The Magic of Mull

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd - 29th June 2023



Golden-ringed Dragonfly



White-tailed Eagle



Peregrine with Oystercatcher



Otters

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Day 1

Friday 23rd June

The first of the group met up at Gilmour Street Station – a quick stop away from Glasgow Central - where they were met by Andy and then we all went to the airport to scoop up the other three members of our group and speed away north.

Although still, dry the weather was closing in as we drove by the impressive and very atmospheric Loch Lomond. Any flying Common Buzzards would have had to have been doing so in the low clouds so we had to content ourselves with a few Mallard and Greylag Geese on the loch itself.

A quick stop at The Green Welly allowed us to refresh the inner man (and woman), to see House Martins dashing around in search of food and hear Willow Warblers calling.

It was wet on the road to Oban, but we able to see the impressive ruins of Kilchurn Castle in Loch Awe, the faux Forth Rail Bridge across the Etive and some very impressive Highland Cattle – including from the estate that supplied these beasts to Balmoral, no less!

We had some time to potter in Oban before the ferry left and spent it examining and discussing the difference between various gull species in the harbour. Black Guillemots were found, and admired, as was a Harbour Seal that was exploring the area.

The crossing produced more Harbour Seals, some Northern Gannets, including one which dived in a spectacular fashion near our ferry, a couple of Arctic Terns as well as the usual Shags and Greater Cormorants.

The rain increased in velocity as we drove from Craignure to Tobermory and apart from a very soggy Meadow Pipit not a great deal else was added.

We met to do our initial list and chat through the week to come on this fantastic island before consuming a gargantuan and very tasty meal and heading off to bed – ready for the day to come.

Day 2

Saturday 24th June

Initially fine and quite clear, the rain swept in as we left the hotel and headed down the south east coast of Mull. We stopped a little before Salen where we saw the first of numerous Common Sandpipers we were to find during the day. Eurasian Oystercatchers were in good voice too and a couple of female Common Eider splashed energetically in the shallow water.

We did the almost obligatory stop by the twin wrecks for photos and then headed to Craignure Golf Course where we braved the light rain to look at what was in the little bay there. A group of moulting Goosanders (Common Mergansers) were just off shore as was another female Eider, this time with a handful of ducklings. Common Terns and Black-legged Kittiwakes were bathing just off the shingle bar and Common Oystercatchers were noisily flying around.

A trip to the Duart Castle didn't produce much in the way of birds but we were privy to the special gathering of the Clan McLean and quickly shown the way out again.

We drove to the car park near to Grasspoint and took advantage of a break in the rain to walk down the track to this lovely sheltered bay. There were lots of European Stonechats on show including a very nice family of very recently fledged birds being constantly fed by their parents. There were Eurasian Siskins, Common Redpolls as well as plentiful European Goldfinches, Common Chaffinches and Willow Warblers in and around the woods and Meadow Pipits galore in the fields. We were able to study a distant group of European Shags on an island to see the differences between them and Great Cormorants before the rains came back and we made our way towards Loch Spelve and Croggan.

We lunched while watching Harbour Seals and family parties of Oystercatchers before driving slowly round Loch Spelve, passed a rampant Peacock, looking for European Otter.

A splendid waterfall caught our attention and while we photographed that we learned of a nearby Otter. Walking down the road, we found this wonderful animal intent on fishing close by the shore. For the next 15-20 minutes we quietly and carefully walked along the road watching it dive and re-surface and occasionally make a sortie onto the beach before resuming its unhurried progress west along the loch shore. Magical.

We then drove to Croggan and enjoyed a lovely walk along the loch side by the woodland finding Dunnocks, Eurasian Wrens, European Robins and a Common Treecreeper. The loch side itself held the inevitable noisy Common Sandpipers and Eurasian Oystercatchers. Stars of the show though were dragonflies with an impressive Golden-ringed Dragonfly looking, with its gold and black hoops, like a rugby league supporter on its way to a game and a pair of briefly copulating Keeled Skimmers – the male a gorgeous powder blue colour.

