

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 30th May 2023



Fulmar



Puffin



Oystercatcher



Seahorse II in Loch Euphort

Tour report and images by Greg Smith



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Tour participants: Greg Smith (leader) with nine Naturetrek clients and three crew members on board *Seahorse II*.

Summary

A wonderful nine-day cruise around the Hebridean islands including two nights at anchor in Village Bay in the archipelago of St Kilda. In numbers, we visited ten different islands, saw six different species of cetacean (including Orca, Minke Whale and White-beaked Dolphin) and 80 species of bird (among them Puffins and Manx Shearwaters in their thousands, several White-tailed Eagles, Arctic and Great Skuas, Twite and St Kilda Wren, and even a Glaucous Gull). But the trip was so much more than this – amazing landscapes and scenery (all explained by their underlying geology), fabulous wildflower spectacles and stories, great food and great company. What more could we have hoped for?

Day 1

Monday 22nd May

Dunstaffnage Marina to Loch na Droma Buidhe, Morvern

Ten of us gathered at Dunstaffnage marina at lunchtime in a state of excited anticipation. A large mature Wych Elm tree in the restaurant garden is an unfamiliar sight since the ravages of Dutch Elm Disease and we took its presence as an omen of the wild delights to come.

We had a discussion about what people wanted from the trip - some very general ambitions: “good company”, “a chance to explore”; some very precise: “I’ve never seen a dolphin” (should be able to sort that), “I want to see a Leach’s Petrel” (hmm a bit trickier); and we all shared the prayer “I’d just like to see St Kilda” (though, having seen the forecast, none of us dared to hope for this one!)

We gathered on board the *Seahorse II*, which looked an impressive craft from the pontoon. We were shown our cabins and given a safety briefing. For some of us there was a worrying emphasis on where to vomit in the event of sea sickness!

As we steamed out of the harbour, a group of male Eiders speckled the seaweedy rocks with white and a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers were keeping close company.

We were soon called in for a cream tea (another omen, this time of the culinary delights to come!) but before long we were back on deck. As we headed up the Sound of Mull, past Stephenson’s Lismore lighthouse, we came to the striking thrust fault at Inninmore Bay which drives a near billion year gap into the geological record between the ancient psammities and gneisses to the east and the young lavas to the west. Here, over the water, some pairs of species presented themselves to test our identification skills. First up were the Arctic Terns (which, we were assured, fly with their bodies going up and down) vs Common Terns (which fly with their wings going up and down); and then the Cormorants (which flap slowly well above the sea’s surface and occasionally glide) vs Shags (which fly with faster wingbeats at a lower altitude and never glide).

Passing Loch Aline, we effectively started our trip at the end of the St Kilda story, as it was here to where the last islanders were evacuated in 1930 to work for the Forestry Commission. Looking at the forestry plantations on the shore, we wondered how many of these trees had been planted by St Kildans.

A Woodpigeon crossed the Sound of Mull purposefully, rather than the White-tailed Eagle we'd been hoping for! We chatted about how much everyone had benefited from the Naturetrek webinars during lock-down and how many subsequent bookings they had given rise to: "Expensive life-savers!" was John and Maggie's conclusion!

A few Red Deer were visible on the Morvern cliff tops and, at last, a distant White-tailed Eagle put in an appearance, but the sighting of our first Gannet, fishing in Loch Sunart, provided a moment of genuine delight. Then we were all wow-ing as we sailed into the delightful natural anchorage of Loch na Droma Buidhe, our hideaway for the first night.

As the sun set, a distant Curlew and a Common Sandpiper kept our first day bird list ticking along, and the flowering Rowans on the shore did the same for the plant list.

Over dinner, Ann confessed that she had promised herself not to have any puddings on this trip, but this promise was quickly broken when the pavlova arrived! Celia observed that Natasha (our amazing chef) was well-complimented by our silence as we all dived in.

Day 2

Tuesday 23rd May

Loch na Drum Buidhe, Morvern to the Isle of Rùm and the Isle of Canna

Our second day dawned cool and cloudy with a promise of sunshine later but further west the wind was blowing and the sea was building. Our skipper Alan told us that the auspices for a voyage to St Kilda were not good but we shouldn't despair just yet. "He's letting us down gently" one of the group observed.

