

Mull trip report, 5<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014

# WILDLIFE TRAVEL

## Mull 2014



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## LIST OF TRAVELLERS

### Leaders

Charlie Moores

David Greenhalgh

**With warnings of a storm due to break in the middle of our holiday, there were many occasions when our trips around the wonderful island of Mull were guided by the weather forecasts given by various media outlets every morning. However as we all now know, just because it's raining in the north of Mull doesn't mean it's not blazing hot a few miles away in the south. The trick is just to enjoy the spectacular scenery and the fantastic wildlife – and the wonderful company of course - and not worry too much about what can't be changed.**

**While one day (our visit to Lunga) was unavoidably wet, I hope I'd be right in saying that the rest of the holiday was hugely enjoyable. I suspect that all of us had our particular 'wish-lists' for the trip (to see otters, 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, even finally getting to grips with that most desirable of plants – the magical Butterwort (I'm joking of course, as those of you on the trip will recognise)...But I'm getting ahead of myself 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 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014

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).

With the weather for the week forecast to be unsettled with some low cloud, the views from the 45 minute ferry ride to Craignure weren't perhaps as stunning as they can be, but we could still appreciate the sweeping coastline of the Scottish mainland, Duart Castle (which we visited during the week), and various smaller islets. There was little in the way of wildlife (something that was most definitely NOT repeated over the next week) but our first **Shags** and a small flock of **Kittiwake** crossing behind the ferry was notable.

David Greenhalgh, our driver for the holiday, met us with his soon to be characteristic smile 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 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** (which is rapidly growing in numbers since it first started breeding on the island less than a decade ago), **Eider** (females 'crèche' their young and we were to see small groups dotted just offshore all around Mull), **Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher, Grey Heron, Barn Swallow, Meadow Pipit, Collared Dove**, 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 lovely harbour front was a strong draw, we were mostly more interested in getting our wildlife-viewing underway. A path, winding into a strip of mixed oak-ash woodland was our target.

Unfortunately the path was surprisingly muddy and slippery, so we didn't spend too much time here. However we got into the swing of the trip by picking out the first of many **Willow Warblers** and **Chaffinches** (both ubiquitous on Mull), and had good looks at **Song Thrushes, Great, Blue, and Coal Tits**. While the views were 'difficult' we also managed to find a small flock of **Crossbills** utilising the few pines along the track.

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We also puzzled over some interesting plants that included **Tormentil** (one of the potentillas), **Water Avens**, **Woodruff**, **Wild Strawberry**, **Maidenhair Spleenwort**, **Sanicle**, **Bugle**, **Wood Violet**, **Yellow/Welsh Poppy**, **Tutsan** (a shrubby species of St. John's Wort we saw again at Loch Buie), and the first of thousands of **Foxgloves**. Those of you who remember wondering just what was the tiny, upright greyish-flowered plant growing in abundance against the rocky side of the path may be interested to know that it was **Heath Speedwell**, an unhelpful name for a plant that grows in habitats from machair to mountains!

After a few hours we realised that we were unlikely to pick up very much more in this very pleasant spot (plus midges were appearing under clouding skies), and walked back to the minibus and on to the Salen Hotel for what would be the first in a series of convivial and very good evening meals...

Was that it for the first day? With the sun not slipping behind the hills before 22:30 there is plenty of après-dinner daylight left and there are two options for evening walks: one follows a road winding down to the old Salen pier, which is sometimes a good location for finding Otters, the other follows the main road to the loch. A few of us decided to walk the  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile to the old pier behind the hotel. Along the road we heard Blackcap, Whitethroat, and a Hooded Crow giving a confusingly 'Eider-like' call (a memory for your guide to definitely tuck away for next year!) but the loch was largely still and quiet except for a few Curlew drifting to roost and the only **Cormorants** of the trip, standing with some Shags on the ruined piles of the pier.

