



# Wildlife Travel Mull 2016

## Mull trip report, 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> June 2016

### LIST OF TRAVELLERS

#### Leaders

Charlie Moores and David Greenhalgh

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Summer in Britain. Occasionally glorious, usually on the 'okay' side, every once in a while very wet. We had the lot on Mull this year: very good weather in full sunshine; enjoying some excellent wildlife watching under somewhat grey skies; and getting soggy at the end. But we didn't miss a day – in fact we barely missed an hour outside – and saw a huge amount of Mull's wonderful scenery and flora and fauna. When all is said and done, though, the trick is just to enjoy the ride – and the wonderful company of course – and not worry too much about what can't be changed.

While one day (our visit to Iona on the last full day) was on the 'dreich' side, I hope I'd be right in saying that the holiday was hugely enjoyable. I suspect that all of us had our particular 'wish-lists' for the trip (to see an Otter, White-tailed and Golden Eagles, Corncrake, orchids, or visit Fingal's Cave or the Iona Abbey perhaps) and we pretty much 'cleaned up' over the six days (though where were those dratted Short-eared Owls, eh?)...But I'm getting ahead of myself so let's go back to Day One and the ferry from Oban to Craignure...

(NB: the first mention of a species in the report is highlighted in bold)

*Charlie Moores, Wiltshire*

### Day One

#### Oban – Craignure – Tobermory – Aros Park

The trip began at the ferry terminal at Oban, where we enjoyed views of breeding-plumaged **Black Guillemot** and discussed the first of a succession of hints and tips on separating **Common, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls** (relatively small, round head, 'soft' expression', greyish mantle, large wing mirrors; large, pinkish legs, pale mantle, 'fierce expression'; large, yellow legs, slate-grey mantle).

In surprisingly good weather (much of the UK was suffering under thundery showers, but apparently not Mull), the views from the 45 minute ferry ride to Craignure were excellent and we could appreciate the sweeping coastline of the Scottish mainland and the Cairngorms, Duart Castle (which we visited during the week), and various smaller islets. The crossing was notable for a flock of Gannets, good views of Arctic Tern and Kittiwakes, but there were very few auks this time around.

David Greenhalgh, our driver/second guide (and an integral part of the holiday), welcomed us off the ferry at Craignure and we were soon on our way north to the Salen Hotel, our base for the holiday. Gerry and Claire, our hosts, quickly checked us in, and soon afterwards we were out again on our way up to Tobermory (which as anyone with kids or grandkids or nephews and nieces will undoubtedly know is the beautiful seaside town immortalised in the CBeebies programme 'Balamory'). Along the way we picked out a number of the commoner bird species that we were to see every day: **Greylag Goose, Canada Goose** (which is rapidly growing in numbers since it first started breeding on the island less than a decade ago), **Mallard, Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Herring and Common Gull, Grey Heron, Common Buzzard, Barn Swallow, Meadow Pipit, and Hooded Crow** (a full species – ie not the same species as the southern Carrion Crow many of us are perhaps more familiar with).

While Tobermory's curving and colourful harbour front was a strong draw, we were mostly more interested in getting our wildlife-viewing underway. A path winding through mixed oak-ash woodland from behind the aquarium and towards Aros Park was our target.

There are many interesting plants along the mile-long route and we quickly found **Tormentil** (one of the potentillas), **Water** and **Wood Avens** (the latter is usually known as Herb Bennett), **Woodruff, Wild Strawberry, Common Valerian, Sanicle, Bugle, Common Dog Violet, Yellow Poppy, Alchemilla** (aka **Lady's Mantle**), **Tutsan** (a shrubby species of St. John's Wort), and many **Foxgloves. Heath Speedwell**, an unhelpful name for a plant that grows in habitats from machair to mountains, was relatively common, and we also found a few **Wood Sorrell, Common Cow-wheat, a single Heath Spotted Orchid**, and a field of **Common Cotton-grass**.

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Near the car-park at Aros Park we found our first **Northern Marsh Orchids** and both **Yellow and White Water-lilies** in the lake.

The birding was surprisingly quiet (this is normally a great place to see common woodland species), though most of us did get good views of a pair of **Wood Warblers** which sang and called from some large oaks. One **Willow Warbler** was nice, but there were few **Chaffinches** and no tits at all!

Following the coast road on the way back to the hotel we had some good luck when an **Otter** showed extremely well, first in full view then fighting its way through thick seaweed. Quite a relief to get that particular 'special' seen on the very first day – especially as despite looking really pretty hard we (as in the whole group) didn't see another one all trip!

Was that it for the first day? Out in the garden was a **Spotted Flycatcher** (an increasingly scarce migrant to the UK now, but one that obviously had found a home at the Salen Hotel as we subsequently saw this charming bird just feet away through the dining-room window every evening) – and a brief fly-through by a **Green-veined White** (our first butterfly of the trip). And with the sun not slipping behind the hills before 22:30 there is plenty of après-dinner daylight left and a few of us went for a late walk, getting superb views in the still good light of a **Common Pipistrelle** bat, two **Red-breasted Mergansers**, and a lot of midges!

### Day Two

#### Knock – Mull Eagle Watch – Ulva

For some of us one of the main draws of this trip are Mull's famous **White-tailed (Sea) Eagles**. Once widespread across much of the UK, this huge raptor (nicknamed the 'flying barn door' because of its massive eight foot wingspan) was persecuted relentlessly by gamekeepers and sheep farmers throughout the 1800s and was finally wiped out in Britain when the last bird was shot on Shetland in 1918.

