



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT MULL & IONA 25TH JUNE – 1ST JULY 2018

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MONDAY 25TH JUNE – *Fine and sunny in light winds, 23C*

After departing our Norfolk base yesterday afternoon and driving as far as Doncaster for an overnight stop, we set off early this morning at 0730 for the remainder of our journey north, collecting our final two guests in Penrith en route. The journey was uneventful, and the scenery beautiful in the superb weather as we wound our way up the west side of Loch Lomond and beyond Tyndrum to Oban. The ferry departed just before 1600, and we enjoyed a fine sail across with great views across to Morvern and up Loch Linnhe to Ben Nevis in the distance. Birds were fairly sparse on the crossing, though we noted a large number of Kittiwakes and a few Shags resting on the skerries in the Sound of Mull and some nice views of **Black Guillemots**. Once in Craignure, we set off down past Lochdon and Inverlussa and on through Glen More towards the Ross of Mull peninsula which would be our home for the next six nights. Rather predictably, it wasn't possible to go through our first afternoon on Mull without seeing a **Hen Harrier**, and right on cue a cracking male flew low across the road in front of the van as we reached Kinloch. We had some nice views of the bird quartering out over the grassland towards Ben More, the first of many we would no doubt see before the end of the trip. Our first Common Sandpipers were 'peeping' away along the shore of Loch Beg, and we saw Common Stonechat and Hooded Crow too before reaching our hotel in Pennyghael. A classic Loch Scridain sunset and excellent dinner would follow, as we planned our first full day on the island tomorrow.

TUESDAY 26TH JUNE – *Fine and sunny, clouding over later, 20C*

A superb day's wildlife watching today, which was really to be expected given we were on Mull in perfectly calm, warm and sunny weather! The excitement kicked off before breakfast, as some of the group found a non-breeding plumage **Black-throated Diver**, presumably a second calendar year bird, floating on the glass-like surface of Loch Scridain just off our hotel. We all had some really nice views of this distinctive bird through the scopes – a great start to the day! After breakfast, we set off in the direction of Kinloch, but didn't get very far as we spotted two **Otters** frolicking in the water just off the rocks. A conveniently placed spot to pull off the road enabled us to set up our scopes and watch the two animals feeding for almost half an hour, getting some really great views in the process. A superb adult pair of **Red-throated Divers** were also seen, preening out on the flat calm water, and we also saw the **Black-throated Diver** again a little closer. Further away, but still a useful addition to the list, was a **Common Greenshank** marching along the seaweed strewn shoreline of Loch Beg, a classic location for this localised species. We managed to tear ourselves away, and head on to a spot where we often see **Golden Eagles**. Two adult birds were sitting out on the crags in the morning sunshine, again giving superb scope views. A little further on, and a ringtail **Hen Harrier** was seen circling above the road, requiring another impromptu pull off. We watched her hunting over the bracken covered hillside in lovely light, before she was joined by the male – it wasn't even 10am, and we had seen many of Mull's specialities already!



Ben More and Loch Scridain, 26th June

Our plan for the morning was to head down to Loch Buie, one of our favourite spots on the island. This took us along the narrow winding road through the oak woods near Croggan, a productive area where we would spend a bit of time looking for woodland passerines. A **Tree Pipit** flew up from the grass as we parked up, and we eventually found it again perched in a dead tree back along the road, giving its subtle high pitched single note alarm call. The highlight here though was a rather unexpected pair of **Common Redstarts**, using one of the nestboxes – we hadn't seen them here for a couple of years, so to get such good views was a real bonus. Other species noted here included Willow Warblers feeding young, a family of Coal Tits, and good views of Treecreeper. Continuing down to Lochbuie, we parked overlooking the water and out to the distant island of Colonsay. It was actually pretty quiet here for birds, but we saw two more distant Red-throated Divers over coffee, and a Common Eider family. Returning back by the same route, we made a stop to look for **Common Redpolls** among the Rhodedendron covered slopes, and we ended up enjoying great views of a male perched on telegraph wires. Common Stonechats, Willow Warbler, Great-spotted Woodpecker and Yellowhammer were also seen. Amazingly it was already lunchtime, so we returned to the main road and parked up at a spot which is often very good for orchids and odonata. It had clouded up now, meaning butterflies were off the menu, but we saw **Golden-ringed Dragonfly**, **Keeled Skimmer**, Large Red Damselfly, Four-spotted Chaser, Heath-spotted, Heath Fragrant and **Greater Butterfly Orchids**. Common Whitethroat and a Sparrowhawk carrying prey were two of the avian highlights as we ate our sandwiches.



