encounter including 2 Red Deer hinds, 2 single female Fallow Deer and a Mountain Hare. Around the shore of the sea loch amongst others we saw several Common Sandpipers, a couple of Shelduck several female Eiders including one with a brood of young & flocks of both Greylag & Canada Geese. With the steady rain still falling we headed back to the hotel seeing a further 3 Mountain Hares on the way, and rounded off the day with the first of many delicious meals at Glenforsa.

Day 2 Sunday 7th July

Three Crossbills on the top of one of the tallest conifers were seen by the first of the group to emerge from the hotel just prior to 6am. Once all the early risers were gathered we drove over to Scarisdale on Loch na Keal. En route a couple of Mountain Hares and a Fallow Deer were seen. Whilst observing the nest site of a pair of Golden Eagles we could see a fully grown young perched on a branch growing out from the hillside and occasionally we could glimpse moments from its sibling which was virtually concealed by foliage. In between observing the young eagle's, members of the party began spotting other species including a nearby Rock Pipit by Heather and a distant Otter by Dennis.

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Also on or over the sea loch were Red-breasted Mergansers and a diving Gannet. Then another Otter was picked up by Dave. It was initially foraging a little way out but gradually worked its way towards the shore close to where we were before it disappeared.

After breakfast the whole group returned to Loch na Keal but this time to the north shore. An Otter was glimpsed close to the shore in tricky sea and light conditions. Turning away from the shore we focused our attention on a pair of White-tailed Eagles which were perched near the top of conifers in a clump overlooking the loch. The larger bird, the female, we knew from her wing tag that she was a 13 year old bird from the mainland near Torridon. As a boat approached up the loch towards us she began to yelp and eventually her mate took off and circled the now stationary boat and swooped down to snatch a fish which had been thrown overboard. He then flapped purposefully back to the clump of conifers to deliver his catch. About 15 minutes later after some further yelping by his mate he set out for the boat again to pluck another discarded fish from the boat and this time he was pursued by a Buzzard which enabled us to appreciate just how big these huge raptors are.

Following a comfort stop where we saw a family of Mute Swans and Common Seals with pups we travelled along the south side of Loch na Keal. Here we observed a pair of Golden Eagles over hillside above their nest site and further on a Kestrel and 4 Ravens. Whilst on the loch side, amongst others were Rock Pipit, Common Sandpipers and 4 Black Guillemots. We took our lunch under the massive cliffs with vistas out to sea with its numerous islands and afterwards following a short drive over a hill pass we arrived at Loch Scridain. Here setting off from a view point onto the nest which contained a large White-tailed Eagle "chick" most of the group walked along the north shore of the sea loch. Meanwhile the remainder watched the eaglet exercising its wings and tearing up food left by its parents, which in recent days had included Harbour Seal placenta.

Once reunited, we soon stopped the vehicle to watch a female Hen Harrier quartering around the salt marsh. Further on we summated another hill pass where we stopped to take in the wild panorama of mountains and lochs and then descended into Glen More. With time pressing we only stopped once more to observe Stonechats at the roadside and then it was straight back to the hotel though some folk glimpsed another female Hen Harrier, which flew across the road ahead of us.

Day 3 Monday 8th July

This morning those out early went for a stroll along the airfield runway. A male Crossbill was again seen in the tall conifers. Siskins were also seen and a Blackcap was singing. A flock of 150 Greylag Geese were on the coast along with Curlew and Ring Plover amongst others. Over the Sound a Gannet and 4 Manx Shearwaters were seen, plus what was probably (an unidentified) cetacean.

Later we all travelled to Tobermory where we boarded our boat and were soon sailing out of the picturesque bay. Shags, Guillemots, Manx Shearwaters and our first Porpoise were seen and then we spotted an adult White-tailed Eagle perched on a rock on a slope leading up from the beach. Progressing steadily we rounded the north coast of Mull and then on our starboard we were passing Ardnamurchan Point, the most westerly land on the British mainland where 2 Golden Eagles were soaring above the sea cliffs. Manx Shearwaters became more numerous after this, as were sightings of Gannets, Puffins and Razorbills.

