Scotland's Mammals & Highlights of the Highlands

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th - 24th August 2023



Manx Shearwaters by Kim Ratcliffe



White-tailed Eagle by Dave Jackson



Goosanders and Harbour Seal by Dave Jackson



Group at Sanna by Dave Jackson

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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Summary

Highlights from our week on the Ardnamurchan peninsula included Red Squirrel, European Badger, Red Deer and the family of Pine Martens who came visiting every night delighting our guests.

We visited historical sites including Glendrian, Castle Tioram, Ardnamurchan Lighthouse, where a Minke Whale and Common Dolphins showed off-shore, and the beautiful beach at Sanna where the Small Isles of Rum, Eigg, and Muck could be seen from the bay.

Close views were had of Harbour Seals on our half-day boat trip as they lounged around on the rocks and a European Storm Petrel was unexpected as it flew close to the boat shortly after launch.

Four White-tailed Eagles, with an adult swooping down for fish, large flocks of Manx Shearwaters and diving Northern Gannets were avian highlights of our time on the all-day trip out to the island of Muck. The return journey was quite an experience with the boat battling against the wind and we were all thankful for our waterproof clothing as we reached the relatively calm waters of Loch Sunart!

Grass-of-parnassus, Bog Myrtle, Meadowsweet, Valerian and Cotton Grass were among the many plants and flowers growing in the wetland habitats amongst the many *Sphagnum* mosses. Waders were on the move with small flocks of Greenshank and Ruddy Turnstones roosting on the rocks while Curlew were seen and heard each day.

We enjoyed magnificent scenery with changeable weather as summer turned to autumn, watched wonderful wildlife, picked edible fungi and savoured local food and drink on this remote and tranquil part of Scotland.

Day 1

Thursday 17th August

Glasgow - Glencoe - Ariundle - Glenborrodale

20°C

After pick-ups from Paisley and Glasgow Airport, we headed north-west across the Erskine Bridge and up the A82 along the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond to our first stop at the Green Welly in Tyndrum. Another stop for photos at Glencoe and we were on our way again.

The Corran Ferry was out of action, so we continued through Fort William and arrived at the Ariundle Centre near Strontian just after 7pm for the first of many delicious, freshly cooked meals.

As we arrived at our accommodation in Glenborrodale a Red Deer stag hurried away as we turned into the road. We unloaded our luggage and began to make plans for the days ahead as two Pine Martens appeared and halted our discussions and a third animal appeared in the darkness as our eyes became accustomed to the low light. These delightful mustelids make up a family group of two kits and their parents who live in the grounds and can often be seen taking a quick snack before running off to forage in the surrounding woodland.

With a long day of travelling most guests had retired to bed before a female Badger appeared and finished off the peanuts left out for the Pine Martens, not a bad start on the first evening!

Day 2

Friday 18th August

Camas nan Geall - Kilchoan - Glendrian- Sanna - Ardnamurchan Lighthouse - Garbh Eileen Hide. Windy with sunny intervals

16 - 21°C

An early morning walk down to the bay was rewarded with a Red Squirrel crossing the path, four Greenshank, three Curlew and a dozen or so Grey Herons waiting for the tide to fall. Hooded Crows scavenged around the rocks as a small bird landed at the water's edge – Kingfisher. Now that was a surprise!

A single Rock Dove, identified by its white rump and uniform plumage, landed on a small island while Siskin, Common Buzzard, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Robins called around us as we made our way back to base for breakfast and to prepare for our first day on Ardnamurchan in clear skies and sunshine.

It was getting breezy as we reached Camas nan Gaell where cattle were resting on the beach below the watchpoint. Information boards told of the history of the bay where standing stones, ruins and an old cemetery gave an insight to a bustling community brutally cleared in the 1800s to make way for a sheep farm.

