Barra to the Butt of Lewis

24th - 31st August 2013



Summary: The weather was generally kind and we had some excellent wildlife encounters in some stunning scenery. In total we recorded 100 species of bird including 9 species of diurnal raptors, all 3 divers and a few surprises such as Surf Scoter, American Golden Plover and Semipalmated Sandpiper. We also had 4 sightings of Otter including prolonged views for over an hour as well as Red Deer, Grey and Common Seals. It wasn't just wildlife either, as we took a trip to the Calanais Stones; as well as a tour of the Abhainn Dearg distillery near Uig and enjoyed some great hospitality in some very good guest houses. In all we had a great week travelling from the most southerly inhabited island in the Outer Hebrides to the most northern extremity at the Butt of Lewis.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Sally Hart, David and Barbara Glen

Daily Dairy:

24th August:

Weather – Sunny and warm with a moderate southerly breeze.

Sally arrived at 14:40 on the flight from Glasgow where I met her before dropping her off for a short rest at North Bay House. After a cuppa we took a trip around the west side of Barra and went for a walk at Tangusdale. Loch na Doirlinn held a few Mallards whilst in a marshy bit nearby we found an immature **Whooper Swan** grazing. A migrant **Peacock** butterfly, a scarce visitor to the islands was watched feeding on Knapweed nearby whilst



a pair of Mute Swans with three cygnets were feeding on Loch Tangusdale. On the coast we found Curlew, Fulmar and a couple of Wheatears as well as signs that Otters had been using the area. The wind was beginning to increase so we made tracks back to the car and headed for Castle Bay where we had a good meal in the Craigard Hotel. I dropped Sally back at the guest house and returned to meet Barbara and David as they arrived in

Castle Bay at 20:30 off the ferry from Oban. We returned to the guest house and retired for the evening.

25th August:

Weather – Calm and warm with a little drizzle at times although mostly cloudy with the sun breaking through in the afternoon for the ferry journey.

I picked up Barbara, Dave and Sally from North Bay House at 09:30 and we checked the moth trap that had been set the night before in the community woodland at North Bay. It was fairly quiet with small numbers of **Dark Marbled Carpet**, **Heath Rustic**, **Autumnal Rustic** and a **Bee Moth** (a micro whose larvae feed on the honey comb of bumblebees, bees and wasps). We continued around the west side of the island and took the road to Vatersay. As we crossed on to the island a couple of **Rock Pipits** flew up from the cattle grid and perched on a roof top providing us with some good views. Nearby a **Grey Seal** could be seen "bottling" in the sheltered sea loch lying adjacent to the road. We continued into the next bay and stopped at a viewpoint looking back towards Castle Bay. We scanned the bay which held more **Grey Seals** both in the water and hauled out on rocks whilst around 50 **Eiders** could be seen in a large group to the east. Three **Red-**

throated Divers were spotted to the north of our scanning position whilst beyond them we had scope views of a juvenile Black-throated Diver actively fishing. A further two Red-throated Divers drew attention to themselves when they began their eerie whaling calls normally reserved for the breeding season. Happy with our haul we continued to the end of the road and took a walk



from the small settlement to the south beach, opposite the island of Sandary. **Twite** were seen flitting around the machair as well as a flock of **Rock Doves** in a recently cut field, plus a few **Lapwings** and **Curlews**. The machair still had lots of flowering plants with large amounts of **Corn Marigold** in the standing crop as well as **Wild Carrot**. The fields held a large stand of **Rest Harrow**, a species with a restricted range in the islands as well as lots of **Knapweed**. A flock of gulls loafing on the beach held a very tame juvenile **Kittiwake** which proved very reluctant to move. On our way back to the car we also got great views of an immature **Golden Eagle** that flew overhead before circling high.

We headed north for our packed lunch at Eoligarry pier in the company of two **Great Northern Divers** that showed well off-shore. A couple of **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Curlews** were also present on the shore whilst another **Golden Eagle** was seen, circling in the far distance over an island in the Sound of Barra. We continued along to the end of the road at Eoligarry and admired the stunning scenery before having a look at the plantations at Ardmhor and North Bay before catching the 15:45 ferry to Eriskay.

