

# St Kilda & the Hebrides – Islands at the Edge of the Atlantic

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th June – 8th July 2023

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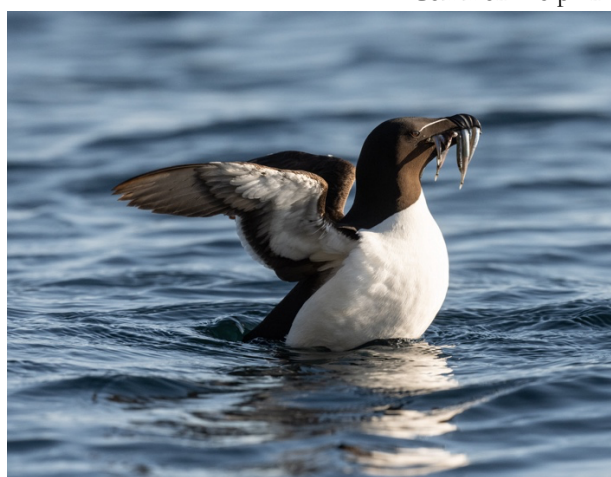
Humpback Whale



Common Dolphin



Puffin



Razorbill

Tour report and images compiled by Rob Williams

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Tour participants: Rob Williams (Leader) with 10 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Friday 30th June

### Dunstaffon to Loch Spelve

The group assembled on a disappointingly grey wet afternoon and hurriedly boarded the boat. The weather forecast for the next day was not good, so we decided to head to a sheltered sea loch on the south coast of Mull for the evening. The crossing from Dunstaffon was misty but gave us nice initial views of a good range of seabirds, including Northern Gannets, Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills, Common Murres (Guillemots) and a couple of Black Guillemots. As we approached the mouth of Loch Spelve a large flock of Gannets were feeding offshore; we watched for a while and then saw a small pod of Harbour Porpoise passing by.

Entering Loch Spelve, an adult White-tailed Eagle was perched on a rocky promontory, and we enjoyed scope views of this fabulous raptor. Several Harbour Seals, some with pups, were on a rocky islet. An Otter was glimpsed on a distant shoreline but could not be relocated as we drew nearer. Along the shore we could see the wonderful colours of the Foxgloves and Bell Heather and the wetter areas were populated with the yellow spears of Bog Asphodel.

## Day 2

Saturday 1st July

### Loch Spelve to Tobermory

An early morning watch from the boat gave us nice views of a hunting Short-eared Owl. A White-tailed Eagle flew over the boat and then back again a few minutes later. Just after breakfast a male Hen Harrier carrying a vole flew past. Many Harbour Seals were in the loch or hauled out on the rocks. We took a trip round the loch but the wind was picking up and it was raining hard, so we headed out into the Firth of Lorn and sailed east and into the Sound of Mull past Duart Castle. We spotted a White-tailed Eagle just above the shoreline eating something (perhaps a Canada Goose?). We watched a while till it flew off and two Hooded Crows immediately came down to clean up the left-overs. The Sound of Mull was quite sheltered, and we saw a good variety of increasingly familiar seabirds, plus our first Arctic Terns. At lunchtime we arrived in Tobermory harbour and anchored just as the Round Mull sailing race arrived.

After lunch we headed ashore and took a walk up to the Rubha Nan Gall Lighthouse (also called Tobermory Lighthouse) through the temperate rainforest woodland dominated by oaks and hazel. We saw and heard several species of woodland birds, including finding a Willow Warbler nest with an egg, and looked at a variety of flowering plants, lichen and mosses. At the lighthouse a pair of Oystercatchers were accompanied by a well-grown chick. After a bit of shopping and a swift half or an ice cream for some, we examined the shoreline and found a couple of Otter spraints (faeces) before we headed back on board for dinner.

## Day 3

Sunday 2nd July

### Tobermory to Rùm

We departed Tobermory heading north and around Ardnurmuchan Peninsula. A Harbour Porpoise came past as we left the shelter of the harbour. Just south of Ardmore point a female White-tailed Eagle was preening on a sea cliff. The swell made for an interesting crossing with most people sitting or holding on well. We saw a few seabirds including our first Northern Fulmar and Great Skuas of the trip. A single Common Dolphin was seen underwater in a wave beside the boat.

After passing south of Muck, we arrived in the lee of Eigg and went ashore for a nice walk with a sandwich in our pockets. The harbour held good numbers of Black Guillemots and a couple of female Eider Ducks, one with two well grown young. Several Harbour Seals were on offshore rocks. The sun was out, and we found three species of butterfly: Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper, and Green-veined White, and a nice Golden-ringed Dragonfly. We looked at the flowering plants and lichens, but the highlights were undoubtedly four species of orchid: Greater Butterfly, Northern Marsh, Heath Spotted, and Fragrant. A small area of machair grassland held a variety of other interesting plants and Pied Wagtail, Northern Wheatear, Meadow Pipit (of the western subspecies *whistleri*) and Rabbits were also noted. We headed north to Loch Scresort on the east coast of Rùm. En route we started seeing large number of Manx Shearwaters; one third of the world population nest on Rùm.

