

# St Kilda & the Hebrides - Islands on the Edge of the Atlantic

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 10 June 2016



Minke Whale



St Kilda Wren



White-tailed Eagle



Northern Gannets

Report compiled by Sara Frost  
Images courtesy of Graham Canny



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Tour participants: Sara Frost (leader) with 11 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Saturday 4th June

### Oban to Loch Sunart, Mull

The group were met by tour leader Sara at 3pm in Oban, where we eagerly put on life jackets and boarded a RIB for the (30 second!) ride over to the Elizabeth G – our home for the next week. It was a hot, calm, sunny day – a fantastic start to the trip. Once on board we were welcomed with drinks, delicious home-made canapés and scones. The group were properly introduced to Sara, the Naturetrek leader, and to the Elizabeth G crew – Rob (Skipper), Sarah (Bosun) and, most importantly, to Martin (the Chef!). After enjoying a wonderful afternoon tea, we quickly settled into our cabins and joined Sara out on deck as we sailed out of Oban harbour. Immediately ahead of us were three or four large groups of noisy, feeding Gannets accompanied by smaller groups of Herring Gulls, Razorbills, Guillemots and several Grey Seals, all making the most of what must have been a substantial shoal of fish under the water. We continued up the calm, glassy waters of the Sound of Mull and found our first cetaceans of the trip – three Harbour Porpoise 50 metres away from the boat. As we continued to sail we added many birds to the start of our list (including Arctic and Common Terns, Black Guillemots and a Red-breasted Merganser) and Red Deer were seen grazing lazily on the surrounding hills. We then anchored in a quiet bay of Loch Sunart for the evening where we enjoyed a wonderful four-course dinner prepared by Martin.

Feeling extremely full, we sat sleepily on the top deck in the warm evening air, admiring the ghostly shapes of Moon and Lion's Mane Jellyfish drifting through the mirror-calm waters and listening to two Cuckoos as the sun set over the loch. For those still up with Sara at 11pm, she pointed out an Otter on the other side of the loch, swimming back and forth, making its way along the shoreline fishing for crabs. It was making the most of the low tide when it wouldn't have to dive so deeply to find its food. We stayed out watching it until 11.30pm, before succumbing to the dimming light and reluctantly retreating inside.

## Day 2

Sunday 5th June

### Loch Sunart to Eriskay

We woke to an idyllic, beautiful morning of clear skies, flat-calm glassy water and the continuing call of Cuckoos, and most of the group sat out on deck before breakfast to enjoy the peaceful surroundings with a cup of tea. After a hearty breakfast, we swiftly got underway on our crossing to Eriskay. Even out in the more open water, the conditions were delightfully calm and we joyfully watched several groups of Harbour Porpoise gently kissing the sea's surface before silently disappearing again. Diving Gannets, auks and Great Skuas were also seen. Our lunch was unexpectedly interrupted by an adult Minke Whale which surfaced seven times around our boat, to whoops and cheers from the group!

We then arrived at Eriskay where it was a beautiful 25°C, and disembarked for a pleasant late-afternoon walk, admiring the flora such as Yellow-flag Iris, Northern Heath Orchid and Liverworts, and crossing a beautiful beach with clear, turquoise waters. We stopped off for a refreshing drink in the island pub "The Politician" (named after SS Politician, which sank in February 1941 en route to Jamaica in the waters near Eriskay. All crew were rescued, and the islanders helped themselves to some 40,000 cases of Scotch whisky!) June and Marjory went for a paddle. We then strolled back to the boat to the calls of Meadow Pipits, Wheatears and countless

Starlings who were taking advantage of the abundance of grubs to feed their young. We were welcomed back on board with another superb four-course meal and afterwards, sleepily sat outside admiring the sunset. For those still up after 10.30pm, Sara pointed out both Mars and Saturn, which became clearly visible as the sky dimmed to an evening twilight.