Ahead of us a skua was sitting on the water and when it took off we could see it was a dark phase Arctic Skua. A couple more Arctic Skuas were seen soon after but on these occasions they were pale phase birds, as was a third one which we observed harassing a Kittiwake. Minutes later we had our first Bonxie or Great Skua just as 2 distant Minke Whales were seen and despite the distance we had prolonged views of them has they tracked on their course across the sea. We became somewhat distracted when several Storm Petrels were spotted quite close to the boat. We weren't gaining on the Minke Whales so the skipper decided to change course and we next encounter 2 schools of Common Dolphins, some giving excellent and exciting views including completely breaching from the sea and travelling alongside the vessel.

After all this activity we entered the relative tranquillity of the Cairns of Coll, a cluster of tiny islets to the northeast of the mother island. A zodiac ferried most of the passengers ashore on to one of these islands complete with a glorious sandy beach for lunch. The inhabitants of the archipelago included Common Seals and quite a few Arctic Terns, with the odd Common Tern seen too. The skipper was keen to recommence cruising and we set off again scanning the sea. Early on a Fulmar was a new species for the day with a further 2 Great Skuas observed before we had some much improved Minke Whale observations plus more Storm Petrels and hundreds of Manx Shearwaters. Heading back and closer to Mull more Porpoise were met and passing back by the White-tailed Eagle site the recently fledged juvenile was standing on the rocky shore and made a short, shaky flight on our approach, under the watchful eye of one of its parents perched in a nearby spruce.

Day 4 Tuesday 9th July

Superimposed mist over the always wonderful scenery of Loch na Keal in the early morning presented a spectacular backdrop to our wildlife observations near Killiechronan. The sun steadily burned of the low cloud to reveal glorious blue skies. Common Gulls had their young on the gravel spit by the mouth of the river where there were also Ring Plover and Common Sandpipers. Out on the water were 3 Red-throated Divers and whilst close to shore a Common Seal was snorkelling around. Overlooking the scene the male of the local White-tailed Eagle pair was perched in one of their regular trees and we witnessed the female fly in from along the hillside.

After breakfast from the hotel we drove southwards and stopped at the south end of Scallastle Bay. Here Arctic Terns were breeding on shingle islands which also held Ring Plover and Eiders. A pair of White-tailed Eagles was surveying the scene from treetops and Heather spotted a foraging Otter in between the islands. A little further on at Loch Don where Highland cattle were standing in the burn that fed the loch, the majority of the party decided to stretch their legs and walk the road along the south side of the estuary. It was a picturesque route through meadows with orchids and hanging oak woods on the hillsides. A family of Whinchat's were busy in one of the open areas and when we arrived at Grass Point, the end of the road, a pair of adult White-tailed Eagles were perched on the skerries where the sea loch confluences with the open sea. Here in the wonderful setting and in lovely sunshine we chose to take a leisurely lunch. Gannets and Kittiwakes passed by over the sea and a third adult White-tailed Eagle was realised perched low on the opposite side of loch beyond the other two. Then an Otter was spotted, this time by Dennis and not far from the eagles. We all watched it was feeding and although somewhat distant and tricky to see initially, it slowly worked its way towards us and eventually passed close to the bank we were observing from. What a marvellous experience!

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We next explored the area around Loch Spelve and Loch Buie. We spent some time below a crag where a Golden Eagle eyrie contained a fully grown young, hoping to see its parents. Raptors appeared in the form of Buzzard, Kestrel, Hen Harrier and a Sparrowhawk carrying prey, plus 5 Ravens but no eagles. Then just has we were about to depart with the last scan of the skyline, an adult Golden Eagle appeared low over the opposite hillside before soaring high and then gliding over to the top most slopes above us! A little later 4 Fallow Deer were seen as we drove to the road end. Here at Lochbuie has we enjoyed ice cream in the afternoon Dave drew our attention to a pair of Golden Eagles flying low over the high cliffs across the bay and Dennis located an adult White-tailed Eagle close-by.

