

Corncrakes and Phalaropes

23rd – 29th May 2009



Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Colin Strudwick, Mike Nicholls

An excellent weeks birding in the Uists produced superb views of Corncrakes, White-tailed Eagle, Short-eared Owl and Red-necked Phalaropes. Skua passage was quiet although all four species were seen with good views of a Pomarine Skuas virtually over-head. A Ring-necked Duck turned up in the latter part of the week at Loch Eynort and we saw good numbers of waders and gulls including Glaucous, Iceland and a young Little Gull. Otters were spotted on two occasions during the week plus plenty of seals and Red Deer to add to a diverse and interesting trip.

Daily Dairy:

23rd May:

Weather – west to south-west force 4 in the evening with sunshine.

I met Mike and Colin at the airport in Balivanich, Benbecula after the arrival of the 16:00 flight from Glasgow. On the way to the guesthouse we stopped to have a look at Loch Mor and Loch Fada where we found a selection of wildfowl including **Shoveler**, **Teal**, **Wigeon** and **Shelduck** as well as a number of commoner waders such as **Dunlin**, **Snipe** and **Redshank**. The surrounding moorland had hunting **Short-eared Owl** and **Kestrel** whilst close to the B&B we had a female **Hen Harrier**. After a meal at the Dark Island Hotel we spotted another **Short-eared Owl**, this time hunting close to the guesthouse where it attacked a local **Buzzard** in case the latter had any designs on young owls for dinner.

24th May:

Weather – southerly backing south-westerly force 7, easing to force 5 later; rain in the morning, becoming more showery in the afternoon and finally clearing at 16:00.

We headed off to Balranald in the hope of catching up with a skua movement although on arrival the news was negative for any seabirds passing so we checked a number of Otter sites including the foreshore at Hougharry which held **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover** whilst the freshwater loch here had both **Little Grebe** and **Shoveler**. Moving on to Loch Sandary in the rain we found 4 **Whooper Swans**, **Arctic Tern**, **Common Tern** and **Sedge Warbler**. Conditions were quite difficult with the wet and windy weather so most of the birding had to be done from the car so we decided to head for Griminish Pier. From the vehicle we spotted a 2nd summer **Glaucous Gull** on Vallay, **Little Tern**, **Arctic Tern**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Gannet** and **Fulmars**. A **Grey Seal** popped up close to the car followed shortly afterwards by an **Otter** feeding in the strong current. It showed for around 30 minutes before disappearing over some seaweed covered

rocks on the Vallay side of the channel. Continuing our circuit we spotted a male **Hen Harrier** along Vallay Strand which gave excellent views in the rain. Malaclate held **Greenshank**, **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Little Tern** whilst the Committee Road produced a female **Merlin**, **Short-eared Owl** and **Curlew**. Returning to Aird an Runair at Balranald we spotted a handful of **Arctic Skuas**, **Great Skuas** and a distant **Long-tailed Skua**; although the latter was seen by Steve only. Other birds we spotted from here included **Arctic Terns**, **Fulmar**, **Gannet**, **Great Northern Divers**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone** and 2 **Whimbrel**. Back on the main reserve we tried for **Corncrake** and although hearing one or two didn't manage to connect with one. We did see a couple of **Corn Buntings** in song when suddenly the rain cleared. We returned to the sea-watching spot once more and managed a **Great Skua** and a few **Arctic Skuas**. We headed home in the early evening stopping at various sites for **Corncrake** and were just giving up when we heard one close to gardens at Bayhead. We waited for a while until manoeuvring the car into a different position just as the bird walked across a drive, completely out in the open! Persistence finally paid off.

25th May:

Weather – south-west 5, decreasing to force 3 later in the day; cloudy and overcast but gradually becoming brighter from mid-day.

