

Wildlife of North & South Uist – The Outer Hebrides

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 20th May 2023

Tour report by Stewart Woolley



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Tour participants: Stewart Woolley (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients.

Summary

Day 1 13/05/23

Transit day to North Uist. White-tailed and Golden Eagles on Skye, seabirds during ferry crossing. Red-throated Divers, Arctic Skua, 2 Hen Harrier and 2 Short-eared Owls on Uist.

Day2 14/05/23

Early morning trip out, Short-eared Owl, 3 Red-throated Diver, Cuckoo and Hen Harrier before breakfast; south to Benbecula, Great Northern Diver, Otter, Porpoise, Red-necked Phalarope and drumming Snipe. A further 3 Great Northern Diver later with 2 more White-tailed Eagles and another Otter.

Day 3 15/05/23

6x Red-throated diver, Red Deer, Raven, Arctic Tern and Short-eared Owl before breakfast. A trip to Balranald RSPB reserve, 6 Corncrake with excellent views had by all, Dotterel, 2 more Short-eared Owls, Great Northern Diver and huge numbers of waders. A lovely 3km walk at Runair. White-tailed Eagle at Hosta with another 2 calling Corncrake.

Day 4 16/05/23

Walk from hotel pre breakfast, Hen Harrier, Red-throated Diver, and Red-breasted Mergansers. A visit to the island of Berneray exploring the Borve Machair, Corncrake, Short-eared Owl, Little Terns, Scaup, Great Northern Diver plus myriad waders, lunch in the island bistro with gentle walks.

Day 5 17/05/23

Black-throated Diver x4, Red-throated Diver, Otter x2, White-tailed Eagle, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier all before breakfast! North Uist: Short-eared Owl, Raven, Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle x2, Arctic Skua, Corncrake all before heavy rain. Afternoon visit to Museum and arts centre in Lochmaddy.

Day 6 18/05/23

A walk around a local woodland before breakfast, South Uist, Corncrake x2, giving superb views, Great Northern Diver plus more Corncrakes at Aird, a visit to RSPB Loch Druidibeag, Red-throated Divers x3, Short-eared Owl, boat trip in afternoon from Grimsay, Red-throated Diver x2, Black-throated Diver, x2, White-tailed Eagle x2 giving incredible close views, Peregrine, deer and seals.

Day 7 19/05/23

A drive to Baleshare before breakfast, 6x Short-eared Owl! Corncrake, Sanderling, Snipe and too many wader chicks to count! After breakfast, again to South Uist, Loch Aineort, Red-throated Diver, 3x Short-eared Owl, Golden Eagle, Grey Herons and Cuckoo. A trip to Ardvule point for a walk and seabirds, an exploration of the single-track lanes of the west side of South Uist with gentle walks.

Day 8 20/05/23

Return to mainland and end of tour, alternative route back through Strathcarron, Strath Bran taking in Highland scenery.

Day 1

Saturday 13th May

Pickups around Inverness, drive to Uig ferry terminal on Skye, voyage to North Uist. Check in followed by short excursion locally, before evening meal.

Our week began with guest pickups around the busy city of Inverness, the gateway to the Highlands, and then on toward Uig on the Isle of Skye. Our route from Inverness took us south along the north shore of Loch Ness. Just out of the city, close to Dochgarroch, we were pleased to see a Red Kite over roadside fields. As in other parts of the country, this species seems to be doing well in areas with low levels of persecution. Carrying on, we reached Drumnadrochit and the iconic (and much photographed) Urquhart castle, once one of Scotland's largest. This magnificent landmark saw, during its five hundred years of use, some of Scotland's most significant exchanges during the Wars of Independence. Ownership frequently changed hands, often when the Macdonalds, lords of the isles, paid a visit and plundered both the castle and everything else in the glen. Interestingly, during their raids, when they cleaned the place out, one of the items they especially coveted were door locks: these were complex to make, and it was far easier to take the fancy ones from the castle!

Heading on south we turned off the A82 at Invermoriston and set off west. The scenery soon changes here, and the road follows the gently meandering River Moriston and its old birch woodlands. We could hear, even through the closed windows of the minibus, many Willow Warblers singing as we drove. The steep sided glen is bordered by some huge forests, notably, Inchcardoch (approx. 50km²), Inverwick (20km²) and the massive Dundreggan (approx. 80km², including open hill).

Once out of Glen Moriston we reached the 11km long Loch Cluanie, famous for its hidden village. A huge hydroelectric dam was built here in 1957, and the new loch soon engulfed everything in the glen. Occasionally, when water levels are very low, some of the farms and parts of the old road to the isles can be seen.

Continuing north-west we entered Glen Shiel and were soon looking up at the rugged (and I think magnificent) Five Sisters of Kintail, a ridgeline of high peaks, three of which are Munroes. These gained their status, not through millions of years of geological activity, but courtesy of a local farmer. Said farmer had seven daughters, and one night, after a wild storm, a boat washed ashore on Loch Duich two handsome young men from Ireland, who stumbled onto dry land, and in true highland fashion, were given shelter by the farmer. The lads stayed on, and after a while they fell in love with the two youngest daughters, and eventually wanted to marry them in Ireland.

This incensed the older daughters, who thought they should be married first, but the boys said they had five strong and wealthy brothers back home who would come to marry them. The girls accepted the deal and waited, and waited, and waited for years. But no husbands appeared. The farmer sought counsel from a local wizard, who said there *were* no brothers, and that, if the farmer wanted his daughters to remain beautiful and to be admired by others, that they should stand on the shore of the loch. They did this and were turned into the stunning mountains we see today. None of your scientific, geological nonsense round here thank you!

As you will all know, Scotland has its fair share of castles, and a few of them are well known enough to even appear of biscuit tins! One of these soon came into view as we reached the top of Loch Duich (pronounced ‘doyk’) and the start of Loch Alsh. Eilean Donan castle sits on a small island overlooking the two sea lochs and offers visitors today that perfect “Scottish image”: the sea, the mountains, the history and atmosphere. Here’s another short history lesson! The castle was originally built by the lords of the isles to protect the lands of Kintail from marauding Vikings. This was largely successful: the lords oversaw the “Kingdom of the Sea” and would go to any lengths to defend it. Over the centuries, the castle contracted in size, probably due to the number of men available to defend it, and it is thought that it was at its largest when newly built. It was in near-constant use for much of its early life and eventually became a powder battery for the Spanish who were in the area in support of the Jacobites. In 1719, the English got word of this and sent three heavily armed frigates, the Flamborough, the Worcester and the Enterprise to deal with matters. The 46 Spanish soldiers who were in residence stood no chance, and the 346 barrels of black powder stored there were used to blow the castle up. The ruins lay, untouched, for two hundred or so years, until reconstruction began in 1911. Today’s castle bears little resemblance to what came before, but a good job was done nevertheless and it’s a fabulous place to visit.

Soon reaching Kyle of Lochalsh, we crossed over the somewhat controversial Skye bridge and onto the misty isle. The drive across Skye saw some lovely bright conditions. Raven and Hooded Crow were seen fairly regularly as we approached Uig, with yet more Willow Warblers being heard. Arriving at the ferry terminal in good time, we grabbed a bite to eat at the slightly disorganised café and spent a little time wandering to a nearby meadow that has, in the past, held Corncrake. Today we were not so lucky, with singing Sedge Warbler and a lovely display of Northern Marsh Orchids being the highlights. Back at the bus, with the scope set up, a scan of the surrounding ridgelines proved worthwhile, as we very quickly picked up on the obvious features of an adult White-tailed Eagle, soon followed by a second. As if this was not enough, a few minutes later, the slimmer, longer tailed form of an accompanying Golden Eagle added to the excitement!

