

Scottish Highlands & Islands | Trip Report

Aug. 10-20, 2024 | by Heatherlea Guide Mark Warren



Heatherlea Guide: Mark Warren, with participants: Kathy, Maureen, Valerie, Lynn, Helen & Dennis, and Gina.

Sat., Aug. 10

Meet, greet and pleasantries exchanged, the group were soon relaxing into one another's company and full of chat as we headed down the A9 and into the Cairngorms National Park. Drive-by Red Kite and Raven were missed by most (there would be other chances) our first true wildlife stop was at the 'Old Bridge' crossing the River Spey. A more than apt place to start given the local title 'Speyside' derives from this iconic river. It was blustery on the top but we still found a Scotch Argus Butterfly enjoying the sun before dropping to riverside path, where some birds were seen. A Gray Heron stood motionless in hunting mode, and swarms of Bank Swallow, contained a few each of Barn Swallow, House Martin. We spent time watching a lone Common Swift blast back and forth, all the birds scattering when a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew through. We spent plenty of time looking at the wildflowers, noticing Water Crowfoot in the river and lots of Devil's Bit Scabious on the bank. At least one Small Scabious Mining Bee was noted among the many flies and commoner Bumblebees too. As is typical for a group from '*across the pond*', we paid homage to Eurasian Wren and European Robin before finding the bird we had actually come for – White-throated Dipper. It took an age for one to show up but once it did, we had lovely views of an adult diving and perching on the rocks. A second was seen as we returned to the bus.

A roadside stop on the other side of Grantown on Spey for a field full of Rook and Jackdaw were two lifers in as many minutes for some of the group. A feeding station beside the golf course gave us more new birds, though a close Red Squirrel was admired first. With a coffee and homemade shortbread in hand, Chaffinch, Siskin, Greenfinch, Blue, Great and Coal Tit all came and went at the busy feeders. It took Great Spotted



Woodpecker a bit more time to come into the free buffet, skittish to begin with, two juveniles with distinctive red crowns showed nicely in the end.

It was over to Nethy Bridge next, the home of Heatherlea and where we would spend the rest of the afternoon taking in the traditional Highland games. Timing our arrival just right, we were well placed to see the Pipe Bands march through the village and onto the games field. After a quick picnic in the Mark's mother-in-law's garden (an artist exhibiting at the games), we roamed freely around the site. We watched the various competitions, from the Scottish dancing to the much-anticipated Caber Toss, and everything in-between. Later, we gathered at the Mountview Hotel for the first of many lively evening meals together, the colour palette of Crimson, Scarlet, Red and whether any of these actually featured in the Dipper's plumage was the hot topic of the night!

Sun., Aug. 11

With the promise of a glorious summer's day ahead, we had no hesitation in heading for the higher hills in the Cairngorms National Park to look for high altitude species. Screaming Common Swift and chattering House Martin at the hotel set us on our way, and our tour still in its early stages, roadside delays were inevitable. A field lined with Red Kite was a justified one! Counting seven and each one glowing brightly in the sun, we opted not to discuss shades of red this time, watching two Brown Hare run around the adjacent field instead. After this good start, a lone Curlew still in breeding habitat at the Lecht was another lifer for some of the group.

Having worked our way to, and then through Braemar, we parked up at the Glenshee car park to scan the Cairnwell. A perfect windless day it might have been, but with no sign of any of our targets and seeming quiet, we opted to take the chairlift up for a better look around. Greeted by spectacular views in every direction, while the group took photos of the scenery Mark set about checking the first area of boulder scree and low and behold found a male Rock Ptarmigan, or at least the head of one! After a scope view for all, from a new position we could see a bit more and after a short wait he even began to walk around. The thermal imager came in handy in tracking down Mountain Hare, one pausing long enough to be viewed through the scopes. After another look at the Ptarmigan from a different angle and even more appreciation of the mountainous scenery we saved our legs, taking the chairlift back down.

