

# Scotland's Mammals & Highlights of the Highlands

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 16 August 2018

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Report compiled by Marcus John

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Tour participants: Marcus John and Bob Elliott (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

We enjoyed a successful week in Ardnamurchan with sightings of several iconic species, often close to our comfortable base in the Glenborrodale Centre. The weather in the Highlands is always variable but we certainly enjoyed more sunshine than showers! A Pine Marten came to visit us on most evenings and we had exceptional views of White-tailed Eagles. We had several close encounters with Otters, including watching a mother with two cubs for almost an hour. We spent a memorable day on board the 'Laurenca': we sailed across to Mull, before encountering Common and Bottlenose Dolphins and a Minke Whale. We appreciated the wild beauty of the Isle of Carna and Loch Teacuis, remote and unspoilt. Throughout the tour, we visited a diverse range of habitats across the entire peninsular, enjoying the spectacular scenery and varied wildlife that Ardnamurchan has in abundance.

### Day 1

Thursday 9th August

Glasgow - Glen Coe - Corran Ferry - Glenborrodale

We met in Glasgow and set off on the long drive to Ardnamurchan. After enjoying views of Loch Lomond and refreshments at the Green Welly Stop in Tyndrum, we drove across Rannoch Moor and then through Glen Coe, considered one of the most spectacular and beautiful places in Scotland. Soon after, we crossed Loch Linnhe at Corran Ferry and continued through Strontian, along Loch Sunart towards Glenborrodale. As we made our way along the winding single track road, we came to an abrupt halt when we saw two Otters swimming close in to shore; everyone clambered out to get a first look at this iconic species. Despite this unscheduled stop, we arrived in time for our evening meal, prepared by local chef Alan and his wife Sian. After dinner, those that stayed up were rewarded with our first look at a Pine Marten, which came in to feed in front of our lounge window. It is always a treat to get so close to what is a largely nocturnal animal that usually stays well hidden.

### Day 2

Friday 10th August

Glenborrodale - Camas Fearna - Camas nan Geall - Ardnamurchan Point - Kilchoan

The weather was showery as we set off to explore the Ardnamurchan peninsula but soon cleared to bright sunshine and light winds. Before we had even left Glenborrodale we had another Otter sighting. A male was feeding in the bay below the bunkhouse and everyone watched him for several minutes – what a way to start our first full day!

The indented coastline has a mixture of lichen-covered rocks, shallow bays and extensive belts of Atlantic oak woodland. We stopped to admire the views at the three bays that lie between Glenborrodale and Camas nan Geall. We spent time scanning for wildlife and were rewarded with more Otters, this time a mother and two pups. We watched them as they fed together close to shore and then they clambered out into the thick seaweed that lined the shore. The mother was feeding under the kelp, occasionally appearing to feed small fish to the playful pups, who ran and tumbled around in the slippery weed. We watched them for about half an hour, only perhaps 50 metres away from where we stood, until they eventually swam off. With their rather fluffy fur, the buoyant pups were unable to stay below the surface for long as they followed their mother. This was an extraordinary encounter that none of us will ever forget!

We continued on to the lighthouse at Ardnamurchan Point, the most westerly place on the British mainland. Here we looked out to sea where hundreds of Manx Shearwaters were passing by, their wings flashing black and white as they banked low over the waves. A solitary Great Skua was the only other notable seabird. We stopped for coffee at the old lighthouse keepers' cottages; these are very atmospheric stone buildings with walls about a metre thick! From the garden, we used our telescopes to scan the mountains and saw two distant White-tailed Eagles and a Golden Eagle.

After another three-course dinner, we set off on our night drive. We were lucky to see a beautiful Barn Owl caught in the spotlight's beam and encountered many Red Deer, including big, mature stags. Pushing our way carefully past the sheep that like to sit on the warm tarmac, our constant scanning was rewarded with a sighting of a Red Fox. Soon after this, we skidded to a halt when a large Hedgehog crossed our path. Bob picked it up and rocked it gently, at which it opened up and looked at us, clinging on to Bob's finger with its clawed feet. Definitely the cutest moment of the holiday!

## Day 3

Saturday 11th August

### Garbh Eilean – Acharacle - Loch Shiel – River Shiel - Castle Tioram – Kentra Bay

After a good night's sleep in our comfortable, and warm bedrooms, we enjoyed a late breakfast. There is always plenty of choice as Alan offers everything from fruit and porridge to a full Scottish breakfast! The woodland around the bunkhouse abounds with birds and we enjoyed watching the activity on the bird table every morning.

