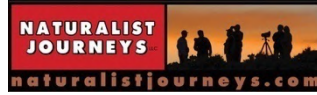
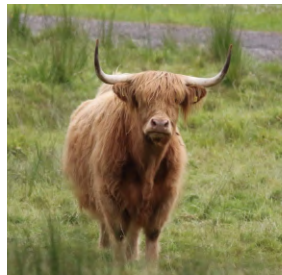


Scottish Highlands and Islands | June 8–19, 2024 Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Mark Warren, Stephen Menzie, and Dave Mehlman, with participants: Barbara, Bernie, Betsy, Carol, Dottie, Gerold, Holly, Jack, Jean, Margaret, Melinda, Ron, and Will



Sat., June 8

**Culloden Battlefield | Clava Cairns | Old Spey Bridge |
Anagach Woods | Mountview**

As we all ate the buffet breakfast at the Brewers Fayre, the restaurant of our hotel, the two local guides, Mark and Stephen, came over from the Heatherlea base and we all introduced ourselves. Packing our gear into the two vans, we all hopped on board to begin our Scottish Highlands adventure. Our first stop for the morning was the Culloden Battlefield just outside Inverness, the site of a major battle in Scottish history where the Jacobite uprising of 1745–1746 was crushed by British government forces led by the Duke of Cumberland. Due to the size of our group, we split into two halves, with the two groups alternating a tour of the battlefield itself led by a docent with a self-guided tour of the small, but very interesting, on-site museum. Of course, although we were



paying close attention to the guide, the battlefield tour participants were also keeping their eyes peeled and we noted the first of what would soon become familiar avian friends, including Meadow Pipit, Eurasian Skylark, Song Thrush, Common Chaffinch, and Common Buzzard. Reuniting after our different tours, we took a short walk on the grounds near the museum, learning more of the common avifauna of the area including Western House-Martin, Coal Tit (which were nesting in a rock wall), White Wagtail, and an apparent Hooded Crow (which hybridizes extensively with Carrion Crow in mainland Scotland).

Finishing here, we drove to the nearby archeological site of Clava Cairns, which protects three Bronze Age circular tombs. We enjoyed our first picnic lunch of the tour here, along with hot coffee and tea for drinks, and explored the site. As usual, while we read the informative signs, we also birded our way around the grounds, finding a nesting Willow Warbler (which proved to be one of the most frequently encountered birds of the tour), a far-off Eurasian Kestrel, singing Common Chiffchaff, and Eurasian Blue and Great Tits. It being mid-afternoon, we then left, made a stop at a Tesco for bathrooms and a few supplies, then stopped by the Old Spey Bridge for some more birding on the way to our hotel for the night. This was a productive stop, despite a light rain, and we found one of the highlights of the tour, White-throated Dipper, almost right away. As expected, they were doing “dipper things” in the flowing river water, albeit with more panache than the American Dipper since they have a bright white throat. Also present were White and Gray Wagtail, a female Common Goldeneye, Common Swifts, and several Common Sandpiper.

Leaving here in late afternoon, we had time for one more stop on the way to the Mountview Hotel. We arrived at the section of Anagach Woods called Poorhouse Woods to observe the traffic at some feeders and enjoy afternoon coffee and tea—a daily ritual on this tour! Perhaps the most interesting bird was our first Great Spotted Woodpecker, the only woodpecker species present in the area. Enjoying the feeders were Eurasian Blue, Coal, and Great Tits; Eurasian Siskins; Common Chaffinch; and an oddly out of place pair of Mallards. In a nearby field, we had glimpses of Mistle Thrush on the ground, the largest true thrush in Scotland. Finishing here, we drove a short distance to the nearby (and quite lovely) Mountview Hotel, our accommodation for the next week (and base of operations of Heatherlea, our in-country operator). We convened before dinner to go over the day’s checklist and then enjoyed the first of many excellent, 3-course dinners in the dining room before heading to our rooms to rest for the next day.

Sun., June 9

**Loch Morlich | Craigellachie Nature Reserve |
Carrbridge | Findhorn Valley**



We began our first full day in the Highlands with a hearty breakfast at the Mountview, including such Scottish specialties as porridge, sausage, bacon, and black pudding. After loading up on food, it was time to load the vans and off we went for a day of exploration. Our first stop was the pine forest surrounding Loch Morlich where we took an easy hike on an old road through a partially logged forest. Here we saw and heard Eurasian Wren (reminiscent of the Winter and Pacific Wren from North America, with which it was formerly considered conspecific), Tree Pipit, Whinchat, and a crossbill (which later proved a Scottish Crossbill based sonogram analysis by Mark). After that we moved to the Loch itself with its attendant Black-headed Gulls, Common Mergansers, Bank and Barn Swallows, and, for a lucky few, a fly-by Red-throated Loon. A quick stop at the bathrooms at the end of the lake yielded decent views of a Goldcrest at a nest, along with Eurasian Blackbird and Common Wood-Pigeon.