Extensive works have been ongoing at Uig for some time and much of the once productive, rocky shoreline is now covered in concrete for the new ferry infrastructure. However, as we boarded the MV Clansman and got settled in on the outer viewing deck, we soon found a smart Black Guillemot and a couple of Razorbills amongst the moored boats in the bay.

The 1 hr 45 minute crossing to Lochmaddy on North Uist was pretty quiet birdwise. The flat calm conditions were lovely for those who don’t travel well, but less than perfect for really good sea-birding, Plenty of small groups of auks were seen, with Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin all noted. A few of the group saw Harbour Porpoise along the way, typically submerging before everyone could get on to them. Several small frenetic feeding flocks of Arctic Terns picked fry from the surface as we passed, and just a single dark Arctic Skua was seen. Looking out north from the starboard side of the ship we could see, in the far distance, the rugged shape of Harris and Lewis, with

the fabulous Shiant Islands a little closer. All too soon we entered Lochmaddy Bay. The weather had closed in slightly, with a little light drizzle and mist as we approached the ferry slip.

Disembarking and finally setting foot on the Uists, we headed south-west for the short drive to our hotel, Langass Lodge. The landscape of North Uist is sculpted by wind and water, and the open section of moorland between the village and our hotel gives a really good feel for the make-up of this amazing place. We very slowly made our way along the now defunct old main road, which runs parallel to the new road. This gave us a great opportunity to scan across the many lochans and areas of damp moorland. We were soon rewarded with our first divers of the trip, when two Red-throated Divers flew over the road and away to a distant pool. As we stood and drank in the atmosphere, a pair of Stonechat flicked between heather sprigs and a stunning male Wheatear flashed his white rump as he leapfrogged stone to stone. A little further along the track, a pair of Arctic Skuas headed east over the moorland. These are such a bird of this habitat at this time of year, and I will never tire of seeing them on their breeding territories.

Once at Langass, we checked in, had a little time to get unpacked, and then got straight to it, out in the bus for a short, luggage-free excursion before dinner. We had literally driven 200m when, alongside the bus and no more than 50m away, flew a male Hen Harrier, his piercing yellow eyes burning a hole in the bus as he passed. What a start!

We really couldn't have asked for a better way to begin our time on North Uist, but it came not a minute later. A female Hen Harrier (ringtail) quietly drifted to the left of the bus over some wet grassland: she very slowly quartered the area in search of food giving us all good long views. Unbelievably, she was closely followed by a cracking, very pale, Short-eared Owl! This bird was followed by a second just down the road a few minutes later; a much darker-looking bird.

As we didn't have masses of time, we took a drive along the south side of Loch Euphort. Tufted Duck and Greylag Geese, along with a pair of Mute Swan, were on Loch Chlachain as we turned off the main road. Euphort is a fairly long sea loch and we soon began to encounter species typical of this habitat. A very elegant Greenshank waded purposefully, with several Redshank appearing slightly more random in their directions! Shelduck, along with a pair of Teal and three Red-breasted Mergansers were seen close to the bus. A little way along the road we saw our first Red Deer of the trip. The Uist reds are special: they are the 'purest-blooded' Reds anywhere in the UK, free of Sika and Wapiti traits. Individuals are a little smaller than other mainland populations and a far cry from the monsters that are held in ornamental parklands in England. Keeping an eye on the time, we were very happy with our start and slowly made our way back to the hotel, picking up a few Lapwing and more Wheatear along the way. We sat down to a fabulous dinner and maybe the odd G&T, looking down the length of Loch Langass to the dramatic peak of Eaval, the highest point of North Uist. Roll on tomorrow!

Day 2

Sunday 14th May

Exploring Benbecula and minor roads along east side, habitat ranging from exposed Atlantic beaches to sheltered sea lochs and freshwater lochans.

As is commonplace on many of our tours, some of the group rose early for our daily pre-breakfast trip out at 06.00: never compulsory, but more often than not well worth the effort! Yesterday's bright weather had given way

to something a little more typically “Hebridean,” with cloud cover and a cool start. This was to change later in the day and cheer up a good bit.

We set off back towards Lochmaddy and then drove a few kilometers north, turning off along the single track Loch Portain road. Our route took us past several derelict crofts, a reminder of busier times in the past. A pair of Wigeon was noted at Aileodar, along with Stonechat and Wheatear. A large number of Mute Swans were on Loch a Duin as we very slowly trundled eastwards. Just a short way along the road, front seaters picked up on a cracking Short-eared Owl just ahead of us, and eventually we all got great views of the bird sat on a grassy tussock not far from the bus. The waters of Loch Dheor held upwards of 25 Shelduck and a decent showing of Red-breasted Merganser, as well as many Greylags, these being on just about every pool and loch on the islands. The low cloud obscured our view of a nearby ridge towards the road end, which was frustrating as Golden Eagle was hoped for here. With an eye on the time, we gradually retraced our steps. The trip back to the hotel gave us yet another Short-eared Owl, a different bird to the earlier one, and at least three Red-throated Divers. Another two divers overhead were probably Black-throated, but Stewart didn’t quite see enough of them to be certain. The short lane to the hotel gave us another super showing of “our” male Hen Harrier, and two Cuckoos called from telephone wires along the road. The number of Cuckoos in the far north-west often surprises visitors, and great views can often be had. I once saw 17 together in one tree at Inchnadamph, not far from Ullapool!

What a start to our day. We settled in for a hearty breakfast, with the added bonus of clearing skies to the east. As we ate, we watched a Willow Warbler picking insects from a Sycamore in the hotel garden, and a Hebridean song thrush foraged on the lawn. This form of thrush is fairly distinctive compared to its mainland cousin, being a little larger, a good bit darker and more boldly marked on the breast.

With a lovely relaxed and very good breakfast “dealt with”, we set off south towards Benbecula. Just 3km from the hotel, an adult White-tailed Eagle flew south over the road junction at Clachan, and our third Short-eared Owl of the day showed well at Carinish. These islands are just the best! The drive down to Benbecula takes around 15 minutes, and gave us our first views of the wild, maritime sculpted west side of the islands. This landscape is wind- and sand-blown; hardy shrubs grow at a 45-degree angle; and as for trees, you can forget them! Heading south, we crossed the North Ford causeway, which links North Uist to Grimsay and Benbecula. It was opened by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1960. Before then, small boats crossed at high tide and the 7km were covered by foot at low tide. This was a risky game, as there is just a two-hour window in which to make the trip. Back then, several local men were employed as low tide guides to help folk cross with goods. Our journey today took just a few minutes thankfully, but the dynamic of the islands must have been very different back then.

Reaching Benbecula, we made for the main settlement of Ballivanich (Baile Mhanaich). Here we hopped out of the bus and had a scan across the bay looking north, and were immediately rewarded with, just in front of us, three Great Northern Divers fished in the shallow water, with a gorgeous summer plumaged adult showing well in great light. As we were watching them, Stewart picked up a movement: a wake in the water, and there was an Otter! It plied its trade in the shallows, occasionally coming ashore on the tiny island of Calla Geodha: we couldn’t have been happier! Unless, for instance, had two Harbour Porpoises cruised in just below our position and lingered, allowing us to see them in the gin clear water. Well, if you like!