For our final part of the day, we drove further west along the beautiful Loch Uisg and parked up by the Old Post Office café overlooking the grand sea loch of Loch Buie. Here there were Northern Gannets circling round and a distant Common Buzzard made an appearance. It was while scouring the tops of the hills that we found our first Golden Eagles. They were fairly distant - Golden Eagles normally are – but the light was perfect and we able to watch these magnificent birds for a good 10-15 minutes including some good views through the telescope.

A wonderful conclusion to the day and it only remained for a calling male Peacock and a field of magnificent, but suspiciously tame looking Red Deer stags to wrap up events as we headed back to the hotel to our list, discuss the next day and, of course, have another huge and lovely meal.

Day 3 Sunday 25th June

Today's weather pretty much replicated yesterday's – wet in the morning becoming beautifully sunny in the afternoon.

We headed south once again after breakfast, but this time though turning back on ourselves to drive up Glen Aros. We gave the now fast-flowing stream a concentrated going over for Dipper but to no avail. A Common Buzzard braved the conditions to fly off out of a wood but little else was around until we found a splendid Whinchat which perched obligingly on the right, and then left, side of the bus. Otherwise for the birds it was only Meadow Pipits

and Eurasian Stonechat. The plants, however, did put up a good show with arrays of beautiful yellow Bog Asphodel, frothy white Meadowsweet and interestingly pale spikes of Heath Spotted Orchids everywhere.

We made a brief trip to the head of Loch Na Keal where we watched a Common Buzzard hanging effortlessly in the strong southwest winds before deciding to have a coffee break back in Salen.

Delicious coffee (and cakes) later, we went back to Loch Na Keal and drove slowly along the south shore, the weather now improving by the minute.

Two Fallow and a Red Deer lurked amongst the bracken and bushes before we decided to stop and check out the small birds nearby. These turned out to be Rock Pipits, but also a few young Northern Wheatear and one Twite which put in a very brief appearance before vanishing forever. Eurasian Skylarks were singing, our first Common Shelducks appeared, and we were about to embark on a walk when we spotted a suspicious looking hunched shape on an island in the loch. White-tailed Eagle! The bird was not close but with the telescope we had good views and could see its powerful build and huge yellow bill. We feasted both on this site, as well as literally, as we decided to have our lunch here in the hope the eagle may do a fly pass.

Lunch over and the eagle still vigorously stationary, we continued our way round the loch. As we approached the awesome cliffs, we noticed a few people clearly intent on something just off the shore. It was a couple of Otters – we assumed a female and a well grown cub. This pair entertained us royally as they dived for food before coming up and energetically chewing their catches. One Otter climbed on to a nearby island and rolled around for some time before slipping back into the water. They both then joined forces for a synchronised swimming display before tumbling around back on the small island and then running onto to the shore and disappearing into what we assumed was their holt in a jumble of massive boulders. It was an amazing, breathtaking display of around 20 minutes duration.

We continued round towards Loch Scridain before our next adrenaline surge which was to find an adult White-tailed eagle in its nest. We got good views through the telescope before, after about 15 minutes, it flew off and was joined by another adult and they both moved off south. The size of these massive birds was illustrated by a tiny little bird which was 'buzzing' one of the eagles. Then we realised the tiny little bird was a Common Buzzard. The eagle clearly demanded most of our attention, but it was good to see a few Siskins, Eurasian Goldfinches and hear Redpolls all in the vicinity.

Around to the south side of Scridain we found yet another Otter having a good wash and brush up on the beach before making its leisurely way into the water to commence fishing. We watched it for a while before wandering down the road where Valerian, Purple Loosestrife and nettles with Peacock caterpillars lined the verges. Another White-tailed Eagle appeared high overhead and, as it was heading in the general direction of the nest site, we wondered if it could be one the pair we'd seen earlier.

It was time to start heading back when the harsh call of a Peregrine made us look up and there was the bird being closely pursued by an indignant female Hen Harrier. We thought we'd seen that the Peregrine was carrying something and later, examining Roland's superb photographs, we saw the lifeless form of a young Oystercatcher dangling from the talons.

Our route home took us through the magnificent Glen More with amazing views whichever way we looked. A very dramatic drive and a spectacular way to end another brilliant day.

Day 4 Monday 26th June

We'd anticipated a wet day but the Gods smiled on us and we had splendid, dry sunny weather. This was just as well as we were off to the Treshnish Isles and Staffa today.