Our next stop was the Craigellachie Nature Reserve on a search specifically for European Pied Flycatcher, which are known to nest in boxes there. However, this is a species in great decline in Scotland and we could not find one, despite intense searching with all 16 pairs of binoculars and 3 spotting scopes! However, we had great looks at Spotted Flycatcher, European Greenfinch, and Eurasian Treecreeper to make up for the “dip” on that one. At that point, hunger pangs were setting in so we drove to the town park in Carrbridge for our sandwich lunch, followed by a brief look around. It turns out that Carrbridge is the site of the World Porridge-Making Championships, the winner of which is awarded the coveted golden spurtle (who knew?!).

After lunch, we drove up and into the very scenic Findhorn Valley, making several stops along the way in its extensive forests and open moorlands. The several hours in this Valley produced many special birds for the tour, including our first Eurasian Curlews and Northern Lapwings, a singing Wood Warbler (another species in decline in Scotland, this was our only one of the tour), European Golden-Plover, Red-legged Partridge, and a Peregrine Falcon. Finishing here, we returned to the Mountview for a brief rest and dinner, followed by our daily checklist review.

Mon., June 10 Cairngorms Tomintoul grouse lek | Loch Kinellan | Chanonry Point | Udale Bay Nature Reserve

In a departure from our normal routine during the tour, we were up early and left before breakfast to drive to the nearby Tomintoul sector of Cairngorms National Park to look for activity on a Black Grouse lek. Although lekking season was over, many males still came to the area to check things out (and presumably swap war stories). Parking off the road, we walked a short ways and stood on the side of the road. Soon, with the help of



Mark and Stephen, we were able to pick out the shapes of several male Black Grouse sitting and moving slowly on the far-off hillside. With the use of all our scopes, we could easily pick out the birds' red eye combs, white undertails, and, with the right view, the lyre-shaped tails. One of the sought-after species of the tour, we all had plenty of time for viewing and photographing. Other species noted in the area included Common Gull, flyover Lesser Redpoll, European Robin, and Song Thrush.

We then returned to the Mountview for our proper breakfast and gathered our gear to head out for the rest of the day. Our first stop was the lovely Loch Kinellan, a small wetland surrounded mostly by trees. Out in the lake itself were several Mute Swan, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Coot, and Little and Horned (Slavonian) Grebe; the latter is a scarce breeding species in Scotland and this was the only place we found it. The surrounding vegetation held Reed Bunting, European Goldfinch, Common Cuckoo, and Eurasian Wren and a Red Kite made a spectacular appearance soaring overhead. Our next stop for birding (and picnic lunch) was Chanonry Point, a known spot for cetaceans as well as birds. After arrival, we grabbed our lunches and walked out to the nearby lighthouse, where we promptly spotted several Bottlenose Dolphins cavorting in the current off the point. Seabirds spotted while observing from shore included Common Murre, Razorbill, Northern Gannet, Red-throated Loon, and Red-breasted Merganser. A Dunnock was observed on the walk back to the cars.

We then moved on to the RSPB's Udale Bay Nature Reserve for some coastal marsh and tidal flat viewing. This site had big flocks of Canada and Graylag Geese, Common Shelduck, a very unexpected Ruddy Shelduck (considered provisional by eBird since it could have been either an escapee or a wanderer from established populations in western Europe), Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover, and some very far off Bar-tailed Godwits. The fields across the road from the preserve held some great birds, too, including a Yellowhammer in a tree, Eurasian Linnets, and more skylarks. With this spectacular finish, we were done with the day, so we headed back to Mountview to freshen up, do our bird list, and tuck into another excellent meal before bed.