The Otter eventually moved off towards the far side of the bay, and we reluctantly tore ourselves away too. We stocked up with lunch items from the excellent Maclennans supermarket, and drove a few kilometers south to

Loch Mor. This is a superb site: very low lying, with areas of open water, tiny sheltered bays filled with Mareestail and Marsh Marigold. We de-bussed and set up the scope. At the far side of the loch, Short-eared Owl #4 quartered the rank grasslands, and we were treated to our first drumming Snipe of the trip: such an evocative sound of this habitat. Some of the tiny, grassy islands held both Common and Arctic Terns, and a few Shoveler up-ended in the margins. Right at the back of the loch, a pair of Gadwall added to our tally and then Stewart locked on to a tiny shape working through the Mareestail close in. Bingo: a fabulous female Red-necked Phalarope! What a stunner, here, right at the extreme southern edge of their breeding range, a bird the size of a sparrow, which overwinters off the coast of Ecuador. Red-necked Phalaropes are unusual in being polyandrous, the female mating with several males: this explains why her summer plumage is so much brighter than the males'. Once she has laid the eggs, he is then tasked with incubating them. The chicks are virtually independent from the off, with the male only providing shelter during foul weather.

We really were having a superb first full day on the islands. To catch our breath a little, we headed back to the aptly-named "Stinky Bay" for lunch. On a calm day, the aromas from the mountains of washed-up seaweed here can be a little overpowering, but with a stiff breeze today, we enjoyed the views, a cup of coffee and the comings and goings of the many hundreds of mixed waders picking through the weed. Sanderling, Dunlin, Turnstone and a few Common Ringed Plovers joined the mix. Offshore, two more Great Northern Divers fished, diving for extended periods and eventually resurfacing a hundred meters or so from where they submerged. We'd taken lunch in the bus due to the strong westerly wind, and decided we'd head for a little shelter in the afternoon.

Moving south a short distance, we had a very quick look over the well named Coot Loch, and duly added Coot to the list: this is one of only a few sites on the islands where one can all but guarantee seeing the species. The loch also held more Gadwall pairs and at least three Little Grebes too.

Crossing over the main road, we once again took to the single-track lanes, passing through Haclait and onwards to Port Pheadair (Peter Port). This is a lovely quiet spot, with just a few work boats and fishing equipment at the road's end. In much calmer conditions we set up the scopes and had a really thorough scan across the bay and its tiny rocky islands. Here we very quickly found another three Great Northern Divers, with one smart bird very close in giving the photographers a chance at a shot. At the far side of the bay, an odd-looking lump on a grassy island soon turned into an adult White-tailed Eagle, and a short time later Susan picked out another a little further away on an outcrop. Birding from the top drawer! As if our boots were not full enough already, a slinky dog Otter hauled out through a kelp bed and gave us all good scope views. The Outer Hebrides are a superb place to see Otter, and due to the climate here, with no 'real' winter, they breed all year round. So there is a good chance of bumping into a female with pups at any time.

The drive back towards the main road saw more Wheatears, the stunning grey backed males so typically dapper of the chat family. Our journey back towards North Uist saw us drop in to Loch Mor once again for another look at the incredible phalaropes, before crossing the causeways again onto Uist. With a little time in hand, we parked up at Carinish and took a stroll to Teampull na Trionaid (Trinity Temple). This is a ruin of a thirteenth-century Augustinian nunnery and place of education, and is possibly the site of Scotland's oldest university. The dense Flag Iris and nettle beds surrounding the ruins have held Corncrake in the past, but not today sadly. We settled for the sound of the many singing Skylark and drumming Snipe as we looked around before slowly wandering back to the bus. We'd had a great day: a huge variety of birds had been seen and many habitats explored. We returned to the hotel in good time, met at the bar for the daily log, and settled in for another tasty meal.

Day 3

Monday 15th May

Exploring the Western side of North Uist. Taking in RSPB Balranald in search of waders etc.

Early starters were met with a lovely bright, if a little breezy day with 6°C showing on the bus. We opted to stay local this morning, heading up to Lochmaddy for a look around the village. The old road there once again was well worth a look from. Several small groups of Red Deer were surprisingly hard to make out against the browns of the heather, but the very vocal local Ravens gave themselves up easily. Stonechat seemed to be present wherever we stopped the minibus. Overhead, Stewart heard the distinctive flight call of Red-throated Diver. The call is very Greylag Goose like, a guttural “Gug,Gug,Gug,Gug”. The advantage of hearing this is that there is only one place to look: up! They only make this sound in flight. Our sky scanning eventually gave us six birds in three pairs, making wide arcs over the moorland lochs. Remember the flight profile? Short feet, head down, bill up! Slightly sad I know, but for anyone with any aviation knowledge, a Red-throat in flight reminds me of a Vickers Victor: look it up, you’ll see! The village was pretty quiet birdwise: a pair of Tufted Duck on a small pool, a few Linnet, Greenfinch, Song Thrush and Pied Wagtails were noted. We went for a short stroll down towards the very rickety suspension bridge which connects Lochmaddy to Sponish. It has been ‘officially’ closed for years, but locals are welcome to take the risk of crossing, and keep removing the safety barriers: not for me!

Robin and Willow Warbler quietly sang from nearby scrub while a pathside Wren blasted out its morning greeting. As we’d spent quite a while with the divers, we were getting short of time, so we slowly headed back for breakfast, stopping only for wonderful close views of another Short-eared Owl just outside the village.

After breakfast, we headed west to explore the tracks and paths around Paible and Balranald. Turning right at Clachan, we soon found a Short-eared Owl quartering roadside crofts, with another just opposite the Bayhead shop where we stocked up with lunch items. The tiny freshwater loch at Bayhead held well over 100 Great Black-backed Gulls, preening and day roosting. It’s a wonder any wader chicks survive with all these apex predators around! Our first birding stop was at Loch Sandaragh (Sandaray) hoping to find Ruff in their summer splendour. Sadly, none had been reported there so far this year, but a scan over the loch saw lots of Redshank, Oystercatcher and two Greenshank.

We carried on and drove the short distance to the road that leads to Balranald RSPB reserve. Just as we turned off the main road, we wound down the windows and heard the distinctive “crex, crex” call of a Corncrake. Excitement grew in the bus as this was one of the key species we really hoped to connect with whilst in the Hebrides. They are notoriously difficult to see, but we had an advantage in that the spring this year was late, and the vegetation was still largely quite short. We sat in the van and waited, and there it was, just twenty feet or so away, in the open, calling loudly. The vibrating rasp could almost be felt, not just heard! The bird then slowly made its way towards us and eventually disappeared from view, right alongside the van. Some in the back were able to twist around enough to see it walking along the roadside behind the van: what a treat! Some in the van had not had great views as they’d unfortunately been on the wrong side, but they needn’t have worried since just a short while later, another obliging male stood out in the open and gave us all great views. Breathe easy, guide! Corncrake is the one bird everyone wants to see, and it’s always a relief to connect early on! As we very slowly moved on, a swan on Loch nam Feithan stood out as different, showing a very straight neck stained a deep peaty brown, something that Mutes almost never have. This smart Whooper Swan allowed for some nice photos and was a good find. A few birds do over-summer out here, but in very small numbers.

