



## ISLAY TOUR REPORT

### Birding Tour of Islay 27<sup>th</sup> January – 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2018

**Participants:-** Chris Brock, Tony Hawkins, Mandy Myers, Derek Pittman, Carol Shepherd & Graham Weaver and Marian Wootton.

**Tour Guide for Norfolk Birding – Chris Mills**

#### **OVERVIEW OF THE TOUR**

This was a seven day winter tour to Islay, off the west coast of Scotland in Argyll. The tour offered a great opportunity to see iconic species such as Golden and White-tailed eagles, vast flocks of Barnacle Geese, plus Hen harriers, Whooper Swans, Chough, Twite and good numbers of divers, wintering sea duck and grebes. There's, also a great chance of encountering the rare Lesser Canada Geese and both Richardson's and Todd's Canada Geese were recorded on this trip. Islay is a real winter birding treat!

We stay in the beautiful, warm and comfortably refurbished Edwardian property at Kichoman, we took 7 rooms with 5 of them ensuite, the others with 2 shared bathrooms. Choughs are visible from the grounds and Golden eagle is a definite possibility!

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*Barnacle Geese you sure see lots of these on this trip, wintering population around 35,000 in 2017-2018*

## Friday 26th January

We met up with the clients in Glasgow, Premier Inn, at North Stepps. We had a nice evening meal in the adjoining restaurant and retired early ready for an early morning start on Saturday.

Overnight in the Premier Inn, at North Stepps.

## Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> January - Kennacraig harbour & ferry crossing.

We left Glasgow at 0700 & arrived. En-route we stopped near at Ardishraig there was a nice group of **Eider** and **Red-breasted Merganser** but the real highlight proved to be a **Black-throated Diver**, which was a little tricky initially as it preened, rolling on to it's sides. But once swimmoing and feeding in a more natural pose, the head shape, black head pattern and flank patches were all evident, a real great early bonus. Another unexpected bonus here was **2 Dippers**, posturing and displaying along the shoreline!

As we headed on towards Tarbert, quite a few birds were noted from the windows of the minibus, including our first **Hooded Crows**, **Raven**, **Buzzard**, **Grey Heron**, **Oystercatcher** and **Curlew** and of the trip. Despite wet conditions, it was a good journey and we arrived at Tarbet, just short of the Kennacraig ferry with plenty of time to spare. After a hearty full Scots breakfast, we had a walk around the harbour. It was a grey wet affair and blustery! But we still had good birding with good views of **Eider**, **Red-breasted Merganser** and the lovely iconic **Black Guillemot**.

By the time we reached the ferry terminal at Kennacraig the weather had closed in, so we didn't bother trying too hard around the harbour area! Though a couple more **Black Guillemot** were nearby and just before the boat left a very close **Great Northern Diver** was very close by and much appreciated

We boarded the ferry for the crossing shortly after midday and took our position for birding during the crossing on the rear deck of the Finlaggan. It's a nice new modern boat, but lacks the port and starboard covered areas of the older boats so less birder friendly!

The crossing was choppy but we still had a good cross section of wintering seabirds. Several **Red-throated Diver**, numerous **c20 Great Northern Diver** There was also lots of **Shag**, **Red-breasted Merganser** & **Wigeon**. Also **Common Guillemot**, a few **Kittiwake**, **Goldeneye** and **Common Scoter**. As we arrived in the Sound of Jura, the first large numbers of **Red Deer** were noted on the hillsides.

We arrived late afternoon at Port Ascraig and decided to head for the accommodation, via the Supermarket at Bowmore.

We stopped off several times for the flocks of **Barnacle & Greenland White-fronted Geese**, we also scanned the Loch Indaal bay just from the outskirts of Bowmore, where we had nice scope views of **Wigeon**, **Eider** and **3 Pale-bellied Brent Geese**.

The COOP at Bowmore is very well stocked these days and we got all our food provisions for the next few days. After shopping we did have more wonderful views of lots of **Barnacle Geese** starting to roost at the head of Loch Indaal.

We arrived just before dark and we settled into the lovely warm and comfortable accommodation at Kilchoman. We had an evening meal in the Lochside which was quite good pub food!

Overnight Kilchoman House

## **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> January– Loch Gruinart RSPB Reserve & Ardnave Point**

Breakfast was arranged for 7.45 and we were all in the minibus & on our way by 8.30am. It was a cold grey morning, windy with occasional showers making birding a little tricky, but we did rather well in the end!

Just behind the accommodation a **Fulmar** was banking along the cliffs, and perhaps surprisingly given the weather a pair of **Ravens** were nest building!