## Day 3

Monday 6th June

### Eriskay to St. Kilda

Those up on deck before breakfast enjoyed a sunny morning watching starlings, pipits, Wheatear and Rock Dove. We set off from Eriskay at 8am and, shortly after finishing breakfast, we had our first dolphins of the trip as a group of Bottlenose Dolphins (known locally as the “Barra Boys”!) steamed their way towards the boat and spent a playful 10 minutes bow riding with us. Sara encouraged everyone to lean over the front of the boat, where the dolphins could be seen rolling on their sides and looking up at the group inquisitively. For those with keen hearing, the dolphins could also be heard whistling to one another – magical! As we continued to sail, Sara found a pod of Common Dolphins, which we slowly approached and very quickly they also started to bow ride and show off with some impressive gymnastics. By early afternoon we could see St. Kilda on the horizon – looking tantalisingly close, yet still over 40 kilometres away. We all stood at the bow of the Elizabeth G for several hours, happily spotting Storm Petrels, Manx Shearwaters, auks and a Great Northern Diver, while watching the cliffs of Hirta growing ever closer.

Finally, we arrived at our long-awaited destination, anchoring in Village Bay and eagerly clambering ashore. We were welcomed by the warden who introduced us to the village and the island’s heritage, before exploring the museum, old church, school, deserted houses and graveyard. A few members of the group had fleeting glimpses of the endemic St. Kilda Wren as it flitted in between the dry stone walls and grassy rooftops of the cleats, along with Wheatear and hundreds of noisy starlings. The delightfully tame Soay Sheep (many with lambs) grazed among the village buildings, completely unconcerned by our presence. The booming calls of Snipe echoed across the bay, and Common Eiders and Ruddy Turnstones could be seen along the shoreline. After an hour of exploration, tummies were rumbling and we boarded the zodiac for the quick ride back to the warmth of the Elizabeth G and another delicious home-cooked meal from Martin.

## Day 4

Tuesday 7th June

### St. Kilda

We woke up to a calm but grey, overcast morning in Village Bay and, once on shore, we set off together to walk to “The Gap”. Our first stop was the graveyard. The majority of the group got their first views of the endemic St. Kilda Wren, which was perched on top of the chimney of the Factor’s house and, five minutes later, also perched on a stone wall two metres away from the group outside the cemetery. Starting our ascent up The Gap the weather worsened and, accompanied by the sounds of distant rumbling thunder, sheets of torrential rain started to pour down on the group. Rob accompanied those who wished to continue, whilst Sara escorted others down to shelter in the museum, to enjoy viewing the artefacts and read material about the heritage of this fascinating island. The lifestyle of the St. Kildans was one of truly remarkable self-sufficiency, and the museum information boards were complimented by well-preserved photos, further immersing us into what must have been a truly gruelling way of life.

Joining up an hour later when the rain had subsided, both groups walked through the village and down to the start of the road where again we split. Those who wished for a longer walk went with Rob up the road for the five-hour round walk to Lover's Stone for a picnic with a fantastic panoramic sea-cliff view, and on to Ruaval. Sara took those preferring a more leisurely walk along to Ruaval, via the curved ridge encircling village bay and enjoying a picnic watching thousands of rafting auks in the bay. Both groups returned (rather soggy) to the boat for hot showers, and a cup of tea and cake. The rest of the evening was spent relaxing and enjoying watching the birdlife and absorbing the atmosphere of the bay.

## Day 5

Wednesday 8th June

### St Kilda to Leverburgh

Waking to another magical morning on the edge of the Atlantic, after breakfast we set off around the dramatic sea cliffs of Hirta – the highest in the UK. We sailed beneath thousands of screaming auks, Gannets and Fulmars, which dominated the skies, cliffs and surface waters. Our route took us west, through a narrow channel between Hirta and Soay, before heading east towards Stac Lee, Stac an Armin, and Boreray. Upon arrival at the first stac (Stac Lee), everyone on deck stood open-mouthed (perhaps unwisely!), eyes gazing upwards, speechlessly absorbing the spectacle of a white, noisy cliff face that seemed to move of its own accord. Countless nesting Gannets hugged the cliff face from top to bottom, utilising every possible ridge and crevice, their nests crammed closely together, leaving no space unused. What used to be grey, volcanic rock was thickly plastered in decades-worth of cream-coloured guano. Amongst the dark brown seaweed nests, glinted blues, greens and reds – fishing nets and ropes that the birds had incorporated into their homes – an obvious worry that they, or their offspring, may unwittingly get caught.