Great Butterfly Orchid and Golden Eagle, 26th June

The second part of our afternoon would be spent down at Loch Ba, a beautiful scenic spot in the centre of the island. We headed there via Craignure, stopping briefly for the shop and toilets, before parking round at Knock. **Grey Wagtail** and **Spotted Flycatcher** were seen briefly as we had a coffee, before setting off along the track down to the loch. It was really warm and muggy, and so the horseflies were out in force here! Nevertheless we found two more **Spotted Flycatchers**, Siskin, Treecreeper, Willow Warbler and Stonechat along the way, and a pair of Common Sandpipers along the loch shore were tending a half grown chick, which was great to see. We didn't see much else though, with no Redstarts here this year, so we returned to the car park and made our way back to base via the Loch na Keal 'scenic route'. Birds noted along the way included several Northern

Wheatears, and we enjoyed magnificent views out to Coll, Tiree, Staffa, Iona, Ulva and the Treshnish Isles. A very enjoyable and productive first day on magical Mull!



Redstart and Common Sandpiper, 26th June

WEDNESDAY 27TH JUNE – *Baking hot day in light winds, 27C*

In over a dozen tours to Mull over the years, we have often been lucky with some sunny weather, but never would we ever have described it as 'hot'! Today was exactly that – we could have been in the Med! Our day started strongly again, as a young **White-tailed Eagle** was sitting on the rocky skerries just west of the hotel. It was still there after breakfast, giving everyone the chance for a distant scope view, and the **Black-throated Diver** was also still present and showing really well. Our morning was planned for us, as we had booked with Mull Charters out of Ulva Ferry for their 'Sea Eagle' trip, always an unforgettable experience and tour highlight. A smart male **Redpoll** greeted us near the pier, signing from the top of a sallow with bright raspberry red breast. Once aboard, we chugged east into Loch na Keal, and down towards Killiechranan spotting the odd **Black Guillemot** and Gannet as we went. Soon the first **White-tailed Eagle** appeared, a male from an adjacent nest site, and swooped in majestically to pluck a fish from the water right next to the boat. It felt as though everyone was holding their breath the whole time! Twenty minutes later and the same eagle was back, taking another fish back to its nest which we were told contained two healthy chicks which had been ringed the week before. The third and final time the eagle came in he made a really slow approach, giving the photographers in the group the best chance yet for some gripping images of it plucking the fish from the water no more than 50 metres away. From here, we motored back west towards the mouth of the loch and along the south side of Ulva. The views here were just stunning, out to Inch Kenneth, Staffa, Lunga, and Tiree. We enjoyed tea and biscuits as we floated silently on the water here but we didn't see too many other birds of note. A small group of moulting Common Eiders, several Shags and **Black Guillemots** being the best of it – a spectacular **Barrel Jellyfish** was perhaps the highlight, passing right under the boat! After a look at the local Common Seals and their new pups, we headed back around Ulva and into the jetty – a really enjoyable three hours on the water.