Reaching the reserve, we stopped at the unmanned visitor centre briefly, before driving along the sand track to park. Part way along the track, we hopped out for a scan across a cultivated field, where a Dotterel had been reported earlier in the week. The field held dozens of Dunlin and Ringed Plovers, and then, success! A smart adult male Dotterel. These are a joy to see, and even more so as we didn't need to climb to the top of Cairngorm to see it!

Reaching the end of the track, the plan was to go for a decent leg stretch as we'd been in the van quite a bit, and we opted to take a slightly early lunch, which we took sat on the grass overlooking the expanse of white sand and the crystal-clear waters ahead. Out in the bay a single Great Northern Diver fished and small family parties of Common Eiders picked around the rocks, the ducklings being very well camouflaged against the kelp. Further out, three Arctic Skuas powered North and there was a constant coming and going of Arctic Terns back and forth to the ternery just behind us.

We really had the weather on our side now: bright sunshine, and quite warm in sheltered spots, it would have been all too easy to get over-comfortable, but there was birding to be done! We set off for a roughly 3km walk clockwise around Aird an Runair, the westernmost promontory of North Uist. This site, given a hard westerly gale, is *the* spot for observing the northerly migration of skuas in the UK: Arctic, Pomarine, and the much sought after Long-tailed Skua can all be seen close in, but today's breeze promised little in the way of good skua action. We were happy enough to watch the masses of waders picking through the weed and were pleased to pick out a handful of Purple Sandpipers in the mix.

As we walked, another Corncrake was heard rasping by the small lochan but was buried in deep waterside vegetation, giving zero chance of a view. The walk around the point here takes about three hours, including many birding stops, and we strolled along chatting and thoroughly enjoying the bracing air and bright sun. Ravens cartwheeled above us as we passed the ternery and we then watched something Stewart was particularly pleased to show everyone: a Dunlin song-fighting. This is something the group had not seen or heard before. Dunlin rise up, singing continuously, a delicate, bell-like, metallic, tingling song, then hang in the air much like a Skylark, before slowly parachuting down, just like a Tree Pipit. For me, it's these things that give me the biggest buzz as a guide, showing people things they have not seen before. A bird doesn't need to be rare to be a thrill!

We carried on out to the trig point, and with a little bit of a squint in the haze, we could just about make out the distant shape of St Kilda, some 65km away, with the high peak of Boreray being most obvious. As we walked, Wheatear and Rock Pipit flicked along the path, more pairs of Dunlin displayed and the song of Skylark filled the air. Great lungfuls of this fresh Atlantic air and the sounds of nature must be good for one's health!

As we completed our circuit, a few Sand Martins worked a steep sandy bank and a Corn Bunting was heard calling from the shell sand farmland. With some slightly weary legs, we were glad of a seat in the bus before heading back for our next stop. Just at the top of the link road, close to the visitor centre we were treated to great views of a further two Corncrakes in a roadside field, one of which stood in the open for a long time, allowing the scope to be set up too. Another was seen a little further along the road bringing our Balranald total to at least six: quite the haul! Drumming Snipe were noted as we left as well. Just a few kilometers north, at Hosta, a dead-end rough road rises to the St Kilda viewpoint, and at the foot of this road lies Loch Eubhal. The surrounding vegetation is another good spot for Corncrakes, with two more added here! As we navigated the potholes, several Wheatear flicked along the posts before we reached the viewpoint. As we looked out, an adult White-tailed Eagle rose above a

nearby ridgeline before drifting off north-east. We were soon to do the same, as we felt we'd really had a super day, and were ready now for a little downtime before dinner. The drive back to the hotel saw us add a further Short-eared Owl to our ever growing tally. Dinner was once again well-received, the local seafood being a particular highlight for some!

Day 4

Tuesday 16th May

This morning we were met with a grey and pretty damp sky, but the forecast was better for later on. We walked south-east from the hotel passing the lush gardens and onwards towards Loch Langass. The conifer plantation here is always worth a look and has held some good birds in the past (Bee-eater recently): Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff and Cuckoo all sang as we walked past, along with a Chaffinch. I mention this because their status out here is very different from the mainland, being much more localised. We began to climb up the slopes of Ben Langass and made our way to Pobull Fhinn (Finns' people stone circle). Various legends are attached to this site, but Irish hero, Finn Macool (or Fingal as he's better known: he has a fancy, echoey cave named after him!) is the man behind the stories. What we do know for sure is that it dates back to circa 3000BCE, and is by far the best-preserved stone circle in the Uists, indeed in the southern Hebrides as a whole. From our elevated position we looked across the loch and saw a small herd of Red Deer hinds, maybe a kilometer or so away. They were on to us immediately and began to move off. Having spent a huge amount of time with Red Deer, it never fails to impress me just how quickly they can cover the ground: with little more than a steady trot, they were gone. Red Deer hinds can become quite nervous at this time of year, since by mid-May they are, for the most part, heavily pregnant, and animals such as these on exposed ground generally want nothing to do with people. As we watched, a single Red-throated Diver flew over the loch and from stage right, the ghostly shape of a male Hen Harrier appeared, probably the same bird we had seen close to the hotel earlier. He worked his way along the lower slope of the hill below our position and out of site to the south. As we scanned the loch for Otters (none today), Red-breasted Mergansers snorkelled in the margins and a lovely pair of Stonechat sat on willow scrub very close to us. The chats as a whole must be the smartest of family groups: every species looks so dapper in their summer dress! Although we had not ventured very far from the hotel, the time had disappeared. As we walked back, we noticed several "Woolly Bears" on the path: these are the extremely hairy caterpillars of the stunning garden Tiger Moth, and it was difficult to step between the many hundreds of black Arian slugs: not sure exactly which species, for there are many! The damp cool start had made us ready for breakfast, where we joined the others to chat about plans for the day ahead.

With breakfast done, we set off north-east and very quickly found our first Short-eared Owl of the day. This bird had a nice fat vole in its talons and was clearly heading away to the nest. Our first stop of the day was to be at Clachan Sands, on the way to Berneray.

As we drove along the rough track to the beach we passed a fenced-off square of wet ground, maybe 80 meters square. The dense vegetation, Yellow Flag, Nettle, *Juncus* etc. looked like ideal Corncrake habitat, and sure enough, "crex crex, crex crex", there it was! We roughly pinpointed where the call was coming from, but never saw this one.

The surrounding grazing land held lots of Lapwing and Redshank with young all over the place. A pair of Redshank sat on fenceposts along the trackside giving fantastic photo opportunities, but we didn't linger so as to not disturb them. Reaching the parking area, we stood and looked north along the expanse of clean white sand, with not a

soul in sight. In the far distance we could see the rugged peaks of Harris, with Berneray, Boreray and Lingeigh much closer. This is a picture-perfect view, framed by never-ending skies and cobalt-blue seas.

We eventually tore ourselves away, and made for the causeway connecting North Uist to Berneray. This was opened in 1999 and was utterly life-changing for the People of both communities, especially those on Berneray. Once on the island we made our way along the smooth ribbon of tar that crosses the Borve machair, which leads to a burial ground after 3km (always good roads to graveyards here). As we trundled along we were astounded by the number of Dunlin and Ringed Plover present here. The flower-rich farmland provides rich pickings, no doubt helped by the continued use of seaweed as fertiliser. It is still collected after big storms and “matured” in middens for a few months.

