

Mull trip report, 6th to 12th June 2013

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

Mull 2013



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LIST OF TRAVELLERS

Leaders

Charlie Moores

David Greenhalgh



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While I would hope that our Mull trip was notable for more than just the startlingly good weather, there is an irony in beginning to write this trip report on the same day that the UK media are reporting that British summers could be soggy and unpleasant for the next decade! 'Summer' may have been wet and dull before our trip started, and it may well be wet and dull in the coming weeks (or years) – but for five glorious days of our trip there was hardly a cloud in the azure sky above Mull and the sun shone from early morning until slipping below the horizon some nineteen hours later. Even the locals were commenting on the good weather by the middle of the week, and for us travellers it meant full, uninterrupted days in the field, soaring eagles, butterflies on the wing, and a day out on Staffa and Lunga I doubt any of us will ever forget (with apologies to Betty who was unwell that day). However I will just add that there is so much to enjoy on Mull that I'm certain we would have enjoyed ourselves even if the weather had been duller.

Anyway, I suspect all that of us had our particular 'wish-lists' for the trip (to see eagles, otter, conchrae, orchids, or visit Fingal's Cave or the Iona Abbey perhaps) and with the weather on our side we always had a good chance to 'clean up' and see most if not all of them...But I'm getting ahead of myself, of course, so let's go back to Day One and the ferry from Oban to Craignure...

Charlie Moores, Wiltshire

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

Day One: Thursday 6th June 2013

The trip began at the ferry terminal at Oban, where some of us 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, dull legs, greyish mantle, large wing mirrors; large, pinkish legs, pale mantle, fierce expression; large, yellow legs, slate-grey mantle).

The ferry ride across gave us stunning views of mainland Scotland's west coast, Duart Castle, and various smaller islets, but apart from a few **Common Guillemots** little in the way of wildlife (something that was most definitely NOT repeated over the next week).

David, our driver for the holiday, met us with a soon to be characteristic smile at Craignure and we made our way – in the sunshine we'd all been hoping for – to the Salen Hotel, our base for the holiday. Gerry and Claire, our hosts, quickly checked us in, and soon afterwards we were on our way back north to Tobermory (which as anyone with kids or grandkids or nephews and nieces will undoubtedly know is the beautiful seaside town immortalised in the CBBC programme 'Balamory'). Along the way we picked out a number of bird species that we were to see every (or almost every) day: **Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Eider, Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher, Grey Heron, Barn Swallow, Meadow Pipit**, and **Hooded Crow**.

While the chocolate shop (and the cashpoint machine) along Tobermory's curving and lovely harbour front were strong draws, we were mostly more interested in getting our wildlife-viewing underway. A path, winding into a strip of coastal mixed oak-ash woodland from behind the last buildings on the harbour front, was our target.

Despite our best efforts we couldn't pick out a **Narrow-leaved/Sword-leaved Helleborine** from amongst the carpet of similarly-coloured **Ramsons**, and the hoped-for **Wood Warblers** had either not arrived in what has been recognised across Europe as a late spring or were silent, but we concentrated on learning the differences between the songs of **Willow Warblers** and **Chaffinches**, and had good views of our first **Ravens** and **Song Thrushes**.

We also pondered over what the rapidly disappearing geometer moths we were glimpsing were (**Brown Silver-lines**, a bracken specialist, it turned out), saw the first of Mull's apparently most common (and the UK's most widespread) butterfly, the **Green-veined White**, and the first of many **White-tailed Bumblebees** (or at least the White-tailed aggregate that includes three phenotypically extremely similar species: *Bombus lucorum*, *B. magnus* and *B. cryptarum*) and **Common Carder Bees**. We also pored over some interesting plants including **Water Avens, Woodruff, Wild Strawberry, Maidenhair Spleenwort, Sanicle, Bugle, Wood Violet, Yellow Poppy, Foxglove**, and both **Lesser Celandine** and **Primrose** (which were still growing in shaded areas across the island despite having 'gone over' weeks earlier in southern Britain).

After a few hours we realised that we were unlikely to pick up very much more in this very pleasant spot, and ambled back to the car-park for the drive back to the Salen Hotel and what would be the first in a series of convivial evening meals...

