

# GBC tour to the Outer Hebrides 14<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> May 2016



## **Participants:**

Alan Rosney, Ceri Jones, Tim Adcock, Alastair Flannagan, Laura Palmer, Andrew Bevan, Alan Woodward, Sandra Woodward, Paul Seligman, Janet Dewes, Rob Gaze, Adrian Meredith, Paul Marshman, Stuart Hardcastle and Trish Wood

## **Accommodation:**

Premier Inn, Paisley,  
Nunton House Hostel, Balinvanich, Benbecula

## **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May**

Fifteen club members set off for the island chain of North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay, early on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May. Our transport was via a 17 seater minibus, hired from Pontyclun Van Hire. Having stopped at Frankley Services to pick up Trish, we decided to break our journey at Leighton Moss RSPB reserve, near Lancaster. Due to traffic delays en route, we had only 90 minutes to take in this lovely reserve. The highlights here were Marsh Harrier, Spoonbill, Ruff (some in breeding plumage), Willow Tit and Pink-footed Goose. Our next stop was at RSPB Geltsdale, near Carlisle. This was a “new” reserve for all of us and what a delight! Situated in the uplands, we saw Whinchat, Ring Ouzel, Merlin, Curlew, Cuckoo and Snipe. The hoped for Black Grouse were not evident however. Our overnight stop was in the Premier Inn, Paisley.

## Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May

From Paisley, we proceeded to the port of Mallaig, to catch our ferry to Lochboisdale, South Uist. The scenery around Loch Lomond and Glencoe was particularly impressive. En route we saw Osprey at Loch Ba. From the ferry we added Gannet, Purple Sandpiper, Manx Shearwater, Black Guillemot, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin to our sightings. We were treated to the sight of around 100 Common Dolphins that escorted us into port.

As we travelled from the port to our digs, we were treated to the sight of a fly-over White-tailed Eagle at Loch Bi. We also stopped briefly at the Ranges to look for the Dotterel that had been reported there, with no luck. We did see a Merlin here however.

We had opted for bunkhouse accommodation, to keep costs down. We stayed in Nunton House Hostel in Benbecula. What a find! The owner, Donald McPhee, couldn't have been more accommodating and the facilities were first class. A bonus was a *crecking* Corncrake in the back garden. The local Starlings (which appear larger and less spotted than the mainland birds) were excellent Corncrake mimics.



Corncrake in the back garden of Nunton House  
© Alan Woodward



Map showing some of the sites visited during the week

P.S. Some of the place names may vary in spelling as they are taken from Gaelic

## Monday 16<sup>th</sup> May

The following morning a pre-breakfast trip to nearby Loch Mor, produced a cracking female Red-necked Phalarope, plus Arctic Terns, Short-eared Owl and drumming Snipe. Over the road was the appropriately nicknamed Stinky Bay. Here Adrian Meredith spotted an adult Iceland Gull, the only one we saw during the trip. In the bay were four very smart Great Northern Divers. We were to see many of this species during the week. Also here were Eider and Whimbrel.

Post-breakfast, we headed for Balranald and Ard Na Runair, managed by the RSPB. Almost immediately we saw Corn Bunting and later we watched a pair of nest building Twite. They are really lovely in their breeding plumage, with pink rump showing. Balranald and Ard Na Runair are jewels in the crown of these islands (we were to make a couple more visits during the week). There were birds everywhere, with Dunlin and Ringed Plover being the most numerous waders. Laura picked out a couple of breeding plumaged Purple Sandpipers loafing on an inland pool. Also seen here were both Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Wheatear and Shag. On our return to the minibus, I picked out an immature Glaucous Gull amongst the numerous Common Gulls.



Some of the highlights from RSPB Balranald Reserve: Glaucous Gull, Corn Bunting, Twite and Dunlin in breeding plumage © Alan Woodward

On our return to our accommodation, we decided to take the minor road that runs through the centre of the island, known as the Committee Road. This location is known for its raptor watch points. We saw three Hen Harriers and a Short-eared Owl.

### **Tuesday 17th May**

Before breakfast we walked to Aird, a site on Culla Bay. We were treated to the sight of an Otter dragging a very large flatfish on to the shore. After breakfast we headed south to Loch Bi, where there were over four hundred Mute Swans. Then back to the Ranges on the west coast to have a second crack at the Dotterel. We were unlucky once more but Tim picked out a rather distant Common Crane. It was here that we saw our only Golden Plovers of the trip. Another Glaucous Gull was found on the coastal strip.

Later we visited Loch Druidbeg. A “tourist eagle” (i.e. Buzzard) got us a bit excited. The plantation here produced good views of Cuckoo. There were also Wigeon here.