As we headed out along the lanes to the famous and magnificent Islay RSPB reserve we were very quickly looking at spectacular flocks of **1000+ Barnacle Geese & 100+ Greenland White-fronted Geese**. We scanned hard through the flocks, but unfortunately we didn't find the Lesser Canada Goose on this occasion. I took the circular road to the NW areas of Ballinaby, I was soon drawing to a halt as I spied a "pale" looking gull. It was a **1<sup>st</sup> winter Iceland Gull** a nice bird to find just a few hours into the trip. But we had barely gone another ½ mile and I was pulling up again for another pale looking gull, another white-winger but this time it was a **2<sup>nd</sup> winter Glaucous Gull!** Brilliant stuff!

We headed on towards the Gruinart RSPB reserve and from the platform we had good views of lots of **Barnacle Geese, Greenland White-fronted Geese, 5 Red-breasted Merganser, c50 Wigeon, 30+ Shoveler, 200+ Teal, 20+ Pintail, Shelduck, c250 Lapwing** and also **12 Whooper Swans**. It was good to find **4 Greenshank** a scarce winter resident, but less expected were **2 Ruff** a much rarer wader on Islay in the winter.

We thawed out in the Visitor centre, enjoyed our packed lunches and hot drinks and then we set off up towards Ardnave.

Despite the strong gusty wind, we convinced ourselves to head out, donning all our layers & waterproofs – it proved worthwhile! We eventually located a nice flock of **31 Chough**, The walk back produced several **Raven**, though the Loch was pretty empty, which was unusual as I normally see a selection of "aythya" ducks and Whoopers on here. The **Chough** eventually came closer and we enjoyed watching them from the comfort of the minibus, such wonderful enigmatic and social birds!

The weather had got very windy with squally showers and we headed back for tea and biscuits. We again ate out at the Lochside, and did see a **Woodcock** near our accommodation en-route back, flushed from the roadside.

Overnight Kilchoman House



*Black Guillemot, Dipper and Shag*

## **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> January – Sanaigmore, Finlaggan and Bunnahabhain**

Today was much calmer & brighter, so after breakfast we headed towards the northern cliffs of the island. We stopped off en-route to enjoy wonderful close views of **2 Buzzards** and a **Raven**. Plus a nice group of **c20 Fieldfare** and several **Redwing** amongst them.

We arrived at one of my favoured spots, I was fairly optimistic after the two previous wet days. We scanned around for 15 minutes, then suddenly a superb **Golden eagle** soared along the top of the ridge, good views as well. Frustratingly, it moved in and out of view several times, behind the ridge. But eventually it came in front of the ridge and then a few minutes later it was joined by a second **Golden eagle**, we watched as they flew around interacted and eventually one of the Eagles perched up on the crags. It was a great performance for the groups first views, to me the most majestic of all the aquilas.

The Eagles continued to perform and fly around, before eventually disappearing off along the ridge. Nearby, at least **5+ Buzzards**, **2-3 Choughs**, **Hooded Crows** and **Ravens** were also noted.

Feeling very satisfied, and still with blue skies, we headed in the fine weather towards Finlaggan, a tip from Ian & Margaret Brooke. It proved a great decision, we had barely poured the coffee out of the flasks, when spluttering I pointed to a huge shape above the ridge behind us, a superb adult **White-tailed eagle** soared along the ridge. It sailed along the ridge and was almost immediately confronted by a sub-adult **Golden Eagle**! The two tangled and it was just amazing viewing and well worth the abandoned cold cups of coffee!

Whilst this was all going on I had heard **Crossbills** calling overhead. Now then eagles had gone I could hear them calling again, they flew overhead and then landed in the deciduous trees up by the house on the entrance track. We headed over and enjoyed great views of **12 Common Crossbills** perched in the trees. Then low across the valley flew a ringtail **Hen Harrier**, followed distantly a few minutes later by a male **Hen Harrier**. Wow! What an amazing morning.

The weather was still wonderful and we headed East towards Bunnahabhain. As we came over the ridge before the distillery an adult **Golden Eagle** appeared and went along the ridge before disappearing.

We reached the distillery but the BBC Winterwatch team were setting out their gear for filming and we realised we were unlikely to see any Otters today. They did as a favour as it happens! We find a sheltered vantage point for lunch, and we were just finishing off, when yet another **Golden Eagle** appeared, in fact **2 Golden eagles**, both adults. These were really close and we had just brilliant views, if this wasn't enough, incredibly, they were joined by a **3<sup>rd</sup> Golden Eagle**! These were then mobbed by a pair of **Peregrines**! "Raptortastic" and just the sort of thing that happens on Islay on a good day!!