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Day Two: Friday 7th June 2013

For some of us the *raison d'être* of this trip was to see **White-tailed (Sea) Eagles**. Once widespread across much of the UK, this huge raptor (often 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 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!

And we, of course, were happy to make our small contribution to Mull this year. It was with great excitement that our first 'proper' trip out was to the new White-tailed Eagle viewpoint, tucked away in Forestry Commission pine trees at Glen Seilisdeir on the North shore of Loch Scridain.

Of course en-route we kept our eyes peeled for other wildlife, and while driving alongside the loch between Salen and Seilisdeir we managed two very brief (and not very satisfying) views of 'floating logs' – as David, our driver, accurately describes a swimming **Otter**. Not all of us saw both, some of us saw neither, but at least we knew Otters were possible and surely we'd see more over the next five days...?

We reached our meeting place at the Eagle viewpoint right on time and were introduced to our two ranger guides, John (who works for the RSPB) and Cheryl (who works with the Forestry Commission). They walked us up to the viewing site, giving us a mass of information about the project along the way, and explained the laws surrounding protected species (we were only able to take photographs of the Eagles because we were under the 'umbrella' of John's licence). Finally we were ushered into a small clearing just off the path where we set up scopes and focussed our attention on a huge pile of sticks up a large pine tree some 150yds away: the nest of a breeding pair of White-tailed Eagles complete with a large (and very hungry) chick.

Excellent views (if not – remarkably – a little hazy because of the heat!) were had by all, which were made even better when one of the adults flew in to feed the chick. After about an hour we were led back to the portakabin 'office' (where **Siskins** and **Coal Tits** were visiting a well-stocked feeder), only to have wonderful views of an adult eagle as it drifted right over us and slowly wheeled away towards the valleys in the distance. Fantastic and thrilling.

How could we possibly top that? Well, perhaps that's the wrong way to look at a trip to the beautiful Isle of Mull, as there are always places to visit and wildlife to see...

Our afternoon was to be spent on the small island of Ulva, so we headed down towards the Ulva Ferry in the south-west of Mull.

En route we were all struck by the miles and miles of **English (Wild) Bluebells** cloaking the hills. Normally growing in shaded woodlands – and increasingly edged out in other parts of the UK by the introduced Spanish Bluebell – the bare slopes of Mull seemed an unlikely habitat for the lovely flower, but, as David explained, they grow amongst the **Bracken** which provides the shade they prefer: we were just very lucky that the late spring had delayed the bracken growth and allowed the literally tens of thousands of bluebells to be seen. A very memorable display indeed.

And of course we at Wildlife Travel don't tend to rush between sites without the occasional stop (for packed lunch or loo stops), and David pulled into a parking area with startlingly beautiful views across Loch Scridain. There were several cars already there, as this is a renowned spot for **Golden Eagles**. A pair were breeding on the nearby hills, and serenaded by **Rock Pipits**, Oystercatcher, and the occasional **Curlew**, we were treated to views of our second iconic eagle species of the day, as the adults patrolled the peaks and ridges in the distance!

On a lesser note (perhaps) the parking area was also the site for a mass emergence of the small beetle **Garden Chafer**, which were swarming like bees over **Silverweed** and **Bird's-foot Trefoil**, and two small ponds where we saw a mass of **Common Frog** tadpoles. Otter, though, was nowhere to be seen...

Definitely an interesting and worthwhile stop though, and we were soon on our way to the Ulva ferry – a small boat that takes just twelve people and shuttles back and forth across the small channel separating Ulva from Mull.

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Ulva is small but beautiful and offers amazing views across to Ben More and the Ardmeanach peninsula. Intersected by loop trails it has woodland, bogs, beaches, and plenty of wildlife (including the extremely rare **Slender Scotch Burnet Moth** – which unfortunately was nowhere to be seen: in fact we didn't see a single burnet moth species on the whole trip, which was most unexpected and surely due to the late spring). However, first things first and a tea break was requested at The Boathouse tearoom on the harbour front. While some enjoyed a perfect pot of tea and some delicious homemade cakes, others walked the short distance to the historic 'Sheila's Cottage' and began exploring the island on their own.

