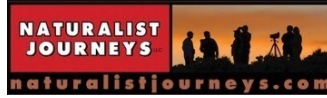


Scottish Highlands and Islands | June 7–18, 2025 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guides: Ian Ford, Jenna Berry, and Dave Mehlman, with participants: Dave, Dawn, Deb, Ellen, Jim, Kathleen, Kim, Lisa, Lorraine, Mary, Philip, Tony, and Will



Sat., June 7 Culloden Battlefield | Clava Cairns | Old Spey Bridge | Poorhouse Woods | Mountview

We started the day at the excellent buffet breakfast at Brewers Fayre, the restaurant by our hotel in Inverness. Suitably fueled, we gathered outside the hotel with all our gear as Ian and Jenna drove up in the two vans. After loading all our luggage (a feat not unlike assembling a puzzle for which you don't have a picture!) off we went on our Scotland adventure. Our first stop of the morning was the Culloden Battlefield just outside Inverness. At this site, on April 16, 1746, the British government army led by the Duke of Cumberland soundly defeated the Jacobite army led by Charles Edward Stuart (aka Bonnie Prince Charlie). This was the last full battle anywhere on British soil. After an exploration of the interesting and very well-designed museum, we had a walking tour of the battlefield led by Charlotte, who covered the key places and facets of the battle. Many of us, of course, cheated



a bit and saw a few birds over and near the battlefield, including Eurasian Skylark, Common Swift, Song Thrush, and White (Pied) Wagtail.

After our tour ended, we got back in the vans and drove to the nearby Clava Cairns for lunch and a short walk around the grounds. The cairns are a group of three Bronze Age burial chambers about 4,000 years old. While admiring the ancient structures, we birded the grounds, seeing (and hearing!) the first of innumerable Common Chaffinches, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, European Robin, Eurasian Treecreeper, Common Buzzard, and Common Chiffchaff (heard only). From Clava Cairns, we proceeded to the town of Carrbridge for afternoon coffee, tea, and snacks and an opportunity to see the lovely old bridge for which the town is named.

From Carrbridge, we ventured far out into the Moorland to visit Lochindorb. On the drive into the loch, we had great wildlife views, spotting Red Grouse (as the resident race of Willow Ptarmigan is called in Scotland), European Golden-Plover, Eurasian Curlew, and Eurasian Kestrel. At the loch itself, a strong wind had picked up, but we had excellent views of two Arctic Loon (aka Black-throated Diver), one far off at the other edge of the loch, but the other quite close. This sighting provided the only one of this species for the tour as it is quite rare in Scotland. Also present were Lesser Black-backed Gull, Northern Wheatear, Hen Harrier, Common Sandpiper, and many Graylag Geese. On the way back out to the highway, we admired the activity around a Common Gull nesting colony and picked up our first European Stonechat of the tour. Our final stop of the day was the Old Spey Bridge, a lovely stone bridge over the River Spey, ideal for birding. Much to our delight, a White-throated Dipper was present, providing an excellent “tick” for some on the very first day of the tour! A few Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers were also present along with colorful Gray Wagtails.

From the bridge, we went straight to the Mountview Hotel, our humble abode for most of the next week. We got settled in our rooms, explored the building and grounds a bit, and then gathered for our first excellent dinner in the dining room. After dinner, we met, did our daily review of activities and checklist, received the plan for the following day, and then retired for the evening.

Sun., June 8 Poorhouse Wood | Tomvaich | Carrbridge | Strathdearn/Findhorn Valley

We started the day with a classic Scottish breakfast in the dining room and then had an opportunity to review the previous night’s captures in the moth trap, which included a lovely Poplar Hawk Moth. After that, we piled



into the vans for a day exploring the area. The first stop was Poorhouse Wood, part of the larger Anagach Forest. The bird feeders right next to the parking lot attracted a lot of attention, both from us and the birds. Some of the stars here were a few Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Scotland's only woodpecker, accompanied by Coal, Eurasian Blue, and Great Tits, Common Wood Pigeons, and the colorful Eurasian Siskin. A quite attractive Eurasian Red Squirrel (in the same genus as the North American Gray Squirrel) also took advantage of the food offerings. A short walk into the woods turned up many singing Common Chaffinches, another Eurasian Treecreeper, Goldcrest, and some fly-by Red Crossbills.