We took lunch a little further south, the Devil's Elbow car park a good place to view the hills as we began our quest for raptors. A brief Northern Wheatear and vocal Meadow Pipit were first, and on a day when the Ling Heather was one of the highlights, Valerie picked out some of the last remaining Bell Heather in flower amongst it. A White-tailed Eagle over the distant hills was also surrounded by something more numerous, namely half a dozen Raven shadowing its every move. A ringtail Hen Harrier among the paragliders was even



further away, and barely worth the effort it went so high. From another viewpoint north of the Cairnwell the raptors were no closer, a juvenile Northern Goshawk soaring high overhead before a Golden Eagle appeared briefly. We would try again for them later in the week. Some downtime (and an ice cream) in Braemar was welcome on a what had become a very warm day. Further stops on our way home were quiet but for our first Graylag Geese, though the scenic drive through the pink heather clad hills was even better second time around.

Mon., Aug. 12

In a marked change to the weather, we began the day in blustery winds yet found shelter under the trees in the Abernethy Forest. Walking the trail at Dell Woods, birds called around us but we also spent time looking at the forest floor. Amidst the heather, mosses and fruiting (berry) plants, various fungi and wildflowers including a few (part over) Creeping Ladies Tresses were admired. We heard Eurasian Treecreeper, Coal, Great and Crested Tit but seeing these proved tricky, and it wasn't until we took a rest at a bench that we had more luck, a Spotted Flycatcher showing nicely. Groups of crossbills had also been heard flying over, and when a pair dropped into the Scots Pine trees right in front of us, the male showed well albeit briefly. Darkening skies, followed by thunder, rain and even a few flashes of lightning put paid to any real chance of seeing much else, so we trudged around the rest of the trail trying not to step on the Black Slugs and a Common Frog now in the path.

After a coffee watching some feeders, we moved out onto the moor appreciative of an improvement in the weather. The large loch at Lochindorb was quiet, but tales of the Wolf of Badenoch's exploits, his castle and a few roadside Meadow Pipit kept us entertained. Our target was Red Grouse, and we found two family groups, the scope coming in handy for the first and the minibus-come-bird hide getting us closer to the second. After failing to find any in the same habitat yesterday, it was satisfying to see this new UK endemic, only recently been split from Willow Ptarmigan. A Eurasian Kestrel hovered near the road as we heading back towards civilisation, finding Carrbridge a pleasant place to have lunch. Collared Dove was seen here and all paid homage to the 300-year-old 'Pack Horse' aka 'coffin' bridge, before continuing our quest for forest birds.

In the woods at Deshar, a Common Hawker dragonfly and squeaks and calls from unseen birds were noted as we made our way to some forest feeders. Quiet here to begin, the warming sun made up for the lack of birds. A local arrived to top up the peanuts and expecting an exodus of birds, the opposite happened with more Coal Tit arriving and suddenly our target bird too - Crested Tit! The chap hadn't even finished when one appeared above his head, and he was a useful landmark in the early directions. Soon we had two in, both showing brilliantly in surrounding trees for around ten minutes. A fabulous encounter! Back at the bus, a shepherd, his dogs and 4x4 combined to give us flight views of Eurasian Teal. A Goldcrest flicked through the car park trees and a White (Pied) Wagtail around a pond, two more new species for the tour.



Milton Loch proved to be a good site for new birds too, with Mute Swan, Tufted Duck and Little Grebe all seen without even getting out of the bus. The latter was a real cracker, showing really close and in full summer plumage. Our last stop of the day was on the forest edge at Tomvaich, and no sooner parked we could hear crossbills calling in the trees overhead. The Sitka Spruces here are tall, and it took a little effort to get the views we wanted but with patience a male perched in the open and two or three streaky juveniles showed regularly as they tore of cones to feed on. Sound recordings taken by Mark proved these to be Red Crossbill, nice birds to end our day.

Tues., Aug. 13

In a change of scenery, we ventured away from the Cairngorm National Park for the first time and north to the Moray Coast. A requested stop to look at the Thomas Telford Bridge over the River Spey at Craigellachie was well worth a little time, and we would continue to follow the river ultimately to its end at the sea. Coastal farmland, namely the barley fields for the Whiskey industry are an important bird habitat of the Moray region, and we saw some of the species benefiting. A family of Corn Bunting were scoped on a wire, had a distant Yellowhammer on another and watched Tree Sparrow feeding young at a nestbox.