We next stopped off near Ballimartin and headed up one of the minor roads, we had **5 Buzzards** over the nearby hill and we also noted another ringtail **Hen harrier**.

We decided to head back after an amazing day of raptors, but the day wasn't quite over! We stopped off between Ballimartin and Bridgend, as there was a large flock of **1500 Barnacle Geese**, feeding close to the road. I pulled up and started scanning, I had been checking most larger groups of Barnacles since we arrived. I was only a few seconds into scanning when I noticed an obviously browner goose shifting through the flock. It took a few seconds to get a clear view as the masses sidled away from us, but eventually I had clear views – a Small race Canada Goose, and an individual that had not been reported in the area recently. I decided to get some pictures, and work through the features later. It took a while to get

everyone on to it, but eventually everyone had it. A bit of Identification work later proved it to be a **Richardson's Canada Goose**. A great find and it demonstrates the value of checking each goose flock as wander around the island.

We ate in this evening, and we all enjoyed two lovely curries a vegetarian and a chicken, combined with a beer or a glass of wine!

Overnight Kilchoman House

## **Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January – Loch Indaal, Bruichladdich, Gruinart**

The fine weather from yesterday had melted away overnight, and we back with grey skies, though the wind was not too strong.

We started the day by looking at the rocky shoreline and bay in front of the Bruichladdich distillery, a favoured haunt of the wintering Purple Sandpipers. It didn't take too long to find them, there were **9 Purple sandpipers**, plus several **Redshank, Ringed Plover, Turnstone** and **Rock pipit**. Offshore there was also a nice group of **Eider, 2 Great Northern Divers** showing very well and **Red-breasted merganser**.

We next scoped the head of Loch Indaal bay from several vantage points & had reasonable views of **2 Red-throated Diver, 10+ Great Northern Diver, c10 Slavonian Grebe** one showing closely off the harbour wall at Bowmore, **35 Greater Scaup, c30 Eider, c200 Common Scoter, Shag, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser & Wigeon**. The wind had increased a little and the choppy sea made it difficult viewing of anything too far out and we couldn't locate any Long-tailed Duck, despite my best efforts<sup>1</sup>

Once on the shoreline there were also large numbers of wildfowl & shorebirds, notable were **11 Pale-bellied Brent Geese** near **Bowmore, 50 Shelduck, 3 Black Guillemot Oystercatcher, 50+ Teal, Redshank** & a few **Dunlin**.

Very suddenly all the **Barnacle Geese** irrupted from the fields near Blackrock and we were surprised to discover they had been disturbed by two young **Golden Eagle**, one of them, headed along the shoreline and overhead providing really nice views.

After searching the bay from Bowmore harbour, it was decidedly chilly and we headed in to a local café for a coffee and warm up. The weather was quite wet during the afternoon and we made use of the hide at Gruinart, we had nice close views of **Whooper Swan, Red-breasted merganser, Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Redshank, Curlew** and the masses of **Geese** and we managed to stay mainly dry. Later on a ringtail **Hen Harrier** gave nice views as it hunted along the edge of the banks.

Overnight Kilchoman House





*Rock Pipit, Curlew & Iceland Gull 2<sup>nd</sup> winter*



*Purple Sandpiper, Richardson's Canada Goose & Golden Eagle*



### **Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> January – Loch Indaal, Bruichladdich, Gruinart**

Today was much brighter but with strong westerly winds, but never the less we still saw some new birds & Otter! After a tip off from Ian Brooke we headed to Black rock and walked out along the shoreline, in the dune slack and soon found **5 Snow Bunting** in a tight group, walking into the wind. They were fairly confiding and we had good views, I rued leaving my camera in the minibus! Also in lovely **c20 Ringed Plover, 10 Dunlin** and we also saw our first **Skylarks** of the trip, unusual as they are normally a common bird on Islay, presumably the arctic blast from a few weeks before had moved most of them on.

We searched for the Brambling Ian had also mentioned near Bridgend, but this was less fruitful. We headed to the woollen mill and we had an hour looking at the old warping machines and a nice look at many of the **Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Great, Blue** and **Coal tits** coming into the feeders, but no Brambling!