### Day Two: Friday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014

For some of us one of the main draws of this trip was 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 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 via the small charge to visit the watchpoint 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 our first stop turned out to be rewarding indeed. Joining a small group of other birders at a well-known parking area on Loch na Keal (which is draped with **Silverweed** and **Bird's-foot Trefoil**), we scanned the water while the low cloud cleared from the tops of the hills behind us. **Rock Pipits** were common here (one perched up well on a gate allowing us all to see the dark streaking) and we soon noted gulls on the far shore apparently mobbing a brown barrel washed up along the tideline: our first White-tailed Eagle! Distant it may have been, but it's always good to find an eagle for yourself.

Exciting as that sighting was, behind us the early morning clouds had lifted. On cue a large shape appeared over the high ridge line: a beautiful **Golden Eagle**! Serenaded by Oystercatchers, the occasional **Curlew**, and our first **Sedge Warbler** (nesting in the irises and mass of **Hemlock Water-dropwort** by the car-park) we were treated to views of our second iconic eagle species of the morning, as the huge bird patrolled the peaks and ridges in the distance. How huge? A bird that looked like a fly buzzing the eagle turned out to be a **Raven** – the UK's largest crow!

It was soon time to leave and head to the meeting place at the Eagle viewpoint, picking up **Sand Martin** and **Wheatear** en route, as well as seeing banks of what all appeared to be **Heath Spotted-orchid** – a common enough plant on Mull if unusual elsewhere, but in such profusion that this was clearly an 'orchid year' on the island.

We arrived right on time and were introduced to our two ranger guides, John Clare (who works for the RSPB) and Rachel French (who works with the Forestry Commission). Last year the eagles had nested about 800yds from a cabin which doubles as an office and exhibition centre, and observers had been led in silence to a viewing spot tucked away under the dark pines. This year the eagles, as our guides explained, were nesting in a far less accessible location away across the valley and we'd be using telescopes set up by the cabin. The views may not be as good, they said, but it was a warm day so keep looking upwards and who knew what might fly over...

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Almost on cue, a pair of Golden Eagles drifted overhead (apparently a pair looking for a territory), and a **Buzzard** appeared (seemingly everywhere on Mull this year, they sowed 'raptor-confusion' every time they appeared – even John admitted that he had to take a good long look sometimes to identify what he was seeing, so no-one should feel despondent that our IDs weren't instant during our stay). Within a few more minutes the sky darkened (well, almost) as a White-tailed Eagle cleaved the air. We'd only been on site for about fifteen minutes and had already seen three species of bird of prey. Superb.

The watchpoint is also a great location to see **Siskins** and **Coal Tits**, which constantly visit a well-stocked feeder. It's good for insects, too, and on a short walk towards last year's now redundant hide-away in the pines we all managed good views of one of the UK's most spectacular odonates, the **Golden-ringed Dragonfly** (plus the widespread **Large Red Damselfly**), the hoverflies **Myathropa florea** and **Syrirta pipiens**, and the jewel-like **Green Tiger-beetle** (*Cicindela campestris*) which was prowling the track looking for its next meal. Butterflies were surprisingly scarce, but a worn **Small Tortoiseshell** and a few **Green-veined Whites** (by far the commonest butterfly of our trip) were on the wing.

With the sun now very high in a cloudless sky – and breakfast becoming a distant memory – we decided to move on. How could we possibly top what we'd just seen though? Well, that's the wrong way to look at a trip to the beautiful Isle of Mull, as there are always superb places to visit and wildlife to see...

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 – with a short stop to debate the country of origin of a Canada Goose feeding with some Greylags. The 'ferry' 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. It took just a few minutes to arrive and a few more minutes to zip across the water.

We were soon at the very welcoming Boathouse tearoom on the harbour front, where we refuelled and sat and wondered why we'd had any concern about the weather at all...

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, and plenty of wildlife (including the extremely rare **Slender Scotch Burnet Moth** – which unfortunately was nowhere to be seen: in fact - as on the same Wildlife Travel trip last year - we didn't see a single burnet moth species during the week).

