HEATHERLEA TRIP REPORT

Naturalist Journeys – Highlands & Islands Tour

Saturday 8 August – Tuesday 18 August



Heatherlea guests Tooey Rogers II, Laura Johnson, Timothy Anderson, Sandra Belford, Zoe Hochstein-Marran and Lorna Hochstein, Lois Zell.

Heatherlea Guide Jenna Berry

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Saturday 8 August
After some brief introductions, we made our way out of Inverness and to our first stop at the Culloden Battlefield. We enjoyed walking around the visitor's centre where we learned all about the history of the Jacobite uprisings and the events that led up to the battle at Culloden where the Jacobite's were brutally defeated by the Duke of Cumberland and his men. Afterwards, we took a guided tour of the battlefield where a very knowledgeable gentleman talked us through the events that passed during and after the battle. Despite the wind, there were some birds to be seen, and the battlefield provided our first encounters with Pied wagtail, Barn Swallow and Linnet.

For lunch, we made our way over to the Clava Cairns, a 4000-year-old Bronze age burial ground featuring ring cairns and stone circles. We heard Treecreeper calling from the Beech trees here, but we couldn't locate them.

After lunch, we headed to our hotel in Nethy Bridge. On the way we paused at Poorhouse Wood to view the bird feeders. Here, we finally got a good views of a family of Treecreepers along with Blue Tit, Coal Tit and Great Tit. Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Siskin where also present and seeing all these species together allowed us to get to grips with some of Scotland's more common species.

We also paid a visit to the Old Spey Bridge just outside Grantown where we were lucky enough to encounter a White Throated Dipper perched atop some rocks in the River Spey. It showed beautifully and we all had excellent views as it preened itself in the sunshine. Also on the river were Grey Wagtails and Mallards whilst the air around us buzzed with activity as Bank Swallows darted back and forth.

Finally, we headed into Nethy Bridge where we checked into the Mountview Hotel and enjoyed some free time to settle in before dinner.

Sunday 9 August
We began our first full day in the Highlands with a visit to some local pinewoods in the Abernethy National Nature Reserve. This expansive woodland is managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds or RSPB and boasts a fine selection of native trees and wildlife.

Surrounded by Scots pines, Juniper, Blaeberry and Ling Heather, we walked along a trail where we reacquainted ourselves with the local Coal Tits, Great Tits and Blue Tits. We also had good views of European Robin and Goldcrest. The latter showed well as they flitted about in noisy family groups, the young birds begging for food and fluttering their wings. Crested Tits were heard in a couple of places and showed very briefly, although these notoriously elusive birds proved difficult to spot as they darted about in the high canopy.

Back at the car park, we enjoyed excellent views of a group of friendly Chaffinches which hopped about our feet and an obliging Willow Warbler which practically glowed in the sunshine.
Next, we headed back into Nethy Bridge where we enjoyed a cup of coffee and a piece of homemade shortbread by the river Nethy.

After some refreshment, we made our way over to the outskirts of Grantown on Spey where a wildflower meadow produced our first butterflies of the trip, Scotch Argus and Small Copper.

For lunch, we made our way to Loch Insh, a freshwater loch. Here we had distant views of a Red Throated Loon and a raft of Goldeneye. There were many people out on the water enjoying the sunshine including fishermen and paddleboarders and as a result, there was not much else to be seen here.

We had more success further along the road at Ruthven Barracks where we encountered many young birds in the surrounding marshland including Stonechats, Reed Buntings, Whinchat and Sedge Warbler which provided a welcome ID challenge! The barracks themselves provided an additional insight into the events that occurred after the battle of Culloden as this was the site where hundreds of men gathered after that fateful day only to receive news that Bonnie Prince Charlie, their charming leader, had fled the country!

We then visited the nearby bird Hide at Insh Marshes, also managed by the RSPB. Here, we saw Grey Heron and Greylag Geese down below us and we had glimpses of Goshawks and Common Buzzards over the distant hillsides.

