

Mull's Otters & Eagles – A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 16th April 2022



Atlantic Puffins



European Otter



White-tailed Eagle



Traigh bhan

Tour report and images by Oliver Smart



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Oliver Smart (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

Mull is the third largest of the Hebridean islands and incredibly beautiful, despite heavy human impact on the land. It holds plenty of iconic wildlife and opportunity to watch and photograph some of the species at very close range. The tour was a great success in 2022, following an absence of several years due to COVID restrictions. Sightings of White-tailed and Golden Eagle with Otters and plenty of seabirds made for a wonderful week of wildlife photography.

Day 1

Monday 11th April

With a dry and warmer forecast compared to the previous week's tour, we met at Gilmour Street Station and Glasgow Airport, with one couple arriving directly in Oban. The ferry crossing was calm and visibility good. We spotted several species of gull, Black Guillemot, Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Great Northern Diver and a Grey Seal in Oban harbour.

We crossed the island quickly to arrive at the Pennyghael Hotel in time for our first delicious three-course dinner. With orders for breakfast and lunch made for the following day, we ran through the camera settings for our first morning as we would be taking a boat trip from Ulva to photograph White-tailed Eagles. Oliver also went through a few images to show examples of how to capture these magnificent birds, the largest in the UK. Composition, speed, background and light were all covered during this short introductory session. We were now armed for the trip and headed to bed excited at the prospect of our first voyage.

Day 2

Tuesday 12th April

This morning we were due to set sail with Mull Charters at 10am. We crossed the island, spotting little on our way to avoid any distractions and arrived in good time to get on the water. We entered Loch na Keal and the crew soon found two eagles, a pair, coming close to the boat. With action stations manned, we all held cameras aloft as both birds came in to take fish from the water. The background *oohs* and *aahs* suggested all was well, although it turned out not everyone succeeded the first time around. Thankfully more birds soon appeared and we had further opportunities to capture these magnificent birds swooping close to the boat.

After this frenetic action we continued sailing along the loch and after a break for refreshments we headed further out, enjoying the wildlife on offer. Mammals were elusive but several birds including Gannet, Black Guillemot and Common Eider were enjoyed by the group.

Once we returned to the pontoon at Ulva, we headed along the loch by minibus and quickly spotted an Otter, which allowed for a decent photography approach. Using fieldcraft to ensure the subject was not disturbed was so important to the welfare of the animal and also would result in a far better wildlife encounter. We headed to a White-tailed Eagle viewpoint just as one decided to visit, whilst we ate our lunch. Following refreshments, we headed to spot Golden Eagles too, a pair nesting on the southern shore.

Our day was definitely not done as another fine spot by Oliver of a Slavonian Grebe in full summer plumage and a second Otter, which we observed for some time, were fab highlights. The Otter eventually caught a large crab, bringing it close to shore to feed. And if that was not enough, we enjoyed the sight of two Short-eared Owls hunting at dusk over rough grassland.

Dinner followed soon afterwards with some Lightroom processing tuition and the first slideshow instalment presented by Oliver. A full, fun-packed day with more beckoning in the morning. What a great start to the trip.

Day 3

Wednesday 13th April

Our day started in the gloom of a miserly weather front but with light winds so all was not lost. We travelled along nearby sea lochs in search of wildlife, striking with an Otter within 30 minutes. The lone animal did not venture to shore but fed happily in open water, catching, what appeared to be small eels. We listened to and watched a Willow Warbler, having just arrived back from its long migration from Africa, and we also observed a Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming into the metal cap of a telegraph pole, which made a wonderful resonating sound!

After breakfast we headed straight to Ulva harbour and caught Turus Mara's boat; the "Lady Lass" out to Staffa and then Lunga islands. Passing through Loch na Keal, we were pleasantly surprised that despite the gloomy misty conditions the water was very calm, so visibility was ideal for spotting seabirds and cetaceans. It was not long before Common Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin were spotted along with lots of Eurasian Shag and Northern Gannet. As we headed to the mouth of the sea loch, we spotted a pod of at least six Short-beaked Common Dolphins, however there were likely many more.

Into deeper water between the mouth and Staffa we passed several islands, where Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone showed briefly as we cruised by and a Kestrel happened to be flying across the top of one island too. Soon after a Manx Shearwater passed by, almost touching the surface of the water with its stiff wings and effortless flight.

At Staffa we experimented with some slow shutter speed images of the basalt rock formations, although the washed-out sky was of little help! A good practice run for another day. We visited Fingal's Cave but with a short landing time we were soon back aboard for our packed lunches and heading off to Lunga in the Treshnish Isles.

At Lunga, we disembarked via a floating pontoon, which they brought to shore and soon we were up on the cliff-tops with an array of seabirds that had only just arrived and settled in the last few days. Puffins littered the floor, all nosing about their burrows and interacting with each other. It was a magical experience to once again be amongst such charismatic birds. In fact several of the group had never set eyes on wild Puffins before so it really had made their day!

We practiced with settings to obtain some beautiful static and action shots before exploring more of the colonies with Fulmar, Kittiwake, Razorbill and Shag. The mist had briefly exposed sunny conditions but soon we were descended upon by further low cloud. It did not hamper us much and the Puffins kept us well entertained as they 'billed', collected nesting material, called their delightful little 'ooah' and wing flapping their way into our hearts.

Back aboard we sailed passed Fladda where two juvenile White-tailed Eagles were hanging out and later a Great Skua passed over the boat. Back to our main base on Mull, we retraced the long winding road back to the hotel for a filling dinner.