A female Yellowhammer alighted on bracken long enough for its identification to be sealed and tractors began bailing the hay on the meadow below where Common and Herring Gulls gave a good size comparison as they caught insects on the wing.

After a quick stop at Loch Mudle where one or two Sand Martins were still flying around, it was on to Kilchoan Community Centre for a short break. From there we took the route to Sanna and stopped on the way to visit Glendrian, a fascinating crofting township abandoned in 1941. On the walk up to the site, the Ardnamurchan volcanic crater, which erupted around 60 million years ago, can be seen with the sea and Small Isles beyond.

Grass-of-parnassus, Common Butterwort and hairbells grew among the machair at Sanna where we walked along the white sand beach, a whirling flock of Ringed Plover included one Sanderling which split off and landed on the rocks. Common Swifts were busily feeding over sheep fields no doubt getting ready for their long migration south and a flock of Twite saw us before we saw them and took flight as we approached.

From there we made our way along the narrow road to Ardnamurchan Lighthouse where some of us chose to check out the café while others viewed Gannets flying low beyond the point and Manx Shearwaters skimmed the waves further out. Several dorsal fins rising to the surface were identified as belonging to Minke Whale and Common Dolphins though the sea was quite rough, and they were only seen for a brief spell.

A call from Kate at Ariundle meant that our plans to eat at the bunkhouse had been changed so we left and headed east stopping to pick chanterelles to add to the next evening's dinner for the adventurous vegan and vegetarians in the group!

Several Harbour Seals were seen from Garbh Eilean hide on the way to Ariundle but no sign of the hoped-for Otter before we left for our evening meal where Kate matched our collection of chanterelles with ones she'd picked herself!

It wasn't long before the Pine Martens came to see what we'd put out for them on our arrival back at base though the Badger didn't show by the time we'd all retired to bed.

Day 3

Saturday 19th August

Loch Sunart – Camas Torsa - Garbh Eilean Hide - Castle Tioram - Ariundle Woodland. Changeable, rain showers, windy

15°C

The tide times were in our favour as we ventured down to the bay where the usual Grey Herons, Great Cormorants and European Shags were roosting but still no sign of the elusive Otter by the time we returned to the bunkhouse for breakfast.

There was little of note at Camas Torsa so we continued on to the hide where a flock of eight Goosander (now called Common Merganser in some circles) fed in the bay. Harbour Seals numbered 27+ with some pups porpoising, a term used to describe cetaceans and seals jumping clear of the water. The term is also used in F1 racing.

A Slavonian Grebe allowed prolonged views as the fish it had caught was a little too large to swallow, but it managed to keep hold of it as a pair of Common Terns flew by.

We'd planned a coffee stop at Cafe Tioram though, like Kilchoan Community Centre shop, it was closed due to staff shortages, so we took a scenic drive over the Shiel Bridge and on to Castle Tioram were we had lunch. The castle was built sometime around the 12th century in a strategic position at the head of Loch Moidart to control the entrance of the loch for the clan lords. The entrance has recently been gated due to the risk of falling masonry and plans to develop the castle as a historic monument have yet to be agreed.

Curlews and Oystercatchers fed along the shoreline although visibility was poor due to the increasing rain, so we headed to Loch Shiel but didn't get out of bus as conditions had worsened.

A popular choice was Ariundle Café for afternoon tea before the weather cleared in time for a very pleasant walk in the nearby woodland. Fungi of many species including *Russulas* and *Agaricus* were growing along the path and on trees, but no edible species were noted. Speckled Wood was the only butterfly to be identified and gave prolonged views as it fed on the purple-blue flower heads of Devil's-bit scabious.

An hour had passed, and it was back to the café for an early dinner before the drive back to Glenborrodale where we completed the checklist and waited for the martens to show. The first to arrive was a male, identified by a piece missing out of its ear, before the kits arrived to entertain us at 10.15pm, bounding around over the picnic table and on the windowsills, with just a pane of glass separating them from us and our cameras!