In the afternoon, we returned to the shores of Loch Insh and enjoyed some afternoon tea at Insh Kirk. We had good views of the sizeable Osprey nest located in a larch tree on an island in the loch but there were no sign of the birds themselves. Presumably having fledged and already begun their journey over to West Africa.

Finally, with time left for one more stop, we visited Avielochan just outside Aviemore where we found a Horned Grebe sitting atop her nest. Little Grebes, Tufted ducks, Goldeneye and Moorhen were also present, the latter had fluffy black chicks in tow. There were also no less than five magnificent Red Kites circling high above us, their long red tails twitching in the breeze.

Soon, it was time to head back to Nethy Bridge in time to enjoy a delicious homecooked dinner.

Monday 10 August
After an early breakfast at 6:30am we left Mountview and headed West to Ullapool to catch our ferry to Stornoway. We boarded the ferry and took up our positions on one of the

viewing decks out of the wind. We had not long left Ullapool by the time we saw our first Great Skua flying overhead, the first of many. As the ferry passed the Summer Isles, we also picked up our first Black legged Kittiwakes and Black Guillemots of the trip. Further out to sea, things got a bit more exciting. Gannets streamed by one after the other in various plumages ranging from dark first and second year birds to bright white adults with yellow heads.

On the water, there were big flocks of Common Guillemots, some containing the odd Razorbill. There were also good numbers of Atlantic Puffins which whizzed by surprisingly quickly for such small, bulky birds, their orange feet trailing behind them. Every now and then we saw Common dolphins passing close by, some put on a fabulous show leaping clear out of the water.

As we neared Stornoway Jenna and Zoe who were still on deck spotted a large flock of Gannets on the water. As the ferry neared the birds, they took off and among them were a number of Sooty shearwaters and a single Great shearwater, the latter being a scarce bird in the Minch. As the ferry came into Stornoway Harbour, we spotted a handful of Red-throated Divers and many shags and Cormorants perched atop the rocks by the shore.

After the car deck had been cleared of vehicles, we were allowed to disembark, and we ate our lunches in the ferry terminal at Stornoway whilst we waited to board again for the return journey.

Once on board again, we had wonderful views of a couple of Grey Seals in the harbour.

The return journey was pleasantly calm and almost windless. The variety of birds was much the same as the journey out but some of us who had missed the Sooty Shearwaters managed to see some on the way back. We also added Northern Fulmar to our lists as a number of birds sailed past us on characteristically stiff wings.

As the ferry docked in Ullapool, we spotted some Hooded crows on one of the piers, and we enjoyed looking around the Ullapool bookstore before heading to the Seaforth Restaurant for dinner where some of us sampled a plate of traditional fish and chips.

After dinner, we made the return journey back to Mountview for the evening.

Tuesday 11 August

After spending most of the previous day on the West coast, today we decided to travel North-East to the Moray coast. We began with a visit to Spey Bay where we enjoyed good views of flocks of Curlew, Shelduck, Goosander and Goldeneye. Along the rocky shore we also found waders including Common Sandpiper and Dunlin.

Goldfinches posed for us as they fed on thistles around the car park and a selection of gulls could be seen around the mouth of the River Spey including Great Black Backed Gull, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull and Herring Gull. Seeing them all together made it much easier to appreciate the size differences between the species and the subtle differences in plumage and leg colour.

Next, we made our way to Loch Spynie. The feeders here attracted good numbers of House Sparrows and a selection of tits including Blue, Great and Coal Tit. Chaffinches were also in evidence along with a very confiding Great Spotted Woodpecker which clung upside down from a coconut shell containing suet. Whilst the feeders attracted many birds, the 'cake shed' in the car park attracted many of our group members who exchanged a few pound coins for some delicious treats like Rocky Road!

