Islay & Mull in Style

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th - 17th October 2023









Barnacle Geese

Red-billed Chough

Tour report and photos by Andy Bunten



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn

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Summary

Rainbows, rainbows, rainbows. Rainbows against a jet-black cloud with Barnacle Geese in the foreground, rainbows almost straddling the dramatic Sound of Islay, rainbows so close you could almost reach out and touch them. They were just stunning.

Also stunning were the landscapes of these two contrasting islands. Every twist and turn of the road delivered a new astonishing view of sea loch, glen, mountain summit or open estuary.

And in these landscapes some amazing wildlife.

We saw thousands of Barnacle Geese cropping the grass just the other side of the fence from our bus – suddenly erupting with a roar like a train rushing by as they all lifted into the air, still wary after their long flight from Greenland.

Small groups of White-fronted Geese seemed less prone to take flight and watched us carefully, their white faces shining in the low slanting sun.

In the flat estuary of Indaal the geese fed and roosted among countless waders and, lurking out there, we found the hulking forms of White-tailed Eagles, patiently waiting to see what food items may appear. Two adults and a juvenile – the latter learning the art of survival.

On Islay we watched these huge birds perched on low rocks in sea lochs in hope that an Otter would do the heavy lifting for them. We saw them swooping down to snatch fish out of the water; we saw them, massive winged, traversing the huge glens.

Otters were the order of the day on Mull, and we had ridiculously good views, including a twenty- minute period where we watched a big dog Otter snooze, scratch, comb and generally luxuriate.

Add sepulchral Northern Ravens, prehistoric looking Great Northern Divers, dainty Twite and elegant Chough and there's only one word for the Islay and Mull trip – stunning.

Day 1

Wednesday 11th October

Five our group met at Paisley Gilmour Street and we quickly packed the bus and headed off to the nearby central motorway and then across the Erskine Bridge and away alongside the bonny, bonny banks.

And they certainly were bonny today too with some glorious sunshine and enough Scottish weather to give us a rainbow so close we felt we could reach out of the bus and touch it. Add a coating of some glorious autumn colours in the woods lining the loch and it was a lovely drive.

The loch itself is of course famous for the Jacobite song but as a physical feature is a record breaker in several categories – largest stretch of inland water by area in Great Britain and containing Inchmurrin, the largest freshwater island in the British Isles

The recent heavy rains had caused various road blockages so we had to do the long loop through Tarbert to access Inverary and then head south along Loch Fyne.

As we drove along, we saw the usual suspects of gulls, corvids, Grey Herons, and Common Buzzards – and later Cormorants and Shags as we hit the coast.

We collected the final two members of our party who had stayed the night before in the Stonefield Castle Hotel and headed the short distance to the ferry.

At the Kennacraig ferry terminal we found a Red-throated Diver very close to the shore as well the usual waders, a Little Egret and a relaxing Harbour Seal.

As we sailed into the cool wind a Red-breasted Merganser shot past and a Great Northern Diver sat in the water close to ferry -disappearing off our starboard bow.

We docked at 20.00 and drove behind a slow, full cattle truck along the north shore of Loch Indaal where a weightless Barn Owl drifted past us on the road verge.

We were quickly at our home for the next three nights – the wonderful Port Charlotte Hotel - where we had a fabulous meal of oysters, and local venison, before getting some rest before tomorrow's full day.

Day 2

Thursday 12th October

A mixed weather day this morning as we drove along the north shore of Loch Indaal in strong sun but also occasional driving rain so resulting in some amazing rainbows behind us.

We made a stop at a layby overlooking the loch to scan through the mass of Barnacle Geese before noticing the huge, hunched shape of a White-tailed Eagle out on the sand banks Then two more were seen on a low rock out in the mud which we watched through the telescope as Golden Plover roosted and Ringed Plover and Dunlin scuttled around. It was wonderful to admire the sheer bulk of these adult eagles which eventually lumbered off in unhurried pursuit off the juvenile which had flown a little earlier.

After a quick stop for lunch provisions, we parked up in another small layby giving us better views of the Golden Plover and also some Bar-tailed Godwits. We were able here to admire our Eagles from a different angle.