But, as yet undeflated, we started the next leg of our journey on the deck listening to Robins, Willow Warblers and a Cuckoo in the surrounding woodland and watching Moon Jellyfish and the peculiar algal balls of Oyster Thief drift past. Again Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Gannets kept our interest, while your scribe attracted the first gentle ribbing of the trip when he observed that a shape in the water was "only a winter-plumaged Great Northern Diver". We all promised that we would never say "only" when describing wildlife.

As we rounded the Ardnamurchan lighthouse (from where Tony had once begun a long-distance sponsored cycle between the most westerly and most easterly points in Great Britain) we caught sight of our first Manx Shearwaters: a bird that would accompany us daily on the trip from now on. The sea felt quite big until we tucked into the shelter behind the Isle of Muck (the smallest of the Small Isles). Here Maggie shouted "Whale!" and those of us on deck had great views of a Minke Whale slowly rolling its long back out of the water just astern of the boat. We followed its putative path with our bins and cameras but were only rewarded by brief views of a couple of Harbour Porpoises, which were tiny by comparison!

We pulled into Loch Scresort on Rùm and dropped anchor. Here we had another fine lunch before popping ashore at Kinloch. The tide was out and black basalt dykes ran out across the exposed foreshore. One of the Johns (there were three in our group!) pointed out the variety of edible leaves around us: young Beech leaves, Nettles, Dandelions and even Daisies. To these we added Scurvy-grass and the curious Pignut (which has an underground tuber not unlike a water chestnut). We observed what a blessing it must have been to have fresh spring greens after the winter roots!

Bullfinch, Siskin and Goldcrest called from the woodland edge and on the lawns of Kinloch Castle (a testament to the poor taste of the absentee landlords of Scotland), we watched several Red Deer stags in velvet. A little further on, we admired a Bird Cherry in flower. Shortly a distant wader drew our interest and enthusiasm, culminating in the suggestion that it could be “a Yank” specifically a Lesser Yellowlegs. It was when it flew across the bay towards us that we were forced to revise our opinion: a humble Greenshank. Boo!! In this situation, “only” was definitely the right adverb!

As we hurried back to meet the tender, we encountered our first insect species of the trip: the famous Scottish midge which descended and slaked its thirst through our skins.

Back on the boat there was just time for a cuppa in the spacious saloon (where we were joined briefly by a summer plumage Great Northern Diver which was espied - or maybe spying - through the porthole) and then we were off to our next port of call, the Isle of Canna.

Here we enjoyed another brief walk on shore where the Eiders were doing their best Kenneth Williams impressions and two feisty Belted Galloway bulls charged around their field, mildly troubling the sheep. A pair of Oystercatchers fiercely defended their nest from a marauding Hoodie. A broad ungrazed field margin and a tall stand of Russian Comfrey were evidence of measures taken here to encourage Corncrakes. Sadly none obliged during our brief visit.

Day 3

Wednesday 24th May

Isle of Canna to Loch Boisdale, South Uist and Loch Euphort, North Uist

After a calm and restful night in the bay at Canna, the early birds among us added Shelduck and Skylark to the list from the deck. After breakfast, we skirted the northern edge of the island past towering cliffs of seabirds (among them Puffins, Razorbills, Fulmars and Kittiwakes) and then out into the Minch for the crossing to the Western Isles.

Here we soon began to pick up small groups of Common Dolphins which approached the boat before powering on. A Bonxie (the local name for the Great Skua) appeared and terrorised a Kittiwake into giving up its hard-earned breakfast. Manx Shearwater and Gannet were both now regularly sighted, and a passing Lesser Black-backed Gull made a change from the usual Great Black-backs.

We sailed up into the protective anchorage in Loch Boisdale on South Uist, as a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers flew by in the opposite direction, and we hunkered the boat down below a towering headland of Lewisian gneiss. We lunched at anchor, again impressed by chef Natasha’s extraordinary culinary abilities, and then headed ashore to explore the port and its surroundings. A large chunk of gneiss on the causeway gave Greg a chance to explain the origins of this most ancient of rocks and how it came to define the landform in many places around the Hebrides - three billion years in three minutes wasn’t bad going!

Buzzing Lesser Redpolls drew our attention away from the rocks and a local resident came out to see what was attracting our interest. A pair of White-tailed Eagles proved a bigger draw. At the other end of the spectrum a bolting broccoli plant in a garden was alive with Common Carder Bees.