The majority of the group followed part of the Wood/Shore walk. Our only **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Common Whitethroat** of the trip was seen here, our first **Cuckoo** was heard (distantly), and we found our first **Lousewort** (a lovely pink plant that surely deserves a better name!). Highlight though was hearing our first **Corncrake**, calling from an inaccessible field studded with sedge tussocks, **Red Campion**, and **Yellow Iris** beds (irises right across Mull bloomed during our visit). A member of the rail family, this terribly elusive species has declined hugely across Europe as farmers cut fields early as they switched from producing hay to silage. The decline is recent too: a reduction in range of 76% in Britain alone since 1970! The core of the remaining population is the Western Isles, and Mull (and it seems Ulva) is an excellent place to see – or more accurately hear – the species.

We gave ourselves just long enough to realise that we had less than no chance at all to see our first Corncrake, but the rasping call (likened to running a finger along the teeth of an old-fashioned comb) was enough to put the species on our 'trip list'.

With a long and exciting day 'in the bag' we made our way back to the ferry, and ultimately back to Salen where we had our dinner at the Mediterraenea just down the road from our hotel.

Does that mean we were finished for the day? No, revitalised by an excellent meal a few of us decided to walk the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the old pier behind the hotel. We added **Sedge Warbler**, had wonderful views of **Willow Warbler** and **Shag**, but the search for a much-desired Otter came to a grinding halt when we were 'challenged' by some rude wildlife photographers lying in our path who decided that sharing a coastline well over a hundred miles in length was beyond them. Such is life, and having had such a great day anyway we chose to ignore them. As we slowly wandered back to the hotel a while later - amidst a growing cloud of midges – the sun sank through a near cloudless sky behind us.

Day Three: Saturday 8th June 2013

One of our number had been expressing concerns about making the sea-crossing to the small islands of Staffa and Lunga (the latter the largest of the Treshnish Isles) which can be extremely rough, but – and while 'remarkably' is an over-worked word I intend to use it again – we awoke to yet another remarkably cloudless sky and reports of a sea that (as in the cliché) was like a mill-pond. Sadly even the promise of as many ginger biscuits as was required to fight any chance of possible sea-sickness wasn't enough to persuade Betty (who was unfortunately feeling far rougher than the water surface she'd been worrying about!) to join the trip out. We missed her.

After yet another excellent breakfast we climbed into David's van and made our way back down to the Ulva ferry and our rendezvous with the Turus Mara. Our trip would start with the journey out to Staffa and Fingal's Cave, and from there we would go on to Lunga and its Puffins and other nesting seabirds.

Fingal's Cave, a deep hollow surrounded by extraordinary basalt columns (and immortalised by Mendelssohn in *The Hebrides*, Op. 26), is 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) became more numerous the closer we got to Staffa and the cave, but it was perhaps the adult and juvenile **Harbour Porpoises** that stole the show. Our only sighting of the trip the views weren't extensive, but the small size (and tiny dorsal fins) were clear enough.

A quick diversion to float by a group of **Atlantic Grey Seals** was a bonus, as was the trip's only **Manx Shearwater** tracking away in front of the boat, but Fingal's Cave was what most of us (I suspect) wanted to see – and while the loudspeakers playing a quick snatch of Mendelssohn as the boat was edged into the opening of the cave was a bit much for the music enthusiasts among our party – the cave itself didn't disappoint.

While some boats don't even get to dock on Staffa because of the huge swells that can form out to sea and crash into these isolated islands, we arrived in cloudless conditions on a sea as soft as a feather bed. The walk along to the cave, and the vertiginous shuffling to get into position inside the cave, may have given your leader a few 'heart in

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mouth' moments, but (fortunately) it was dry and safe and everyone in the group had the experience they were hoping for. It's not to be missed.