We set off east today in rainy weather. Given the conditions, we made our first stop at Garbh Eilean, where a large hide has been built from local oak with a turf roof. Here we spent a pleasurable hour watching the wildlife on the inner reaches of Loch Sunart. The main attraction here are the seals; we saw several Harbour Seals and two Atlantic Grey Seals. Good numbers of terns were swooping over the main channel; through the telescopes we were able to pick out both Common and Arctic Terns.

We stopped for coffee and cakes in the community café in Acharacle and went out to check Loch Shiel, which was rather quiet. We ate our packed lunch by the River Shiel, where deep black water gushes through narrow rocks and under an old, narrow, arched bridge. After this, we continued on to the shallow bay where sits the forbidding fortress of Castle Tioram, the ancestral seat of the Clanranald. As soon as we emerged from our vehicles, a juvenile White-tailed Eagle flew out from the sheer cliffs that lie behind the beach. As we walked towards the castle, the incoming tide was forcing air out of thousands of lugworm burrows, many jets of bubbles spouting across the sand and making a curious sound.

On our return journey we visited Kentra Bay and Moss, the latter an 'eccentric' peat bog with an unusual flora.

After dinner and completing our checklist, we were again entertained by a Pine Marten coming in to the peanuts and peanut butter sandwiches. All of this was captured on Bob's trail camera, which allowed us to track the Pine Marten activity throughout the week.

## Day 4

Sunday 12th August

Port na Croisg - Camas Fearna – Kilchoan - Sanna Bay - Glenborrodale

After an early morning walk down to Glenborrodale Bay and another big breakfast, we set off westwards again. At Port na Croisg, we soon found a mother and two pup Otters, out on the headland at the edge of the bay. We watched as they jumped around the rocks; not the closest views but lovely to see three Otters interacting together, both in and out of the water. The pups stay with their mother for up to a year, until they are able to fend for themselves. Once they leave, she quickly gains breeding condition again. We saw them again from the roadside at Camas Fearna but somewhat briefly.

It was Sunday and Kilchoan was mostly shut, though we did manage to get hot drinks at the Steading craft shop. After this, we drove out to Sanna, across a strange landscape comprised of a volcanic ring formation of rocky ridges. We stopped to admire several Stonechats, which seem to love this sheltered area. Although hidden away in this remote corner of the highlands, the white sand beach at Sanna has often featured in lists of the best beaches in the UK. We walked along the track, where blue Harebells and white Grass of Parnassus grew in the short turf, towards the extensive dunes. The beach itself is stunning, the turquoise sea lapping the white sand, which contrasts with the smooth, black rocks. Looking out to sea, we saw Gannets, Shags and Manx Shearwaters. A harsh call drew our attention to two Great Northern Divers, which flew low around the bay before disappearing from sight. As we walked back through the dunes and grass, we saw two very smart Wheatears.

On our return to Glenborrodale, a solitary Otter was feeding out in the bay; a nice way to complete another great day.

## Day 5

Monday 13th August

Loch Sunart – Bloody Bay (Mull) – Sea of the Hebrides – Isle of Muck

We spent the whole day on board the 'Laurenca' with skipper Andy Jackson. As we set off along Loch Sunart, we soon found a pair of Red-throated Divers in lovely breeding plumage; approximately 300 pairs breed on Scotland but nowhere else in the UK. We saw several of the resident Harbour Porpoises, some surfacing very close to the boat. As we approached the Sound of Mull, we encountered a few Atlantic Grey Seals amongst dozens of Harbour Seals.

We crossed over the Bloody Bay on Mull, where a pair of White-tailed Eagles has bred for many years. We soon found an adult sitting high in a pine tree, before it flew off across the waves.

We left the sheltered waters and headed north-east across the Sea of the Hebrides. We saw another White-tailed Eagle as it flew from Mull to hunt over Ardnamurchan. Seabirds soon appeared, including Gannets, Common Guillemots, Razorbills and a Puffin, which swam quite close. We were all scanning the calm water for any sign of a cetacean and it was Frances who spotted several dorsal fins in the distance. Andy changed direction and we were able to confirm that it was a pod of Common Dolphins heading our way. They swam right around the boat, sometimes shooting vertically out of the water and repeatedly breaching clear of the surface. Andy throttled up to full power and the dolphins swam alongside and began riding the bow wave, leaping clear of the water at eye

level! We realised that there were several Bottlenose Dolphins with the Commons, though they did not approach as close.

