



In late June I was fortunate to be able to take some leave whilst in the far north of Scotland and after studying Gordon Hamlett's excellent guidebook and doing some research, decided the best plan would be to visit the Island of Handa.

Handa is a privately owned island, which is around 15 miles south of Cape Wrath, the most North Westerly point of mainland Scotland. The island and access to it is managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, who kindly gave me permission to reproduce their map:



Above: Handa map, courtesy of the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Further information can also be found on their website at www.swt.org.uk/visit/reserves/HAI/Handa%20Island/

The above map can also be found on the Scottish Wildlife Trust website along with further information.

Access to the island is by ferry from the village of Tarbet and I believe the boat runs Monday to Saturday (weather dependent) with first crossings around 9am and last returns around 5pm. In practice it looks like the ferry runs when there's nearly a boat full and comes back to the island when the wardens radio that there are a few people waiting to return.

I stayed the night before at a lovely B&B at Kylesku which had a scope in the conservatory to view seals in the loch below and had Ring Ouzel in the grounds the day before I arrived! At the bridge of Kylesku itself I saw Red-throated Divers in the narrows under the bridge and Black Guillemot.



Above: Kylesku

The drive from Kylesku to Tarbet for the ferry took about 20 minutes but is through the most fantastic scenery I've seen in the UK, that area of Scotland changes from green valley to sea loch to mountains, seemingly with every bend of the road. There was plenty of car parking at Tarbet and it was only a ten minute wait for the 09.15 ferry. The trip to the island itself is under ten minutes but on the way out I saw Black Guillemot, Red-throated Divers, Bridled Guillemot (which surfaced next to the boat) and Shag plus a number of skuas flying around the island itself.



Above: Common Guillemot of the bridled variety

As we approached the landing beach there were two Great Skua (Bonxies), fighting over some desiccated remains on the foreshore.



Above: Bonxie scraps

After landing we were all taken to the nearby shelter for a briefing on the island, the bird species and some “do’s and don’ts” – the main rule being not to stray from the paths. There was also a sightings board and the wardens were very helpful with potential locations for some of the wildlife and bird species.

Once the briefing was over I deliberately hung back to let the majority of the group get ahead, as I’d decided to take as long as I needed to and was in no rush. Within 50metres of leaving the shelter I saw my first Bonxies and when I reached the ruined village I stopped and took in the Arctic Skuas on the slopes beneath plus Red Grouse feeding in the bracken around the ruins. There had been light rain and as I sat by the ruined croft a dark phase Arctic Skua flew to within 10metres of me to drink from rainwater on some large slabs just beneath the path (I knew it had been a good idea to let the main party get away from me at that point!).



Above: Dark phase Arctic Skua

Following the path to the north west there were many Bonxies and Arctic Skuas, both on the ground and in flight and on climbing the first proper ridge I got excellent views of a pair of Arctics, one of which was a pale phase. There was no aggression from either species but I believe I was there prior to them starting to establish firm territories.



Above: Pale phase Arctic Skua

The path takes you across the island to the main sea bird cliffs at Puffin Bay and as you reach the cliff top there is a large freshwater pool set back about 100m from the cliff top path where I got good, if distant, views of groups of up to fifteen Bonxies which were bathing and preening. There was a brief view of a Red-throated Diver on the same pool, as it flew in from the sea and then moved to the near edge. I spent some time at that stretch of cliffs watching the many Fulmar and other seabirds in the large colony.



