

## Corncrakes and Skuas

14<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> May 2016



An excellent week's birding in Uist with both Corncrake and all four skua species seen. Unfortunately the weather conditions were not conducive for pushing Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas close inshore although we did manage to pick up one of the former and 2 of the latter, late one afternoon after a very wet day. Views were not as good as are had with onshore winds but we were lucky to see any at all considering the weather during the week. Corncrakes on the other hand performed very well with some excellent sightings and with the added bonus of up to 3 Red-necked Phalaropes at their regular site. All 3 divers and all the regular raptors were seen with Hen Harrier being sighted daily and eagles seen on 3 days. We also connected with some good scarcities during the tour including 6 Dotterel and an adult White-winged Black Tern on the first day,

followed by a Crane the next day. We also saw both species of seal and Otters on four different occasions including a family of three together on the second day. All in all it was an excellent week birding in Uist.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Barry Lintott, John Herbert, Peter and Dinah Francis, Mark Clay, Barbara Bird, Helen Wheeler and Mike Kosniowski

### **Daily Dairy:**

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

Mostly sunny and bright today although cool in the moderate northerly wind

After picking up Mike from Lochmaddy at 9 am we promptly headed south spotting both a Short-eared Owl and a male Hen Harrier on route to Balivanich; a good taste of things to come. Once Barry and John were on board we made our way to Coot Loch where the local star, a White-winged Black Tern was performing well as it fed along the loch margin. Other birds present included Arctic Tern, Gadwall, Shoveler, Moorhen, Coot and a couple of Black-tailed Godwits that dropped in whilst we were there. We moved on to Loch Mor where we found more Arctic Terns making a home on the small islands as well as getting some great views of a male Hen Harrier. Nearby Stinky Bay held plenty of Eiders as well as 2 Great Northern Divers, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone and Ringed Plover. It was then time to return to the airport to pick up Mark who was coming on the morning flight from Glasgow. Once Mark was aboard we headed for Ardivachar, stopping at Coot Loch once again to get views of the tern before making our way to the headland at the north-west tip of South Uist. 2 Corncrakes were heard calling at North Bay before we arrived at Ardivachar. 2 Arctic Skuas were causing mayhem along the shore as they hunted waders which were followed by a Merlin that hurtled low along the coast, alighting on a rock for a short time before disappearing around the headland. Other birds noted here include 2 Great Northern Divers off-shore and 4 Whimbrel. We then headed across the Range and managed to locate 6 Dotterel that showed well amongst the grassy tussocks as well as 17 Whimbrel. By this time it was mid-afternoon

and we were off again, back to Lochmaddy to meet the rest of the group coming in off the ferry from Skye.



As we reached Lochmaddy a Cuckoo showed quite well, calling on the edge of the village as we approached the ferry terminal. Unfortunately the ferry was delayed somewhat so we took a walk from the car park towards the village but were soon distracted by an Otter that was fishing in Lochmaddy Bay. We walked out towards the area where it was lurking and enjoyed views of it for the next 30 minutes or so as it fed in a channel between us and an island. A couple of Common Terns also showed very well and an adult White-tailed Eagle circled over the hills to the south as the ferry pulled in to the port. A couple of distant Red-throated Divers were also noted before we all headed to the Range to have another look at the Dotterel. We got even better views on the second visit and a Short-eared Owl as a bonus before finally having a look at the White-winged Black Tern so that everybody managed to see it in case it left overnight.



After settling in to the respective guesthouses we enjoyed an evening meal in the Dark Island Hotel.

