

Autumn Gold

15th – 20th September 2013



Summary: The weather was very unsettled this week with strong north or north-westerly winds producing un-seasonally cold conditions for the first half of the week. The temperature and weather did improve in the latter half although it was regularly still windy and wet at times. Despite the sometimes demanding conditions we had some excellent birds with superb views of a couple of **Grey Phalaropes**, a juvenile **Red-necked Phalarope**, which is rare here in autumn; a **Mediterranean Gull** and a juvenile **Long-tailed Skua** overhead at Loch Sandary! We had all the regular birds of prey including good views of both **White-tailed** and **Golden Eagle** plus some great views of an immature **Merlin** on a kill by the roadside. Scarce waders were just that and notable by their absence which must have been due to the wind direction. Even so the wintery conditions did produce some early goose movements with both **pale-bellied Brent Geese** and **Pink-footed Geese** noted during the week. We had all the usual mammals including both seal species, Red Deer and around 4 sightings of Otter to keep us entertained. In all we had some great bird sightings in a stunning landscape and enjoyed some island hospitality.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Ann Sime, Roger Tozer and Margaret Jack

Daily Dairy:

15th September:

Weather – Gale force 8 westerly winds throughout the day with frequent, heavy showers in the morning becoming less frequent with sunny spells in the afternoon.

Margaret, Roger and I met up at Hestimul Guesthouse at 09:30 and had a quick look around the nearby fields at Torlum and Stinky Bay. The former held a large flock of **Golden Plover** and **Lapwing** as well as **Snipe**, **Greylag Geese** and a **Reed Bunting** by the roadside. Stinky Bay provided us with views of **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Ringed Plover**, **Eider** and a **Red-throated Diver**. We headed back

to the guesthouse where we met up with Ann, the final tour participant and made our way to the South Ford. Here we explored Balgarva, Ardivachar and the northern end of Loch Bee. 2 **Lapland Buntings** flew up calling from grass by the road at Balgarva whilst the bays and shore had **Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Turnstone, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwits, Shelduck** and **Teal**. 40 **pale-bellied Brent Geese** were seen heading south, low to the sea off Balgarva whilst a **Bonxie** was observed dragging the corpse of a Shelduck out of a pool near Hebridean Jewellery.

From here we headed south calling in at the Howmore River and Stoneybridge although the gale force winds and heavy rain that came on at the latter site made viewing difficult. 40 – 50 **Brent Geese** were spotted attempting to shelter behind rocks on the shoreline and we also managed to pick up more **Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Turnstone, Eider** and 3 **Wigeon** before the weather sent us back to the shelter of the vehicle. We moved on to North Loch Eynort and had our packed lunch in the relative shelter here. We didn't venture far from the car as the showers were becoming more frequent although we did see both **Red-breasted Merganser** and **Shag** on the water and Ann drew our attention to the huge bulk of an adult **White-tailed Eagle** that gave great views as it headed low, up the loch and past our vehicle.

Post lunch we drove across to the west side of the island and took a windy walk out to the point at Ardvule. 2 **Red-throated Divers** were seen off-shore whilst 50 **Brent Geese** were seen heading south and a **Grey Phalarope** was seen skimming around the point, low, over the sea although it had gone before we reached the point. Other birds included **Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Curlew, Redshank, Gannets, Shag, Cormorant, Teal** and **Golden Plover**. We made our way back across the bumpy track and took the minor road back north. As we passed the coastal fields at Peninerine we were lucky enough to spot an immature **Merlin** on a kill. We enjoyed excellent views of the falcon as it tore into its catch just yards from the roadside. We returned to the main road where we spotted another **Merlin** as it zipped across the road near Thatharsal whilst 3 **Buzzards** were seen riding the updrafts on the western flanks of the hill. We continued north, calling in at the south end of Loch Bee where we had 3

Whimbrel flying over calling, as well as a large flock of **Golden Plover**, **Lapwing**, 2 **Knot** on the loch side and **Redshanks**.

We finally took a quick look at the fields at Torlum before returning to the guesthouse and enjoying an evening meal at the Dark Island.

