

NORFOLK BIRDING

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Outer Hebrides – 10th June - 16th June 2018

Tour leader – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding

Participants:- Phil Beet, Jane Hibbert, Karen Hunt, Rona McGreevy, Jan Thompson, Sue Walton and Jane Wright.



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Common Redshank – a very common sight around the island

Accommodation

This tour was based in 5 star self-catering accommodation on North Uist and is extra special! A fantastic architect designed & re-fitted house with amazing moorland & machair views to the sea. It has a large lounge, diner & kitchen area with 2 fridge freezers and 4 en-suite rooms at ground floor plus 2 twin rooms with dedicated bathroom at first floor. Further details can be seen by visiting <http://www.clachanlodge.com/ClachanLodge-Gallery.htm>

Food

As this was an exclusive tour and the group had asked to cook and eat meals within the accommodation, we visited and used the Supermarket on North Uist.

We bought food provisions for making breakfast, packed lunches and evening meals. All of the meals were cooked by several of the group and all the food was brilliant! But a special mention should always be made of the Peanut butter flapjacks! Thanks Sue & everyone else.

Transport to and from Scotland

Transport was from an agreed meeting point and overnight stay in Stirling. Transport was via our 9 seater minibus, so there was ample space for luggage, scopes & cameras etc.

Sunday 10th June

We all met in Paisley and set off North for Mallaig. We stopped off for provisions in Fort William and again 15 miles south of Mallaig for lunch. The stop yielded a few nice birds with **Lesser Redpoll, Grey Wagtail, Garden Warbler, Mistle Thrush, Willow Warbler** and a close **Tree Pipit**. Overhead **Buzzards** and **Kestrel**.

We reached Mallaig harbour, which is one of the least exciting terminals from a birding perspective! However, we were soon underway and the crossing proved to be great one, both for calm seas, birds and Dolphins. Bird highlights were a steady plethora of auks, including good numbers of **Puffins** and **Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Shag, Black Guillemots. Gannets, Kittiwakes, Arctic Terns, Fulmars** were all seen, but the best birds were undoubtedly a single **Great Skua, 4 & 2 Manx Shearwater** and **2 Storm Petrels**.

A further delight was two excellent pods of **Common Dolphins**, around 25-30 in each group. The second group closer and jumping clear out of the water, a real spectacle.

After a late afternoon meal aboard the ferry, we arrived around 6.30pm at Lochboisdale. We then headed up through the islands, heading for our accommodation at Clachan on North Uist. We weren't travelling too long before we were stopping for our first **Short-eared Owl**, showing beautifully as it quartered close to the minibus. Not too long after, we were screeching to a halt for a superb male **Hen Harrier**.

Both these species provided repeat performances with different individuals as we headed north.

We weren't far south of Lochmaddy, when I noted a Diver off on one of the lochs. I assumed it was going to be a Red-throated, but scope views confirmed a niggling doubt! A superb summer plumaged **Black-throated Diver**, we had great views for over 45 minutes and secured some reasonable pictures.

We eventually reached the lodge, unpacked and enjoyed a beer and glass of wine before heading off to bed.

Monday 11th June

We were up around 630am, it was a slightly overcast but bright morning! Whilst downing a mug of tea we had scope views of a **Golden Eagle** soaring over the ridge to the rear of the accommodation, a great start.

We left at 7am and headed to Balranald, but stopped several times for **2 Short-eared Owls, Wheatears** and a **Hen Harrier**.

At Balranald, it was a bit chilly with a fresh northerly breeze. There was the usual pleasures of close **Redshank, Lapwing** and **Oystercatchers**, several with young and showing down to a few metres. **Snipe** were drumming and **Corncrakes** were calling, though the Corncrakes proved elusive this morning and one just gave brief head and shoulder views. We did enjoy nice views of **Corn Buntings**.

We headed back for brunch, enjoying another close perched **Short-eared Owl** along the way. We then headed out towards Loch Portain to search mainly for raptors in now bright skies. We had several **Wheatear** along the roadside and stopped off for a smart pair of **Twite**, the male showing off his pink rump.

A short **Common Sandpiper** walk provided views of a **Cuckoo** and, a **Whimbrel** flew over calling, though raptors were at this point frustratingly out of sight. Fortunately, this was all about to change!

We then had an inspired hour with Eagles totally dominating the scene, **2 White-tailed Eagles** and **2 Golden Eagles** showed very well on and off with them both soaring overhead at low altitude just above the cliffs.