The next stop was another forested area called Tomvaich where we walked an old road through a delightful pine and spruce forest. A Mistle Thrush greeted us as we started out and we were serenaded by Eurasian Wrens, Willow Warblers, and a Common Chiffchaff. We also had decent views of Spotted Flycatcher as well as a Tree Pipit perched high in a pine. After our walk here, we made a quick stop back in Carrbridge for bathrooms and then went on to explore the vast Strathdearn (or River Findhorn valley). This immense, glacially carved valley provided unparalleled views of the uplands and allowed for extensive scanning of the skies and ridgetops for raptors. A first stop at the site known as Garbole was quite productive. On the ground and along the river were Eurasian Curlew, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Meadow Pipit, and Bank Swallow, while the skies held a Red Kite, several Common Buzzards (the "Red-tailed Hawk" of Scotland!), and a far-off, soaring White-tailed Eagle.

We took all afternoon to explore this delightful valley, stopping several times as we climbed slowly higher. We found both Red Deer (in the same genus as the North American Elk) and Sika Deer for mammals, and some great birds such as Common Cuckoo, an Osprey, Bank Swallow, and Song and Mistle Thrush. Turning around, we headed back down the valley, stopping at a local community center to use the bathrooms. While there, we found Eurasian Bullfinch, a nice addition to the list. Returning to the Mountview, we made one final stop for the day at a pond by a farm which had a large flock of Green-winged Teal (of the Eurasian form), a Common Moorhen, Common Redshank, and a bunch of Rooks. We returned to the Mountview, had a bit of a rest, then gathered for dinner in the dining room. This was followed by our daily wrap-up and checklist and overview of plans for the following day.

Mon., June 9 Bogmoor | Spey Bay | Banff | MacDuff | Troup Head boat trip

[note: Today, the group split into two halves and did the same itinerary, but in a different order, with one group doing the boat trip in the morning and the other sites in the afternoon and the other group doing the mainland sites in the morning and the boat trip in the afternoon.]

We began with our usual fine breakfast in the Mountview dining room and then split into two groups to explore the Moray coast and visit Troup Head. The group led by Ian first visited the coastal town of Bogmoor which has a small park literally filled with bird houses. The objective here was to find Eurasian Tree Sparrow, which are



much harder to find and more restricted in distribution than their congener, the House Sparrow. After searching carefully at numerous boxes and seeing many more numerous House Sparrows, we finally found a Tree Sparrow to add to our list. Also present here were Western House-Martin, Rook, Jackdaw, European Goldfinch, and a Dunnock. In the barley fields nearby we found at least two Corn Buntings, an interesting species we did not encounter again during the tour.

Our next stop was the Scottish Dolphin Centre at Spey Bay where we had a chance to use the facilities and scan the adjacent ocean and bay. The most interesting find here was a lone Pink-footed Goose, a presumably unwell, lingering individual of a species that is a winter visitor to Scotland. This delightful spot also yielded many Mute Swans, a large flock of Common Mergansers, several Common Eider, Great and Lesser Black-backed Gull, cooperatively perching Reed Bunting and Sedge Warbler, some Eurasian Linnets, and, for a very lucky few who happened to be looking in the right place at the right time, a Common Kingfisher. Continuing our journey along the coast, a roadside stop yielded nice views of a Yellowhammer, Willow Warblers, and, frustratingly, a loudly singing Eurasian Blackcap which refused to show itself. As mid-day approached, we drove to the town of Banff and parked near the River Deveron estuary for some birding and our picnic lunch. Due to the weather and tide, mostly present here was a large flock of European Herring Gulls with a few Great Black-backs mixed in, though we had fly-by appearances of a Great Cormorant, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Northern Gannett. At the end of lunch, the other group appeared and we briefly mingled and compared notes before separating again for the rest of the day.