We slowly sailed around Boreray and onto Stac an Armin, where we saw where the St. Kildan men would leap from their boats onto a perilous ledge before scaling the cliffs to gather Gannets, upon which the inhabitants of Village Bay so depended for food. Looking at the sheer cliff face from the safety of a sturdy vessel, it was incomprehensible to imagine attempting such a feat from a small wooden, unpowered boat that would be thrown about in the unforgiving waves.

Groups of Gannets circled above us, Great Skuas shooting through them, harassing the Gannets into regurgitating their catch. The skuas worked in teams – taking turns to lead the attack, and once a conflict had ensued, five or six other skuas would quickly fly in to knock the Gannet from the sky and send the group of them spiralling into the water - pulling tail feathers and pecking wings as they went. Despite the odds, the Gannets escaped without losing their fish on all occasions. As we reluctantly started to sail away from Boreray for our return crossing, we looked back to see the undeterred black dots relentlessly terrorising the white clouds of Gannets.

As we made our way into open water (heading for Leverburgh, Harris), the sea remained delightfully calm. Porpoise were seen, along with another Minke Whale. Half way through the journey, Sara saw some distant dorsal fins and called for the boat to change direction for closer inspection. As we drew nearer, we were delighted to find a small pod of White-beaked Dolphins. Although clearly busy feeding, their curious nature got the better of them and they paused their lunch to swim over to the boat to investigate us for several short minutes before regrouping and disappearing.

Upon arrival into Leverburgh, we anchored in the calm harbour in good time for a short walk before dinner. Setting off through the stacked lobster pots along the harbour, we made our way along a quiet road that followed the shoreline, enjoying the sunshine and roadside flora (Yellow-flag Iris, Violets and Butterwort to name a few) and watched several male Greenfinches sitting on the telegraph wires, looking very smart in the evening sun. We scoured the shoreline for otters, without luck, and opted to return to the boat for dinner (Martin's delicious cooking being too much to resist).

After our meal, Sara took some of the group back off the boat to sit along the shoreline and watch for Otters where a nearby freshwater outlet ran into the sea (coastal River Otters will frequent such outlets to wash the salt water from their coats). We walked through a field (seeing our first Greylag Geese of the trip) and settled down on a bank, watching the sun set over hills of Harris, the beautiful pink sky reflected in the calm waters in front of us. We watched Oystercatchers, Herring Gulls and a Heron go about their business as the sky faded to a pale twilight – the darkest it would get all night. By 10.45pm we had no signs of an Otter and, rather tired from an already exhilarating day, we opted to return to the boat.

## Day 6

Thursday 9th June

### Leverburgh to Loch Sunart, Mull

As we had a long journey ahead, we set sail at 6.30am to cover a few hours of ground before breakfast. The weather continued to favour us – bright blue skies beamed from above as we glided through calm waters. Most of the group were eagerly on the bow with Sara, who was pointing out countless Porpoise and occasional groups of Common Dolphins. We also saw a very small Minke Whale, which looked to be only 4-5 metres in length (presumably a juvenile). It appeared twice, and we stopped the boat hoping to perhaps see its mother surface nearby, but after 20 minutes or so of waiting, nothing further appeared.

We continued on, and as we were having lunch sailing past the west coast of Skye, the appearance of two adult Minke Whales interrupted lunch, resulting in the immediate abandonment of plates and drinks (sorry Martin!) as everybody rushed outside. Here, we had the best views of the trip, as the two Minke Whales surfaced repeatedly around the boat, giving an audible “pfoo!” each time they rose out of the water. Delighted, we continued south and arrived in Loch Sunart by 6pm, anchoring on the north side (having moored on the south side for our first night). Sara took the group on shore for an evening stroll and for a quick visit to a lovely locally run visitor centre about the area's natural history. Meanwhile, Rob went diving for scallops and, once we were all back on board, we enjoyed a feast! After dinner, most opted to reluctantly start packing for our departure the next day and later joined Sara out on deck in hope of seeing an Otter. Unfortunately we were unlucky again, but Sara resolved to run a final “Otter Watch” at 6am the following morning for those who wished to get up.