Day 4

Sunday 20th August

Peritif point Camas nan Geall - Kilchoan - Glendrian- Sana - Ardnamurchan Lighthouse - warm, wind, mostly clear and sunny pm

16°C

The day started well with a Red Squirrel on the nut feeder before another visit to the loch in perfect, still conditions and a rising tide. Hooded Crows, Greenshank and a young Raven being fed were the highlights, but the Otter was still nowhere to be seen, much to our continued frustration.

A distant herd of Red Deer were gathered on Ben Hiant viewed from Camas nan Geall while Rock Pipits, Greylag Geese and a large flock of Ringed Plover flew over the jetty at Kilchoan.

A return to the lighthouse was a popular choice and while some of the group booked on a tour to learn about the history and take in the magnificent 360° views from the top, others walked down to the foghorn viewing platform where Gannets and Manx Shearwaters patrolled below.

With some of the group still craving more exercise an option was given to walk two miles across the mountain to Portuairk and meet the rest of us there. Gannets were diving in the turquoise water of the bay, and we could see Sanna where we'd been a few days earlier.

With no sign of the walking group, binoculars were trained on the path they should have come down before a text message was received "we're safe but lost. See you on the beach". The group had taken a slight detour and arrived at the secluded Bay MacNeil beach between the lighthouse and Portuairk and reached our rendezvous in good spirits later than expected.

Returning to the jetty, Jane described a bird on the water that matched Black Guillemot, but it had been lost to view and she did well to spot a low-flying Sparrowhawk over the bay as it disappeared out of sight. A grey-looking juvenile Rock Pipit fed among the rocks at Mingary Pier, and out at sea, more Manx Shearwaters glided by.

We returned to base for an early dinner which gave us enough light after for another walk down to the bay where Roe Deer and a trio of Little Grebes were the only wildlife of note so back up the hill where our evening's entertainment was supplied courtesy of the Pine Marten family before we retired to bed.

Day 5

Monday 21st August

4

Glen Mor - Camas nan Geall - Garbh Eilean hide - sun

17°C max

Another pre-breakfast excursion down to the loch and another fruitless search for Otter although we did get our first sightings of a singing Wren and three Greenshank but little else, so we returned for breakfast before venturing out again.

The planned boat trip on Loch Sunart was postponed due to wind and rain forecast so we chose to re-visit some of the most scenic parts of the peninsula which gave us the opportunity to walk down to the beach at Camas nan Geall. Flocks of Linnets, a few Meadow Pipits and Ravens were observed as some of the group took to removing some of the plastic and tangled fishing nets from the pebbles. A good job well done!

Continuing past Loch Mudle, we turned off along a narrow, birch-lined road to Fascadale where we crossed a boggy field containing carnivorous plants, Broad-leaved Sundew and Common Butterwort before reaching the cliffs. Once the centre of wild salmon fishing, the ice house, where the fish were packed to be transported all over Britain still remains.

The clouds were looking ominous, and rain was falling as we made our way back to the minibus, so we decided to take a break at Kilchoan before continuing to Mingary Pier. The weather was in for the day, so we returned to the comfort of the bunkhouse for tea and coffee and eagerly awaited the arrival of Kate to cook our evening meal and for the return of the Pine Martens.

Day 6

Tuesday 22nd August

Loch Sunart - Loch Shiel - Garbh Eilean Hide. Rain showers

10-14°C

A slight chill in the air as we made our usual pre-breakfast excursion to the loch, checking various sites for the impossibly invisible Otters. Chanterelles were collected as we made our way back for breakfast and to prepare for the boat trip out on the loch.

Boatman, Andy's long-legged cat, which has wildcat genes, greeted us as we parked the minibus. It wasn't in the least bit 'wild' but could conceivably pass as one if seen at night in the headlights of a vehicle.

