

Scotland's Mammals & Highlights of the Highlands

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 – 16 August 2015



White-tailed Eagle by Noel Davison



European Otter by Noel Davison



View from Island of Carna by Janet Ludlow



Bottle-nose Dolphin by Janet Ludlow

Report compiled by Marcus John
Images courtesy of Janet Ludlow & Noel Davison



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Introduction

We had a hugely enjoyable week in Ardnamurchan with multiple sightings of iconic species, often close to our comfortable base in the Glenborrodale Centre. Pine Martens came to visit us on five occasions and up to three Otters were seen together in nearby Glenborrodale Bay, surely one of the most beautiful settings in the entire highlands. We spent a memorable day sailing to the Isle of Muck on board the “Laurenca”; wildlife highlights included a Basking Shark, a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins and two Minke Whales. We visited a variety of different places across Ardnamurchan, often pausing to scan for wildlife and, when the rain came down, stopping at some excellent cafes! Red Deer and White-tailed Eagles were a regular sight as we drove through the wonderful scenery of this remote peninsula.

Day 1

Sunday 9th August

We met in Glasgow and set off on the long drive to Ardnamurchan. After enjoying views of Loch Lomond and refreshments at the Green Wellyboot in Tyndrum, we drove the length of Glen Coe, considered one of the most spectacular and beautiful places in Scotland. Soon after, we crossed Loch Linnhe at Corran Ferry (where Black Guillemots breed) and continued through Strontian, along Loch Sunart to Glenborrodale.

We arrived at the Glenborrodale Centre in the early evening. After a delicious dinner cooked by the lovely Jane, we met together in the sitting room to consider the itinerary for the following day and to discuss our targets for the week.

Throughout the holiday, the Glenborrodale Centre itself provided opportunities for seeking out wildlife; Red Deer walked silently through the woods and a good number of common birds visited the feeding station during our stay.

Day 2

Monday 10th August

We took our first walk down to Glenborrodale Bay before breakfast, where we watched noisy Common Terns as they fed, and pairs indulged in bonding displays. Gannets and Shags flew past the mouth of the bay and we saw our first Harbour Seal. We returned for our first breakfast with Jane, who provided a choice of everything from creamy porridge to a full cooked breakfast.

We set off in the minibus to drive west towards Ardnamurchan Point, stopping first at the dramatic viewpoint of Camas Nan Geall. There was a light breeze but clouds clung to the top of Ben Hiant, the highest peak on Ardnamurchan. A group of Ravens was joined by a pair of White-tailed Eagles but they were soon lost to view in the low cloud.

The sun was shining by the time we arrived at Ardnamurchan Point. Looking out from the lighthouse we saw a good range of seabirds including Gannets, Manx Shearwaters, Kittiwakes and a Storm Petrel. Even better, we found a distant pod of Harbour Porpoise and then a much closer group of five. These small cetaceans are still not well understood but the resident population around Ardnamurchan seems to be thriving.

We enjoyed coffee and cakes in the lovely café before driving back to Kilchoan. It had started raining by now and so we stayed inside the minibus to eat our packed lunch. In the bay, we found a solitary Twite feeding in the seaweed, a lovely little finch and a typical bird of the highlands.

In the afternoon, we drove back past Glenborrodale and on to the hide at Garbh Eilean. This lovely oak structure is a wonderful place to spend an hour on a wet afternoon. We enjoyed watching both Harbour and Grey Seals and learning how to distinguish the two species. Common Terns were feeding in the loch and we saw four elegant Goosanders, one of the fish-eating “sawbill” ducks.

After an excellent dinner, some of us stayed up to watch for nocturnal wildlife from the comfort of the sitting room. At about 11pm, we had our first Pine Marten, which came in to feed for several minutes, in clear view.

Day 3

Tuesday 11th August

Before breakfast, we set off on an early morning drive in search of the big Red Deer stags that are best seen at this time of day. During the stalking season, they spend the daylight hours up on the high tops. We saw a few young stags but only one big adult, which was partially hidden at the edge of woodland. Any disappointment was quickly dispelled when Steve spied an Otter in Camas Fearna. We watched it feeding for about fifteen minutes, at one point climbing out onto a rock and giving great views.

After breakfast we drove east to Castle Tioram, where we enjoyed a walk out across the tidal causeway to the castle and back across the wide beach. A Spotted Flycatcher and a Red-breasted Merganser were eclipsed by a pair of adult White-tailed Eagles that flew out from behind the cliffs and over the castle, a memorable moment.

After coffee and cakes in the excellent community café in Acharacle, we went to the jetty to look out across Loch Shiel. We found a pair of adult Black-throated Divers in full breeding plumage – a rare and beautiful sight. In the distance, an adult White-tailed Eagle stood sentry in a tall pine – in the scope we could clearly see the white head and yellow bill.