16th September:

Weather – Another very windy day with west-north-westerly force 7 winds, increasing to force 8 accompanied by heavy showers (less frequent than the previous day).



We began today with another look at the fields at Torlum which again held a large mixed flock of **Golden Plover** and **Lapwings** as well as **Snipe** and plenty of **Greylag Geese**. Nearby Stinky Bay held the usual array of waders including **Bar-tailed Godwits** so we quickly moved on to the recently cut fields at Nunton. One field in particular

was alive with **Golden Plover** and **Lapwings**, in amongst which we spotted a juvenile, male **Ruff**. A mixed flock of finches were also feeding in the field and contained a lone **Corn Bunting** which perched on the roadside wires providing us with some great views.

Moving on we headed for Griminish Pier in North Uist and took a walk past Callernish House to the coast. The sea was mountainous although we did manage to spot a number of **Gannets**, the odd **Fulmar**, a **Red-throated Diver** and 4 **Great Skuas** before retreating back to the pier where we had parked. Not long after turning back a flock of 40 – 50 **pale-bellied Brent Geese** came struggling past, into the wind; this

was shortly followed by a young **Grey Phalarope** mid-channel between us and Vallay Island. It alighted on the water for long enough to allow all of us to get scope views before it continued its battle against the wind. A juvenile **Hen Harrier** also flew over to Vallay before we reached the car and continued our circuit around the island. From here we drove west around the north-western tip of the island and stopped to scan the shore and freshwater loch at Hougharry. Loch na Reivil held **Little Grebe**, **Shoveler** and **Tufted Duck** whilst the coast had the usual **Dunlin**, **Sanderling** and **Ringed Plover**. Heading for Balranald we spotted a **Sparrowhawk** on the edge of Hougharry en route to the coast at Aird an Runair where we found more common waders including **Turnstone**, **Redshank** and **Bar-tailed Godwit**. We made our way back to the visitor centre for some shelter and our packed lunch as well as some close views of a flock of **Twite**.



Post lunch we drove around to Loch Sandary taking the track that runs around the east side first and passes a small hedge where we located a **Willow Warbler** and a couple of **Stonechats** taking advantage of the little shelter it provided. The loch itself was fairly quiet although we did spot a skua overhead. We initially were a little unsure of the bird's

identity although it appeared very slight and long-winged as it glided away from us. Luckily the bird returned back towards us allowing us to take a number of images and secure the identity as a juvenile **Long-tailed Skua**; a cracking surprise for an inland loch and in the autumn. We moved onto Langass Lodge and took a walk adjacent to the plantation which held a number of **Goldcrests**. The loch was home to a small party of **Red-breasted Mergansers** whilst a flock of around 70 geese in the distance proved to be a skein of **Pink-feet**, our first of the autumn.

Finally we moved on to Baleshare where we located good numbers of **Golden Plover** whilst masses of gulls feeding on the tide edge contained a **Little Gull**. In amongst one group of gulls we noticed a **Grey Phalarope** feeding on the water's edge. As it



wasn't far and the rain wasn't imminent we walked along the beach towards the bird, flushing a second phalarope from behind a clump of seaweed en route. Both birds provided superb views and allowed us to secure some nice images.

We retired on this high and after a rest in the guesthouse had our evening meal at Stepping Stones restaurant in Balivanich.

17th September:

Weather – The wind eased a little today from north-west force 6 to force 5; showery at first but later becoming mostly sunny.