Today two other people joined us for the day and we met up on Benbecula so that we could explore Loch Mor and Loch Fada first thing. This produced the usual array of species for this time of year with **Shoveler**, **Wigeon**, **Dunlin** and **Redshank** on the lochs and **Short-eared Owl** hunting close by. Moving south we called in at Peninerine where we spotted 3 summer plumage **Great Northern Divers** off-shore and good numbers of **Eiders**. A flock of **Sanderling** scurried along the beach when suddenly a mass panic among the birds forewarned of the arrival of a hunting **Peregrine Falcon**. A little further south, Aird Micheal also held **Great Northern Diver** plus a mixed flock of **Sanderling** and **Dunlin** on the beach. Our next port of call was Ardvule which also produced a good selection of birds

as well as the opportunity to compare both **Harbour Seals** and **Grey Seals** in quick succession. Birds here included **Manx Shearwaters**, **Razorbills**, **Arctic Tern**, **Kittiwakes**, **Gannets** and 3 **Arctic Skuas** off-shore; whilst the beach held **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Whimbrel**, **Curlew**, **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin** and **Turnstone**. Both **Shelduck** and **Lapwings** were seen with young and on the journey across Bornish Machair we spotted good numbers of **Wheatears** and a couple of **Swallows**. Leaving the west coast we drove the short distance to the east side of the islands and timed our arrival with the cloud just beginning to lift. Before we had left the car park we had spotted 2 **Golden Eagles** and an adult **White-tailed Eagle**. Other birds in this lovely area of the islands included **Red-throated Diver**, **Shag**, **Buzzard**, **Black Guillemot**, **Willow Warbler**, **Chiffchaff**, **Twite**, **Hebridean Wren** and **Dunnock**. We also spotted both species of seals and **Red Deer** from here. Loch Druidibeg produced a male **Hen Harrier** plus a family party of **Ravens** whilst our venture around the north-west of South Uist put us amongst a tightly packed bunch of around 4 calling **Corncrakes**. When so many territorial birds are in such a small area it's bound to be fractious and before long one **Corncrake** was seen in flight followed by another calling bird showing well amongst an area of nettles and iris. After prolonged looks at the Corncrake here we moved on to Benbecula spotting a few **Little Terns** en route. Loch Mor held an array of displaying waders, gulls and Arctic Tern creating a lively scene to round off a good day out.

26th May:

Weather – south-westerly force 6 to 7 with occasional blustery showers.

As the wind was quite strong we drove up to Balranald and out to Aird an Runair to look for skuas. Shortly after arriving we had good views of a fine adult **Pomarine Skua** heading north. This was followed by further sightings of all four species of skua further out to sea including 3 **Long-tailed Skuas** which were a little too far to see much detail although their pale upper parts were clearly visible through the scope. Other species seen included 3 **Great Northern Divers** and 2 **Red-throated Divers** heading north; **Gannets**, **Fulmar**, **Kittiwakes** and lots

of **Arctic Terns**. Crossing back over the main reserve we spotted a **Corn Bunting** in song when a message came through that a **Red-necked Phalarope** was



showing in Stinky Bay. We decided to head straight for the site although as we were nearing another message reached us that the bird had flown off. We needn't have worried as when we got there a female was feeding along the shoreline amongst the **Dunlin, Sanderling** and **Eiders**. We had excellent

views for around 25 minutes before the bird flew off with the other waders. We took our lunch at Aird in the shelter of a dune before heading up to Langass. The plantation here gave us a bit of shelter from the wind and we spotted a variety of birds including **Cuckoo, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Buzzard** and **Red-breasted Merganser**. Our final destination of the Committee Road produced three male **Hen Harriers**, a male and female **Merlin, Kestrel, 6 Curlews, Golden Plover** and a **Greenshank**. After this successful jaunt we headed back to the guesthouse and spotted our fourth male **Hen Harrier** of the day at Griminish, Benbecula; a fine way to end the day.

27th May:

Weather – west to north-west 3, increasing force 4; rain and low cloud clearing around mid-day to become sunny.

Again we headed out to the sea-watching point at Balranald although few birds were passing off-shore. An **Arctic Skua** buzzed passed, chasing the terns whilst on the beach we spotted 2 immature **Iceland Gulls**, a summer plumage **Knot, Sanderling, Turnstone** and **Dunlin**. We decided to head for Berneray although



before we left Balranald we had superb views of another **Corncrake** on the roadside verge. Heading along the Claddach Vallay road we paused to look at a very close **Short-eared Owl** perched on a fence post just a matter of a few metres from our vehicle before a cyclist sent the bird into the plantation and out of sight. Once on Berneray we headed for Loch Brusda where we had excellent views of an adult **Little Stint** and a summer plumage **Black-tailed Godwit** as well as both **Little**