Tues., June 11 Loch an Eilein | Loch Insh | Insh Marshes | Craigellachie Nature Reserve | Lochindorb

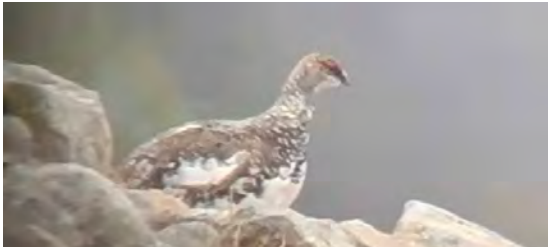
Today, we were back to our normal breakfast time of 7:30 am after which, well nourished, we loaded into our vans for another day birding in the Highlands. Our first destination was Loch an Eilein where we parked and went for a longish, but very gentle, hike through beautiful ancient Caledonian pine forest—everyone marked on the tranquility and peacefulness of this forest with its widely spaced, tall Scottish Pines and verdant understory



of shrubs and forbs. Oddly, the forest was pretty quiet, although the easily recognizable songs of Common Chaffinch periodically echoed through the trees. After being patient, however, our walk yielded some nice birds including Red Crossbill (identified by Mark by sonogram analysis a couple of days later), Eurasian Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and Mistle Thrush. At a feeder, we admired a Red Squirrel (in the same genus as the North American Gray Squirrel, not the North American Red Squirrel!) and an assortment of Chaffinches and various tits coming and going.

After returning to the vans, we then drove to a site nearby where Mark knew about an active Osprey nest near Loch Insh. We got out of the vans and then positioned ourselves and the scopes so we could see the large stick nest, which had an Osprey on it (with a chick or two that periodically raised their heads) as well as another one perched nearby. This species is a conservation success story in Scotland, as they were formerly extirpated and have gradually recolonized many areas in recent decades. We then continued to the very spiffy hide at the Insh Marshes RSPB Preserve where we looked out over a vast wetland from either inside the hide or on the roof and ate our lunch sandwiches. The highlight species here was Western Marsh Harrier, for which Insh Marshes provides one of the few nesting sites in Scotland. With careful and extended watching, we saw a female harrier come and go to an apparent nest site a few times. Also present were Common Redshank, Graylag Goose, Northern Lapwing, and several Black-headed and Common Gulls.

After a bathroom stop in Kingussie, we returned to the Craigellachie Nature Reserve for our second try at European Pied Flycatcher. This time we had much better luck as, after a bit of a wait, an immature male appeared at medium distance and most of the group were able to get on it, though it kept moving around behind branches. While waiting, we were entertained by Coal and Great Tit, Willow Warbler, an Eurasian Treecreeper apparently with a nest nearby, and Eurasian Siskin. After this successful stop, we drove a bit higher up into the highlands to visit the vast Lochindorb, a large lake almost completely surrounded by moorland. This fascinating spot yielded some great birds for the trip list, most importantly including a pair of Arctic Loon (Black-throated Diver) with two chicks—this is one of the few known breeding locations for this species in all of Scotland. Other exciting species at this Loch included Eurasian Wigeon (2 pairs with some chicks—the only sighting of this duck on the tour), Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal (also with chicks), Red Grouse (as the local, resident subspecies of Willow Ptarmigan is known locally), Lesser Black-backed Gull, European Golden-Plover (a pair with some chicks), and European Stonechat. These great sightings brought to conclusion a long, but extremely rewarding, day in the Highlands so we returned to the Mountview for dinner, our checklist, and a night's sleep.



Wed., June 12 Glenshee Ski Centre | Devil's Elbow | Braemar Valley

After our by-now-normal excellent full breakfast at the Mountview, we set off for a day at higher elevations, the weather having improved enough by this point that we felt they were doable. Although the highest elevations were still too snowy to attempt, Mark knew of one of the ski centres where it was possible to ride a chair lift up the mountain, which would bring us to within a short walk of higher elevation habitats and their unusual birds. So, off we went after loading our gear into the vans and, after about 2 hours and a dramatic sighting of a Short-eared Owl at the Lecht Ski Area along the way, we arrived at the Glenshee Ski Centre, Scotland's largest ski area. Arriving at the parking lot, we quickly scanned the surrounding mountains and moorlands, picking out several Red Grouse here and there along with some Red Deer and a Mountain Hare or two.

After that, several of the group felt up for the chair ride to the top of the lift, so we bought tickets, got in line, and enjoyed a peaceful ride up about 300 feet higher than the base. At that point, it was a short, but steep and rocky, hike up to the top of the nearby munro to stand at the summit at about 3,065 feet. As expected, it was cold and windy up there, but the scenery—moorland in every direction with far-off snow-capped peaks—was incredible and totally worth the trip. After some searching, Mark and Stephen finally located a nicely posing male Rock Ptarmigan on a nearby rock outcrop, that species' preferred habitat. With the scopes, everyone had decent views of this unique species, presently in its summer plumage with only restricted areas of white showing. Deeming our mountain-top quest complete and successful, we rode the chair lift back down the mountain, where we joined up with those who had decided not to make the trip.