As we walked out of the village and over a small burn, we all got to munch on the vanilla-flavoured stems of Sweet Vernal Grass. Our guide observed that it was not a good idea to nibble all plants with a view to finding unexpected flavours as a stand of the lethal Hemlock Water Dropwort (not dissimilar to celery in appearance) grew nearby.

The road verge on the causeway back to the harbour was yellow with Kidney Vetch and Bird's-foot Trefoil. The amiable conversation took us round to the story of a series of 'fairy' sightings in Nottingham which were traced back to researchers attaching tiny LED lights to Daubenton's Bats in order to observe their movements.

Back on the boat, our skipper explained that the wind out over the Atlantic beyond the western Isles was creating 'big seas' and there was little chance of us making it across to St Kilda. But we would continue up the sheltered side of the Western Isles towards Harris with a view to visiting the Shiant Islands instead - an extraordinary place in itself, made famous by Adam Nicholson's delightful books. We agreed that, with this news, it seemed the last air of hope was now released from our tyres. The 'new message' alert on Haward's phone was the Bob Marley classic Three Little Birds and Haward was getting plenty of messages so the tune gradually wormed its way into our heads such that we all found ourselves involuntarily singing "why worry....?" as we went about our business. Why worry, indeed!

The final leg of today's journey took us up to Loch Euphort on North Uist, a remote spot where Greg had spent some time a few years ago and he was excited at the prospect of getting ashore.

After dinner, the view through the porthole tonight revealed a white-winged gull making its way with other gulls to a large gull roost inland. Three heads rushed to the window in hope of a better view and much debate ensued as to its identity.

The next morning Greg was up early in hope of catching the gull on its way back out along the loch, but it didn't appear (at least not yet...)

Day 4

Thursday 25th May

Loch Euphort, North Uist to Leverburgh, Harris

What did appear were three Red Deer, swimming sedately across the loch in the early morning sunshine. As they reached the bank, they strolled casually onto the boulder strewn shore. Dripping with water, they turned to look back at us then shook themselves like dogs. The weather this morning was delightful, belying the previous day's news about our prospects.

Looking down into the smooth clear water we could see tiny red fish-like creatures swimming up to the surface - it was Mike our boatswain who put a name to them for us: Ragworms. They had also been spotted by the Arctic Terns, who were taking them from the surface close to the boat.

A commotion in a field by the shore drew our attention where a Buzzard was attacking something on the ground. Suddenly a huge pair of wings appeared, and a disgruntled White-tailed Eagle flopped up and dropped down a short way away just out of sight from the boat. Satisfied with this achievement, the Buzzard flew away.

This morning the group split and while some came ashore for a walk, others took a trip around the loch in the tender. The latter group saw more swimming Red Deer, a distant Otter and a flight of Mute Swans.

The shore party had a more botanical focus - though we began with two pairs of Twite feeding along the shore and a party of Red-throated Divers flying overhead uttering their barking calls.

Among the Heather moorland and Iris beds, we passed an ancient ruined farm complex and a small harbour. We saw blue Heath Milkwort and yellow Tormentil, white blobs of Common and Hare's-tail Cotton Grass and the insectivorous leaves of Round-leaved Sundew and Common Butterwort. An Otter put in the briefest of appearances on an offshore skerry, while we saw signs of its presence on the headland around us: in the form of dismembered crabs and a sweetly-scented spraint. An adult White-tailed Eagle crossed the bay.

By this point Ann was making a name for herself as “eagle-eyes” as she found yet another insect in the dense sward, this time a gorgeous purple and bronze click beetle by the name *Ctenicera cuprea*. She also found a Common Heath moth, a scorpionfly and a rove beetle *Staphylinus erythropterus* (told by its yellow-haired scutellum and pale bases to the antennae).

A family party of Stonechats, with one well-developed fledgling, noisily occupied a Rowan tree among the Bracken as we descended to some stepping stones across a channel linking Loch Obisary with Loch Euphort. Here some striking Map Lichen drew our notice.

We came upon a tiny boggy lochan with (flowering) Bog Bean and (not yet flowering) White Water Lilies. Here the warm sunshine brought out a Four-spotted Chaser, which our guide delightedly showed us in his cupped hands, and a Large Red Damselfly.

Back on the boat we compared notes on our respective trips over a mixed salad lunch of unbounded delight. Who knew that water melon and feta would go so well together? Natasha evidently did! As John put it, we were all doing a particular bird impression over lunch: the Gannet!