We continued our way around Indaal to Bowmore where a lovely pair of Eider led into a discussion of how wonderfully attractive so many of our black and white birds are. In the nearby sheltered bay we had a very close Bar-tailed Godwit plunging his whole head into the water in pursuit of his breakfast.

A quick take-away coffee later we had a final stop to scan over the loch and watch some elegant Whooper Swans with Wigeon and a few Brent Geese.

Then we set off down the road to Port Ellen where two Merlins put the fear of God into a flock of smaller birds before landing briefly on some telephone wires where a couple of Hooded Crows chased them off. We dodged into the passing places to avoid the huge lorries coming from the port finding Redwings and Twite as we did so.

We arrived at the Oa peninsula by around 13.10 so had lunch watching a single Twite on the feeders and a small flock of very smart Rock Doves. We made our way across boardwalks and damp footpaths to get to the impressive American monument where we gazed across at Rathlin Island and the Northern Ireland mainland before making our way back along the cliff edge through some very impressive and very docile Highland Cattle

Back at the feeders there was a flock of fabulous Twite with accompanying Goldfinches feeding eagerly on the bird seed. As we watched we heard the distinctive calls of Red-billed Chough, a pair of which flew past us and over a nearby hill where a few Roe Deer were grazing.

Our drive back along the single-track road towards Bridgend produced more deer -this time Red – and including a fine stag.

As evening was approaching, we decided to drive through the flat grasslands towards Gruinart where we found massive flocks of yapping Barnacle Geese and smaller numbers of grazing White-fronted. From the elevated watchpoint near the RSPB Visitor Centre we had magnificent views of these geese as they took off with a roar like an express train to go to their roosting sites out on the estuary.

This signalled it was time for us to leave and go back to our hotel for another magnificent meal

Day 3

Friday 13th October

Another beautiful morning, another beautiful breakfast and more beautiful rainbows as we drove along Loch Indaal – parking up again to have a look at our family of three White-tailed Eagles

This time the young bird seemed to have found some food and, with the usual ragged crowd of surrounding gulls and crows, was tearing chunks out of something

A 'spring' of Teal were sleeping rather than springing just in front of us and the light was giving us better views of a flock of Golden Plover and various other scuttling waders.

After chatting to a photographer who was intent on the eagles, we did a slow drive to Gruinart where the light was ideal for viewing the thousands of geese. The White-fronts - Greenland race - were particularly well illuminated, perfectly showing off their white faces and black-barred bellies.

A Great Tit hopped along the wall in front of us accidentally showing the presence of a Brown Hare sitting motionless just the other side of the wall. For all the world like a lump of dung or turf or brown soil it gazed at us with its limpid brown eyes secure in the knowledge that we couldn't see it.

We spent the next hour at the RSPB Visitor Centre in a fascinating conversation with the Area Manager, Jack Fleming, who explained to us the genesis of this huge nature reserve and the management that goes in to make it perfect for a whole range of different species throughout the year.

Then we drove the short distance to Ardnave and indulged in a very blustery walk with occasional squally showers. Our first find was a stand of very impressive Shaggy Ink Caps and we discussed how delicious they can be when young – these specimens were sadly turning to the inky mass from which they get their name.

We did some beachcombing and seaweed identification for a while and a very handsome Chough flew in calling just into the nearby sand dunes. A great view.

More spectacular rainbows accompanied our bus bound lunch before we headed off to the Kilchoman distillery visitor centre where we sat in front of a roaring fire and fortified ourselves with coffee and cakes. (And some with the distillery product).

They grow their own barley at Kilchoman and we stopped alongside the stubble fields where a mixed flock of finches -mainly Chaffinches and Goldfinches -shone in the low angle sun.

Back near the visitor centre we walked the 1.5 KM through the woodland, full of squeaking Goldcrests and churring Wrens, to a hide but, finding it full, retraced our footsteps and went to the other hide.

We felt we probably got the best of the deal as we had a magnificent time there.

There were lots of Teal, Wigeon, Barnacle and White-fronted Geese, Shovelers, with top heavy beaks, periscoped their way around the pools and Lapwings, like floating scraps of paper above a bonfire, twisted and turned their way low over the fields. The warden, walking a few fields away, disturbed some waders and Bar-tailed Godwits, Redshanks and Curlews all rose to find a new undisturbed piece of wetland to continue their roosting.

