

Mull's Otters & Eagles – A Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th – 22nd April 2023



Atlantic Puffin



European Otter



Staffa



White-tailed Eagle

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

Introduction

Staying alongside Loch Scridain on the stunning island of Mull, the group enjoyed 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 seabirds and waders, making for a wonderful week of wildlife photography.

Day 1

Monday 17th April

Travelling day

The group were met at Glasgow Airport and we arrived promptly in time for the Oban to Craignure ferry and sighting a pair of Red-throated Diver in the harbour. The forecast for the next few days was glorious and the sailing was calm and at times quite warm! A Harbour Porpoise was the main highlight of the crossing, along with Black Guillemot, Black-legged Kittiwake and a few Common Guillemot.

We crossed the southern part of Mull, spotting plenty of Red Deer and a White-tailed Eagle along the way, cruising over the mountainside; its white tail confirming its adult age. A Common Sandpiper along Loch Scridain was nice to see along with several commoner species including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Greylag and Canada Goose, Grey Heron, Northern Wheatear and Great Northern Diver.

During our first dinner, which involved plenty of laughter, our leader discussed the itinerary and workings for the week ahead. With our first long day planned, we retired early to prepare for a day out on the Treshnish Isles.

Day 2

Tuesday 18th April

Loch Scridain, boat trip to Staffa & Lunga

A 6.30am start before breakfast, we ventured around Loch Scridain in search of Otters. The tide was slowly ebbing out, so we covered more ground initially and found some Sand Martins collecting nesting material from the road. We were able to take some photographs of them on the ground, which was unusual.

Heading for breakfast, our leader spotted the first European Otter of the day. It was close inshore, so we carefully exited and got into position. As the otter was heading around a peninsula, it continued on the same trajectory, so despite nice views, it was too far to shoot on this occasion.

After refuelling, we drove to Ulva harbour, and met the crew of the Turus Mara boat *Hoy Lass*. On route, we spotted some large skeins of Pink-footed Geese heading north, assumingly back to their breeding grounds in the Arctic. We sailed to Lunga, diverting to Staffa, which was wonderful to be able to land and briefly experiment with some slow speed landscape photography. The rough swells were still present, and these created some super waves through the cave and gullies. Back to Lunga, we were staying for a late photography special so after our lunch overlooking the Atlantic Puffin colony, we started our photography. As the afternoon progressed, the light

improved. We were blessed with blue skies and sunshine all day, so as the evening ensued, we enjoyed maximising the opportunities. Razorbill, Common Guillemot, European Shag, Black-legged Kittiwake and Northern Fulmar also entertained us.

Some of the group enjoyed a walk to Harp Rock, where we practised photography with some flying Puffins as well as some incredibly close shags nesting amongst the boulders. As with all good things, they must come to an end, and we were collected for the return leg and then the long drive back for dinner.

It was the most memorable and productive day and even despite the weary limbs, we were all thoroughly fulfilled.

Day 3

Wednesday 19th April

Loch Scridain & boat trip on Loch na Keal

Our second full day and a very full day it was too! We had breakfast fractionally later after our late evening and then headed out to scour the coastline for otters and anything else photographable. The skies were beautifully clear with literally not a single cloud showing! The wind, though, had picked up and was quite choppy on the lochs. This may have prevented the Otters coming out as we did not spot any on the two main lochs. Plenty of birdlife was seen though, but even then, fewer numbers on the water than expected.

We took Mull Charter's boat trip out onto Loch na Keal and enjoyed three hours watching and shooting White-tailed Eagles. We had three dives on this first trip, with adults coming to pick up fish from the sea. Seeing these majestic and incredibly large birds diving at speed but with an element of grace and splendour, it really was inspiring to watch.

Gulls, Shags and auks milled around the boat too and despite the slightly bumpy ride, it was a fantastic afternoon out at sea. Once returned ashore we drove to Dervaig across moorland before dropping down through Glen Aros and enjoying close views of White-throated Dipper, although once again not quite close enough for photographs. It just felt like one of those days.

We navigated around to the southern side of Mull once more and scanned for owls and harriers but no joy here either! A few of the group stayed aboard once we arrived back and we enjoyed stalking two Great Northern Divers out on the loch. Using rocks for cover and only moving when the birds were underwater, we were able to get nice shots with the evening afterglow on the water. A lovely way to end the day.

Day 4

Thursday 20th April

Boat trip to Ardmeanach and Loch Spelve

Today was our second boat trip with Mull Charters; however, we managed to squeeze an hour's birding and photography into our day before breakfast. We were still on the hunt for Otters, but the high state of the tide was probably a little off-putting to them, with little seaweed exposed. We did enjoy though a range of close birds including Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Curlew, Common Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Meadow Pipit and Grey Heron.

