

St Kilda & The Hebrides – Islands on the Edge of the Atlantic

Naturetrek Tour Report

15th – 23rd July 2022



Manx Shearwater



Storm Petrel



Common Dolphins



St Kilda Wren

Tour report and images by Tim Melling



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Summary

Departing from Oban on this 9-day voyage, we sailed north through the Sound of Mull, along the western coast of Skye and over to the Outer Hebrides, stopping to explore and overnight in some beautiful bays and sea lochs along the way. Heading across the Minch brought several groups of Common Dolphins that came to bow-ride, and great views of Manx Shearwaters and Storm Petrels. Arriving at St Kilda was the undoubted highlight (it can never be guaranteed!), with a full day to explore the island of Hirta and immerse ourselves in the history and wildlife of these islands. The St Kilda Wren was regularly heard and seen, along with numerous Snipe that chipped and drummed around us. Sailing underneath the sea stacks and cliffs, for which St Kilda is justly famed, was a jaw-dropping experience, as tens of thousands of Gannets swarmed above our heads and the sea surface was brimming with Puffins, Guillemots and Razorbills. We stopped at the Monach Isles where we heard two Corncrakes and saw many seals, plus a beach full of waders. Heading to Barra we saw both Golden and White-tailed Eagles, Great and Arctic Skuas, and a Black-throated Diver plus many Porpoises. Heading across to Tiree we saw White-beaked Dolphins and hundreds of Storm Petrels and managed to photograph a Wilson's Petrel which was most unexpected and very rare for Scotland. We then had a fantastic day visiting the Isle of Staffa and Fingal's Cave where we saw breeding Puffins, Twite and many wild flowers. Then onto Ulva where we had an incredible show of raptors; Two Golden Eagles being mobbed by a Merlin plus two White-tailed Eagles, one of which was really close. We then returned to Oban via Tobermory.

Day 1

Friday 15th July

Dunstaffnage to Loch Sunart

We met at Dunstaffnage marina at 1pm and boarded our vessel Seahorse II– our home for the next week. Around the marina we saw a few Black Guillemots, plus Raven and Hooded Crow. We found a Garden Tiger Moth on the deck which we put ashore before setting off. We met our crew; Donald the Skipper, John the Bosun, and Sarah the Chef. After a brief safety talk we set off up the Sound of Mull at about 2:30. There were plenty of Manx Shearwaters and a few Gannets, Shags, Oystercatchers and Arctic Terns plus two distant Golden Eagles on Moidart. A few Razorbills, Puffins and Guillemots chaperoning youngsters were also seen. Then at 4pm the welcoming smell of warm scones wafted from the galley and drew us down for afternoon tea. No cetaceans were seen but a number of Common Seals kept our interest. We tucked into Glenmore Bay, Loch Sunart, for the evening and, after a delicious homemade dinner, we went to bed.

Day 2

Saturday 16th July

Loch Sunart to Sound of Harris

In the morning we saw three Harbour Porpoise around our boat, including one youngster. These were our first cetaceans of the trip. Also a surprise was a young male Hen Harrier that flew right over the boat and even stayed long enough for a few photographs. Captain Donald was worried about the weather forecast “freshening up” by Tuesday and he was worried we might miss our weather window to visit St Kilda, so we made the decision to spend a full day sailing across the Minch to our anchorage in the Sound of Harris so we could head straight for

St Kilda the following day. So we spent a full day at sea, in overcast, occasional drizzle conditions. The sea became a little choppy at times but was generally calm. Oddly a Poplar Hawkmoth appeared on the boat while we were at sea but flew off as we neared the Outer Hebrides. Throughout the day we saw hundreds of Manx Shearwaters and very many Guillemots and Razorbills chaperoning young. Puffins were also plentiful, including one or two that had shed their summer bill cover, which is a rare sighting in Britain. We managed to see nine Storm Petrels and about a dozen Black Guillemots, some surprisingly far from land. Additional good birds seen today were Red-throated Diver, Bonxie and four Arctic Skuas, three dark and one pale phase. One Minke Whale was seen briefly, and Sarah the chef saw one from her galley window, but they weren't cooperating. But Common Dolphins more than cooperated as throughout the day we had a succession of small pods that came to bow ride with maybe fifty dolphins in total. A single White-beaked Dolphin was seen by a couple of people but it moved quickly through. We anchored about 7:30pm, twelve hours after we set off.

Day 3

Sunday 17th July

At sea (to St Kilda)

This morning it was drizzling but soon cleared up, and with little wind. We had a good search for Otters early morning but all we saw were a few Common Seals. We left the Sound of Harris at about 9am ready for the seven hour journey to St Kilda. In the Sound of Harris we saw a few Black Guillemots, Rock Doves, Curlews, Arctic Terns, plus a single Common Tern. As we headed out past the islands we started to see a few Manx Shearwaters but on the last island we were amazed to see two adult White-tailed Eagles. One took flight as we passed and joined another circling round. The journey to St Kilda had quite a large swell, and was relatively quiet with no cetaceans whatsoever. Manx Shearwaters even dried up about half way but we did manage to see two Sooty Shearwaters and a Balearic Shearwater. Other birds of interest were lots of Puffins, four Bonxies and seven Storm Petrels. As we neared St Kilda the Puffins, Guillemots and Gannets became more numerous, and we started to see our first of several Grey Seals.