On arrival at Spey Bay, it was a bit of an overload on the senses, and so many new birds to look at, we began methodically with the terns and gulls roosting on the shingle. Picking out three species, Sandwich Tern were the most numerous, with a few each of Common and Little Tern – the latter a potential future split from Least Tern so is one to keep an eye on! Among the *Larid* (in size order), were Black-headed, Common, Herring, Lesser Black-backed and plenty of Great Black-backed Gull. In a mixture of plumages, gulls are rarely straightforward, and a pod of Bottlenose Dolphin did their best to distract from Mark's ageing lesson. The gulls flushing into the air signalled a likely raptor, and sure enough at least two Osprey put in an appearance during our session here. A large flock of Common Merganser worked the flowing water of the river, and we picked out Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Redshank and Ruddy Turnstone in various parts of the estuary.

Noticing a lot more waders flying around the creeks and channels on the other side of the river, we relocated there and walked out on the shingle to a suitable viewpoint. A local birder was already set up, and helped us pick out single Ruff, Common Sandpiper and Black-tailed Godwit plus two Common Snipe among the many Dunlin and Ringed Plover feeding on the exposed mud. In one channel a Pink-footed Goose was a surprise, with Eurasian Teal, Gray Heron and Redshank in the same place. A few Pied (White) Wagtail were seen, and after several flyovers we finally got a good look at a male Linnet as we walked back. Lunch on the edge of the estuary gave us a few more birds. A group of Eurasian Oystercatchers flew west, a Whimbrel (Eurasian subspecies) came in off the sea and a Yellowhammer posed nice and close.

Deviating away from the coast, we bumped our way down the bumpy track to Loch Spynie RSPB reserve. At the parking area, the common birds at the feeders were by now familiar, so we walked down to view the



water from the hide instead. Graylag Goose, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Coot and Little Grebe were plentiful, while a Gray Heron and Eurasian Moorhen showed just outside the windows. A floating raft was still occupied by breeding Common Terns, and we saw several adults coming in with fish for hungry youngsters. Guide Mark's excitement levels rose a notch when a juvenile Western Marsh Harrier appeared. Still a scarce species in northernmost Scotland, it was even more of a surprise when a second, this time an adult female was sighted over nearby fields as we drove away from the site... Local breeding perhaps?!

But for distant Eurasian Oystercatcher, Gray Heron, big gulls and closer people and their dogs, our next stop at Lossiemouth didn't offer much so we didn't linger. Burghead was much better, and timing our visit with the incoming tide we got the shorebirds in close. Brightly plumaged Ruddy Turnstone, brightly legged Redshank and cute Ringed Plover were the dominant species, that us until we found a close group of Red Knot. And some of them were actually red, likely having recently migrated south to join the summering flock of non-breeders often here. With the wind increasing there seemed to be more offshore too, Northern Gannet and Black-legged Kittiwake passing east with greater frequency. A Northern Fulmar was trickier to see, banking back and forth at speed. Time ticking on, a drive-about to try and find Partridge failed largely down to the height of the barley fields and our need to make a 6pm dinner reservation. And so, a Eurasian Magpie would be the day's final bird, not that we would see much more at Findhorn in the now gale force wind! In the pub for dinner was the best place to be, and after more food than we could eat, local gin and good laughs, we returned to base ready for tomorrow's early start.

Wed., Aug. 14

A coupe of hours travelling north-west saw us arrive into Ullapool, which with its own micro-climate was markedly green compared to the '*beautifully bleak*' moorland we had driven through to get there. A day devoted to watching seabirds, we boarded the MV Seaforth for the Minch crossing, took up our positions as the ferry set sail down Loch Broom. A flying Red-throated Loon was one of the first birds seen, followed quickly by flotillas of European Shag. Our first pod of Common Dolphin showed up early too, called by a whale watcher on board and we would go on to benefit from his cetacean spotting skills. Small rafts of Common Murre became a regular sight, and once we had our '*eye in*' we started to pick out the squat shape, and blacker Razorbill among them. Three Great Skua (or Bonxie as they are referred to in Old Norse) had been attracted to a fishing boat, and one of these decided to follow the ferry offering the perfect flyby. Northern Gannet, Black-legged Kittiwake and Arctic Tern were our next seabirds, all three seen as we neared more open water.