After lunch, we weighed anchor and headed back down the narrow loch. Here we finally reconnected with last night's white-winged gull loafing on a rock with some Herring Gulls. Now we were sure - Glaucous Gull, an arctic species more often seen in the depths of winter but one or two of which had been reported in the Western Isles this week.

Appropriately euphoric, we left Loch Euphort and headed north towards Harris. Our delight was further enhanced by a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins breaching in the distance and a Black-throated Diver which flew around the boat showing off the white flank patches behind its wings.

Sea birds were in evidence once again with Gannets and Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Razorbills, Arctic and Common Terns and the occasional Arctic Skua and Bonxie.

Now our skipper Alan appeared and pumped some air into our deflated tyres with the suggestion that there may be a window of opportunity in the weather to run for St Kilda ahead of the storm tomorrow and sit it out in Village

Bay for two nights before heading back. As a result we were to pull into Leverburgh on Harris for the evening where we would take stock of the latest forecast at 4am before making the final decision.

Suitably reinvigorated, we went ashore at Leverburgh from our anchorage beside what looked like a giant but empty plinth (perhaps awaiting a statue of Lord Leverburgh who established the port here in the early 20th Century) and had a stroll around before dinner. Three Greenshanks saw no repeat of our earlier confusion and several pairs of Tufted Duck on the village pond were a useful addition to the list, as were White-tailed Bumblebee on Cotoneaster, the Germoline-flavoured leaves of Meadowsweet and a couple of smart Rock Doves. An old stone barn was bedecked in ferns including: Maidenhair Spleenwort, Hart's-tongue Fern and Black Spleenwort.

John provided us with our first 'tourist eagle,' a big Buzzard doing its best to confuse, and the Harris Tweed shop enabled us to make our first tourist purchases.

As we returned to the tender, eagle-eyed Ann once again came up trumps with three punkily hirsute caterpillars belonging to the Garden Tiger moth. A useful reminder that no keen entomologist should pass a fence post without giving it the once-over!

Day 5

Friday 26th May

Leverburgh, Harris to Village Bay, St Kilda

A very early start for the crew as the final decision was made - most of us only knowing we were going for it by the sound of the engine starting and the anchor being raised. Woo-hoo!

Our guide couldn't sleep (was it the noise, the rolling of the boat or the excitement?) so he went up on deck to keep the crew company. The dawn was grey and overcast, with a decent breeze from the west, but *Seahorse II* powered into it, crashing into the North Atlantic swell like a battering ram.

Halfway into the eight hour crossing to the St Kilda archipelago, a huge fin appeared through the murk off the starboard bow and then 4-5 more. These fins slowly rose out of the water like periscopes with none of the forward roll of momentum that most cetaceans exhibit. Orcas! No recent sightings had been reported and these were not the pair of bulls which usually patrol the Hebrides. And it's a very big ocean so what a remarkably fortunate encounter! All the crew (including Natasha the chef) got to see them but sadly all the guests were tucked away below decks. Sorry guys!

There were some broken hearts as we approached St Kilda and the guests slowly came up on deck to the news. But any disappointment was soon put behind as the islands loomed through the mist. First, Boreray with its two vast sea stacks and a halo of white lenticular cloud capping it. And then Hirta itself, the central island of the St Kilda archipelago, dark and brooding directly ahead of the boat.

In the last two hours of the crossing, Fulmars and Gannets had begun to appear around the boat but by this stage the skies were filled with them, along with innumerable Puffins.

After dropping anchor in Village Bay, we lunched with anticipation, peering out of the window at the famous amphitheatre of green sward, speckled with stone structures, sloping up from the bay. We fancied that we could already hear on the breeze the ringing song of the St Kilda Wren. But we didn't have to fancy for much longer, as we carefully climbed down into the tender and motored to the jetty. By this time Greg's inadequacy in the nautical knots department was legendary!

On the shore, after washing our boots in a tray of disinfectant, we were greeted by the NTS St Kilda ranger Sue Loughran and an NTS volunteer Marion Petschi whose father was born on St Kilda. Also among the welcoming party was the bird monitoring ranger Craig. He and our guide Greg were old friends, having worked together on Handa (another remote Scottish seabird island), so there was much jollity and delight. We were given a quick introduction to the island and then we were left to explore for ourselves. For the moth-ers among us, Craig showed us a Shears (the sole occupant of the previous night's moth trap).