Loch na Keal and surrounds from our boat trip today

Lunch was at nearby Eas Fors, where the temperature peaked at 27C! **Dark Green Fritillary** was noted whizzing over the bracken, and we also saw Willow Warbler, Common Whitethroat and **Grey Wagtail**. Continuing on, we navigated the rather tedious minor road around Treshnish and on to Calgary – the island was really busy in the nice weather, so there was a lot of pulling over and reversing to be done! Calgary beach looked stunning in the sunshine, but our destination would be the remote Caliach Point, at the very north-west tip of Mull. Afternoon tea in the sunshine here scanning out across the sea produced a group of **Harbour Porpoise**, plenty of Shags, Common Guillemots and Rock Pipits, plus numerous Northern Wheatears bobbing about on the grass. The views out from here were also spectacular – Ardnamurchan, Eigg, Rhum, Skye and Coll all being visible. As we headed back out along the lane, scattering more Wheatears as we went, a Spotted Flycatcher popped up on a roadside fence post, giving everyone a nice view. The wildlife generally seemed to be keeping low in the baking heat though [something they are probably not used to on Mull] and we didn't see a great deal else until we had passed Craignure and headed back down the Glen to Inverlussa. Here we made a short roadside spot at a location which is often good for **Whinchat**, and sure enough had nice views of a pair working their way along a fenceline, and up and down on the telegraph wires. Thinking that perhaps we might see a Hen Harrier or two on the way back, we actually went one better with a pair of **Golden Eagles** appearing over the ridge near the three lochs viewpoint. We dived into the small parking area and watched the eagles soaring for some time, mobbed almost continually by an agitated Common Kestrel. Superb views through the scope, with near perfect light on these most magnificent birds as they slowly spiralled round above the mountainside. Not quite so action packed as yesterday, but a delightful day all the same with some excellent highlights.

THURSDAY 28TH JUNE – *Another very hot and sunny day, 30C*



The view from our hotel this morning!

The unbelievable weather continues! Our pre-breakfast observations outside the hotel included the Black-throated Diver again on Loch Scridain, though otherwise it was largely quiet in the already very warm conditions. We had decided that we would head down the Ross of Mull today, and take the short ferry crossing from Fionnophort to Iona. We knew it was going to be tough going in the heat, but that we had to at least have a go at finding a Corncrake against the odds! We started up around the famous Abbey, a major pilgrimage centre from where Christianity was spread throughout Scotland. A Sedge Warbler was chattering away on the irises and showed pretty well, and the first of many Northern Wheatear juveniles were also seen. Some smart Rock Doves, and obliging singing Willow Warbler, were the only other sightings of note before we retraced to the village centre and then up the track towards the west coast of the island. This was the quietest, hottest drag of the day with little seen other than Wheatear, and a pretty hot and tired group reached the golf course on the west coast where we sat down in the refreshing breeze for an early lunch. The bay looked beautiful in this weather, and we saw Common Eiders, Shelducks and Red-breasted Mergansers here. Best of all though, was a fine summer plumaged **Great Northern Diver** fishing just offshore, completing our diver set for the tour and the first time we had ever managed it! The long walk back produced just a couple of short snatches of **Corncrake** creaking, but clearly we weren't going to see one today. We reached the pier just as the ferry was coming in, which was good timing, and so we swiftly returned to Fionnophort and headed down to Fidden for a welcome cup of tea. Here a female **Hen Harrier** was hunting over the bracken covered hillside, and an unexpected flock of twenty Lapwing were seen.



Ben More with Highland Cattle – a classic Scottish scene!

Our afternoon was a more chilled out affair, after the exertions of walking around Iona in the heat. We drove back up to Pennyghael, and then on up the glen to scan for raptors from a few watchpoints. At the first, an adult **White-tailed Eagle** drifted over as we pulled up, but unfortunately disappeared behind the hill and wasn't seen again. Large Heath and Six-spot Burnet were noted at ground level, but we didn't note much else here and so moved on to Glen Forsa. **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary**

was seen well here, while over the adjacent hillside, an adult **Golden Eagle** drifted over. The bird crossed the valley, ending up over the ridge to the south, where it was mobbed by a comparatively tiny Common Buzzard! It really was a hot and sticky afternoon though, and with the day wearing on we opted to head back towards base and take a slow drive around the top end of Loch Scridain and Loch Beg to look for Otters. We didn't see any, and had to make do instead with another excellent view of our local male **Hen Harrier**, which flew right alongside the van at the roadside. A fine end to an otherwise very quiet day.