**15<sup>th</sup> May:**

A light – moderate north-westerly wind and cloudy conditions generally made for a cool day

This morning we drove north and made a couple of stops along the Committee Road where we managed to pick up at least 3 Short-eared Owls and 3 male Hen Harriers including a male making a distant food pass to a female over Ben Risary Plantation. A distant Cuckoo was seen perched on top of the pines and both Collared Dove and Wood Pigeons were seen in the trees. We moved on, taking the Claddach Vallay road west

and paused by a freshwater loch where we spotted a drake Wigeon, a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers and 2 Common Sandpipers. 3 Short-eared Owls were also seen including two having a skirmish close to the roadside. Delighted with the morning so far we headed to Griminish Pier and walked along the coast to Callanish. 2 Red-throated Divers flew over and 2 Great Northern Divers were feeding in the channel between us and Vallay Island. Little, Arctic and Common Terns were also seen whilst 3 Barnacle Geese were near Callanish House and a male Sparrowhawk showed very well, perched on a fence at close range for a minute or two. We also spotted an Otter feeding close to the shore of Vallay on the way to Callanish but on the return, we had good scope views of a mother and two cubs all together on a seaweed covered rock. We continued around the north-west corner of the island pausing at Scolpaig where we spotted a couple of Whooper Swans on the loch and both Linnet and Twite near the road.

We pulled in at Balranald for lunch by the visitor centre followed by brief views of a Corncrake in Hougharry by some although we needn't have worried as a short while later we all had excellent views of one by the roadside and out in the open. 2 Whooper Swans were also noted on the adjacent Loch nam Feithean before we headed for the coast at Balranald. Lots of waders were present on the coast at Aird an Runair and we got good views of Dunlin, Turnstone, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and a single Purple Sandpiper in summer plumage. Nearby Loch a' Roe produced Moorhen and a couple of Shovelers whilst off-shore we picked up 5 Great Northern Divers, a Black Guillemot and 2 Razorbills. From here we moved on to Loch Sandary where we spotted Tufted Duck, Teal, Common Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Swallows, Sand Martins and a male Reed Bunting. We decided to head south for the rest of the afternoon in search of a reported Crane that we eventually found feeding in a recently ploughed field at the south end of the Range. It showed reasonably well before flying into a much grassier and more hummock ridden area; 2 dark-phase Arctic Skuas also hurtled along the coastline here before we headed back towards Benbecula. Finally we took a look at Loch Mor where we heard a Quail calling that unfortunately didn't show to us but was flushed from the roadside by the very next vehicle!

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

Weather – It was dry today with light westerly winds although it was cloudy and cool.

We started with a look at Loch Mor / Fada this morning where we got decent scope views of a female Red-necked Phalarope bobbing and spinning on the loch before it flew out of sight. Other birds here included Shoveler, Wigeon, Gadwall, Red-breasted Merganser as well as a distant Peregrine Falcon being mobbed by a Short-eared Owl over the moors to the north-east. We then parked up near Market Stance and took a walk along the track at Reuval. This began well with good views of an Arctic Skua overhead followed by a Short-eared Owl and a pair of Hen Harriers. A Black-throated Diver showed well, preening on a loch whilst another flew past at close range with more distant views of a couple of Red-throated Divers. A pair of Wigeon, Stonechats and Twite also added to the diversity of the walk as did a few typical moorland plants including Common Butterwort, Lousewort and Heath Milkwort.



We returned to the vehicle and headed south, noting a Red-throated Diver flying over the main road before enjoying our lunch near Peter's Port at the picnic site that also provided views of Twite. A Golden Eagle put in a brief appearance over the island of Wiay before we took the road towards Uskivagh and spotted a distant White-tailed Eagle perched on the ridge. We also had another distant Peregrine being mobbed by 2 Arctic Skuas towards the east coast of the island. In the afternoon we moved on to South Uist and along the north side of Loch Bee. A few Knot were feeding at the inlet including a summer plumage bird and masses of Dunlin. 2 Corncrakes were heard calling at Ardkenneth where we parked near the church to scan the north-west corner of Loch Bee. Here we found Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal as well as 6 Pink-footed Geese on the machair. Black-tailed Godwit, Little, Common and Arctic Terns were also seen whilst an Otter showed well in the distance as it feasted on a large fish on one of the many islands visible from here. We then took a quick look at North Bay to see if we could locate any Corncrakes which was unsuccessful although a male showed very well by Loch an' t-Saile on the way back to the main road. A look on the South Ford from Hebridean Jewellery produced a few waders including summer plumage Grey Plover as well as Knot, Bar-tailed Godwits, Ringed Plover and masses of Dunlin. We finally tried for Quail once again but nothing was heard.

