



Background:

I'd visited Mull as a child in 1979 (no Sea Eagles back then!) and even though I was only 8 years old, had vivid memories of some of the scenery and of Red-throated Divers calling as they landed on a secluded Loch. I've always wanted to return but as my wife does not enjoy the normal Scottish weather it has taken to the year of a certain landmark birthday that I have been able to visit the island again. As most will appreciate combining a 'family' holiday (even a thinly disguised one!) with a birding trip is not easy and I had to balance the requirements (usually food or toilets) of three children ageing 7, 12 and 20, as well as my wife!

I've attempted to structure this report so that someone who is not familiar with the island can use the information to plan a trip to see key species. I would advise they do some planning and gather as much information from the internet and written text as possible. I found www.mullbirds.com very useful and I also purchased the "Isle of Mull Bird Report and Species List Issue 8" (see previous website for details) and "Birdwatching on Mull and Iona" written by David Sexton and Philip Snow. Both were excellent sources of information. I also marked up a Mull Leisure and Tourist map with all the prime spots and key species (nothing like being prepared!). You may ask why I didn't employ the services of one of the many guide companies on the island, which I'm told are very good, but it was just personal preference. I take a great deal more satisfaction from finding bird species myself. For the same reason I didn't visit the Loch Frisa Sea Eagles (although if I hadn't found any by the fourth day no doubt I would have done!) Whilst I have included some photos, I do not have the equipment to take decent bird shots, they simply serve as decoration to the text! All were taken on a Canon G11 compact.

28th May

We stopped, on route to Oban, at the Cruachan Power Station visitor centre on the A85. This is on the shore of Loch Awe. Out on the Loch was a Red-throated Diver with a male Pied Flycatcher singing in the car park. There was an occupied Osprey nest on the far side of the Loch but unfortunately no birds were in residence at the time of our visit, we had to press on to get the ferry. A quick scan of the high ridge of Ben Cruachan behind the car park produced our first eagle, a Golden, hanging in the wind. As the A85 wound its way along the Loch Etive shoreline groups of Eider with young were scattered along the edge of the loch. In the driving rain a quick look in Oban harbour produced a few smart Black Guillemot scattered amongst the boats. On the ferry, with the rain not helping visibility, the occasional Black Guillemot and Gannet was seen between Oban and Craignure. On arrival at Craignure ferry terminal there were Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher and a Red-throated Diver to welcome us.



Above: Loch Don

We had booked a cottage on the Grasspoint Road, just around the corner from Lochdon, named Ardnadrochet. As we approached we were greeted by a Short-eared Owl hunting the fields adjacent to the loch. A couple of Red Deer hinds put their heads up warily watching, even though there was some distance between us. The cottage was already home to breeding Great Tit, Swallow and Pied Wagtail.

An evening drive up to Grass Point produced close views of Whinchat and Short-eared Owl. Numerous Meadow Pipits, Willow Warblers and a couple of soaring Buzzards were seen. Good views were had of two Cuckoos, a male calling and displaying in flight chasing another. More, very nervous, Red Deer hinds were watched melting away into the woodland.

29th May

A planned drive to Tobermory, for a supermarket visit, turned into an eight hour exploration of the east coast of the island, stopping at every conceivable place (mainly all the Forestry Commission sites) and trying to avoid using the 'passing places' as viewpoints!! Target species for the day were White-tailed Sea Eagle and Otter plus any Cetaceans in the Sound of Mull would have been a nice added bonus!

First stop Craginure Bay, viewed from the ferry car park where a couple of cracking male Eider with Herring Gull loitering. A Common Seal's head appeared and then disappeared a number of times whilst it watched us from off-shore. Further stops at the end of Craginure Golf Course, Garmony and Fishnish all looked promising but only produced Oystercatcher, Curlew and more Herring Gull. The weather was not the best with strong winds whipping up the sea and alternating driving rain showers with occasional periods of blazing sun!

Salen Bay held Shag, Great Black-backed Gull, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Common and Herring Gull. A handful of Common Seal were hauled out on the rocks in the bay. All the literature stated it was a great place for Otter but not today!

Hooded Crow were ubiquitous, the occasional Carrion Crow and plenty of Buzzard were all in evidence along the east coast. Tree Pipit were heard singing, between showers, close to Ardnacross and a quick stop (reconnaissance mission!) at Aros Park produced a Cormorant on the lake.