Day 5

Wednesday 10th July

Another misty early morning ensued for those gathering for the pre-breakfast outing. We headed west from Salen across the islands isthmus. At Gruline 4 Mountain Hares were grazing in a recently cut and harvested grass field. Then it was on to Scarisdale where despite the glimmers of sun above the murk, horizontally the visibility was to say the least limited. Driving slowly and stopping frequently we scoured the shore and strained our eyes across the water to the edge of the mist shroud. It looked like conditions were against us and then BINGO! Ripples in the water proved to have be caused by an Otter, no there was two, in fact we had found three! A mother Otter was busy foraging with repeated dives, frequently successful, whilst her two large cubs frolicked alongside. They appeared unconcerned has we observed them at length from the vehicle until they had slowly drifted away busy in food and fun. They were still close to shore so we drove close to them again and recommenced our watch. Soon the mother climbed onto a rock surrounded by water to rest and was joined by her young, before she led them back into the water to swim ashore just ahead of us. The 3 of them clambered over the rocks and into the rank vegetation where we lost sight of them before they emerged on the landward side of the road bounding off into the trees having apparently crossed under the road through a culvert.

Even after breakfast the fog persisted though we could make out 2 Red-throated Divers as we followed the road along the north shore of Loch na Keal. Several miles along where the road climbed higher we broke out of this inverted cloud into blue skies and bright sunshine with spectacular views over the fog bound sea loch to the peaks opposite including Ben More, Mulls highest mountain at just over 3000 ft above sea level.

The foggy conditions weren't too bad at Ulva Ferry where we boarded "Hoy Lass" our boat to visit the islands to the west of Mull. Gannets and a single Fulmar were seen and for a short while the vessel was shadowed by a Lesser Black-backed Gull before we were engulfed in a fog bank. The fog wasn't in anyway an issue to the enjoyment and interest of the fascinating island of Staffa. In fact the sea conditions allowed the boat to enter deeper into the famous Fingal's Cave than normal. Once ashore the group explored at will including investigating the cave on foot following the hand railed route and taking their lunch out on the grassy top of the island which was bathed in sunshine. Amongst other birdlife Fulmars and Black Guillemots were nesting close to the landing area.

After an hour ashore we sailed for the Treshnish Isles where on approaching Lunga we broke out of the fog and soon the cry "Bonxie" was heard has three and then a fourth Great Skua flew overhead, their white wing flashes showing exceedingly well in the light conditions. We landed on Lunga, the largest of the archipelago and after negotiating its tricky boulder beach and short but steep climb to a pleasant grassy terrace we were in Puffin wonderland.

These parrot-like billed auks had all been to modelling school and posed endlessly for the assembled cameras. On Dave's advice most of the group eventually prised themselves away and continued trekking further along the island, passing nesting Fulmars, Shags and Razorbills, not to mention the black Rabbits. All the while the smell got stronger and the noise louder and ultimately we befell Harp Rock and the spectacle it held. This huge stack had broken free of Lunga and left a void straight down to the sea. Its top and cliff ledges were teaming with sea birds particularly Guillemots and Kittiwakes with the call of the latter seeming to ascend all others. Carefully scanning through the thronging Guillemot masses down chicks could be revealed and the "spectacled" bridled from were to be found. It was all too soon that we had to leave this magical seabird city and return to our waiting boat.

Once aboard we cruised through the northern most Treshnish Isles inhabited by Grey Seals and with signs of former human inhabitants in the shape of ruined buildings and fortifications. En-route back to Mull Dennis spotted a Manx Shearwater and as we passed along the north side of the island of Ulva, a pair of Golden Eagles was soaring and several Red Deer were seen grazing. Finally after being informed by Dave, the skipper obligingly diverted his course to enable excellent views of an adult White-tailed Eagle perched in a dead tree alongside the shore. Meanwhile as the boat manoeuvred Ian and Sylvia saw an Otter swimming close by through the window whilst every other passenger was focused on the eagle on the opposite side of the boat.