We had snacks and coffee and then headed back towards Balranald. We were stopping again when two different **Golden Eagles** soared along the ridge, giving great views.

We headed to the peninsula but shortened the route out by driving the track, then headed along the shoreline. There was a fantastic mixed flock of shorebirds, lots of **Dunlin** and **Sanderling**, plus a few, but very smart summer plumaged **Turnstone**. This flock, with lots of varying plumage patterns was a joy to scan through and searching eventually yielded a partial summer plumage **Curlew Sandpiper**. There was also a plethora of gulls and it was pretty easy to pick out the second calendar year **Iceland and Glaucous Gulls**. It was great for comparison.

We next turned our attention to the **Arctic Terns** and enjoyed thrilling views perched and in flight at very close range. It was also fun watching the **Ringed Plover** and we found a pair huddling down with a recent youngster. We then walked back and decided to have another go at the Corncrakes! At least three were calling from one field and patience eventually gave us brief but reasonable scope views, of head and shoulders as it called away.

The day was neatly rounded off with a repeat view of the **Golden Eagles** en-route back, but this time they were much lower against the hillside and we got truly great views and some pics.

A brilliant first day!



Common Snipe & Ringed Plover



Raven & Common Sandpiper

Tuesday 12th June

We headed south after breakfast and the first stop was just south of Lochmaddy. Where we were soon stopping for a repeat performance of a stunning breeding plumage **Black-throated Diver**, but this time in better light, we had wonderful scope views for 45 minutes. Whilst watching the **Black-throated Diver**, **4 Red-throated Divers** had been flying around calling and we eventually saw one drop on to a Lochan. We drove up and were delighted to find a pair, which eventually drifted out into view from the near bank and gave lovely scope views. It was great to see both species within a really short space of time, both in breeding plumage. We also had a distant **Arctic Skua** flying over from here.

We then continued further south, we stopped off 2-3 times for hunting **Short-eared Owls** en-route. We arrived at a Loch on Benbecula and immediately on arrival located two male **Red-necked Phalaropes**, one of the males came in really close and we got photographs as well as fantastic views. Further up the Loch we found **Gadwall**, **Little Grebe**, **Teal** and a cracking male **Ruff**, with beautiful gingery head dress.

We then headed to one of the nearby bays and from here there was an excellent group of shorebirds, **40 Dunlin**, **20 Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover** and **12 Turnstone** many in breeding plumage. Also a pair of **Shelduck** with a crèche of young, plus Eider with young. A nice flock of **25 Bar-tailed Godwits** arrived just as we were leaving.

We lunched then watched over another nearby Loch, this was good for wildfowl, with small numbers of **Wigeon**, **Shoveler**, **Gadwall**, **Tufted Duck**, **Little Grebe** and at least one **Coot**, the only one of the trip!

We next headed down to Sgioport valley, we enjoyed nice views of **Wheatear** and **Stonechat**, plus a **Cuckoo** was calling. After a bit of scanning a **Golden Eagle** appeared, and it was watched as it skimmed along the mountain tops, before disappearing from view, also **Raven** and **Hooded Crow** along here too.

We decided to head back for late afternoon tea at the lodge and enjoyed great views of juv **Meadow Pipits** in the garden and a very close male **Cuckoo** that flew over the accommodation. After dinner we headed first up towards Balranald, we had a male **Hen Harrier** cross the road en-route. We arrived up at the reserve at 8.15pm and over the next hour we must have had ten plus **Corncrakes** calling, we had hoped for improved views from yesterday, but most were calling intermittently and none proved easy to see! Several **Corn Buntings** were singing, plus lots of wader activity.

We headed back and then set out just after 10pm to look and listen for the Long-eared Owls I had found the previous week. By 1030pm, at least two youngsters were calling quite strongly, though neither could be seen. The midges were now a distraction! It turned 11pm and decided to drive the lanes, the first circuit drew a blank, the second one proved partially successful. An adult **Long-eared Owl** crossed the road in front of us and could just be seen perched in a tree. This bird then evaporated into the dark.

I rolled gently down the hill and then scanned the fence posts, it was sat ahead of us on a post and by approaching slowly we had nice views. It flew again, but very luckily it had just moved twenty odd posts down the lane. This time the bird allowed us a close approach with the headlights picking out the eyes and ear tufts, it amazingly allowed approach to within around 12m, even allowing for the high ISO of 6400 the pictures came pretty well.