We stopped off for a coffee and then headed back to Bunnahabain, safe in the knowledge the Winterwatch team had left. We arrived and it was very nicely sheltered and comfortable out of the strong westerly, the bay a picture of calm and ideal for Otter searching. We picked out a few birds as we waited and looked, a single **Red-throated Diver, 3 Great Northern Diver, 6 Red-breasted merganser**, a close **Black Guillemot, a Grey wagtail**, a surprise was a **Dipper** it was just in the seawater where the river runs in. Then I located distantly our first **Otter**, it initially refused to come any closer, but eventually it headed for the rocky shore and gave great views, in and out of the water feeding on crabs and flatfish. Then a second **Otter** appeared, in the end we were treated to well over an hour of entertainment, superb scope views as well.

Another great day on Islay!

We had a nice meal this evening at The Bridgend Hotel

Overnight Kilchoman House

### **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> February – Loch Indaal, Bruichladdich, Gruinart**

Today's forecast was not great, but in the end it was very windy but fairly dry. The wind hit 50 mph around midday so I arranged a distillery visit for the afternoon

We headed off down the east shoreline of Gruinart on the minor road. This is an excellent area, but this year there wasn't so many shorebirds as in previous years. We still had lots of birds though **c2000 Barnacle Goose, c500 Greenland White-fronted Geese, Goldeneye, 6 Red-breasted Merganser, c300 Shelduck, 10 Oystercatcher, 100 Curlew, 30 Bar-tailed Godwit, 2 Greenshank, 30 Turnstone, c50 Dunlin, 10 Redshank, c40 Turnstone, Reed Bunting and Stonechat** this species was also much scarcer this year, presumably also affected by the cold weather 2 weeks ago. We had seen many **Brown Hare**, particularly in the dark, but this morning one was hunkered down very close to the road, it was damp and looked rather sorry for itself as you will see from the included image!

In the afternoon we headed to the Kilchoman distillery, we were greeted by **c20 Chough** on arrival at the rear of the distillery. We had a very enjoyable tour and everyone, even the non-whisky drinkers tried the different tasters at the end of the tour, several of us took it a stage further and treated ourselves to a bottle of malt whisky!

We rounded the day off in the warmth of Ian & Margaret Brooke's and over cups of tea, we did enjoyed watching around **c30 Chough** doing their acrobatics as they came into roost at Kilchoman cliffs.

We had a nice meal in the new Pizzeria in Bowmore this evening, and it was a pleasure to have Ian & Margaret Brooke along. When we left restaurant the skies had cleared and the wind had dropped and so it was ideal conditions for Owls to be out hunting after two poor weather days. We weren't disappointed as **2 Barn Owls** were hunting just west of Bridgend along the reedbed.

### **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> February – Loch Indaal**

Today dawned beautiful, with sunshine and howling westerly wind completely gone. It was perfect conditions to go and look at the sea in Loch Indaal. We arrived and it was like being on a different place, a mirror of sea with birds visible for miles! Plus lots of birds, we had a lovely couple of hours, with wonderful views of **30+ Great Northern Diver, 10+ Red-throated Diver, 15+ Slavonian Grebe, 40+ Red-breasted merganser** one raft of **30 Mergansers, c150 Common Scoter, 28 Greater Scaup** plus we managed to find **9 Long-tailed Ducks** giving great scope views close inshore. As we neared Bridgend the high tide had concentrated the geese and there was around **c10,000 Barnacle Geese** roosting on the flats, an amazing sight and sound. We thoroughly enjoyed the morning and then headed down to The OA.

We arrived a The Oa and bumped into Dave Wood who told us where to look for the Twite, but first we headed out on to the headland. We saw some **Mountain Goats** high on a distant ridge. Then as we arrived at the crags, Mandy pointed out a **Golden Eagle** breaking the skyline, it came closer and was soon joined by a second **Golden Eagle**. Then one of the birds soared up high and came rushing down, it started displaying, a roller coaster ride! It was suddenly apparent why it was displaying another and third **Golden Eagle** was in view and this bird also started displaying. A **Sparrowhawk** joined them as well our first of the trip! Amazing to watch these magnificent birds with 3m wingspans performing such aerial acrobatics. Eventually the interloper was impressed enough and headed off, the local pair then dropped and sat together for us on the distant crags, but reasonable views through the scope.

We eventually had to leave the perched **Golden eagles** as we guessed they might be sat there for some time, surveying their domain! Also in evidence **5-6 Ravens, 3 Chough** and several **Hooded Crow**.

We had a nice lunch, outdoors today at the picnic benches and then headed around the other side of the reserve. We soon find the Twite, there was a flock of about **150 Twite** and we enjoyed great views of them in the sunshine. Nearby Dave Wood had told us to look carefully through the **1000+ Barnacle Geese**. I set about scanning through them and in the good light we soon were watching the **Todd's Canada Goose**, this bird had been present and faithful to this area for some time. Out on the Lochan, there was lots of **Wigeon, Greylag Geese** and **c10 Goldeneye**.