We returned to the shores of Loch Sunart to have our packed lunch at Camas Torsa (meaning “Thor’s Bay”). As we were eating, a Red-throated Diver flew by and its evocative call carried across the loch. After lunch, we drove out to Acheteny and had stunning views of another adult White-tailed Eagle as it flew above the shores of Loch Mudle.

After dinner, some of us took an evening stroll down to Aperitif Point, where we watched Pipistrelle bats feeding close overhead. Then an Otter appeared out in the middle of the bay, before swimming closer as the evening light faded over the calm waters. Not to be outdone, those that stayed at the centre had seen a Pine Marten which came in to feed before dark. What an end to a terrific day!

Day 4

Wednesday 12th August

This morning we took a boat over to the island of Carna, which has just three cottages and no permanent residents. In the company of skipper Andy Jackson, we appreciated the serenity of this special place, where so few people ever visit. One group walked up the heathery slopes with Andy whilst the rest of us stayed near the

jetty. Both groups had views of Otters in the rain, though they were at some distance. We also enjoyed watching a close flock of Lesser Redpolls and Common Terns feeding their young.

After returning to Glenborrodale for hot drinks and home-made scones, we drove out to Swordle. Nowadays, this consists of a farm and a handful of cottages but it was a thriving township before the clearances. In fact, there have been significant settlements here since the Stone Age and it is the focus of a long-term archaeological study. We could make out the turf-covered remains of a large Bronze Age burial structure and, close to Swordle Bay, we examined the site of a Viking ship burial, still marked out with the original stones (the artefacts have been removed and were exhibited in the British Museum). Down on the sandy beach, Noel found some tracks that belonged to a Mink. Gannets and Manx Shearwaters flew past and on the walk back, we had great views of a perched female Sparrowhawk.

After dinner, we had our best views yet of an adult Pine Marten, as it ate peanuts on the table right next to the window. We agreed that this was a different individual, much more confident than the one that we had seen over the previous two nights. We then set out on our night drive, back down the road to Swordle. We found a Short-eared Owl above Camas nan Geall and then a Barn Owl near Branault, before another Short-eared Owl appeared. In addition, we had good views of two big Red Deer stags and a Hedgehog, curled up by the side of the road!

Day 5

Thursday 13th August

We began our day scanning for raptors at Camas nan Geall. We watched a White-tailed Eagle being mobbed by the local Ravens; it repeatedly rolled over to present talons to its tormentors, which was an impressive sight!

Next, we drove through Kilchoan and on to the stunning white-sand beach at Sanna. The road took us through the famous volcanic ring structure, where concentric rocky ridges mark the site of ancient volcanic activity. The clouds cleared as we arrived and we enjoyed a beautifully sunny afternoon on this idyllic stretch of coast. The dunes held an interesting range of flowers including Harebells and Grass of Parnassus. A group set off to walk around to Portuairk, while the rest of us drove back to Kilchoan pier to look for more Otters - but to no avail.

After dinner we again walked out to Aperitif Point, where Angie spotted a close Otter climbing through the rocks and seaweed, coming straight towards us! It came within 50 metres of the platform before diving under the water and disappearing from sight. It eventually re-appeared much farther off-shore, where it continued to feed, at one point climbing out to eat a large fish. Glenborrodale Bay was giving us reliable Otter sightings and this was our best view yet!

Day 6

Friday 14th August

We spent the whole day on board the *Laurenca* with skipper Andy Jackson, who has an unrivalled knowledge of the waters and marine wildlife around Ardnamurchan. We began with a circumnavigation of Carna, stopping for several minutes to watch a dog Otter swimming close to the boat and climbing out onto rocks. Reluctantly, we left the Otter behind and sailed on through Loch Sunart, where we found a pod of Harbour Porpoises.

We took the boat into Bloody Bay, the site of a famous battle between rival factions of the MacDonald clan, where we found a juvenile White-tailed Eagle sitting on low rocks, close to the water. Perched up in a nearby tree was an adult, keeping a watchful eye on the youngster. As we sailed away from Mull, Andy took us close to a feeding Basking Shark, which we reckoned to be about eight metres long. This was turning into a remarkable day!

There were good numbers of seabirds flying close to the boat as we made our way across to Muck. We had plenty of time to explore the island and enjoy refreshments in the lovely little café before getting back on board to return across the Sea of the Hebrides.

Andy took us back across towards Mull in order to look for cetaceans and we were rewarded with a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins swimming right up to the boat! We witnessed lots of interaction between the eight dolphins, with individuals occasionally leaping clear of the water. After a few minutes they moved on, despite Andy's attempts to coax them into riding our bow wave.

As we travelled back into Loch Sunart, we saw one Minke Whale and then another one appeared! We watched them surface several times, one was an adult but the other appeared smaller, perhaps a half-grown youngster. Finally, as we approached Laga Bay, two White-tailed Eagles flew over the boat, as if in recognition of an outstanding day!