We began the day by driving to the southern side of South Uist and taking a short walk at Smerclate. A juvenile **Hen Harrier** was spotted hunting over the fields whilst the shore had **Rock Pipit**, **Shag**, **Cormorant** and **Snipe**. The freshwater loch had **Teal** amongst a small group of **Mallards** and a couple of **Mute Swans**. We moved on to Eriskay and pulled up at the ferry terminal to scan the Sound of Barra. We found a distant **Red-throated Diver** on the sea and a couple of **Rock Pipits** on the shore but more surprising was a **Golden Eagle** that flew up from the hills to the south-east and proceeded to display for a short while. This was followed by 2 adult eagles sailing



overhead and providing us with some excellent views. Next we took a short walk at Acairseid where we got chance to compare both Grey and Common Seals side by side. We also found **Kestrel**, **Shag** and a **Golden Eagle** heading back south and providing us with more great views. Eriskay being only small and having little cover didn't take long to cover

so we headed back to the causeway connecting this fine little island to South Uist. From here we stopped to scan the more sheltered waters to the east and managed to locate another **Red-throated Diver**, **Red-breasted Mergansers**, **Eider** and **Shag**.

As we had not explored Loch Eynort on our past, windy and wet visit we returned but before taking a walk enjoyed a packed lunch in the parking area at the end of the road. Our walk here produced a distant Otter on rocks at the east end of the loch for around 5 -10 minutes before it slipped away whilst bird wise we had a **Golden Eagle** over the hills to the east; later an immature **White-tailed Eagle** in the same area as well as **Kestrel**, **Chaffinch**, **Willow Warbler**, **Goldcrest**, **Robin** and the Hebridean varieties of **Dunnock** and **Wren**. Moving on we headed for the west coast picking up a male **Hen Harrier** at Ormiclate on our way to Stoneybridge. We were hoping that last week's Baird's Sandpipers were still present but no luck on this score although we did spot **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover**, **Turnstone**, **Redshank** and **Eider**. Nearby Peninerine had **Bar-tailed Godwit** as well as the usual array of waders. Lying adjacent to Peninerine is the townships of Snishival and Howmore where we took a walk along the dune edge and by the river. As we returned along the sand dunes we flushed a **Short-eared Owl** from its hiding place in the Marram Grass. It flew a short distance before coming down but a nearby **Buzzard** took exception to it and after a brief skirmish the owl disappeared once more.

As we headed back to the main road and our guesthouse an immature **White-tailed Eagle** flew overhead. We chased it down the road to the nearby hill of Thatharsal where it circled for some time before being joined by a second immature. Both birds were together for a short time before each went their own way over the moor; a fine way to end the day.

We had our evening meal at the Dark Island Hotel.

18th September:

Weather – Another cold day with west-north-westerly winds, force 6; sunny spells with occasional showers.

Our destination today was Berneray although before heading to this, the most northerly inhabited island in the southern part of the archipelago we called in at Coot Loch. This is the last breeding site for **Coots** in the islands where they are also declining with now just 8 birds left here. A stop at Balivanich produced **Red-throated Diver**, **Eider** and **Grey Heron** before moving on to Oban Trumisgarry where we spotted an Otter fishing quite close to the road in the brackish loch as well as 2 **Hen Harriers** hunting to the rear of the loch, including a fine male and a **Kestrel**.

Once on Berneray we first headed for Borge machair where we found 100's of **Golden Plover** feeding on the freshly cut fields. A possible American Golden Plover had us searching through masses of plover that moved to the hummocky ground between the ploughed machair and the western shore but to no avail. We returned to the ploughed area which still had lots of **Lapwing**, **Greylag Geese** and **Twite** feeding. As we drove back across a **Lapland Bunting** was heard calling; we pulled over and took a short walk across the stubble to find at least 3 **Lapland Buntings** hidden in the grass. They flew around calling for the next 10 minutes, coming down in sometimes quite short vegetation but never allowed close up views on the ground. A **Peregrine** was seen chasing **Rock Doves** in the distance to the north and once out of view we headed the same way ourselves. The tide was very low when we reached the north-east side of the island and had revealed a superb, sandy beach. We took a walk

across this and managed to spot a good variety of birds including lots of **Pied Wagtails** and **Rock Pipits** as well as good numbers of **Ringed Plover**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone** and **Dunlin**. **Curlew**, **Bar-tailed Godwits** and a single **Black-tailed Godwit** were also found amongst the exposed seaweed. Good numbers of gulls were also feeding in the shallow water and we managed to pick out a juvenile **Kittiwake** amongst them. We took our lunch in the shelter of an old croft house by the youth hostel before returning to Borve. Many of the **Golden Plover** had moved to the southern end of the hummocky area enabling us to scan from the vehicle although all we could find amongst the masses of plovers was a juvenile, male **Ruff**.