Now begins a running motif for 'Mull 2014' – the search for the insectivorous, small (perhaps underwhelming to anyone who doesn't appreciate the nuances of carnivorous purplish plants) **Common Butterwort**. We strolled down towards a nailed-on dead cert of a location: a damp bog that was ablaze with the things last year. There was not a dead fly stuck to a sticky green pad to be seen! Fields of **Common** and **Hare's-tail Cottongrass**, our first **Northern Marsh-orchids** (the deep-red colour standing out from a distance), acres of Foxglove, mounds of Heath Speedwell, our first **Lousewort** (a lovely pink plant that surely deserves a better name!) but not a Butterwort to be seen. Oh well.

The birding was a little quiet too. A Whitethroat sung from an overhead wire, a Blackcap sung in the oak woods, but little else of real interest. Insects were rather better: all the group enjoyed good views of a very fresh **Four-spotted Chaser**, we found a **Small Heath** by '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) and followed that by several **Large Heath** (ssp *scotica*) butterflies, a declining species of boggy moorland. The bracken-faithful geometer moth **Brown Silver-lines** was seen several times, and I found the small moth **Silver Hook** on the way back but unfortunately only after the rest of the group had headed back to the Boathouse for a cuppa...

The last ferry leaves Ulva at 17:00, allowing us plenty of time to arrive back at the Salen Hotel (about 30 minutes away) and freshen up for our meal. Rather than head straight back, though, we still had time (and the weather on our side) to stop at the Loch Na Keal car park again. Remarkably we once again saw White-tailed Eagle (this time flying right over our heads towards a nest hidden away in trees on the hillside), and – much to the surprise of several observers who'd been there all afternoon – wonderful views of an Otter that ran along the shore before diving into the water!

We'd had an exciting day, but after eating the whole group was ready for even more! We marched out along the main road towards the loch (and a rusting ship), and just fifteen minutes later were enjoying splendid views of another **Otter**, which even came out of the water briefly (most of the group watched presumably the same animal

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there again on a brief unplanned morning stop a few days later while a forgotten camera was retrieved from the hotel by David and Robert – clearly a location to remember).

I say 'enjoying': the Otter was wonderful, but we weren't the only observers along the road. While we watched this most entrancing of mammals, several thousand tiny midges watched us, diving in to take bits of scalp as the opportunity arose. It was with some relief that the sun sank low enough for us take a unanimous decision to retreat back to the hotel and some well-deserved rest (this, I should say, was the only time midges really bothered us, and they really weren't an issue during the trip otherwise).

### Day Three: Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2014

As the trip leader I am always very aware of the weather and try to 'flex' the day's itinerary accordingly, but because of booking requirements there are some elements of the week that I can't change. Today we were booked to visit the outer islands of Staffa and Lunga (the latter the largest of the Treshnish Isles) and even with a decidedly unpromising weather forecast we had little option but to either go or miss out on the islands altogether. And there is no way at all a Wildlife Travel trip to Mull would miss out on Fingal's Cave or the seabirds on Lunga....

So after yet another excellent breakfast we climbed into David's van 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 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.

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. A brief sighting of a breaching **Harbour Porpoise** was a bonus, as were a couple of **Manx Shearwater** racing low over the water in typical rakish style..

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. 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, but several of us saw one at the entrance to the cave.

From a wildlife point of view, though, the best sighting on Staffa was very close views of two **Great Skuas** (or Bonxies as they're widely known), which were patrolling the cliffs looking for unguarded eggs or chicks. Large, fierce, and 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. We saw these (or others perhaps) on Lunga too.

After a brief picnic lunch on the top of the cliffs, we were soon back on the boat and heading for Lunga (and what were clearly thick rainclouds on the horizon). 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 unadvisable, 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. Truly a reason to visit Mull again.

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!). **Arctic Terns** usually fish in the same bay the boats docks as well.

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Lunga is also a good place to see **Atlantic Grey Seals** (a very friendly – or very curious – individual came within feet of us at one point), and is also renowned for plants. We all had good views of **Wild Thyme**, **Milkwort**, **Thrift** and **Sea Campion**, and Heath Spotted-orchids were growing in very large numbers on the short grass near the Puffins.