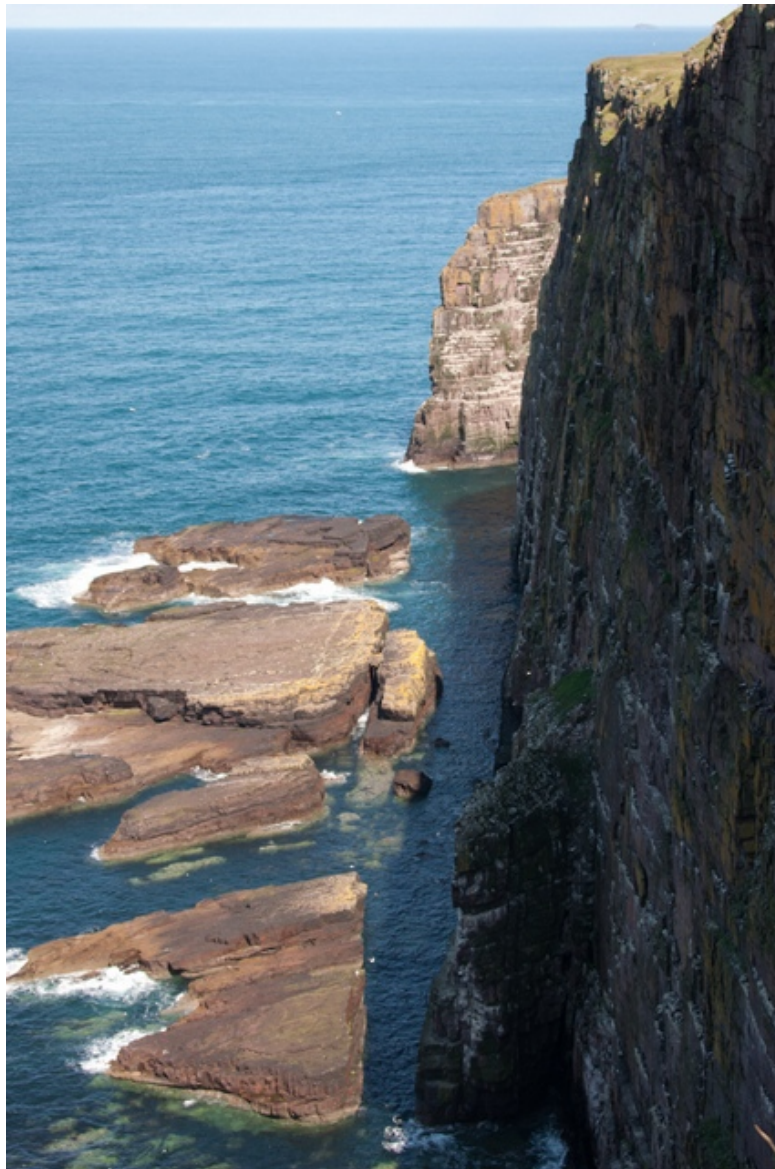
Above: Bonxie flock

Just to the west is the Great Stack which had Razorbills, Common Guillemots and Puffins in the burrows on the top of the stack. Just as I left the Great Stack I saw a Bonxie drop into a small freshwater pool about 15m from the path and I sat and watched as it preened, drank and rested – it was a fantastic setting for some photos and I even managed to drop back to my 300mm prime and take the 2x teleconverter off the camera: some of you may recognise this bird from the July 2011 Manchester Birding mystery bird competition!



Above: Bonxie drinking

My next stop was the cliffs just to the west of Sithean Mor where I watched Bonxies harrying the seabird colonies and a Peregrine take a Guillemot from wave height as it attempted to reach the sea to escape.



Above: Handa Cliffs

I also spent an hour trying for flight shots of skuas and Fulmar with limited success. I love watching Fulmar and at that point on the walk round the island they were using the thermals from the cliffs to glide effortlessly along the cliff tops and interestingly didn't seem to react to the skuas. Also along this section of the path I saw a pair of Hooded Crows and plenty of broken sea bird eggs which had been predated – presumably by gulls, skuas and hoodies alike.



Above: Fulmar

Following the path around to the south brings you back along the bottom of the area below the village which was where most of the Arctic Skuas were seen and also gives good views of some of the bays and beaches, which looked almost Caribbean – there were seals in the bays but I couldn't find any Otters.



Above: Handa beach

Closing the loop the path rejoins the ruined croft, at which point I saw more skuas and Wheatear amongst other species but there were by now (2pm or so) noticeably fewer skuas around – which led me to believe that the earlier in the day is better. Then a short wait for a boatload for the ferry followed but it's a fairly idyllic spot to wait.



Above: Handa landing area

Finally on the return trip there were close up views of Red-throated Diver – a species I’d only ever seen from about 200metres before.



Above: Red-throated Diver

Handa was an amazing experience and I can thoroughly recommend it in the right season, top tips would be:

Take plenty of water and whatever food you’ll need

- Ensure you have plenty of time – to walk straight round would probably take just over an hour but there’s so much to see I took six hours
- Take plenty of gear – it went from heavy rain to glorious sun on my visit and there’s no shelter at all
- Take binoculars rather than a telescope and plenty of memory cards for your camera

As a bonus I also saw a Black-throated Diver at a roadside loch as I travelled south to Ullapool, I sat in the car and waited for it to swim and fish right around the loch.

After half an hour or so I set off back on the road but as I got about a mile down the valley I thought “how often am I going to see a Black-throated Diver, I’m going to go back and watch it some more...” as I turned the car round I saw a distant raptor – thinking about whether this would be my twentieth Buzzard or “tourist eagle” I drove back towards the loch and the raptor, which was flying along a low ridge parallel with the road; when to my amazement I realised it was a Golden Eagle! I must have scanned 60 miles of distant ridges on my travels, without seeing an eagle and then suddenly one was 50metres over my head. Light conditions were horrific for photos but I managed a couple of shots of the eagle and the Hoodie which was mobbing it from time to time. I moved along the road to stay in front of the eagle and ended up with a Golden Eagle over the ridge behind me, and the Black-throated Diver on the loch in front of me, a very memorable end to a fantastic day!



Above: Black-throated Diver



Above: Golden Eagle

Thanks must go to the Scottish Wildlife Trust and their wardens on Handa, to Gordon for his excellent book which inspired my trip and to Marcus of ebirders for some last minute local information by text!



Above: Golden Eagle with Hooded Crow in attendance

References:

Best Birdwatching Sites in the Scottish Highlands, Buckingham Press, Gordon Hamlett
Scottish Wildlife Trust: <http://www.swt.org.uk/visit/reserves/HAI/Handa%20Island/>
Newton Lodge: <http://www.newtonlodge.co.uk/>

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www.manchesterbirding.com