We spent a couple of hours on St Kilda and everyone managed to see St Kilda Wren, both adults and juveniles, and we heard the subtly different song. Snipe seemed to be extraordinarily common, chipping and drumming everywhere. We also saw both Great and Arctic Skuas, plus many juvenile Wheatears, Rock and Meadow Pipits, and Starlings. A single Chiffchaff was also seen. In the harbour was a single Red-breasted Merganser plus a few Eider, and on the shore were Turnstone and Ringed Plover.

Day 4

Monday 18th July

St Kilda

We woke up in the harbour at Hirta to drizzle and low cloud which unfortunately lasted all day. But we still had a great time on the island. Most managed to visit all the places of interest around the village. St Kilda Wrens, Snipe and Wheatears were much in evidence. Those who ventured up to the Gap were "greeted" by some rather zealous Arctic Skuas which clearly had a chick nearby. There were Oystercatchers and Turnstone on the beach but the only different bird was a White Wagtail. The flushes had insectivorous Sundews and Butterwort with a couple of species of Eyebright, but try as we might, we failed to find St Kilda Dandelion, which had finished flowering. By 3pm everyone had opted to return to the boat so Donald did a circuit of the massive Gannet

colony of Stac Lee next to Berneray. All agreed it was a jaw-dropping experience to sail below such amazing cliffs and bird-filled skies. We then headed across the sea towards our next destination, the Monach Islands. Close to St Kilda there were numerous Auks, especially Puffins, plus Gannets and Fulmars. But as we got further from land Storm Petrels started to appear, sometimes in small groups. We saw over thirty Stormies which slightly outnumbered Manx Shearwaters. The only other birds of note were a few Great and Arctic Skuas and a single juvenile Swallow following the boat. We had dinner en route and arrived at the Monach Islands about 9pm.

Day 5

Tuesday 19th July

Monach Islands to Barra

This morning we took the Zodiac around the Monach Islands to get a good look at the many Grey Seals in the area. We dropped some people off on the beach while the rest went on a Zodiac cruise. On the beaches we could see Otter footprints but alas no Otters. As we cruised along the sandy beach we could hear two Corncrakes singing but no chance of a sighting. A Skylark was also singing overhead, our first of the trip. Along the beach were hundreds of summer plumage Sanderling, plus smaller numbers of black-bellied Dunlin. In addition there were Curlew, Oystercatchers, Turnstone and Ringed Plover. The Greylag Geese here are the genuine wild breeders rather than the feral ones from further south. Also great to see were two Great Northern Divers in full summer plumage flying over the boat.

We set off at about 10:30 for the eight hour journey to Castlebay on Barra. The weather was cool with occasional showers yet we read that London had experienced the hottest temperature ever recorded in Britain that same day. Near the Monach Islands a few managed to see a single White-beaked Dolphin and later a Minke Whale was seen. But seabirds were rather sparse today with just a handful of Storm Petrels, Manx Shearwaters, Bonxies and Puffins. The highlight was a single Sooty Shearwater although Tim tried to get people onto a Leach's Petrel but nobody managed to see it. But as we neared Vatersay things began to get better. First we spotted a Golden Eagle being mobbed by Hooded Crows, followed by two Ravens. Then a summer-plumaged Black-throated Diver flew right past. Two or three groups of Harbour Porpoise were just offshore as we turned round towards Castlebay. Then we spotted a White-tailed Eagle perched on the cliffs of a small island that we passed. And as we arrived in Castlebay on Barra the sun started to shine. A post dinner walk around Castlebay gave us several surprising new birds; Swift, Mute Swan, Mallard, House Sparrow, Blackbird, Hebridean Song Thrush, Stonechat, Linnet, Goldfinch and Reed Bunting. But much more interesting was Great Yellow Bumblebee, a rare machair speciality.

Day 6

Wednesday 20th July

Barra to Tiree

After breakfast, we went ashore for an hour or two's stroll. We started seeing birds that had otherwise been absent such as Goldcrest, Blackbird and Reed Bunting. Most popular were some Redpolls feeding on Sorrel with plenty of noisy Stonechats around. Most people managed to get good views of the dark Hebridean Song Thrushes plus the two rare Bumblebees; Great Yellow Bumblebee and Shril Carder Bee. Late morning we set off to Tiree but the sea was pretty quiet. We had one group of about 20 White-beaked Dolphins then later a

small group of Common Dolphins that came to investigate the boat. One of the commonest seabirds on this trip was Storm Petrel, with a couple of hundred seen by everyone that wanted to. People were concentrating on trying to photograph them as they whizzed by and the photographs clearly showed a single Wilson's Petrel with its pale carpal bar, trailing legs and even the pale webs between the toes. This was an extraordinarily rare bird so far north. Also of interest were a couple of winter plumaged Puffins close to the boat. We had seen thousands of Puffins but only a handful were in winter plumage. As we neared Tiree there were hundreds of Shags plus many Guillemots on the water.

