

OUTER HEBRIDES, UISTS AND BARRA, May 2009

by Simon Warford



Above: Seawatching at Aird an Runair, Balranald (Mark Rigby)

Participants: Simon Warford, Simon Johnson, Melanie Beckford, Mark Rigby

Sites visited:

North Uist: Balranald RSPB, Committee Road, Griminish, Berneray, Loch Sandary, Grenitote.

Benbecula: Stinky Bay, Coot Loch & various other Lochs.

South Uist: Loch Eynort, Grogarry Lodge, Loch Druidibeg, Ardivachar, Howmore, Ardvule, Loch Skiport, Loch Thallen.

Barra: Brehvig, Northbay, Loch Tangusdale, Eoligarry.

Daily Diary:

22nd May: An overnight drive saw us pick up Wood Warbler, Cuckoo, Black Throated Diver, Greenshank, nesting Common Scoters, Mealy Redpoll and an Otter before we had even arrived at Uig for the 9.30am ferry. On the 2 hour ferry crossing we managed to see 2 Great Skua, 40+ Manx Shearwater, Great Northern Diver and several Puffins amongst the many commoner seabirds. On arrival at Lochmaddy we wasted no time in heading to Benbecula to try for the Red Necked Phalaropes. On route we saw a pair of Red Throated Divers on a small roadside loch in fine breeding plumage. Unfortunately we drew a blank with the phalaropes but saw our first male Hen Harrier of the trip. We then went back to North Uist and to the Committee Road which runs through the centre of North Uist. Here in the space of an hour we saw 2 Golden Eagles, 2 male and a female Hen Harrier, Arctic Skua, Golden Plover and Short Eared Owl. Nearby at Griminish we saw another Golden Eagle, 2 Short Eared Owls, 6+ Little Terns fishing in a tidal channel, another pair of Red Throated Divers and enjoyed watching 2 Otters for a while catching fish and then relaxing on a grassy bank. Finally we headed to Balranald RSPB, probably the easiest place to see Corncrakes in the British Isles, and we were not to be disappointed. We soon located one sat in full view on a low wall calling but unfortunately it disappeared quickly before one of our party could see it. However by the visitor centre at Balranald another calling bird was quickly located with its head pointing skywards allowing us all to get some good views. Other birds seen at Balranald included Whooper Swan, Twite & 2 Purple Sandpipers. Nearby we saw another 7 Whooper Swans on Loch Sandary and managed 2 more Short Eared Owls on the way back to our accommodation.



Corncrakes at Balranald and Otters at Griminish (Mark Rigby)

23rd May: With steady rain falling we decided to head to Berneray where we saw both a drake Garganey and a Little Stint that were seen there the previous day both on Loch Brusda along with 2 Cuckoo's along the roadside. More were heard from the Corncrakes but they remained elusive in the strong wind. We then saw 2 Golden Eagles from our cottage window as we dropped our things off late morning. As the rain stopped we promptly set off out again up to the sea watching point at Aird an Runair at Balranald. While on route we received a text from a local birder which read "80 Long Tailed Skua's in one flock over Aird an Runair late morning". We quickly headed to the headland to be greeted by delighted birders leaving who had seen over 300 Long Tailed Skua's in only 2 hours! Trying not to dwell on our mistake of not getting there earlier we quickly began sea watching. In the next 4 hours we managed to see a magnificent 18 Long Tailed Skuas, 4 Pomarine Skua, 9 Arctic Skua and 1 Great Skua. Also seen were 10 Purple Sandpipers and several summer plumaged Great Northern Divers. After the excitement of seeing some of the spectacular Skua passage we headed to a site at the north end of North Uist to see a Golden Eagle eerie where we got reasonable views of an adult bird feeding a single chick while the other adult was flying around over a hilltop. As there are no cliffs on North Uist the nest was situated on the side of a small hill. We ended the day on Committee Road where we saw a male Merlin sat on a post and 4 more Short Eared Owls.



The bay at Aird an Runair, Balranald (Simon Warford)



Short Eared Owl & Rock Doves (Mark Rigby)

24th May: With more windy weather we headed out for an early morning sea watch at Aird an Runair which turned out to be disappointing as the wind was in slightly the wrong direction. Nothing of note was seen and not even any Corncrakes were heard so we headed back for breakfast. We then headed to Benbecula to try again for the Phalaropes but still no sign although one of us did manage a brief Spotted Redshank. So we headed off to South Uist for the afternoon calling at Loch Skipport first we saw a pair of Hen Harriers and a Great Skua. At Grogarry Lodge a Cuckoo was seen in a walled garden. At Ardvule all we could find were several Whimbrel and a few Arctic Skuas. With the sun now shining our next port of call was Loch Eynort to look for raptors, a large sea loch stretching almost across the whole width of South Uist and opening out into the Minch. It wasn't long until an adult White Tailed Eagle appeared halfway down the loch, we watched it for a several minutes and it then flew slowly across to where we were sat and then proceeded to fly right over our heads allowing us to obtain some amazing views. Shame our photographer had left his camera in the car thinking that an Eagle wouldn't come close enough! Also here we saw a pair of Red Throated Divers, several Black Guillemot with Chiffchaff and Cuckoo in the small plantation. On the journey back to the cottage we saw the usual 3-4 Short Eared Owls.



