

Corncrakes and Phalaropes

28th May – 2nd June, 2012



Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Lesley and Paul Langston, Melvyn and Janet Sheard, Rosemary Clark and Glyn Edwards.

All in all a successful tour with a total bird count of 95 species including excellent views of Corncrake and Red-necked Phalarope including two unusual sightings of the latter with females spotted on Loch Bee and Berneray. We also managed a couple of surprises during the five day trip with an immature Little Gull on Berneray, an adult Little Stint at Rubha Ardvule and a calling Quail (alas only heard) on the machair by the Howmore River. Divers featured well with three sightings of Black-throated Divers plus good views of summer plumage Great Northern Diver and Red-throated Diver. We spotted just a single Otter during the tour although got excellent views from above; and had an exceptional sighting of a Harbour Porpoise off Berneray which could be seen swimming underwater.

Daily Dairy:

28th May:

Weather – force 5 east-north-east winds, sunny but cool.

I met Rosemary and Glyn off the 11 am flight from Glasgow and we headed south for a few hours birding before the rest arrived on the afternoon flight. The first two stops in Balivanich and Stinky Bay produced Sanderling, Turnstone, Dunlin and Ringed Plover, plus a Curlew Sandpiper at the latter site. We headed to Peninerine for lunch on the dunes before taking a walk at Druidibeg plantation which held a number of Willow Warblers and a singing Blackcap. Behind the plantation we spotted a Short-eared Owl and a Buzzard having a short battle before the owl flew off over the moor. We had another Curlew Sandpiper at the southern end of Loch Bee as well as Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwits, Wigeon, Teal and Eider. Time was ticking on so I dropped Rosemary and Glyn at the guest house and went to pick the others up from the airport. Once everyone had settled into their guest houses we had a short look at the regular phalarope site before dinner and had great views of a female Red-necked Phalarope near the roadside; a fine way to start the trip.

29th May:

Weather – Cloudy and cool at first but becoming sunnier and warmer in the afternoon. Wind was east, north-east force 5, falling to force 4 in the afternoon.

This morning we headed straight for Balranald where we had good views of a male Corncrake calling close to the minibus on the approach road to the reserve. We also picked up a number of waders here including Snipe, Dunlin, Sanderling and Bar-tailed Godwits. Our



next port of call was the very scenic Griminish Pier and Callernish House. The garden here held a calling Corncrake whilst the channel separating us from the island of Vallay had both Little and Arctic Tern fishing. We had good views of a Cuckoo near the pier plus Goldfinch and Sedge Warbler in the garden. Continuing our circuit of North Uist we spotted a Short-eared Owl hunting at the

side of the road at Claddach Vallay before we had a quick look on the machair at Sollas. We returned west and had lunch along the Committee Road where we had great views of a male Hen Harrier and were accompanied by a Cuckoo singing from the fence line above our lunch spot. After lunch we retraced our route towards Balranald gaining some excellent views of three Short-eared Owls en route as well as a Cuckoo being chased by four disgruntled Meadow Pipits. We also spotted three Whooper Swans between two lochs along the north-west corner of the island. On returning to Balranald we had prolonged views of a Corncrake in the open not far from the visitor centre. Loch Sandary held three over-summering Whooper Swans whilst Loch Paible produced Little Tern, Common Tern, Dunlin and Ringed Plover, amongst others. Steve managed brief views of a Golden Eagle as we headed back to Benbecula. We popped into a site quite close to Balivanich once back on Benbecula and had good scope views of a pair of superb Black-throated Divers on the freshwater loch.

Daily total: 63 species

30th May:

Weather – winds were from the east and force 4 or less; cloudy but becoming sunny and hot. Today we headed to South Uist calling in at the southern end of Loch Bee that was showing a large extent of mud due to the extended dry spell. There was a scattering of waders including Bar-tailed Godwit and Dulin plus a surprise in form of a female Red-necked Phalarope which flew off over the loch. Our next stop was North Loch Eynort where we had an adult White-tailed Eagle on arrival which flew up the loch from the east and over the hill to



the north-east of where we were parked. This was followed some time later by more views of an adult and an immature White-tailed Eagle circling over this tidal loch and surrounding hills. The loch had both summer plumage Red-throated Diver and more unusually a summer plumage Black-throated Diver. Other birds spotted in the area included Black Guillemot, Arctic and Common Tern as well as