The next stop for the day was the small town of Macduff, where our boat would depart from. We parked the van at the boat dock, used the facilities, and donned our rain gear just in case. We then climbed down to the boat where we were welcomed by Captain Harold and soon departed for a 3.5-hour journey to the east along the coast and back. This proved to be a memorable journey with highlight after highlight, almost too many to single out. The primary destination for the tour was the Troup Head RSPB preserve, a massive cliff-face rising almost 300 feet straight out of the ocean. The preserve harbors Scotland's largest mainland gannet colony and is home to an estimated 50,000 total nesting seabirds. Northern Gannets literally filled the sky, the cliffs, and even the water, while Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Northern Fulmar, and Black-legged Kittiwakes occupied every niche available from the water's edge to the cliff top. A bit further along, we even saw a small Atlantic Puffin colony, with these ocean-going waifs standing guard at the front of their burrows. Meanwhile, Great Cormorants and European Shags stood watch on various islets and a few Black Guillemots were spotted here and there. During our voyage in and out, we also spotted a Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver, if you prefer) out on the ocean and had a lovely "swim-by" sighting of a Bottlenose Dolphin. To top it all off, on the way back to Macduff, Captain Harold slowed the boat down and began to toss chunks of fresh fish out. As if by



magic, gulls and gannets appeared to feast on the offerings. The gannets, in particular, put on an amazing show as they dove into the water right next to the boat! This up close and personal view of how gannets feed was a top highlight of the entire tour and has to be seen to be believed. Honestly, words cannot do justice to this great boat tour and we probably could have stayed out longer.

However, it was the end of the day, so upon arriving at the dock, we climbed out onto the dock, profusely thanking Captain Harold, took off our rain gear, and then headed straight back to Mountview. After arriving, we changed clothes, met the other group, and all regaled each other with wild tales of gannets and other sea creatures. After that, another delectable dinner followed by our checklist and review of plans for the following day.

Tues., June 10 Abernethy Forest | Curr Wood | Craigellachie Nature Reserve | Avielochan

Starting the day with another excellent Scottish breakfast, we then got into the vans and headed out for a day in the field. The first stop of the morning was the beautiful Abernethy Forest for a hike on the Two Lochs trail. Walking along to the tune of the Chaffinch chorus, we found some familiar species: Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Treecreeper, and Eurasian Wren. However, luck was with us today and we also found some of the less frequent species we were in search of. A few Tree Pipits put on their flight displays and perched in nearby trees for good looks. A small group of Crested Tits (remarkably similar in appearance to the North American Bridled Titmouse) foraged in the pine canopies. A pair of Common Redstart (completely different from the American Redstart!) perched at very close range for us, obviously near a nest. We also found a Common Goldeneye and some Common Sandpipers on the lochs to round out this excellent morning walk. After departing here, we made a quick rest stop in Nethy Bridge and then swung by Curr Wood for another pine forest walk, though we found nothing new.

We ended the morning at the Craigellachie Nature Reserve where we enjoyed our picnic lunch around the parking lot before setting off on a hike through the woods. The weather had turned excellent, so this enjoyable walk turned up several forest species (Willow Warbler, European Robin, Eurasian Siskin, Treecreeper) and a few waterbirds in the ponds (Gray Heron, Mallard, Little Grebe). Toward the end of the walk, however, Ian and Jenna detected the calls of a European Pied Flycatcher, known to nest in the area. Since this was a highly sought-after species, most of the group continued walking up a short, but steep, hill, at the top of which was a nest box and, indeed, a pair of nesting flycatchers! Apparently feeding young, we maintained a respectful distance and



had multiple views of both sexes of this elegant species coming and going from the box with food. Upon returning to the vans, we loaded up and continued on our way. We stopped at Avielochan and walked an old road into a lovely (and quite large) pond, set up the scopes, and started scanning. We soon found the object of our quest here: a Horned Grebe (aka Slavonian Grebe) in full breeding plumage, the only one of the tour. In addition to the grebe, the pond had Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, and Mallard (all with chicks in tow), Gray Heron, two Little Grebes, and the requisite Eurasian Oystercatcher.