We were soon back on the boat though and heading for Lunga. Online descriptions talk about 'Puffin Therapy' and how incredibly close visitors can get to the nesting Puffins, Guillemots, and Shags on the island. The theory is that while humans are close by, predators like skuas (which we didn't see), Ravens (which we did), and **Peregrines** (just a few of us were fortunate to see a male drift over the island, the only one of the trip) keep their distance so the nesting seabirds feel safer out in the open. 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. Truly a reason to visit Mull again - though whether the weather would be so kind...

Lunga also gives fantastic views of **Razorbills** and Common Guillemots (including the '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 and named for the foul-smelling fish oils they vomit onto anyone or anything that gets too close!). A final interesting avian 'observation' was hearing the chuckling of (**European**) **Storm-petrels** which breed in burrows below the ruins of an old village (Lunga was occupied until 1857). It's a bizarre sound, especially when it seems to be coming from the depths of the Earth.

Lunga is also renowned for plants, but once again the late spring seemed to have held back some species. Bluebells were again everywhere, and while we all had good views of **Wild Thyme** and **Milkwort** and a few maritime plants like **Thrift** and **Sea Campion**, the plant searchers amongst the group (and please correct me if I'm wrong!) spent much of the time working out what an unfamiliar slender plant growing out the rocks was: the verdict was **New Zealand Willowherb**, an escaped garden plant that is spreading rapidly around the UK.

The day was already a resounding success, but we weren't quite finished yet. A few of us managed to obtain seats on the upper (open) deck (I will point out here that I did try to offer mine to the people most important on this trip - you, the clients - but no-one took me up!) where we had nice views of **Arctic Tern**, **Gannet** and - (here's this word again) - remarkable views of a young White-tailed Eagle which flew off the island of Fladda and circled over the sea. What a way to end the day!

Day Four: Sunday 9th June 2013

How could we possibly follow up our trips to Staffa and Lunga? We had in fact barely touched parts of Mull, and our first stop on what would be a long, hot day was along the route out to the very beautiful Grass Point. En-route we stopped briefly at a bridge that spanned a channel trickling out to sea, where we had very distant views of a hunting male **Hen Harrier** while listening to the ubiquitous Chaffinches, Song Thrushes, and Willow Warblers. On the bridge was growing more New Zealand Willowherb, **Ivy-leaved Toadflax**, and Maidenhair Spleenwort.

This brief stop was just a taster for what awaited further along. The final 800m or so out to Grass Point is flanked by bog, which was dotted with **Cotton-grass**, the lovely parasitic **Butterwort**, **Cuckoo-flower** (Lady's Smock), and various sedges. We also found our first **Heath Spotted Orchids** - though really not in full flower. Hopefully we would find more developed individuals later in the trip? Small pools were alive with newly-emerged **Four-spotted Chasers**, a **Tree Pipit** was in full song, **Common Redpolls** were in the trees, a Cuckoo flew quickly right across the horizon, and there were high numbers of the striking **Green Hairstreak** (the most widespread of the UK's hairstreak butterflies I estimated 20+ by the time we reached the bus again).

Other notable insects here included **Common Heath** and **Cinnabar** (both diurnal moths, the latter dependent on **Ragwort** which was just coming into flower) and the beautiful **Marsh Fritillary**, a relatively small fritillary that has declined massively in recent decades: the declining fortunes of the species are 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 the one, but hopefully this gorgeous insect has a strong foothold on Mull.

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On reaching the point itself (which I arrived at somewhat later than most of the group) I was greeted with calls to check out a pod of **Bottle-nosed Dolphins** which were moving past (a photo that Sue took was checked out by a colleague of mine who is far more expert than me and confirmed as this species, which we suspected at the time). Also on the water was a breeding-plumaged **Red-throated Diver**, more Eider, and – to our delight – sitting out on a small islet were two adult White-tailed Eagles! Superb. And the views got far better when both eagles lifted into the air, and we were able to watch one of them spirally up and over the bog towards the low mountains where David said they would be breeding.

The one (minor) disappointment was not finding an Otter. Still, we had the afternoon for that...

