Scottish Highlands & Islands | Trip Report Aug. 13 – 23, 2022 | by Holly Page





With guide Holly Page and participants Deanna K., Deanna M., Ed, Marlo, Susan, and Wilfried.



Sat., Aug. 13

Nethy Bridge | Abernathy Highland Games

After a hearty breakfast in Inverness our guide, Holly, collected the group and we headed south on the A9 towards Nethy Bridge. We took the scenic route along Carr Road, allowing time to get a look at some of the more common birds. Holly spotted a Red Kite above the road and pulled over but by the time we got out it had gone. Ed spotted a bird perched on a fence post which turned out to be a common Buzzard. It posed nicely allowing everybody to get a good look at the first raptor of the trip. Further down the road we paused alongside a field full of corvids – Rook, Carrion Crow and Jackdaw were side by side providing a nice comparison. A Curlew was also seen in the field along with a Pheasant. We arrived at our comfortable hotel in Nethy Bridge and freshened up before heading down into the village for the Abernethy Highland Games. Games such as these are a tradition in the Highlands of Scotland and feature massed pipe bands, Scottish dancing, and piping competitions for both adults and children. The weather was sunny and really quite hot so we wandered round the field taking in the sights before sitting in the shade and watching the Chieftain's Parade. Jet lag and the heat of the day took their toll, so we had an early finish to get some much needed rest before the real birding started on Sunday.



Sun., Aug. 14 Abernathy Forest | Lochindorb

The weather continued to be fine and sunny as we headed into the Abernethy Forest for a wander along the trails through the wonderful scenery. On the shores of Loch Garten we watched a Mallard dabbling which was at least something familiar to everyone! We also had a look at a lovely orchid – Creepin g Ladies Tresses, it had p retty much gone over but there were still a few flowers left. We stopped in at the Loch Garten Visitor Centre which has a number of bird feeders set up. This meant we could get good views of birds such as Chaffinch, Siskin and Greenfinch. A pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers came to one of the feeders out at the front of the centre and chased each other round the trees for quite a while and a Red Squirrel came and took its fill of the peanuts. Holly heard the call of the Crested Tit, a speciality of the Scottish Highlands, and we all got views of it in the trees as it came into one of the feeders, grabbed itself a peanut and took off. A little way down the road we stopped in at a dragonfly pool, enjoying the warm weather on the boardwalk alongside Black Darters.

After lunch we headed for the hills and a beautiful area of moorland surrounding a loch, Lochindorb, and here we had great views of Red Grouse. We saw a family party of 5 birds crossing the road in front of us before disappearing into the heather. At Tomvaich we were again in beautiful woodland but this time spruces rather than pines. We listened for the "chip chip" call of our quarry and it wasn't too long before we heard it – half a dozen Red Crossbills landed in the spruces above us, and we all enjoyed watching them before they carried on their way. We had a cup of tea at Old Spey Bridge, the old road bridge crossing the River Spey. The water level was quite low, and we saw a Grey Wagtail bobbing around on the rocks on the river bank. Further upstream, quite some distant away, a Goldeneye was diving for food and Holly spotted a Dipper but unfortunately it disappeared around the bend rather than coming closer. We finished the day at Castle Roy with Murdo, an 8-year-old Highland Cow who is very friendly!

Mon., Aug. 15 Moray Coast

Today we had an early start as we had a long drive up to the eastern Moray Coast for a boat trip. We arrived at Macduff Harbour and boarded the "Seacat" for our sailing out to the seabird colonies at Troup Head. This is the only mainland Gannetry in Scotland and being in a boat underneath the cliffs affords the best views of the birds. Several thousand Gannets breed here and the sounds, sights and smells of the colony are quite something to behold. Kittiwakes were also still on their nests but the auks (Guillemots, Razorbills and



Puffins) had already left for the winter. On the return journey Marlo spotted a couple of Arctic Skuas flying past and we also saw a few of each of the aforementioned auk species on the water.