Common Buzzards soared around in the sky before we saw a Peregrine high in the clouds and clearly focussed on hunting. It continued circling before suddenly closing its wings and stooping at breakneck speed towards some unfortunate victim.

After this drama we had Act Two as a lovely pearl-grey and black male Hen Harrier flew low over some nearby fields occasionally twisting round and diving down to the ground.

The finale was even better with a female Hen Harrier flying towards us and passing right in front of the hide only a few feet away. Stunning.

It was starting to get dark now so we made our way back through the fields, grey with a covering of Barnacle Geese, and alive with flocks of Golden Plover that showed first beautiful gold then startling white as they flipped over in perfect synchrony.

Back at the hotel we quickly did our list before diving in to some stunning locally caught Oysters, followed by delicious fish and chocolate fondant. We really didn't want to leave this marvellous hotel!

Day 4

Saturday 14th October

Today was our transfer day and although we were very sorry to leave Islay, the Queen of the Hebrides, and this truly wonderful hotel, we were looking forward to our visit to the fifth largest British Island – Mull.

After our final excellent breakfast, we headed off fairly early to catch the ferry across to Kennacraig. We drove down the Port Askaig Road where there were the usual Common Buzzards, Meadow Pipits and Common Starlings. We passed a field with a big flock of chattering Barnacle Geese and a huge black cloud behind them with a glorious rainbow pasted across it. A wonderful farewell to Islay.

Onto the ferry an Otter was sighted just as we left and many of us went on to the outer deck to see what we could find. More rainbows were what we first found, straddling the sea across from Islay to Jura. Astonishing.

The early part of the trip only produced a few birds – Common and Black Guillemots, Northern Gannets and Shags but as we neared the mainland we found Great Crested Grebe, Red-throated Diver and a Common Scoter

The drive to Inverary was uneventful apart from the now usual rainbows and stunning autumn leaf colours. We paused in Inverary for refreshments and to pay homage to the well-known 'Vital Spark' before continuing to Oban where had some time for gargantuan crab sandwiches and various other purchases.

The short crossing to Mull didn't produce a great deal of wildlife though the drive up to Tobermory took us past a field with a handsome roaring Red Deer stag jealously guarding his wives

We had a few moments to sort ourselves out at our new hotel, with spectacular harbour views, before getting down to the serious business of our excellent evening meal, watching the Ireland v New Zealand rugby game and then getting some sleep

Day 5

Sunday 15th October

5

Another day of sunshine and showers and yet another day of stunning rainbows, including perhaps the most vivid and complete rainbow any of us had ever seen.

We set off a little earlier today at around 08.30 after a big and very comprehensive breakfast and got as far as the turning up to Glen Aros where we stopped to watch some Red-breasted Mergansers going through their extraordinary geometric shapes as they displayed to each other in the nearby bay.

At the Craignure ferry we stopped for a swift toilet break which quickly became extended as the chocolate shop was found to be open and selling coffee as well as chocolate.

Restored, we carried on passed Loch Don where there were a few waders, including some Bar-tailed Godwits and Common Redshank, before heading down to the Grasspoint parking area and walking down to the point. Eurasian Stonechats flicked around and perched obligingly as a stupendous rainbow -of course - appeared on cue with a sharp and refreshing shower.

At the point Black-legged Kittiwakes swept through on the wind, Shags flew low over the water and a pair of Redbreasted Mergansers allowed good views through the telescope. A cetacean of some sort, probably Harbour Porpoise, surfaced very briefly before we walked back to our cars, disturbing a Common Snipe as we did which burst out from beneath our feet.

Driving back through the lovely sessile oak woodlands we slowed to negotiate the obdurate cows and had excellent views of vivid red Fly Agaric.

Along Loch Spelve we had a couple of extremely brief views of an Otter's head before the main act.

We'd stopped at Croggan for lunch when a big dog Otter appeared just off shore. We watched it swimming among the tide line until it clambered out on the rocks right in front of us and curled up like a cat to sleep, preen and scratch. What amazing views! We watched it through the telescope for a good twenty minutes until it uncurled and slid back into the water for some more snacks. Magical! More magic was to follow as we found yet another Otter further round the loch - this time standing on a rock on the shore before scuttling into the water and swimming along the shore edge.

We deserved cake after this and drove along Loch Buie to The Old Post Office to receive our just rewards.