We possibly spent a little too long at Grass Point (for which I'll apologise now, but in my defence it was a treasure-trove of biodiversity) and we headed down the coast towards Loch Buie and a lunch break. We stopped after a quite long (and frustratingly 'otter-less' drive though we did have frequent views of **Red Deer**) in a beautiful spot near Ben Buie and the Lochbuie Standing Stone Circle, where we picked up a Golden Eagle patrolling the distant ridges, a young **Grey Wagtail** (I never saw the adults), and – less welcome – Jill picked up a couple of ticks from the bracken: clearly the pesky arachnids are present in large numbers and waiting for picnickers to join them off the paths!

The Standing Stone Circle, which is in grounds owned by Lochbuie House, is reached by walking across two 'boggy' fields – though this year the fields were more like the dry and heavily grazed pastures more typical of southern England in late summer. However, wildlife is seemingly everywhere on Mull and as we walked to the stones we had fabulous views of a Cuckoo which had dropped down into the grass to pick up a food item (usually a caterpillar of some sorts but more likely a beetle) and then sat in the branches of a dead pine for several minutes. A rare prolonged view of a bird normally heard but not seen well.

As regards the circle itself, there is precious little information online to explain why it is there or who built it (I looked before the trip), but the "13.4m diameter circle originally consisted of 9 stones, one of which has disappeared and been replaced with a small boulder. The stones range in height from 1.2m to 2m and have flat faces faced inwards. There are 3 outliers, the nearest of which is 0.85m high and lies just to the SE, the tallest 2.7m to the SW. Set in a natural amphitheatre formed by the surrounding hills, this is a magical place."
(<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=491>)

That seems a fair enough description, and while there is no information at all at the circle itself, it is indeed a place for some quiet contemplation (or a chance to catch our breaths after a hectic few days). A wonderful spot, if on a different scale to Avebury or Stonehenge!

From the circle we wandered slowly through the farmyard attached to Lochbuie House to Moy Castle, the ancestral home of Clan MacLaine. Built in the 15th century the castle was close to collapse at one point and is now scaffolded and structurally sound. It must have given amazing views over Loch Buie at one time, but at the moment it is closed to visitors. Nevertheless we had our own views over the loch from the beach where we saw more Eiders, gulls, and small flocks of Sand Martins which evidently nest close by.

A short distance on we met up with David again and made our way in the minibus to an all together larger and more impressive castle: Duart. En route Betty proved how much we'd missed her the day before by spotting a Hen Harrier as it circled over the bus. A wonderful bird.

I will now apologise again for the fact we got to Duart later than we had intended. We had hoped to enjoy some dancing and piping which was scheduled into our day, but we arrived too late. With hindsight we could have lopped time off each of our earlier stops, and I appreciate that several of the group were very disappointed that we missed the events at Duart – and also appreciate that you were kind enough not to let your frustrations show too overtly. Lessons were learned that day!

While not wishing to make light of the disappointment in any way, at least the tea-rooms were still open (as was the castle, but only for about an hour). It was a good opportunity to recharge after a day under yet more cloudless skies, and slowly filter down to the lawn in front of the castle from where we had stunning views out across to the mainland (and good views of a Rock Pipit wandering around the grass). An (almost) excellent end to yet another exciting and wildlife-filled day.

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Day Five: Monday 10th June 2013

With warnings that the expected rain was finally on its way, we awoke to a fifth beautiful day. Though the wind did pick up for a while in the early afternoon, we had yet more sunshine – and I like to think we absolutely made the most of it!

Our plan was to work our way around the northern part of Mull, having a look at Dervaig, Calgary, and ending up at the Eas Fors waterfall (either so impressive or so uninspiring that its name actually translates to the waterfall waterfall – I prefer to assume the former). In the end we added two unscheduled stops, one suggested by David, and one we stumbled on as we were looking for somewhere to find dragonflies...

We began by heading out for a small flush that previous groups had stopped at and found the very lovely **Golden-ringed Dragonfly**. The female is the longest of the UK's dragonflies (because of its large size and extended abdomen) and though they can be common they need better habitat than the newly rubble-strewn site we found when we arrived. Places do get trashed (unfortunately) but they make for a forlorn visit. A very pink male Common Redpoll twittered around as we poked about for something of interest, but we soon gave up and got back on the road to Dervaig.