Above: Tobermory

Tobermory Bay held more Herring Gull and a couple of Shag, whilst a Chiffchaff sang behind the old church. A decent, if slightly pricey, late lunch/early tea at Café Fish (clue's in the title!) was followed by the planned visit to the Co-Op.

Taking the road out towards Glen Gorm north west of Tobermory we passed (presumably the only) landfill site which held the usual Carrion and Hooded Crow with plenty of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull. Two Ravens also put in an appearance. Target species (according to the literature) for Glengorm were Hen Harrier and both eagles. Turning a corner in the road we had a tantalizingly brief glimpse of a female Hen Harrier before she disappeared over the conifer tree line. Buzzard and Hooded Crow were plentiful. Thinking that may have been our chance with the harriers we carried on and turned a further corner to see a stunning silver male floating down the side of a tree lined valley. The male Hen Harrier crossed over the road in front of us and continued to float over the forest. A Mistle Thrush sang from the top of the nearest conifer. Continuing down the road to Glengorm Castle produced a long distance and unsatisfactory view of a Golden Eagle.

Turning the car around and travelling the whole length of the east coast produced nothing new except a singing Blackcap at a toilet stop! Turning onto the narrow Grass Point road a 100 yards from the cottage a Golden Eagle surfed the wind on the ridge to the east of Loch a Ghleannain. A Short-eared Owl quartered the fields adjacent to Loch Don.

Later that evening another stunning male Hen Harrier slid past the Ardnadrochet cottage. A 10.30pm walk (still with the light) up on the adjacent ridge produced two hunting Short-eared Owls plus a number of very wary Red Deer hinds. A Cuckoo called nearby and a Grasshopper Warbler started to reel as the gloom descended.

At the end of the first full day on Mull the number of bird species totaled 47, but no White-tailed Sea Eagle or Otter yet!

30th May

Opening the cottage curtains a pair of Linnet were feeding on the road outside with a pair of Siskin for company.

Turning left onto the A849 from the Grass Point road immediately brought views of hunting Short-eared Owl and female Hen Harrier. Singing Skylark, Wheatear and Stonechat were numerous adjacent to the road.

At the north end of Loch Spelve a single Mute Swan fed in the shallows, Bullfinch and Long-tailed Tit were calling as we drove through the woodland at Strathcoil and two Ravens passed overhead. The shoreline adjacent to the road running alongside the loch held Turnstone and our first Otter sighting (cue mad scramble in the back of the car by wife and two daughters!). We watched for a while as the animal fed amongst the sea-weed. An absolutely stunning summer plumage Great Northern Diver then slid by. Shag and Red-breasted Merganser were also close by on the loch. A distant Golden Eagle drifted over and perched statuesquely on the one of the ridges of Creach Beinn above the loch. Its great outline etched clearly against the skyline.

Further down the road, half way along Loch Uisg (just to the west of the small roadside cottage) we watched a pair of Golden Eagle interacting and breaking branches from small trees on the hillside. The sun was out and the golden mane on the birds could clearly be seen. A Peregrine passed high overhead. Close to the standing stone circle approaching Lochbuie another Golden Eagle was up over the summit of Ben Buie. Carrying on down to the beach at Lochbuie another bird passed over the ridges on the west shore of the loch. Clearly a good area for eagles this!



Above: Loch Buie

On the beach, in front of the remnants of Moy Castle, were a Whimbrel, seven Ringed Plover, two Dunlin and numerous Common Sandpiper and Oystercatcher. Red-breasted Merganser cruised offshore with Song Thrush, Meadow Pipit, Blackbird, House Sparrow and Wheatear all in the gorse and short grass at the head of the beach. A redpoll called from a wire fence and Lapwing wheeled above the fields behind the few cottages. Superb views of a feeding Otter were had from the small island in front of the castle ruins.



Above: Loch Spelve from Croggan

Returning to the road we took the fork to Croggan which follows the southern shoreline of Loch Spelve. A raft of twenty Eider were close to the fish farms in the loch, with many Herring and Common Gull perched on the floating cages. Close to the shore an immaculate Black Guillemot fished.

An evening walk around Grass Point was enjoyable with well over one hundred terns and numerous Guillemots out in the Firth of Lorn. The birders staying in Grass Point Cottage pointed out a White-tailed Eagle that had just flew in and perched in a tree further into Loch Don. Typically our views would have been closer if we'd have been on the hillock behind our cottage! The immense bird took off and glided over the tree line out of view.