We had lunch by the mouth of the River Deveron in Banff for lunch before a quick trip to the scenic 17th century harbour in Portsoy where we didn't see too much, just a few Eider and Shag. At Portgordon, a little further west, we had a walk along the shingle beach and found a few wader species. Dunlin and Sanderling were working the tideline, moving like clockwork toys, and a single Golden Pl over was also present. For our cup of tea and cake stop we visited Loch Spynie which has a great feeding station. Tree Sparrow and Red Squirrel were the highlights here. We ended the day with a wonderful meal at a traditional British pub where many of the group tried traditional dishes such as Cullen Skink and fish & chips.

Tues., Aug. 16 Black Water Falls | Mellon Udrigle

The weather was forecast to be pretty horrendous around the Cairngorms so we decided to head west to avoid the worst of it. Our first stop was at Black Water Falls, a small rest stop alongside a lovely fast-flowing river and cascading waterfall. We got amazing views of a Dipper as it came and landed on a rock right in front of us – much better t han the distant views we had the other day. We continued north and west with our next location being Dundonnell, at the head of Little Loch B room which is a sea-loch. The tide was well in and it was a little quiet but we enjoyed lovely views of Curlew and some Hooded Crows while we had a cup of tea and shortbread. A few stops were made alongside Gruinard Bay and we started to see increasing numbers of seabirds including Shag, Gannet and our first "loons" with a number of Red-throated Divers offshore. In a smaller bay we found a flock of Black-throated Divers, at least 13 birds, and most of them were in stunning breeding plumage. A few Ravens were cruising around, seemingly playing in the breeze and chasing each other, it's such a joy to watch birds who simply seem to relish flying.

We had our lunch on the slipway at Laide. It was pretty chilly but we were joined by a Robin for a little while. Once we had eaten we visited Mellon Udrigle where we walked down the boardwalk onto the beach. Along the way we passed a large colony of mining bees who were making their homes in the dunes, we later identified them as Ivy Mining Bees. Holly scanned the wall of a local garden and spotted something which she got really excited about. Putting the scope on it confirmed it was an adult Woodchat Shrike – a real rarity



in the UK and especially on the west coast of the highlands! We all got a view through the scope before it was flushed by some walkers. Marlo re-located it allowing further views before it flew off again and couldn't be relocated. A few other passerines were in the area including Linnet and Northern Wheatear.

After all the excitement we retired to Aultbea for a comfort stop and enjoyed incredible views of 3 Blackthroated Diver loafing on the sea right in front of us while Ringed Plover and Redshank fed along the shoreline. A White-tailed Eagle was then spotted flying overhead and was soon joined by a second. We watched the two birds circling and soaring over our heads before they moved off, being joined by a third! We had a final stop of the day at Gairloch with tea and cake. The harbour here was very quiet but that was ok considering the wonderful birds we head already seen today.

Wed., Aug. 17

Cairngorm Mountain Range

Today we ventured south to explore a different area of the Cairngorm Mountain Range. We drove through some incredible moorland scenery before dropping down to Royal Deeside, near Balmoral, and onto Glenshee. Here we used the chairlift to get up to The Cairnwell, the lift taking us up to around 3000 feet above sea level and then it was a short walk up to the summit. Here we were hoping for Ptarmigan which live on the mountains in this area. They aren't easy to find, however, and so it proved today with no birds being found despite a thorough search of the area. We did, however, see plenty of Mountain Hares, Meadow Pipits and some interesting alpine plant s.

We had a lunch and retail stop in Braemar, a lovely little highland village with unique shops where we bought local gin and artisan chocolate. For the afternoon we went on a tour of the Craggamore Distillery, one of several the famous Speyside whisky distilleries. It was interesting to see the process to make the spirit and, of course, the tasting at the end was a firm favourite!