Missing the dragonfly at this location actually worked in our favour, as – determined to find one to show the group – I kept an eye out for some suitable habitat as we drove along. The road we were on went through a Forestry Commission plantation and almost as we were about to leave the trees we happened to pass a small patch of open bog that looked like it just might contain some interesting insects. Virtually the first insect we saw? A lovely Golden-ringed Dragonfly! Crossing a small stream several of the group hopped into the bog and soon had great views of more Four-spotted Chasers, **Large Red Damselfly**, and several of the group described what had to be a female **Beautiful Demoiselle**. The real prize though was several **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries** – another butterfly suffering long-term declines nationally.

On top of that we found the striking hoverfly *Sericomyia lappona* (the northern/western relative of the species I initially thought it was, *Sericomyia silentis* or the **Bog Hoverfly** as it was often known), and had close views of what is likely to be *Empis tessellata*, a member of the Dagger Flies which preys on other insects and suck out their bodily fluids through its long 'dagger-like' proboscis! Check out any patch of flowers or hedgerow and just think about the life-or-death struggles that are going on. It's tough to be an insect...

From this fortuitous find we moved onto Dervaig. A quirky bookshop enjoyed by earlier Wildlife Travel groups closed last year on the owner's death, so after a fairly quick stroll up to see the peculiar rounded steeple of Kilmore church (which was built in 1905) and enjoying views of yet another White-tailed Eagle wheeling over the hills (they really are unmissable now thanks to the solid conservation work that's taken place over the last two decades) we drove on to our next stop: the Calgary Arts Centre.

The Calgary Arts Centre is renowned for two things: an excellent tea-shop/restaurant and Narrow-leaved/Sword-leaved Helleborines (quite an attractive combination when all is said and done). We'd booked in for 13:00 and (with your leader still feeling contrite and wary of making any further scheduling errors) we arrived at 12:30. Time therefore for a quick 'pit stop' and to head to the small patch of mature woodland behind the Centre for a pre-lunch walk.

At first sight the woods didn't look all that different to the woods behind Tobermory we'd visited on our first afternoon on Mull, with the same suite of songbirds and banks of Ramsons. However it didn't take long to find our first helleborines – or much longer to find a whole bunch more! An absolutely beautiful orchid, much the colour of a Ramsons but very obvious once noticed, I hope the group enjoyed them as much as I couldn't help repeating that I did. Coming back around the small hillock the path followed we then came across our first – and only as it turned out, this really was a late spring – **Northern Marsh Orchid**, another beautiful plant and growing right by the path making it very easy to see.

Two insects of note that were sighted on our way back to the Centre were a Nomad bee (probably *Nomada flava*, but difficult to be certain without dissection of a specimen) and a rather striking potter wasp – probably *Ancistrocerus scoticus*.

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After an excellent lunch (thanks again, Jenny, for the extra slice of Lemon Drizzle cake!) we headed back into the woodland, where invigorated by too much organic Elderflower presse your leader made a foolish attempt to recapture his lost youth by sliding down – and falling off – a zip wire. Never again...

Still, no damage other than to my pride was done, and we made our way across the road below the Arts Centre to Calgary Bay, a beautiful sweep of sand and sea framed by low, wooded hills. The habitat from the grassy meadow above the beach to the edge of the dunes looked excellent for a variety of plants and insects, but despite some hard searching (while less dedicated members of the group recaptured *their* lost youth in a far less physically foolhardy way - by going for a paddle in the flat-calm sea) very little was added to our trip list except for the common hoverfly ***Helophilus pendulus*** and **Bitter Stonecrop**. It was especially disappointing not to find any burnet moths as the sward looked ideal, but if they were there they were hiding well – and considering they are brightly coloured diurnal moths that normally sit around on the tops of flowers I think the late spring is the more likely explanation.

Before we climbed back into the minibus back at the car-park we were treated to a lesson in fieldcraft by a man with a small camera who stood within a few metres of Sand Martin nests in a stream bank, oblivious of the distressed birds swerving to avoid him as they came into feed their young. A lesson in how NOT to do it, because if that's fieldcraft, I'm a Swiss cheese etc etc...