The ferry journey was quite productive with good numbers of **Grey Seals** hauled out on a small island not far out from the terminal on Barra. Here there were also a mixed flock of both **Shags** and **Cormorants** which allowed us to compare the subtleties between the two species. Other birds recorded on the crossing include **Red-throated Diver**, **Guillemots**, **Black Guillemots**, **Eiders**, **Gannets**, **Kittiwakes** and a **Golden Eagle** circling over the south side of Eriskay. Once on Eriskay we stopped to take some photos from a viewpoint looking back across the Sound of Barra in the company of a couple of **Small Tortoiseshell** butterflies enjoying the carpet of flowers. From here we continued north pausing to admire five **Buzzards** circling over Ben Askernish before reaching Liniclate Guest House, our home for the next three nights.

We had dinner at the Dark Island Hotel before retiring for the evening.

26th August:

Weather – Low cloud with some patchy drizzle to start but the cloud lifted a little and there was a little sunshine for a while; mild.

We explored the environs of South Uist today starting with a number of sites on the South Ford such as Ardivachar, Balgarva and Hebridean Jewellery. These tidal sites held **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Grey Plover**, **Knot**, **Snipe**, **Redshank** and the regular gulls. A **Bonxie** was spotted dragging a dead **Shelduck** out of a tidal pool whilst Loch an' t-Saile held good numbers of **Teal** and **Wigeon**. Leaving the South Ford we drove to the south-west corner of Loch Bee and had our first surprise of the trip when we located a moulting adult **American Golden Plover** along-side a **Golden Plover** on the edge of the loch. Masses of **Mute Swans** could be seen in the distance whilst a flock of around 30 **Swallows** hawked around the nearby compound on the edge of the range.

Continuing south we called in at Howmore briefly where we spotted a few Sand Martins hawking with the Swallows around the gardens in the area. We stopped behind the bike shop on the main road and got good views of a Sedge Warbler, low in the undergrowth where we intermittently heard it calling. We moved on to Loch Eynort where we enjoyed our packed lunch before taking a walk through Archie's garden. Over the loch we had four Red-throated Divers in flight plus a couple of others fishing the waters as well as two Kestrels, Buzzard, Grey Heron, Black Guillemot, Chaffinch, Wren and Song Thrush in the area. Mammals included both Grey and Common Seals, some distant Red Deer and two Otters located fishing at the far end of the loch. We walked round and got some decent scope views of them as they fished before eventually climbing out onto rocks and disappearing from view almost an hour after we first spotted them.

Moving on we headed for Ormiclate Castle spotting a juvenile Hen Harrier en route. From the remains of the 18th century castle we scanned the machair and had 40 Blacktailed Godwits flying south followed by around 40 Golden Plover and approximately 200 Lapwings; most likely having been flushed by a raptor. Nearby at West Loch Ollay we perhaps found the culprit as two Peregrines gave good scope views as they perched and periodically made short flights around the side of the loch. The juvenile of the two Peregrines briefly chased a Raven before settling down on a rocky perch whilst the loch held a single Shoveler, Little Grebe and plenty of Greylag Geese. Our next stop was at



Stoneybridge as we started our way back north. Here we had more

Common Seals off-shore whilst closer too we spotted Curlews, Bar-tailed

Godwits, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Eiders. In roadside fields at

Snishival we found more Lapwings with 3 Golden Plover mixed amongst them and 7 Black-tailed Godwits. The nearby Howmore River held Teal, Shoveler and a couple of Shelduck but the grand

finale was yet to come. As we passed Loch Druidibeg we caught sight of a long-winged

raptor over the loch. We stopped and were delighted to find an **Osprey** hunting over the water. We followed it along the loch and watched as it plunged into the water, missing on this occasion but later we had great views of it carrying quite a large fish that appeared to be a fine trout, which it consumed on the loch side after some extended circling; a fine way to finish a great day.

We returned to the guesthouse and had a pleasant evening meal at Stepping Stones Restaurant in Balivanich.

27th August:

Weather – Today was mostly cloudy with light to moderate westerly winds and feeling mild.