A detour to Kallin Harbour proved very productive. We were watching a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers in the harbour when two skuas swept in, landing on a small island. Scope views proved that they were Arctic Skuas. Brief views of a White-tailed Eagle were obtained.



View over Loch Druidbeg © Alan Woodward

From here we moved on to a small lochan, close to the harbour and saw our first breeding plumaged Red-throated Divers of the trip.

### **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> May**

We re-visited Loch Mor, to try and show the Red-necked Phalaropes to those that had missed them the first time around – no luck though. Alastair started chatting to a birder, whom he thought he recognised. It was John Wilson (no, not GBC’s John Wilson) but the former warden of Leighton Moss. We had some very close views of Twite here.

The weather closed in but it didn’t really stop the birding. A stop at some wooded gardens in Lina-clate produced some passerines: Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Linnets, Song Thrush (which I believe is an island race, being darker than the mainland birds), Willow Warbler, Sedge Warbler and last but not least a Common Redpoll.

As the winds were increasing, we opted to go back to the sea watching headland at Ard Na Runair, hoping for some skua passage. We only saw a couple of Arctics here, the others remained well offshore. One “new” bird for the trip was Little Tern. From here we stopped at Loch Sandaray and saw our only Whooper Swans of the trip.

Langass plantation was our next stop. There weren’t many birds showing here so we went on to Lochmaddy Harbour. Here we had good views of Black Guillemot. We returned to our digs via the Committee Road, picking up great views of Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl en route. An unexpected sighting was a Red Grouse that flew across one of the lochans.

## Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> May

As the weather wasn't great we opted to do a tour of the island, hoping for some birds en route. We began at Stinky Ba and then went on to Petersport (Grimsay pier). Another tour of the Ranges produced few new species but we did see them wheeling out a cruise missile!

As the winds were freshening, we opted to go to Rubha Ardvule for some sea watching. There were lots of Ravens here. (Surprisingly we saw few Hooded Crows on our trip. Apparently there a mass cull was undertaken a few years ago and the population hasn't really recovered).

A trip to the *Whisky Galore* island of Eriskay produced our only Common Sandpipers of the trip – thanks to Tim braving the driving rain. A close Great Skua was a bonus.

## Friday 20<sup>th</sup> May

The party split in two. One group (the A team) opted to do a boat trip from Kallin, on *Lady Anne's* boat trips, having first "got" the Red-necked Phalaropes at Loch Mor. The trip promised close up views of White-tailed Eagles fishing in the sea loch. It didn't disappoint. This group also saw Black-throated Diver, a species that eluded the other party.

The B team headed for Ard Na Runair again. The winds had turned to the south-west and it looked good for skua spotting and so it proved. Following a run of Arctic and Great skuas, we were at last treated to the sight of two (or possibly three) Long-tailed skuas passing through the bay. Another highlight was the sight of a male Otter catching crabs and dragging them on to nearby rocks, providing the photographers with great views. One area we hadn't visited before was the east-facing Loch Euphort. This was a delightful valley, where we saw lots of Red-breasted Mergansers, plus both Golden and White-tailed Eagle.



Immature White-tailed Eagle © Alan Woodward



Most of the waders were in breeding plumage - Turnstone and Sanderling © Alan Woodward

Back to the Committee Road for a spot of raptor watching. An immature White-tailed Eagle flew right over our heads, giving a spectacular view. Whilst we were watching a lovely male Hen Harrier (all but one of the Hen Harriers we saw were males – were the females on eggs?) Stuart called out that he had seen a large black cat emerging from a plantation on the hillside. It remained in view for a few minutes. Scope views confirmed that it was a large cat, probably a Black Panther. A few photos were taken by Alan and Adrian. Even at long range the size of the beast was obvious. Our landlord confirmed that a farmer had reported one fifteen years earlier but his sighting had been dismissed. With our photo evidence we await the final adjudication.

The sunset in the evening was quite spectacular. Adrian and Stuart got to work, taking some lovely shots in Culla Bay. They also picked out some Common Scoter in the bay. Some remained in the hostel – after all someone had to finish all the beer in the fridge. (No names but his surname rhymes with haze).

### **Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May**

We caught a very early ferry from Lochboisdale to Mallaig. Once again we had great views of Common Dolphins in the bay. Adrian called Storm Petrel but no-one else could get on to it. The species seen were similar to the outward crossing.

Back on the mainland we had a long journey back to South Wales. We had a couple of stops en route but didn't really add any new species to our trip list. We eventually arrived back in Cardiff at 1.20 am. on the Sunday. Many thanks to Ceri and Tim for doing all the driving.

Alan Rosney

Typically, a mega turned up on the day we left. A Black-billed Cuckoo was found. Never mind, we'll have to go back!