Bizarrely, there was another encounter with a long-lost Craig on the island that afternoon as Haward and Celia greeted one of the crew members of the *Hebridean Sky*, which was also moored in the bay and on board which they had travelled on a previous holiday in the south Atlantic!

The St Kilda Wren was much in evidence among the ruined cottages and hundreds of ancient cleits (technically the plural is cleitean) - old stone storage sheds which are unique to St Kilda. Also in evidence were the Fulmars which are beginning to occupy the village, nesting on walls and buildings. Snipe were squeakily sawing from the depths of Iris beds. All around us were the famous Soay sheep, an ancient breed unique to the island of Soay (one of the St Kilda archipelago). From there they were brought to Hirta in 1932 soon after the evacuation of the last human population. Since then, they have been left to run feral and for decades have been the subject of detailed studies into population dynamics. They are very variable in colour (ranging from blonde to dark brown), but all share the same small size and agility. Occasionally we came across groups of rams grazing together apart from the rest – they will spend the summer building themselves up for the autumnal rut.

After exploring the buildings along the Main Street, which included the manse, the chapel and the factor's house, the latter looking rather more robust and refined than the islanders' cottages, some of us headed up the hill to the north to see the famous sea cliffs. It took a little effort, and not a little puffing, and the frequent botanical stops seemed increasingly contrived. But, following a line of cleits up the slope, we soon made it to the cliff-edge, while Curlews bubbled in the low clouds above our heads.

Both species of skua entertained us on the ascent (as Gerry Rafferty might have put it had he ever visited St Kilda "Arctics to the left of me, Bonxies to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle with Skuas.") But thankfully the tiny wind-swept Heath Spotted Orchids and the unusual white-flowered form of Common Lousewort didn't drive Greg to further song.

In the distance, we could see the towering sea stacks of Stac Lee and Stac Armin, white-over with Gannets, while below us a myriad Fulmars huddled on the rocks. The colourful flowers of Roseroot, Thrift and Sea Campion kept them company. Pied Wagtail and its sister the White Wagtail were both present, as was a Greenland Wheatear - the latter two both destined for higher latitudes before they settle down to breed. On the beach, Turnstones and Ringed Plovers were joined briefly by a Dunlin.

On the return to the tender, we checked in with Craig (the birdy one, not the boaty one!) to report our findings. He was dubious about the Curlew (“I’ve been here three years and have only ever seen three” he said). But we insisted so he set off up the steep incline to check it out for himself. Later in the evening we listened to recordings of Whimbrel and discovered, to our horror, that, as well as its distinctive seven-note piping whistle that we usually hear from birds on passage, the Whimbrel does indeed have a very beautiful and haunting song not unlike that of a Curlew - the very song we had heard this afternoon on Hirta!

That evening we opened a bottle of malt whisky to celebrate our arrival on St Kilda and the following morning we gave what was left to Craig by way of apology for sending him on a wild curlew chase!

Day 6

Saturday 27th May

Village Bay, St Kilda

We spent a magical night in Village Bay enjoying the view of the island from our slightly choppy anchorage. The bay is screened from the wild seas to the west by the island of Dùn, a rocky line of pinnacles, what remains of the volcanic caldera that raised St Kilda out of the sea. To the south lies the island of Levenish, which got its name when a St Kildan asked her partner what time they’d be back from the island. “Levenish?” came the reply. (I’ll get my coat...)

Immediately after breakfast we got back into the tender for our second visit to Hirta in as many days. This morning we had our first experience of a true Scottish dreich (or a ‘misty moisty morning’ as Maddy Prior might have called it). As we motored to the shore, we were subjected to an intense but very short-lived shower, which turned out to be the only rain we saw all trip.

After confession time with Craig, we split up to explore different parts of the island. Your scribe went with Ann and one of the Johns along the shore and then up into the hills. On the beach were yesterday’s small party of waders and a single Black-headed Gull which was occasionally harried by a nearby Arctic Skua.

Up the hill, a Whimbrel mocked us with its seven-note piping call and a patch of the Dog Lichen *Peltigera* attracted our attention among the more familiar moorland plants. Two of us soldiered on to the summit where an MoD listening station sits looking out to the northwest. The wind up here was treacherous, and our botanical searches were regularly interrupted by the need to remain vertical. We did however find a striking Dandelion specimen which we were later told was the endemic St Kilda Dandelion - unique to the islands.