and **Arctic Terns**. We then ventured to the north-east side of the island and scanned the sea where we spotted **Great Northern Divers**, **Red-throated Divers**, **Razorbills** and a couple of **Rock Pipits**. As the low cloud had started to lift we headed back to our sea-watching site. As we drove around the north side of the island we spotted a circling **Golden Eagle** near Scolpaig and had excellent views of a hunting **Short-eared Owl** by the road. Once at Balranald a couple of **Great Skuas** flew north but little else although a **Peregrine Falcon** put on a good show making two passes at the assembled waders before a dark-phase **Arctic Skua** also tried its luck. Amongst the normal waders along the strand we spotted a **Whimbrel** whilst off-shore was **Great Northern** and **Red-throated Divers** as well as a handful of **Kittiwakes**. On the fresh water at Balranald the nesting **Whooper Swans** had hatched their clutch and 7 cygnets bobbed on the loch with their attentive parents. Heading back to Benbecula we called in at Loch Sandary which held 7 **Whooper Swans** as well as 2 **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Little Grebe**. Back on Benbecula we found a mixed flock of **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Knot** on the shore just south of Stinky Bay whilst over on Loch Mor we found a male, followed by a female and then another 2 female **Red-necked Phalaropes**. One of the females was obviously paired with the male and soon proved this point by mating

on the edge of the loch. A none-breeding **Black-tailed Godwit** was also on the loch and a **Corncrake** was calling from a thick area of iris with just its bill showing. Finally after a brief look at Coot Loch we walked over to a hidden arm of Loch Fada where we found a **Gadwall** amongst the regular **Shoveler** and **Tufted Duck**.

28th May:

Weather – mist and low cloud throughout much of the day with light rain at times and occasional brighter spells.

The first stop this morning saw us examining the contents of the moth trap from the previous night and although not full of moths held one or two surprises. In the trap were a very late male Belted Beauty moth; a Poplar Hawkmoth, 2 Fox Moths, a White Ermine and a single Knot Grass. A stretch of water at the Loch Eynort turning held a male **Ring-necked Duck** which showed well for us at the west end of the loch before relocating to the east end later in the day. From here we headed down to Smerclate where we spotted a couple of **Whooper Swans** on the freshwater lochs whilst hordes of gulls gathered on the beach plus 4 **Whimbrel**, a **Bar-tailed Godwit** as well as 18 **Hooded Crows** feeding on the seaweed. We also spotted a few **Great Northern Divers** off-shore before moving on to the Eriskay causeway. From here we had 6 **Red-throated Divers** with two birds showing very well in excellent light conditions; plus **Great Northern Diver**, **Gannets**, **Eiders** and **Guillemots**. We drove a short distance to the bottom of the small valley at South Glendale and went for a walk up the road. This was a good half an hour with at least 2 **Short-eared Owls** and great views of a **Golden Eagle** overhead being mobbed by 2 **Ravens**. Other birds we saw in the valley include **Kestrel**, **Song Thrush** and a family of **Stonechats**. At Daliburgh we stopped to check the loch behind the Co-op where we found 2 **Sand Martins** hawking over the surface and a **Lesser Redpoll** in the abandoned garden next door. We next headed out to Ardvule for lunch and were joined by an **Otter** feeding close in-shore. Heading back across the machair which was full of young waders we headed north calling in at Stoneybridge and Peninerine. Both sites were fairly

quiet apart from more summer plumage **Great Northern Divers**. Further north still we drove across the Range where we had a singing **Corn Bunting**, whilst Ardivachar held a flock of **Bar-tailed Godwits** and a few **Knot**. **Little Terns** were seen at both North Bay and Balgarva on our way to Benbecula. Stinky Bay had a mixed flock of **Sanderling**, **Dunlin** and **Turnstone** feeding along the shore whilst on Loch Mor we spotted a 1st summer **Little Gull**. Our last site of the day was a little visited area on the east side of Benbecula. Almost as soon as we got out of the car we spotted 2 **Golden Eagles** causing pandemonium amongst the nesting gulls and waders. As the excitement over the eagles subsided, we spotted pair of **Peregrine Falcons** perched on a small crag. A family of **Ravens** ventured over to the very same crag but this proved all too much for the male Peregrine and he launched into the air with purpose, hurtling after one of the Ravens which lost a tail feather in the exchange. We retired back to the guesthouse and to the Orosay Inn for the evening meal.

29th May:

Weather – south to south-easterly force 6 to 7 with low cloud breaking up during the day to become mostly sunny.