A re-introduction programme was started in the early 1970s using birds sourced from Norway. The then Nature Conservancy Council released 82 chicks on the island of Rum (less than 30 miles north of Mull) between 1975 – 1985, and in 1983 the first 'British' White-tailed Eagle chicks for around a hundred years were hatched. Birds looking for new territories wandered along the coast and discovered Mull, where the Eagles are now breeding in good numbers and are thought to be worth more than £5million a year to the island's economy!

A strong draw then, and today we would be visiting the Mull Eagle Watch, tucked away in a pine plantation at Glen Seiliseir on the North shore of Loch Scridain. However, wildlife is all over the island and en route to the Mull Eagle Watchpoint we first made a quick stop at Knock to check the stream for a breeding **Dipper**. Not only was the Dipper on view (its beak stuffed with invertebrates presumably for waiting youngsters), but a **Golden Eagle** was soaring high against the mountains behind. How big are these magnificent birds? At one point two Buzzards mobbed the eagle and looked like flies buzzing around it. A great start to the day.

A brief stop along the shoreline at a well-known parking area on Loch na Keal (which is draped with **Silverweed** and **Bird's-foot Trefoil**) brought us good views of **Rock Pipit**, a singing Meadow Pipit, and a distant **Wheatear**, but with time short we headed off to the Watch which is now owned by a coalition of groups including the local community.

We arrived right on time and were introduced to our guide, the RSPB's Debby Thorne. As Debby explained to us the eagles (one of around 20 pairs on Mull this year) were nesting in a tree about 1 km away across the valley, and we'd be using telescopes set up by the cabin. A six-week old chick was in the nest but – for a while at least – there was no sign of an adult. Until, that is, and unseen by all of us, Debby noticed that the female had appeared on a dead tree about 50m to the left of the nest! Good scope views were obtained when the female flew onto the nest and began feeding the youngster.

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The watchpoint is also a great location to see **Siskins** and **Coal Tits**, which along with Chaffinches constantly visit a well-stocked feeder. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** flew overhead, and single **Goldcrests** called from the trees but went unseen.

We said our goodbyes to Debby around midday. Our afternoon was to be spent on the island of Ulva, so we headed down towards the Ulva Ferry in the south-west of Mull, getting good views of a **Cuckoo** (sat on a fence post across a field) along the way. The 'ferry' itself is little more than a small motor boat which takes just twelve people and chugs back and forth across the narrow channel that separates Ulva from the mainland. The ferry took just a few minutes to arrive and a few minutes more to zip across the water.

We were soon at the very welcoming Boathouse tearoom on the harbour front, where we refuelled in the very comfortable gallery on the upper floor.

Ulva is a compact island (too large to comfortably walk around in an afternoon, but small enough to cover some good habitat quite quickly) and offers amazing views across to Ben More and the Ardmeanach peninsula. Intersected by loop trails it has woodland, bogs, beaches, 'Sheila's Cottage' (a faithful reconstruction of a traditional thatched croft house by the harbour which was last lived in early this century by Ulva resident Sheila MacFadyen), a rather austere Parliamentary church (one of five churches on Mull and Iona to be designed by Thomas Telford and completed, along with the manse, in 1828 at an expense of £1495.14s.1d).

The route to the church takes about 45 minutes to walk (less if you charge on past the flowers and animals!). Plenty of orchids are found along the path (good numbers of Northern Marsh Orchids, for example, the deep-red colour standing out from a distance and clearly different to the numerous and very variable Heath Spotted Orchids). Fragrant Orchid was particularly common this year, we found a single **Lousewort** (a lovely pink plant that surely deserves a better name!), and a small patch of open bog is often worth looking at for butterflies and moths (**Small Heath** is usually seen here) and **Bog Asphodel** can usually be found. Our only **Bistort** of the trip grows near and in the churchyard, and **Red Campion** is commoner on Ulva than anywhere else. When the sun shines plenty of wildlife can be seen in fact – including the extremely rare **Slender Scotch Burnet Moth**, which unfortunately was nowhere to be seen in the rather dull weather – but not especially so on this occasion: just a single **Whitethroat** was seen, and a **Silver Ground Carpet** was the only notable macro moth.

Ulva is a beautiful island, but does need to be seen at it's best: in sunshine. The last ferry leaves Ulva at 17:00, but we chose to leave a little earlier allowing us plenty of time to arrive back at the Salen Hotel (about 30 minutes away) and freshen up for our meal. A quick stop back along the loch drew a blank – but the energetic Diana decided to walk the mile or so back to the hotel and was rewarded with excellent views of an Otter! The motto seems to be: never stop looking on Mull – there's always something to see...

### Day Three

#### Eos Fors waterfall – Ulva Ferry – Staffa and Lunga

A bit of a damp second day, then, but with a better forecast for the rest of the week things would undoubtedly improve! Today we were booked to visit the outer islands of Staffa and Lunga (the latter the largest of the Treshnish Isles) which meant a visit to Fingal's Cave and the thousands of seabirds on Lunga....

After yet another excellent breakfast we climbed into David's minibus and made our way back to the Ulva ferry and our rendezvous with the team from Turus Mara, who have been running boat trips for over forty years. Our itinerary today would be a circular loop: a 40 minute crossing below the southern end of Ulva out to Staffa and Fingal's Cave, then a similar length journey on to Lunga and its Puffins, and finally 45 minutes back to the ferry point via Loch Tuath and the north coasts of Gometra and Ulva.