View of Loch Skipport (left) and View of Loch Eynort (right), South Uist (Simon Warford)

25th May: An early morning start for Barra produced another 4 Short Eared Owls on route for the ferry at Eriksay. Another quick look for the Phalaropes en route proved fruitless. At Eriksay we were treated to a stunning Black Throated Diver in summer plumage next to the harbour wall. On the short ferry journey we counted around 18 Great Northern Divers, many in full summer plumage and around 25 Black Guillemots. Barra is a beautiful little island with stunning scenery which we enjoyed perhaps more so than the bird life we managed to find on the island. Despite a good search of the two sites with mature trees the best we could find was 3 Crossbill, Whitethroats, Goldcrests and a 2 Cuckoo's. We returned to South Uist around 4pm and called in at Loch Thallen on the way back north. Here we saw an Otter running across a field being harassed by several species of wader until it disappeared into a reedbed. We decided to stop off at Loch Eynort again in the hope of seeing some more raptors. After a few minutes of scanning the area Melanie found an Aythya duck on the far side of the loch resting in the seaweed. Unsure of the identification at that distance we all got on the bird and soon agreed it was in fact a drake Ring Necked Duck! We watched the bird for a while and it became more active and eventually started feeding. A short while later it flew and landed right next to where we had parked! We walked back to the car park and we were treated to some excellent views. If accepted by the Outer Hebrides Bird Group this will be around the 24th record of this species for the islands. As we were about to leave a lovely male Hen Harrier came drifting by and a calling Cuckoo was perched on a fence post. Our final visit of the day was to the river mouth at Howmore where we had our only Sand Martin of the trip. Not much else was seen apart from large numbers of Dunlin and Sanderling which seem to gather in their hundreds at this time of year on their way north. Only 2 Short Eared Owls were noted on the way back to the cottage!



Top left: West coast of Barra (Simon Warford); Top right and bottom left: Black Throated Diver and drake Ring-necked Duck (Mark Rigby)

26th May: With another westerly wind blowing we made a very early start for an hour or two's sea watching before breakfast at Aird an Runair. A quick stop at Balranald RSPB visitor centre on route enabled us to see two more Corncrakes including a bird which we watched moving through the grass and then ran across the road right in front of us. Upon arrival at Aird an Runair we found an immature Iceland Gull feeding along the shoreline with other gulls, this was turning out to be a much better early morning already. Off the headland two of us managed brief views of a Basking Shark but unfortunately it quickly disappeared in the choppy sea. With just a handful of Arctic Skuas offshore we decided to head back for breakfast. Just as we started to walk back to the car 2 Long Tailed Skuas flew suddenly appeared flying close inshore past the headland. Then not for the first time just as we got back to the car a stunning Pomarine Skua flew right past us over the beach, what an excellent couple of hours.



Pomarine Skua and Corncrake running across the road, Balranald (Mark Rigby)

After breakfast we decided to try yet again for the Phalaropes on Benbecula. With still no sign of the birds on their favoured Loch just as we were about to leave a birder pulled up in a car and informed us that 2 Red Necked Phalaropes were in fact feeding in nearby Stinky Bay! After a quick drive we were rewarded with good views of a female Phalarope feeding with Sanderling on the shoreline. There was no sign of the male bird but we were more than happy to finally catch up with this cracking little wader. A quick visit to Ardivachar saw us add Bar Tailed Godwit and Knot to our trip list. We then decided to head back to North Uist. While driving near Grenitote we spotted an Eagle low down being mobbed by Buzzards and gulls. After an emergency stop we watched the immature White Tailed Eagle, complete with yellow wing tags, attempting to catch a Greylag Goose on a small loch.

We watched it for about half an hour as it was continually being mobbed by 2 Buzzards, offering us a truly incredible encounter. A final visit to the Golden Eagle eerie confirmed parent and chick present and correct. A male Hen Harrier was seen hunting nearby. To end our trip we decided on a last visit to Balranald. A quick look on the sea produced 4 more Pomarine Skuas flying north. Our last significant sighting was of a pair of Whooper Swans with 7 cygnets on a roadside loch within the reserve. The second year running they have bred at Balranald.



Top left: Red-necked Phalarope; Top right: White-tailed Eagle being mobbed by Hooded Crow; Bottom left: Whooper Swan family (Mark Rigby)

27th May: A look around Lochmaddy prior to departing only produced Common and Arctic Terns. By 1.30pm we had arrived back on the mainland.



View from Grenitote, North Uist (left by Simon Warford) and sunset on North Uist (right by Mark Rigby) where even in May you can be birding till 10.00pm!

Simon Warford, May 2009

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