The one drawback about these isolated islands is that once onshore should the rain come there is nowhere to shelter. And the rain came! As we decamped from the ferry onto Lunga the rain began to spit, by the time we made our way back to the boat it was very wet indeed. However, the birds still showed, modern raingear works well, and a brisk walk keeps you warm (sort of). Fortunately the wind hadn't got up and the crossing back was uneventful...and in case anyone reading this is wondering about booking a trip in the future, this was the last (and only) time we got wet!

It had been a long (and ultimately very 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: Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Mull is a remarkable island, and there are a huge number of different habitats to explore. Today we would be spending 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 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 800m 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.

The tip of the Point is reached on foot, so we left the minibus and walked. Re-reading last year's Trip Report I found that I had noted that it was at Grass Point that "we also found our first Heath Spotted-orchids" of the trip and that they were "not in full flower". This trip was in exactly the same week as in 2013, but the contrast couldn't have been more different. I've rarely seen so many orchids in one place. Heath Spotted-orchids (ranging for 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 a smallish orchid that wasn't fully open but was undoubtedly either **Greater** or **Lesser Butterfly Orchid**.

Fortunately we soon found more butterfly orchids, including a couple of tall spikes near the cottages. It seems likely that we actually saw both species, but looking at the pollinia these were **Greater**s. Sadly, as the residents told us, a couple of even larger spikes had been selfishly picked by visitors the day before. As Wildlife Travel always stresses, take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but footprints...

Grass Point seems to be an excellent spot for birds too. There's always the chance of birds of prey (we only saw Buzzards this time around) but **Common Redpolls** were in the trees and we had great views of a **Cuckoo** calling from telegraph wires before relocating to the top of the pines right in front of us. Beautiful birds, though that's probably not an opinion shared by the abundant Meadow Pipits which these brood parasites are looking for here...

The boggy countryside here is also good for insects. Last year good numbers of the striking **Green Hairstreak** (the most widespread of the UK's hairstreak butterflies) were seen, but they were absent this year. However notable insects we did see included a superb **Narrow-bordered Bee Hawk-moth**, a day flying bumblebee mimic which typically hovers in front of plants as it nectars. We also found a teneral Golden-ringed Dragonfly still clinging to the larval case it had just emerged from, **Common Heath** and **Cinnabar** (both diurnal moths, the latter dependent on **Ragwort** which would soon be coming into flower) and 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, but all of us had excellent views.

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Personally I could spend all day at Grass Point (or at least this year until I found a butterwort – abundant last year they were nowhere to be seen this!), but this is not my trip of course, and it was time 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 cliff top 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.

For those determined to keep looking for wildlife an alternative is offered by the recently-planted Millennium Woodland by the tea rooms. Two of us opted for the woodland and while it's clearly not mature yet, it is a lovely and very relaxing spot. A selection of rare trees (including very range-restricted whitebeams) has been planted and a circular pond will undoubtedly attract dragonflies.

The lawns between the coach park (this is a very popular tourist attraction) were once again dotted with Heath Spotted-orchid (and a few Northern Marsh Orchid), and while not especially notable for many visiting birders the tall pines here do attract **Greenfinches**, which are not always easy to find on Mull.

While we don't tend to charge around too much on Mull, we had another stop planned for the day: the Lochbuie Standing Stone Circle and Castle Moy. As this entailed a fairly long drive down a narrow road we returned to the minibus and were soon on our way again.

The drive along Loch Buie can be very good for Otters, but – sadly – not today. The road passes through some excellent moorland which can be good for Hen Harrier but - sadly again – not today. We did find **Stonechat** here as well as plenty of 'Hoodies' and Buzzards but little else of note – except perhaps seeing at first hand just how rampant Rhododendron can be when it's 'released' into a fertile landscape with nothing to control it. Beautiful from a distance, the dark and depleted understorey demonstrated how effectively this Asian member of the *Ericaceae* (heathers) smothers native plantlife.

We soon reached the parking spot for the Standing Stone Circle, which is in grounds owned by Lochbuie House. The stones are accessed by walking across two 'boggy' fields – last year these had been dry and straightforward to cross, this year they were flooded and without a 4x4 almost impassable! Not at all what I was expecting...