Day 6

Thursday 11th July

Loch Don was the focus of our early excursion. We started along the north shore of the estuary where one of the first sightings was a close Red Deer stag with his antlers in velvet. Several more of the species were encountered on both sides of the sea loch. Raptors included Buzzard and Kestrel whilst Curlew and a Redshank were amongst the waders seen.

Later the whole group travelled westwards besides the north shore of Loch na Keal. Early on a Fallow Deer was seen and a distinct Grey Seal gave good views offshore. A family of at least 4 Kestrels were active on the upper slopes above the road whilst closer at hand a family of Whinchat's were being fed, with the handsome male showing well. A stop at a cottage garden provided a slight diversion from our usual activity but even there the birdlife was not neglected with a female Hen Harrier observed and a singing Yellowhammer was also seen.

Afterwards we followed the coast of Loch Tuath northwards until the road cut inland and several miles after this at Ensay most of the group set of walking. Passing between cliffs above and below with views out to sea the route eventually rounded a hillside to reveal the beautiful Calgary Bay, with its golden beach at its head. The remainder of the group had scouted ahead in the vehicle and were able to direct the walkers onto a feeding Rock Dove they had found and too much excitement on to a school of about a dozen Common Dolphins. These cetaceans performed fabulously for us has they frequently breached the flat sea water and we easily track their progress for a considerable time.

We had lunch at picnic tables at the head of Calgary Bay before driving eastwards through Dervaig. Stopping to by a fresh water loch Dave noticed 2 unidentifiably eagles perched distantly on a crag. We decided to try to approach closer and this meant on foot. A convenient track provided pleasant walking has we carefully closed in on our quarry. Once relocated, a scope was stealthily trained onto the perched raptors and to our delight it revealed an adult pair of Golden Eagles!

It was a thrill to see these magnificent birds close by and when one took off the power of its deep purposeful wing beats could be fully appreciated. We withdrew with care and left the remaining bird perched surveying its vast territory.

Having exerted ourselves in the heat of the afternoon sun on yet another glorious day we sought sustenance and shelter in the "Old Byre" tearoom. Afterwards travelled south through Glen Bellart and on into Glen Aros. A stop at the head of the second glen discovered an adult White-tailed Eagle perched on the grass at the top of a gentle sloping field whilst close by the noisy commotion of a flock of Swallows alerted us the presence of a marauding Sparrowhawk which was clutching prey in its talons.

Day 7 Friday 12th July

The first couple out on our final morning at the Glen Forsa Hotel had the pleasure of 2 Otters Dave had spotted a few minutes prior. Watching from the gate to the airfield runway they appeared to be a mother and this year's cub. They were sight foraging in the sea initially for around 15 minutes before they went ashore where with the combination of the merging background and the enveloping mist we lost them after about 5 minutes. We drove to the opposite side of the island at Scarisdale but the mist was just as dense there. However en route we observed 5 Mountain Hares in a field and on the approach back to the hotel a Red Deer hind crossed the main road ahead of us and nonchalantly browsed a willow bush before completely disappearing from sight.

Sadly after breakfast it was time to pack the minibus and make our way to the ferry terminal. We discovered that due to the fog the ferry was delayed by an hour but once it arrived we were soon under way. A couple of Lesser Black-backed Gulls trailed the vessel gliding seemingly effortlessly a stern waiting for scraps to be tossed to them. They provided a final escort to a magnificent tour of Mull with many fond memories and images in the company of a great group of folk!