At this point, the day was almost done so we started our trip back, but not before a short roadside stop by Milton Loch, which had Mute Swan, Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, and another Gray Heron. We then returned to the Mountview for a rest, dinner, and our usual daily wrap-up, checklist, and discussion of plans for the following day.

Wed., June 11 Black Grouse lek | Glenshee Ski Centre | Devil's Elbow | Braemar Valley

We started the day a little different. We had an early (6:00 am) departure from Mountview and drove a short distance. The vans slowed down and we drove by a Black Grouse lek with at least nine males still present, some facing off and doing "lek things," others just hanging out. So as not to disturb the birds, which were right next to the road, we drove a short distance away, parked the cars, and then got out and set up all the scopes for some extended grouse viewing. Another real highlight of the tour, as we watched these dramatic birds with their red eye combs and lyre-shaped tails doing their thing. Also present, as we studied the grouse, were a European Stonechat, Eurasian Curlews, and a Meadow Pipit. One quick road stop on the way back yielded more of the same plus another Common Cuckoo, Dunnock, Redpoll, and a Eurasian Wren. We then returned to the Mountview for a proper breakfast, where we were welcomed by a small flock of Long-tailed Tits in the front parking area, followed by gathering our gear for another day in the field.

Today we headed up into the Cairngorms National Park to explore some higher elevation habitat. Our first stop of the day was in the highlands near the Lecht Ski Centre, where we found several Red Grouse (including a few downy young), more Curlews, and a Eurasian Skylark. Continuing, we stopped in Braemar to use the bathrooms and then arrived at the Glenshee Ski Centre about mid-morning, our primary destination for the day. Here, those who wished could take the chair lift up the Cairnwell, a munro with fairly easily accessible habitat above treeline at over 3,000 ft. This fun adventure involved a relaxing chair ride up the mountain and then some additional walking to get up to the top of the munro. It was much cooler and windier up there, but the sun warmed us up, particularly in sheltered areas. Our primary objective on top was to look for Rock Ptarmigan, but,



despite an all-hands-on-deck effort to cover a large area, none were to be found. However, we consoled ourselves by admiring the lovely “alpine” habitat including Northern Firmoss and blooming Cloudberry.

After descending from the mountain top, we drove a short distance on the highway to a pull-off known as Devil’s Elbow, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch and did some birding. The top highlight here was a female Ring Ouzel, hopping around in the grass among the shrubs—the only one of the tour. A pair of Northern Wheatear were repeatedly seen, clearly feeding young in a nearby nest, a Eurasian Kestrel flew by the crags, and an Osprey cruised by as we snacked. As we walked around, we discovered a road-kill Mountain Hare, providing an opportunity to see this interesting rabbit species up close.

At this point, it was mid-afternoon and time to start making our way back to the Mountview. A few roadstops in moorland habitat on the way produced Bank Swallow (known as Sand Martin in the U.K.), a few more Redpolls, and some good soaring raptors, including Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Kestrel, and White-tailed Eagle. We made a second stop in Braemar for the bathrooms and a bit of a shopping opportunity before returning to the Mountview for a break, dinner, and our usual end of day wrap-up. As dusk settled, Ian led those interested over to the nearby Nethy Bridge Country Club where the group saw and heard two Eurasian Woodcock and heard a Tawny Owl.