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First of all though we made a brief stop at the Eos Fors Waterfall (which translates as the 'Waterfall Waterfall Waterfall'), where we flushed a **Grey Wagtail**, a **Yellowhammer** perched all too briefly in a bare tree, and for a brief moment we saw what at first sight appeared to be a White-tailed Eagle – but which on second look proved to be a 'white-tailed' Common Buzzard, a perfect (albeit small) doppelgänger of an immature Eagle...Oh, well...

Plants here included the spiky yellow Bog Asphodel, a small but heavily-scented Fragrant Orchid, and more Heath Spotted Orchid (it looked like a good year for this particular lovely and very variable little plant).

We were soon back on our way to the Ulva Ferry and the outer islands. Our first stop would be Fingal's Cave, a deep hollow surrounded by extraordinary basalt columns (and immortalised by Mendelssohn in *The Hebrides*, Op. 26). It's a remarkable 'natural wonder' but of course there were other natural wonders to be looked out for as we crossed open sea to get to it. Seabirds (especially Puffins and **Guillemots**) became more numerous the closer we got to Staffa and the cave.

Occasionally boats don't get to dock on Staffa because of swells that can form out to sea, but despite the overcast conditions and building clouds we docked with little problem. Visitors normally get to spend about an hour on the island, giving us time to make the walk along the rocks to the cave and safely manage the vertiginous shuffling to get into position inside it. It's only when you're inside the cave that you can really appreciate it, and it's not to be missed if you're not easily spooked by drops into the ocean. It's worth keeping an eye out for the fascinating **Sea Slaters** on the rocks here too: looking something like a woodlouse on steroids they're reclusive and not always seen.

After a brief picnic lunch, we were soon back on the boat and heading for Lunga. Online descriptions of Lunga talk about 'Puffin Therapy' and how incredibly close visitors can get to the nesting Puffins, Guillemots, and Shags on the island. Normally getting so close to nesting birds would be inadvisable, but here the theory is that while humans are close by predators like Great Skuas and Ravens keep their distance. The nesting seabirds are actually safer because we're around. That makes good sense; even so little can prepare you for just how close you can actually get to a Puffin when it's not watching its back for a Bonxie attack.

On a broad, grassed area above the rocky (and slightly difficult to traverse) beach, hundreds of Puffins are literally within touching distance. Visitors (myself included) are awestruck, and the temptation to stow a Puffin or two into a rucksack must be strongly fought! Other locations around the UK may offer similarly close views of nesting seabirds, but none I've visited feel so isolated yet so accessible. In fact, so 'approachable' are these birds that one even stood on Jan 'the Puffin Whisperer's' legs and picked at her shoelaces – a strange sight indeed! Truly a reason to visit Mull again.

Lunga also gives fantastic views of **Razorbills** and Common Guillemots (including the less common 'bridled' form) which crowd the ledges at Harp Rock, a stack in the southwest of the island, There is also a large colony of **Kittiwakes** here, which provides an excellent opportunity to learn how to separate these gulls from **Fulmars** (which are petrels, though once thought to be gulls (or 'maws' as they were known) and named for the foul-smelling fish oils they vomit onto anyone or anything that gets too close!). **Arctic Terns** were fishing in the same bay the boats docks as well.

An unusual sighting here was a pair of breeding-plumaged **Twite** feeding on **Common Sorrel** seeds. These were the first I'd seen in four visits to Mull, and it was lovely to catch up with them at last.

Both Staffa and Lunga can be good for **Great Skuas** (or Bonxies as they're widely known), and this year we saw higher numbers than usual – at one point seven were in the air over Lunga at the same time. These large birds patrol the cliffs looking for unguarded eggs or chicks. As much a top predator out on these islands as Peregrines or Otters, these skuas can be difficult to see away from the breeding colonies and rarely seen this well.

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Lunga is very good for plants too (if observers can be persuaded to look away from the thousands of seabirds anyway), **Roseroot** grows from every rock and **Wild Thyme**, **Milkwort**, **Thrift** and **Sea Campion** were widespread. Heath Spotted Orchids were growing in very large numbers on the short grass near the Puffins. Last year we found **Spring Squill**, but not this time, though it was noticeable how many **Primroses** were still flowering – we saw few elsewhere suggesting climactic conditions on Lunga are rather special indeed!

On a less pleasing note a fly past by an incredibly low RAF jet almost gave several of us heart attacks! Why a pilot should feel the need to buzz an island and disturb colonies of seabirds (and about a hundred day trippers) is beyond me. Thankfully none of us were standing on the edge of the cliffs at the time...

The crossing back was (perhaps fortunately) uneventful (and a bit bird less), and we were soon back at the hotel. It had been a long (and ultimately damp) day. Food and rest seemed high on everyone's agenda, and (I have to say thankfully) a walk out after dinner was not...

### Day Four

#### Kilmore – Calgary – Lip na Cloiche – Loch Na Keal

We woke to somewhat grey skies, but with a forecast that things would clear (which they duly did) I was hopeful we would have another very good day (which we duly did!).

The plan for Day Four was to work our way around the northern part of Mull, having a look at Dervaig, then Calgary, stop at a high point to drink in some fabulous views down to the distant Ulva Ferry, dip into the remarkable private garden of Lip na Cloiche, then drive slowly back looking for Otter.

