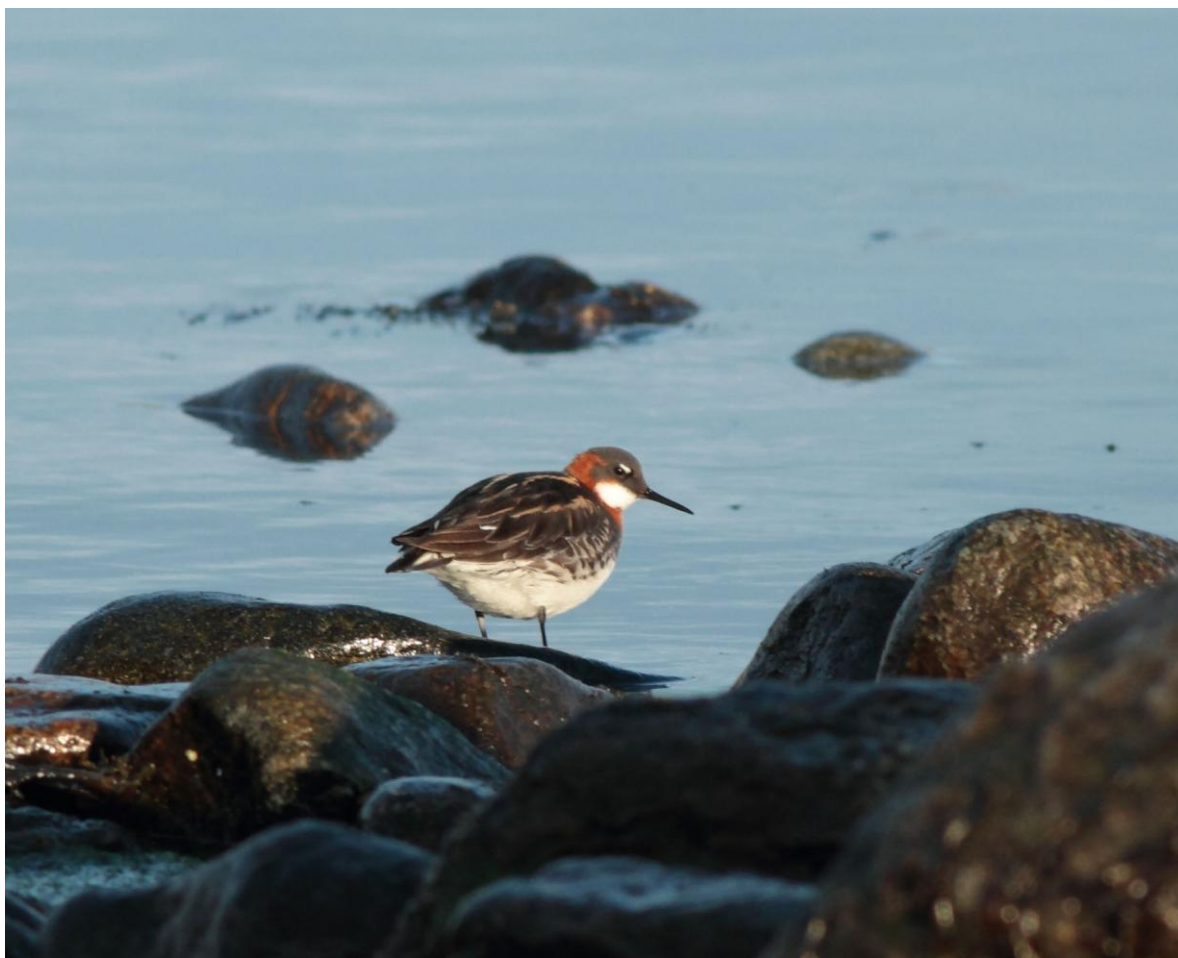


## Corncrake and Phalaropes

26<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014



Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Ian Bunker, Aileen Broderick, Toni Menzes and Andrew Peel, Gordon and Wendy Hubert.