Thur., June 12 Loch Spynie RSPB Preserve | Lossie mouth | Burghead | Findhorn | Benriach distillery tour

Incredibly, we began the day with another excellent Scottish breakfast in the dining room, then loaded up for another full day in the field. Our first destination was the excellent Loch Spynie RSPB preserve near the coast. This less than one hour outing proved to be the single most productive (in terms of species seen) birding outing of the tour, recording 35 species! Loch Spynie starts off with a great set of feeders by the parking lot. The feeders produced Yellowhammer, the finch sisters (Gold-, Green-, Chaff-), the tit brothers (Coal, Blue, Great), and a brief, but stunning sighting of a Eurasian Pine Marten. A short, easy walk through the woods to a hide produced multiple Common Chiffchaffs (singing and not visible, as always), Eurasian Blackcap (ditto), Greater Whitethroat, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and many Eurasian Wrens. At the hide, which looked out over a large lake with some tern and gull nesting platforms, were many Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls (with many chicks), Little Grebe, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Coot, and Gray Heron. What a super morning that was!

After Loch Spynie, we drove to the coast to look over the River Lossie estuary at Lossiemouth. Highlights here were a couple of Common Ringed Plovers hiding out in the rocks along with a very well concealed Ruddy Turnstone and the usual assortment of gulls. After a quick stop in Lossiemouth to use the facilities, we visited



the coast at Burghead for a short walk. This site provided more and closer views of Ringed Plovers, some excellent sightings of Rock Pipit, and a few gannets and kittiwakes offshore. We also found a dead-on-road Wood Mouse, which otherwise we probably would not have recorded for the tour, prompting many to quote: "Alas, poor wood mouse...". To conclude the morning, we drove on to the small town of Findhorn for the much-awaited traditional fish and chips lunch at the Kimberley Inn. The excellent lunch really hit the spot, except that some of us made the mistake of ordering an appetizer (e.g., delicious fish chowder) AND the fish and chips, which turned out to be a meal for a large family.

After lunch, we ended this delightful day with a tour and tasting at the Benriach Distillery. This distillery, founded in 1898, is one of the classic Speyside single malt distilleries. Our guide Ian took us through the malting process, mashing, distilling, and then one of the legendary cask rooms before conducting a tasting. The three whiskys tasted included the 10-year unpeated, 12-year peated, and an 18-year special blend. A fascinating visit and opportunity to learn about one of Scotland's most famous "products," without a doubt. We then returned to the Mountview for a rest, dinner, and a daily wrap-up.

Fri., June 13 Badaguish | Loch Insh | Dalnahaitnach | Dell Wood | Nethy Bridge

Despite it being Friday the 13th, we were intent on continuing our Scotland adventure! We started, as always, with a great breakfast, then got into our vans for a final day in the field in the Highlands. The first stop was the Badaguish Outdoor Centre near Aviemore. We parked the vans and took an hour walk along the roads of the center, birding and naturalizing on the way. The weather was not particularly cooperative today, but we dug out Song and Mistle Thrush, lots of Siskins, Willow Warbler, Common Chaffinch, and European Greenfinch. We also spent some time identifying a variety of insects; outstanding finds included the Six-spotted Burnet and a Green Tiger Beetle. Continuing our activities, we stopped briefly at the Glenmore Visitor Center to use the facilities and admire the monument placed there by Norwegian commandos who had trained in highland Scotland during WWII. The next stop was Loch Insh, where we parked by the train tracks and walked under them to scan the waters of the Loch. The highlight here was a pair of Red-throated Loon; also present were other waterbirds such as Common Sandpiper, Canada Goose (yes, they are everywhere!), Graylag Goose, Common Goldeneye, and a few far-off Green-winged Teal.

For our next stop, we drove to the head of a large valley of the River Dulnain (the name of the place was the basically unpronounceable "Dalnahaitnach") where we scanned the fields and forests for new species. The best sightings here were a few Redpoll and a calling Common Snipe; also present were Gray and White (Pied) Wagtail,



Jackdaws, and many Common Gulls from a nearby colony. The final stop of the morning was the very pleasant Dell Wood where we enjoyed our picnic lunch and did a little casual birding. Upon finishing here in early afternoon, we returned to the Mountview for a free afternoon. Many of the group took the opportunity to walk down the hill to nearby Nethy Bridge for a little more sight-seeing, exploring, and birding on our last day. We then reassembled for dinner, the daily wrap-up, and the settling of our bills in preparation for leaving the next day.