We left Bernery and began a circuit to the west, stopping at Athmore to scan the loch which had a couple of **Wigeon** and a **Moorhen**. We continued around the north part of the island before stopping at Malaclate for a scan across the sands. A movement in a strip of water out in the bay proved to be an Otter, fishing and as it was a fare way off we took a walk across the sands to get better views which we did. After a while the Otter began to swim towards a small, tidal, seaweed covered island where we could distinctly here young animals “chittering”. They showed briefly but then hid amongst the rocks so we began making our way back to the shore. Masses of **Golden Plover** were also sheltering amongst the rocks on the sands as well as **Bar-**



tailed Godwit, **Greenshank**, a **Knot** and a variety of gulls. Amongst the gulls we found a 1st winter **Mediterranean Gull**, a rare bird in this part of the world. It showed well and allowed us to capture some images before it flew off, alone to the south. We also made our way south, across the Committee Road and took a quick tour of Baleshare. As we got onto

the island we had good views of an adult, male **Hen Harrier** quartering the fields by

the roadside. As we watched a juvenile bird flew in and spooked the male which left the area leaving the youngster to hunt the long grass. There was a large flock of **Golden Plover** at Teannamachair and a few **Sanderling, Ringed Plover** and gulls on the shore. Loch Mor produced **Moorhen, Tufted Duck** and **Little Grebe**.

We finished our day on Baleshare and headed back to the guesthouse before enjoying an evening meal in the Dark Island.

19th September:

Weather – South-easterly force 2 with rain in the morning, clearing around mid-day with the wind increasing to force 5 – 6 before easing to north-east 1 in the late afternoon.

We began with a look at the South Ford from Hebridean Jewellery. The tide was fairly high so birds were concentrated on the muddy sands here and included at least 100 **Grey Plover** (with some still in summer plumage), **Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Bar-tailed Godwits, Redshank, Turnstone, Knot, Curlew** and **Sanderling**. From here we had a look at Ardivachar and Kilualay machair. The fields here were full of activity with 100's of **Golden Plover**, at least 80 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 2 **Ruff**, masses of gulls including a juvenile **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and hordes of **Skylarks**. Amongst the feeding hordes were of course hundreds of **Greylag Geese**. We moved further south and briefly stopped at Howmore where we had a couple of **Reed Buntings** in the Alders and a small flock of redpolls which flew off from a roadside garden. A **Merlin** dashed across the road at Snishival and we spotted 2 **Red-throated Divers** off the coast at Peninerine; whilst Stoneybridge produced **Dunlin, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Knot** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**.

We continued a little further south and had our packed lunch at Rubha Ardvule. Whilst tucking into our rolls a sudden panic amongst the birds on the shore drew our attention to a hunting **Peregrine**. It flew into a flock of **Starlings** that bunched tightly together and swirled around as a mass of birds preventing the Peregrine from singling one out. The element of surprise now gone the Peregrine shot off and the

Starlings returned to feeding on the dune edge. In the far distance we also spotted the huge bulk of an immature **White-tailed Eagle** flying low over the machair. Heading back towards the main road the fields adjacent to Loch Bornish had a flock of **Golden Plover** and **Curlews** resting by the loch side. Once back on the road we turned north once again calling in at Loch Stilligarry which had around 60 **Tufted Duck** and a few **Little Grebes**. We also ventured along the Loch Skipport road and took a look at Druidibeg plantation. As usual it was pretty quiet apart from a **Common Redpoll** showing well on the side of the road. We left South Uist and tried our luck on Benbecula. As we drove west between the freshwater lochs of Fada and Loch Mor we spotted an Otter fishing in the former loch. It showed well for a while before it obviously caught something large, which it then took to the bank to consume out of sight. Stinky Bay was quiet so we took a walk on the machair at Borve / Torlum. We found plenty of **Eiders** and a selection of commoner waders along the shore against the superb backdrop of the Cuillin Mountains on Skye in the distance.