Day 4

Thursday 14th April

Following an early breakfast, we departed for Ulva to repeat day two of our trip and board Mull Charters vessel “Lady Jayne” for an excursion looking for eagles. We had little luck during the first half of the trip, despite promisingly calm conditions. The lightest of breezes and fine rain made for mixed potential but the White-tailed Eagles failed to respond. We progressed back from Loch Tuath to Loch na Keal, which immediately reversed our fortunes and two eagles quickly came in to food. Appearing out of the gloomy white sky they dived and swooped in, catching the fish with ease and disappearing as quickly as they had arrived.

After our pleasant trip we headed up to the nearby cliffs overlooking Loch Tuath and ate our lunch, whilst taking a few landscape images. We continued on north and skirted inland over moorland with some Red Deer before dropping down to Dervaig and then through Glen Aros. At the river mouth we enjoyed searching for and succeeding in photographing Dipper before heading around to Loch Spelve. The tide was in so, apart from a male Hen Harrier flying distantly, the chance of Otter was diminished. We continued back to our Short-eared Owl spot, however they also failed to appear during our vigil, so we made our way to our hotel for a warm shower and lovely dinner.

After completing our checklists, we finished with a small presentation by Oliver on black and white, silhouette and high and low key images. A relatively early night was had by all, as we had a long final day ahead.

Day 5

Friday 15th April

Our final full day on Mull, but actually we were heading to Iona! Before breakfast, we headed to Carsaig, but failed to connect with anything, the light was incredibly dull and wildlife just did not seem too keen to wake early. We headed over to Loch Scridain once more but equally there seemed little activity compared to previous visits.

Breakfast time soon came around and apart from lots of Great Northern Divers, we came home empty-handed. Once food and drink were consumed, we headed east to Fionnphort. The sun made an appearance and it looked hopeful for a partially sunny day, however at the coast strong easterly winds and further cloudy skies welcomed us to the harbour!

Following the short 10-minute crossing, we left some of the group at the Abbey to explore, with the remainder heading to North Beach. We enjoyed the rough landscape and spent time connecting with some gorgeous scenic images. There were some wonderful rocky leading lines, sandy shores, grassy dunes, turbulent surf and distant mountains to capture. We spent over an hour working the shoreline before heading to meet the others and to have lunch.

Following our picnic, we made our way to the west of the island and explored the coast for a short time before returning to catch the ferry. A Merlin whizzed past us at high speed but failed to stop as it disappeared out of view. Corncrakes were yet to start calling and we may have been a little early for these charismatic and skulking summer migrants.

Once back to Mull, we continued to Fidden Bay, adding Snipe to the list, but by now it was raining heavily, so we started to make our way to the hotel for our final meal and slideshow presentation. But our last success was a short detour to Loch Assapol where we found several Irish Hares, which were believed to have been introduced to Mull.

It had been a great week of wildlife and landscape photography and we made the best of the conditions presented to us. The wilderness and special nature moments made it a wonderful holiday and everyone was content with plenty of images and even better memories of our time on Mull.

Day 6

Saturday 16th April

Our ferry was early so we did not have time for a morning drive, however while leaving the hotel and saying goodbye to our excellent hosts Tony, Joy and Paul, we spotted a Common Sandpiper immediately along the shoreline. This was our first sighting and last new species for the trip and a great addition to our tally.

From the ferry to Oban we spotted a feeding frenzy of gulls along with two Harbour Porpoise. Auks passed by the ferry and further Shag and Great Northern Diver were seen as we crossed the sound.

Arriving back in Oban we had a brief stop to look for Black Guillemots before returning to Glasgow, pausing along the way to have lunch at Inveruglas. Back in the city we said our goodbyes following a terrific week on the Island of Mull.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	April 2022					
			11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>				✓		
4	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓		✓	
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓			
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓			
8	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓			
11	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			✓			
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓	✓		
17	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓		✓		
18	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓	✓	✓		
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammea</i>		✓				
21	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					✓	
22	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓				
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
25	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					✓	
26	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓				
27	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓	
28	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓			
30	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			✓			
31	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						✓
32	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓	✓			
34	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		✓	✓		
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓		
36	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
38	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓		
40	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			✓			
41	Common Guillemot	<i>Aria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
42	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
43	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
44	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			✓
45	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓				
47	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓		

48	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓		
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H	✓			
50	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
51	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					✓	
52	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>					✓	
53	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>					✓	
54	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
55	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓		
56	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		H			H	
57	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		H	✓		✓	
59	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓			✓	
61	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓				
62	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓		
63	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓		H	H
64	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H				
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	H	
66	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓		✓	
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			H			
70	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓		
71	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	✓	
73	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓		
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	H
75	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓				
76	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
77	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓	
81	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓	
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓	✓	
83	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓			

Mammals

			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
2	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓	✓			
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						✓
5	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓			
6	Irish Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>					✓	

Plants

			April 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16
	Flowers							
1	Sea Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>					✓	
2	Lesser Celandine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>					✓	
3	Ivy-leaved Toadflax	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>					✓	
4	Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage	<i>Chrysosplenium oppositifolium</i>					✓	
5	Maidenhair Spleenwort	<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>					✓	
6	Butterbur	<i>Petasites hybridus</i>					✓	
7	Common Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	American Skunk Cabbage	<i>Lysichiton americanus</i>			✓	✓		

Other

Black Slug – *Arion ater*Drinker Moth – *Euthrix potatoria*

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