We then continued along the highway a short distance to the set of curves known as the "Devil's Elbow" where we pulled off to the side of the road and enjoyed our picnic lunch sandwiches. Birding as always, while eating at this spot we had great views of a pair of Northern Wheatears, showing off their white tails, another White-throated Dipper in a small stream, and a foraging Ring Ouzel hopping around in the grasses. Concluding our lunch stop, we turned the cars around and headed back. We made a quick stop at the Lecht Ski Area again, re-finding the Short-eared Owl sitting alongside the road. Great views were had of this superb bird (the only owl of the entire tour!) as it sat and then glided off to forage for the rest of the day. Our next stop on the way back was the town of Braemar, where we explored a bit and saw 2 Long-tailed Tits fly over the car park and heard an Eurasian Blackcap singing (oddly, this species proved very difficult to find on this tour). A final stop in the moorlands on the return trip yielded beautiful views of a pair of Red Kites, Common Buzzard, Common Raven, and yet more Willow Warblers. Returning to the Mountview, we had an early dinner followed by the bird checklist and then off to bed to rest for an exciting day ahead.



Thur., June 13

**MacDuff | Troup Head boat trip | Banff | Coastal Trail
at Whitehills Beach | Bogmoor | Spey Bay | Loch Spynie
Nature Reserve**

With the improving weather, today was the designated day for our boat trip off the northeast coast of Scotland. Therefore, we started with an early breakfast due to the drive time to MacDuff from where the boat would depart. After breakfast and assembling our gear, we split into two equal sized groups for the day, one in each van led by Mark and Stephen, respectively. Both groups did the same thing, except that Stephen's group went on the boat trip to Troup Head in the morning and then visited land-based sites in the afternoon, while Mark's group went on land in the morning and then took the same boat trip in the afternoon. Arriving at the MacDuff harbor before our schedule departure, we had a chance to use the facilities and note a few birds such as a Rock Pipit on the breakwaters and Great Black-backed Gulls perching nearby. At that point, the boat was ready, so we boarded the very stable Sea Cat under the command of Captain Harold and set off for the morning trip along the coast to Troup Head and back.

This wonderful boat ride under mostly sunny skies and a gentle swell was one of the highlights of the tour, without a doubt. The spectacle of thousands of kittiwakes, gannets, fulmars, murre, and razorbills coming and going from their cliff nesting sites is impossible to describe in words, but we delighted in every moment. In fact, we were surrounded by various species right from the start, with a few Black Guillemots right near the harbor and increasing numbers of Razorbills, Common Murres, Northern Gannets, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Northern Fulmars as we neared the big nesting cliffs. A few Atlantic Puffins were about, to provide an additional splash of alcid color, along with Great Cormorants, European Shags, and a few Common Eider. Stephen's sharp eyes picked out a Parasitic Jaeger among the avian crowds, a nice addition to our day's bird list and, at least twice, flocks of Common Scoter flew by at a distance. Although we did not spot any whales or dolphins, several Gray Seals on the rocks added a mammalian component to our species list. In addition to birds, the boat trip took us past the very picturesque coastal towns of Gardenstown, Crovie, and Pennan, situated right on the shore under towering cliffs. The town of Pennan is famous in some circles as the site of filming for many scenes of the movie Local Hero.

Returning to the dock, we got off the boat and drove to Banff Harbor, very close by, for our sandwich lunch on the breakwater overlooking the River Deveron estuary. While eating, we enjoyed great views of some Sandwich Terns (the only ones of the tour), Common Mergansers, and White Wagtail. Since both groups arrived in Banff at the same time, the two groups got to swap stories about the varied activities that lay ahead for each. After



lunch, Mark's group repeated the boat trip while Stephen's continued for the afternoon on the land-based part of the day. The first stop for the latter was nearby Whitehills Beach, where we walked a short distance on the Coastal Trail near the Red Well. This short stop proved very productive for birding. Highlights included detailed views of Eurasian Linnet, our only Corn Bunting of the tour, Dunnock, and a Greater Whitethroat perched in a tree against the skyline.