The settled, warm weather made birding a pleasure during the week and allowed us to enjoy our target birds in comfort. A couple of good sightings of **Red-necked Phalaropes** included 4 or 5 birds together, including a pair a mating; whilst the elusive **Corncrake** was seen well on day one when a male was spotted calling on top of a rock by the road. This individual provided us with great views and whilst one or two others were seen and plenty heard this was the best sighting. Raptors showed well with **Golden Eagle** seen daily and 3 good, close sightings of **White-tailed Eagle** as well as plenty of **Hen Harriers** and a **Peregrine** on day 1. More unusual species included a **Curlew Sandpiper** as well as an unseasonal **Scaup** although the rarest was a displaying **Short-toed Lark** by the Howmore River. This could quite possibly be the first occasion this Mediterranean species has been seen singing in the UK! Other goodies included single **Glaucous Gull** and **Iceland Gull** as well as good views of **Short-eared Owl** and plenty of **Cuckoos**. All in all it was an enjoyable and very successful trip.

## Daily Dairy:

26<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: Light easterly winds with cloud but becoming brighter and warmer during the day.

I met Gordon and Wendy at their guesthouse just before 9 am and set off to meet the rest of the group further south. En route to Lochboisdale we had good views of a **Short-eared Owl** by the road at the Loch Carnan turning. Once in Lochboisdale we picked up Ian, Andrew and Toni before heading down to Eriskay to meet the ferry from Barra and Aileen. Once we were all together we dropped in at Smerclate at the south-west tip of South Uist and soon had our first good bird of the trip – a drake **Garganey** that was on a small freshwater loch here. A short walk along the beach produced **Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Dunlin** and **Sanderling** whilst on the rocks to the south-west we managed to compare both **Cormorants** and **Shags** side by side. A couple of Grey Seals were also hauled out on the rocks and a **Red-throated Diver** flew inland calling.

Heading north we stopped at Kildonan to look at a **Short-eared Owl** and 4 **Buzzards** that were circling high to the west of the road. Another **Short-eared Owl** could be seen over the hills to the east along with a couple of Red Deer whilst slightly further up the road we got good views of a perched **Short-eared Owl** carrying a vole.

We moved onto the west side of the island and had our lunch on the coast at Peninerine to the accompanying calls of a **Corncrake**. After some time Toni spotted the bird, which was stood on top of a rock, by the side of a minor road where it was showing very well. This allowed all of us to get great scope views until eventually a vehicle drove down the road and it scuttled off its rock. Meanwhile off-shore we found a couple of summer plumage **Great Northern Divers** bobbing on the sea. A little further north we pulled off the road and took a track by the Howmore River where we parked and waited to see if our prize bird would be singing. In no time at all a **Short-toed Lark** took to the air in a display flight and gave all of us great views as it dropped into the fields before repeating its performance. This is a very rare bird in the Outer Hebrides and possibly the first ever to be seen displaying in the UK. 5 **Teal** and a **Shoveler** were on the river whilst an immature **White-tailed Eagle** flew over, heading south and a **Peregrine** circled with 2 **Buzzards**. The 2 **Corn Buntings** that zipped past us seemed to pale into insignificance after the last 20 minutes of birds but this is one of the last sites in South Uist where they can still be found.

Steve dropped everyone off at their accommodation apart from Ian, who came along for the ride to Hebridean Coaches where vehicles were being exchanged. No sooner had we pulled up when we a **Golden Eagle** was spotted soaring overhead before it drifted south. Vehicles swapped and back in Benbecula, a visit to the co-op to pick up supplies provided us with 3 more eagles including good views of a **Golden Eagle** that flew over the southern end of Benbecula, heading east, chased by a **Raven**.