Alternative access is via the beach and walking past Moy Castle (the ancestral home of Clan MacLaine, the castle was close to collapse at one point and is now scaffolded and structurally sound) and then through the farmyard attached to Lochbuie House. The shoreline here is good for coastal plants, but with the rain clouds building again it seemed better to press on to the Stones – stopping only for good views of a Spotted Flycatcher feeding in a patch of woodland.

The Stone Circle itself is not promoted on site and there is precious little information online to explain why it is there or who built it 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>)

We didn't stay long, stopping on the walk back to the minibus only to look at a small party of Gannets fishing offshore and a Common Sandpiper bobbing on nearby rocks. It was a good decision to make: we'd only got a few hundred yards up the road when the Heavens opened! It was dry again by the time we reached the hotel (such is the weather on Mull)...

### Day Five: Monday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Today we were visiting Iona, home of the Iona Community, the Iona Abbey, and perhaps the most accessible place in the UK to see **Corncrakes**. Once common in damp grasslands across Britain this elusive (and surprisingly small) rail has declined hugely following habitat loss and changes in farming practice. Difficult to see at the best of times, they can be near-impossible in heavy rain...what would the weather bring today? Nothing but sunshine as it turned out... One of our most sought-after birds of the trip (at least, 'still sought after' at this point) was Hen Harrier, that much maligned and iconic raptor that still survives in Scotland after being all but eradicated from the English grouse moors it was once so common over. The road we took wound through miles of what looked to all of us to be perfect habitat, but despite a couple of stops (and hundreds of Meadow Pipits, one of the harrier's principle prey items) we had no

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joy. We did eventually find our first **Whinchat** (and what was almost certainly a **Twite**, but the views were too brief to be certain) which was a small consolation. Hopefully the Corncrakes on Iona would be more co-operative (though I made sure to 'manage expectations' by quashing any thoughts of 'good views'...

The ferry 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) and - after making plans to meet up at the quayside restaurant for lunch for those who wanted to 'do their own thing' during our stay on Iona - the whole group headed off towards the banks of irises growing near the Abbey.

Almost immediately we heard a male calling from an overgrown enclosed 'paddock' adjacent to the stile leading into the Abbey grounds. It's very difficult to pin down a Corncrake as the odd 'ZZZPP ZZZPP' call it makes seems to move around all the time: what's happening is that the bird itself is creeping through the grass and turning its head as it calls. Clearly down by a ruined wall, though, which was acting as a sound board reflecting and amplifying what is already a surprisingly loud noise, we had our bird - but would we ever see it?

While I was still trying to calm down any thoughts of 'good views' or even 'photographic opportunities', the call began to move towards a fence line bordering the overgrown paddock and a much larger field. All of a sudden - as we will all probably remember until we're in our dotage - a Corncrake popped into the open and began to feed along the fence, walking straight towards us!

Cue a frenzy of camera work - well, sort of. Anyway, some ridiculously good images were taken. leaving several Wildlife Travellers perplexed at why I could possibly have thought there was any doubt that we wouldn't be adding Corncrake to our list of 'birds seen'. Once again, trust me - those were incredibly good views, my friends!

On the downside, while we were checking out 'back of the camera' shots a Herring Gull swooped down, spooking an adult Corncrake and grabbing a chick which it killed about 50yds from us. It was all over in an instant, and though disheartening it is of course a natural event (a subsequent search on the internet uncovered a video of a Herring Gull taking an adult on Iona just the day before).

While the Corncrake was the highlight - and despite waiting on hour for another view while most of the group visited the Abbey, we didn't see another one - 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), **Redshank**, **Duncock**, and **Starling**.

Having had such remarkable views of the Corncrake (there, I've said it again) we headed for lunch. With the weather still in our favour we made the decision to visit the other side of the island. While the coastline is pretty, Sand Martins are common, and there are Wheatears around, the machair here has been agriculturally 'improved' and grazed flat: not the botanical hotspot that machair can be elsewhere in the Hebrides.

Leaving Iona slightly earlier than planned allowed us time to have a quick look at Fidden, the rocky moorland just above Fionnphort. Our principle targets were again Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl, neither of which we'd managed to find so far. The area looks perfect for both (and for moorland plants - Heath Spotted-orchid were again everywhere), but - as we'd been told several times by those 'in the know' - this was a poor year and both eluded us again.