Thurs., Aug. 18

Lossiemouth

It was an early start this morning, leaving the hotel at 6.30am to visit a local Black Grouse lek. At this time of year, after the breeding season has ended, there isn't too much action to be seen but males still attend the site to maintain their place in the pecking order. We saw at least 5 male Black Grouse on the hillside, their



beautiful plumage showing up nicely in the early morning light. A lovely addition was a male Hen Harrier, quartering the moor before disappearing down into the grass. We had a lovely breakfast back at the hotel before making for the Moray Coast where we would cover some sites further west than those visited on Monday. We drove alongside the River Spey and began our birding at the mouth of the river, known as Spey Bay. An Osprey was fishing in the river while several waders roosted or fed along the shore. A dozen Black-tailed Godwits were joined by a Greenshank and a Pectoral Sandpiper – a rare American visitor to UK shores. Slightly inland we stopped at Loch Oire to pick up some of the more common UK waterbirds including Common Moorhen, Coot and Tufted Duck. A family of Mute Swans were also present.

Back on the coast we visited Lossiemouth with another Osprey seen fishing while Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Teal grazed on the marsh. At Burghead we had lunch at the headland and enjoyed watching some more waders down on the rocky shore. There were Red Knot and Ruddy Turnstone, some of which still had vestiges of their breeding plumages, plus Ringed Plover and a few Sandwich Terns flew past. We drove through some farmland spotting a lovely family group of 7 Grey Partridge and a few Magpies. The last site of the day was Netherton, at the south end of Findhorn Bay. Here we scanned the saltmarsh and the bay with Marlo picking up a lovely Peregrine sat on the grass giving great views in the scope. A Quail was heard calling but, despite searching, could not be seen (which is normal for this elusive species).

Fri., Aug. 19 Cairngorm | Speyside | Strathdearn

This was to be our last day in the Cairngorm and Speyside area before we embarked on our island leg. We began the day at the Cairngorm Mountain base station. It was a little gloomy and really cold but we thoroughly enjoyed the views down to Loch Morlich and Aviemore. On the bird front it was a little quiet with only Meadow Pipit and Pied Wagta il being seen until Marlo dashed off up the hill to check something out which looked a little more interesting. Unfortunately, he pulled his calf in doing so and, to add insult to injury, the birds were Woodpigeons! We had a break in Aviemore to allow everyone an opportunity to explore the village before heading into our private estate in the hope of a glimpse of one of the rarest birds in the UK, the Capercaillie. This is the largest grouse species in the world but under serious threat in the UK due to a mixture of habitat loss, disturbance, and climate change. Sadly, we didn't see a Capercaillie but we found a mixed flock of small birds including some firm favourites with the group – Crested Tit, Treecreeper and Coal Tit.



The last part of the day was spent up a secluded highland glen, Strathdearn, in the hope of seeing more raptors. We watched a European Kestrel hovering while hunting but were hoping for something larger! Then it appeared – a stunning Golden Eagle cruising above the ridge opposite us. It disappeared behind the ridge a couple of times before eventually flying in front of the hillside where most of us lost it against the heather. Marlo managed to follow it and said it appeared to have landed in a rocky area. Holly scanned the area with the scope an eventually managed to pick it out. Even though it was well camouflaged everyone got great views of it in the scope. It was a real treat to see such a majestic bird both flying and then perched.

Sat., Aug. 20 Creag Meagaidh Nature Reserve | Isle of Mull

After breakfast it was time to leave The Mountview Hotel and Nethy Bridge behind and begin the journey west. At Creag Meagaidh nature reserve we spent some time at the feeding station, enjoying the close views of birds such as Chaffinch and Siskin plus a new bird for the trip with a Lesser Redpoll. We passed through the town of Fort William on the west coast before crossing Loch Linnhe on the Corran Ferry, the first of two ferry crossings today. Stopping in a roadside layby at Sallachan we scanned the sea-loch picking up Eider, Red-breasted Merganser and Shag.