Our next stop was the town of Bogmoor where we stopped specifically to search for Eurasian Tree Sparrow. At the spot, there was a large cluster of nest boxes placed in the trees; although most were occupied by House Sparrows, we did manage to find a few Tree Sparrows in some of the boxes, allowing us to add this declining species to our trip list. Other birds present included a large number of Rooks, European Goldfinch, and Common Wood-Pigeon. Finishing our brief visit here (a successful mission!) we continued to Spey Bay on the coast at the Scottish Dolphin Centre. After parking the car, we walked over to the nearby cobble berm overlooking the beach and then a short way along the mouth of the Spey River. In the ocean were numerous gulls and a few Razorbills; "eagle-eye" Stephen also spotted a Parasitic Jaeger sitting on the water with his scope and everyone was able to get on it with a bit of work. The estuary of the Spey was full of birds, including an Osprey fly-by, Mute Swan, Arctic and Common Tern, a small group of Sanderling, and a Common Sandpiper. A walk along the trail by the river yielded Willow Warbler and a heard-only Sedge Warbler.

Our final stop of the day was the Loch Spynie RSPB Reserve where we watched the feeders for a while. We had great views of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Common Chaffinch, Eurasian Goldfinch, and Yellowhammer to put a conclusion to an excellent day in the field. We then drove back to the Mountview to unpack, unwind, have another excellent dinner, and a great review of a super day of birding. Then, off for a well-earned rest to prepare for the next day.

Fri., June 14

**Anagach Woods | Cromdale | Glenlivet Estate | distillery
tour | Abernethy Golf Club**

Today was our last full day in the field while based at the Mountview and we started with our usual delightful and filling breakfast followed by organizing our gear for the day and loading up in the vans. Our first destination was back to the Anagach Woods to try to find a few species we might have missed on our first visit to a different part of these extensive pine forests. We enjoyed another delightful, easy walk through the tall forests, noting the signs with Capercaillie on them to give us some hope! Many of our by now familiar avian friends were



present, either in sight, song, or both: Willow Warbler, Common Chaffinch, Eurasian Treecreeper and Wren, and Tree Pipit. Our first good sighting, however, was glimpses of an Eurasian Jay flying through the trees. Fortunately, this lovely jay perched briefly on a branch allowing most in the group to get views of it either in binoculars or a spotting scope. The second great sighting was of a male Common Redstart sitting way in the top of a pine—it was first detected by its song. Its convenient perch allowed us to put all the scopes on it for extended views, albeit backlit ones. This proved, oddly, to be the only Redstart of the tour.

On our hike back out to the vans, however, Mark and Stephen brought the group to an abrupt halt by detecting some Crested Tit calls, one of our most highly sought-after species! Sure enough, after some diligent searching, we saw a small flock of four tits foraging in the nearby pines. Although constantly moving, they did not fly away and everyone was able to get some kind of decent views of this very interesting tit species. In fact, after a bit of time, some of the birds came down to eye-level in some low pines next to the road for eye-popping close views! It became evident that this was a family group, probably with 2 adults and 2 fledged chicks. This extraordinary stroke of luck really made our day and, to celebrate, Mark took the group to a nearby spot with a large patch of Twinflower, rare in Scotland, and we enjoyed our morning coffee there. We finished the morning with a quick stop at Mark's house so he could pick up something and, while he went inside, we birded the surrounding landscape and discovered a Greater Whitethroat foraging in some low vegetation—a fortunate sighting since not all of the group had found one earlier.

We returned to the Mountview for lunch and a quick break, after which we drove to the Glenlivet Estate for some pre-distillery tour birding. High on a hillside in one of the estate's forestry tracts, we scanned the landscape and had views of two Golden Eagles on a far-off crag. We then drove down to the distillery itself, having the great luck of seeing a Pine Marten cross the road in front of the vans. Arriving at the distillery, we were met by our guide Ian and given a thorough tour of the process of whisky making, at least as practiced by Glenlivet! This fascinating tour included some talks by Ian, a multimedia presentation of some of the local people the distillery works with, and a visit to the distilling room with its enormous copper stills. We then visited a warehouse to see actual barrels of whisky being aged and were quite impressed by the amount of whisky lost through evaporation over time—no wonder old whiskies are so expensive! The conclusion of the tour was, as expected, a tasting of three different malts of Glenlivet, followed by a swing through the store for those interested. Returning to the Mountview reasonably early, we worked through our checklist before dinner and then, with some regret, enjoyed our last dinner at Mountview.