We did have views of another predator here though, one that we viewed with mixed feelings: an **American Mink**. Mink are not native British mammals and were of course brought to the UK to be farmed for their fur. Needing to eat one third of their body weight every day - and having no natural predators here - Mink have had a terrible impact on aquatic mammals and ground-nesting birds. Eradication programmes are underway on Mull, but these are strong, intelligent creatures and no doubt it will take a long while before the last one is removed...

At this point, then, we were still missing the all-important Common Butterwort - I mean of course Hen Harrier, though the plant was a niggling absentee... but David had been talking to local contacts and thought that we might stand a chance of finding a pair that were nesting and viewable (albeit at distance) about 30 minutes up the road back towards Salen and dinner.

Pulling into a layby opposite a magnificent vista of hills and bracken-clad moorland we gave ourselves one more chance - and within a few minutes we had both them floating low over the ground with typical harrier élan, the silvery-blue male and the brown female 'ringtail'! They may have been a long way off, but what gorgeous birds.



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With the midges starting to appear again, and a long and ultimately successful day behind us, after about twenty minutes we headed back to the hotel and another excellent dinner.

### Day Six: Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014

With warnings that the expected rain was finally on its way, we awoke to another 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, then Calgary, dip into the remarkable private garden of Lip na Cloiche, and end up at the Eas Fors waterfall (either so impressive or so uninspiring that its name actually translates as 'waterfall waterfall waterfall' – I prefer to assume the former).

Our first stop was along the narrow road from Salen to Dervaig. The road passes through a Forestry Commission plantation, and last year we found a small patch of open bog that looked pretty much like many patches we'd passed, but which was both accessible and – it turned out - contained some interesting insects. Parking by a small bridge, I volunteered to go ahead and check out the bog – given the soggy conditions at the stone circle no-one else came with me, but even from the bridge everyone saw Golden-ringed Dragonfly, Four-spotted Chaser, Large Red Damselfly, and our first **Beautiful Demoiselle**. The real prize, though, was missing: last year I'd found several **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries** here – another butterfly suffering long-term declines nationally – but sadly while Green-veined Whites were common the fritillary was nowhere to be seen. Timing is everything with butterflies, and it turned out this year emergence took place after we'd left.

Walking back to the minibus I discovered one more element of the natural history of Mull: deer ticks. Fascinating, disgusting, pointless, far tinier than you might think...take your pick, but there's no getting away from the fact that the little beasties are on the island and that if you wander into the bracken they're likely to find you. They are easily removed if you find them before they latch on, and not so difficult (if you're careful) if they do.

From here we moved onto a brief stop at the coastal village of Dervaig. A quirky bookshop enjoyed by earlier Wildlife Travel groups closed a few years ago after the owner died, so after a fairly quick stroll up to see 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 we drove on to our next stop (seeing a Cuckoo whip across the road en-route): the Calgary Arts Centre.

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 went for a quick stroll through the woods to see how many orchids were out. Worryingly, it appeared there were none at all...!

An absolutely beautiful orchid, the Sword-leaved Helleborine is much the same colour of the Ramsons that grow here in huge numbers, but are fairly obvious once you get your eye in. While this was only intended to be a brief look, it was fairly clear that this was not a helleborine year. While we saw a few woodland plants like **Enchanter's-nightshade**, **Herb-robert**, and Sanicle, I have to admit to a 'butterwort moment': where had the orchids gone?

The 'mystery' was solved over lunch, when the owner explained that the orchids had flowered early (hundreds of them). There were, she said, perhaps just three or four plants still flowering near the willow arch. They weren't easy to see, hidden away amongst the Ramsons, but they were there.

That sounded like a challenge. After an excellent lunch we headed back into the woodland to find those helleborines...

While I won't turn this report into an endless tale of helleborine-related derring-do, I can definitely say though that it was a moment of quite strong relief when we finally found three orchids: two pretty much 'gone over', and one with just enough of the creamy-white flowers and yellowish-orange spot at the base of the lip to show what a beautiful plant this is.