We drove down through some fabulous scenery to the ferry terminal at Lochaline where we boarded the ferry to take us across to Fishnish on the Isle of Mull which is a 20-minute crossing. Once on the island we made for Loch Spelve, driving the loch- side road slowly to enjoy the view and see the birdlife. Once at the end of the road we spent some time taking in the scenery and watching a small group of Oystercatchers down on the shore, mixed in with a flock of sheep, no doubt making a meal of any insects stirred up by the animals' hooves. We had a brief view of an Otter out in the water but it was moving away from us so not everyone saw it. This was made up for by the White-tailed Eagle which was seen soaring over a ridge – a great way to welcome us to Mull!



Sun., Aug. 21

Staffa | Treshnish Isles

Today we were booked on a boat trip to visit a few of the islands that lie of the west coast of Mull. On the way to the harbour at Ulva Ferry we had time to make a couple of stops at the eastern end of Loch na Keal. At the first stop we spent some time watching a number of species in amongst some grazing horses. A few Pied Wagtails were joined by Meadow Pipits a nd a couple of Mistle Thrushes. At the second stop Holly spotted a White-tailed Eagle perched high in a pine tree. These are truly huge birds and seeing them perched allows you to appreciate how large their bill is. It took flight, going out over the loch towards a tourist boat which often throws out fish for the eagles. It was soon joined by a second bird, and it was wonderful to watch the two gliding over the water and circling the boat, hoping for food.

We boarded our boat at Ulva Ferry and set off for the island of Staffa. This island is famous for its fascinating rock formations and Fingal's cave. Knowing that most people on the boat would make a beeline for the cave when we docked Holly took the group up onto the top of the island first. We watched some Shags on the cliffs before finding a sheltered spot where we could eat our lunch. Holly heard a Twite call and before long had located this small finch feeding on a bank of heather. It wasn't easy to give directions to its location, but everyone got a great view. With plenty of time left before the boat came back for us we headed along the rocky ledges at the bottom of the island round to Fingal's Cave. By this time all the other people on the boat had already seen the cave and so we had it to ourselves! Well, not quite to ourselves – a group of Lion Jellyfish were floating around in the water of the cave!

Once back on board the boat we sailed for the Treshnish Isles. Sadly, due to the outbreak of Avian Flu, landing on these islands is currently prohibited but we enjoyed sailing around them, seeing some of the Grey Seals which call this area home and were also delighted when a Great Skua flew past. In general, the waters were pretty quiet allowing two of the group the time to have a snooze! Returning to dry land we headed back to our comfortable hotel after a very enjoyable day.

Mon., Aug. 22 Ffionnphort | Iona Abbey

For the penultimate day of our trip we were visiting another island. We drove around the south end of Mull to Ffionnphort where we parked the van and boarded the ferry as foot passengers to cross to Iona. Here we had a little time to explore the island on our way to Iona Abbey. The weather wasn't too pleasant with a stiff, cold breeze so birds were a little hard to come by. As we approached the abbey we found a lovely Wheatear but not much else. We spent some time exploring the various parts of the abbey and its museum, learning much about the history of the island, the abbey and the community. Leaving Iona behind we took the scenic route back to our hotel, round Loch Scridain, seeing Golden Eagle and some Golden Plover before the weather got the better of us.



Tues., Aug. 23 Dervaig | Departures

Today was the last day of the tour and after a lovely breakfast we left our hotel to explore the north tip of Mull. We set off in drizzly rain but as we moved further north the weather began to improve so by the time we arrived at Dervaig the rain had stopped and we could see blue sky in the distance. The tide was quite low and a few waders were feeding in the channels. There were at least 2 greenshank, one of which had a limp but seemed to be feeding ok. A small group of Snipe were seen flying off but only Holly and Deanna K saw them. Scanning the shore, we picked up a new bird for the trip – Canada Goose! 5 of them were grazing on the shore before noisily flying off – it was a nice reminder of home for the group! Holly then spotted another Snipe, this time sat on a rock out towards the edge of the sea-loch. Although it was a little far away with the scope trained on it and it moving its head backwards and forwards everyone was able to see the bird with its long bill and stripes on the top of the head.