Returning to the guesthouse a **Merlin** dashed across the road near Coot Loch and the fields at Torlum were still full of **Lapwings** and **Golden Plover**, rounding off another day.

20th September:

Weather – Today was slightly warmer than most of the week with south-westerly, force 5 winds; showers with occasional sunny spells becoming cloudier in the afternoon.

Our last day began well when Ann spotted a juvenile / 1st winter **Grey Phalarope** on the sea at Stinky Bay. It showed well as it occasionally lifted on the swell that was breaking on the inshore rocks. Other birds here included **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover**, **Turnstone**, **Redshank**, **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Eiders**. Moving on we stopped in Balivanich to scan the beach by the airport which held a few **Ringed Plover** and **Turnstone** whilst a flock of **Eiders** were bobbing off-shore.

We left Benbecula and headed north taking a turning for Loch Sandary on North Uist. **Snipe** were feeding on the water's edge whilst a flock of around 80 **Golden Plover** were wheeling round along with **Lapwing**, 2 **Ruff** and a good number of **Curlews** that came down on the south shore. The loch itself was pretty quiet with just a few **Tufted Duck** so we moved on to Loch Paible. This tidal area is extremely variable in the amount of birds it produces and today it was poor. In fact it was



almost bird-less but we persisted and walked out to the mouth of the loch. There were a few more birds here with **Ringed Plover** sheltering behind the small rocks along with **Turnstone** and the odd **Dunlin**. Once on the coast we spotted another phalarope on the sea just to the south of the loch mouth. We assumed

from the size that the bird was a Grey but wandered over to have a closer look which was very fortunate as it turned out to be a juvenile **Red-necked Phalarope**; a rare bird here in autumn.

After our success we moved on to Balranald and drove out to the coast at Aird an Runair where we found **Dunlin**, **Sanderling** and **Turnstone** feeding on the shore whilst off the headland we had a few **Gannets** and a **Great Northern Diver** fly overhead. **Teal** and **Mallard** were on the small freshwater loch here whilst good numbers of **Twite** were feeding on the machair. We had our lunch at the visitor centre before venturing on to Hougharry. Ann was obviously on form today, spotting a moulting adult **Great Northern Diver** off-shore which gave good scope views.

Tufted Duck and **Little Grebe** were on Loch na Reivil whilst 20 **Black-tailed Godwits** flew over. A few **Rock Pipits** were feeding along the shore whilst more **Twite** were busy feeding in the weedy fields. We continued around the north-west of the island

picking up a **Merlin** near Scolpaig and a **Greenshank**, **Sanderling** and **Ringed Plover** at Vallay Strand. We crossed the Committee Road, pausing to look at some Red Deer which was rather a good point to stop as we also had a **Kestrel** and a distant **Golden Eagle** circling low over the moor. We took a short walk at Langass next although it was pretty quiet.

We headed back south from here to explore the South Ford once again. We again had a good selection of commoner waders including **Grey Plover** and **Bar-tailed Godwits** whilst off-shore we spotted **Red-throated Diver** and a few **Red-breasted Mergansers**. An immature **White-tailed Eagle** was causing chaos on the machair south of Ardivachar and at one stage put up a **Short-eared Owl** that must have been hiding in the long grass. Finally on our way back to the guesthouse we stopped at Loch an't-Saile where we enjoyed a good flock of around 60 **Black-tailed Godwits**.

I dropped Ann, Roger and Margaret back off at the guesthouse in the late afternoon where we said our goodbyes with Roger and Ann staying for another night or two before returning home and Margaret moved on for a couple of days on Barra.

Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen daily in small numbers
Great Northern Diver	A moulting adult off Hougharry on 20 th
Little Grebe	Fairly common and seen almost daily
Fulmar	Seen off Griminish, 16 th
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common and seen daily
Mute Swan	Common
Whooper Swan	One on Loch an Sticir, 18 th
Greylag Goose	Very common
Pink-footed Goose	Around 50 flew south-east near Langass Lodge, 16 th
Brent Goose	Flocks were seen struggling against the weather conditions on 15 th and 16 th plus 8 were lingering at Balgarva, 19 th / 20 th
Shelduck	Small numbers seen on two dates
Mallard	Common
Shoveler	Seen on 16 th only
Wigeon	Sightings on just 2 dates
Teal	Fairly common with sightings on every day of the trip
Tufted Duck	Common
Eider	Common and seen daily
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen every day in small numbers
White-tailed Eagle	Seen on 4 dates with 3 on 17 th
Golden Eagle	Sightings on 2 dates with 3 on 17 th
Hen Harrier	Seen on 4 dates with max of 4 on 18 th
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	Singles on 2 dates during the week
Kestrel	Fairly common and seen almost daily in small numbers
Merlin	Seen on 3 dates with great views on the first day
Peregrine Falcon	Singles were seen on 2 dates

Coot	8 were at the only regular site in Benbecula
Moorhen	Noted on just the 18 th
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common and seen daily in good numbers
Grey Plover	Flocks were seen on 3 dates and at 3 different sites
Golden Plover	Common with some good numbers seen most days
Lapwing	Common on the machair and adjacent fields
Knot	Small numbers seen on 3 dates
Sanderling	Very common
Turnstone	Common and seen daily
Dunlin	Common
Redshank	Common
Greenshank	Fairly common and seen on 4 dates ^t
Bar-tailed Godwit	Common and seen daily
Black-tailed Godwit	Sightings on 3 dates with around 80 on 19 th
Curlew	Common and seen daily
Whimbrel	3 flew south over Loch Bee, 15 th
Snipe	Common and seen daily
Grey Phalarope	Sightings on 3 days with 3 on 16 th and some great views
Red-necked Phalarope	A juvenile at the mouth of Loch Paible, 20 th
Ruff	1 or 2 were seen on 4 dates during the week
Great Skua	Seen on 3 dates
Long-tailed Skua	A juvenile was over Loch Sandary, 16 th
Black-headed Gull	Common
Mediterranean Gull	A 1 st winter was at Malaclate, 18 th
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Small numbers were seen on 3 dates
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	A juvenile was off Berneray, 18 th
Rock Dove	Common and seen daily with some large flocks
Collared Dove	Fairly common and seen daily

Short-eared Owl	One was flushed from the dunes at Howmore, 17 th and another by a White-tailed Eagle at Eochar, 20 th
Skylark	Common
Swallow	Small numbers seen daily
Rock Pipit	Seen almost every day in small numbers
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen regularly in small numbers
Hebridean Wren	Fairly common and seen on 3 dates
Hebridean Dunnock	Seen on 2 dates in suitable habitat
Robin	Seen most days
Wheatear	Common and seen every day in small numbers
Stonechat	Noted on 4 dates
Hebridean Song Thrush	Seen around the guesthouse
Blackbird	Common
Willow Warbler	1 or 2 on 16 th and 17 th
Goldcrest	Seen on 16 th and 17 th
Hooded Crow	This increasing species was seen on most days
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Recorded only on 17 th
Linnet	Seen almost daily in small numbers
Twite	Common and seen virtually every day
Common Redpoll	One seen well on 19 th (also flock of un-identified redpolls on the same day at Howmore)
Greenfinch	Fairly common and seen almost every day
Reed Bunting	Sightings on 2 dates
Corn Bunting	1 at Nunton and 4 at Tigharry
Lapland Bunting	2 on 15 th and 3 on 18 th

Mammals:

Otter	Seen on 3 days with sightings from Loch Eynort, Loch Fada, Oban Trumisgarry and Malaclate
Grey Seal	Common and seen on 4 dates
Common Seal	Common
Red Deer	Noted on 20 th only
Rabbit	Seen most days
Short-tailed Field Vole	One by the path to Spanish, 17 th

Dragonflies:

Common Hawker	A few were seen on 19 th / 20 th once the weather was a little warmer
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