North Uist was on the agenda today and our first port of call was Loch Sandary on the west side. Here we located a number of **Snipe** feeding on the loch edge plus a flock of **Golden Plover** and **Lapwing** as well as a small group of **Tufted Ducks**. From here we took a walk across the machair at Cnoc a Lin to the coast. We had around 20 **Corn Buntings**, **Linnet** and **Greenfinch** around the crops whilst along the shore we found **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover** and a brief juvenile **Hen Harrier**. A little to the north lies the tidal Loch Paible where we found a few **Shelduck**, around 30 **Teal**, **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Curlew** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**.

We moved on to Balranald spotting a **Sparrowhawk** hunting low over the fields prior to reaching the visitor centre. We headed straight out to the coast at Aird an Runair picking up a singing **Corn Bunting** at the track side en route. A short walk to the shore produced a good variety of waders including plenty of **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover** and **Turnstone** as well as two juvenile **Curlew Sandpipers**. A **Great Skua** flew over whilst off-shore we could see two **Razorbills** bobbing on the sea. A **Moorhen** was on a small freshwater loch whilst we had views of a male **Hen Harrier** hunting the machair as we drove back towards the visitor centre. On the edge of Balranald lies the township of Hougharry and Loch na Reivil. We stopped here, scanning the shore and freshwater loch which

produced Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Snipe, Wigeon and Tufted Duck amongst others.

We had our packed lunch at Griminish Pier after locating a **Whooper Swan** on Loch Scolpaig en route. Post lunch we continued around the north side of the island picking up **Greenshank** at Claddach Vallay and **Kestrel** at Ahmore. A side road took us to the relatively isolated area of Cheese Bay, via Loch Portain. Once here a short walk along the road produced **Golden Eagle**, **Kestrel**, **Grey Heron**, a **Great Skua** overhead, **Stonechat** and a few **Red Deer** on one of the islands in the Sound of Harris. From here we headed back to the guesthouse in Benbecula picking up another male **Hen Harrier** as it flew across the main road providing brief but great views.

Our evening meal was in the Dark Island again today.

28th August:

Weather – Calm and sunny but becoming breezy late afternoon with strengthening winds and cloud moving in from the south.

We continued our journey north today heading for Harris via Berneray. Stopping at Oban Trumisgarry en route were we spotted a male **Hen Harrier** hunting the moor behind the loch whilst on a more distant hillside we picked a female / immature being mobbed by 4 **Kestrels**. At Newton a flock of **Lapwings** and **Curlews** were resting on the sands. Nearby Loch an Dun Sticir had a single **Whooper Swan** and on the hills above we managed to pick up 3 **Red Deer** resting in a coll. We arrived on Berneray mid-morning for the 10:25 sailing for Harris.

The crossing was nice and calm as well as being productive with sightings of 3 different White-tailed Eagles including a distant adult, looking across towards Cheese Bay and 2 immature birds perched and then in flight over a collection of islands half way across the sound. Other birds seen include good



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numbers of Red-throated Divers, a single Black-throated Diver, masses of Shags, Eider, Cormorant, Guillemots and Razorbills, Gannets, Kittiwakes, 3 Great Skuas and 2 Manx Shearwaters. We also had a brief Merlin over the front of the ferry shortly after leaving Berneray. Grey Seals were common and were seen both hauled out and swimming close to the ferry route whilst an Otter showed well on a small rock in the middle of the sound.

Once on Harris the scenery dramatically changes to a more rugged, mountainous and rocky environment interspersed with sandy beaches in the south-west. Our first stop was Northton where we found a number of waders which included **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling** and **Curlew**. A few miles further up the road we stopped to scan the Sound of Taransay from Horghabost. From here we spotted a few **Red-throated Divers**, **Black Guillemots** and **Kittiwakes** as well as good numbers of **Common Scoters** with many quite close in. Whilst scanning through these we managed to locate an adult male **Surf Scoter**. We moved along the road a little to another viewpoint from where we got relatively great views of the drake Surf Scoter as it fed amongst the sprawl of 120 **Common Scoters** that were spread out between us and the dunes at Luskentyre.