When we were just 30 minutes from the Isle of Muck Janet and Jan spotted another dorsal fin, which turned out to be a Minke Whale! Andy manoeuvred the boat for a closer view; the whale then surfaced slowly so we could see the top of its head, the blow hole and the long back as it slowly went under. You know you are close to a whale when you can hear the blow!

We enjoyed a break in the quaint café on Muck and a walk across this tiny island, with a population of around 40 people. The shallower waters around Muck held several Black Guillemots and on the island itself we saw our only Eider of the tour; we even heard a Corn Crane.

On our return past Ardnamurchan Point we saw another Minke Whale and a pod of five Bottlenose Dolphins slowly swimming near the rocky shoreline. We cruised past huge rafts of Manx Shearwaters and saw many Gannets. Finally back in Loch Sunart, we encountered yet more cetaceans in the form of Harbour Porpoise. It had been an exceptional day at sea with four species of cetacean and thousands of seabirds.

## Day 6

Tuesday 14th August

Ockle - Port na Croisg - Camas Fearna - Kilchoan - Garbh Eilean

On our pre-breakfast walk we again saw an Otter feeding in the calm waters of Glenborrodale Bay. After breakfast, we headed off to visit the north shore at Ockle, an area of the peninsula we had yet to visit. We drove around Ben Hiant, Loch Mudle and inland past Braeside, from where we enjoyed stunning views of the small Isles: Rum, Muck and Eigg. We enjoyed a short walk to a reed-fringed lake where we looked in vain for late dragonflies. A flock of Black-tailed Godwits flew overhead, a sign that autumn migration was already underway. We also found a single Swift, a rare sight this far north in August.

We retraced our journey back to the bays on the south shore and then visited the westerly village of Kilchoan, where we stocked up in the only shop for 20 miles! After this, we returned to the hide at Garbh Eilean. It's easy to reach this hide, just a short stroll from the car park, where you can soak up superb Loch Sunart views as you watch for the local wildlife. Common and Atlantic Grey Seals bask on the shores of Garbh Eilean (the 'Rough Island'), and there is a heronry on the smaller island beside it. We spent a relaxing hour watching the wild world go by. As well as the usual seals, we saw Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander, both saw-bill ducks with long serrated bills for catching fish.

We returned to the bunkhouse with time to relax before dinner. The Pine Marten came in to visit the feeding station outside our window; as it turned out this was our last sighting of the tour. The woods around Glenborrodale hold probably the highest density of this species anywhere in the UK and sightings are virtually guaranteed. However, this doesn't diminish the excitement of watching this charismatic mammal at such close quarters.

## Day 7

Wednesday 15th August

### Braeside – Swordle – Laga – Carna – Loch Teacuis

Some of us went out before dawn to look for the mature stags that visit the lower woods only at night and return to the high tops soon after first light. We photographed a couple of good looking three-year-old stags and saw three more White-tailed Eagles. The others went down for a last look at Glenborrodale Bay and had incredibly close views of an Otter, which sat out on a weedy rock only a few metres from where they sat! Just before breakfast, we checked the moth trap and found an interesting assortment of insects. The commonest moth was the very pretty Lesser Swallow Prominent, but over 10 species were recorded in total. In addition we had also trapped a beautiful burying beetle.

It was a damp morning when we set off and headed straight past Ben Hiant to the junction for Braeside. Here we paused when someone spotted a raptor on the ground. We soon realised that a sheep carcass had attracted a total of seven White-tailed Eagles and we watched them jockey for position and take turns feeding – an extraordinary sight! Next, we continued up to the north coast and enjoyed a gentle walk down to sandy Swordle Bay. Here we found a pair of Ringed Plovers with a youngster and had close views of a very neat young Dunlin. We visited the site of a Viking ship burial and nearby bronze-age remains; this sheltered valley has been inhabited for several thousand years.

We stopped for a coffee break at the Ardnamurchan Natural History Centre before heading to Laga Bay and a rendezvous with Andy Jackson. We spent our last afternoon on board the 'Laurenca', cruising round Carna and into the remote Loch Teacuis. We found another Otter but it was swimming strongly and was soon lost to sight. A few minutes later, when we approached the long sand bar that lies behind Carna, pandemonium broke out amongst the waders and terns; the cause was an immature White-tailed Eagle which flew in low across the water and settled down on the sand bar. Andy cut our engines and we drifted into the sand bar, where we sat and appreciated the sounds of water and wild birds. Soon dozens of Common Terns were feeding around us, carrying fish to the sand bar to feed well-grown young.