As we parked at the graveyard, the skies had cleared leaving yet another bright sunny day, although the wind was still pretty bracing. We crossed some very tightly-cropped grassland to have a look at the grave of Angus Macaskill, the giant. He was 7 feet 9 inches tall and was born on Berneray in 1825. He was described as having immeasurable strength and as possessing the largest chest of any non-obese man! He was even invited to Windsor Castle by Queen Victoria to give a demonstration of his power, after which she proclaimed him to be, “The tallest, stoutest and strongest man to ever enter the place”! On top of all his impressive stats he was also a really good egg. He was much-loved by the locals and in 1991 the memorial here was erected in his honour, all seven feet nine of it!

Our walk led us to the fabulous West Beach, which, although a bold claim, must rate highly in a list of world’s best beaches. We took a stroll along the powder soft white sand with some kicking off their shoes! Just in the breaking surf, the distinctive (once you get your ear in) raucous call of Little Tern could be heard, and two of these tiny birds dipped into the water picking fry from the surface. Offshore, up to four Great Northern Divers showed too. The view north from here leads the eye to the island of Pabbay, the site of a Celtic hermitage, the ruins of an iron age settlement, and its Pictish carved stone. Walking back to the van, more Little Terns passed overhead as did several Arctics: they breed out on the machair in areas left for them and give the local sheep a really hard time if they get too close! Having worked up a thirst and a hunger we had a lovely sit-down lunch today at the Berneray Bistro. The fresh local ingredients went down a treat, as did the lashings of ginger beer: how very Enid Blyton!

After lunch we visited Loch Bhrusda, the largest area of fresh water on the island. Setting up the scope for a scan, Stewart picked out five Pink-footed Geese among the Greylags on the far bank and a female type Greater Scaup in with Tufted Duck on the loch, neither a species we would have expected to see this week. Redshank, Oystercatcher and Curlew stood on a mud bank at the northern end of the loch as we turned to head across the island. Berneray has a very relaxed feel about it, like nothing really matters if it gets done until tomorrow, but, like many other coastal villages in picturesque spots, the houses are gradually being bought as holiday homes, leaving a very uncertain future for those locals who want to stay. Having driven across the island (after waiting for half an hour for the council roads team to re-surface the road) we arrived at the east beach. The elevated parking spot here gives great views over the beach and the Sound of Harris: another four Great Northern Divers were seen from here, along with a further six Little Terns, some sat on the tideline. We were able to see their wee black bandito masks and bright yellow bills. A pleasant surprise were three fly-over Whimbrel, picked up on call. Out in the sound, a passage of Gannet moved steadily north: these will have been breeding birds from the vast colony on St Kilda. They use the Sound of Harris as a short cut to the Minch: otherwise it’s a long way around the Butt of Lewis or away south to Barra. The sound also held a decent number of Black Guillemot and feeding Arctic Terns.

Having enjoyed a slice of tea loaf and a brew while looking out, we set off back towards North Uist. We stopped to look for Golden Eagles at the twin peaks of Beinn Breac and Beinn Mhor: none today, but Buzzard and two Arctic Skuas were seen here. Wanting to get back with a little time to ourselves before dinner, we pushed on, arriving at Langass by 18.15. We'd had a super day on Berneray, the weather had been kind, and we'd seen some great birds.

Day 5

Wednesday 17th May

North Uist, taking in areas of the north end of the island as well as the central high moors.

This morning started off overcast, cool and breezy with a deteriorating outlook later in the day, with heavy rain forecast mid-afternoon. Pre breakfasters set off to look primarily for Otters around Lochmaddy, and the now familiar old road lochs turned up trumps! Four shapes out in the middle of Loch Sgadabhigh turned out to be displaying Black-throated Divers, resplendent in their smart Saville Row grey-and-black suits! These birds are almost too perfect to be real. We watched through the scope as they squared up to each other, heads pointing skyward and chests puffed out, the black and white pin-stripes on the neck and chest sides hard to make out at distance. Black-throats in flight have much more prominent feet than Red-throats, and tend to carry their heads in a more level plane. We couldn't have asked for a better start to the day, added to by a calling fly-over pair of Red-throats.

Driving on to Lochmaddy, we strolled to a small wooden platform by the Arts Centre for a thorough scan of the bay and its many islands. Our timing was perfect: we hadn't been there long when the first of two Otters appeared in front of us. We watched one of them fishing and coming ashore to feed, while the second animal was a little further out in open water, eventually porpoising at speed to cover the water quickly. Otters are always a joy to watch, especially real, wild maritime ones: some of the half-tame freshwater Otters of mainland waters just don't have the same mystique. Away to the east, at the mouth of Lochmaddy bay, stands Aird Nam Maddah, a rocky promontory, and sat atop this was the distinctive shape of an adult White-tailed Eagle, being mobbed by Great Black-backed Gulls and Hooded Crows, both looking miniature by comparison. The bay also gave us Tystie (Black Guillemot), Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Arctic Terns and a pair of Common Sandpipers. Well-chuffed with our pre-breakfast haul, we set off towards the hotel, but we weren't done yet! Turning onto the small lane to the Hotel, a ringtail hen harrier was closely followed by a Short-eared Owl. Interestingly, a look through a thermal imaging scope at these two birds allowed us to see the harrier glowing red, but the insulation on the owl rendered it invisible, even through a very expensive bit of kit! Just to top things off, a male Peregrine steamed through just ahead of us and a Cuckoo dropped into the hotel plantation as we parked up. Black-throated Diver, Red-throated Diver, Otter, White-tailed Eagle, Short-eared Owl, Hen Harrier, Peregrine and Cuckoo: not too shabby for one and a half hours on a Wednesday morning!

After breakfast we set off anticlockwise around North Uist. The drive around took us past the plantation at Grogarry, where a further two Cuckoos flew across the road, and just a little further on a Short-eared Owl hunted before settling on a tuft fifty meters from the road. Loch Aonghais held two Little Grebes, and a small reedbed just beyond the Sollas sho, gave us at least two singing Sedge Warblers.

Just down the road from Sollas, at Malacleit, we turned south onto the narrow Committee Road, which runs for about four miles and effectively cuts North Uist in half. It was constructed by local men in c.1846 as a work

creation project following a devastating potato famine: they were destitute and starving, and giving them something to do in return for a wage was at least part of the solution. Today, it is a fabulous birding spot, with raptors being the main focus. The weather had by now begun to close in somewhat, and with light rain now setting in, we parked up by Cnoc Alltraim (Cnoc is Gaelic for hill) and scanned out across the huge conifer plantation covering Beinn Riseairaidh. A Short-eared Owl drifted between us and the wood and finally, a male Hen Harrier began to semi-display over the wood: not quite a full sky dance, more purposeful flights and steep dips into forest clearings. From deep in the woods, a ringtail rose up and we witnessed a lightning-fast food pass: blink and you'd miss it! The male appeared from time to time as we resigned ourselves to lunch in the bus: never ideal, but needs must. Stewart made the hot drinks which helped a little! Sadly, what appeared to be a road casualty Otter was in a roadside gully. At certain times of day, this cross-island short cut can be a surprisingly fast road.