We stopped at the base of the Clisham, the highest point in the Outer Hebrides, for lunch before continuing north. Post lunch a **Merlin** shot over the road at Ardvourlie whilst



a stop on the border between
Lewis and Harris produced 2
immature White-tailed Eagles
showing well as they circled
overhead at Loch Seaforth before
finally drifting off eastwards. We
arrived in Stornoway around 15:00
picking up Rook and Jackdaw in
town and a Sparrowhawk having a
tussle with a Hooded Crow at
Sand Street. East of town, Loch
Branahuie held a few Tufted Duck
and bathing gulls whilst to the

south of the Braighe we had great views of 7 summer plumage **Black-throated Divers** fishing close in-shore. We had a quick look at nearby Aiginish where we found around 20 **Teal** and 2 **Wigeon** on the sea as well as 10 **Red-throated Divers**; plus **Ringed Plover** and **Turnstone** on the shore. A few **Common Seals** could also be seen loafing on rocks under the loose cliffs to the north. We retired to Carnan Beag guesthouse in Sandwick before finishing a good day out at the Thai Café in Stornoway.

29th August:

Weather – Today was mostly cloudy in the morning with fairly light south-westerly winds and a little intermittent drizzle; becoming brighter in the afternoon with occasional sunny spells developing.

We began the day by traversing the Pentland Road which took us across Lewis towards Carloway and the Calanais Stones. As we arrived fairly early in the day we got there before the hordes descended and enjoyed this fascinating site to ourselves. Below the stones lies the long arm of a tidal loch where we managed to spot a distant **Black-throated Diver** fishing in the calm waters. On the other side of the loch lies the small township of Linshader from where we spotted a distant **Golden Eagle** being mobbed by a cluster of **Ravens**. The loch itself was quiet apart from the odd **Shag** and **Cormorant** so we continued on to Valtos and explored the beaches and coves of this delightful area. We spotted a number of **Fulmars**, **Black Guillemots**, **Red-throated Divers**, a few **Eiders**, **Stonechats** and a group of 5 **Buzzards** playing over a crag.

We had our packed lunch over-looking the dramatic coastline at Mangersta head. Offshore we spotted a trickle of Manx Shearwaters passing by, Steve had a lone Sooty Shearwater plus a couple of Red-throated Divers and plenty of Fulmars and Gannets. Through popular request we had a short tour of the Abhainn Dearg distillery lying in a remote valley to the south of Uig where we got some local history and an insight into the production process. Nearby, lies Ardroil beach which although popular with visitors still held a couple of Black-tailed Godwits as well as a few Sanderling, Dunlin and Ringed Plover.

We called in at Linshader on the way back picking up the juvenile **Black-throated Diver** in a small freshwater loch just before dropping down the hill to the village. This bird had also been present on our morning visit and gave us some great views before heading to the far side of the loch. Not long after arriving at the tidal loch we located an **Otter** fishing in the channel. We watched it for around an hour as it caught numerous smaller fish and occasionally came out onto the bank to eat larger prey items. A huge bird taking flight on the far side of the loch turned out be an immature **White-tailed Eagle** which circled around before making for the moors to the east. We left the Otter around 17:20 and took the turning for the Pentland Road back to Stornoway. As we began to rise onto the moorland we came across 2 **Golden Eagles** showing exceptionally well. One bird was perched on the hill top whilst the other circled above. Both gave excellent views whilst the perched individual allowed us to study it through the scope for ages before it too circled off over the moor.

We returned to Sandwick Bay and had our evening meal at the Crown Hotel in town.

30th August:

Weather – strong south to south-westerly winds with some drizzle and mist lifting at times with some clear spells and a little sun although rain in the later afternoon.

We began today with a trip to Loch Ordais, Bragar. A walk along the southern shore of the loch and above the boulder beach produced the usual selection of Rock and Meadow Pipits and a handful of waders at the far end. Amongst the mixed flock of Dunlin, Sanderling and Ringed Plover a small wader was seen in flight. Once on the beach we were able to gain some good views through the scope allowing us to identify it as a juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper. This rare visitor from North America showed pretty well and once it had settled on a sandy area adjacent to the loch itself, gave some good, close views. The loch held a few Mallard and Wigeon plus we also recorded Snipe and Black Guillemot here. After this good start we moved further up the coast to Loch Barvas and took a short walk on the machair on the west side of the loch. A few gulls were loafing on the side including a juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gull with an adult whilst Lapwings, Swallows and Buzzards were evident on the machair. Off-shore we managed to find 3 Great Northern Divers sheltering in the bay.