Sat., June 14 Creag Meagaidh Nature Reserve | Corran Ferry | Lochaline Ferry | Loch na Keal

With some reluctance, we had our last breakfast at the Mountview Hotel, assembled all our gear in the lobby, masterfully repacked the vans, and then departed on our trip to the Isle of Mull. After a quick rest stop in Laggan, we arrived at the Creag Meagaidh Nature Reserve for a bit of birding. Despite a bit of rain and the action at the bird feeders, we turned up nothing new for the trip but did enjoy nice sightings of Eurasian Siskins, Common Chaffinches, and a European Goldfinch up close. We continued on our merry way, stopping again at the Morrison's in Fort William for a quick break, and arrived before mid-day at the Corran Ferry, the first of two ferries we had to take. This short ride took us across Loch Linnhe, a salt-water loch, to the small town of Ardgor. We stopped there to admire the Black Guillemots nesting on the boat dock and also had a brief fly-by of a pair of Common Eiders. Driving a short distance further, we pulled off the road to scan the loch and some nearby rocky islands. Hauled out on the islands were some Harbor Seals, the first of the tour and several Common Mergansers; in the loch were a large number of Canada Geese and on the island itself was a small Common Tern colony. Here we also found our first true Hooded Crow of the tour (this species is most prevalent in western Scotland and hybridizes with Carrion Crow toward the east).

We made a few other road stops as we drove to our next ferry, everyone grabbing their own picnic lunch as they felt the need. One memorable stop had a truly great sighting of a pair of White-tailed Eagles flying by—finally they were more than a speck in the sky! Another stop yielded a Red-breasted Merganser to add to our species list. Arriving at the Lochaline Ferry, the one to take us to Mull, we joined the queue and then took the easy ride across to Fishnish—we had arrived on Mull! And, spotted another White-tailed Eagle in the process!! Upon arrival, we drove to the Glenforsa Hotel to check in and unload. Meeting up again in late afternoon, we went for one last birding outing to explore the nearby Lochna Keal. The top highlight here was some European River Otters swimming in the Loch—one of the sought-after mammal species on the tour. Bird-wise, we turned up another White-tailed Eagle, Bank Swallows, Black Guillemot, European Shag, and European Stonechat. Returning



to the hotel, we had a short break, then the first of several great dinners in the dining room, followed by our daily review and plans for the following day in the upstairs lounge.

Sun., June 15 Calgary Bay | Treshnish Isles, Lunga, Staffa boat trip | Lochna Keal

Today, the first of two excellent days on Mull, started off with breakfast in the dining room. Afterward, we gathered all our field gear, including extra layers, for a full day in the field including an extended boat trip. Loading into the vans and starting to pull out, we came to a rapid halt and implemented our “emergency van evacuation plan” as a Common Hedgehog ran across the driveway! We all tracked down and watched this amazing critter as it foraged along, oblivious to our presence. Having had our fill, we set out and first stopped at Calgary Bay for some coastal birding. Despite heavy clouds and a light rain, we saw several Hooded Crows and heard Eurasian Blackcap, Greater Whitethroat, and Willow Warbler. Continuing, we arrived at the small community of Ulva Ferry, where we parked the vans, used the on-shore facilities, and got in line to board the Turus Mara, our boat for the day. While waiting, we admired several Arctic Terns foraging in the harbor. Finally, off we went, our first destination being the Isle of Staffa.

The boat ride produced many birds of a nice variety of species. Those with patience were able to spot multiple Manx Shearwaters flying over the waves along with scattered Northern Fulmar. As we approached Staffa itself, the alcids became very noticeable, with large rafts of Atlantic Puffin hanging out along with some Common Murres and Razorbills. However, the highlight was the island itself: a large block of columnar basalt rearing out of the sea. In particular, the southern end has several caves in it; the largest of which, Fingal’s Cave, is a well-known “must-see” in the Inner Hebrides and has been visited by famous people since the 19th century, including Queen Victoria and Felix Mendelssohn. Unfortunately, repair work on the island’s dock prevented us from landing, but a circumnavigation of the island allowed us satisfactory views of its spectacular eminence.

