

Ardnamurchan – The Red Deer Rut

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th September – 3rd October 2023



White-tailed Eagle



Red Deer



Male Stonechat



Ardnamurchan Lighthouse

Tour report by Steve Gater, Images by Hugh Cullen



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Tour participants: Steve Gater, Richard Hockin (leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

Summary

Ardnamurchan, even with mixed weather, is an amazing place to visit: wildlife, scenery, good food and excellent company combine to great effect! The views of Red Deer were superb every day, especially stags guarding their harems of hinds, or challenging to establish their own. Close-up views of Pine Marten, Red Squirrel, and more distant views of Otter and Harbour Seal added to the mammal excitement. On the bird front, we had terrific views of Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Buzzard, Raven, Black-throated Diver, Stonechat, Dipper and more. We found a decent range of plants for so late in the season (including Grass-of-Parnassus and Devil's-bit Scabious), plus some fascinating lichens, such as Tree Lungwort. Mix in the excellent company of a lovely group of people, and we had a simply wonderful week in the wilderness of Ardnamurchan.

Day 1

Friday 29th September

Pick-ups at Paisley Station and Glasgow Airport were synchronised between the two buses, but a red light at the start of the first leg of the drive separated us. Not to worry: we met up again within minutes of each other at the Green Welly Stop in Tyndrum, before driving in heavy rain through Glen Coe, through Fort William, and on a long dog-leg to reach Strontian. The latter stretch was caused by the temporary closure of the Corran Ferry. Two clients who had travelled by car met us, and our first delicious meal was also waiting, at the Ariundle Centre. Mute Swans, Mallards, Grey Herons, Cormorants and Starlings were seen en route. A road-kill Red Deer added to the list and plenty of living, healthy specimens were running across the road on our night drive to the Ardnamurchan Bunkhouse.

We 'hit the sack' to the sound of bellowing: a nearby Red Deer stag advertising his presence!

Day 2

Saturday 30th September

One couple had a bright start to the day with a short walk and experienced a close encounter with a Red Deer stag: possibly the noisy one from the previous night, and certainly one not to be messed with! A cooked breakfast and a check of the feeding station followed: a curious Red Squirrel delighted everyone. Weather forecasts suggested rain in the afternoon, but it kindly kept off until 9.00pm which was perfect for our first search for mammals and more. And we were not disappointed.

Eyes were on the lookout for Otters as we drove west, but sadly none were spotted. So we headed off to Ben Hiant and a little further along stopped to see Red Deer coming down the mountain. Several groups of hinds were picked up in binoculars and scopes, with accompanying stags sporting impressive antlers. Eyes switched up into the sky when a large bird appeared, hanging on huge out-stretched wings. 'Why is that a White-tailed Eagle?' 'Look at the wings, just like barn doors'. A couple of Common Buzzards also showed up, then two Golden Eagles. It was great to see all three of the local large raptors almost at once.

We were ready for coffee, so we set off to the nearest source at Ardnamurchan Lighthouse. As we watched the sea, Sheila told us of the family history of author Robert Louis Stephenson, relatives of whom designed all the Scottish lighthouses bar one. And we had more entertainment with fabulous views of Gannet, Arctic Skua, Great Black-backed Gull and Cormorant. We were delighted when a Minke Whale was spotted and seen briefly by most of the party.

Lunch was enjoyed on the pristine sands of Sanna Bay, with Herring Gulls for company. Several Stonechats were flying about and a smart male posed for close viewing. The scenery was stunning, the calm soothing. A few intricate

white flowers of Grass-of-Parnassus clung on, with lemon flowers of Mouse-ear Hawkweed and dangling blue flowers of Harebell. On our return for the facilities at Mingary Pier, three resting Shags allowed for close observation of key features to distinguish them from the Cormorants seen earlier. A flock of Twite was appreciated, along with other finches.

Our final stop was most rewarding, watching scattered parties of Red Deer and one very dark stag ready to engage with the many hinds, and possibly a protective alpha male. Bellowing was heard and the animals spotted in the scope. The light was fading so we couldn't witness any action, but the potential threat was becoming very real. Ravens called and flew overhead, and a Hooded Crow flew by and perched to offer great views. But we had to be back at the bunkhouse to prepare tea – for Pine Martens, that is! And shortly after we finished our own dinner, a single adult duly obliged giving amazingly close views for a long time.

So, our first full day in the field finished on a high, with the prospect of much more to come.

Day 3

Sunday 1st September

Heavy rain delayed our early morning walk to scan Sunart Loch from Aperitif Point. The first bird seen was a Dipper, then a Little Grebe: a great start. Cormorant, Great Black-backed Gull and European Herring Gull completed a small pre-breakfast list, but the quiet, picturesque setting made the hour memorable. Tree Lungwort and other lichens, Hard Fern and other plants added to the variety.

A cooked breakfast followed and a stop-start drive along Loch Sunart to search for Otters. Sadly, we missed out again, but we did hear Curlew and saw Oystercatchers. The final hop was on to the viewpoint looking towards the impressive Ben Hiant, then a walk down onto the beach of Camas nan Geall, ideal for photographers and wildlife enthusiasts alike. The remains of early habitation add to the mystique of this idyllic place. Then add the best views that you could wish for of White-tailed Eagle flying overhead and you have a jaw-dropping experience. The light picked out the white head and tail of this massive bird which soared above us in full majesty. The comparatively 'small' Buzzard that called and flew around next was more familiar to most of the group. Stonechats and Twites were present, and Hooded Crows and Oystercatchers tracked across the beach.