Our first stop was along the narrow road from Salen to Dervaig (oddly we flushed a **Common Snipe** from the centre of the road not far from this stop!). The road passes through a Forestry Commission plantation, where several years ago we'd found a patch of open bog with a burn running through it. Pretty much like many patches we'd passed, in fact, but this one is accessible – which makes a huge difference to seeing what might be in it. It turns out this patch contains some interesting insects – providing the sun is out. In the rain it's not worth getting out of the bus unfortunately, but as we drove up the clouds parted, the sun shone, the midges started dancing, and I was really hopeful we'd 'clean up'.

Parking by a small bridge, a few of us crossed the stream to check out the bog, but even from the road and the bridge everyone saw four odonates: **Golden-ringed Dragonfly**, **Four-spotted Chaser**, **Large Red Damselfly**, and **Beautiful Demoiselle**.

What I was really looking for though was a small orangey butterfly, the **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary** – a beautiful butterfly suffering long-term declines nationally. We found several: this was a very good year indeed for them on Mull and we saw them in good numbers in several places subsequently, but all of us had great views of this dainty insect here which set us up for comparisons with other butterflies over the next few days. A number of Green-veined Whites were in the area too.

From here we moved onto a brief stop overlooking the open moorland near the coastal village of Dervaig. Curlews were common here, and right by the minibus we again saw good numbers of moorland plants like Bog Asphodel, Common Cottongrass, Ragged Robin, Heath Milkwort, Wild Thyme, and Heath Spotted Orchids.

After a fairly quick stroll we drove on to look at the peculiar rounded steeple of Kilmore church (which was built in 1905) and a look out of the river mouth where we saw our only **Goosanders** of the trip and a **Reed Warbler** which flicked quickly over the water before disappearing.

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Our next stop was for coffee (coffee and cake seemed to be a recurring theme this year – no bad thing on what was supposed to be a relaxing holiday!) at The Byre, just a mile or so out of Kilmore. The walls at the Byre are dotted with **Maidenhair Spleenwort** and **Ivy-leaved Saxifrage**, and a short walk along a grassy bank brought us views of **Clouded Buff** (a yellow moth easily disturbed during the day), **Small Heath**, and a teneral (recently-hatched so not fully coloured) dragonfly that was undoubtedly a **Keeled Skimmer**, a local species found on bogs in western Britain and Ireland and utilising runnels and streams.

Our next stop was the Calgary Arts Centre, at the head of the lovely Calgary Bay, The Calgary Arts Centre is renowned for three things: an excellent tea-shop/restaurant, its beautiful art gallery, and the **Sword-leaved Helleborines** that grow on a woodland slope behind the main buildings. Quite an attractive combination when all is said and done. We'd booked in for lunch at 13:00 and as we arrived a touch early we went for a quick stroll up onto the flat moorland above the Centre, where we found very large numbers of Heath Spotted Orchid, and a few Northern Marsh Orchids and Fragrant Orchids. A very low berried shrub we found by accident (lying down to enjoy the sun!) appears to be **Bearberry**. We also had nice views of a White-tailed Eagle drifting across what was becoming a lovely clear sky: a massive bird it easily shrugged off the attention of a Common Buzzard and disappeared over the hills in the distance.

Time for lunch in the (now expanded) and very nice restaurant, before – in very relaxed mood – heading back out and down through the woodland. To the sound of the ubiquitous Chaffinches and Willow Warblers we looked for the speciality here: an absolutely beautiful orchid, the Narrow-leaved Helleborine. This plant is much the same colour of the **Ramsons** that grow here in huge numbers, but are usually fairly obvious once you get your eye in.

Unfortunately it quickly became clear that the helleborines had already gone over (as had the Ramsons), and we saw just two rather elderly plants: the leaves were plain to see, but the flowers themselves were dry and closed. A shame, but probably a result of the extended hot period the month before which followed heavy rains in early spring. Every year on Mull brings changes from the year before and it's striking how on repeat visits things can look so different: for instance I'd never seen so many Foxgloves as this year, and so few Bluebells. Last year orchids were very scarce indeed, this year abundant (including far more Fragrant Orchids than I'd seen before). I'd not seen flowering Marsh Cinquefoil before, this year they appeared to be widespread. Win some, lose some seems to be the norm!

Anyway, as the group declared, we did see the helleborines even if they weren't at their best. Continuing through the woods we disturbed a small black moth with a gleaming white fringe to the upperwing: the **Chimney-sweeper**. A rather lovely little moth (it may not sound like it from the description, but it is) the caterpillars feed only on **Pignut**, a small umbellifer that is widespread along the lower edge of the woodland.

Under glorious skies, we made our way across the road below the Arts Centre to Calgary Bay, a beautiful sweep of machair, sand and sea framed by low, wooded hills. The habitat from the grassy meadow above the beach to the edge of the dunes can be excellent for a variety of plants and insects. Dependent on grazing, some years the machair here can be shorn so heavily it's almost devoid of plants but this year it was ablaze with wild thyme, birds-foot trefoil, **Heath Milkwort**, buttercups, **Daisies**, and we found a single patch of red **Common Storksbill** and one dune full of yellow **Biting Stonecrop**. Really lovely, it was like walking through a wildflower meadow – albeit one with plants no higher than an inch or so!

With **Sand Martins** beeding in the dunes and Eiders offshore, a huge sweep of beach, and lovely cliffs, this really is a lovely spot and were this a 'beach and flip-flops' sort of holiday somewhere you could easily wile away an afternoon on the sand – and the group photo in the report was taken here (see, the weather can be lovely on Mull). However, as much as I like to relax just like anyone else (really, I do!), we had other places to visit before the day was done.