Leaving Dervaig we headed up the steep hill with a stop at the viewpoint at the top with a view out to the islands of Coll & Tiree. We continued along the road pulling in at the hide at Loch Tor. There was nothing on the water itself, but a few birds were flitting around in the trees between the car park and the loch. A group of Mistle Thrushes flew off calling and Ho Ily also heard a Bullfinch call just below us. It popped out into the open allowing everyone to see it – another first for the trip! It appeared to be a young male bird so wasn't quite in his full red-fronted finery but with a definite reddish tinge. Marlo then found a male Blackcap through a birch tree but it disappeared from view before anyone else could see it. By the time we were dropping down into Tobermory, the main town on Mull, the weather had improved further, and the sun was even on the verge of coming out! We parked on the harbour and the group had some time to potter around the lovely town before we went to connect with our ferry back to the mainland.

We joined the ferry queue at Fishnish in glorious sunshine and had our lunch. Just as the ferry was pulling into the dock some Bottle-nosed Dolphins were spotted. It was a lovely surprise, and they came really close to the shore allowing amazing views, sometimes even jumping clear out of the water. We boarded the ferry and quickly jumped out up onto the deck to watch the dolphins again. They had moved a little further away



but were still visible We then had another surprise as an adult White-tailed Eagle flew across the Sound of Mull and disappeared into some pine trees. What a fabulous way to say goodbye to the island of Mull! Landing at Lochaline we made our way to the Corran Ferry but took the scenic route via Kingairloch. The sunshine followed us all the way and we had a couple of b rief stops where we saw a few Grey Wagtails, with one being a lovely adult which was much more yellow than any of the others we had seen on the trip. A couple of Black Guillemots were seen offshore and virtually the whole way were accompanied by Meadow Pipits and Stonechats. Arriving at the Corran Ferry we had 10-15 minutes to wait for our crossing and scanning Loch Linnhe produced Cormorant, Shag, Great Black-backed Gull and Eider. We continued our journey north passing back through Fort William then following the Great Glen northeast, through Fort Augustus to Inverness. Here we had a lovely final dinner together before saying our farewells at the airport hotel. It was a great way to end what had been a great trip with wonderful birds and company.

Group Highlights

Ed:	The Peregrine Falcon and the Highland Games
Susan:	The White-tailed and G olden Eagles, the Sparrowhawk outside the Mountview, Fingal's cave – spectacular. The Highland Games too.
Deanna K:	The Robi n and Goldfinch! Robin especially, something about them is so adorable – it's smaller and more shy than American Robin and it's beautiful. Enjoyed that the trip interspersed the birding with the other things – the distillery, the abbey and Fingal's cave.
Marlo:	The Woodpigeons! The Robin is one of my favourite birds and the Goldfinch. My favourite thing was watching the White-tailed Eagles flying round the boat in Loch na Keal – got a photo of them flying low over the water and they are completely synchronised.
Deanna M-C:	Highland Cows – including Murdo! White-tailed Eagle – so majestic and you can tell what they are!
Wilfried:	Oystercatchers amongst the sheep at Loch Spelve.
Holly:	Finding the Woodchat Shrike, best rare bird I've ever found. The Bottle-nosed Dolphin and White-tailed Eagle as we were leaving Mull in great weather – just perfect! The group – brilliant people, so much fun, really has been a joy!