As it dusk became closer, a small group of us reconvened in the Mountview lobby with Mark and we walked the short distance to the nearby Abernethy Golf Club for some crepuscular birding. Arriving at the course, we walked onto the fairways (obviously, no golfers present at this late hour!) and began to watch and wait. With great luck, every once in a while the distinctive silhouette of a flying Eurasian Woodcock came zooming by, distinctive with its long beak and medium size! In fact, we had several fly-bys coming and going in different directions so that there had to have been at least two different birds. After having had these great looks at this life bird for most, we returned to the Mountview before it was completely dark, having the extraordinary luck of seeing another Pine Marten cross a driveway along the way. What a finish to an epic day!

Sat., June 15 Travel to Mull | Fishnish | Dervaig | Loch Frisa | Tobermory

Today marked the start of the “Islands” part of our tour. We had a slightly earlier breakfast, loaded up everything in the vans, and then began our journey to the Isle of Mull. The first stop, after passing through the town of Fort William and by Ben Nevis, the highest point in the U.K., was the Corran Ferry, a short car ferry ride across Loch Linnhe. After landing on the far side at Ardgour, we pulled off to the side of the road to admire the Black Guillemots nesting in small nest platforms nearby, along with some European Shags and Great Cormorants. We then drove a little bit for a roadside stop along the Loch to admire the views, enjoy our morning coffee and biscuits, and spot a few Harbor Seals and Arctic Terns. We then continued to the queue for the Lochaline—Fishnish Ferry, the final boat which would actually take us over to the Isle of Mull. During this longer ride, we all got out and went up to the passenger deck to enjoy the ride.

Arriving at Fishnish, we disembarked and drove to a nearby picnic area with overviews of the channel for our picnic lunch. While there, we set up the scopes and got decent, though far-away, looks of a White-tailed Eagle sitting high in a conifer (which had been spotted by Mark and Stephen from the ferry as we approached the shore). Another one of the more sought-after birds, we were very happy to have seen this magnificent bird, though of course we hoped for more sightings during the rest of the tour!. While eating we also noted a few other things such as Willow Warbler, Eurasian Siskin, and Gray Heron. After lunch, we drove west across the island to the small town of Dervaig to do some birding along a coastal bay. This proved to be an excellent stop for birds! Amid a large flock of Graylag Geese, Mark and Stephen spotted a lone Pink-footed Goose, at this point in time a very late, lingering wintering bird, which was the only one of the tour. While scanning the shoreline, Dave noticed a flash of bright blue fly through the scope view and immediately we all began looking for a



Common Kingfisher. After a lot of effort, we finally located where the bird was perching, perhaps near a nest, and everyone got decent, if a bit far-off, views of it through the scopes. Arguably one of the prettiest species on the tour, this also proved to be the only one we found. Other species in this diverse area included Canada Goose (an introduced species in the U.K.), Common Redshank, Hen Harrier, and another White-tailed Eagle flying majestically overhead.

We then headed back over to the east side of Mull, making a detour along a road through the moor and shrublands toward Loch Frisa. During a stop along the road for our afternoon coffee and tea, a few birds made an appearance, notably Hooded Crow, Common Buzzard, and a pair of Whinchats. Perhaps most interesting here, however, was a great wildflower display, including Bell Heather, Mother of Thyme, and Tutsan. Along with the flowers was a lovely Cinnabar Moth, very distinctive with its red and black wings. But, best of all, was a Slow Worm found by Holly and Gerold that was basking in the sun! At first appearing like some kind of snake, the Slow Worm is actually a legless lizard—a fascinating discovery indeed. At this point, the afternoon was fast ending up, so we drove to the very picturesque town of Tobermory for a bit of free time to explore this little harbor town. After reuniting, we drove south to our hotel for our days on Mull: the excellent Glenforsa Hotel in the small town of the same name. We settled into our comfortable rooms and then had a great dinner in the dining room, followed by our daily checklist, and then called it a day.

Sun., June 16 Loch na Keal | Treshnish Isles, Lunga, Staffa boat trip

We started the day with breakfast at the Glenforsa then prepared for a day on a boat off the west coast of Mull. The boat left from Ulva Ferry on the west side of the Isle so we had time to make several stops around the very scenic Loch na Keal to do some birding. This very productive Loch yielded a non-breeding plumage Common Loon, a small flock of Red-breasted Mergansers, White-tailed Eagle, Eurasian Curlew, and a pair of Eurasian Otters swimming at a bit of a distance from shore. We arrived at Ulva Ferry a bit early, so had time to enjoy our morning coffee and flapjack before boarding the Jack B with the Turus Mara company for our day long excursion out to some of the western islands off Mull. Heading out into the ocean under mostly cloudy skies with a moderate swell, we soon arrived at the Treshnish Isles which we circled in the boat. The isles and the waters surrounding them were full of Atlantic Puffin, European Shag, and Black Guillemot and a few of us who were watching carefully spotted some Manx Shearwaters.