Initially, we visited the south side of Loch Na Keal where we once again found a distant White-tailed Eagle perched on a small, low island in the loch. Sheltering from the wind, we watched it through the telescope as the tide rose to its claws and it decided enough was enough and flew low across the loch.

We then went to the head of the loch and scanned around to see what we could find. What we did find was another White-tailed Eagle soaring over the nearby hills, its white tail shining in the sun.

We continued along the north shore of Loch Na Keal where a Spotted Flycatcher flipped over the road in front of us then perched in a tree and, later, a Common Whitethroat sang from a low bush right next to our bus.

At the Ulva Ferry terminal we clambered upon boat and headed off to sail round the north part of Ulva. As we left, a male Hen Harrier floated over the nearby peninsular giving tantalising views. Less tantalising were the views of two White-tailed Eagles we found perched majestically on low cliffs and gazing down at us with stunning indifference.

We landed on Lunga around 13.00 and spent the next two hours on this marvellous place in fantastic weather. Atlantic Puffins lined the low cliffs with immaculately smart Razorbills alongside them. We were all transfixed by the antics of both these auks going about their daily tasks only a few feet away from us.

Tearing ourselves away from this theatre, some of us headed further along the path to see Northern Fulmars, with their stiff-winged flight, zoom into their nest sites before energetically pair bonding, calling, gaping and head shaking. Along the path bottle-green Shags, hiding amongst the rocks, glared at us with their startling bright green eyes and shook their beaks warningly at us as we passed their nests. More Atlantic Puffins and Razorbills entertained us as we made our way along the path until, turning a corner, we came across a massive number of nesting Guillemots. The sight, sound and smell of this colony was mesmerising, and one could sit and watch this constant motion for hours. A pair of Bonxies were patrolling the cliffs and the Razorbills and Puffins disappeared from sight as these big predators zoomed low over their nesting sites.

We dragged ourselves reluctantly from Lunga and sailed to our next stop – the geologically astonishing island of Staffa. Some made the walk along the low path into Fingal's Cave while others walked onto the top to find a couple of Common Snipe, Rock Pipits, more Bonxies, a small flock of Twite and some beautiful Common Blues among the wild flowers.

The boat negotiated the tricky mooring approach at Staffa, we hopped on and headed back to the Ulva ferry, arriving to see a female Hen Harrier where we'd previously seen the male.

Then it was back to the hotel for another delicious meal, the list (of course) and an early night.

Day 5

Tuesday 27th June

Unfortunately, our luck with the weather ran out today with steady rain from the moment we woke up.

After breakfast we decided to have a look at the north part of Mull and set out on the road to Dervaig.

We paused at the Mishnish Lochs and through the rain found a pair of Little Grebes diving among the splendid yellow water lilies as well as three young Mallard ducklings which scuttled away across the water as they took fright at something we didn't see.

We visited the splendid hide at Loch Torr where they'd obviously been some good sightings recently. The low cloud and rain were not the best for any raptors but we watched Sand Martins zipping across the loch surface hawking for insects. A beautiful male Eurasian Siskin flew close to the hide in front of us and landed in a low Birch sapling. The omnipresent Common Sandpiper was here too as were plentiful Grey Herons.

We left the hide and drove to Calgary Bay but the rain militated against a walk so we retraced our wheel tracks to the Old Byre Heritage Centre to have some tea, coffee and, of course.....cake.

On the way back we once again struck lucky with yet another adult White-tailed Eagle drifting over a ridge in front of us.

With the rain still very heavy we decided that this was the opportunity to spend some time in Tobermory and accordingly we returned and wandered around its delights including the Whale and Dolphin Society, Mull Museum, Aquarium, Arts and Crafts shops and distillery.

The rain was due to cease later that evening, so we decided to take advantage of the long evenings, have an early dinner and head out around 19.20.

It was still wet as we headed back out again going north and west, through Dervaig and turning up the narrow road to Croig where we parked up and walked, in the now dry weather, along the track to the sea.