Meanwhile the rest of the group explored the ruined houses and cleits, and Maggie and John got a walk with Craig (who was no doubt anxious to ensure that no more surprises came his way). Chiffchaff and Skylark were two unexpected treats - neither breeds on the archipelago.

We headed back to the boat for lunch and then some of us returned for a third visit (how many times can you say you’ve been to St Kilda?!) This time we explored a delightful hidden gully where Primroses and Dog Violets flourished.

Back on *Seahorse II*, Ann had an amusing exchange with our boatswain Mike who was cleaning the cabins. Seeing a screwed up sick-bag on the table, Ann reassured him “it’s just my bag of poo.” As Mike’s eyes widened, she realised that this needed further elucidation. She had laid claim to yesterday’s sweetly-scented otter spraint, with a view to dissolving it and studying its contents when she got home. I’m not sure that this provided any more reassurance than the first explanation!

Later, we had a full roast dinner with (as one person put it) “a view to dine for”. Over dinner we tried to get our heads round the sheer numbers of Puffins which bred here during the 19th century - perhaps as many as three million birds; and every year they were caught in their tens of thousands. In 1876 it was calculated that something like 89,000 Puffins were killed in a typical season by the islanders and in 1894 Lord MacLeod’s factor received over two tonnes of feathers as part of that year’s rent payment! At the other end of the spectrum, the very last Great Auk on British soil was killed on Stac an Armin in 1840.

Day 7

Sunday 28th May

Village Bay, St Kilda to Loch Scavaig, Isle of Skye

Another early start today to run for the mainland in the window between Atlantic storms. The anchor chain rattled and clanked its way up from the seabed at 5am raising some from their bunks, anxious to avoid missing out on whatever the sea had to offer today. The dawn was heavily overcast but strangely still as we ploughed through seas heaving with Fulmars, Gannets and Puffins and the occasional Bonxie. But we soon caught the Atlantic swell on our stern and each big wave lifted and carried the boat forward through the water before dropping it into a trough where it sat seemingly motionless until the next wave came along. After a couple of hours two unusual dolphins appeared along the prow of the boat. Large black and white creatures with long sickle-shaped dorsal fins - very different to the Common and Bottlenose varieties we had seen hitherto. A couple of snatched photos, a glance at the chart in the wheelhouse and a quick check in Mark Carwardine’s excellent book soon told us that they were White-beaked Dolphins, an open ocean species rarely encountered in inshore waters but perfectly at home out here in the middle of the Atlantic.

Slowly the rest of the team arose to join those in the saloon and on deck. There was carnage briefly at the breakfast table as the lurching boat sent cups and plates flying. Even John’s beloved marmalade hit the deck!

As we made the sound of Harris, the sea calmed and the bird life diversified with Arctic Terns, Black Guillemots and Great Northern Divers joining the Shags, Kittiwakes and plunge-diving Gannets. We wove our way between the islands and sand bars on the dropping tide and a Grey Seal peered at us from a reclining position, seemingly floating on the water though in reality loafing in very shallow water not far from the channel. At one point the entire company, it seemed, could be seen peering at mobile phone screens as we got the first signal since leaving Harris two days before.

We entered the Minch and set a course for the south side of Skye. Here the notorious wild seas were flat calm, even glassy in places. “Perfect conditions for spotting cetaceans” said Maggie and instantly Greg shouted “Whale!” and we got the unusual view of a Minke Whale swimming directly away from us.

As we came past Ramasaig Bay on Skye, the calm conditions seemed to have inspired the Common Dolphins as three different pods appeared distantly and performed energetic acrobatics, each leap attracting an approving cheer from the watchers on deck.

A \$120m super yacht sailed across our stern taking Howard Schultz - the owner of Starbucks and scourge of the American trades unions - on a Hebridean holiday. Bet he wasn't having as much fun as we were!

We cruised along the narrow channel between the towering jaggedness of the Black Cuillin on Skye's southern shore and the gentle roundness of the island of Soay - I guess we should call it the other island of Soay. Conditions calmed a notch further as the sun came out and we headed up into the sheltering delights of Loch Scavaig. Here we dropped anchor, completing a picture postcard scene of blue sky, blue sea and looming mountains. What a spot! We went ashore as Common Sandpipers chattered around us, Moon and Lion's-mane Jellyfish drifted past and Sea Trout leapt to gain access to a stream cascading into the sea.