Our original schedule had been to go onto the Eas Fors waterfall but David suggested we stop off at a small garden not far from the bay at Ballygown. Lip na Cloiche is run by the impressive Lucy Mackenzie, who has single-handedly hewn a garden out of a bracken-covered hillside. Clearly a determined woman, 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, meconopsis, gunneras and other damp-loving specialities*"

Even better is that entrance is free (though we of course made donations).

And the gardens are 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). As an example, almost the first insect we saw on entering the gardens was a male **Sabre Wasp *Rhyssa persuasoria***, the largest ichneumon in the UK. White-tailed Bumblebees and Common Carder bees were widespread, but the **Ashy Mining-bee *Andrena cineraria*** is the first record of the species in Scotland since 2002, and only the third since 1988. I've yet to confirm that the Nomad bee I found was another *Nomada flava*, but I'm much more confident that hoverflies included ***Eristalis horticola***, ***Xylota segnis***, ***Syritta pipiens***, and ***Merodon equestris***.

A good haul for a short, unplanned stop! This was also the only location we definitely recorded **Yellowhammer** (singing outside the garden, but clearly audible from within it) and Ravens flew overhead.

Ordinarily perhaps a day of this quality would be considered enough, and had the waterfall been miles out of our way we may well have gone back to the hotel. However, with the sun still in the sky and Eas Fors just a few miles away (and in the right direction) we made the – correct – decision to drive on...

From a small roadside stop by the falls things looked quite promising. A narrow wall of water sliding into a pool, shade-creating trees, and a **Dipper!** Typically a shy bird, Dippers don't normally hang around for a group our size to take photographs but this one was atypical – and we all had better than expected views. Excellent.

Whilst the filmy ferns mentioned in the holiday leaflet weren't seen, the site was interesting for plants – though these were mostly to be found across the road (where the 'real' waterfall slides over the cliff in a haze of spray and tumbles into the sea below). Heath Spotted Orchids were plentiful, as were Butterworts, Silverweed, Wild Thyme, and **English Stonecrop**. These in turn attracted a **Small Heath** and numerous Green-veined Whites. However, while these were very enjoyable there was a slight distraction in that one of the group (you know who you are, John) decided to get closer views of said waterfall and said spray that put a severe strain on your leader's normal cardiac function: I think next time I visit I may have to be a little more robust in the 'reading of the Risk Assessment rules' before I let anyone off the minibus...

And so ended a quite remarkable day, full of wildlife, spectacular views, and superb weather. What would tomorrow bring...?

Mull trip report, 6th to 12th June 2013

Day Six: Tuesday 11th June 2013

What did today bring? Rain. Not all day, but for long stretches of it the sky was thick with cloud. The temperature had dropped too. After the near-unbroken sunshine of the past five days the change in the weather came as a bit of a nasty shock, particularly as this was the day we'd scheduled for a visit to Iona to look for Corncrakes. Difficult to see at the best of times, they can be near-impossible in a gale...

We made our way down to Fionnphort to catch the Iona ferry via quick stop off to look for **Early Purple Orchids** on a dune slack. They were there but had clearly withered under five days of clear skies: a sharp contrast to the cold rain that lashed down as we stood looking at a few shrivelled spikes before heading back to the minibus.

The ferry to Iona takes just minutes to cross 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) and - after making plans to meet up at the quayside restaurant in the afternoon for those who wanted to 'do their own thing' - we headed off towards the bank of irises growing near the Abbey.

The difficulty of seeing Corncrakes in the rain, even when you're stood in the centre of some of the most important breeding habitat in the UK, was soon apparent. Even if they had been calling - and the call is surprisingly loud - it was almost impossible to hear anything over the sound of rain bouncing off anorak hoods and waterproof trousers. The sensible thing to do was to retreat to the Abbey and its fascinating (and dry) interior. Most of us did just that until the rain eased into showers and occasional moments of broken clouds about two hours later.