We drove straight down to Loch Eynort this morning and spent an hour scanning from our vantage point. After around 45 minutes an adult **White-tailed Eagle** appeared at the mouth of the loch being pursued by **Ravens** and gulls. The eagle proceeded to fly up the loch, circled overhead and then off to the north-west giving us superb views.

We also spotted a few **Red-throated Divers**, **Shag**, **Cormorant**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Chiffchaff**, **Willow Warbler** and **Lesser Redpoll** in the general area.

Leaving Loch Eynort we stopped for another look at the drake **Ring-necked Duck** before continuing on to Loch Skipport. A short walk along the path here brought us views of a **Cuckoo**, an immature **Golden Eagle** being mobbed by 2 **Buzzards** and finally a male **Hen Harrier** in a skirmish with a **Raven**.

Moving on to Benbecula we popped into Stinky Bay and Coot Loch before checking a few fresh-water lochs on Baleshare that held a few **Wigeon** but little else. We returned to Benbecula where Loch Mor held the usual **Shoveler** and **Wigeon** amongst the wildfowl, plus 2 **Whimbrel** and a **House Martin** over head. To cover the loch thoroughly we took a track down to the western edge where sudden panic amongst the waders and gull was followed by the appearance of a large **Peregrine Falcon**. This flushed a startled mass of panicking birds including a previously hidden immature **Little Gull** before catching a **Black-headed Gull** from the nesting colony on one of the small islands. After some time and lots of harassment by the other birds the Peregrine took its catch to a quieter area out of view and away from the other nesting gulls. A fitting climax to six days full of raptors.

I dropped Colin and Mike at the airport where we said our goodbyes before they caught the 17:30 flight to Glasgow.

Species List:

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Great Northern Diver
3. Little Grebe
4. Fulmar
5. Manx Shearwater
6. Gannet
7. Cormorant
8. Shag
9. Grey Heron
10. Mute Swan
11. Whooper Swan

12. Greylag Goose
13. Shelduck
14. Mallard
15. Gadwall
16. Shoveler
17. Wigeon
18. Teal.
19. Tufted Duck
20. Ring-necked Duck
21. Red-breasted Merganser
22. White-tailed Eagle
23. Golden Eagle
24. Hen Harrier
25. Buzzard
26. Kestrel
27. Merlin
28. Peregrine Falcon
29. Corncrake
30. Coot
31. Oystercatcher
32. Ringed Plover
33. Golden Plover
34. Lapwing
35. Knot
36. Sanderling
37. Turnstone
38. Dunlin
39. Little Stint
40. Common Sandpiper
41. Redshank
42. Greenshank
43. Black-tailed Godwit
44. Bar-tailed Godwit

45. Curlew
46. Whimbrel
47. Snipe
48. Red-necked Phalarope
49. Arctic Skua
50. Pomarine Skua
51. Long-tailed Skua
52. Great Skua
53. Black-headed Gull
54. Common Gull
55. Herring Gull
56. Lesser Black-backed Gull
57. Great Black-backed Gull
58. Iceland Gull
59. Glaucous Gull
60. Kittiwake
61. Little Gull
62. Little Tern
63. Common Tern
64. Arctic Tern
65. Black Guillemot
66. Common Guillemot
67. Razorbill
68. Rock Dove
69. Collared Dove
70. Cuckoo
71. Short-eared Owl
72. Skylark
73. Swallow
74. Sand Martin
75. House Martin
76. Rock Pipit
77. Meadow Pipit

78. Pied Wagtail
79. Hebridean Wren
80. Hebridean Dunnock
81. Robin
82. Wheatear
83. Stonechat
84. Hebridean Song Thrush
85. Blackbird
86. Sedge Warbler
87. Chiffchaff
88. Willow Warbler
89. Hebridean Starling
90. House Sparrow
91. Hooded Crow
92. Raven
93. Chaffinch
94. Linnet
95. Lesser Redpoll
96. Twite
97. Greenfinch
98. Reed Bunting
99. Corn Bunting

Mammals:

Otter

Atlantic Grey Seal

Harbour (Common) Seal

Red Deer

Short-tailed Field Vole

Insects:

Green-veined White

Red Admiral

Belted Beauty

Poplar Hawkmoth

Fox Moth

White Ermine

Knot Grass

Four-spotted Chaser

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