Next, we proceeded to Lunga, where the boat tied up to its floating dock and then motored in toward its landing on the rocky beach to allow all on board to disembark. What followed was an amazing two-hour exploration of this fascinating island full of birds, though not without its challenges to walk on. Most in the group took on the challenge of scrambling up the narrow trail to a cliff above the beach which put everyone “up close and personal” to puffins and Razorbills—an unforgettable experience not easily replicated anywhere else on the planet. Apparently unafraid or accustomed to humans, the birds went about their daily business, coming and



going from their burrows, periodically issuing commentary on the sad state of the world, the weather, food choices in the ocean, bad visitor behavior, etc. Billions of pixels were expended at this spot, by everything from phones to long lenses. Some in the group continued past the initial spot to walk to the end of the trail overlooking an enormous murre colony, with thousands of birds clustered on the seacliffs making an enormous noise (and smell!). Some in the group had looks at a Great Skua periodically cruising by and a few Twite. The entire time, the apparently very healthy island population of Eurasian Wrens sang vociferously while Rock Pipits cruised the beach. In sum, an amazing experience that has to be seen and felt and that is impossible to put into words, though some of the pictures do it justice.

Everyone returned eventually to the boat where the crew made a very careful head count and then we departed back for Ulva Ferry. Many birded on the way, spotting lots of European Shags, Graylag Geese, and Common Eiders. Oddly, a pair of Common Shelducks flew off a neighboring islet on the way back and, as we came closer to the dock, another White-tailed Eagle was perched in a tree along the shore, surveying its domain. Arriving back at the dock, we disembarked, walked up to the vans and then headed back to the Glenforsa, making a stop at Lochna Keal on the way. Though not as birdy as before, some in the group saw an otter and the (by now) usual White-tailed Eagle was nearby. We returned to the Glenforsa, had a break, enjoyed our dinner (most actually remembering what they pre-ordered!), and then finished the day with our wrap-up in the upstairs lounge.

Mon., June 16 Scallastle | Iona | Loch Beg

We began, as was by now becoming normal, with breakfast at the Glenforsa, then began our day in the field. The prime objective for the day was to visit the Isle of Iona, but to do that we had to travel along the coast and through the mountains to the town of Fionnphort. Naturally, we made numerous birding stops along the way. First was at Scallastle, where an offshore islet had a number of Arctic Terns, a group of Ruddy Turnstone, two Dunlin (the only ones of the tour), and a Common Ringed Plover. Most of the stops turned up the usual suspects (Eurasian Oystercatcher, Willow Warbler, Reed Bunting) but we found a Common Loon at one stop near Loch Spelve. Leaving the coast, we drove up into the mountains and stopped at the very scenic Three Lochs Viewpoint. While there, another birder stopped by and gave us a helpful tip, so we continued on the highway a bit through the moorlands, stopped, and promptly saw a Short-eared Owl carrying some prey! A true highlight moment of the tour, we spent some time admiring this remarkable bird as it sat on the ground and enjoyed its "elevenses."

Finally arriving at Fionnphort, we parked the vans in the lot, used the facilities, then joined the queue to walk onto the ferry to Iona, a short passage straight across the channel to the isle. We then spent about 2 hours on



Iona, first heading to the Abbey for a self-guided tour and then some free time for exploring this lovely island. The abbey is one of the oldest Christian sites anywhere in Western Europe, founded by St. Columba in 563. We took advantage of our time here to explore the entire abbey, including its small museum with ancient tall crosses, and admire the coastal scenery. Birds, of course, were also on our minds! Probably the “best” bird encountered during the day were several Corn Crakes, their distinctive calls emerging from tall grasses. Despite the efforts of numerous eyes, only Ellen was able to glimpse one as it moved through the grass; there was agreement, however, that this was a “countable” bird due to the difficulty in actually seeing one. Also present on Iona were genuine Rock Pigeons, numerous Eurasian Wrens, Song Thrush, European Goldfinch, Eurasian Linnet, and the usual loudly-singing-but-invisible Eurasian Blackcap.