## Day 7

Friday 10th June

### Loch Sunart to Oban

At 6am several members of the group were eagerly waiting on top deck, and it wasn't long before Sara pointed out the first Otter, 100 metres or so away, swimming by the jetty we had landed on the evening before. Our luck held and, as we watched it swim along the shoreline, it was joined by another, which clambered about on the rocks before getting into the water. We watched in the morning light, as the two Otters swam back and forth

between two bright orange buoys. After 45 minutes, we were joined by most remaining members of the group, and we lost sight of the Otters momentarily, only to find three of them appearing a hundred metres behind the boat. We watched, mouth open, whispering excitedly to one another as not four, five but SIX Otters then appeared, all swimming back and forth and diving for crabs, butterfish and mussels, leaving silver ripples of water. What a spectacular end to the trip! We watched for another 45 minutes until, reluctantly, we had to leave for Oban, but the memories of watching a family of wild Otters were everlasting.

As we sailed down the Sound of Mull, we were all desperate to see the bird of prey that had eluded us so far – the White-tailed Eagle. Scanning the shoreline, with the help of Skipper Rob, we located a White-tailed Eagle nest, with the adult perched in a nearby tree – we were delighted! Manoeuvring the boat closer to shore, everyone got excellent views of the eagle as it stared at us with distinct disinterest. Not wanting to outstay our welcome, after 20 minutes of photographing and admiring, we sailed on towards Oban, slowly easing our way back into civilisation as we started to pass houses, moored boats and salmon farms. Grey Seals and Porpoise continued to make appearances until we arrived in the harbour at 1pm to disembark. We all said our goodbyes and left with everlasting memories of a truly wonderful voyage to St. Kilda: the Edge of the World.

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The group

## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					✓		
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓					
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓						
4	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	✓		
5	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓						
6	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓			✓	
7	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓	✓				
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓				✓	
11	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓			✓	
14	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓	
15	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							✓
16	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	H			
18	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓					
19	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓			
20	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		H	✓	✓	
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓						
22	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
23	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
25	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓				✓	
26	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓				✓		
27	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			✓				
29	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓				
34	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓			
35	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	H	H			H	
36	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓					
37	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		✓		
38	Starling	<i>Stumus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
39	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>						✓	
40	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓		✓		
41	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		H					
42	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓		✓	
43	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						✓	
44	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H					✓	
45	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					H	H	
46	St Kilda Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes hirtensis</i>			✓	✓	H		
47	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓				✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
48	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	H							
49	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓						
50	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					✓			
51	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
52	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>								
53	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓			✓	✓		
54	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓				✓		
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
56	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
57	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	H	H					✓	
58	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓			
59	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>							✓	

## Mammals

1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					✓			
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>					✓			
4	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			✓					
5	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓			✓		
6	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
7	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
8	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Eurasian (River) Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓							✓
10	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓							✓
11	Soay Sheep	<i>Ovis aries</i>			✓	✓	✓			
12	Eriskay Pony	<i>Equus caballus</i>		✓	✓					

## Jellyfish

1	Egg-yolk Jellyfish	<i>Phacellophora camtschatica</i>			✓	✓	✓			
2	Moon Jellyfish	<i>Aurelia aurita</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		

## Plants of interest recorded

Northern Marsh Orchid , *Dactylorhiza purpurella*

Common Butterwort , *Pinguicula vulgaris*

Tormentil , *Potentilla erecta*

Primrose , *Primula vulgaris*

Heather , *Ericaceae*

Cotton Grass , *Eriophorum angustifolium*

Lady's Smock , *Cardamine pratensis*

Round-leaved Sundew , *Drosera rotundifolia*

Thrift , *Armeria maritima*

Violet , *Viola sp.*

Yellow-flag Iris , *Iris pseudacorus*

Marsh Marigold , *Caltha palustris*

Bluebell , *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

Liverwort , *Marchantiophyta*

# Map of the Hebrides



0 km 15 30 km  
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