Passing the Summer Isles, a White-tailed Eagle was keeping look out from Priest Island, a breeding site for European Storm Petrel. A second, immature eagle was far easier to see flying up and cruising back and forth for a while. Entering the Minch proper, occasional Northern Fulmar cruised by, their white heads and albatross like flight style really standing out this time. Far trickier to get a good look at were the European



Storm Petrel, the wind, waves and fact that they were barely the size of a Swallow making for a tough task. The first shout of whale 'blows' went up, and though we didn't catch a sight of these two cetaceans (a Fin and Humpback) we got luckier with the third. Surfacing close to the boat, we were all well placed despite the gathered crowd to see the magnificent fluke as it deep dived. A juvenile Parasitic Jaeger came in and followed the boat for a while, and as we neared Stornoway, a few Manx Shearwater were seen at last, as was a surprise juvenile Little Gull.

Our lunch eaten and an hour of rest, our ferry was on the move again and heading out from Stornoway Harbour. Significantly windier, the sea state was going to be a lot more of a challenging this time, but we were quickly onto pods of Common Dolphin again. A group of 40+ Manx Shearwater all got up together offering a better chance to view them, and Great Skua and a Parasitic Jaeger, and adult dark morph this time were all seen early in the return leg. Mark saw a Red (aka Gray) Phalarope floating around on the sea but none of the group connected, faring better when a Sooty Shearwater raced past the ferry mid-crossing. A few large whale blows were seen (likely one each of Humpback and Fin, but no actual whales seen), and as we started to relax when the ship entered Loch Broom again. Half a dozen Great Skua had latched onto what was likely the same fishing boat as earlier, and some six hours after we had first departed, we moored up back at Ullapool. It had been an enjoyable day at sea, despite being a bit breezier than we would have liked.

Thurs., Aug. 15

A full day dedicated to exploring the wild west coast, our first stop overlooking Loch Achnault would have been a random one, had it not been for a known pair of Whooper Swan here. Keeping a low profile at the back, careful positioning of the scope around the rowan bushes got us the desired life bird. The view down into Loch Maree from Glen Docherty is widely regarded as one of the best in Scotland and definitely worthy of another pause before continuing to Gairloch. Overlooking the bay from a raised viewpoint, a brief downpour delayed us finding Red-throated Loon which were the main target here. A Song Thrush in the bushes was nice too and we might have stayed longer had it not been for the persistent Highland midges! Various local amenities proved useful before we found the beach a less insectivorous place to watch birds. More Red-throated Loon included a close one just off the beach, though the Arctic Loon we found further out gave frustratingly brief views before disappearing. Some migrant Sanderling plus Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Rock Pipit and White Wagtail occupied the beach, and a juvenile Black Guillemot and Common Tern the bay.

Scenic photography was fully justified today, and after a few such stops we came into Aultbea as it was time for lunch. A flock of Eider looked a bit strange, all of them having moulted into eclipse plumage. The absence of loons was frustrating, though hopefully that meant pairs were still on inland breeding lochs, but we did well for eagles with reasonable views of an immature White-tailed and a pair of Golden enjoying the breeze



together. At Laide Jetty, we at last found shelter, the sun out and a beautiful little cove to explore – some even (rightly) said it would have been a better place for lunch...?! Grey Wagtail and Rock Pipit showed nicely, and a North American Mink darting across the same rocks was a (unwanted) surprise. A mixed flock of small birds working through the bushes included Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Long-tailed Tit, species which had until now eluded us.