As we returned across Loch Sunart to the jetty, a pod of Harbour Porpoise swam close enough for us to hear their gentle blows as they surfaced. A lovely way to complete another successful day.

## Day 8

Thursday 16th August

### Corran Ferry - Glen Coe - Glasgow

We set off immediately after breakfast for the long drive back to Glasgow. We crossed back over Loch Linnhe on the Corran Ferry before stopping to look for Red Squirrels in Glen Righ forest. We were lucky enough to find several of these lovely little mammals running around the feeders as we arrived; a great way to complete our mammal list! Continuing through the mountains, we enjoyed views of Glen Coe before taking a break in Tyndrum. We arrived back in Glasgow in plenty of time for everyone to catch their various trains and planes.

It had been a very successful week with some lovely sunny weather and a few showers, of course! Highlights included: amazing views of at least 10 different Otters; evenings spent with a local Pine Marten; a day at sea with four species of cetacean and seeing so many eagles! Everyone appreciated the wildlife and special scenery that Ardnamurchan has to offer and we also greatly enjoyed each other's company. The Glenborrodale Bunkhouse

was welcoming and comfortable and both Alan and Sian ensured that we ate well throughout our stay. Ardnamurchan is a remote yet beautiful place that retains a true sense of wilderness; time spent here will live long in the memory.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>					2	40	42	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		30		19	20	20	40	
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	1							
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		9		7	15	6		
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>							6	
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>					1		7	
7	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			7			9		
8	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2					5	
9	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1						
10	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓		1				
11	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>					2		2	
12	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				2				
13	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		200+		20	4500	10		
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				6	100	10	✓	
16	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		5		28	100+		15	
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1	4		4	
18	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1						
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		3	1		1		1	
20	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		4	1	1	3		11	
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		10	4	10	2	5	8	
22	Corn Crane	<i>Crex crex</i>					H			
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				4	2		5	
25	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						12		
26	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		5	10	2	1	1	6	
27	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>							H	
28	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		4		3		3	2	
29	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		7				2	4	
30	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					2			
31	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>							2	
32	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>					40	6	1	
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
34	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
35	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		✓						
38	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			1					
39	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			5	1	1		50+	
40	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			15					
41	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		1			3			
42	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>					✓			
43	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					✓			
44	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>				1	4			
45	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>					1			

	Common name	Scientific name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
46	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				6				
47	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		3	✓			3		
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1		4			2	
49	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	1	1				
50	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	1					
51	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>						1		
52	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1	1	1				
53	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3		1		1	2	
54	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>								
55	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1			1	
56	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		4	8	12	15	7	12	
57	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	20	
58	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
64	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H				H		
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H	1		1		
66	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta eurpaea</i>		1						
67	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1					
68	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				15		1		
69	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	2		1	1	1	1	
70	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1					3	
71	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				3			1	
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		6		10	3	6	3	
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		10		12		2	2	
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		8		4	1	3	1	
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	20				
76	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1		1				
77	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		3		3	1	H		
78	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		1						
81	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						1		
83	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					H			
84	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		2						
85	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				5				
86	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				H	2			
87	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>								
88	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
89	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>							2	

## Mammals

1	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	2	5		4		2	2	
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	Common name	Scientific name	August							
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
2	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	1	1	1		1	1		
3	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	2	2		2	1			
4	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>							1	
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		67	6	70		4	40	
6	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1					3
7	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1						
8	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					10			
9	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>					15			
10	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		4		1	20		5	
11	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			15	2	95	10	200	
12	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			2		8			
13	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>					2			
14	Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>		1						
15	Pipistrelle sp	<i>Pipistrellus sp</i>		2			1	1		
16	Field Vole	<i>Microtus agrestis</i>		1						
17	Common Shrew	<i>Sorex araneus</i>		2						
18	Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>		1						
19	Feral Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus</i>							5	
20	American Mink	<i>Neovision vison</i>		1						

## Other Taxa

Scotch Argus, *Erebia aethiops*

Green-veined White, *Pieris napi*

Common Hawker, *Aeshna juncea*

Common Carder, *Bombus pascorum*

Froghopper sp, *Cercopoidea sp*

Burying Beetle, *Nicrophorus interruptus*

Lion's Mane Jellyfish, *Cyanea capillata*

Moon Jellyfish, *Aurelia aurita*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Peacock, *Aglais io*

Highland Darter, *Sympetrum striolatum*

White-tailed Bumblebee, *Bombus lucorum*

Ichneumon wasp, *Ichneumonidea sp*

Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*

Sea Star, *Asterias rubens*

Atlantic Mackerel, *Scomber scombrus*