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After a quick 'rest break' in the car-park loos (where I found a pristine **Green Carpet** moth on the wall!) we drove up and away from the Bay. The road winds for several miles through wonderful moorland. The scenery in this part of the island is absolutely spectacular, and I now always stop by a cairn at a high point overlooking the lochs and bays below a few miles further on.

Not only was the view superb – whichever way you looked – but the damp, boggy ground is good for plants. Nestled amongst the many Heath Spotted Orchids and Tormentil was our only **Mountain Everlasting** of the trip, **Round-leaved Sundew** were plentiful amongst the sphagnum, and Diane saw and photographed some pale leaves that (back on the bus) I identified from her pictures as our first **Common Butterwort**. With many small shallow peaty pools and runnels this would appear to be a good site for the scarce Keeled Skimmer dragonfly, and we had fairly good views of a pale blue male as well as a female.

The final stop of a very full day was at the private garden of Lip na Cloiche. Small but absolutely crammed with plants and navigated by a circular path, the garden has been developed by the impressive Lucy Mackenzie, who has single-handedly hewn it from a bracken-covered hillside. Clearly a determined woman (and occasionally prickly, as Jen discovered by inadvertently wandering in to the house to stroke Lucy's cat!), the gardens are quite extraordinary and are described on the Lip na Cloiche website as: "*an eclectic and comprehensive collection of small trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, including some Chilean and New Zealand rarities. The garden was planned for long-season interest, providing a pattern of good planting ideas all year round. A picturesque burn is planted with primulas, mecanopsis, gunneras and other damp-loving specialities*"

Entrance to the garden is free (though donations are requested) and it's another beautiful spot. While the plants are the main draw for most people, it is also superb for insects (perhaps the latter was of more interest to some than others, but anyone going to Mull who is interested in bees and the like needs to make a stop here). **White-tailed** and **Red-tailed Bumblebees** were both on the wing, and **Common Carder bees** are impossible to miss. Hoverflies are common too, and a proper search would undoubtedly uncover more, but species we saw included the bee mimic **Eristalis intricarius**, **E. horticola**, and **Syritta pipiens**. A single very worn **Peacock** butterfly was the only one we saw all trip.

And so ended a quite remarkable day, full of wildlife and spectacular views. A superb way to (almost) bring the trip to a close...

### Day Five

#### Grass Point – Duart castle – Loch Spelve - Garmony

Mull is a remarkable island, and there are a huge number of different habitats to explore. With the forecast predicting cloudless skies and warm sunshine (so perfect for observing insects), we changed the itinerary slightly to spend time along the east coast. Flatter than the north of the island, one area in particular gives access to a wonderful bog and coastal turf: the very beautiful Grass Point, which is where we headed after breakfast.

The turning to Grass Point is not far south of the Craignure ferry terminal (and just beyond the turning to Duart Castle). A side-road winds through low hills and oak woodlands (again studded with many orchids) to the Point itself, crossing a low bridge over a tidal inlet which is often good for Common Sandpiper, Herons, Mute Swans *et al.* Hen Harriers are often seen from the bridge, but not on this occasion.

The 'bridge' is a lovely spot, but is just a taster for what awaits further along. The final 1500m or so out to Grass Point is absolutely beautiful. It's flanked by bog which is dotted with **Cotton-grass**, **Cuckoo-flower** (Lady's Smock), Ragged Robin, and various sedges (**Star Sedge** is common here). The Point itself (upon which stand two renovated cottage-type farm houses with fantastic views out to sea) is short turf and excellent for plants too – plus there's always a chance of spotting passing cetaceans.

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The tip of the Point is reached on foot from a small car-park, so we parked the minibus and – after a biscuit and coffee stop provided by David – walked down the main road. Heath Spotted Orchids (ranging from almost all-white to strong pink) were all along the roadside. In the deeper grasses were good numbers of Northern Marsh Orchids, and about 400m from the minibus we found several smallish all-white orchids: looking at the parallel pollinia these were **Lesser Butterfly Orchids** (our fifth orchid species of the trip).

The boggy countryside here is also good for insects of all sorts, and we saw a mating pair of Golden-ringed Dragonflies. Last year good numbers of the striking Green Hairstreak (the most widespread of the UK's hairstreak butterflies) were seen, but despite searching hard they seemed to be absent this year. However, numerous Small Heaths were seen, and more surprisingly probably double-figures of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (which really does seem to be having a very good summer on Mull). The 'star' butterfly here, though, is the beautiful **Marsh Fritillary**. A relatively small fritillary this last species has declined massively in recent decades, believed to be the result of inappropriate habitat management, coupled with the need for sufficient habitat for the butterfly to form *meta populations*, where local extinctions can be reversed by recolonisation from neighbouring colonies. We just saw two (one rather worn), but all of us had excellent views.

Moths can be very obvious at Grass Point, but besides many tiny **Grass Veneers** of various species we saw just Silver Ground Carpet, a worn but still emerald-green **Forester** (a scarce moth in Scotland, this is a key site), a **Silver Y**, and the strikingly enormous final instar caterpillar (about the length of my little finger) of the **Northern Eggar** (the northern form of Oak Eggar) – it twitched convulsively which could perhaps have been a defence against parasitic flies which might lay eggs on it or a reaction to parasites already living inside it!