Once we had everyone back on board we popped in for a look at Coot Loch where we spotted **Gadwall, Shoveler, Little Grebe, Snipe, Arctic Tern** and one of the few remaining **Coots**. Following this we had a quick look at Stinky Bay before dropping in at Loch Mor where we had good scope views of 4 or 5 **Red-necked Phalaropes** for around 20 minutes. A **Buzzard** with young was visible

from our parking spot and a dark phase **Arctic Skua** heading low over the loch rounded off a very good first day.

### 27<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: Light easterly wind with cloud in the morning, clearing around mid-day to become sunny and warm.

We started our day with a trip to Rubha Ardvule, South Uist picking up a Red Deer by the roadside en route. Once on the headland we found good numbers of waders on the beach including **Sanderling, Turnstone, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Redshank** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**. 2 summer plumage **Great Northern Divers** were showing well on the sea along with a couple of **Shelduck**. We made our way back across Bornish machair where we spotted 2 **Sand Martins** hawking over the fields before a pit stop at Kildonan which produced 2 **Curlews** in flight over the fields.



Heading back north for a short distance we took a minor road, east to North Loch Eynort where we enjoyed a short walk through the wooded garden to a viewpoint over-looking the loch. This was a very productive site with 2 **Golden Eagles**, including an immature overhead; an adult **White-tailed Eagle**, also overhead as well as **Great Northern Diver, Black Guillemot, Cuckoo, Blackcap, Chiffchaff** and **Goldfinch**. The loch was also alive with boisterous Harbour Seals. From here we drove north to the Howmore River where we had a singing **Sedge Warbler** and **Common Sandpiper** over the road before moving

on to Loch Skipport. The moorland was rather quiet and a short walk to the dilapidated pier at the end produced a winter plumage **Red-throated Diver** and 2 **Twite** nest building in the cutting for the road. On returning to the main road we spotted a couple more **Common Sandpipers, Stonechats** and a male **Hen Harrier** heading over the hills back the way we had come.



We continued back north and just after crossing the Loch Bee causeway met up with a low flying, adult **White-tailed Eagle** that was circling over the road. We pulled over rapidly and jumped out of the vehicle to get some superb views of this huge bird as it circled off, westwards.

Our final site for the day was Ardivachar at the north-west tip of South Uist. The beach and headland here was full of gulls and waders including **Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Sanderling** and **Dunlin**. A large group of **Ravens** were feeding amongst the seaweed with the gulls which included a 2<sup>nd</sup> year **Iceland Gull**. Groups of

**Eiders** loafed off-shore whilst a few **Arctic Terns** hunted in the shallows rounding off another fine day.

## 28<sup>th</sup> May:

Weather: Light winds, sunny and hot.

We headed for North Uist this morning calling in at Balranald first where we heard a couple of **Corn Buntings** in song which also showed well by the track out to the coast. On the coast we found a few waders including **Dunlin**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover** and **Sanderling** whilst off-shore we recorded **Great Northern Diver** and **Guillemots**. As we wandered back to the minibus from the headland at Aird an Runair we spotted an immature **Glaucous Gull** feeding on the beach in the company of a young **Great Black-backed Gull** which in direct comparison was pretty similar in size and bulk.

Moving on from Balranald RSPB we took a look at Loch Sandary where a drake **Scaup** and 2 **Whooper Swans** had taken up residence. We headed back north and around the north-west corner of the island before taking the road to Griminish Pier where we had a short walk along the shore to Callernish House. 2 summer plumage **Red-throated Divers** were feeding in the stretch of water separating us from the island of Vallay and gave some good scope views. Other birds here included **Little Tern**, **Arctic Tern**, **Cuckoo**, **Whimbrel**, **Sedge Warbler** and a **Whitethroat** in the garden at Callernish House. We enjoyed our lunch by the pier before continuing our circuit of the island.

At Oban Trusmishgarry we noted 3 **Kestrels** and a **Common Sandpiper** whilst Lochmaddy Bay produced a distant **Golden Eagle**, **Black Guillemot** and **Common Terns**. The road from Lochmaddy to Benbecula runs through moorland dotted with lochs and prime habitat for a number of breeding birds which on our journey south to Clachan na Luib produced a **Short-eared Owl**, followed by a male **Hen Harrier** at the roadside and 2 fly-over **Red-throated Divers**.