An enjoyable evening meal was had at Stepping Stones.

### **17<sup>th</sup> May:**

Weather – A moderate south-south-easterly wind accompanied by rain throughout much of the day until the wind turned to the south-west late in the day and then rain ceased.

We were struggling a bit in the wet conditions and a trip to Loch Euphort turned up little apart from Red Deer and a couple of Common Terns. We continued north picking up a male Hen Harrier by the roadside, near Lochmaddy whilst Oban Trumisgarry produced a few Teal and more Dunlin. We paused again near Newton Ferry and managed some great views of an adult summer plumage Great Northern Diver close inshore by the road. We crossed the causeway and explored Berneray where we found Little and Arctic Terns, Gannets and Great Northern Divers off-shore as well as Dunlin, Sanderling,

Turnstone, Knot and lots of Ringed Plover on the machair. Smaller birds were represented by Linnet, Twite and displaying Rock Pipit by the harbour. We moved on from a rather soggy Berneray and stopped at Grenitote where we found a lone pale-bellied Brent Goose on the tidal sands. We had lunch in the shelter of the van before pausing at Malacate which produced Little Tern and a summer plumage Greenshank. At nearby Claddach Vallay we had good views of a summer plumage Grey Plover before we moved on to Hougharry. Lots of waders were close to the road at Loch na Reivil which also held good numbers of Swallows and Sand Martins hawking over the water. A Corncrake was heard at close range nearby but unfortunately not seen. A cake and coffee from the trailer on the campsite at Balranald revitalised us before heading out to the coast as the rain had now stopped. A few seabirds had taken advantage of a lull in the weather and during the next hour or so we managed to spot 2 adult Pomarine Skuas, at mid-distance and a more distant Long-tailed Skua that showed the characteristic shearing flight action as it headed north. We also spotted 2 Great Skuas, an Arctic Skua, Fulmars, Gannets and small numbers of Kittiwakes which wasn't bad at all considering the conditions had not been ideal for sea-watching. A Corn Bunting was singing nearby and on our way back towards the visitor centre we managed to pick up another 2 at close range. Finally on the way back to the accommodation we spotted a male Hen Harrier at Claddach Kirkibost.

We enjoyed our dinner at Stepping Stones with a Short-eared Owl showing outside Ceann na Pairc on the drop off and Mike picked up a Corncrake behind the B&B at 5 Nunton.

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

Weather – Initially a very light breeze became a moderate north-easterly during the day. It was also cloudy in the morning but the sun soon broke through to leave a sunny afternoon.

We ventured on to South Uist today stopping off at Ardvule first where we took a walk onto the headland. Here we had Black-throated Diver, Great Northern Diver and Red-throated Diver off-shore where they were feeding and relatively easily located with a scope in the calm conditions. Other birds included Arctic Tern, Fulmars, Gannets, 2

Razorbills heading north and a few distant Manx Shearwaters virtually on the horizon. 2 Arctic Skuas were hunting the area and as we returned to the vehicle we got some excellent views of the pair chasing waders at close range before passing almost overhead. Masses of Dunlin, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Turnstone were feeding on the shore whilst Loch Ardvule held Shoveler and Tufted Duck. Grey Seals were also noted on the rocks and bottling off-shore before we returned to the main road and cut across the island to North Loch Eynort. Archie's trees at Loch Eynort provided the usual array of passerines such as Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Robin, Dunnock, Wren, Goldcrest and a migrant Spotted Flycatcher.