Cuckoo, Twite, Willow Warbler, Hebridean Song Thrush, Hebridean Wren and 18 Siskins (normally a scarce bird here). We adjourned to Kildonan café for lunch where some of us indulged in a Cheese and Haggis Toastie. From the café we spotted a pair of Hen Harriers, the female of which got into a fight with two Buzzards. From outside of the café we spotted a distant Golden Eagle and a small herd of Red Deer. We continued south after lunch popping in to Smerclate along the south coast where we had summer plumage Great Northern Divers, Dunlin etc. and a number of Grey Seals hauled out on the rocks and bobbing in the Sound of Barra. Next was our most southerly destination, Eriskay where we took a short walk after having a quick look from the ferry port where we spotted Rock Pipits and Black Guillemots off-shore. A walk in the Aarseid valley turned up three Golden Eagles that soared overhead for around ten minutes giving us excellent prolonged views as the resident pair saw off a youngster. After the excitement on Eriskay we turned north and potted our



way back towards Benbecula picking up a singing Whitethroat in Daliburgh whilst a walk at Stoneybridge produced Whimbrel, Sanderling and two Artic Skuas chasing a flock of Dunlin. A House Martin was seen briefly over a garden at Stilligarry as we travelled north. As we crossed the causeway over Loch Bee a large raptor was spotted circling virtually over the road. We

pulled over almost underneath a Golden Eagle that gave us fantastic views as it headed off west, circling whilst being pursued by a Short-eared owl.

Daily total: 75 species

31st May:

Weather – Warm and sunny with light winds.

Today we headed for our most northerly point on the island of Berneray spotting two Short-eared Owls en route close to Lochmaddy. Our first stop looking east into the Sound of Harris from the hostel on Berneray produced Red-throated Diver, Little Tern and Arctic Tern whilst

a Hebridean Wren found itself a rather unusual song post from the top of a thatched otter's head. The shore nearby had good numbers of waders including Bar-tailed Godwit, Turnstone, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Dunlin. We then drove to the north end of Loch Bhrusda and walked across the machair to a viewpoint over-looking the Sound of Pabbay. A number of seabirds passed through the narrows with Gannets, Kittiwake and Razorbills spotted whilst two or three Great Northern Divers were off-shore. A Harbour Porpoise was spotted and gave exceptional views as it fed very close inshore, just off the tide edge. Views were so good that you could occasionally see this smallest of the British cetaceans, swimming under water. Returning to the van we were passing Loch Bhrusda when another female Red-necked Phalarope was spotted feeding along the north shore. We pulled over and went to get scope views when we also noticed a Greenshank on a small sand spit as well as smaller waders such Turnstone, and Dunlin. Good numbers of Arctic and Little terns were also seen resting on the sand where we spotted a 1st yr Little Gull, a scarce visitor here. Time was ticking and we didn't want to miss the tide at Cheese Bay so we ate our



lunch on the hoof as we drove around to Cheese Bay. Here we walked to a spot looking over the Minch towards Skye and eventually spotted our target – an otter. It promptly disappeared behind a rocky island but came out on our side after a wait and then swam towards the shore we were perched above. We got excellent views as it swam underneath our stance before it looked up and spotted us and disappeared for good. We also

spotted four Great Skuas over island in the Sound of Harris, Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and got good views of a Cuckoo. Finally we returned back north a short distance to admire a fine display of the Hebridean Marsh Orchid near Clachan Sands.

Daily total: 70 species

1st June:

Weather – Northerly, force 5 winds; cool with sunny spells and broken cloud.

This morning we headed to the north-west corner of South Uist at Ardivachar where we managed views of a Corncrake on the way out and excellent views for all on the way back

along the roadside. Off-shore we spotted summer plumage Great Northern Diver and a fly-by Arctic Skua before heading for Loch Skipport. The latter site was fairly quiet although whilst on the way back to the main road we spotted an immature Golden Eagle circling. Steve put his foot down and we jumped out to get great views of this superb bird circling over Loch Druidibeg whilst being mobbed by a male Hen Harrier. The latter site also held a summer plumage Black-throated Diver which showed well as if drifted along the eastern shore of the loch. Heading south a large raptor was spotted over the moor at Snishival. We pulled over and got more excellent views of an immature Golden Eagle hunting and drifting slowly east towards the hills of Hecla, Ben Mor and Ben Corrodale. Moving on we drove out across Bornish machair for a walk at Rubha Ardvule. Good numbers of waders in the south bay here included a couple of Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone and best of all a summer plumage Little Stint. Off-shore we spotted Razorbills and Gannets whilst both Grey and Common Seals were seen loafing on the rocks or bobbing in the sea. We enjoyed our lunch here before moving on to North Loch Eynort where we spotted another immature Golden Eagle on arrival as well as another more distant bird over the hills. The loch had good numbers of Arctic Terns fishing over it and one or two Red-throated Divers showing off their summer finery. Heading back north we called in at Howmore and took a walk around the machair and dunes here. As we headed for the coast we picked up the distinctive call of a Quail which remained hidden in the grass somewhere whilst a couple of the Corn Buntings sang from prominent posts.