Back on Benbecula we visited a site for **Black-throated Diver** and were delighted to find a bird actually on a nest, incubating. From a safe distance we got good scope views of the bird and its exquisite plumage. The surrounding moorland is also good for owls and although we didn't catch any on this occasion we did spot a female **Hen Harrier** hunting. On the west side we also explored the delights of Stinky Bay where we found all the regular waders whilst inland we could hear the distinctive call of 2 male **Corncrakes** sounding off loudly behind us. A couple of the group wandered closer to one of the calling birds and were rewarded with good views of one in the open along a fence line. Unfortunately by the time everyone else had arrived the bird had dropped into the vegetation and became much more difficult and obscured by the long grass and Mares Tails. We did glimpse the bird a couple more times and were able to get the scope on it but it was very much living up to its reputation of being elusive.

**29<sup>th</sup> May:**

Weather: Light southerly winds with cloud throughout the day.

We had a brief stop at Coot Loch this morning where we picked up **Shovelers**, **Coot** and **Little Grebe** before moving on to Langass Lodge, North Uist where we took a short walk to the Stone Circle. As usual we picked up plenty of Red Deer in the area plus a few decent birds including a migrant **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Sparrowhawk**, a distant **Red-throated Diver** and a fly-by **Arctic Skua** as well as **Stonechats** and **Willow Warbler**. From here we had a short drive to Baleshare which proved to be quiet with few birds visible on the lochs apart from the odd **Shoveler** and **Tufted Duck**, plus an **Oystercatcher** nesting in the top of a strainer post.

We moved onto Peter's Port for lunch and Steve took the opportunity to swap vehicles. On arrival at the end of the road we scanned across to the island of Wiay and picked up a **Golden Eagle** straight away. It was initially circling over the hill top before it alighted on the trig point and stayed in the same spot for the next hour at least. We also had **Rock Pipits** with fledged young, **Common Terns** and **Red-breasted Merganser**. As we retraced our route back towards the main road we spotted a **Cuckoo** on telephone wires. We pulled over and got great views of it through the scopes as it was being mobbed by an irate pipit.

Post lunch we moved onto South Uist, first calling in at the Range by Loch Bee where we found a couple of **Whimbrel** before we took a second look at Ardivachar. The 2<sup>nd</sup> year **Iceland Gull** was still present amongst the mass of immature gulls and a selection of waders were picked out along the tide line including **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Ringed Plover**.

For the rest of the afternoon we took a walk along the Rueval track, Benbecula which quickly produced a hunting **Short-eared Owl**, **Twite** and good numbers of **Stonechats**. **Red-throated Divers** appeared to be everywhere with birds flying back and forth between the lochs calling as they did so. On our return journey we got great views of 2 **Red-throated Divers** that had dropped in on the first loch, where they posed very well for us allowing us to obtain nice views through the scope. A short while later we came across another **Cuckoo** which was also showing well as we reached the car park whilst Ian, Toni and Andrew who were behind the rest of the group managed to see a male and female **Hen Harrier** over the heather slopes to the south.

We retired back to the various guesthouses before dinner with a final **Spotted Flycatcher** showing up at Liniclate where Toni and Andrew were staying.

**30<sup>th</sup> May:**

Weather: Light westerly winds with some cloud although plenty of sunshine and generally a warm day.

This morning we headed to our most northerly destination and the island of Berneray. En route we spotted a couple of **Whooper Swans** at Oban Trumisgarry and both **Chiffchaff** and **Willow Warbler** at Clachan Farm plantation. A close **Buzzard** was also admired brooding its' young on a nest which was positioned in a conifer overhanging the drive to the house here.