Day 7

Saturday 15th August

Our last full day on Ardnamurchan started with an early morning drive for Red Deer stags, before Jane prepared another delicious breakfast for us. We set off to drive out west for another visit to the lighthouse at Ardnamurchan Point. We stopped at the usual bays and found an Otter in Camas Fearna. After our success with White-tailed, everyone was now keen to track down a Golden Eagle so we stopped for a final scan at Camas nan Geall, but without luck.

On the advice of Niall, the head stalker for the estate, we headed up the private road to the wind turbine above Loch Mudle. Here we found two White-tailed Eagles; one was perched on the ground, very close to the track. Then we saw another eagle flying away with carrion in its talons – a close look in the scope revealed this to be our first Golden Eagle!

We drove along the single track road to Ardnamurchan Point, as a showery morning gave way to fine and dry afternoon. We saw both Linnet and Twite when we returned to Kilchoan. We drove back to Achateny and then paid a last visit to the Nadurra Centre. We stopped for refreshments and some last minute gifts. Before leaving, we checked the fields and along with the usual flock of Greylag Geese, we found some lovely Golden Plover, a few of which had vestiges of their summer plumage.

After our final dinner, a last visit from one of the local Pine Martens was a fitting end to a week of exceptional wildlife sightings!

Day 8

Sunday 16th August

After our last big breakfast, we returned to Glasgow via the Corran ferry and Glencoe. The roads were relatively quiet and we had a pleasant journey back to the Lowlands.

It had been an amazing week, with a variety of mammals seen at very close quarters. We had almost daily sightings of both Pine Marten and Otter and the number of White-tailed Eagles had been exceptional. The day at sea had provided us with superb views of three species of cetacean, another Otter, a Basking Shark and lots of seabirds! The whole group greatly appreciated the wonderful wildlife that Ardnamurchan has to offer and we thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. The service provided by Faye and the quality of the food throughout our stay are well worth mention. The accommodation was very comfortable and we were made to feel truly welcome by everyone.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Scientific name	Common name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			3	2	1	1	1	
2	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		1	1	2	1		1	
3	European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>			1					
4	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>						1		
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				2			3	
6	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		1						
7	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		20	100	13	40	20	70	
8	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1					
9	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						20		
10	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		8				20		
11	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						2		
12	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		7		10		50	2	
13	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1	1			70		
14	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>		2						
15	House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>				1				
16	Pipistrelle sp.	<i>Pipistrellus sp.</i>					✓			

Birds

1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1					
2	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>			2					
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1	2	2	2		2	
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>						2	2	
5	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		12		60	10	100		
6	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>			L					
7	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		20	2	20	15	40	100	
8	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	2	1				
9	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		20	10	10	10	30	20	
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		8		15		22	28	
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				6	6		6	
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	6		2	8		6	2	
14	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					2			
15	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	6							
16	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		4						
17	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			1			2		
18	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	4	2	2	4	4	
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	3	10	8	6	2	10	
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			2	1			1	
21	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>							1	
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			4	2		1	1	
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>							29	
25	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				1	6	1	2	
26	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			30	3	8		1	

	Scientific name	Common name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
27	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		H			H		4	
28	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1					
29	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						1		
30	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			4		3			
31	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			1	6	6	4	6	
32	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>						2		
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		2	4	2		2	2	
36	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		4				2	4	
37	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		10	10	4		20	16	
38	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						30		
39	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						15		
40	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	4			1		2		
41	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				5			1	
42	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>						30		
43	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1			1			
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>					2		2	
45	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				1				
46	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					H			
47	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				2				
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1				2	
49	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		1		H				
50	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
51	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
53	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
54	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		2	2	2	2		1	
55	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1		2		2	1	
57	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>							L	
58	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			1	1				
59	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			15		10		2	
60	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1		1		1	
61	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		3	2	2	2	2	4	
62	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>				6	8		10	
63	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3	2	1	2		4	
64	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1					
65	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						1	1	
66	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				2				
67	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			2				1	
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		10	6	12	6	2	12	
72	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		10	20	20	10	6	100	
73	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			1			30	15	
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>					20		6	

	Scientific name	Common name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
75	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>				20	10	1		
77	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		15		3	2			
78	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				20	6		6	
79	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		1		H	1		2	
80	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	1			3			3	
81	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>						10	2	
82	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			2				1	

Fish

1	Basking Shark	<i>Cetorhinus maximus</i>						1		
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Other Taxa

Common Hawker Dragonfly, *Aeshna juncea*White-tailed Bumblebee, *Bombus lucorum*Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*Large White, *Pieris brassicae*Moon Jellyfish, *Aurelia aurita*Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*Slow Worm, *Anguis fragilis*Common Carder Bee, *Bombus pascuorum*Dark Green Fritillary, *Argynnis aglaja*Scotch Argus, *Erebia aethiops*Small White, *Pieris rapae*Lion's mane Jellyfish, *Cyanea capillata*Common Frog, *Rana temporaria*Common Lizard, *Zootoca vivipara*