Personally I could spend all day at Grass Point: it really is a beautiful spot. However after a time we needed to move on. Our next stop would be lunch (and restrooms) at Duart Castle.

The tea rooms at Duart are worth a visit in themselves, but of course for those interested in history the real attraction is the Castle. Home of the Clan Maclean, this fabulous building (which is still occupied) stands on a clifftop guarding the Sound of Mull and enjoying one of the most spectacular and unique positions on the West Coast of Scotland. It's a wonderful place (perhaps a bit bleak in mid winter!) and a tour takes about an hour.

As importantly for us naturalist types, the area below the castle is very good for plants and therefore insects. Thistles, trefoils, irises, Marsh Cinquefoil, **Marsh Marigold**, buttercups, and grasses grow in profusion, and are no doubt the reason for the range of invertebrates we saw. Butterflies included more Small Heaths, another Marsh Fritillary, several more Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, and the highlight (in my opinion anyway) a pristine **Dark-green Fritillary** which gave us wonderful views of both its upper- and underwings. While this is the most widespread fritillary found in the British Isles, it's a species I've not seen for (literally) two decades, so a nice find. We also found our only Burnets of the trip here – not Slender Scotch of course, but the much more common **Six-spot Burnet**: a striking species nonetheless. We also had good views of another Clouded Buff. A male **Linnets** feeding on seeds by the edge of the loch was the only one saw on the trip.

Not a bad way to spend a day so far (especially under gloriously blue skies) – but we weren't finished yet! At some point on the trip David (driver, guide, integral part of the trip etc etc) had made what appeared to be a rash promise (breaking the 'no guarantees rule') saying that we WOULD see White-tailed Eagle at Duart. Eagles could fly over any time (especially in good weather), but David seemed to be more confident than just hoping for a flyby...

About halfway along the track from Duart Castle back to the main road, David pulled into a handily placed parking space, set up a scope on some trees across a meadow, and there were two magnificent adult White-tailed Eagles – we should never have doubted him (especially as he'd pulled exactly the same surprise with another group just the week before!). This was the view we were all hoping for, and that

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view got even better when one of the adults decided to stretch its wings and lifted off for a quick loop around the headland (pursued by aggrieved Hooded Crows). Wonderful birds, and close enough to see every feather through binoculars. Great stuff.

Just down the road from Duart lies an opportunity for yet another raptor, and one we'd not seen yet: the **Hen Harrier**. Ruthlessly exterminated from English grouse moors (it appears that there are perhaps just three pairs in England this year), declining in Scotland, the Isle of Man, and Wales, this is a species that was – until the advent of gamekeeping and private shoots – a relatively common species. It's now a prized find, especially in summer when the birds are paired up.

Surely with the clear skies (and a more friendly attitude towards them on Mull than other parts of the UK) we could see one? Pulling into a layby opposite a magnificent vista of hills and bracken-clad moorland we jumped out of the minibus and began scanning – and within a few minutes we had two, floating low over the ground with typical harrier élan, the silvery-blue male and the brown female 'ringtail'! They may have been a little distant, but what gorgeous birds.

While we watched it appeared that the male and the female were not actually 'getting on' all that well. The male appeared to be buzzing the female, diving at her with talons outstretched. Not, it seemed, the food passes we'd initially thought we'd been watching. When a third bird then appeared – another female – we perhaps had our answer: the first female was perhaps an interloper, an unpaired bird, and the male was attempting to drive her off? Males will mate with multiple females, so that was perhaps not the explanation, but it was interesting behaviour nonetheless...

The raised bit of 'old road' we were stood on gave us good views down to Loch Spelve, where we saw a distant seal, there were more Curlews around, and our only **Common Blue** butterfly of the trip - er, fluttered by...

With the afternoon morphing seamlessly into 'dinner time' we headed back to Salen, making a quick 'otter stop' at Garmony, a headland not far from the hotel. Previous trips have seen otter here, but – again – we drew a blank (that sighting on the first day was becoming ever more precious). However, we did enjoy good views of Arctic Terns, a Black Guillemot, found large stands of **Wild Raspberry**, and rather helpfully three breeding plumaged **Golden Plovers** (masquerading as Dunlin when a long way out) flew in and landed on a spit – an unexpected additional species to end what had been a wonderful day.

What would tomorrow bring?

### **Day Six** **Glen More – Fionnphort - Iona**

Unfortunately it brought rain – and plenty of it!

One of the reasons I'd switched the itinerary around (going to Grass Point yesterday instead of Iona as originally planned) is that today's forecast was for rain, rain, rain – and that's not good at all for butterflies and moths. On the other hand it's not always all that bad for Corncrakes...

While Iona is home of the Iona Community and the site of a very special abbey (open to the public of course), it is perhaps the most accessible place in the UK to see – or at least hear - a **Corncrake**. Once common in damp grasslands across Britain this elusive (and surprisingly small) rail has declined hugely following habitat loss and changes in farming practice. While they are never easy to see, there was a higher chance of finding one still calling in a downpour than of seeing a Marsh Fritillary in the same conditions...

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The drive from Salen to the Iona Ferry at Fionnphort (at the south western tip of Mull) takes over an hour – Mull is a big chunk of rock! – the road going through some of the finest moorland in the south of the island as it winds through Glen More. It also, unfortunately on a wet day, tracks the highest hills on Mull, which act as a magnet for rain clouds which can often hang low over the hill tops and roll down the hillsides.