We finished day two on 71 species.

31st May

Leaving the cottage at Loch Don, with a Cuckoo passing over, we travelled left on the Glen More road. Stopping at the small car park in the glen above Loch Sguabain a Golden Eagle rose above the ridge followed shortly after by a second bird.

At the end of Glen More taking the B8035 we had Otter briefly on the north shore of Loch Scridain. Birds in the area included Buzzard, Carrion Crow, Heron, Mistle Thrush with Oystercatcher and Curlew on the shoreline.

Where the turn off to Burg (The Wilderness) is on the B8035, there is a parking lay by on the right where clear views of a White-tailed Sea Eagle's nest, in the conifer forest to the north, can be had. On arrival both birds were away from the nest but two three weeks old chicks could be seen. After a short wait the male and female could be seen circling further down the valley. The female (complete with a green tag on its right wing) dropped to the nest and proceeded to feed the chicks. Two Golden Eagles were in the area too with a pair of Buzzards mobbing. A Sparrowhawk passed surprisingly close to the nest.

Moving further down the B8035 a Rock Pipit was on the shore of Loch na Keal. Turning left at Salen and then again at Aros onto the Dervaig road we saw Raven, Buzzard and Tree Pipit.

Turning right at Dervaig onto the B8073 we watched Red-breasted Merganser, Little Grebe, Great Black-backed Gull and Buzzard at Loch Meadhoin (one of the three small Mishnish lochs).



Above: Aros Park

A walk around Aros Park, just south of Tobermory, produced Coal and Great Tit, Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Siskin, Song Thrush and Chiffchaff. Out on the sea a pair of Black Guillemot fished.

Day three finished with 75 species.

1st June

Awaking to foul weather, low cloud, hard driving rain, we headed to the north west corner of the island. At Killiechronan, at the head of Loch na Keal were Raven and Great Black-backed Gull. Around the loch on the B8073 a pair of Rock Dove were in the fields at Oskamull. Further round at Ballygown two male Yellowhammer were attempting to out-sing each other. Another pair were by the road at Burg (we didn't have Yellowhammer at any other location on the island).

On the machair behind Calgary Sands, banks of preening gulls consisting of mainly Herring and Lesser Black Backed were sat with the occasional Great Black-backed too. A Gannet also flew around the bay. Continuing to Dervaig where the River Bellart falls into the loch (Poll Athach) a pair of Goosander hunted in the shallows.

At the meeting point (car park) on the B8073 for the Loch Frisa Sea Eagles a pair of Hen Harrier tumbled above the heather with a quick food drop before the female disappeared into its depths and the male over a ridge.

Returning south on the A849 we stopped for a walk around Garmony Point (close to the Fishnish ferry) where there were Arctic Tern, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Rock Pipit, Common Sandpiper (with young), Common and Herring Gull, Tree Pipit, Red-breasted Merganser, redpoll and Pied Wagtail, both the latter with young. A mixed flock of feral Greylags (which are all over the island) and Canada Geese were also in the area. A couple of herons fished in the shallows with two female Eider and young swimming offshore. A Sedge Warbler sang in the willows on the marsh.

At the end of day four 80 species had been seen.

2nd June

Taking the A849 west at Loch Beg, Sand Martin wheeled over the marsh and another stunning male Hen Harrier quartered the ground. Further down the road seven Black-headed Gulls (our only ones of the trip) washed in the shallows with Ringed Plover dotted around the shore.



Above: Loch Scridain

Further down the road on Loch Scridain were Great Black-backed Gull, Eider, Shag and Greylag Geese. Willow Warbler sang from the wires, Common Seal basked in the sunshine on the rocks offshore, Buzzard soared overhead and a Stonechat called by the roadside.

Taking the turning off the A849 to Scoor, Loch Assapol held Great Black-backed Gull, Little Grebe and heron. Martins and Swallows flew over the water, a Curlew called on the moor joined by a Cuckoo calling from the conifers. In the fields adjacent to the (very rough) track were Whinchat and Lapwing. A Kestrel drifted over the moorland putting up Meadow Pipit and Wheatear. Stonechat seemed to be everywhere.