A walk through the trees and along the northern edge of the tidal loch provided us with plenty of eagles including distant views of a Golden Eagle to the east and 2 White-tailed Eagles; one perched on the ridge and another in flight to the south. Luckily as we rested

on a bench just east of the taller trees we were treated too much better views of a Golden Eagle as it circled almost overhead whilst being mobbed by a male Hen Harrier. The pursuit went on for some time when the harrier was also joined by a second male as they attempted to drive off the eagle's unwanted attention. It eventually moved off to the east and after a walk we returned for lunch at the car park. Activity continued throughout lunch when a Golden Eagle appeared over the nearby trees, this time being mobbed by a Peregrine Falcon; a fitting end to an excellent morning. We returned to the west coast and headed north, stopping at Peninerine where we heard a Corncrake calling. We positioned the bus off the road and waited until eventually a quite vocal male hopped out on the side of the road before moving further into the field where it perched on a small rock to continue calling.



From here we continued north until reaching the Loch Skipport road where we turned and headed to the east side once again. A Red-throated Diver showed relatively well as it bobbed on the sea loch although we found it quiet for raptors until a Merlin shot across the loch in front of us shortly followed by an immature White-tailed Eagle over the hills on the edge of the Minch. A quick look at Grogarry Lodge produced nothing new so we returned to our accommodation before heading out for dinner after another excellent day.

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

Weather – A strong south-south-easterly wind and cloudy conditions until late morning when more persistent rain set in until early evening when the wind swung towards the south-south-west.

We called in at Loch Mor first and soon picked up 3 Red-necked Phalaropes not far from the roadside showing well. One bird soon disappeared but a pair proceeded to mate before they also flew across the road to Loch Fada. We also spotted Gadwall, Shoveler and Red-breasted Mergansers on the loch. Heading north we called in at Baleshare and took a quick spin around various lochs and patches of machair noting the usual variety of waders and gulls plus Black-tailed Godwit and plenty of Snipe. A Short-eared Owl showed on our way back to the main road where we continued north to Balranald. Out on the coast we spotted a couple of Fulmars gliding past the headland as well as loads of Dunlin, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Turnstones on the shore. A couple of Great Northern Divers were off-shore whilst a male Ruff resplendent in breeding finer flew past us at Aird an Runair. Twite, Corn Bunting and Wheatears were noted on the machair as we crossed back to the visitor centre for lunch. Whilst part way through lunch a glance out the visitor centre's door revealed an Arctic Skua, hunting over wet ground and flushing 2 Ruff from the western end of Loch nam Feithean.

After lunch we took a look at Loch Hosta where a mixed flock of Sand Martins and Swallows were feeding in the shelter of the bank. Slightly further south we pulled in at Loch Sandary where we found a couple of Whooper Swans, Little Grebe and Tufted Ducks as well as an Otter that was hunting along the western side of the loch and occasionally coming out on the bank to eat its catch. We continued in a southerly

direction and explored the South Ford area, calling in at Hebridean Jewellery for a cuppa and cake to revitalise us before another bout of birding. Masses of waders were again present with Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Sanderling and Turnstones making up the numbers but also a superb summer plumage Grey Plover. Fulmar, Kittiwake, Arctic Tern, Little Tern and a couple of Arctic Skuas were also seen as well as a more distant Bonxie (Steve only). After a good look around the area we retired back to our accommodation before our final evening meal together at the Stepping Stones Restaurant.

### **20<sup>th</sup> May:**

On the final morning we had another look at the phalaropes before most people departed by either the early flight from Benbecula or the late morning sailing from Lochmaddy to Uig. Mark hung on until the afternoon flight and although nothing new was added to the trip list we did see a late Redwing in Carinish in the afternoon.