If that sounds a bit gloomy, apologies – but it doesn't mean that we couldn't still find wildlife. Halfway along the glen a female Hen Harrier put in a brief appearance – not on a par with yesterday's sightings but welcome nonetheless. Then, slowing down to allow an oncoming vehicle to pass, I noticed the distinctive pale greeny-yellow leaves of Common Butterwort on a rock face. Surely after all the searching in ideal habitat, we wouldn't catch up this interesting plant in the growing by the side of the road? Actually, we would. They were plentiful up here, the violet-like flowers still growing too. In fact, once we'd got our eyes in we found a rich variety of colourful plants all within a few yards of each other: the lilac butterwort, yellow Bog Asphodel and Birds-foot Trefoil, white Hedge Bedstraw, deep-pink Wild Thyme. Lovely (if a bit wet).

Pulling into another layby, David asked (casually, the cunning devil) if we'd like to see a Golden Eagle? I will confess now I knew nothing about yesterday's White-tailed pair, and nothing about the Golden Eagle pair he knew were nesting high up on the crags in front of us! After rather poor and somewhat obscured views (and a meeting with a rather rude wildlife guide – no names mentioned – who appeared rather wild about us being in his part of Mull) both birds suddenly dropped off the cliffs and soared effortlessly across the valley. Both birds drifted across the bottom of the glen to the cliffs on the other side where they had (we discovered later) stashed a deer carcass. The best views I'd ever had on Mull, and even the clouds lifted a little allowing sunlight to reflect off the golden hackles these fabulous birds are named for.

Common Butterwort and Golden Eagle...whatever the weather threw at us, we'd already done well (okay, the plant wasn't quite as important as the bird, but they all add to the overall good feelings eh...).

With time to make up we drove straight through to the ferry terminal. The sailing to Iona takes just minutes to cross from Fionnphort (at the south western tip of Mull) to Baile Mor which is itself just a short walk from the world-famous Abbey. Corncrakes on Iona tend to use Iris beds (thick cover from the perspective of observers, but plenty of room to scoot between clumps if you're a laterally compressed rail).

First though, lunch at the quayside restaurant (a wise move really, as it can get quite busy after 13:00). Having arranged a meet-up time to catch the ferry home, the group split up after 'cake and coffee' to do their own thing under the gathering rain clouds. Many of us headed off towards the banks of irises growing near the Abbey, hoping to hear a Corncrake. Nothing doing unfortunately.

At this point the Report dives off up a sidetrack really, as just the three of us decided to carry on with the search rather than go into the Abbey. We walked out of the village to an area where I'd seen Corncrake (briefly) for the last three years (seeing a male **Peregrine** whipping down the shoreline as we went). On reaching the favoured spot, almost immediately we heard a male calling! It's very difficult to pin down a Corncrake as the odd 'ZZZPP ZZZPP' call it makes seems to move around all the time, especially this time of the year when the vegetation is so long: what's happening of course is that the bird itself is creeping through the grass and turning its head as it calls. Brown, small, secretive, dripping wet – would we ever see it?

Remarkably we did! As we were scanning an area of irises with a bare patch of grass in its centre, the bird started calling again and was clearly on the move. All of a sudden it appeared in a clump of relatively short turf, and began calling its lovely little head off. The three of us were on it in a flash (almost, anyway) and were even rewarded with a remarkably unexpected 'walkaround' as the bird (limping, perhaps after an attack from a gull or skua?) came out in full view for a few long seconds then melted back into the undergrowth. Not something I would have put money on (or even someone else's money on) and despite the now constant rain well worth the effort we'd put into seeing it.

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There was almost no chance at all of seeing the bird so well again, or drying out if we stayed put, so we headed back for more cake (a practice I will be developing on further trips). It's worth saying that there are of course other bird species on Iona, and we caught up with both **Rook** and **Jackdaw** (the former breeds mainly on Mull and the latter only on Mull, oddly).

The rest of the day sort of fizzled out a little (no views of otter (again) and little of great interest aside from a brief view of a **Whinchat** and a Cormorant – the latter surprisingly scarce on Mull), under increasingly heavy rain and gathering gloom that belied the fact that on a clear day it barely gets dark on Mull at this time of the year. Oh, well, it's Scotland, it rains sometimes...but any day that includes Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle, a superb display of upland plants AND Corncrake can't be too bad.

### Day Seven

#### Fishnish Hide – Garmony – Craignure/Oban

Our final morning on Mull is always going to be a slightly sad affair – we're leaving one of the UK's top wildlife spots after all – and thoughts inevitably turn both to what we've seen (almost everything except Short-eared Owl) and to not missing the ferry home! Have no fear, on that latter point we have things worked out and under control (David, has, after all, 'ferried' thousands of people of the ferry in his years on Mull).

There is always time for a quick look for more wildlife before we leave the island though, and some excellent sites lie between Salen and Craignure. But with a hint of drizzle in the air (and the midges starting to build) we had no plans to go too far from the minibus though.

Our main stop was at a hide built on a small headland at Fishnish. Bolted down with industrial strength strapping, the hide looks out over the Sound of Mull and can (occasionally) be good for otter and waterbirds. As we all merrily filed in to the hide (a public hide remember) we were met with scowls from two photographers who were spending their holiday on Mull staring across seaweed and rocks waiting for distant views of an Otter. I won't go on, but I thought our behaviour was impeccable, theirs not so much. Anyway, to sum up we had good views of Heron, Meadow Pipit, and Oystercatcher – and no views at all of Otter. But the air was full of birdsong, was clear and fresh, and we'd seen virtually everything anyway...