The loch itself was very quiet, the only birds of note here being Tufted Ducks, Mute Swans and Little Grebe. We checked the feeders once more before we left and eventually found a Tree Sparrow on one of them sporting its characteristic white collar and black cheek spots.

For lunch, we made our way to Lossiemouth where we paused by the beach. As the tide fell, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Sanderling dropped in to feed on the newly exposed mud.

After lunch, we headed to Burghead. The rocky shore here produced a nice variety of small waders including Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, more Ringed plover and a single Purple sandpiper. We also spotted Northern Wheatear and a Rock Pipit on the beach.

Finally, we took a scenic drive around the arable fields where we found Eurasian Magpie, Red Legged Partridge and a large flock Linnets perched on overhead wires.

Wednesday 12 August

This morning we re-visited the pinewoods, this time at Dell Woods where we hoped to connect with the elusive Crested Tits. Despite our best efforts, no Crested Tits were seen or heard. We did however see many Coal Tits, Great Tits, Blue Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker feeding in the trees all around us.

Leaving the pinewoods behind, we drove over the Dava Moor to Lochindorb. On the way we encountered Meadow Pipits sitting in the Road and a lone Stonechat perched on a fencepost. We paused for a cup of coffee by the lochside and Laura spotted a Black Throated Diver on the water. It showed well, allowing good looks through the telescope before it flew to the far side of the loch. Buzzards and Red Kites were seen circling over the hilltops.

Further along the road, eagle eyed Laura spotted a Red Grouse hiding in the heather. We got out of the bus for a better look and had fabulous views through the telescope. It soon became apparent that this adult bird was not alone as three youngsters emerged from the

heather behind it. We watched them making their way up a heather embankment, avoiding an approaching flock of sheep!

Next, we made our way to Strathdearn, aka the Findhorn Valley in search of raptors. Whilst we enjoyed our lunch, we spotted a pair of White-tailed eagles flying high above the road. They circled high into a thermal before speeding off up the valley. There were also numerous Buzzards and Red Kites enjoying the warm and windy weather. Pied Wagtails flitted back and forth along the road and Curlew could be seen in the fields alongside the cows.

We made numerous stops further down the valley which produced more Buzzards and groups of Red Deer resting in the sunshine. One group, made up entirely of stags, were sporting some quite impressive antlers. As we headed back out of the valley we spotted more eagles. At least two juvenile Golden Eagles and one more young White-tailed Eagle soaring high in the distance.

Soon, it was time to head into Tomatin for our Distillery tour. We had no sooner reached the door at the visitor's centre before we spotted another White-tailed Eagle over the car park! Of course, we had left our binoculars in the bus! After taking a tour of the Tomatin Distillery and learning all about how whisky is produced, the group enjoyed a tutored tasting session where we sampled three different whiskies.

After perusing the shop and treating ourselves to some souvenirs, it was time to head back to Mountview for another delicious dinner.

Thursday 13 August

This morning we headed west once again where we made our first stop of the day at Dundonnell. The saltmarsh here held good numbers of Eurasian Curlew and in the fields beyond with the sheep, we could see Greylag Goose and Oystercatchers. Overhead, we spotted Red-throated Divers which gave themselves away with their loud honking calls. Eventually, after scanning the hills for some time, Jenna found a White-tailed Eagle perched atop a crag. It was an adult bird sporting a pale head and neck and the characteristic white tail (although we only glimpsed the latter feature when the bird lifted its tail to poop!). A second White-tailed Eagle was located sitting on a crag below the first bird. This bird was much darker and seemingly younger than the bird above it.

The Eagles clearly had no intention of moving any time soon so after a good look through the telescope we left them behind and headed to Gruinard Bay. We found a spot overlooking Gruinard Island, the infamous 'anthrax island'. Now considered safe, the island was once used to test the effects of lethal anthrax back in 1942 as part of a government biological weapons programme. On the water we found Black Guillemot and at least four Red-throated Divers and on the island itself we saw another White-tailed Eagle perched high

against the sky. A Common Seal sang from the rocks down below us and a number of Fox Moth caterpillars were found clinging to the grass by the roadside.