## Species List:

Mute Swan	Seen daily and in large numbers on Loch Bee
Whooper Swan	Small numbers over-summer with sightings on two days
Pink-footed Goose	6 late birds were seen from Ardkenneth / north-west Loch Bee
Greylag Goose	Very common
Barnacle Goose	3 were lingering near Callanish House, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Brent Goose (pale-bellied)	A pale-bellied bird was at Grenitote, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	Small numbers seen on 3 dates
Shoveler	Seen virtually every day in small numbers
Wigeon	Fairly common and seen almost every day
Teal	Sightings every day of the trip
Tufted Duck	Common
Eider	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Common and seen every day
Corncrake	Seen well on at least 3 days by all of the group and on another couple of occasions by others
Quail	Heard calling at Loch Mor, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Crane	One on the machair at the south end of the Range, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Red-throated Diver	Seen on four dates
Black-throated Diver	2 on Benbecula, 16 <sup>th</sup> and 2 on South Uist, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Great Northern Diver	Common and seen almost every day
Little Grebe	Noted most days and common on lochs adjacent to the machair
Fulmar	Small numbers noted along the west coast
Manx Shearwater	A few were seen distantly off Ardvule, 18 <sup>th</sup>

Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Seen off Ardvule
Grey Heron	Common
White-tailed Eagle	Seen on 3 dates
Golden Eagle	Noted on 2 dates during the week
Hen Harrier	Seen daily with most being males
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	One was seen on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Kestrel	Noted on 14 <sup>th</sup> only
Peregrine	Seen on 2 dates with one watched mobbing a Golden Eagle at Loch Eynort
Merlin	2 sightings with one at Ardivachar and another at Loch Skipport
Moorhen	Noted on 2 dates
Coot	Only seen on "Coot Loch"
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Very common
Grey Plover	Seen on 3 dates and in summer plumage
Golden Plover	Seen on 3 dates
Dotterel	6 showed well on the Range, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Lapwing	Common breeder
Knot	Small numbers on 2 dates
Sanderling	Very common
Purple Sandpiper	Summer plumage birds at Balranald on 2 dates
Turnstone	Very common
Dunlin	Abundant
Common Sandpiper	Fairly common and noted most days
Redshank	Common

Greenshank	Only noted on one date
Black-tailed Godwit	Small numbers seen on 3 dates
Bar-tailed Godwit	Common
Curlew	Fairly common
Whimbrel	Noted on first 3 days with 17+ on 14 <sup>th</sup>
Snipe	Common with many birds displaying
Red-necked Phalarope	First seen on 17 <sup>th</sup> with 3 birds on 19 <sup>th</sup>
Great Skua	Seen off Balranald and the South Ford (Steve only)
Pomarine Skua	2 adults heading north off Aird an Runair, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Arctic Skua	Seen every day in small numbers
Long-tailed Skua	One rather distant adult heading north at Aird an Runair, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Seen off-shore on 3 dates
Little Tern	Small numbers noted most days
Common Tern	Fairly common
Arctic Tern	Common
White-winged Black Tern	An adult on Coot Loch, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Black Guillemot	Noted on just one day
Razorbill	Seen on 2 occasions
Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	Seen on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Collared Dove	Seen every day
Cuckoo	Seen on 3 dates and heard on others
Short-eared Owl	Seen virtually every day

Skylark	Common
Swallow	Common
Sand Martin	Common
Rock Pipit	Noted on 3 days
Meadow Pipit	Very common
Pied Wagtail / White Wagtail	Seen every day with a White Wagtail noted at Aird an Runair
Hebridean Wren	Common and regularly heard but no always seen
Hebridean Dunnock	Seen on two dates although not uncommon in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on two days
Wheatear	Common
Stonechat	Seen on just 2 dates
Hebridean Song Thrush	Common around gardens
Redwing	Singles on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup>
Blackbird	Common
Sedge Warbler	Fairly common
Willow Warbler	Common
Goldcrest	Only heard at Loch Eynort
Spotted Flycatcher	One at Loch Eynort
Hooded Crow	Common
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Noted on one date
Linnet	Seen every day in small numbers
Twite	Seen every day in small numbers
Common Redpoll	Noted on 4 dates
Goldfinch	Seen at Loch Eynort

Greenfinch	Seen daily
Siskin	One at Loch Eynort, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Reed Bunting	Fairly scarce
Corn Bunting	Seen at Balranald – a rapidly declining species

**Mammals:**

Otter	seen on four occasions
Harbour (Common) Seal	Common
Atlantic Grey Seal	Common
Red Deer	Common on the moorland

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