With the ferry on its way from Oban, and us needing to be on it, we tried one last stop at Garmony before heading to Craignure. Not much going on to be honest, but we did get lovely views of a Whitethroat and an absolutely stunning pink male **Lesser Redpoll** (I'm not knocking the redpolls that visit feeder in winter, but in breeding-plumage – what a bird).

Our final 'birding' would of course be from the ferry back to Oban, but sadly, yesterday's mizzle hadn't quite cleared when we left. We did our best, and much to my relief had excellent views of **Manx Shearwaters** as three crossed behind us before a raft of about thirty was disturbed by the boat itself. An unexpected treat and (I think I'm right in saying) our 86<sup>th</sup> bird species of the trip – which added to our 10 butterflies, 5 orchids (at least 150 plants in total), frogs, toads, one bat, Red Deer, five dragonflies, and a bunch of moths/beetles etc makes quite a nice total and a great trip I hope all will agree...

**My thanks for everyone in the group for making my job so easy, and so enjoyable (and for helping me realise the joys of coffee and cake!). I sincerely hope everyone enjoyed the trip as much as I did. Thanks to David for his input and safe driving. I hope I'll have the pleasure of meeting you all again.**



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**MULL 2016: some highlights**



Top: European Shag and Marsh Cinquefoil (both NM)  
Centre: Corncrake (DM) and Golden Eagle (NM)  
Bottom: Dark Green Fritillary (CM) and 'Jen the Puffin Whisperer' (NM)

Photos courtesy Charlie Moores (CM), Diane Morris (DM) and Nigel Meacham (NM)

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<b>BIRDS</b>								
<b>Family Anatidae (Swans, geese and ducks)</b>								
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		x	x	x		x	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	x	x		x	x	x	
Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			x		x		
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				x			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	x				x	x	
<b>Family Phasianidae (Pheasants and Partridges)</b>								
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				x	x		
<b>Family Procellariidae (Shearwaters)</b>								
Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			x				
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>							x
<b>Family Sulidae (Gannets)</b>								
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	x		x			x	x
<b>Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)</b>								
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>						x	
Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x
<b>Family Ardeidae (Hérons)</b>								
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)</b>								
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		x		x	x		
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		x				x	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					x	x	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Falconidae (Falcons)</b>								
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		x		x	x		
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	x			x		x	
<b>Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)</b>								
Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>						x	
<b>Family Himantopidae (Oystercatchers)</b>								
Oystercatcher	<i>Himantopus ostralegus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)</b>								
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				x			
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				x		x	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Charadriidae (Plovers)</b>								
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					x		
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	x		x	x			
<b>Family Stercorariidae (Skuas)</b>								
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			x				
<b>Family Laridae (Gulls)</b>								
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		x					
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	x	x		x	x	x	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	x		x			x	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	x	x	x		x	x	
Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	x		x				x
<b>Family Sternidae (Terns)</b>								
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	x		x		x	x	x

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<b>Family Alcidae (Auks)</b>								
Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			x				x
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	x		x		x		x
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			x				x
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			x				
<b>Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)</b>								
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Cuculidae (Cuckoos)</b>								
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		x					
<b>Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)</b>								
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		x		x			
<b>Family Alaudidae (Larks)</b>								
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		x	x	x			
<b>Family Hirundinidae (Swallows and Martins)</b>								
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				x		x	
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Motacillidae (Pipits and Wagtails)</b>								
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		x	x				
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				x			
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarelli</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Cinclidae (Dippers)</b>								
Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		x					
<b>Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)</b>								
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		x	x	x	x		
<b>Family Turdidae (Thrushes)</b>								
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)</b>								
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>						x	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		x	x	x		x	x
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	
<b>Family Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers)</b>								
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				x			
<b>Family Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)</b>								
Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		x			x	x	x
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	x	x		x	x		
<b>Family Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)</b>								
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	x						
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	x						
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	x	x	x	x		x	x
<b>Family Regulidae (Crests)</b>								
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		x					
<b>Family Paridae (Tits)</b>								
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		x					x
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	x	x					x
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	x	x	x		x		
<b>Family Corvidae (Crows)</b>								
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>						x	
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>						x	
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x



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Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		x	x			x	
<b>Family Sturnidae (Starlings)</b>								
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Passeridae (Sparrows)</b>								
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Family Fringillidae (Finches)</b>								
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		x		x			x
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			x		x	x	
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	x		x	x	x		x
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>					x		
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>			x				
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>							x
<b>Family Emberizidae (Buntings)</b>								
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>			x				

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<b>LARGER MAMMALS</b>								
<b>Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)</b>								
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		x		x	x	x	
<b>Family Phocidae (Seals)</b>								
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		x					
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	x	x		x	x		x
<b>Family Phocoenidae (Porpoises)</b>								
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			?				
<b>Family Mustelidae (Mustelids)</b>								
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	x						
<b>Family Cervidae (Deer)</b>								
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		x	x	x	x	x	
<b>BUTTERFLIES</b>								
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		x			x	x	
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>					x		
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		x			x		
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>				x			
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>				x	x		
Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>					x		
Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>					x		
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>				x			
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>					x		
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		x		x	x		
<b>DRAGONFLIES</b>								
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrosoma nymphula</i>		x		x	x		
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>				x			
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>				x			
Keeled Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum coerulescens</i>				x			
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>				x	x		