Our next stop on the boat trip was the Isle of Lunga where we made a very interesting and unique landing using a floating pier which was pushed up against a rock to allow everyone to disembark. With the assistance of many



hands everyone made it ashore and walked across the rocky shore onto the grasses of the island and climbed up the short cliff. On arriving at the top of the cliff, we discovered the wonderful sight of many Atlantic Puffins scrambling around their nest burrows which were right at the edge of the grassy cliff. What a treat to watch these amazing birds come and go! In amongst the puffins were also a few Razorbills. All this provided endless opportunities for photographs and we had over an hour and a half to discover this delightful place. While on the island, we ate our picnic lunches and discovered a few other birds, including several Great Skuas, Rock and Meadow Pipit, and European Shag. A few in the group saw Twite there and Stephen and Mark heard a Corn Crake to top off the list.

Our allotted time on Lunga being up, we made our way carefully back down the cliff and across the rocks to the boat's floating pier, which had been pushed up against a rock again. Loading up the boat, a careful count was made by the crew and we set off for the Isle of Staffa, our final destination of the day. On our way to Staffa, sharp-eyed Mark picked out a rapidly flying Pomarine Jaeger low over the water, to provide one of the more interesting sightings of the tour, and more Manx Shearwaters were dipping and diving over the waves. We approached Staffa from its southern end, allowing us magnificent views (from both sides of the boat!) of the amazing basalt columns which make up its distinctive face, punctured by a few wave-cut caves. After the views, the captain navigated us to a tricky tie-up at the concrete dock and all those who wished climbed ashore. Once on the island, everyone had the option to either hike along the basalt cliffs to Fingal's Cave at the south end or climb a steep wooden ladder to the top of the island. Most opted for the Cave hike, which involved an uneven, but not very hard, walk using the broken off, hexagonal basalt columns to step on. This dramatic cave cuts far back into the basalt and has been visited over the years by numerous famous people including Queen Victoria and William Wadsworth. The few who bravely ventured up the wooden stairs to the top of Staffa with Mark were rewarded by great views of a Twite.

After our various hikes, everyone on the island returned to the boat and we started the return trip to Ulva Ferry via the south shore of Ulva, thus completing a full loop around this large island with no roads. On the way, we saw good numbers of Manx Shearwaters, for some reason occurring this afternoon close inshore. We returned to the ferry dock, disembarked, then headed back to the Glenforsa for a rest, dinner, and a wrap-up of a magnificent day on the water.



Mon., June 17 **Iona**

Up at our usual time for breakfast at the Glenforsa, we then loaded the vans and headed on the long drive to the far southwest of Mull and the town of Fionnphort. There, we parked in the car park, enjoyed a quick morning coffee, then walked down to the ferry landing to board the ferry for the short ride to Iona, easily visible across the channel. This was to be a day on foot so we walked on board the boat, enjoyed the short ride, and then disembarked at the Iona Ferry Terminal. Our first activity upon arrival was to search for Corn Crake, a rare and declining species in the U.K. that still has a bit of a stronghold on Iona. Walking a short distance from the ferry landing to a grassy area, we stood, watched, and listened. Sure enough, after a while, the raspy, two-note call was heard from deep in the grasses. However, even though we had many observers and binoculars looking, no sign of the bird itself was actually detected—which is normally the case for this species! We consoled ourselves, however, with an extremely good sighting of a Sedge Warbler perching both on a phone line and on a fence post, allowing good scope views of this cryptic species. Also about were Rook, Hooded Crow, Bank and Barn Swallow, and genuine Rock Pigeons.