FRIDAY 29TH JUNE – *Hot & sunny in light winds, 25C*

Today was our Treshnish Isles trip, seeing us head down the Ross of Mull towards Fionnophort for our 0945 sailing with Staffa Tours out to the island of Lunga. On the way, we had a spare twenty minutes to pop down to Loch Assapol, near Bunessan, where we noted a nesting pair of Yellowhammers, and heard a Cuckoo. Continuing down to Fionnophort, we joined the boat and steamed out through the Sound of Iona on another baking hot sunny morning! A fine **Red-throated Diver** was in the sound, and we soon began to see plenty of Common Guillemots, Razorbills and **Puffins** as we made a beeline out to Lunga which would be our first stop. Reaching the island, and cruising around to the north side, the sea was peppered with hundreds of auks and Fulmars, floating on the crystal clear turquoise water – we could have been in the Mediterranean!



Puffin on Lunga – fantastic close ups of this iconic auk today

Heading ashore on the floating pontoon, we crossed the boulder beach and up to the base of the cliffs, where we could see thousands of **Puffins** flying to and fro and enjoy close views of Rock Pipits and Wheatears. Once up on the clifftop, we were literally in amongst the Puffins and spent some time watching them going about their business, including several pairs which seemed to be still doing housework and taking grasses down into their burrows. Others clearly had pufflings underground and we saw several birds diving down holes with beaks full of sandeels – great to see. A pair of **Great Skuas** were patrolling from a nearby small island where they appeared to be nesting, and we had some superb views of them, much to the annoyance of the Puffins who would cascade off the clifftop in unison each time a ‘bonxie’ made a pass. As we continued along the clifftop to Harp Rock, we enjoyed amazing close views of breeding Razorbills, Fulmars and Shags, the latter nesting among the boulders which lined the pathway. Harp Rock itself was a noisy, smelly and boisterous Guillemot city, with thousands of birds thronging the ledges with half grown chicks. Kittiwakes were also nesting here in numbers – a great place to sit in the sun and enjoy our lunch overlooking the mass of birds! Picking our way back, we spent some more time with the **Puffins** and watched **Arctic Terns** swirling over their nearby nesting island before it was time to board the boat again for the thirty minute trip to Staffa. Rather than walking down to Fingal’s Cave, we opted to take a walk along the top of the island to look for **Twite**. We found a singing bird perched distantly, but could see its pink rump through the telescope! It eventually flew and dropped down onto the undercliff, where we found it feeding with two others and had some really nice scope views. Another highlight here were the **Black Guillemots**, breeding in the cave entrance by the jetty and giving some really lovely views, the best we had enjoyed so far.



Common Guillemot and chick, Harp Rock, Lunga

The sail back under clear blue skies and sunshine saw us back in Fionnophort about 3.15pm, and after collecting the van we made for Loch Assapol again for afternoon tea stop. The Yellowhammer pair were still busy, but we didn't add anything else apart from a Common Whitethroat – it was stinking hot here! We didn't hang around, as we couldn't wait to get the air conditioning on in the van for a respite from the oppressive heat – yes this really was the west coast of Scotland and not southern Spain!! Heading back up to Pennyghael, we collected two of the group who had sat out the Lunga trip [having done it before three times, they had opted for a day walking locally instead noting Wood Warbler, Whinchat, Cuckoo, Dark Green & Small Pearl Bordered Fritillaries] and headed around Loch Scridain to the Burg peninsula. A short walk in the sun here was unproductive – we hoped to find the mega rare Slender Scotch Burnet Moth but it was perhaps too warm for it to be out and about – even the butterflies were finding it too hot now! A **Greenshank** was seen near Tioran on the high tide, and working our way slowly back around to Loch Beg we checked for Otters, but none could be found. We did have cracking views of a female **Hen Harrier** though, hunting beside the road, and then the male appeared and crossed the road in front of us before making off across the water towards Kinloch. A nice end to another scorching hot day in the Inner Hebrides!