We drove north to the
Butt of Lewis in the
increasing wind and
decided to have our lunch
in the shelter of the hide
at Loch Stiapabhat. A pair
of Mute Swans was
present on the loch with 4
cygnets as were 2 Tufted
Duck and a couple of
Wigeon. The nearby
machair held a large flock
of Lapwing, around 300
Golden Plover as well as

a flock of **Twite**. The butt itself was fairly quiet for birdlife although there were numerous **Fulmars** and **Gannets** passing by plus smaller numbers of **Manx Shearwaters**, a few **Kittiwakes** and a **Great Skua**. We also managed to glimpse a **Harbour Porpoise**, close in to the cliffs just off the lighthouse before it moved out of view, heading south. The rain was beginning to set in so we headed south ourselves, stopping at Melbost, Borve for a quick look. A few **Manx Shearwaters** were spotted off-shore whilst the pebble beach had a few **Curlews** and **Rock Pipits**.

We returned to Stornoway and after a rest at the guesthouse had our final evening meal together at the Cabarfeidh Hotel in Stornoway.

31st August:

Weather – There was a strong westerly wind today accompanied by sunny spells and showers.

On our final morning together we made our way to Tiumpan Head stopping en route at the Braighe once again. Here we found 5 **Black-throated Divers** close in-shore as well as an adult and juvenile **Arctic Tern** and a few **Kittiwakes**. Loch Branahuie on the north side of the Braighe held a few **Tufted Duck**, **Wigeon** and **Curlew** but was otherwise quiet. Continuing north along the Point peninsula we called in at Loch Tiumpan where we found a few **Greylag Geese** and more **Tufted Ducks** whilst nearby Tiumpan head produced a few **Gannets**, **Fulmars** and **Kittiwakes**.

In the late morning we took a walk in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway where the mature, mixed woodland provides a complete contrast to the sandy beaches and windswept moorland covering so much of the islands. The grounds are home to some commoner species not found elsewhere in the islands including Blue Tit, Coal Tit and Treecreeper, plus a recent colonist, Long-tailed Tit. We also encountered Wood Pigeon, Goldcrest and Buzzard in the grounds which provided a nice sheltered walk before we said our goodbyes to Sally as we dropped her off for her flight back to Glasgow.

David, Barbara and I, made our way back through Harris to catch the ferry from Leverburgh at 14:45. The crossing once again provided us with some good sightings including a summer plumage **Great Northern Diver**, **Red-throated Divers**, **Eiders**, **Gannets**, **Shag**, **Cormorant** and an adult **Pomarine Skua**, powering its way low over the sea, westwards. Roughly half way across the Sound of Harris and on a small rock we spotted an **Otter** once again, as we had on our way north and rounding off a great trip.

David and Barbara caught a bus from Carinish south to their guesthouse in Lochboisdale before catching the ferry back to Oban.



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Species List:

Red-throated Diver Seen virtually daily

Black-throated Diver A juvenile was seen from Barra, 7 were off the Braighe,

Lewis, a juvenile was seen at Linshader and another off

the Calanais Stones

Great Northern Diver 2 were seen off Barra, 3 at Barvas and another from the

Leverburgh – Berneray ferry

Little Grebe A few were seen in Uist

Fulmar Common off Lewis

Manx Shearwater Small numbers were seen in Lewis

Sooty Shearwater One was seen off Mangersta

Gannet Very common off-shore

Cormorant Common and seen daily

Shag Common with large numbers in the Sound of Harris

Grey Heron Common and seen daily

Mute Swan Common in Uist but only a pair in Lewis

Whooper Swan One on Barra and a couple in Uist

Greylag Goose Common

Shelduck Small numbers seen in Uist

Mallard Common

Shoveler Seen on one day only

Wigeon Fairly common and seen on 5 days

Teal Seen on 3 dates

Tufted Duck A common breeding species

Eider Common

Common Scoter 120+ seen in Sound of Taransay

Surf Scoter A drake was seen well in the Sound of Taransay

Red-breasted Merganser Recorded in 2 dates

White-tailed Eagle Five were seen on 28th and one on 29th

Osprey One was seen fishing on Loch Druidibeg

Golden Eagle Sightings on three dates with 3 birds on 25th, one on 27th

and three on 29th

Hen Harrier Seen in Uist and Benbecula

Buzzard Common

Sparrowhawk Two birds were seen during the week

Kestrel Seen on three dates

Merlin Three or four were seen on 28th
Peregrine Falcon Two were seen in South Uist, 26th

Moorhen One sighting on North Uist Coot Only seen on 'Coot Loch'

Oystercatcher Very common

Ringed Plover Common

Golden Plover Common with good sized flocks seen at a few sites

American Golden Plover A moulting adult was seen at Loch Bee, 26th

Lapwing Common

Knot Just three seen on the South Ford

Sanderling Seen most days

Turnstone Seen on two dayes

Dunlin Common passage migrant

Curlew Sandpiper Two were at Balranald

Semipalmated Sandpiper A juvenile was found at Loch Ordais, Lewis, 30th

Redshank Common

Greenshank Seen on two dates

Black-tailed Godwits Small numbers seen on three dates

Bar-tailed Godwit Non-breeding birds were seen at a couple of sites

Curlew Fairly common and seen daily

Snipe Fairly common

Great Skua Small numbers seen regularly with sightings almost every

day

Pomarine Skua An adult was seen on the return journey across the Sound

of Harris

Black-headed Gull Common

Common Gull Very common

Herring Gull Common

Lesser Black-backed Gull Small numbers were seen on three dates

Great Black-backed Gull Common

Kittiwake Fairly common in certain locations, especially Lewis

Arctic Tern An adult and juvenile were seen off the Braighe

Black Guillemot Common

Razorbill Small numbers seen on two dates
Guillemot Small numbers seen on two dates

Rock Dove Very common

Wood Pigeon Seen around Castle Grounds, Stornoway

Collared Dove Seen on two dates only

Cuckoo A juvenile was seen at Linshader

Skylark Small numbers seen

Swift 4 hawking over a loch south of Kildonan Centre

Swallow Fairly common

Sand Martin Small numbers seen on two days in Uist

Rock Pipit Seen on five days in small numbers

Meadow Pipit Common

Pied Wagtail Seen daily in small numbers

Hebridean Wren Occasionally seen

Hebridean Dunnock Sightings in North Uist

Robin Seen on three dates

Wheatear Small numbers seen most days

Stonechat Small numbers seen on the moorland most days

Hebridean Song Thrush Only seen on two dates

Blackbird Common

Sedge Warbler Seen on South Uist only

Blue Tit Seen in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway
Coal Tit Seen in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway
Long-tailed Tit Seen in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway
Treecreeper Seen in the Castle Grounds, Stornoway

Hooded Crow Common

Rook Only seen around Stornoway

Jackdaw Seen around Stornoway

Raven Common

Hebridean Starling Very common

House Sparrow Common

Chaffinch Seen around plantations

Linnet Fairly common in Uist and Barra

Twite Common and seen most days

Goldfinch Seen in Barra

Greenfinch Occasional sightings
Reed Bunting Seen on one day only
Corn Bunting Seen well on North Uist

Mammals:

Harbour Porpoise One was seen off the Butt of Lewis

Otter Two were seen in South Uist, two sightings in the Sound of

Harris and another off Linshader

Harbour (Common) Seal Farily common, especially Loch Eynort

Atlantic Grey Seal Common

Red Deer Seen on three days

Insects:

Speckled Wood Seen around Castle Grounds, Stornoway

Peacock One was seen in Barra, 24th

Common Blue Small numbers seen

Green-veined White Common

Dark Green Fritillary Seen in Barra

Small Tortoiseshell Seen in first couple of days in sunny weather

Steve Duffield

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