After this bit of birding, we walked over to the world-famous Iona Abbey and everyone gave themselves a personal tour of the Abbey, which was originally founded by St. Columba in 563. The buildings standing today are renovated versions of an abbey first built in the early 1200's. Touring this site and feeling the peace and tranquility of the place and the Isle itself was a wonderful feature of this tour. As everyone finished their tour at their own pace, we reconvened near the visitor center for our picnic lunch. After lunch, we all walked back to the ferry landing, hearing (and not seeing!) another Corn Crake in the process. Arriving at the landing, the group had some ice cream and free time, if desired. Another try was also made to see the Corn Crake we had first heard at the same spot, but again we heard nothing but calls. At that point, the time to catch our return ferry had come, so we boarded, took the short ride across, and loaded in our vans again. During the drive back to Glenforsa, we stopped at the scenic Loch Beg Bridge for coffee, snacks, and some final birding of the day (which produced another White-tailed Eagle!). We then returned to the Glenforsa for a break, our daily checklist, and the final great dinner at Glenforsa.

Tues., June 18 **Loch Sunnart | Urquhart Castle | Travel to Inverness**

With some regret on everyone's part, today was the day we had to return to Inverness to conclude the tour. However, we began with another fine breakfast at the Glenforsa, before carefully packing all our gear in the vans for one last time. Everything loaded, we departed, retracing our steps in the van and taking the ferry to



Lochaline. After disembarking, we drove across the mainland and spent some time birding around the east end of Loch Sunart. Although pretty quiet, bird-wise, we were able to spot two Common Greenshanks foraging among the rocks and seaweeds, the only ones found on the entire tour. After this stop, we proceeded to the second ferry to Corran, crossed, and continued making our way northeast, following the dramatic Great Glen. We enjoyed our final picnic lunch stop of the tour on the shores of the oddly redundantly named Loch Lochy and then continued to our major destination for the afternoon: Urquhart Castle on the shores of Loch Ness near the town of Drumnadrochit.

Urquhart Castle was a very important site in many aspects of Scottish history. The current ruins date from the 13th century onward, although the castle itself was blown up in 1692 by government forces as a result of the Jacobite rebellion. What remains primarily reflects the long tenure of Clan Grant at the site; the Clan made many modifications and additions over the centuries, many of which are still visible. This was our one castle visit of the tour and we made the most of it, walking through the remaining foundations, watching the short informational video, and admiring the trebuchet. Plus, it had the benefit of being right on Loch Ness, the one Loch in Scotland probably everyone in the world has heard of! Alas, Nessie was not reported the day we were there, although there certainly were many people around to observe it if it had made an appearance. Satisfied with our castle tour, we continued and stopped at Dochgarroch Lock for our final afternoon coffee, tea, and cookies of the tour (and a few group photos). This lock allows navigation to/from Loch Ness and the River Ness, which leads to Inverness; we were able to watch a few small boats get locked through.

After coffee/tea, it was time to complete our journey so we continued northeast through the town of Inverness to the Courtyard at Inverness Airport where our tour came to an end. We unpacked all the gear, with most of us staying the night and then either departing tomorrow or heading to extra days in Scotland. Mark took Bernie, Jean, and Stephen to the train station for their separate trains so we all said good-bye at that point. The folks staying at the hotel checked in and had some time to organize before we all met later in the evening in the Courtyard's dining room for a final, post-farewell dinner.

Wed., June 19 Departures

Our tour ended today with various departures home, continued stays in Inverness, or onward adventures in Scotland. With great memories of this wonderful adventure, we headed out into the world on our various travels.

Photos: Group Photo (Dave Mehlman - DM), Atlantic Puffin (Mark Warren - MW), Highland Cow (DM), Northern Gannet (Barbara Hamilton - BH), Short-eared Owl (Stephen Menzie - SM), Group at Culloden (DM), Ring-necked Pheasant (BH), Group Birding (DM), Meadow Pipit (DM), Black-headed Gull (DM), Carrbridge (DM), Findhorn River (DM), Plough Inn (DM), Mute Swan (BH), Great Tit (BH), Great Spotted Woodpecker (BH), Chaffinch (BH), Watching Rock Ptarmigan (DM), Rock Ptarmigan (DM), Braemar Valley (DM), Scenic (John Naughton - JN), Atlantic Puffin (BH), Common Murre (BH), Northern Gannet (BH), Troup Head Gannet colony (BH), Herring Gull (BH), Glenlivet Tour (DM), Foxglove (DM), Highland Cow (William Hamilton - WH), Black Guillemot (DM), Tobermory waterfront (DM), Staffa (DM), Staffa Boat (DM), Atlantic Puffins (JN), Group on boat (DM), Iona Abbey (DM), Iona Scenic (JN), Razorbills (DM), Common Cuckoo (SM), Group (JN), White-tailed Eagle (SM), Common Bottlenose Dolphin (SM)