Wednesday 13th June.

Finally the long dry spell of dry, good weather broke and today dawned wet and windy.

We decided to head out around 8am and then head back for lunch, as the weather was forecast to deteriorate. We headed for a Loch where I had previously seen Otters, but in the windy conditions it was tricky. We had to settle for **Red-breasted Mergansers**, several **Shelduck**, **Stonechat**, **Willow warbler** and a new species for the trip a calling **Goldcrest**.

By now the storm we had been promised was getting going and the rain started we retired to the nearby café for coffee and biscuits!

Through the rest of the day the winds strengthened to 40+ mph and the rain was now fairly intense. A few of us took a local walk whilst the rest of the group caught up on emails and reading during the afternoon. But the birding today was over!



Common Gull & Black-throated Diver



Northern Wheatear & Common Stonechat



Golden Eagle & red-necked Phalarope



Little Tern & Lapwing



Long-eared owl & Short-eared Owl

Thursday 14th June

The forecast for today was not good with gale force winds and heavy rain, but by late morning, the rain was reduced to showers with brighter spells and the wind was strong but not quite gale force.

We decided to head out and we visited the lovely gift shop in Lochmaddy and did a circular walk around the harbour area. There was two smart breeding plumage **Red-throated Divers** out on the sea and a **Black Guillemot** offshore. A **Common Seal** was basking out in the rocks, but no sign of any Otters. A **White-tailed Eagle** soared briefly along the distant cliffs, but disappeared very quickly.

We then headed to Griminis harbour, where there was **Gannets** passing just offshore and several **Little Terns** fishing. We then headed on towards Balranald, we stopped off for a **Short-eared Owl**, out bravely hunting and battling with the wind, presumably it had young to feed! We were soon stopping again, this time for a new trip bird a **Whooper Swan**, there were a few less around this year and this one posed nicely in lovely light.

At Balranald we enjoyed watching the surf along the shoreline, a nice backdrop to **Gannets**, **Arctic Terns** and **Fulmars** steadily flying past into the strong wind. A lovely flock of hundred plus shorebirds whirled past, predominantly **Dunlin** and a few **Sanderling**. Also **Shelduck** and **Eider** with young. Back along the main track a **Corncrake** was calling, but again intermittently and from thick cover.

We then scanned the nearby Lochan, there was a nice mix of wildfowl, two pairs of **Wigeon** and **Gadwall**, plus numerous **Tufted Duck**. Out in the bay there was several **Eider** plus a few **Ringed Plover**.

I came back the long way and stopped off along a known Hen harrier site, we were very lucky as within minutes of pulling up the male **Hen Harrier** appeared complete with prey and we watched in awe as he neatly food passed to the female!

Another good day despite the windy conditions!

Friday 15th June

After breakfast we headed out and stopped off at one of the watchpoints. From here we had nice views of **2-3 Hen Harriers**, plus displaying **Curlew** and nice views of **Twite**.

We then moved to another vantage point and as we headed up the hill, we had great views of **3 Short-eared Owls**, plus a male **Hen Harrier**. Up at the top it was quieter, so we headed back down, we spied a big raptor in the distance and we stopped and got out. It was a sub-adult **Golden Eagle** and we enjoyed nice views as it circled over the valley. We lunched at Balranald and then headed out on to some nearby wet machair, we had a brilliant few hours and were soon watching, lots of waders and their young, **Dunlin, Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe** and **Ringed Plovers** - all in profusion. Further on we enjoyed lovely views of both **Little** and **Arctic Terns**. We also managed to add **Great Northern Diver** a first winter bird was just offshore.

We headed back and had a meal out for the first time on the tour at Hamersay House. Sadly it was rather disappointing and the home cooking was missed tonight!

Saturday 16th June

We were up very early and boarded the ferry from Lochboisdale at 6.30am. The crossing was good with some real nice seawatching, the highlights were **500+ Manx Shearwater**, very close **Arctic** and **Great Skuas**, a single **Storm Petrel** plus nice views of **Puffins, Guillemot, Razorbills** and **Black Guillemots**. We docked at Mallaig around 9.30am and we were soon dropping everyone off back in Paisley, Glasgow.

A great trip again on the Uists, and a big thanks to the **Leicester Ladies and Phil** for joining me!



Arctic tern & Cuckoo



© Balranald bay, North Uist

This tour will run again in June 2019 – please contact us if you are interested in joining the tour.

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