After breakfast, we headed straight to Ulva harbour and boarded *Lady Jayne* for the second time and headed out the waters off Ardmeanach. Here we enjoyed fantastic encounters with White-tailed Eagle including five dives. Everyone had finally scored this magnificent bird and for some an unusual shot of the bird upside-down with its head the right-way up!

We also spotted Harbour Seal, Common and Black Guillemot, Common Raven, Great Northern Diver and Northern Gannet. The beautiful clear blue skies and amazing colour graduation was just a perfect morning on the water.

After our trip, we headed to Grasspoint for lunch, overlooking the Firth of Lorn. Northern Gannets were diving into the water with a good contingent of European Shag sitting on the water. Then, it was on to Loch Spelve. We navigated around towards Croggan and encountered two European Otter. The first one we were able to photograph from the vehicle as it swam and fed amongst exposed seaweed. The second was out in the open along the shoreline, and stalking it along the road, we were able to capture it doing something our leader hadn't seen before; actually, leaving a spraint on a rock!

Heading back out of the loch we enjoyed further lovely photo opportunities with a Red-breasted Merganser and a Whimbrel that our leader spotted. Both were highly photogenic.

We finished the day overlooking grass and moorland close to the road where we watched four Hen Harriers quartering in search of prey. Two males and two females were seen, with the males coming close enough at one point for a brief picture, although only one member of the group managed a superb image!

A late return to the hotel and a fine dinner was taken, before we retired after a very long day in the field. Tomorrow was going to see even more action and we could not wait.

Day 5

Friday 21st April

Iona, Loch Assapol & Loch Spelve

We took the first ferry across from Fionnphort to Iona and spent the first hour walking around the abbey. With all the staff in a meeting we were given free access, which was a treat! After learning about the history of the island and its inhabitants, we walked to the northern shore and spent some time photographing landscapes. Plenty of meadow species were also seen including Skylark, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and two delightful Twite. With clear blue skies for the third day in a row, it was not the best of conditions, but still a wonderful way to spend the morning.

Afterwards a few of the group enjoyed a walk to the top of Dun I, the highest point on the island. Panoramic views from the summit were stunning, looking out towards the Inner Hebrides, Treshnish Islands, Staffa, Isle of Mull, Rum and Jura!

We returned to Mull during mid-day and drove to Loch Assapol for lunch, having photographed some delightful Highland Cows on the beach! We were also hoping for Irish Hare, but the heat and timing perhaps accounted for their absence. Whilst having lunch, we did however see a Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and heard our first

Cuckoo of the year. Our leader also located a Sand Martin colony that he'd not observed before and Carole spotted some Garden Tiger caterpillars feeding on fresh Foxglove leaves.

For our afternoon session, we returned to Loch Spelve and once again on the hunt for Otters. Having seen two the day before and conditions much the same, we were surprised not to find any during several hours of searching. Plenty of other shoreline wildlife was spotted including Turnstone, Whimbrel, Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Common Sandpiper. Several Great Northern Diver and a Great Cormorant were seen along with a Harbour Seal.

Our final dinner was most enjoyable but sadly it was almost the end of our delightful trip to the Isle of Mull.

Day 6

Saturday 22nd April

Travelling day

Our final morning, we decided to have one last attempt at looking for more Otters. We left the hotel at 6.30am and travelled around the local loch. Within 15 minutes we caught sight of an Otter, however after tracking it for over 30 minutes, it disappeared into a holt without a picture being taken! It just goes to show how wild they are and how elusive they can be. It was wonderful though to observe it at distance and watch its behaviour; actively feeding in open water.

We connected with lots of other wildlife during the two-hour session including Common Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Grey Heron, Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Rock Pipit, Common Greenshank and Great Northern Diver.

After breakfast, we made our way to Craignure for our return ferry and then to look for Black Guillemots in Oban Harbour. They did not perform today with the tide out, but a few bobbed around in the waters nearby.

We headed back to Glasgow Airport via Inveruglas for lunch and a lovely view over Loch Lomond and said our final farewells after a very enjoyable sunny week on Mull.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays



Iona

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓					
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓				
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓	✓		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓			
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓		
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	H			✓	✓	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓				
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>				✓	✓	
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>				✓	H	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓			
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓				
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓				
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓				✓	
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>					✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓		
Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>					✓	
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>					✓	

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H	H	H	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	H	H	✓	H	H	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				H		
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓		
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</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>		✓			✓	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓	
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓			✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				H	H	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			H		✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				H		

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		Y			Y	Y
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		Y				
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		Y		Y	Y	Y
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		Y		Y		Y
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>					Y	
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	Y					

Others

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023					
		17	18	19	20	21	22
Moon Jellyfish	<i>Aurelia aurita</i>		Y				
European Peacock	<i>Aglaia io</i>			Y		Y	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>					Y	
Brown Silver-line	<i>Petrophora chlorosata</i>					Y	
Garden Tiger (larvae)	<i>Arctia caja</i>					Y	



White-throated Dipper