Andy gave us a geology lesson and pointed out the Precambrian rock mountains surrounding the bay and as we motored out across the loch a small black and white bird came into view – a very unexpected European Storm Petrel. Whilst these birds are occasionally seen out at sea, it's unusual for them to occur so far into the loch and was probably attracted to the fish farms that line the lochside.

Shag and Cormorant rested on a rock giving a good comparison to the size and shape differences of the two species as we came to Loch Teacuis where we learned about the unique wildlife hidden in the water below us. A flock of waders including Black-tailed Godwits, Eurasian Curlew, Dunlin and Ringed Plover circled around before alighting a distance away.

We then approached a Harbour Seal colony where animals of different ages watched us as we watched them, and a small flock of Goosander preened on the rocks. We then circled around to the northern part of Càrna to look for marine life, but Grey Heron and Hooded Crow were the only species of note.

A sub-adult White-tailed Eagle came into view above the hillside as we were making our way back into Laga Bay, the first of the trip and much anticipated as it drifted effortlessly over the mountains and out of sight. A Lion's

Mane Jellyfish was seen in the clear water as we thanked Andy for a great morning out on the loch and made our way back to the minibus.

We had lunch back at the bunkhouse before heading east and stopping at various points until we arrived at Loch Shiel which must be one of the wettest places in the UK (DJ pers com!) A dozen Red-breasted Mergansers were diving in unison close to the pier while Little Grebes gathered out on the loch as persistent drizzle drove us back to the minibus.

We paid another visit to the hide where a juvenile Black Guillemot was the closest bird, the mottled barring on the wing panel confirmed its age compared to an adult in winter plumage which has an all-white patch.

We arrived at the Ariundle Centre for dinner where one of our guests was served with a special cooked meal of the chanterelles she'd given to Kate. Some of us were more envious than others!

A wild goat ran alongside the road as we returned to Glenborrodale later than usual. Peanuts were thrown out for the Pine Martens with apologies made for keeping them waiting and just as the group were getting ready to retire for the night, a Badger appeared to feast on the nuts. An excellent end to the day.

Day 7

Wednesday 23rd August

Laga Bay – Muck. Calm early, becoming stormy later

10-21°C

It was a still morning when we arrived at Laga for our second boat trip and one that would take us out of Loch Sunart, past the most westerly point of the British mainland across to the Isle of Muck.

As we approached an island off Ardslignish, all eyes were on a large bird perched upright on the rocks. We weren't disappointed as the huge size matched White-tailed Eagle, an immature bird in its 3rd or 4th year with a few white tail feathers and the bill becoming yellow. We eventually obtained fabulous, close views and photos of this majestic eagle.

A fishing boat approached, and an adult White-tailed Eagle dived in to take a fish off the water before returning to land. We maneuvered around until we were close enough to the island where Ruddy Turnstones roosted on rocks below the eagle.

A total of four eagles were seen before we continued our journey where small groups of Common Guillemots and Razorbills gathered as Ardnamurchan Point came into view where sighting of Minke Whale and Common Dolphins had been logged on a cetaceans app in the same area we'd seen them from land on our first visit to the lighthouse.

The sea had become rough as we watched Gannets and Manx Shearwaters in good numbers congregating around fish shoals, the shearwaters numbering in their hundreds.

We slowed the boat, but no cetaceans were seen as we crossed the sea to Muck. A pair of Ravens flew over the boat as we moored up to the jetty where we had lunch before taking a short walk to the café for tea and cake. Healthy populations of Common Starlings and House Sparrows flocked around the houses before a Sparrowhawk zipped by putting all the birds up.

Goldfinches and Linnets fed on thistle seeds as we strolled along the quiet lane to the north of the island before we returned to the boat for our journey back. A pair of Great Skua (or Bonxie), appeared in front to the boat but the waves splashing over the sides prevented binocular views.

Andy skilfully manouvered the boat past Ardnamurchan Point, meaning 'headland of the great seas' and we were pleased to have reached the comparative stillness of the loch after battling into the wind and waves for most of the journey.