Even more refreshed we headed back east, pausing to examine some fine Fallow Deer, and then drove west through the amazingly impressive Glen More.

We saw distant Red Deer and staggering panoramic views but no raptors until we arrived at the marshy area at the head of Loch Scridain where we found a quartering female Hen Harrier and a hunting Common Buzzard as well as a lively, feeding Common Greenshank and a pair of Whooper Swans.

Back through Glen More again sharp eyes in the back seat spotted two huge White-tailed Eagles soaring over a ridge to our south. We hopped out of the bus to watch them but had to curtail our viewing as we were in a passing place and couldn't linger long.

We were homeward bound now but stopped to watch a Red Deer stag guard his 18 strong harem and hear the unbearable tension of the final moments of the England v Fiji rugby game.

What a day!

Day 6

Monday 16th October

The forecast was good for the day which started somewhat "dreich" but gradually pulled itself together and ended up a beautiful still, blue sky sunny sort of a day.

Initially we drove to Salen –where we saw four Bar-tailed Godwits, two Common Greenshank, Redshank and Wigeon as well as the usual gulls and Mallard in mud flats near the abandoned boats.

We visited toilets in Salen but sadly the little tea shop had been exhausted by the Mull rally and was closed

Undaunted we substituted jelly babies and wine gums for coffee and drove to the camping area at the head of Loch Na Keal. Here there were more Bar-tailed Godwit, nice Golden Plovers and scuttling Ringed Plover. Then sharp eyes saw a big bird appearing over the distant hills -another White -tailed Eagle.

The boat which takes people out and throws out a few fish for the eagles was doing its stuff and through the telescope we got excellent views of the eagles swooping in and snatching the offerings from the waves.

We drove a little way round to the north shore Loch Na Keal and once again picked out an eagle beating its way low over the waves. A Common Buzzard entertained us soaring nearby overhead.

Our Otter luck continued with one fishing just off shore and we watched it hunting and then climbing back onto a rock and settling down for a sleep. We left it in the arms of Morpheus and drove round to the south side of the loch where we met with Dave Sexton of the RSPB who provided us a fascinating insight into the wildlife of the island and particularly the White-tailed Eagle re-introduction scheme across the British Isles.

We learned that there were 22 pairs of WTE on Mull now and fortunately, following a very poor bird flu affected year in 2022, this year was a real success with 18 young produced

We parked up along the south side of the loch when we saw a familiar huge shape on an island -sure enough a White-tailed Eagle. We watched it through the scope for a while then decided to have a walk along the shore before lunch.

We were returning with the sun out strongly and we could see there were two eagles - with their huge yellow beaks very evident they looked a little like Eagle in the Muppets.

We ate our lunch finding natural features as excellent seats and basked in the warm sun as we ate our various offerings.

A winter plumage Black Guillemot entertained after lunch before we did the amazing drive under the Gribun Cliffs with the astonishing views out to sea and of the Treshnish Islands.

We parked carefully a little further on for more jaw-dropping views then drove down to Scridain and along for a coffee stop and the most gorgeous light imaginable illuminated various waders – key amongst them two shining white Common Greenshanks.

Then it was back through Glen More where we looked in vain for Golden Eagles but did find some very impressive roaring Red Deer stags guarding their hinds.

Back towards Tobermory we found a lovely Dipper in the stream at the end of the Aros Valley and were able to tuck into a little parking area to watch as it did its subaquatic stuff - the only aquatic passerine we have'.

Then back to our hotel for the list and our last delicious meal at this hotel with its amazing views out across the town and harbour.

Day 7

Tuesday 17th October

The sun sparkled across the Tobermory houses this morning as we decided to go for a quick walk on this, our final time on Mull. The walk across the golf course towards the lighthouse was absolutely beautiful and Robins and Wrens called from the woodland as we made our way back to the hotel along the coastal path.

We said a fond farewell to two of our party who were staying on the island for a few days more and, as we drove from Tobermory to Craignure, we were treated to a farewell flight pass of a massive adult White-tailed Eagle right in front of our bus.

At Craignure we had enough time to descend on the lovely little Chocolate Shop and buy gifts for those left at home.