At the top of the hill, we stopped to chat to a nice couple with a scope who told us they had recently been watching Golden Eagle, and as if by command, a big female rose briefly from behind Beinn Amhlasaraigh, closely followed by the slightly smaller male. The two birds drifted off south-east and, thanking the couple for the heads up, we carried on in the hope of connecting again. This was a good plan! Just around the next bend we stopped and hopped out. Stewart had a good scan of nearby ridges and then called out, "Got her!" The female eagle was sat a couple of hundred meters away, partially obscured by rocks, part way up Beinn a Charra. We all got onto her through the scopes and she helped us out by moving a few meters out into the open. We watched her for ages in the rain: it didn't matter! These were some of the best views of a wild Golden Eagle I'd ever had, and we left very happy!

Loch Bruist, close to the end of the road, held three Arctic Skuas, one of these being a stunning pale-phase bird. We decided to nip back to the Balranald visitor centre to use the facilities, and took the opportunity to have a brief look for Corncrake again. The two birds close to the centre we'd seen earlier in the week were still present, as was another a little further on. We also got some good views of Snipe sat among the grasses, incredibly well-camouflaged and giving us a bit of a challenge. The weather was now fairly horrid, and with little enthusiasm for a good soaking we headed clockwise back towards Lochmaddy, passing the Scolpaig tower, a folly built in the 1830s by Dr Alexander Macleod to give the locals some work. They had double the labour, as they had to destroy an iron age broch on the site to build his wee tower!

We arrived at Lochmaddy and went for a look at Taigh Chearsabhair, the wonderful community museum and arts centre. A coffee and slice of cake here were welcome, and a look around the photography exhibition by visiting artist Xavi Bou was incredible: his use of timelapse techniques to take images of flying birds was mind-blowing. We arrived back at Langass in plenty of time to dry off thoroughly before dinner, watching the lashing rain on the restaurant windows as we ate. We'd had a good day, and a huge number of very special birds had been seen, including the pre-breakfast trip tally. We'd made the most of the weather window we'd had, but were glad to have a slightly early finish: tomorrow was going to be busy!

Day 6

Thursday 18th May

A drive down onto South Uist looking at the both the mountainous east side and low lying machair farmland of the west. Boat trip in the afternoon exploring remote sea lochs and inlets.

Thursday dawned very damp with a stiff south-westerly wind blowing, which kept the temperature down too. We could have stayed in, but that's just not us! A very short distance from the Hotel lies Langass woods, a community woodland with a network of sheltered paths, and this seemed like a good bet for a wander on a morning like this. North Uist has no native woodlands, and this modest area with its mixed planting has become a very biodiverse site on the island. Much of the woodland is given over to fairly dense conifer plantings, with some areas of windblown mature trees. Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*) and Rowan (*Sorbus agg.*) are also block planted, giving a variety of habitats. As we entered the woodland, we soon connected with a very localised species on Uist: Goldcrest. We heard several as we walked around, along with Wren and a decent number of singing Willow Warblers. Overhead, the cronking call of Raven could be heard and a distant Cuckoo was probably the one outside the hotel, as we were no more than a kilometer away as the Cuckoo flies!

Some may remember Hercules the Bear from the 1970s and 80s. He appeared in many TV and film roles, and lived with Andy and Maggie Robbin. He shot to fame in 1980 when, during a visit to Uist to film a Kleenex advert (of all things), he escaped and spent the next 21 days on the run. Having a full grown, adult male Grizzly Bear on the loose sent the island into a state of panic, and the place was locked down. After extensive searching by the army, he was eventually tracked down by a local crofter and darted from a helicopter. Hercules had lost nearly forty percent of his bodyweight during his adventure and clearly hadn't hurt a flea! He died in 2001 and was buried here at Langass woods where today, a life-size wooden carving of him stands among the trees. Andy passed away in 2015, age 84, and wished to be buried next to his beloved best friend. Some of the people of Uist attended the short service and still tend the graves today.

Strolling on, we left the dense shelter of the woods and could see northwards across the open moor and lochs which make up much of this island. Two Arctic Skuas powered through and the highlight was the pair of Black-throated Divers on Loch a Bharpa, just opposite the car park. We had lovely views through the scope, and the dull grey light helped to see the birds cryptic markings. Arriving back at the hotel with a real need for a hot drink and a quick dry out, we joined the others for breakfast.

Heading south today, we crossed the causeways once again, travelling down over Benbecula, stopping at the Cop for lunch items (from the car park here, we found several Common Eider and a nice group of migrant Bar-tailed Godwit), before travelling on to South Uist.

We turned right as soon as we reached the island and slowly drove along the rough track towards Lochdar. It was miserable outside, with steady rain hampering our views, but the exposed mud and sand of the tidal bay to our right provided feeding grounds for hundreds of Ringed Plover and Redshank. Just opposite the Hebridean Jewellery Workshop we heard a Corncrake and stopped for a look. We were rewarded with some fantastic views as the bird walked out into the open and called right in front of us before moving off into deep cover. A second bird just a few minutes later was picked up on call only but wasn't very far away either. The road here ends at Aird a Mhachair graveyard, and from the beach car park and the shelter of the minibus, we watched the huge number of waders feeding among the weed, a bit of rain making no difference to them!

South of where we were parked lies "The Range". This is a huge area of machair farmland and short grass plain that is a missile testing facility run by MOD Hebrides. The land part of The Range is just a tiny part of the overall area used, with the combined land and sea sanitised airspace comprising of some 115,000km² to an altitude of 14,000m. The grassland here is a superb birding spot, and the public has restricted access when the range is not

being used. Unfortunately for us, the red flags were flying and the site was to be in use the whole week. We did, however, hear another two Corncrakes calling from nettle beds next to the graveyard. Travelling around South Uist, a feature that we see again and again are the roadside shrines to the Virgin Mary. These appear in some seemingly odd places and are all over the island. They are relatively recent, and were erected in the 1960s when the missile range first opened. They were a reminder to the military and scientific personnel stationed here that things are done a little differently in these parts, and to respect the ways of the people. The islanders of the Outer Hebrides are largely deeply religious, and since the reformation, North Uist, Harris and Lewis have been strongly Presbyterian, while Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, Barra and Vattersay have held on to their pre-Reformation Scottish Catholicism.

We re-traced our route a little, having been unable to access The Range, and crossed the causeway that splits the freshwater Loch Bi in half. We turned off to Geirinis and had a look across the loch. Huge numbers of Mute Swan are always present here, the largest count I've had being 418! Today we clocked up close to 300. Lots of waders, mostly Dunlin, were feeding close by, with a couple of Common Terns flying through.