We passed a couple of White-tailed Eagle as we returned to Laga Bay where we thanked Andy for another adventure on the seas and for getting us safely back to dry land!

Kate arrived to cook our final meal and as we were finishing, a Pine Marten and a Red Deer appeared much to the delight of her assistant as she recorded the animals on her mobile phone. We were pleased to share 'our' animals with her on our last night at the bunkhouse.

Day 8

Sunday 24th August

Glenborrodale - Glasgow via Glencoe and Rannoch Moor

After an early breakfast, mindful of the extended journey back to Glasgow with the Corran ferry still out of service, we spread the remaining seeds over the picnic table for the birds and peanuts were strewn across the patio just in case the Pine Martens decided to pay an early visit.

The route back through Acharacle passes the Glenfinnan viaduct (made famous in the Harry Potter films) which overlooks Loch Shiel. We stopped at Fort William where some of the group went to take a closer look at a steam train with its restored Pullman carriages that runs over the viaduct on its way to Mallaig.

The Green Welly with its impressive selection of Scotch Whisky was our final stop before we returned to Glasgow, dropping some of the group at the airport and others at Paisley Train Station where we said our goodbyes and reflected on our adventures and wonderful wildlife we'd seen during the week. Pine Martens were a group favourite, but Otter eluded us though there's always something to go back for!

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Species lists

Mammals

Scientific name		August 2023										
	Common name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24			
Pine Marten	Martes martes	3	2	3	3	2	2	3				
European Badger	Meles meles		1				1					
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus											
Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus				1							
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris		1	1			1					
Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis		4				2					
Harbour (Common) Seal	Phoca vitulina		/	✓	✓	/	/	✓				

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name		August 2023								
	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Canada Goose	Branta canadensis						✓			
Greylag Goose	Anser anser		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Merganser	Mergus merganser			8			6			
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator						12			
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus							✓		
Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata									
European Storm Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus						1			
Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus				✓	✓	✓	✓		
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	✓	√	✓	✓	√	√	✓	✓	
Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus			1						
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			3		√	√			

Common name		August 2023								
	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus		✓		✓	✓	√	✓		
European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	√	√	√	✓	√	√	√		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus				1		1	1		
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla						1	4		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		12		√		√	√		
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	2								
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa						√			
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata		√	√	√	√	√	√		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus							√		
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia		4			3	√			
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres							√		
Sanderling	Calidris alba		1							
Dunlin	Calidris alpina		-					1		
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus			✓	✓	√	√	✓		
Common Gull	Larus canus		√		√					
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	1	,	√	√	√	√	√	√	
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus		√	· √	√	√	√	√	· √	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus graellsii	√							√	
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo			2	3	/	/	√		
Great Skua	Stercorarius skua							2		
Common Guillemot	Uria aalge							<u>-</u> √		
Razorbill	Alca torda							√		
Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle				1			1		
Rock Dove	Columba livia		1			√		1		
Feral Pigeon	Columba livia 'feral'					√			√	
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		√			_ •	√			
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		√	√		√	√	√		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		Н	Н						
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica		,	,					√	
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓							✓	
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓							√	
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		,	√	√	√		√		
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Great Tit	Parus major	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia		√	√		, ,	√	√		
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√		√	√	√	√	√		
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	, v	√	'	√	√	✓	√		
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		Н	Н	'	V	, v	'		
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		Н	Н	Н			1		

Common name		August 2023								
	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		Н	Н						
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula					Н				
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		1	1						
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Swift	Apus apus	2	4							
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		1							
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		✓	✓	√	✓	√	✓	✓	
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		1	2	1	2	2			
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula		2		Н					
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				2					
Twite	Linaria flavirostris		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	√	✓		✓		
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		Н	Н	1					
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella		1							

Other

Common Toad – Bufo bufo