

# Mull's Otters & Eagles – A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 16th April 2023

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Eurasian Otter



White-tailed Eagle



White-throated Dipper



Atlantic Puffin

Tour report and images by Oliver Smart

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

## Introduction

The Isle of Mull holds plenty of iconic wildlife and opportunity to watch and photograph some of the species at very close range. Good numbers of White-tailed Eagles and Otters were seen and plenty of returning seabirds and waders made for a wonderful week of wildlife photography.

## Day 1

**Tuesday 11th April**

### Oban to Craignure ferry

Our first day was very much a travel day as we met at various points in Glasgow by our leader and journeyed to Oban via the beautiful Trossachs and Loch Lomond. Our ferry crossing was a smooth sailing and a few birds including Black and Common Guillemot, Hooded Crow, Black-legged Kittiwake, Shag, Red-throated and Great Northern Diver were spotted along with an Atlantic Grey Seal.

At arrival on Mull, we navigated to the Port nan Gael Inn on the southern shore of Loch Scridain, our base for our six-day tour. A weather front passed through, but it did not dampen our spirits to the forthcoming week of wildlife. With the customary briefing and delicious first dinner completed, we retired to our rooms to prepare our gear for the following morning.

## Day 2

**Wednesday 12th April**

### Loch na Keal & Loch Spelve

We woke to heavy showers and gloomy conditions. With a slight change of plan for the morning, we decided against a 'sunrise' search for otters and had a slightly earlier breakfast instead, thus giving us opportunity for better conditions later! With persistent rain, we headed out around Loch Scridain and over the mountains to Loch na Keal. There were plenty of Great Northern Diver, Meadow Pipit, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Gull and Great Black-backed Gull to be seen, but with limited visibility, we decided to head to Tobermory and spend the morning at the marine aquarium.

Our afternoon boat trip for eagles was unfortunately cancelled due to the increasing wind and precipitation. We considered returning for lunch at the hotel and to undertake some Lightroom tuition, but during our journey back, the clouds lightened and our fortunes changed with a short clear window. We had lunch along Loch Spelve and had a great sighting of our first European Otter. It did not stay for long as it had finished feeding and trotted off across the road. We hadn't even ventured out of the vehicle so after sustenance we continued down to Lochbuie where Nicky spotted our second mustelid. We enjoyed decent views and this time with the camera as it appeared to feed on a fish. We also stopped along the way for Northern Wheatear, Northern Lapwing and Common Greenshank.

As the rains returned, albeit briefly, and as the otter continued feeding in deeper water, we continued on our journey back. We stopped abruptly when our guide spotted another Otter across the loch as well as our first female

Hen Harrier. We diverted to see this one, which was swimming parallel to the shoreline and once it had ventured off and the rain returned, we made the final moves back to the warmth of the hotel.

## Day 3

Thursday 13th April

### Iona

In complete contrast, the day started with the calmest and most beautiful conditions one could imagine! The early light was stunning, with golden hues everywhere. We left the hotel early at 6.30am and started looking for Otters. Within 15 minutes we found two, feeding in a channel of water exiting the loch. They were distant so we attempted to get closer on foot, but it was just that little too tricky, so we carried on driving instead. We encountered a fabulous Grey Heron standing in water, but it had the most beautiful orange and reddish glow from the hillside, reflecting back onto the surface. After several minutes we proceeded on and encountered another two Otters, a different pair to the first ones. They were most likely mother and pup and by the size, probably from the previous year.

We stalked them whilst they were under water and positioned ourselves on the bank slightly above them. We had good cover behind us and keeping still they were none-the-wiser. We enjoyed a wonderful encounter as they continued to feed, diving and rolling around in the surface seaweed. They exited the water a couple of times to feed on their larger catches and also to scent mark.

The animals were side-lit and a couple of shakes of their bodies and the water droplets showed up beautifully against the background.

After breakfast we headed to Iona, catching the ferry from Fionnphort. We started the mid-morning session with some landscape photography at the northern end of the island, which has magnificent views back across to Mull. The snow-capped peak of Ben More was showing nicely. We experimented with various filters and angles, capturing leading lines of rocks or seaweed on the white sandy beach.

After our lunch on a neighbouring beach, we split off into two groups; those wanting to visit the abbey and those wanting to climb Dun I. From the top the panoramic views were particularly special as good light and far distant observation was possible.

We met up for a late afternoon sailing back to the mainland and then had a short drive to see Irish Hare close to Bunessan. After this we had our first attempt at searching for owls and harriers; however, a small rain front passed through curtailing any likely chance that the birds would be out hunting.