It was a shame Mark had to drag us away from such a lovely spot, but the next vista from above Gruinard Bay was pretty spectacular. Massive mountains, numerous islands and all in the same view as the bright blue sea typify this part of Scotland. Stunning but seemingly bird less, a fortuitous '*napkin blowing out of the bus*' incident led to the discovery of two Arctic Loon, an adult and juvenile tucked under the cliffs. The scope rapidly scrambled, at last we could watch what was arguably our main birding target from our West Coast jaunt. A flock of previously unseen Red-breasted Merganser were nice too. And as we moved around to Dundonell we were spoilt again, Kathy spotting two more Arctic Loon nice and close at the head of Little Loch Broom. Monochrome their plumage might have been, but with the sun out they sparkled gloriously and were a delightful pair to finish on before the lengthy drive home.

Fri., Aug. 16

We started before breakfast, part of the group joining Mark on an early morning excursion onto Dava Moor to look for Black Grouse at a known lekking site. And while finding them proved easy enough, to say they were largely inactive was an understatement! We began with four males, albeit at a fair distance, and over the next hour our time was spent building the total up to eight or rushing to the scope when one had a scratch or shuffled a few inches. And then, when the sun came out from the clouds the birds livened up. One really began dashing about, sparring with others and even jumping up and down. At times we had eight white pom-pom tails fluffed up and even lyres splayed as the birds jostled one another. A good show in the end, and we had our best view of Redpoll in the bushes too.

After breakfast, we spent the morning birding local sites to try and collect some unseen species. Starting with a walk around the old Birch woods at Craigellachie NNR, we didn't have to go far for a great look at Eurasian Treecreeper. Multiple Osprey, probably as many as four different individuals were seen as we strolled the trail, as was a Little Grebe on the pond. But for Robins and Wrens the woods were quite today, but a number of new fungi kept us (especially Gina) entertained, and a male Eurasian Kestrel showed nicely perched up. A Mistle Thrush flock beside the busy main road was another new species so we got out for a scope look, predictably our very next birds being the same species on the quieter road to Dalnahaitnach. Parking at a viewpoint for a coffee, a Golden Eagle suddenly appeared overhead offering our best view as it battled into



the increasing wind. Bank Swallow, Stonechat and Meadow Pipit also showed well at this pleasant location. A quick look at Broomhill Bridge failed to deliver the hoped for Kingfisher, but we did see a Willow Warbler and Valerie finally got a photo of a Rook outside the hotel.

Collecting those participating in the afternoon's distillery tour, we headed up to Scalan to take lunch first. At the foot of the Ladder Hills, and with a plantation for shelter this really was a lovely sunny spot, several Scotch Argus enjoying the warmth too. A male Red Crossbill flew in a began singing from a treetop, replaced by an equally vocal Redpoll when it flew off. Walking down to the pond, Kathy found a Common Toad(let), we admired the mosses and curious red British Soldiers Lichen, and got close-up looks at Common Blue and Emerald Damselfly through the scope. The last few hours of our day were spent at the Glenlivet Whiskey Distillery. And in their 200th anniversary, our tour of Scotland's first '*legal*' Whiskey maker was excellent, with tales of the past, present and future aims of the distillery, concluded as always with a tasting session.

Sat., Aug. 17

Saying our goodbyes to the team at the Mountview Hotel, we drove west leaving Strathspey, crossing its famous river one last time and entering Lochaber. Wildlife sightings were limited to a few Roe Deer, Rabbit and Buzzard so talk turned to 'Monarch of the Glen', Mark pointing out key locations featuring in the popular British TV series. There was too much cloud at Fort William to stand any chance of seeing Ben Nevis so we pressed on, our first scheduled stop coming at Ardgour just after we crossed Loch Linnhe on the Corran Ferry. Here at the old pier, at least three Black Guillemot (aka 'Tystie' as we learnt) were still home, and we could hear their chicks whistling from the nestboxes specially provided. A stop at nearby Sallachan gave us Harbour Seal, Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, European Shag and Common Tern, though we would have liked the Eurasian Jay which flew past us screeching to have showed better. Post coffee rain ushered us on, and with it getting heavier there were no more stops until we arrived at Lochaline, rolling straight onto the ferry bound for Mull.