Yellowhammer pair at Loch Assapol, 29th June

SATURDAY 30TH JUNE – *Hot and sunny in light winds, 25C*

The heatwave continued today, though it was a touch cooler and more comfortable with a slight breeze and the odd puff of cloud around – the first ones we had seen all week! We enjoyed a superb days wildlife watching, which started for some with good views of **Otter** close to the hotel, and the **Black-throated Diver** still lingering offshore. Our main destination for the morning would be Grasspoint, though of course it was impossible to drive all the way up the glen without seeing a pair

of Hen Harriers on the way! Winding our way down the narrow Grasspoint road, we enjoyed a nice little flurry of birds at the top end with a **Spotted Flycatcher** on the roadside fence causing us to stop, and then a scaly juvenile **Redstart** popping up in the same view. Down by the parking area, a pair of **Whinchats** had fledged young out too, and we had some really nice views of them all perched on top of the bracken with the male calling nervously nearby. Walking down towards the point, we saw several **Golden-ringed Dragonflies** and **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries**, though we couldn't find any Marsh Fritillaries this year despite the perfect butterfly weather. Orchids were also plentiful, with **Lesser Butterfly Orchid** added to the list, and we were frequently seeing and hearing Willow Warblers all along the walk. At the point, we spent some time scanning the sound, where many gulls were feeding in the tidal race including Black-headed Gulls and Kittiwakes. A small bird caught the eye, a long way out, showing a more tern like flight. It showed a dark 'W' pattern on its upperwings, but soon alighted on a rock way out in the distance with lots of other gulls. Eventually we could see it well enough to note a partial dark hood, and again its diminutive size against the surrounding Kittiwakes and Common Gulls – it was a first-summer **Little Gull**, our first ever for the tour. Heading back up to the car park, a pipit circled us silently and dropped into some tall pines. It was a lovely, richly coloured fresh juvenile **Tree Pipit**, which soon took off again and gave us a 'bzzzt' as it flew past. Back at the van over coffee, we enjoyed the **Whinchats** again, and then two adult **White-tailed Eagles** circled into view way above the ridge in the distance – excellent!

Next stop was Salen, where we would try unsuccessfully for Wood Warbler and have lunch by the old boats looking over Salen bay. We did find a nice **Common Greenshank** here, and a Red-breasted Merganser, but nothing more. Tobermory was the final corner of the island which we had not visited, and with reports of a long staying Iceland Gull recently, we had two reasons to visit. It was baking hot here though, and we couldn't find the gull despite good numbers being present in the distillery burn. A look for the Dipper often present here was also unsuccessful – time to move on and try something else in the hot part of the day! Heading back to Salen, we took the road round towards Knock and then on to a spot where we knew of a White-tailed Eagle nest. The birds weren't in residence, but it was a super spot to enjoy a brew with **Dark Green Fritillary** on the wing and a real bonus in the form of a full summer plumage **Slavonian Grebe** on nearby Loch na Keal. Presumably a failed breeder or early returnee, as the species does not breed in Mull. Just as we were getting ready to leave, an adult **White-tailed Eagle** drifted in, and off across the loch, where it caught up with a second bird and circled distantly over the hillside. After a few blank days for this species, we were making up for it today. Next we drove around to another spot, this time overlooking a Golden Eagle territory, and spent some time carefully scanning the cliffs. On the way a short stop at a river crossing produced lovely views of a young **Dipper**, our first and only one of the trip. At our chosen eagle watchpoint, a Common Snipe was in the roadside ditch, but initially there was no sign of any eagle action. Perseverance paid off again though, as an adult **Golden Eagle** circled into view, giving great scope views as the sun glinted off its golden nape feathers. It circled high and away, before returning and joining its mate. We then watched the two eagles circling together for ten minutes or so, giving everyone a chance on the scope. This wrapped the day up nicely, and all that remained was to drive back round to Pennyghael via Glen Seilisdeir, scanning for Otters as we went. No Otters again this evening, but stunning views of our regular female **Hen Harrier**, quartering right alongside the van again in beautiful light. Always a great end to any day!