We rounded off the trip as is the tradition with a lovely evening meal in the Port Charlotte Hotel.



*Barnacle Geese, Greenland White-fronted Goose & Pale Bellied Brent Goose*





*Hooded Crow, Brown Hare & Chough*



### **Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> February – Port Ascraig harbour & ferry crossing to Kennacraig**

We headed down after breakfast to Port Ascraig said our farewells and were aboard the ferry heading back to the mainland by 9.30am.

The crossing provided a good selection of birds to finish the trip, **c15 Great Northern Diver, 5 Red-throated Diver, 2 Slavonian grebe, 5 Kittiwake, 1 Razorbill, Common Guillemots, several Black Guillemot & Common Scoter.**

### **Summary**

Overall we had a successful trip, recording 106 species of birds.

The weather was challenging at time but with so many continual observations of quality species and good views of many scarcer species we had a really enjoyable trip. Cumulative sightings over the week produced – 12 Golden Eagles, 4 White-tailed Eagles, 100 + Great Northern Diver, 20+ Slavonian Grebe, 60+ Chough, 5 Hen Harriers, 2 Peregrine, Black Guillemot, Long-tailed Duck, 150+ Twite, plus 2 different Lesser Canada Goose amongst the vast numbers of Barnacle Geese. Added to this were the great views of Brown hares and the prolonged observation of the Otters.

Systematic list of species recorded is on the next page, the three species that are marked with an asterisk \* were recorded en-route and not on the island.

## Systematic list of species recorded during the trip

1	Red-throated Diver
2	Black-throated Diver*
3	Great Northern Diver
4	Little Grebe
5	Slavonian Grebe
6	Fulmar
7	Northern Gannet
8	Great Cormorant
9	Shag
10	Grey Heron
11	Mute Swan
12	Whooper Swan
13	Pink-footed Goose
14	Greenland White-fronted Goose
15	Greylag Goose
16	Barnacle Goose
17	Pale-bellied Brent Goose
18	Small Race Canada Goose
19	Shelduck
20	Eurasian Wigeon
21	Eurasian Teal
22	Mallard
23	Pintail
24	Shoveler
25	Tufted Duck
26	Greater Scaup
27	Common Eider
28	Long-tailed Duck
29	Common Scoter
30	Goldeneye
31	Red-breasted Merganser
32	White-tailed Eagle
33	Hen Harrier
34	Sparrowhawk
35	Buzzard
36	Golden Eagle
37	Kestrel
38	Peregrine
39	Pheasant
40	Moorhen
41	Oystercatcher
42	Ringed Plover
43	Golden Plover
44	Lapwing
45	Ruff
46	Purple Sandpiper
47	Dunlin
48	Woodcock
49	Bar-tailed Godwit
50	Curlew
51	Redshank
52	Greenshank
53	Turnstone
54	Black-headed Gull

55	Common Gull
56	Herring Gull
57	Iceland Gull
58	Glaucous Gull
59	Great Black-backed Gull
60	Kittiwake
61	Guillemot
62	Razorbill
63	Black Guillemot
64	Rock Dove
65	Woodpigeon
66	Collared Dove
67	Barn Owl
68	Skylark
69	Meadow Pipit
70	Rock Pipit
71	Grey Wagtail
72	Pied Wagtail
73	White throated Dipper
74	Wren
75	Dunnock
76	Robin
77	Stonechat
78	Blackbird
79	Fieldfare
80	Song Thrush
81	Redwing
82	Mistle Thrush
83	Goldcrest
84	Long-tailed Tit
85	Coal Tit
86	Blue Tit
87	Great Tit
88	Eurasian Jay*
89	Red billed Chough
90	Jackdaw
91	Rook
92	Carrion Crow*
93	Hooded Crow
94	Raven
95	Common Starling
96	House Sparrow
97	Common Chaffinch
98	Greenfinch
99	Goldfinch
100	Siskin
101	Linnet
102	Twite
103	Common Crossbill
104	Common Bullfinch
105	Snow Bunting
106	Reed Bunting

## **Mammals**

	<b><i>Mammals</i></b>
	Red Deer
	Roe Deer
	Mountain Goat
	Otter
	Brown Hare
	Rabbit
	Common Seal

## **Food**

Breakfast & sandwich provisions were bought from the Supermarket in Bowmore, evening meals were cooked & eaten mainly at the accommodation.

**This tour will run again in March 2019**

**For further details contact:-**

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