Once on Berneray we drove up to the north-east side to Rushgarry. Here we got great views of 2 winter plumage **Great Northern Divers** alongside a winter plumage **Black-throated Diver** providing us with an opportunity to compare both species at close range. **Little Tern** and **Arctic Terns** were busy feeding in the area whilst a couple of **Black Guillemots** were spotted off-shore. The beach still held plenty of waders too with **Turnstone**, **Sanderling**, **Dunlin** and **Ringed Plover** scurrying along the sand until an **Arctic Skua** came zipping past and put them all up in a whirling mass. A short walk along the dune top gave us good views of all the waders and a scan across the fields revealed a couple of **Fulmars** nesting on a small crag to the west. We moved to the middle of the island from here to take a look at Loch Brusda where we found more **Little** and **Arctic Terns**, displaying **Snipe**, **Twite** and a lone **Barnacle Goose** amongst the **Greylags** on the machair.

We headed back to North Uist and Clachan Sands for our lunch before taking the road around the north side towards Balranald. To the east of Grenitote we stopped at a rise in the road and Andrew picked up a **Golden Eagle** circling over the hills to the south whilst plenty of Red Deer could be found scattered around the moor and fields. A mile or so further along the road we pulled in by the plantation and had good views of 2 **Cuckoos** on the wires and fences in the area, as they followed each other around. **Sedge Warbler** and **Willow Warbler** were singing from the plantation whilst a male **Hen Harrier** made an appearance low over the moorland to the south. We continued our circuit of North Uist spotting another male **Hen Harrier** along the hill side at Scolpaig before we



reached Balranald. We had a brief stop here at the visitor centre where we could hear a Corncrake calling although it remained hidden during our short stop. Shortly after a message came through about a **Curlew Sandpiper** on Baleshare so we headed back to this low-lying island connected to North Uist via a causeway. After some searching we did get good scope views of a sub-adult Curlew Sandpiper on the near edge of Loch Mhic Coan.

Our final stop of the day was at Loch Mor, Benbecula where we were treated to 30 – 45 minute of 4 **Red-necked Phalaropes** that gave very good views through the scope. 3

females and a male were seen feeding and displaying culminating in a mating followed by a lot of flying about; a great way to end the day.

**31<sup>st</sup> May:**

Weather: Light – moderate southerly winds with plenty of sunshine in the morning but high cloud began to develop in the afternoon.



Gordon and Wendy opted to make their own down to catch the ferry to Barra after experiencing some vehicle problems in the morning so we said our goodbyes outside the guesthouse and the rest of us started south. We called in at the Howmore River and drove around the coast until we reached the main road once again and took the turning for Loch Eynort. A **Red-throated Diver** was showing well from the small causeway across a tidal creek and a **Cuckoo** was located perched on telephone wires with an attendant **Meadow Pipit**. We pulled up at the end of the road at the same time an adult **White-tailed Eagle** flew in

and circled low over the car park giving all present a great look at this huge bird. A short walk amongst the trees and along the northern side of the loch produced 2 **Red-throated Divers**, 3 **White-tailed Eagles** together over Ben Mor and a **Chiffchaff** in the more mature trees near the car park.

After our good morning at Loch Eynort we drove to Eriskay so Aileen could catch her ferry to Barra and her return flight to Glasgow. Another couple of additions to the bird list came in the form of **Razorbill** and **Kittiwakes** that were seen in the Sound of Barra during our lunch, before we said goodbye to Aileen. Finally I dropped Ian, Toni and Andrew off at Lochboisdale in time for the ferry back to Oban where we also parted company after a great birding break in Uist.