A short walk along the entire length of this stream (Britain's shortest river, allegedly) brought us to the delightful Loch Coriusk. Here the splendid scenery was complemented by the amazing rocks beneath our feet: ice-smoothed gabbros intersected by fine-grained basalts and quartzite veins. The wildflowers also impressed with the pure white form of Heath Spotted Orchid, the resinous incense of Bog Myrtle and the Oblong-leaved Sundew greedily feasting on the myriad midges. An Arctic Tern was determined to impress his girlfriend with a long Pipefish hanging from its beak like a Zapata moustache.

The day ended with the promise of another unexpected treat on the morrow, as Alan our skipper explained that, having eaten up the nautical miles today, we had put ourselves within striking distance of the Treshnish Islands off the west coast of Mull. With this prospect ringing in our ears, we slept soundly and expectantly.

Day 8

Monday 29th May

Loch Scavaig, Isle of Skye to Lunga, the Treshnish Isles and Tobermory, Isle of Mull

A 6am start in glorious sunshine. The calm sea played tricks with our eyes - every wave was a possible cetacean. Eventually Tony spotted, looking into the low sun, spotted the real thing - a Harbour Porpoise. Some flocks of Manx Shearwaters were gathered in the water alongside the boat and then ahead of the boat a vast cloud of them rose from the surface (a single flock of at least a thousand!)

Maggie kept her collection of lighthouse snaps ticking over with the elegant one on Ardnamurchan to the east (famous, we were told, for its Egyptian style design) and the less elegant, indeed positively stumpy, one on Eigg to the west. The island of Eigg itself had an other-worldly appearance: tall cliffs and talus fans falling into the sea, overtopped by a flat green plateau, like something out of Edgar Rice Burrough's *The Land That Time Forgot*. No pterodactyls today though, just plenty of Shags and the occasional Cormorant.

A distant gathering of surface-feeding Kittiwakes and plunge-diving Gannets drew our interest, but the feeding cetacean that such a sight usually indicates was not forthcoming.

Approaching the Treshnish Islands, we toured around the Cairn na Burghs where in the late winter a local fisherman had snapped an itinerant Walrus. Longer ago, these islands were home to a large garrison during the

Napoleonic Wars, evidence of which could still be seen in the tall fortifications filling gaps in the sheer cliffs. Grey Seals loafed on the skerries (one seeming to wave a flipper at us in greeting) while large flocks of Puffins and Guillemots gathered on the sea.

As we dropped anchor off Lunga, a big-lunged Wren on the cliffs above us could be heard singing above the sound of our engine.

After clambering ashore and making our way carefully across the boulder beach, we were struck by the abundance of lush flowering vegetation on the island. Thrift, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Tormentil, Iris, Sea Campion, Primrose, Roseroot and Bluebells were collectively a source of delight, even the shoreline rocks contributed to the technicolour spectacle with blue-grey (*Ramalina*), white (*Lecanora*) and yellow (*Xanthoria*) crustose lichens.

But our attention quickly moved from the botanical to the ornithological when we reached the 'platform of puffins'. Here we sat quietly on the short grass sward and delighted in the company of dozens of Puffins as they went about their undemanding business of loafing, preening and occasionally taking over nest duties from their partners. Things would be very different in a week or two when the eggs would have begun to hatch, and a steady supply of sand eels would be required for hungry mouths. But for now, all was serene.

After lunch, some of us ventured along the cliff-top path, through the gauntlet of nesting Razorbills and Shags to the famous sea stack of Harp Rock where 10,000 sea birds nest: Guillemots on a sloping rock sheet somehow balancing a single precarious egg, while below them the rudimentary nests of Kittiwakes looked positively palatial in comparison. We picked out one or two 'bridled' Guillemots in the crowd, looking like someone had doodled white spectacles onto their faces. A Herring Gull was doing circuits around the stack waiting for an unwary egg-sitter to exit. A couple of Arctic Skuas (one a gorgeous pale phase bird) were similarly expectant - harrying any birds foolish enough to try bringing fish back to the rock.

The return trek from the spectacle drew the quote of the week from Haward, whose camera lens was filled by the face of a particularly confiding bird. "That's the closest I've ever got to a Shag!" he declared innocently, to much hilarity.