By this time our group had dissolved across the tiny island, and despite looking for anyone else who may still be interested in seeing (or at least hearing) Corncrakes, just two of us ended up sat by an Iris bed at the base of Iona's highest hill, Dun I, listening to two males noisily establishing their territorial borders. It took a while but eventually we both had fantastic views of one of them for about fifteen minutes as it moved across gaps, stood and took that 'head-up calling' stance so beloved by photographers, and picked at food items. We never even caught a glimpse of the second bird, despite it being the nearer of the two!

Other bird species on Iona that we caught up with included both **Rook** and **Jackdaw** (neither of which we saw on Mull, oddly), Pied Wagtail, Goldfinch, **Duncock**, **Starling**, and the usual gulls and Hooded Crow.

We didn't, perhaps, spend enough time looking for machair plants - though if any of the group have records they'd like to add please do let me know. The machair itself seems to be now confined to a small area on the other side of the island (which is widely farmed): a long walk as we discovered when a group of us made a belated (and failed) attempt to yomp to the machair before the return ferry.

This wasn't our original plan, and two of the group misunderstood the change and returned on an earlier sailing: they were left wondering where we all were, but did get compensation of wonderful views of a female Hen Harrier with David. Had the day been better I'm sure we'd have voted to stay on Iona longer, but after the sunshine and hard walking of the previous days I think we made the correct decision to call it a day when we did.

As we headed back across Mull we once again looked for Otters - a mammal that had suddenly become as elusive as a Corncrake in the rain. And once again we couldn't spot any. Frustrating, but we did get excellent views of a **Mountain Hare** standing in a field by the side of the road. Shorter-eared than its more widespread mainland cousin the Brown Hare, it was a powerful-looking and distinctive animal. Any lingering questions about whether we'd mistakenly identified other hares as one of the ubiquitous **Rabbits** we'd seen on every day of the trip vanished. An impressive and beautiful beast...

Day Seven: Wednesday 12th June 2013

Our final morning on Mull dawned more brightly than the day before, but the talk seemed to be mostly about how incredibly fortunate we'd been over the first five days. There is no doubt that the weather had helped, but as I said at the top of the Trip Report I genuinely think it would have been difficult not to enjoy Mull whatever the weather.

By this point we had seen well over 80 species of bird, 8 mammals, 8 butterflies, and a wide variety of other insects and flowering plants (plants are not my strongpoint admittedly, something I will address for next year, but definitely a wide variety!). We'd covered most of the island, no-one had been injured, and - unless I missed the complaints - we'd all eaten and slept well. What more could we have asked for?

Mull trip report, 6th to 12th June 2013

Better views of Otter for one thing...

While the check-in time for our ferry back to Oban was fairly early (and was vital to make), we did still have time to make a stop en-route at Garmony Point to look at an Arctic Tern colony. With the rain still spitting (albeit lightly) these elegant, long-distance travellers were not drawn enough to tempt some of our own travellers from the comfort of the minibus, but my motto is 'while it's light there's always wildlife-watching to be had'. Almost incredibly on one of my first scans of the water a distant shape emerged that appeared to have a tail and to be swimming across the loch.

It was, indeed, an Otter! And a mightily welcome one at that. No, we didn't get eyeball-to-eyeball views of it scrunching its way through a trout or some such, but we were all able to watch it for a good fifteen minutes as it hunted offshore in the company of geese, gulls, and Arctic Terns. And for good measure we found our only **Ringed Plover** of the trip too.

A worthwhile stop and just a short drive from Craignure where we would pick up the ferry. We made it in plenty of time – enough time in fact to get good views of a lovely breeding-plumaged **Great Northern Diver** in the harbour, discuss the merits of 'ticking' the Rock Doves under the pier (they all looked suspiciously 'Feral Pigeon'-types to me), and donate a little bit of our packed lunch to two Hooded Crows before embarking.

And – apart from finally getting Jenny onto a Black Guillemot as we docked at Oban – that was it.

My thanks for everyone in the group for making my job so easy, and I sincerely hope everyone enjoyed the trip as much as I did. Thanks to David for his input and safe driving, and to the folks on Mull that we met, stayed with, or were served by, I hope I'll have the pleasure of meeting you all again.