After another brief stop to take some pictures of the dramatic scenery, we made our way to Aultbea for lunch.
Looking out to sea, we found yet another Red-throated Diver along with a group of Common Eider ducks and a pair of Black-throated Divers. A large group of shags could be seen sitting atop some old-world war two sea defences. Eventually, it began to rain and with no sign of it stopping we headed down into Gairloch.

The Bay in Gairloch proved to be very quiet but we did find some Common Ringed Plovers, Oystercatcher, Common and Arctic Terns and a number of Rock Pipits on the rocks by a freshwater outflow.

Next, we headed to loch Maree where we enjoyed a cup of coffee and a piece of homemade flapjack. Five Red-throated Divers wheeled around over the loch before they eventually settled on the water allowing for some good views. Unfortunately, it was still raining and with not a breath of wind to keep the biting midges away we decided to move swiftly on!

On the way back to Nethy Bridge, we stopped at Loch Kinellan near the village of Strathpeffer. There were a good selection of wildfowl here including Little grebes, Eurasian Coots, Moorhen, Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Mute Swans. The surrounding vegetation produced a few young Greater Whitethroats and both Barn Swallows and Sand Martins could be seen darting around over the water.

With the rain still falling, we decided to call it a day and head back to Mountview for the evening.

Friday 14 August

This morning, we headed inland to Deeside. On the way to Braemar, we stopped to view two male Black Grouse which were fighting either side of a sheep fence. Despite it not being the breeding season and having no fancy tail feathers to display with, these two males seemed to be occupying one of the known satellite leks and going through the motions of establishing a hierarchy. One of the males showed particularly well, standing proudly in the field, his black feathers shining blue in the light and we all had wonderful views through the telescope.

After our surprise Black Grouse sighting, we continued on our way to Braemar. Once we arrived, Jenna checked the live video feeds from the top of the Cairnwell to see if the clouds had lifted enough for us to take the chairlift up. Since there were still some lingering clouds, we decided to start our day in Deeside with a bit of retail therapy in Braemar. Most of us

ended up sampling the produce in the local bakery whilst other treated themselves to gifts from the shops.

Finally, after about an hour in Braemar, the clouds lifted and we were able to explore the hills. We took the chairlift from the visitors centre up to the top of the Cairnwell where we spent some time searching for Rock Ptarmigan. The Ptarmigan where nowhere to be seen but we had fabulous views of Red Grouse and Mountain Hare. The views from the top were also spectacular, making for some epic photo opportunities!

For lunch, we made our way down to the Devil's Elbow viewpoint. A Eurasian Kestrel perched atop one of the rocky crags and we saw Ravens, Common Buzzards and Red kites over the hills.

With time left for one more stop before we headed back to Mountview, we paused in one of the laybys so scan the ridges for eagles. We were not disappointed. Two young Golden Eagles appeared over one of the ridges and circled around before crossing the valley. One of the birds peeled away into the distance, the other circled right overhead for some time as it was repeatedly dive-bombed by an angry Peregrine Falcon! The perfect end to a wonderful day in Deeside.

Saturday 15 August
After an early breakfast at 6:30am, we said our goodbyes to Mountview and Nethy Bridge and began our journey to Mull. After a brief comfort stop in Fort William, we boarded the Corran Ferry and made the short crossing over to the other side of the water. Once we reached the other side, we paused by the shores of Loch Linnhe for a cup of coffee and a piece of shortbread. Common Seals and Red-breasted Mergansers loafed around on the rocks and Oystercatchers and Hooded Crows could be seen feeding on the shoreline.