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Tour Report The Magic of Mull

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata				3	2		
2	Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis			2		20+		
3	Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus	2		100's		1		
4	Storm Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus			10				
5	Gannet	Morus bassanus	6	1	50	10	10		1
6	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	5	6	1	2	6	1	
7	Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis	20+	10+	50+	10+	50+	10+	10+
8	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	4	10	5	12	6	8	2
9	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor		6	3	2		3	
10	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	20+	30+	20	50+	20	50+	20+
11	Canada Goose	Branta canadensis	20+	20+		30+			
12	Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	2	2	2		1		2
13	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		3	4	2	4	52	
14	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	8	4	5	30	10	10	
15	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus albellus	4	10		4	10	12	2
16	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		2		2		1	
17	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		3		1	1	1	
18	Buzzard	Buteo buteo		10	1	6	5	6	
19	White-tailed Eagle	Halaeetus albicilla		3	2	8	1	1	
20	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos		3	2	4	2	2	
21	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		1		2	2	5	
22	Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		5	✓	✓	✓		
23	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula			1	3			
25	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		2		1			
26	Curlew	Numenius arquata			2	4	2	15	
27	Redshank	Tringa totanus						1	
28	Common Sandpiper	Actis hypoleucos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua			2	1	4		
30	Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus			4				
31	Black-headed Gull	Larus ridibundus		1			2	1	
32	Common Gull	Larus canus	10	50+	20	50+	✓	✓	✓
33	Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus					1		2
35	Greater Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	6		20	20	100+		
37	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	2		1		✓		
38	Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea			30	✓	30+		
39	Razorbill	Alca torda	3		20		40+	1	
40	Guillemot	Uria aalge	2		50		100S		
41	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle	4	4	5	6	10	2	2
42	Puffin	Fratercula arctica	•		50	_	100s		<u> </u>
43	Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus			1	10	✓	✓	✓
44	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia					1	1	
45	Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		8	✓	✓	· ✓	<u>·</u>	
46	Great-spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major			h	h			
47	Skylark	Alauda arvensis		2	1	3	2	4	

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	Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	July 9	10	11	12
48	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia		2	5	✓	2	4	
49	Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	House Martin	Delichon urbica		2		3			
51	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus	1	3		2	3	2	
53	Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis				2			
54	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea		4				1	
56	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		1	h	h	h	2	
57	Dunnock	Prunella modularis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
58	Robin	Erithicus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra				3		6	
60	Stonechat	Saxicola torquata		4		2		4	
61	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	1	4		2	6	1	
62	Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		3	2	2	1	1	
65	Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus		2		2		h	
66	Whitethroat	Sylvia communis		3		2		h	
67	Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			h	h	h		
68	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus		✓	✓	✓		✓	
69	Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓		✓	✓	✓	
70	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓			✓	
71	Coal Tit	Periparus ater			h	h		h	
72	Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		1					
73	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		✓		✓	50	✓	
74	Raven	Corvus corax		12+	5	10	10	10	
75	Jay	Garrulus glandarius				1			
76	Hooded Crow	Corvus corone		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Siskin	Carduelis spinus		2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		2	5	✓	✓	✓	
82	Redpoll	Carduelis flammea				1		2	
83	Linnet	Acanthis cannabina		3				2	
84	Twite	Acanthis flavirostris				1	2		
85	Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra		3	1				
86	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella				h		2	
87	Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		2				h	

Mammals

1	Mountain Hare	Lepus timidus	3	6			4		5
2	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Western European Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus						1 dead	
4	Pipistrelle Bat	Pipistrellus pipistrellus	1prob						
5	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus					50+	1	
6	Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	6	10	50	4	20	10	
7	European Otter	Lutra lutra		2		2	4		2
8	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	2			2	10	12	1
9	Fallow Deer	Dama dama	2	1		5		1	

			July							
	Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
10	Minke Whale	Balaenoptera acutorostrata			4					
11	Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis			25					
12	Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena			24					

Reptiles

1	Common Lizard	Zootoca vivipara			1	

Butterflies

Green-vein White Common Blue Small Heath
Meadow Brown Dark Green Fritillary Marsh Fritillary