## Day 4

Friday 14th April

### Ulva boat trip & island drive

Taking an early breakfast, we were away at 7.15am and heading out looking for Otters and other wildlife. We encountered two, but both were too far for photography. We navigated Loch na Keal in the most beautiful conditions, none of us believing what a difference it was to the first day of the trip!

At Ulva, we caught the Mull Charters boat trip and heading north into Loch Tuath. Martin and Alex were the crew onboard and we were entertained to three fantastic White-tailed Eagle dives. The light was wonderful, and everyone secured plenty of shots of the birds descending and snatching a fish out of the water. We continued on to the edge of the sea loch and entering the waters beyond towards the Treshnish Isles. We encountered plenty of other seabird life including an adult Glaucous Gull, Great & Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Common Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake. Common and Black Guillemots were spotted on the sea along with a few Razorbill and plenty of Shag.

After the boat trip, we took lunch overlooking the loch and identified some nice flowers including flowering Wood Sorrel, Hairy Bittercress, Lesser Celandine and a violet species, before heading further into the mountainous north-western area of the island. Our leader picked up a number of raptors including two Golden Eagle, a male Hen Harrier, Common Kestrel and lots of Common Buzzard.

We continued to Calgary spotting Speckled Wood and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies and then down through Glen Aros. It was fairly quiet until we encountered a pair of White-throated Dipper. The male perched on a rock at the edge of the river and sang. We practiced with some slow shutter-speeds to blur the water with reasonable success.

The end of the day combined rain initially followed by some beautiful light at the edge of Loch Beg. We were unable to spot any other target species this evening so retired to the hotel as the sun dipped for a well-earned beverage and dinner.

## Day 5

**Saturday 15th April**

### Otter watching & seabirds on the Treshnish Isles

For a couple in the group, we headed out in search of more dawn wildlife. The light and conditions were perhaps the most perfect they could be. We scoured the coastline along Loch Scridain and located four more Otters; however, three were too distant for photography and one was in shade as the sun had not yet reached the section of loch it was foraging along.

We also encountered three juvenile White-tailed Eagles along the shoreline. Watching them take to the air and perform some acrobatics was amazing. Their sheer size and power were clear to see. After enjoying the numerous Great Northern Divers and various passerines singing or flitting about in vegetation; we retraced our route back to the original 'shaded' Otter. Amazingly it was still in the same area and was being watched closely by a Grey Heron and two Great Black-backed Gulls. Carefully exiting the vehicle and stalking the animal, we were well placed for photographs. Unfortunately, and like something out of a magician's toolkit the Otter simply vanished! The water was so calm there was not a single ripple of escape and there appeared to be no overland movement either. What happened to this perfectly presented opportunity will never be known!

Despite the loss of this picture-perfect postcard shot, we returned for breakfast and then headed off to Ulva harbour. We met our crew from Turus Mara and boarded the Hoy Lass for the journey to Staffa and Lunga.

Staffa had large swells so we were unable to land; however, the views of the waves crashing into the basalt rock

columns was highly impressive. Lunga was much calmer and we connected with the floating pontoon and made it ashore. We were allowed to stay until early evening and enjoyed photographing the hundreds, if not thousands, of Puffins that had returned to breed. Razorbill, Common Guillemot, European Shag and Black-legged Kittiwake had already re-established nesting territories. A Great Skua being mobbed by gulls and a juvenile White-tailed Eagle flew over too, confirming the number of predators in the area.

Some of the group completed the walk to Harp Rock, whilst others enjoyed the constant antics of the Puffins. Twite, Meadow Pipit and Wren were also noticeable passerines on the island.

Into the early evening we were collected and returned safely to dock, after a rough initial passage. After the drive back, we enjoyed our final meal together and continued laughing and chatting about the week's events!

## Day 6

Sunday 16th April

### Travel day back to Glasgow

The final morning, we headed back to Oban and spent a short time watching Black Guillemots along the sea wall. The journey was uneventful and a break overlooking Loch Lomond for lunch was a wonderfully pleasant way to end the trip back in Glasgow.



Eurasian Oystercatchers



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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓					
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</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>			✓	✓	✓	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓		✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				✓		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		✓	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				✓	✓	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓		✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</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>		✓	✓		✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓		✓		
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓				
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓	

		April 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓		
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</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>					✓	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓				✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓		
Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			✓			
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓		✓	✓		
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus colybita</i>				✓		
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				H		
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓		
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓	✓	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓					
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓		
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓			
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				H		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓			
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>					✓	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		H				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		✓		
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			H			

## Mammals

		April 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					✓	

Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓					
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓		
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Irish Hare	<i>Lepus timidus hibernicus</i>			✓			

Small Tortoiseshell and Speckled Wood also recorded on 14<sup>th</sup> April.



Iona (above) and Staffa (below)