We arrived at Tiree about 5pm and went ashore for a walk. We saw many Lapwings plus a single Ruff which were new for the trip. On the beach were many Ringed Plovers, Dunlin and Curlew plus a couple of Common Terns. Dunnock was also new, in a gorse thicket with several Linnets. We asked a local birdwatcher about Corncrakes but they said there weren't any on this side of the island so we decided against another visit in the evening.

Day 7

Thursday 21st July

Fingals Cave and Ulva

We set off from Tiree at 9:30am towards the Treshnish Islands. Soon after we left Tiree we saw four pods of Common Dolphins which came to play in front of the boat but the rest of the open sea was quite quiet with just a few Arctic Skuas, Puffins and Manx Shearwaters. But as we neared the Treshnish Islands we spotted a raft of several hundred Manx Shearwaters which took to the air in a great cloud. Three Harbour Porpoises also appeared as we passed Lunga. We had an early lunch of soup and cheese then straight after lunch we visited Fingal's Cave in the sunshine, first by Zodiac to the cave entrance, then later we landed and walked the basalt column pavement to reach the cave on foot. These basalt columns were formed 55 million years ago. The other part of the UK with structures similar to this is Giant's Causeway in Ireland, and legend has it that both this and Fingal's Cave were the end pieces of a bridge built by the Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill (a.k.a. Finn McCool), so he could travel to Scotland where he was to fight Benandonner, his gigantic rival. The legend is, in effect, geologically correct as both the Giant's Causeway and Fingal's Cave were indeed created by the same ancient lava flow, which may have at one time formed a "bridge" of sorts between the two sites. We then had a wander around Staffa for a couple of hours, watching the breeding Puffins and marvelling at the abundance of wild flowers; Heath Spotted Orchids, Bell Heather, Tormentil, Sea Campion, Scots Lovage and Thyme. Several Common Blue and Grayling butterflies were also seen, plus one Meadow Brown. Other birds of interest were several Twite, Skylarks and Shelducks.

We then made our way to Ulva where we had a raptor extravaganza. We saw two White-tailed Eagles, two Golden Eagles, one being mobbed by a Merlin, plus Peregrine, Kestrels and Buzzards. One White-tailed Eagle perched on the shore near to our anchorage. Before dinner we took a Zodiac cruise to look for Otters but couldn't find any. We did see Harbour Seals and more Shelducks though.

Day 8

Friday 22nd July

Mull

We tried another Zodiac trip for Otters but all we saw were many Common Seals plus a dead one with a White-tailed Eagle feeding on it. Alas no Otters in flat calm conditions. After breakfast we set sail for Tobermory and managed to see the usual seabirds plus a few Harbour Porpoises and a pod of Common Dolphins. After lunch we spent the afternoon in Tobermory. Some walked south through some ancient woodland to a loch filled with both yellow and white waterlily. A few more plants of interest included Wilson's Filmy Fern, Lemon-scented Fern and Sanicle. New birds for the trip were Siskin, Chaffinch, Bullfinch, Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Blue Tit and Long-tailed Tit. Also Speckled Wood and Golden-ringed Dragonfly were seen.

Day 9

Saturday 23rd July

Mull to Oban

The weather forecast for last night was strong winds of variable direction so we decided to remain anchored in the shelter of Tobermory. This necessitated an early start so we set off back at 6am, arriving in Oban about 10am. The weather was overcast with low cloud so no chance of any eagles but we did see the usual seabirds including Manx Shearwaters and chaperoning Guillemots. At Dunstaffnage it was time to say farewell and go our separate ways. But what a great trip we had had, including reaching St Kilda.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	July 2022									
		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>					✓	✓				
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>						✓		✓		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓				✓		✓	✓		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓	✓						
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>							✓			
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>					✓					
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓								
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>					✓					
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Leach's Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>					✓					
Wilson's Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>						✓				
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			✓							
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>			✓		✓					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	✓				✓		✓			
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓								
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	
Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>					H					
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>						✓	✓			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓		✓	✓				
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓			
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓					✓	✓	✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					✓	✓	✓			
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓		✓			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>										
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓	✓					
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓					✓				

Common name	Scientific name	July 2022								
		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓		✓	✓			
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓						✓	✓	
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>					✓				
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>							✓		
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>							✓		
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							✓		
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓	✓	✓		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>								✓	
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓			✓		✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓				✓	✓		✓	
St Kilda Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes hirtensis</i>			✓	✓					
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>						✓			
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					✓	✓		✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>					✓	✓		✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>						✓		✓	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>					✓	✓			
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓				✓	✓		✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓			
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>								✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>								✓	
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>								✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>								✓	

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		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>								✓	
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓				
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>							✓		
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammae</i>					✓	✓			
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>								✓	
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓	✓			
Reed Bunting	<i>Emeriza schoeniclus</i>					✓	✓			

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	July 2022								
		15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>									
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		✓			✓				
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓				✓	✓		
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>		✓			✓	✓			
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓			✓		✓		
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓						✓	✓	