A late afternoon walk on Rùm took us past the castle at Kinloch. We concentrated on the foreshore at a very high tide. Several Red-breasted Mergansers included a female with 10 recently hatched chicks that were speeding across the water and dipping their heads to look underwater. Several Common Eiders included moulting males and females with young. A Red Deer stag was seen across the bay and was then found again grazing and observed down to about 25 m distance; from the antlers, still in velvet, we estimated him to be 6-7 years of age and in his prime. The woodland near the castle held a recently-fledged brood of Spotted Flycatchers being fed by an adult. A Treecreeper was hitching up a Scots Pine and several Siskins were calling from the trees. We spent the night at anchor in Loch Scresort.

## Day 4

Monday 3rd July

### Rùm to Canna

After breakfast we departed Loch Scresort and travelled north of Rùm to Canna. We found a pod of Common Dolphins that rode the bow waves and played around the boat for a while and saw many Manx Shearwaters. A single European Storm-Petrel was new for the trip. At Canna we headed ashore for a walk. We landed on Sanday and worked our way across the island heading south from the Kirk. The grassland held some interesting plants. A few Great Skua were flying about the island, and we were serenaded by Skylarks, while Northern Lapwings were new for the trip. We heard a couple of Corncrakes and although we got close to the iris and nettle beds they were in, we had to be content with hearing this rare bird.

We crossed the bridge onto Canna and made our way back to the boat. Given the persisting strong westerly wind and swell out to sea we decided to stay in the sheltered anchorage and overnight here. Most of us went ashore for

another walk before dinner, picking up Common Whitethroat and enjoying good views of Eider, Oystercatchers, Wheatears and Rock Pipits that were right by the road with the high spring tide.

## Day 5

Tuesday 4th July

### Canna to the Shiant Isles

We departed Canna at 5am and sailed north past the western headlands of Skye. The weather had improved and we had a smooth passage with only small waves and a little remnant swell. The sky was overcast and the water was dichromatic, dark black with silver reflections. We saw some Common Dolphins and good numbers of seabirds including a few European Storm-Petrels. Off the NW shore of Skye we spotted a whale and on approaching we realised it was a Humpback! This is a rarity in Scottish waters, and we enjoyed about 45 minutes watching it. It would take a series of five to seven breaths with short dives of six to eight seconds between them and then a deeper dive of five or six minutes before reappearing again. Once it reappeared right behind the boat allowing us to see the detail of the blowhole and hear the rush of expelled breath. What a privilege and an undoubted highlight of the tour.

We arrived at the Shiant Islands for lunch and then went ashore, making a slightly adventurous landing on a rocky beach between the islands of Garbh Eileen (Rough Island) and Eileen An Tighe (House Island). We walked up onto the higher land of the latter, the southern island. We found a family of Eurasian Wrens of the endemic Hebridean subspecies *hebridensis* along the strand line with noisy rufous-coloured youngsters begging the adults for food. A couple of males were singing from the rocky slopes behind the beach. Snipe were calling and drumming over the iris beds and wet grassland, where we also found two carnivorous plants - Butterwort and Round-leaved Sundew.

Several Great Skuas were on the upper part of the island and flying along the cliffs terrorising the auks. We watched with mixed emotions as we watched one drown and then start to eat a Puffin just offshore. Several small flocks of Twite (of the British endemic subspecies *pipilans*) were seen. We then took a zodiac trip through the flocks of auks in the bay and enjoyed very close views of the Razorbills, Puffins and Guillemot's, noting several bridled individuals amongst the latter. A team of ringers were catching and ringing auks on a slope and when they packed up and departed a White-tailed Eagle soon appeared. The water was crystal clear, and we saw several species of jellyfish. For fun we had dropped a creel and pulling it up we had a good look at Common Lobster, Edible Crab and Velvet Swimming Crabs, all of which we returned to the sea.

## Day 6

Wednesday 5th July

### Shiants to the Kyle of Localsh

We awoke to a beautiful morning with stunning golden light on the bay and islands of the Shiants. The sea was calm and covered in thousands of auks and the constant stream of commuting adults to and from the cliffs was staggering and showed the scale of the colony and the importance of these now rat-free islands. We took a pre-breakfast cruise around the bay in the zodiac and enjoyed close up views of myriad auks as they bathed and rested on the water. A few young Razorbills were heading out to sea as half-sized fluff balls accompanied by their father. A few had lost their way and were calling incessantly until dad suddenly popped back to the surface beside them.

An immature White-tailed Eagle watched over proceedings from high on the cliff, occasionally changing perch and attracting the ire of a Great Black-backed Gull or Hooded Crow. Hebridean Wrens sang from the shore and amazingly their song carried over the noise of the seabird colony.