With some distance still left to travel to the Lochaline Ferry we continued on our way. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the ferry terminal, we were informed that the ferry was experiencing some technical difficulties and was cancelled! After some quick phone calls to the office and a check of the map, Jenna ushered everyone back into the bus and we high tailed it to the next best available option, the Kilchoan Ferry in Ardnamurchan, some 50 miles away. Thankfully, we made it in the nick of time, and we were one of the last vehicles to be allowed to board the ferry.

Soon we were relieved to be on our way to Tobermory on Mull. On the way, we had amazing views of hundreds of Manx Shearwaters, Common Guillemots, Razorbills and some Black Guillemots and Gannets.

We arrived in Tobermory around 14:30pm and after finding somewhere to park in the busy town centre we finally enjoyed some free time to explore the town and its colourful

buildings. At 4pm we met up in the car park by the Tobermory Distillery, and we headed onwards to the Glenforsa Hotel, our base for the next few days.

Sunday 16 August

Today we enjoyed the first of two full days on the Isle of Mull. After breakfast, we drove to Ulva Ferry to catch our boat to Staffa. On the way, Jenna paused by the shores of Loch na Keal to scan some of the surrounding pine plantations for resting eagles. She spotted two of them sitting high up in a spruce tree, an adult bird alongside a much darker juvenile. We had good looks at them through the telescope before continuing on our way.

As we drove down into Ulva Ferry, we saw many Mistle Thrushes, a Blackbird and a Chaffinch all sat on overhead wires. The Mistle Thrushes were moulting and after a tough breeding season they were all looking quite bedraggled!

Whilst we waited to board our boat to Staffa, Jenna spotted another immature White-tailed Eagle sitting in the trees on and island. It was soon moved on by a group of angry Common Terns and amazingly it decided to fly right towards us! It circled a couple of times low overhead giving fantastic views before returning back to its original spot in the trees.

As we left the harbour aboard the Turus Mara, we had excellent views of two more adult White-tailed Eagles which flew right in front of the boat. Unlike the immature bird we had seen earlier, these two mature birds were sporting bright white tail feathers.

As we headed out to sea, we spotted a few more White-tailed Eagles perched on top of some of the hills and islands in the distance.

On the water, we encountered many seabirds including Northern Gannets, Common Guillemots, Black Guillemot and Razorbill. We also saw hundreds of Manx Shearwaters and were soon surrounded by them, some very close to the boat.

Once we reached Staffa, we disembarked and split into two groups. Some of us headed along the rocks to view the basalt columns in Fingal's Cave whilst the rest of us headed up to the top of the island for a short walk. Meadow Pipit and Rock Pipit perched side by side allowing for a helpful comparison between the two species and we saw a pair of Great Skuas sitting on a grassy mound, no doubt keeping an eye out for any morsels dropped by visitors lunching on the island!

Eventually, it began to rain, and we reconvened on the jetty whilst we waited for our boat to return. In the shallow water by the jetty, we spotted By- the-wind Sailors floating in the water, little blue organisms that resemble Jelly fish but are actually many tiny animals living together. They are closely related to the Portuguese Man of War, and we observed the little structures on top of them that act like sails giving them their names.

The journey back proved much wetter than the journey out, but we still saw many Manx Shearwaters flying all around the boat and our captain took short detour to show us a pod of Common Dolphins which leapt around us and played in the bow waves.

In the afternoon, we revisited Loch na Keal where had much better views of a White-tailed eagle sitting in the pine trees. The sun was now shining, and we saw in great detail the large yellow bill and blonde head and neck feathers associated with the mature adults of this species.
Around the other side of the loch, we found Fallow Deer resting in the fields alongside the sheep. A Great-spotted Woodpecker perched atop a dead tree and posed well for us in the telescope and Black guillemot and Goosander were found on the water. Common seals lazed on the rocks in the sunshine and Ringed Plover, Rock Pipit and Northern Wheatear scuttled around on the mudflats and short cropped grass by the shore. We found yet another adult White-tailed Eagle perched on a rocky island offshore. This one too was disturbed by terns and flew right by us giving fantastic views.