It was a beautiful walk with many Meadow Pipits flitting to and fro, joined by small numbers of Twite which circled around us occasionally landing on the telegraph wires long enough for quick views through the telescope. Common Linnets were present too, their bright red chests evident even in the less than perfect light. Grey Herons fished in the shallows and the usual gulls circled around tantalisingly pretending to be something a little more interesting. Common Kestrels appeared from a low cliff and chased each other around before splitting up and getting on with the job of hovering and looking for voles.

Reaching the coast there was a lovely small sandy bay where five Ringed Plovers called and chased each other, heads down, across the sandy dunes.

The mist was coming in again, so we left this beautiful, peaceful spot and drove through the light rain back to Tobermory and our comfortable hotel.

Day 6

Wednesday 28th June

Today dawned a great deal brighter than the previous day as we made our way down to Tobermory Harbour for our second boat trip – this time with Sea Life Mull.

We left at 09.30 with Moon Jellies and Lion's Mane in the waters around us and almost immediately saw the distinctive rolling form of a Harbour Porpoise. We cut the engines and waited and watched as we saw the animal continue to just appear before diving down again and continue with its remorseless search for food.

Leaving the shelter of the harbour, the seas became a little more lumpy and many of the people on the upper deck moved down below leaving only our group and a handful of others to gaze out for the marine life. Northern Gannets appeared and we later saw some of these magnificent birds plunging into the sea, Black-legged Kittiwakes flew elegantly by occasionally twisting and turning to snatch a morsel from the sea's surface. Common Guillemots, Razorbills and Atlantic Puffins were all appearing near us and some on the boat also had a brief glimpse of a couple of tiny Storm Petrels. It was the Manx Shearwaters that particularly caught our attention though as we sailed through rafts of these incredible birds and had them swirling around near us.

Wonderful though these seabirds were, we had bigger fry in mind and eventually, as we were off the east coast of Coll, a Minke Whale was sighted. Initially we had brief and distant views but gradually it got closer before disappearing and then emerging again right next to the boat in a great whoosh of exhaling air. It was a fantastic experience. We were still talking about it as we turned back and sailed through more Manx Shearwaters and other seabirds towards Tobermory. More Harbour Porpoises awaited us, and we saw a pod of three and then another singleton as we rounded the lighthouse and moored up.

The sun was well and truly out now so we decided to try our luck along the Calgary road again, this time going to the Caliach area. Common Buzzards seemed to be the bird of the day and we found these birds all over this afternoon. There were plenty of Northern Wheatears bounding along the sides of the road in front of us and the occasional Eurasian Curlew called from the shoreline.

Our next stop was the beautiful Calgary Bay where we strolled along the white, shell sands in the sun doing a bit of casual beachcombing and finding some lovely seaweeds, Cockles, Razorshells and shore crabs – the latter sadly deceased.

We'd heard that Short-eared Owls had been seen on the road passed Calgary, so we drove along this very wild and remote track but sadly no owls were around. There were, of course, plenty of Common Buzzards as well as the now very familiar Meadow Pipits, Common Stonechats and Northern Wheatears. We heard Blackcaps and Common Whitethroat singing from the small areas of woodland and scrub and a Common Snipe perched out on a wall to give good views.

We called in at the Torr Hide in the hope that the good weather would lure some raptors out but all we found were the usual Sand Martins and, of course, a Common Buzzard.

It was time to return to our hotel now to do the list and prepare for yet more good and very plentiful food.

Day 7

Thursday 29th June

Sadly, we had to leave today and, dodging the showers, some had a pre-breakfast wander down to the harbour to seek out the Edward the VIIIth post box.

After breakfast we made our way to the FC hide near the Lochaline Ferry and looked out across the Sound to the mainland beyond. A Eurasian Curlew probed about in the seaweed, while Grey Herons stood as if made of stone at the edge of small pools. Willow Warblers, Wrens and Blue Tits were in the trees surrounding the hide as we left and made the short journey to the local golf club.

Here there were five Red-breasted Mergansers just offshore and a colony of bickering Common Terns on a low rocky outcrop.

The rain came as we arrived at the ferry terminal, and we were soon on board and making our way on the short trip to Oban.

A Great Cormorant flew across our bows and both Arctic and Common terns dipped for fish in the harbour.

We looked in vain for any cetaceans and, when we landed, drove steadily, via a brief lunch break at Inverary, to Glasgow.