Above the woodland is a narrow strip of coastal meadow that runs parallel to the trees (with lovely views over Calgary Bay just below). The site can be walked over in a few minutes, but today it took a little longer as it was ablaze with Heath Spotted-orchids (ranging from almost unmarked pure white to deep pink with strong markings)

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and studded with the scarlet of Northern Marsh-orchids. There were also several **Fragrant Orchids**: some were only just beginning to flower, but one or two were fully out and the thick, sweet scent was evident from several feet away.

Leaving the meadow we cut back through the woods and disturbed a small black moth with a gleaming white fringe to the tip of 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.

With afternoon progressing, 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 is excellent for a variety of plants and insects, but despite some searching very little was added to our trip list except for **Common Storksbill** (which we must have seen before but not recognised). It was however in a far better state than the machair on Iona and would repay a longer more intensive search.

We again found an Eider crèche off the beach, and by the car-park is a small colony of Sand Martins that give excellent views from the side of the road. It's a lovely spot and were this a 'beach and flip-flops' sort of holiday somewhere you could easily wile away an afternoon – however, much as I like to relax like anyone else, we had other places to visit before the day was done.

Our next stop 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, 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. Of more interest are the female **Ashy Mining-bees** *Andrena cineraria* that are here in good numbers: I recorded one here last year which was apparently the first record of the species in Scotland since 2002 and this would appear to be a regular location for the species. 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 *Syrirta pipiens*.

This is also a reliable place for **Yellowhammer** (singing outside the garden, but clearly audible from within it) and at one point up to four Buzzards flew overhead.

Just a few miles further down the road is the Eas Fors waterfall which was our next stop. Last year we had good views of Dipper here, but sadly not this time around. The turf below the road is an excellent place for Heath Spotted-orchid (and Silverweed, Wild Thyme, and **English Stonecrop**), but with the island sinking under the weight of 'Heaths' this year the group were already satiated. The falls are absolutely reliable for one other plant we still needed to find: Common Butterwort. Incredibly none were on show!

Cutting short our stay at the falls gave us an extra hour that we hadn't 'budgeted' for. The scenery in this part of the island is absolutely spectacular and David suggested a stop by the 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 looked rather exciting for plants (you can guess what's coming). Nestled amongst the Heath Spotted-orchids and Tormentil was our only **Mountain Everlasting** of the trip, and – at last – Common Butterwort! Was this the highlight of the trip for everyone...er, no, it had been a very full six days and we'd already seen so many wonderful things, but I was pleased to see it, and the UK doesn't have that many insectivorous plants, so even the doubters amongst us were (I got the impression) mildly interested...

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 Seven: Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014**

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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 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 few more hours in the field before we leave the island though, and some excellent lie sites between Salen and Craignure. 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, and our first stop was a layby overlooking a shingle bank which gave us good views of Arctic Terns and a range of geese and ducks. To the right is a hillside that can be the hunting ground of Golden Eagles but low cloud obscured most of it on this occasion.

Our next stop – and as the cloud rolled in, our final one – was at Garmony Point. This used to be the best site for the tern colony, but they appear to have relocated just up the road, and our principal target was actually a pond about a twenty minute walk away where we hoped to find **Round-leaved Sundew**.

The walk more or less follows the coastline and goes through some beautifully boggy habitat full of cotton-grasses and a good selection of local plants. Common Heath moths are (indeed) common and we found our only **Latticed Heath** of the trip here. The pond, on the left as you walk beyond the Allt Ahdach Moine River (devotees of Star Trek may wonder whether this little river was named by Klingons!), is shallow, lined by Bog Myrtle and full of **Marsh Marigold** (or Kingcups as they're sometimes known) and the sundews – our second insectivorous plant species in two days - are easily found by looking along the edge.

A short walk in the heady, unpolluted air of Mull, our ears filled with the sound of Oystercatchers, terns, and calling Common Sandpipers, seemed a perfect way to end our trip...and as the rain began to begin in earnest, a lovely way to soak up the atmosphere of what really is a very special island indeed.

**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 helped by, I hope I'll have the pleasure of meeting you all again.**

