



Our crazy few days on the Uists, a trip arranged by the Bolton RSPB with great thanks to Steve Settle who did a lot of planning and thanks to Simon Warford for tips passed on to help us on our way. To be honest the weather wasn't on our side but that wasn't going to dampen our spirits

There were ten of us going up to Oban to catch the ferry across in three cars but then at Oban we squeezed into two cars with five in each to save ferry money. We stayed in a hotel in Benbecula, the central island, so we could then spread our wings and see all of North and South Uist as this was not a crazy bird ticking trip but more an exploration of these magical islands. On the ferry across we managed to see, lots of Manx Shearwater, Fulmar, Kittiwake, two Great Skua and a few Puffins and the usual auks.



Manx Shearwater (left) and Great Skua (right)



Fulmar

We were up at six every morning and out all day till dusk, squeezing in a bit of food where possible and if your really lucky maybe a bathroom break. Usually the latter tended to be any bush, which is not easy as there are not many bushes on the islands!

One of the highlights was seeing two Golden Eagles sat on and near the nest together at the RSPB watch point near Griminis Pier on North Uist. The watch point is about a mile away and set up by the RSPB to watch from a safe distance, still a great thing to see though.

The one thing they don't tell you about the Uists however is the wind is non directional. You can't leave your scope alone for a second or it will get blown over and with the price of scopes these days you've got to be careful. It seems to blow straight through cars when you stand behind them and I've never been anywhere so windy. Using your scope is really hard work sometimes (providing it hasn't already fallen over!), you hide behind a wall and you're still in the wind. Also, never open the car door without gripping it tightly; otherwise it can literally get blown off. It's crazy, what a place!

On our first trip off the ferry to the hotel we were treated to a fantastic male Hen Harrier that actually flew through someone's back garden. Imagine a Hen Harrier on your garden list! We were off to a good start.



Hen Harrier, passing in the right place it seems!

Committee Road gave us great views of more Hen Harriers with a male and female doing a fantastic aerial food pass Also seen were Hooded Crows, a low flying Cuckoo and great views of a Short-eared Owl.



Above from top to bottom: Hooded Crow and Short-eared Owl with prey

On route to Loch Eynort we had a Merlin and once there we saw a Golden Eagle being continuously mobbed by two Ravens and also a distant White-tailed Eagle, our first Red-throated Divers and Grey Plovers, Otters and one Jonathon Platt. I seem to bump into Jonathon in the most random of places! A nice passing rarity on the island, a Lesser Yellowlegs was found by Jonathon, our very own Manchester birder. Well done that man! He did try to call me but with no 'phone reception on the island I missed the call but did later speak to him and we all managed to catch up with the Lesser Yellowlegs on the next loch at Baile Gharbhaidh where it had to duck and hide from a hunting Peregrine. This also proved to be a good place to catch up with common species that aren't particularly common on the Uists. There aren't many trees but the plantation there gave us some uncommon Uist birds like Willow Warblers, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Dunnock, Robin, Stonechats and Whitethroat. It might seem strange that these species appear uncommon on the Uists but we did not see any of these birds anywhere else!



Lesser Yellowlegs, a nice Transatlantic rarity

Stinky Bay lived up to its name and en route we picked up Golden Plover, Turnstone, Eider, Whimbrel, Curlew, Common Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, also a few Arctic and Little Terns too. There was another bay we visited a few times we could not pronounce that had the same perky smell. We simply named it 'even stinkier bay'.

During our stay a pod of Pilot Whales became trapped in the bay and people were worried they would become beached. Luckily all but one whale managed to get out safely but it was a strange sight to see so many whales in such a small area. Our small claim to fame was that some of our Bolton RSPB group ended up on the BBC news, mistaken as islanders when the camera panned across the bystanders looking over the whales. I won't mention Holly's name to avoid embarrassment!

Balranald RSPB was superb, and the sea watching point of Aird an Ronair was a fantastic place. Here we had great views of Arctic, Great, Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas. There were nesting Arctic Terns, Gannets and Fulmars. This site is also a great place for Corncrakes and although it seems they were hiding from the wind whilst we were there we did pick up a consolation Corn Bunting.



Gannet



Dark-phase Arctic Skua



Long-tailed Skua (left) and Pomarine Skua (right)



'fully spooned' Pomerine Skua

It all seemed to blur into one though as the whole islands are just full of lochs and you can find birds all the time on small unknown areas. Whilst I can vividly remember seeing our first Great Northern and Black-throated Divers I genuinely can't say where there were! Being on the Uists for me is a little like that. It's all a bit much to take in and four days is nothing more than a mad weekend. It just flies by.

I can't tell you how many times we searched for Corncrakes. The best spot for them at Balranald was too windy and they were not playing. There were lots of fields with calling crakes in them but could we see them? They were hard work, its one thing to hear them and another to actually see them and if you want to try to get a photo, well put on the lottery money and take a lucky gamble. I never managed it! Luckily on our last six o'clock morning jaunt we did all manage to see one together, a nice end to our trip.

My favourite self-found bird was a Glaucous Gull, a proper white winger. Such a powerful gull, effortless in its flight and poise and with such good colour. It made all the nearby Herring Gulls looks really drab sat next to them, what a great bird.



Above: second calendar year Glaucous Gull

On the way back home we went via a different route on the ferry due to the wind but we managed to add to our lists seeing dolphins by the boat, a Sooty Shearwater plus more Great Skuas, Gannets, various auks, Fulmars and some large flocks of Manx Shearwaters.

What a trip, what a place, I can't wait to go again. An eleven hundred mile round trip during which Terry our driver and all round good guy managed to fall and almost break his hand yet keep driving. He never said a word until someone noticed his hand swelling a little. What a trooper. Thanks Terry.

Dennis Atherton, May 2011

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