SUNDAY 1ST JULY – *Warm day in a slightly cooler breeze, 24C*

Today was a travelling day, but we had time to squeeze in a little birding either side of breakfast. We opted for an 0830 breakfast and an hours walk beforehand, along the nearby Carsaig road. Our primary target was Wood Warbler, but unfortunately we drew a blank – for the first time ever we didn't even manage to hear one on the island this year, a species in dire straits. The **Black-throated Diver** was once again off Pennyghael, meaning we had now seen it every day in virtually the same spot! Another species we had recorded daily, and far less surprising, was **Hen Harrier**. Mull is a premier location in Britain for this species, and as we packed up the van and headed off up the glen towards Craignure, we saw a male drifting over the road near the three lochs viewpoint. We also called in briefly at a **Golden Eagle** eyrie, and had absolutely superb views of both adults circling

above the crags – perhaps the best views of the whole week! They were being relentlessly mobbed by a pair of Kestrels, which looked like tiny midgets by comparison! The crossing back to Oban was in beautiful sunshine, though sadly the drive back to Norfolk was not so incident-free – a bad accident on the A85 meant a closed road and a fifty mile detour to the north via Glencoe and Rannoch Moor. We still managed to get back to Great Ryburgh just before midnight.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Great Northern Diver
2. Red-throated Diver
3. Black-throated Diver
4. Slavonian Grebe
5. Great Cormorant
6. European Shag
7. Northern Gannet
8. Northern Fulmar
9. Grey Heron
10. Mute Swan
11. Greylag Goose
12. Canada Goose
13. Common Shelduck
14. Mallard
15. Common Eider
16. Red-breasted Merganser
17. Common Kestrel
18. Common Buzzard
19. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
20. Golden Eagle
21. White-tailed Eagle
22. Hen Harrier
23. Common Pheasant
24. Corncrake [H]
25. European Oystercatcher
26. Common Ringed Plover
27. Northern Lapwing
28. Common Redshank
29. Common Greenshank
30. Eurasian Curlew
31. Common Snipe
32. Common Sandpiper
33. Great Skua
34. Black-headed Gull
35. Common Gull
36. Herring Gull
37. Lesser Black-backed Gull
38. Great Black-backed Gull
39. Little Gull
40. Black-legged Kittiwake
41. Common Guillemot
42. Razorbill
43. Black Guillemot
44. Atlantic Puffin
45. Common Tern
46. Arctic Tern
47. Collared Dove

48. Rock Dove
49. Common Cuckoo
50. Common Swift
51. Great-spotted Woodpecker
52. Dipper
53. Barn Swallow
54. House Martin
55. Sand Martin
56. Skylark
57. Meadow Pipit
58. Rock Pipit
59. Tree Pipit
60. Pied Wagtail
61. Grey Wagtail
62. Wren
63. Northern Wheatear
64. European Robin
65. Common Redstart
66. Common Stonechat
67. Whinchat
68. Dunnock
69. Common Blackbird
70. Song Thrush
71. Willow Warbler
72. Sedge Warbler
73. Blackcap [H]
74. Garden Warbler
75. Common Whitethroat
76. Goldcrest
77. Spotted Flycatcher
78. Blue Tit
79. Great Tit
80. Coal Tit
81. Long-tailed Tit
82. Treecreeper
83. Hooded Crow
84. Western Jackdaw
85. Rook
86. Common Raven
87. Common Starling
88. House Sparrow
89. Chaffinch
90. Greenfinch
91. Goldfinch
92. Bullfinch
93. Common Linnet
94. Eurasian Siskin
95. Common Redpoll
96. Twite
97. Reed Bunting
98. Yellowhammer

Butterflies

1. Large White
2. Green-veined White
3. Red Admiral
4. Painted Lady
5. Small Tortoiseshell
6. Small Heath
7. Large Heath
8. Dark Green Fritillary
9. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary
10. Common Blue
11. Meadow Brown
12. Speckled Wood

Dragonflies

1. Golden-ringed Dragonfly
2. Keeled Skimmer
3. Large Red Damselfly
4. Blue-tailed Damselfly
5. Highland Darter

Mammals

1. Red Deer
2. Fallow Deer
3. Grey Seal
4. Common Seal
5. Harbour Porpoise
6. Rabbit
7. Mountain Hare
8. Otter

*Checklist started from Oban so excludes species seen only on the journey