As our time on Iona came to an end, we all gathered for a snack of scones and coffee at a restaurant by the boat dock before walking back on board the ferry and returning to Mull. Arriving at the dock, we walked back up to our vans and began our journey back to the Glenforsa. On the return, we made one stop at the old Loch Beg Bridge for our afternoon tea and snacks and a final bit of birding. Our luck continued here as we watched two more Short-eared Owls flying back and forth across the grass-covered hills, complemented by a Hen Harrier, Meadow Pipits, and Northern Lapwings. The owls were a memorable highlight of the day, if not of the entire tour, and we celebrated our good luck with that species. We then returned to the Glenforsa, had a break, then another excellent dinner followed by our normal checklist and wrap-up.

Tues., June 17 Travel to Inverness | Urquhart Castle

We started our last day on Mull with breakfast, followed by the intricate packing of the vans. We worked our way back to Fishnish and the first ferry of the day, making a couple of stops along the way at sites Jenna and Ian thought would be interesting. It was a lovely morning and we got renewed sightings of many things, though nothing new for the tour, including a Common Snipe, Hen Harrier, Reed Bunting, and our last Hooded Crows. Arriving at the Fishnish ferry terminal in plenty of time, we got in the queue and had a bit of free time for some birding around the terminal. The ferry finally came, we drove on, and in 20 minutes were back at Lochaline. Continuing our long drive up the Great Glen we stopped quickly in Fort William for a bathroom break and by early afternoon were at our major stop along the way: legendary Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness.

Urquhart is in a strategically important location on the Loch and played a key role in many of Scotland’s various fights, battles, and struggles over the century. The remains left today date to the 13th century though it was substantially modified and added to over the years since then. The castle was largely finally destroyed by the end of the 17th century by government forces to prevent its use by “rebellious uprisers.” After arriving, we paid our admission fee and then entered through the visitor center and gift shop. Many took the opportunity to walk through the on-site museum and see the movie, followed by a self-guided tour to the ruins themselves. After



enjoying our visit to this fascinating historical site, we got back in the vans and continued driving into Inverness. In late afternoon, we arrived at the Courtyard at Inverness Airport for our last night.

Assembling in the early evening for our final daily checklist and dinner, Ian and Jenna kindly joined us for the meal, which we had ordered in advance. A great time was had by all as we toasted our guides and our success and told many tales, mostly true, about our great adventures during the past two weeks. We then called it a night and did some final packing.

Wed., June 18 Departures

This morning, the tour ended with various of us departing to destinations far and wide by plane and train. Departing, of course, with great memories of an excellent tour!

Photos: Atlantic Puffin (Jenna Berry - JB), Iona Abbey (Dave Mehlman - DM), Group (Dawn Greenway - DG), Northern Gannet (Debbie Ellinger - DE), Scenic (DE), Eurasian Bullfinch (DM), Eurasian Blackbird (DE), Carrbridge Bridge (DM), European Golden Plover (DE), Jenna and Ian (Kim Nelson - KN), Highland Cow (DE), Yellowhammer (KN), Common Bottlenose Dolphin (DE), White-throated Dipper (DE), Pied Flycatcher (DM), Whiskey Barrels (DM), Group Birding (Kathleen Halat - KH), Black Grouse (KN), Glenshee (DM), Cairngorms (DM), Cheers! (DG), Common Tern (DM), Red Squirrel (DE), Common Ringed Plover (DE), Sheep (DG), Mountview Hotel (DM), Lochaline-Fishnish Ferry (DM), Black Guillemot (DM), Hedgehog (DE), Staffa (KH), Atlantic Puffin (KN), Razorbills (KN), Lunga Scenic (KH), Atlantic Puffin (KN), Short-eared Owl (DM), Iona Scenic (KH), Iona (DE), Jackdaw (DE), Atlantic Puffins (JB), Sailing Ship (DE)