The weather had begun to clear a little, with an odd patch of blue sky now poking through. We drove just a few kilometers to the south and took the narrow road along the north shore of Loch Druidibeag, the former National Nature Reserve, now under the management of the RSPB. This is a breathtaking site, in the shadow of Hecla and Beinn Mhor, the highest peaks in the Uists. A small plantation part way along the road held Willow Warbler, Blackcap and calling Cuckoo, with lots of Meadow Pipits lifting from the roadside. Another Cuckoo kept just ahead of us as we made for the road end at Loch Sgioport. We had lunch here, noticing several patches of Common Butterwort around the damp peat hollows. A few Sundew were found as well: both species are insectivorous. After lunch, we walked the short distance to the loch, overlooking the remains of the old jetty and works here. This sheltered sea loch, now peaceful, was once a hive of activity. The pier that we see now is the skeleton of one built in 1879, and was used by steamers from Glasgow and Oban both to bring goods in and to export primarily barrels of salted herrings back to the mainland. As we viewed across, a Short-eared Owl worked the face of Aird Horragaigh, and three gorgeous Red-throated Divers flew in and landed a little way up the loch, giving good scope views. A few Shag a couple of Black Guillemot were further out. Unfortunately, the summit of Hecla was still shrouded in cloud, making our chances of seeing Golden Eagle slim.

With much better weather arriving, we slowly made our way back, connecting with a further three Cuckoo as we drove. The feral herd of Shetland ponies here are quite well known and a few were close to the road, the wee foal being particularly endearing, (although I'd bet they can be objectionable, stubborn brutes when the mood takes them). Heading north once back at the main road, we took an unclassified track up the slopes of Ruabhal, passing the imposing statue of "Our Lady of the Isles". A Madonna and child, this statue was constructed in 1957, as part of the objection to the plans for the missile facility. Canon John Morrison, the local priest, proposed the idea and raised the funds in response to the locals' fears that their way of life was about to be turned on its head. From the viewpoint, on a clear day, one can see north to Harris and south to Barra, and pretty much everything in between. We were really lucky here today: a White-tailed Eagle drifted by and out over the low grounds, disappearing in the now bright sunlight.

We gradually made our way north, over the causeway, across Benbecula and onto Grimsay, a small island that can easily be missed. We turned off and made for Kallin, a tiny commercial port, where several day boats head out in search of shellfish. The harbour sits in the shelter of the uninhabited and private island of Ronay. Our reason for

heading here was for a boat trip on the Lady Anne with its owner/skipper Nick and crewman/business partner Nye. We boarded in good weather and had a briefing about the plans for our trip. The waters around this part of the island are treacherous, and access to the sea lochs is totally tide-dependent. We relied wholly on Nick's extensive knowledge: he has been a commercial fisherman for many years. Today we decided the best thing would be to head south and explore some of the waters on the east side of Benbecula. As we motored we began to see plenty of seabirds: Black Guillemot, Shag, Common Gull, and a few Common Guillemot. An occasional Harbour Seal spy-hopped and a few were hauled out on rocks. Two Red-throated Divers were hard to pick out, the overall grey plumage well-matched to the bright light on the sea. Fish farming is big business out here, and while not universally popular, is an invaluable source of employment for locals: a double-edged sword if you like. We passed a huge fish farm on the way south. Nye said it contained 1.2 million fish with plans submitted for an extension the same size. Arriving at a secluded site (I'm not saying where!) we spotted an adult White-tailed Eagle sat atop a grassy island. Very slowly moving on, there was suddenly a shadow over the boat, and above us, a huge female White-tailed Eagle appeared, very inquisitive and quite bold. Some of the group were left speechless as we enjoyed the company of this incredible bird, and everyone managed a photo, even those only with mobile phones. She hung in the wind until we reached a favoured spot, and when Nye got the nod from Nick, he threw just one small pollack overboard and Nick moved the boat away a short distance. The eagle knew exactly where it was and after a few adjustments, she banked sharply into wind, dropped the landing gear and dived steeply, flaring at the last second and taking the fish with little effort. I generally dislike the word 'awesome', but it applied here! Shortly after, the male rose from behind a low ridge: he was not so bold and stayed away from the boat. Both birds were because they were guarding an active nest. We briefly cruised in for a look at the huge structure and were lucky enough to make out one fluffy grey chick. There may have been a second but we couldn't say for sure. Nick has great ethics during these trips, and we very soon left the birds in peace, delighted with what we'd seen.

A little way further on, we were then shown something none of us had ever seen, including me. We pulled up close to a small heronry, this in itself being unusual as they were nesting on a low cliff face, maybe 10 meters high or so. Thirteen active nests being noted, but the remarkable thing was that, right in the middle of this colony, there was a pair of Peregrines on the nest: they were vocal and guarding two chicks. There must be some kind of symbiotic relationship going on here: the herons could have taken the Peregrine chicks at will, and the falcons the same with the herons. It was clearly mutually beneficial to live in harmony, and a sight I doubt we'll see anywhere else. Overjoyed with our sightings, we gradually headed back towards the harbour, two hours having disappeared in a blink! Entering a sheltered bay just to the South of Roisnis, Stewart spotted a pair of Black-throated Divers on the water. They allowed a fairly close approach, and some good photos were taken. Black-throats in summer plumage must be right up there if a list of the world's smartest birds were ever compiled!

We arrived back at Kallin for 5pm and made our way north towards the hotel, getting back in plenty of time for a relaxed look over our sightings today over a drink, before another great meal.

Day 7

Friday 19th May

South Uist, visiting Kildonnan, Loch Aineort, then across to Ardvule heading north to Howmore river, Staoinebrig, Tobha Mor and on to Benbecula.

Friday's early risers set off in gorgeous bright sunshine, still breezy but mild compared to the last couple of days. We very quickly connected with our first Short-eared Owl a short distance from the hotel, with a second bird as

we turned onto the Hebridean Way at Clachan. We drove the short distance to the fabulous island of Baleshare. A short bridge/causeway attaches this sandy, low-lying island to North Uist. As we made our way west towards a secluded beach carpark, we were amazed by the number of breeding waders on the farmland and wet corners. Lapwing and Redshank with young were in every field, chicks were running around in all directions, and the air was full of singing Skylark. Common Snipe were present in good numbers with birds drumming overhead and calling from cover on the deck. We passed a large number of derelict crofts, which demonstrated how many people would have worked and lived off the land here back in the day. As the older generations have passed on, youngsters have moved away to the mainland, as scratching a living out here on a croft these days would be marginal at best. The land has been swallowed up for grazing by larger farmers and the old croft buildings have fallen into ruin. These do, however, provide habitat for Corncrakes. Nettles and Flag Iris grow up among the ruins and scrap farm machinery, and we were lucky this morning to hear at least two Corncrakes. Reaching the beach, we went for a very pleasant stroll along the white sand, where several small groups of Sanderling scurried back and forth in the tideline, giving us ample opportunity to look at the variety of plumages displayed by the different-aged birds. Some were a deep brick-red, in full breeding dress whilst other non-breeding birds were in almost full winter plumage. The ninety minutes hours out before breakfast vanished in a second, and we soon had to head back. By the time we got to the Hotel, we'd seen a remarkable six Short-eared Owls and a single ringtail Hen Harrier.