Daily total: 68 species

2nd June:

On our final morning we took a walk on the machair at Torlum / Borge and had a look at Coot Loch / Loch Mor and Stinky Bay. The usual selection of wildfowl and waders we picked up as well as a Whimbrel showing well at the latter site on the beach. We popped in at MacGillivrays in Balivanich following a request for a couple of souvenirs before we said our goodbyes to Paul and Lesley, Rosemary and Glyn. Melvyn and Janet were staying on for a few days and hiring a car so we said our final farewells at the garage in Creagorry.

Species List:

Red-throated Diver	Seen on three dates in small numbers
Black-throated Diver	Three sightings at three different locations
Great Northern Diver	Small numbers seen on three dates
Little Grebe	Fairly common
Fulmar	Small numbers seen off-shore
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common
Mute Swan	Common
Whooper Swan	Three on Loch Sandary
Greylag Goose	Common
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	A single sighting on 31 st May
Shoveler	Fairly common and seen daily
Wigeon	Fairly common breeding species
Teal	Seen on three dates in small numbers
Tufted Duck	A common breeding species
Pochard	A drake was seen on Howmore River, 28 th only
Eider	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen almost every day in small numbers
White-tailed Eagle	2 were seen on 30 th
Golden Eagle	Seen on two dates with five on 30 th
Hen Harrier	Seen virtually daily in small numbers
Buzzard	Common
Kestrel	Fairly common
Corncrake	Seen well on two dates
Quail	A male was heard calling at Howmore, 1 st
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch'
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Common
Lapwing	Common
Knot	Seen on 29 th only

Sanderling	Common
Turnstone	Small numbers seen
Dunlin	Common passage migrant and breeder
Little Stint	An adult in summer plumage at Ardvule, 1 st
Curlew Sandpiper	One in Stinky Bay and one at southern end of Loch Bee, 28 th
Common Sandpiper	Common
Redshank	Very common
Greenshank	One seen on Berneray, 31 st
Bar-tailed Godwit	Non-breeding birds were seen at a couple of sites
Curlew	Fairly common
Whimbrel	Two sightings in different days
Snipe	Common
Red-necked Phalarope	Females seen on three days
Arctic Skua	Seen on three dates
Great Skua	Four seen on 31 st
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Little Gull	An immature on Berneray, 31 st
Little Tern	Fairly common
Common Tern	Common
Arctic Tern	The commonest tern
Black Guillemot	Common
Razorbill	Occasionally seen off-shore
Rock Dove	Very common
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Cuckoo	Often heard regular sightings with four seen, 29 th
Short-eared Owl	Seen almost every day of the trip
Skylark	Common
Swallow	Fairly common
Sand Martin	Noted on 29 th
House Martin	One on 30 th
Rock Pipit	Seen on one date
Meadow Pipit	Common

Pied Wagtail	Seen regularly in small numbers
Hebridean Wren	Common in certain areas
Hebridean Dunnock	Common in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on 3 dates
Wheatear	Common
Stonechat	Noted on 31 st
Hebridean Song Thrush	Seen almost daily
Blackbird	Common
Whitethroat	Singing birds noted on 30 th and 31 st
Sedge Warbler	Seen on two dates
Willow Warbler	Common but localised
Goldcrest	Seen on 30 th only
Hebridean Starling	Very common
Hooded Crow	Seen on 4 dates
Raven	Common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations
Linnet	Seen daily
Lesser Redpoll	Seen on one date
Twite	Seen well on two dates
Greenfinch	Occasional sightings
Goldfinch	Noted on 29 th and Callernish House
Siskin	Seen on one date
Reed Bunting	Sightings on 30 th
Corn Bunting	A few birds seen on 1 st June at Howmore

Mammals:

Otter	One was seen well on 31 st May
Grey Seal	
Common Seal	
Red Deer	
Rabbit	
Harbour Porpoise	

Butterflies:

Green-veined White the commonest species and seen daily

Small Heath

Small Tortoiseshell

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