The ferry crossing was, thankfully, uneventful with a brief glimpse of a Harbour Porpoise as we left the sound. With a London train having been cancelled we needed to make good time to Glasgow so we sped to The Green Welly for a quick refreshment stop and arrived at Paisley Gilmour Street at 14.50 – plenty of time for everyone to catch their trains home.

It had been a really wonderful trip made more so by the group who were so friendly, positive and interested that it was a joy to be their leader. Thanks all.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced	Introduced			October 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17			
Brant Goose	Branta bernicla		30								
Canada Goose - I	Branta canadensis					✓	√				
Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis		√	√	√	√					
Greylag Goose	Anser anser		√	√	√	√	√	√			
Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons		100+		•		•				
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	4	/		√	√		√			
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	1	√	√	V	√	√				
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		1	√		V	V				
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			√							
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope		√	√	√		√				
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	,				1		,			
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca	√	√ 20	√	√	√	✓	✓			
Common Eider	Somateria mollissima		20	✓							
Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra		2		1						
Goosander	Mergus merganser				1						
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator	1	12		√		,	,			
Common Pheasant - I	Phasianus colchicus	1	12		√	√	√	√			
		√	√	✓	√	√	✓	✓			
Red-throated Diver Great Northern Diver	Gavia stellata Gavia immer	1			1	1					
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	1 1	1	1		2	1				
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	_			,			,			
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	√	1	✓	√	√	✓	✓			
European Shag	Gulosus aristotelis		-		√		,	,			
Great Cormorant		√	√		✓	√	√	√			
	Phalacrocorax carbo	√	√	√			✓	✓			
Hen Harrier White-tailed Eagle	Circus cyaneus Haliaeetus albicilla			2		1					
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	2	6	3	,	2	6	1			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus			√	√	√	√	√			
<u> </u>	·	√	√	√	✓	√	√	√			
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		√	√		√	√	✓			
European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		60	✓			✓				
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		20	✓			✓				
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica		✓	✓		✓	✓				
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres		✓				✓	✓			
Sanderling	Calidris alba		✓								
Dunlin	Calidris alpina		√	√			√				
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago			1		1					
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	√	√	✓		√	√	√			
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia					1	2				
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla					√		✓			
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	√	✓	√	√	√	√	√			
Common (Mew) Gull	Larus canus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√			

I=Introduced	0.1 415	October 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common (Murre) Guillemot	Uria aalge		1		✓	✓		✓	
Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle				✓		1		
Rock Dove	Columba livia		√	√	✓	√	√	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	√		√	√	√	√	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Barn Owl	Tyto alba	1	-	-	-	-	-		
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		1		1		1		
Merlin	Falco columbarius		3						
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus			1					
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius					1		1	
Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax		2	1					
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rook	Corvus frugilegus	✓	✓	√	✓	✓	√	✓	
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	√						✓	
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	√	√	√	√	√	√	✓	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		√	√		2	√	√	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		-	-		√	✓	✓	
Great Tit	Parus major			√	√	√	•	-	
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus			•		•	6	Н	
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus			Н					
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	√	√	√	√	√	√	✓	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Redwing	Turdus iliacus	√	√	· ✓	•	√	•		
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	V	V	√		V	√	√	
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus			√		√	10		
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		√	√	√	√	√	√	
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		1		V			V	
White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus		1	√		√	√ 1		
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		,	,	1	,		/	
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		√	√	√	√ H	1	√	
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		1			П	l l		
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		√	√					
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis			✓ ✓	/	/	/	1	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		√	V	√	1	1	✓	
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		,	,	,	1	1	,	
Twite	Linaria flavirostris		10	1	√	√	√	✓	
Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret		10	4		1			
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		6	√		ı			

Mammals (D = Dead)

I=Introduced		October 2023								
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17		
European Hare	Lepus europaeus		6	2						
European Rabbit - I	Oryctolagus cuniculus		√	√	√	√	✓	√		
Western European Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus		D			D	D			
Eurasian Otter	Lutra lutra				2	4	1			
Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	✓	√		√	√	√			
Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena					1		1		
European Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus		√	1						
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus		√		√	√	√	√		
Fallow Deer - I	Dama dama					6	4			

Others

		October 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
Fox moth caterpillar	Macrothylacia rubi		✓			✓	√		
Fly Agaric	Amanita muscaria					√			
Shaggy Ink Cap	Coprinus comatus						✓		