After breakfast we headed south and were soon accompanied by four bow-riding Common Dolphins. The sea was calm and we enjoyed a good passage to the Sound of Rassay. We then motored down the east coast of Skye seeing the Kilt Rock Falls and the Old Mann of Storr. We stopped for a stroll in the small town of Portree and then carried on to Plockton for the night. Going ashore after dinner some headed to the pub and others chose to walk around this pleasant little community.

## Day 7

Thursday 6th July

### Plockton to Loch Ceann Traigh

We headed south past Kyle of Lochalsh and then south through the Sound of Sleat. It was drizzling on and off, but we enjoyed good views of the Skye bridge and the world's last turntable ferry between Glenelg and Kylerhea. We found a pod of four Bottle-nose Dolphins which came to the bow briefly. At Mallaig we said goodbye to Captain Donald and welcomed Captain Alan aboard. We went ashore and some of us took a nice walk over the hills behind Mallaig and found a few new birds including Redpolls, Dunnocks and Stonechats. Some checked out the Jacobite steam train that was in town. Sailing south we headed to the shelter of Loch Ceann Traigh for the night.

## Day 8

Friday 7th July

### Loch Ceann Traigh to Loch na Droma Buidhe

After breakfast we headed ashore for a walk but increased logging and associated road-building operations, meant the area was busy and muddy and we opted for a tender ride around the loch instead. We found many seals and enjoyed nice views of a variety of shorebirds, including four Ringed Plover chicks that were only hours old.

## Day 9

Saturday 8th July

### To Oban

We awoke to a beautiful morning but windy morning and sailed down the sheltered waters of the Sound of Mull to Dunstaffnage. We saw a couple of Common Dolphins, Harbour Seals and an array of seabirds en route. At the marina we said our goodbyes and all started our journeys home.

Despite, not being able to get to St Kilda and unseasonably inclement weather, we had enjoyed a fascinating week exploring the western isles and finding some great wildlife. In total we had seen 84 species of bird, 11 mammals and a good variety of plants and invertebrates, both terrestrial and marine. Highlights had included good views of Humpback Whale, Common and Bottle-nose Dolphins, numerous seabirds, White-tailed Eagles, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl.

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Common Guillemot (Bridled form)

## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	June - July 2023								
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓							✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				2					
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	5	2					
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			25	20	10	2			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	16					5	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			2	1		1		3	1
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>			1		1	1			
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>					1*				
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>				5	5				
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			1		20	10			
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	1	1		2		5	1
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓						✓	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓							
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	✓	✓	1		1	1		1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1	1					1
Corn Crake	<i>Crex crex</i>				3H					
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				3					
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			1					7	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				3	3				
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	2	10				1	1
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		2					
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			3						
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	1	5	3	2	1	10	2
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				2	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓		✓		✓			1	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓				10		20	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓		✓		5				✓
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			1	5	8	2			
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>				1	1				
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	10
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓		1		✓	✓	✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	8	5		2			2
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓		2	2	✓	✓	✓		
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	1	2		5		3	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1	3	1						
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>						H	4		
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		✓							
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			1						
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓							

Common name	Scientific name	June - July 2023								
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>						1			2
Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓					4			✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	4	8	2	5	3	4	4
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			12	1					
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			5						
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓							
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓							
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>								H	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1						
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		5	5				
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	10	4		2	2		
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	2	1			1	1	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>				2					
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓							
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>				1			1		
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>							3		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	5				H		
Hebredian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes hebridensis</i>					6	H			
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		3		5	2		
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	3			2			1
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓					1		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	2				1	1	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>							4		
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			4	20	10				
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		10		✓	✓		
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓					3		
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>									
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		H							
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2	10					
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	5	20	✓	2			
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	1	10	10	2			
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	H						
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		2					
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>					5				
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				3					
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>							3		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		18			4		
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		H	4						

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	June – July 2023								
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓		✓	✓					
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>					1				
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>					1				
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>								4	
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			1	✓	50	4			3
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓	1					1	



Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				2	3	3			
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	1*	S							
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	3						
Feral Goat	<i>Capra circus</i>	6								

## Others

Common name	Scientific name	June – July 2023									
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
<b>DRAGONFLY</b>											
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>			1							
<b>BUTTERFLIES</b>											
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			2							
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>			1							
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>			2							
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>				1						
<b>OTHER INVERTEBRATES</b>											
Shrill Carder Bee	<i>Bombus sylvarum</i>			1							
Common Moon Jellyfish	<i>Aurelia aurita</i>	5	2			5					
Lion's Mane Jellyfish	<i>Cyanea capillata</i>		3	3	2	20					
Barrel Jellyfish	<i>Rhizostoma pulmo</i>				1	2					
Jellyfish sp.	<i>Medusozoa sp</i>					1					
<b>NOTABLE PLANTS</b>											
Fragrant Orchid	<i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>			8							
Northern Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>			3	1	5					
Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>			20	✓						
Greater Butterfly Orchid	<i>Platanthera chlorantha</i>			2							
Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>					✓					
Round-leaved Sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>					✓					