## Species List:

Mute Swan	Common and seen every day
Whooper Swan	2 individuals seen on 2 dates
Greylag Goose	Common
Barnacle Goose	1 with Greylags at Loch Brusda, Berneray, 30 <sup>th</sup>
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	Seen on 2 dates during the week
Shoveler	Fairly common and seen every day
Wigeon	Noted on the first day only
Teal	Fairly common and in small numbers on 4 days during the week
Garganey	A drake was seen on Benbecula, 26 <sup>th</sup>
Tufted Duck	A common breeding species
Scaup	A drake was on Loch Sandary, 28 <sup>th</sup>
Eider	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen every day in small numbers
Red-throated Diver	Seen almost daily in small numbers
Black-throated Diver	2 in breeding plumage on 28 <sup>th</sup> and 1 in winter plumage, 30 <sup>th</sup>
Great Northern Diver	Seen daily in small numbers
Little Grebe	Fairly common although noted on just 2 dates
Fulmar	Noted nesting on Berneray
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common, breeding at Loch Eynort
White-tailed Eagle	4 sightings over three days
Golden Eagle	1 or 2 seen daily
Hen Harrier	Seen virtually daily in small numbers
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	1 on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Kestrel	Seen on two dates only
Peregrine	1 on 26 <sup>th</sup> over Peninerine
Corncrake	Seen on 3 dates and heard every day
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch'
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Very common
Lapwing	Common
Sanderling	Common



Turnstone	Seen every day
Dunlin	Common passage migrant and breeder
Curlew Sandpiper	A sub-adult was on Baleshare, 30 <sup>th</sup>
Common Sandpiper	Noted on 2 dates
Redshank	Very common
Bar-tailed Godwit	Non-breeding birds were seen at a couple of sites
Curlew	Fairly common
Whimbrel	Seen small numbers on 2 dates
Snipe	Common
Red-necked Phalarope	4 or 5 were seen on 26 <sup>th</sup> and 30 <sup>th</sup>
Arctic Skua	Single birds were seen on 3 dates
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Kittiwake	Seen from the ferry terminal in the Sound of Barra
Iceland Gull	A 2 <sup>nd</sup> year was seen on 27 <sup>th</sup> and 29 <sup>th</sup>
Little Tern	Noted on 2 dates
Common Tern	Common
Arctic Tern	The commonest tern
Black Guillemot	Fairly common
Guillemot	Seen on 28 <sup>th</sup> only
Razorbill	Seen in the Sound of Barra, 31 <sup>st</sup>
Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	1 noted on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Cuckoo	Often heard and occasionally seen
Short-eared Owl	Seen on 3 days
Skylark	Common
Short-toed Lark	A displaying adult was by the Howmore River, 26 <sup>th</sup>
Awallow	Fairly common
Sand Martin	Seen on 2 dates during the week
Rock Pipit	Seen on 2 days but not uncommon in the right habitat
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen every day
(White Wagtail	Seen in small numbers on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> )
Hebridean Wren	Common in certain areas
Hebridean Dunnock	Common in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on 3 dates

Wheatear	Common
Stonechat	Seen on 2 dates
Hebridean Song Thrush	Not uncommon around gardens
Blackbird	Common
Blackcap	Heard at North Loch Eynort
Whitethroat	Heard at Ludag and seen by Andrew at Callernish House
Sedge Warbler	Recorded every day
Willow Warbler	Common but localised
Goldcrest	Heard at Loch Eynort
Spotted Flycatcher	One seen on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Hooded Crow	Seen every day and increasing in the islands
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations, common
Linnet	Fairly common
Twite	Common and seen every day
Goldfinch	Seen at North Loch Eynort
Greenfinch	Sightings virtually daily
Siskin	A couple were at North Loch Eynort, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Reed Bunting	Seen on 3 days
Corn Bunting	This declining species was seen on 2 days

Mammals:

Grey Seal	Regular sightings
Harbour Seal	Common in Loch Eynort and around Berneray
Red Deer	Seen every day
Rabbit	Common and increasing

**Steve Duffield**

**Western Isles Wildlife**

**7 Carinish, Isle of North Uist, HS6 5HL**

**Email: [steveduffield70@gmail.com](mailto:steveduffield70@gmail.com)**

**Tel. 01876 580619 / Mobile 07867 555971**