From the top deck, a Eurasian Otter was seen briefly, though with the ferry moving one way and it swimming the other, the views were pretty brief. The same was true of a flyover Osprey near Lochaline, noteworthy for being a non-breeding raptor in the Morvern region. Once on Mull, a picnic area close to the Fishnish ferry terminal was a good place for lunch, especially with an adult White-tailed Eagle perched in the tree opposite. In fact, we saw quite a bit here with Scotch Argus butterflies, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Grey Wagtail and the chance to compare Great Cormorant with European Shag side by side. A few Hooded Crow fed around the seaweed, the pale grey 'waistcoat' of these west coast birds leaving no doubt as to their identity, even if the taxonomy police may lump them with Carrion Crow soon... A male Red Crossbill was definitely the star



bird here, showing superbly close in low trees, its captivating performance somewhat eclipsing the eagle which did literally nothing in an hour! Either way, it was a nice session.

Following a minor road through Mull's northern interior, roadside Meadow Pipit and Stonechat were passed before we came out on the north coast at Dervaig. A good site for shorebirds, the fact there weren't any in the tidal pools today was perhaps down to the two different White-tailed Eagle we had passing close overhead? At a distance we spotted a couple of Red-throated Loon out in the bay, and on the opposite shore a Greenshank, a wader we would have liked to have seen better. Common Merganser, Little Grebe, Eurasian Curlew and Rock Dove were also seen, but sadly no Kingfishers! After some scenery appreciation and a quiet raptor watch at the head of Glen Frisa, we visited Tobermory. The brightly coloured seafront houses definitely made up for the damp weather, and it was a really attractive little town to explore. Making for the hotel, nearby standing stones were nice though we couldn't see a route to get to them and we stopped outside Salen to photograph the very old boats. A much closer Greenshank was a nice bird to finish what had mainly been a travel day.

Sun., Aug. 18

An early soaking, as we tried to see a few birds outside the hotel didn't dampen our spirits and we were breeze dried quickly enough and again and birding the southern shore of Loch Na Keal. A White-tailed Eagle looked very exposed out on a rock, the Harbour and Atlantic Grey Seals nearby taking no notice of it. A group of Black-tailed Godwit flew by, a species which is on passage from Scandinavian breeding grounds at this time of year. Driving further, a few Northern Wheatear posed nicely among the flocks of Meadow Pipit and we saw Whimbrel, Ringed Plover, Common Merganser and another passing godwit tagged onto an Oystercatcher flock. Relocating to the north side, a better look at a Bar-tailed Godwit there would have been nice but we couldn't park. At a regular eagle watchpoint, a juvenile White-tailed Eagle was well camouflaged until it flew. Returning after a short circuit, it was joined by an adult offering our best views of this Mull speciality.

Time for our boat trip, and after watching Black Guillemot, Common Tern and numerous Gray Heron we were on our way with the crew from Taurus Maura. On a course around the north side of the island of Ulva, we paused at rocky outcrops for Harbour Seal and a still busy Common Tern colony. The sea being a little choppy made it difficult to look for wildlife but we saw Gannet Kittiwake, and nearing the Treshnish Isles a group of Harbour Porpoise. Cruising between the small skerries, lots of Gray Seal were hauled out and while most seabirds had departed, there were still a good number of European Shag and Great Skua around. With some uncertainty over how the trip would 'pan-out', the skipper decided to put us ashore on Lunga, the largest of the Treshnish Isles for lunch and the chance to stretch our legs. After a pontoon aided landing we were on this special island, greeted by a family groups of Twite and Rock Pipit. Lunga is famous for its nesting Puffins,



and with no expectations of seeing any this late in the season, we were somewhat taken aback when one flew in carrying fish! A late breeder by some two weeks it didn't hang around, dashing into a burrow with its catch before returning to the sea a few seconds later.