After a fantastic, eagle-filled day, we headed back to the Glenforsa Hotel for a well-earned dinner.

Monday 17 August
We left the Glenforsa Hotel early after breakfast and made our way to Fionnphort where we caught the ferry over to Iona. After about ten minutes or so, we were on the island and we walked a short distance to the Iona Abbey, one of Scotland's most sacred sites. This site has been a vibrant centre of Christian worship ever since St Columba arrived in AD 563 and boasts iconic high crosses and architecture spanning the 13th to the 16th centuries.

We enjoyed a walk around this historic site at leisure, listening to the information on the handheld devices that were provided.

Afterwards, we enjoyed some free time on the island to explore the many craft shops selling locally made woollen garments and Jewellery.

Unfortunately, after we left the Abbey, it began to rain and visibility became much reduced. As a result, the return journey over towards Craignure was very wet and almost devoid of birdlife! Thankfully, the shorebirds were not put off by the wet weather, and we found some Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Ringed Plover on the mudflats at Loch Don.

Further along the coastline at Garmony, we found Many Common Terns along with Ruddy Turnstones, more Ringed Plover and some European Golden Plovers, the latter being a new species for the trip.

With the rain still hammering down and visibility being poor all around, we decided to call it a day and head back to the Glenforsa Hotel to dry off.

Tuesday 18 August

We spent the final morning of our tour revisiting some of the sites we had been to over the last couple of days, trying to find some of the species we had missed. Our first stop was at Loch na Keal where we hoped to see otters. Sadly, Mull's otters remained uncharacteristically elusive and the only species of note here were Canada Geese, Grey Heron and Hooded Crows.

Our next stop, back at Garmony, was more productive. A European Goldfinch landed on the saltmarsh right in front of us allowing us to fully appreciate just how beautiful these little finches are with their bright red face masks and black and yellow wings. A mixed flock of small birds was moving through the trees around the car park, and we found Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch and our first Long-tailed Tits of the trip. The latter put on quite the show, hanging upside down, plucking caterpillars from the leaves and then bashing them on the branches!

Soon, it was time to head to the ferry at Fishnish and not a moment too soon as it began to rain heavily. Thankfully, the service was running as normal this time, and we managed to board our ferry without a hitch! From the ferry, we saw Gannet, Common Guillemot and a single Arctic Skua.

Our drive back to the Corran Ferry was very wet and visibility was poor. We made a short stop alongside Loch Sunart for a coffee break and saw Goosander and Grey Herons resting on one of the islands.

Surprisingly, despite a couple of large lorries being loaded onto the Corran ferry, we manged to get a spot (just!) and were soon on our way to Fort William. We paused at the Marks and Spencer food hall to use the facilities and some of us took the opportunity to buy some of the good quality snacks on offer.

Continuing on our way, we drove on into Fort Augustus. It was still hammering down with rain and traffic on the main road to Inverness was slow, but Jenna decided to take a scenic and less busy route out of Fort Augustus to avoid the worst of the crowds. We enjoyed fabulous views on the way to the A9, and we could see Loch Ness down below us.

Once we reached the A9 we made our way to the Marriot Hotel where some of us said our goodbyes. The rest of us reconvened in the evening for one last delicious meal together in the Snow Goose, a local pub.

If you enjoyed Jenna's trip, click here to find out the next holidays that Jenna will be leading.