Back at 'Puffin central', Tony and Toni had enjoyed an hour in the company of auks and strangers (though fewer of the latter would have improved matters). As a distraction, Greg drew attention to the Primrose blooms on the slope behind them and gave a quick lesson in how the two forms of flower, pin and thrum (with projecting stigma and projecting stamens respectively), minimise the risk of self-pollination. Suitably mind-blown, we returned to the boat, only stopping to pick up a pink-rumped Twite singing to its mate on the foreshore.

The next leg of our journey took us back up the shore of Mull and round into Tobermory. On the way we had another pleasing encounter with Common Dolphins - a pod of 6-7 briefly bow-riding as we passed Caliach Point. At the same time our guide picked up a large shearwater in the distance, the colour of milky coffee. It was too distant to get any plumage features on but its angled wings, powerful wing beats and purposeful gliding flight suggested Cory's Shearwater. We checked recent rarity reports online but found nothing to support this hypothesis. Put it down as one that got away! A winter plumage Red-throated Diver close to the boat presented less of an identification challenge.

We managed an hour ashore at Tobermory but failed to add anything significant to our trip list, though the Ivy-leaved Toadflax and its phototropic flower stalks were a novelty. Of more interest was a pillar box erected during the short reign of Edward VIII – one of only 50 or so in existence.

Our last dinner on board on our final evening was a delight. And the assembled throng agreed that the culinary marvels of the trip had been no less outstanding than the natural history wonders. Finally, some of the group were given a tour of the engine room and its several engines – from which we had heard so much throughout the trip.

Day 9

Tuesday 30th May

Tobermory, Isle of Mull to Dunstaffnage Marina

As we weighed anchor for the final time, we saw that we had been sharing the bay with two boats (*Hebridean Sky* and *Gemini Explorer*) which we had last shared an anchorage within Village Bay. The sun once more beamed down on us as we set off down the Sound of Mull for Dunstaffnage. We were all in a quiet and reflective mood after what had been a most memorable week.

The Moon and Lion's-mane Jellyfish were here joined by the dustbin-like Barrel Jellyfish. The sea offered little further novelty for the next hour but, as we passed Duart Castle and entered the Firth of Lorn, our patience was rewarded by the sight of two Minke Whales slowly surfacing in the sunny sea. Further away, towards the Slate Islands, two more were also visible. Nearer at hand, numerous Harbour Porpoise were in evidence, testament to the area's status as a Special Area of Conservation specifically for this species. They usually appeared in twos, but one of these pairings caught our notice because, having surfaced, the animals stayed up for a short while before slowly dropping from view. This unusual behaviour was explained by one of the photographers on board whose snaps showed that these were a mother and calf pairing, rather than two adults.

We thought this flurry of cetacean activity must surely be the wildlife highlight to end our trip but, as we entered the harbour at Dunstaffnage, the gull colony on Eilean Mòr erupted as an adult White-tailed Eagle circled low above the island. Continually targeted by Common and Herring Gulls, and by brave Hooded Crows which dive-bombed it from above, the eagle just slowly wheeled to and fro taking occasional evasive action but seemingly untroubled by the attention he was attracting - both from the birds and the awed people watching from the boat. Magic! Far and away our best views of an eagle on the entire trip.

Once more ashore, on this occasion for the final time, we bade each other farewell - all agreeing that this trip must surely have set the benchmark for all future Naturetrek tours of St Kilda and the Hebrides.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023									
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>							✓			
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				✓						
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓								
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	3	6		✓				
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓						
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			2		✓		✓	✓		
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓		✓			✓	✓		
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓					
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓								
Corn Crane	<i>Crex crex</i>			✓							
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>					H			✓		
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				1	✓					
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓							
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓				✓				
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓		
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓							
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓	✓						
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓	·						

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023									
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>					✓		✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓							
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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				✓	✓	✓				
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓								
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓								
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		✓				✓	✓			
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓			✓	✓				
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓								
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓								
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	.	.				.	✓			
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓			
Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>							✓	✓		
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓								
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓							
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓		
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓								
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						✓				
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓				✓	✓			
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓			✓			✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓							
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓					✓		
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓		
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>			✓							
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓								

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023									
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>									6	
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</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>	✓	✓		✓				✓		

Others

Green Veined White

Salt Marsh Moth Caterpillar

Water Avons

Lichens

Yellow Flag

Cellandines

Pond Skater

Half Moon Jellyfish

Coombe Jellyfish

Barrel Jellyfish