Back on the boat, we worked our way through the waves and over to the island of Staffa. And though there would be no landing today due to the heavy swell, we still had a good look at the impressive basalt layers of this entirely volcanic island. Three layers are largely visible today, and slow cooling of the central rock has led to the creation of incredible hexagonal columns, matching Giant's Causeway in Northern Island. Our skipper gave us a good look at Fingal's Cave, a location made famous through Felix Mendelssohn's "*Hebrides Overture*". Steaming back towards the mainland, a playful group of Common Dolphin joining us part of the way – a nice ending to our day at sea. Back at our hotel, a flock of Black-tailed Godwit fed in the newly cut airfield, watched by a perched White-tailed Eagle.

Mon., Aug. 19

Deciding not to take another early morning soaking, we left the Glenforsa straight away and began to work our way through the 'Ross off Mull' towards the Iona ferry. Driving through an abundance of suitable Hen Harrier habitat, it wasn't too much of a surprise when a female was seen as we passed Ardnadrochet. A nearby forest track was helpful as a parking place but head height bracken was not, though within a few minutes most obtained a view of sorts. The rain coming on stronger as we headed west, another unplanned stop worked out better when two Eurasian River Otter were spotted while letting traffic pass. Convenient parking area number two and the tour group watching them already made the animals easy to track, and we had great views. A scrubby bush offered the perfect cover, and creeping over we enjoyed the two playing in the seaweed, resting on the shore and then fishing in the shallows. An encounter as good as it gets on Mull, and worthy of getting soaked in the rain! The (superb) wildlife delays meant we wouldn't make the planned ferry, so another short stop to take in a standing stone was appreciated by many – even though it looked a bit strange in the front garden of a guest house!

It was going to be a very wet day on Iona, and once on the island we joined other day trippers with a look around the main sites of interest. The Nunnery, Cemetery and the grand Abbey itself were all visited in turn, as we took in the history of St Columba's initial arrival and development of Iona as the centre of Christianity through the years, to its current status and the beliefs of its permanent residents. Covered buildings gave welcome shelter from the conditions and as we met for lunch at the community centre/shop the rain actually eased. A flying shape resembling a Dunnock was seen here and glimpsed briefly on the ground by Lynn too. Checking out the shops was more in favour than other options, and an hour later we returned to Mull via the ferry. The rain might have stopped out west, but heading east we caught it up again and a raptor watch at the foot of the Glenmore valley was short lived. A juvenile Hen Harrier showed up though, eventually passing



close enough to be appreciated by the one client (thanks Valerie...) who wasn't hiding in the bus! Cue time to go home, after what was undoubtedly our wettest day in the field by some margin!

Tues., Aug. 20

A Song Thrush family in the hotel car park and a drive-by Eurasian Otter were our final wildlife sightings on Mull before we caught the morning ferry. Pressing quickly through Morvern, there was a brief moment of excitement when a flock of Eurasian Jay flew beside the bus. Otherwise, our progress swift and even after crossing Loch Linnhe on the day's second ferry, a coffee break was cut short by the weather. The last part of our travel morning involved driving through the Great Glen, and at Fort Augustus on the south shore of Loch Ness we soon realised we were in tourist central! Strange to suddenly be around so many people, we took our lunch here, watched the canal lock gates in action and drove on in a slow-moving procession of traffic.

Visiting Urquhart Castle on the banks of Loch Ness is one of the best ways to take in this most famous of Scottish locations. The remains still impressive even since their abandonment, we saw no monsters on the water but did learn about the many battles through the ages at this important site. After a good look around, we still had time for some last-minute birding, and at Loch Laide finally connected with Horned Grebe. One of the UK's rarest and most attractive breeders, an adult fed a juvenile at a fair distance but a second, older youngster drifted right over to our viewpoint offering a great look. One more stop at Dochgarroch Lock yielded no more new birds, though it was entertaining enough watching the novice boat skippers negotiating the gates.

And so, our tour drew to a close, one final meal in Inverness the last time we would all be together. Thanks to all for their great company, lots of laughs and enthusiasm during the course of the trip. A fun holiday for Mark to lead, enjoy your future travels around the globe.

Thanks to Lynn and Valerie, whose images appear alongside Mark's in this tour report.