We arrived without incident and said a fond farewell to some at the airport and to others at Paisley Gilmour Street - a five-minute ride to Glasgow Central.

It had been a fabulous trip with some great wildlife sightings and a lot of laughs. My thanks to all the group for being such wonderful travelling companions.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

					June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Canada Goose	Branta canadensis		✓	✓		✓		
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor		2	2	2			
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna			6		5	2	
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓	\checkmark	✓	\checkmark
Common Eider	Somateria mollissima		✓	2	✓		3	
Common Merganser	Mergus merganser		4					
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator		2	6				6
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		✓			Н		
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis				✓			
Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus				50		100+	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis					2		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	1	10	√	✓	√	✓	√
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	4	12	√			√	✓
European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis	12	√	√	√		√	√
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	2	2					1
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos		2					
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		1	1	2			
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla			3	4	1		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		4	6	√	1	15	√
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	2	√	√	· ✓	√	√	
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		4	6		•	1	•
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula					5		
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		2	1	2		1	
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata		6	6	6	1	4	1
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		6					
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		√	√	√	√	2	√
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla		6		√	•	√	•
Mew Gull	Larus canus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	√	√	√	√	√	√	
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	√	√	· ·	•	•		
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	V	40		√	1	√	
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea	2			V			
Great Skua	Stercorarius skua				4			-
Common Murre	Uria aalge				1000'		√	
Razorbill	Alca torda		1		s √		√	
Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle	10	1	4	12		,	√
Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica				100's		/	
Rock Dove	Columba livia			40		20	20	1
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	√	√	1		-	-	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	,	√	2	√	4	4	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		1	<u> </u>	V	3	2	
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		<u>'</u>	1			_	
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius			1				1
Rook	Corvus frugilegus	√		'				
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	✓ ✓	√	√	√	√	√	<u>√</u>

Common name		June 2023							
	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax			12	2		12		
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		Н	√				Н	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		1					2	
Great Tit	Parus major					1	2		
Common Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		1						
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		1	Н	1	1	Н	Н	
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia		√		1	15	20		
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	√	√	√			2		
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	Н	√	Н	Н	Н	Н	Н	
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			Н	Н		Н	Н	
Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis		Н		1		Н		
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus			1					
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		√	Н	1	√	Н	Н	
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		√	✓	√	√	√	√	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		√	✓	√	√	√	√	
Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata				1				
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		4		1	2	2	1	
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra		1	1					
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		√	√	√	1	6		
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		√	✓	√	√	√		
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	√	√	✓	√	√	√	√	
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		1		1				
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	√	√	✓	√	√	√	√	
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus			2	12				
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula						1		
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		✓			Н	Н		
Twite	Linaria flavirostris			1	6	4			
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina					2			
Common Redpoll	Acanthis flammea		6	Н					
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		6	✓		Н	1		
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		8	√	√	1	2		

Mammals

Common name				June 2023				
	Scientific name 23	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus				1	√		√
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus			√	√		√	
Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	12	8	√	√		√	√
European Otter	Lutra lutra		1	3				
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus		20	√	√	1	1	4
Fallow Deer	Dama dama			2	1			
Minke Whale	Balaenoptera acutorostrata						1	
Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena						5	
Short-tailed Field Vole	Microtus agrestis	1						

		June 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
Common Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pipistrellus	1							

Others

Common name		June 2023								
	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29		
Moon Jelly	Aurelia aurita				√		√			
Lion's Mane	Cyanea capillat		√				√			
Beadlet Anemone	Actinia equina				√					
Golden Ringed Dragonfly	Cordulegaster boltonii		1							
Keeled Skimmer	Orthetrum coerulescens		2							
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		√							
Peacock (caterpillar)	Inachis io			√			√			
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina			√			√			
Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus				√					
Small White	Pieris rapae			√	√					
Six-spot Burnet Moth	Zygaena filipendulae			√	√					
Cinnabar Moth (caterpillar)	Tyria jacobaeae							1		
Fragrant Orchid	Gymnadenia conopsea					√				
Heath Spotted Orchid	Dactylorhiza maculata		√	√	√		√			
Bog Asphodel	Narthecium ossifragum		√	√			√			
Butterwort	Pinguicula vulgaris						√			