To contact Heatherlea to discuss this, or any other Heatherlea holiday call us on 01479 821248 or email info@heatherlea.co.uk



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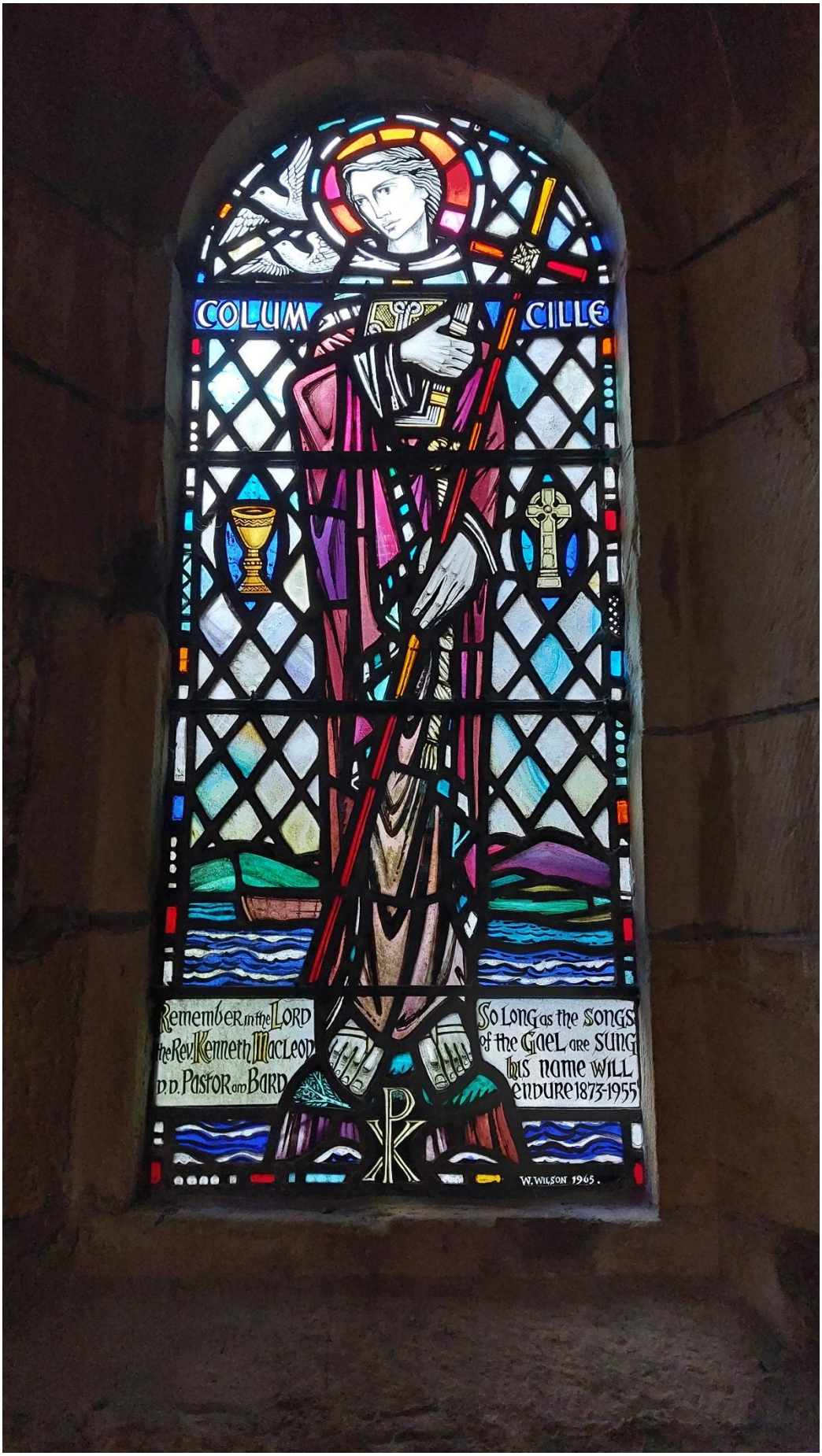


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COLUM CILLE
Remember in the LORD
the Rev. Kenneth MacLeod
D.D. PASTOR and BARD
So Long as the SONGS
of the GAEL are SUNG
his name WILL
ENDURE 1873-1955
W. WILSON 1965.