Returning to the A849, in Bunessan Bay, Rock Pipit, Greylag Geese and heron were all foraging with a Buzzard passing overhead. From Fionnphort, looking across to Iona, Gannet, Shag, Raven, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls were all in the Sound of Iona. Taking the road out to Fidden, just before the campsite, Redshank, Rock Pipit, Lapwing (with chicks) and Ringed Plover all were in the area. Hooded Crow and Herring Gull kept a watchful eye for stragglers.

Returning on the A849 and taking the Uisken road, Rock Dove, Linnet and Buzzard were all seen. On the beach at Uisken Rock Pipit and a White Wagtail were feeding amongst the seaweed on the shore. From the eastern end of the beach, looking out over the sea, Kittiwake, Shag, Razorbill and Great Black-backed Gull were all seen. A pleasant hour of sea-watching produced a splendid adult summer plumage Pomerine Skua (with full spoons!) drifting over the water occasionally crashing in on a party of auks sat lazing on the sea. A Manx Shearwater appeared and landed on the sea amongst a flock of Guillemot. A number of Black

Guillemot were dotted around and a Razorbill bobbed off shore. A pair of Rock Dove passed over my watch point. Returning on the A849 a pair of Red-throated Diver were by the southern shore of Loch Scridain. Travelling through Glen More a Peregrine soared over the Caladoir River. A Cuckoo called as we travelled deeper into the Glen. Turning onto the Grass Point road the usual Short-eared Owl hunted over the fields.

An evening viewing of Loch Don produced a pair of Mute Swan, two Red-breasted Merganser and Common Gull. Around the cottage a Song Thrush sang with Meadow Pipit, Cuckoo and redpoll all calling. The viewing was cut short as the midges started to bite!

Day five ended with 87 species seen.

3rd June

On a very hot day with clear blue skies, a male Reed Bunting sang from a branch as we turned off the Grass Point road. Travelling through Glen More we had Golden Eagle again over the peaks.



Above: Glen More

On the road adjacent to Loch Scridain a brief glimpse of a splash in the water below was followed by a quick braking maneuver, abandoning the car in the verge we all ran back down the road. Three Common Dolphin were hunting fish below our viewpoint. One of them caught a fish and then continued playing with it for a further couple of minutes, flicking it in the air and chasing after it. The three animals were watched breaching, doing backward flips and rolls, quite a performance (this made the wife's holiday!). A Red-throated Diver swam close to the dolphins and we were joined at our vantage point by a Spotted Flycatcher.

Taking the ferry over to Iona, from Fionnphort, a flock of Kittiwake fed in the Sound of Iona. At the landing on Iona we were met by Jackdaw. In the grass field outside the Heritage Centre (opposite the hotel organic garden) a Corncrake called for a frustratingly short period. Rooks called in the trees behind. A climb up Dun then followed, with lunch on the top affording a single Twite which fed quietly on the grassy slopes.



Above: Iona

From the beach at the northern end of the island a Common Seal was bobbing in the water with Common Tern, Shag and the usual gulls accompanying it. Small flocks of Razorbill and Kittiwake fed off shore with Ringer Plover and seven pristine summer plumage Sanderling running up and down the beach.

Sitting having (very good) afternoon tea in the St. Columba Hotel garden a pair of Rock Dove passed overhead. Another look for Corncrake at the rear of the fire station produced only a Sedge Warbler.

We were met at the ferry landing point at Fionnphort by a very confiding Grey Seal, presumably looking for cast offs from one of the small fishing boats moored up.

At the end of the last full day of our holiday 93 species had been seen (plus Corncrake had been heard!)

4th June

A quick walk around Garmony before the ferry departure produced Eider, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Arctic Tern, Shag, Pied Wagtail, Sedge Warbler and Cuckoo. Pulling up at the Craignure ferry terminal an eagle was just disappearing over the tree line mobbed by a crow. From the wing width it was probably a Sea Eagle, fitting that it should be the last bird seen before we departed the island.

On the ferry to Oban there was plenty of activity in the Firth of Lorn with terns, gulls, rafts of Guillemot, the occasional Black Guillemot, Shag and two Red-throated Diver. A few seal heads could be seen bobbing in the water.

A detour on the return journey and stop off at Knotdale did not produce any Beaver but did get the bonus of a pair of Osprey circling our heads!

All in all a superb trip and even better my two daughters want to go back next year !

Nick Hilton, June 2011

www.manchesterbirding.com



Birds everywhere!