We drove along towards Braehouse to look for more Red Deer, and for our picnic lunch. We found a group of about thirty and enjoyed them as we munched. The wind direction was not favourable so the deer strode off, leaving us to finish lunch and to follow in the vans. We tracked, and had close views of, seven hinds which were content to feed and to keep a close eye on us. Leaving them to their extended lunch, our very short journey ended at Fascaidale, an isolated spot overlooking the sea, and the islands of Muck and Eigg. Sea-watching produced an Arctic Skua harassing gulls for food, a Black-throated Diver in winter plumage, and a raft of 70+ Gannets, with spectacular views of them diving into the waves from height.

The drive back to the facilities at Mingary Pier required careful negotiation of road space with a herd of Blue Grey cattle, many very reluctant to give even an inch to let our vans through. Their earlier, smelly, presence along the road attracted some twelve or more Pied Wagtails, probably several families, as well as generating much laughter. This soon turned into sheer joy and amazement at seeing 30+ Red Deer at close quarters (two stags and the rest hinds) – all in great condition.

As we enjoyed this feast of deer-watching, our eyes turned upwards to two Golden Eagles flying overhead and offering fine views. A Raven called and flew over. A short drive uphill took us to yet more Red Deer, this time with two magnificent stags that slowly, but surely, approached each other, bellowing loudly. A sudden and very heavy downpour sadly ended the show and what had been a very successful day. We headed back to the bunkhouse

to enjoy another rich and filling meal, accompanied by a Pine Marten and topped off with a highly satisfying checklist. It had been a long day, but one full of superb wildlife experiences.

Day 4

Monday 2nd October

Today started with a Grey Heron, the first of many seen throughout the day. After another cooked breakfast, we took a short drive to the relatively new Ardnamurchan Distillery, which was closed. And that was fortuitous: our plan to wait thirty minutes for it to open allowed us time to scan the edge of Loch Sunart for an Otter. And one promptly appeared, with short but good and highly satisfying views. We also enjoyed finding a Grey Wagtail on the strandline.

Salen Pier was next up, with good views of Shag from the Pier and more Grey Herons. Garbh Eilean hide between Salen and Strontian was a good site for lots of Harbour (Common) Seals, spending their time in and out of the water. Some almost fooled us by looking like giant otters, humping their backs in the water. Yet more Grey Heron were seen, then a magnificent White-tailed Eagle soared overhead giving more fabulous views. A handsome Red Deer stag had showed well on the drive and several hinds were seen too. We enjoyed our packed lunch was enjoyed, and set off back to Salen and Acharachle.

After a brief facilities stop we took a short drive to the Pier, where we picked up a Black-throated Diver on Loch Shiel. The water was high, hiding some interesting plants, so we ventured north to the bay of Castle Tioram, which was resplendent in the sun. From the side of the castle we photographed the massive, empty White-tailed Eagle nest, high in a conifer tree on the opposite bank. And we saw Grey Herons, along with Goosanders, Black-headed Gulls, Hooded Crows and Ravens. A Speckled Wood butterfly was noted, Sea Thrift was in leaf, and large patches of Tree Lungwort covered the bark of Sessile Oaks and other trees.

A timely return through Acharachle allowed us to savour the best of the community café, then return to Garbh Eilen hide for our final otter-watch, but without success on this occasion. Nevertheless we appreciated the range of species seen in the morning as the light faded. It was now time for a return to Ariundle Centre where Kate and her team had our final dinner ready: yet another good feed. The night drive was enlightened by twelve Red Deer (including three stags), and plenty of bats and moths.

Our day ended with a fascinating and inspiring talk by Niall Rowantree, who kindly shared his wisdom and knowledge regarding the issues surrounding deer and conservation in western Scotland. This was a real treat and privilege. So our packing was late in the day, a most rewarding day in so many ways and a fitting finale to three terrific days in the field. And the local Red Deer stag bellowed all night to ensure that we wouldn't forget him in a hurry!

Day 5

Tuesday 3rd October

It was time to go home: our time had flown this week. And how fortunate we were seeing such an amazing diversity of wildlife. An early breakfast gave us time for a longer drive than normal to arrive in Glasgow on schedule for onward connections. One couple was driving separately so we said our fond farewells after breakfast. Then we took leave of this very special part of Scotland with strong memories of all the things that had made our week so precious. It had been a fabulous week.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, E = Evidence)

Common name	Scientific name	September - October 2023				
		29	30	1	2	3
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				4	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	30			10	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				2	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			✓		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓	✓	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		20			
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				4	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	5	✓		12	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		25	70		
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		3	8	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	12	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		3	✓	✓	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓			
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	✓	✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	4	2	✓	
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			4	✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	4		H		
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				6	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	

Common name	Scientific name	September - October 2023				
		29	30	1	2	3
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		3		✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓		
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H				
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	2	4	10	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			E		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			6	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	60		✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		10			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓			
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓			
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓	
Pied (White) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		12			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓		
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		20	4		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		4		✓	

Others

		September - October 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	1	2	3
MAMMALS						
Noctule Bat	<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>	✓			✓	
River (Common) Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓				1
Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	✓		✓	✓	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	138	✓	50	75	32
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓		
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	✓		1		
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓			✓
INVERTEBRATES						
Butterflies						

		September - October 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	1	2	3
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	2		✓	✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Parage aegeria</i>	✓				✓
Moths						
Oak Eggar Moth (caterpillar)	<i>Lasiocampa quercus</i>	✓		✓		
Others						
Spiked Shield Bug	<i>Picromerus bidens</i>	✓			✓	
German Wasp	<i>Vespula germanica</i>	✓			✓	