After breakfast we once again set off south to explore some bits of South Uist we didn't get to yesterday. The drive down over Benbecula gave us another three Short-eared Owls: it's amazing what can exist given peace from persecution and disturbance! Our first stop today was Loch Aineort, a long sea loch half way down the island. This is a very atmospheric spot, picture postcard beautiful in any weather. We parked at the road's end and had a scan across the islands in the loch. Dozens of Common (Harbour) Seals were hauled out, with others in the water, some playing. A few Red-breasted Mergansers fished, and a pair of Red-throated Divers were mobile, making occasional calling flights along the length of the loch. We took a walk up through the surprising Arinaban woodland, a wonderfully sheltered spot which is the creation of a local landowner. Although a private woodland, there are a number of well-made paths that were able to access. The planting here is pretty mixed: some UK natives and other, more exotic types. Goldfinch sang from a nearby spruce and small group of Lesser Redpoll flew overhead. Robin, Wren, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff were also noted as we walked. Leaving the shelter of the woodland, we looked up to the left and immediately got on to a sub-adult Golden Eagle: not a massive individual and probably a male, he didn't linger but gave us reasonable views as he vanished into the huge bowl of the south side of Beinn Mhor. Two Cuckoos gave good views from the tree tops and continued to call as we carried on with our amble. We had a scan for Otter as this is a good place to see them, but were unlucky today. The small spruce plantation at the loch side here is home to a modest sized heronry, with maybe half a dozen nests, and were surprised, when we found half a heron egg, by just how small they are given the size of the bird. Nothing much else was added as we enjoyed our walk back to the bus, a single duck Mallard with a couple of ducklings being the only bird of note. With a request for coffee, we made for the Kildonnan museum and café and enjoyed a quick brew before heading west to Rubha Aird a Mhuile (Ardvule to the rest of us). This is a wild, windswept promontory with a brackish lagoon at its point. The rough track along to the parking area gave us Wheatear, a couple of Curlew and Lapwing. Parking up, we took lunch close to the van, enjoying the views south. The walk to the point is just over a kilometer and took us past the ruins of Dun Vulcan, a once significant structure built around 100 BC. It now stands on the edge of the shoreline and is in danger of further damage. However, when it was built, the land was very different and it would have been on an island in the middle of a freshwater loch. Excavations in the mid 1990s revealed it was roofed with Tamarack Larch that would have arrived here as driftwood from Canada.

The loch today held several pairs of Tufted Duck, a couple of Shelduck, Mute Swan and a handful of Sand Martins hawked overhead. A look out to sea from the WW2 gun emplacement produced a few Gannets and a very small passage of Manx Shearwaters: it was otherwise quiet as made our way back to the van.

From Ardvule we ventured north, taking the minor roads along the coast and passing several areas of open water. Gadwall, Kestrel, and Common Buzzard were all seen before we arrived at the Howmore River. This is the drain to sea from Loch Druidibeag and is the closest thing to an estuary here. The tide was in, and few birds were evident as we parked at the Church for a quick look around the ruins of the Howmore ancient chapels. There is evidence that some kind of Christian presence may have existed here before the 9th century, but the ruins of the four buildings that survive are no older than 1200CE: these are similar in design to Irish Celtic structures, but the significance of these is still hidden in the past.

As we prepared to leave Howmore, we heard an almighty bang and a loud “whoosh”: we spun round and could see a huge, vapour/smoke trail heading way out to sea. Clearly, a missile had just been sent on its way from The Range, and by the look of the trail, a pretty big one! We were at least five kilometers away and it was loud to us. A bit surreal as the thirteenth century had just met the twenty first, with a bang! Generally, we’d encountered fewer birds today, and the lack of any info on the local grapevine reflected this across the islands: maybe the rise in temperature and slightly more settled conditions had had an effect? We’d had a good day though, and had still seen plenty. Satisfied with our efforts, we arrived back at the hotel in plenty of time for us to put a few things together for our trip home tomorrow.

Day 8

Saturday 20th May

Leave North Uist and return to Skye, drive back to Inverness via Strath Carron, Achnasheen and Strath Bran, approaching Inverness from the north via Kessock bridge.

An early start for us all today as we were at the ferry terminal in Lochmaddy for 06.30, for an 07.20 sailing back to Uig on the MV Hebrides. Our crossing was once again very calm, a little too calm for good birding. Some of the group decided the lure of a Caledonian Macbrayne full Scottish breakfast was greater than standing on a wind-blown deck looking at the sea! Small groups of auks, mostly Razorbill, loafed on the surface, with the occasional Puffin too. Fulmar, Gannet, Kittiwake, Arctic Tern, a single Great Skua and two Arctic Skuas were seen about half way across. The undoubted highlight was a European Storm Petrel which crossed the wake of the ship for a few minutes. As the ship entered Loch Snizort on the approach to Uig, a small pod of Common Dolphins joined us alongside for a short time: these are always a joy to see.

Disembarking, we set off for Inverness. As we had no particular time constraints this morning, we turned off the main drag once off Skye and headed north along the picturesque road towards Stromeferry and Loch Carron. From here we turned right and headed up Glen Carron passing Achnashellach station. The railway that runs roughly parallel to the road looks like such a pretty route: it would once have been popular with wealthy folk from Edinburgh and London heading to the hills for deer stalking. As we drove, we noted lots of Red Deer out on the low grounds by the railway and a few Common Buzzards had us checking every one! Stopping for a while at Achnasheen station, we had a look across a nearby hillside for Black Grouse (none today), and the oversummering (singing) Redwing that had held territory around the station for the previous five summers looked like he may have reached the end of the road. A few miles along the road in Strath Bran we stopped for lunch by Loch a Chuilinn,

and had a good listen for Wood Warbler. A potential male called very briefly, but the road was quite busy today and hearing was difficult. Willow Warbler, Siskin and Coal Tit were heard. We took this opportunity to have a natter about the trip as a whole and I won't forget the kind words offered to me at this time! Our drive back into Inverness was largely quiet birdwise, save for two Red Kite near Muir of Ord. As we entered the city a short time later, Common Swift was the final species added to our tally for the week. Totting up how many species we had seen somewhat misses the point of a trip to the Outer Hebrides, but the total was 105. We really had had a fantastic week away, the weather had been largely kind, with an odd reminder of where we were thrown in! The wildlife had been wall-to-wall: we had connected with all of the "target" species during our time, and we had been lucky enough to experience some wonderful moments with incredible creatures.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the clients for making this such a special trip, and hope to see them all again in the future. Please also accept my apologies for the delay in receiving this report: my farming year has somewhat got in the way of things I should have attended to earlier!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓							
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				✓				
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓					
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>				✓				
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	4	3	6+	2		3+	2+	✓
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				✓	4	4		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		7+	1	✓		✓	4+	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓							✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4+	✓		✓			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>								✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	2+	3	1		✓	3		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓							✓
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	2		✓	✓			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓						
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	1				2		1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓	2+		
Corn Crake	<i>Crex crex</i>			7+	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓					
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓						
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>				✓				
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>						✓		
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			2	3+				
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓		✓	✓			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			✓					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		1						
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓							✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			✓	6			✓	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓						
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	3+		2	2	✓	4+		✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓			✓				✓
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓							✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓							✓
Common Pigeon (Rock Dove)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	✓	3+	4+	✓	✓	✓	9+	✓
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>								✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓							✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>								✓
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓					
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>								✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						✓		
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>								✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓							
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>							✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
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Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓					
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				✓				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>							✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓							

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Mammals									
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>								
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓					✓	
Grey Seal	<i>Halicaeerus grypus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>								✓
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		2			2+			
Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		3+		✓				✓

Others

Moths
Drinker (caterpillar)
Garden Tiger (caterpillar)
Plants
Northern Marsh Orchid
Marsh Marigold
Bogbean
Wild Pansy
Silverweed
Thift
Cuckoo Flower
Common Butterwort
Heath Spotted Orchid
Lousewort
Birds Foot Trefoil
Tormentil