Photos Courtesy of Holly Page & Heatherlea

SPECIES	13/08	14/08	15/08	16/08	17/08	18/08	19/08	20/08	21/08	22/08	23/08
Mute Swan						x					х
Greylag Goose		х	x	х				х	х	x	х
Canada Goose											х
Mallard		х	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Eurasian Wigeon						x					x
Eurasian Teal						x					
Tufted Duck						x					
Common Eider			x	х		x		х	x		х
Common Goldeneye		х									
Common Merganser		х				x		х	x	x	x
Red-breasted Merganser				x				x		x	x
Red-legged Partridge							x				
Grey Partridge						x					
Red Grouse		х									
Black Grouse						x					
Common Pheasant	x		x		x	x	x			x	x
Red-throated Loon				x							
Arctic Loon				x							
Common Quail						Н					
Northern Fulmar			x								
Manx Shearwater									x		
Northern Gannet			x	x		x		x	x	x	
Great Cormorant			x			x		x	x		x
European Shag			x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Grey Heron			x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Little Grebe						x					x
Red Kite	x				x	x	x				
Osprey				x		x					
White-tailed Eagle				x				x	x		x
Hen Harrier						x					
Eurasian Sparrowhawk						x	x				x
						^	^				^

Common Buzzard	х	х		x	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
Golden Eagle							х			х	
Common Moorhen						х					
Eurasian Coot						x					
Eurasian Oystercatcher		х	х	x		x		x	x	x	х
European Golden Plover			х							x	
Common Ringed Plover			х	х		х			х		х
Eurasian Curlew	х		х	х		x		x	х	х	x
Black-tailed Godwit						x					
Ruddy Turnstone						x					
Pectoral Sandpiper						x					
Red Knot						x					
Sanderling			х								
Dunlin			x			x				x	
Common Sandpiper			x			x					x
Common Redshank			x	x		x		x	x		x
Common Greenshank						x				x	x
Common Snipe											x
Parasitic Skua (Jaeger)			x								
Great Skua			x						x		
Atlantic Puffin			x								
Black Guillemot			x	x					x	x	x
Common Murre			x	~		x			~	~	~
Razorbill						^					
Sandwich Tern			x								
						x					
Common Tern						х		х	х	х	Х
Arctic Tern						х		х	х		х
Black-headed Gull			х			x		x	x		x
Mew Gull		х	х	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Herring Gull		 	х	х		x		x	х	x	x
Lesser Black-backed Gull		х	x	x		x			x	x	
Great Black-backed Gull			х	x		x		x	x	x	x

Black-legged Kittiwake			х	х		x			х		х
Stock Dove											
Rock Dove			x	x						x	x
(Feral Pigeon)			~	~							
Common Woodpigeon	х	х	х	х	х	x	х	х	х		х
Collared Dove	^			^							
		х	х		х	X	Х	х	X	х	Х
Tawny Owl									Н		
Common Swift	х	х									
Great Spotted Woodpecker		х	х								
Common Kestrel					x						x
Peregrine Falcon						x					
Eurasian Magpie						x					
Western Jackdaw	x	х	x	x	x	x	х	x		x	x
Rook	x	х	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Carrion Crow	x	х	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
Hooded Crow				x				x	x	x	x
Northern Raven			x	x	x		х	x	x	x	x
Goldcrest		х									
Great Tit											
		х	Х		X	X	х	X			
Eurasian Blue Tit		х	Х		Х	x	х	х			Х
Crested Tit		х					х				
Coal Tit		х	х		х		х		х		
Sand Martin								х			
Barn Swallow	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
Common House Martin	х	х					<u> </u>	х		х	x
Long-tailed Tit					х						
Willow Warbler	x					x	х				
Eurasian Blackcap			х								x
Common Whitethroat		<u></u>					<u></u>		Н		
Sedge Warbler						x					
Eurasian Treecreeper		х					х				
Eurasian Wren		х				Н	х			х	x
Common Starling	х	х	x	x	х	x	х	х	x	x	х

White-throated Dipper		х		x							
Song Thrush				x		х					
Mistle Thrush		х					х		x		х
Common Blackbird		х	x	x	x				x	x	х
European Robin		х		x	x	x		x	x	x	х
European Stonechat				x				х		х	х
Northern Wheatear				x	x					х	
Dunnock			х								
House Sparrow	х	х	х	x	х	х	х	х	x	х	х
Eurasian Tree Sparrow			х			x					
Pied (White) Wagtail	x	х	x	x	x	x	х	х	x	х	x
Grey Wagtail		х	x			x	х				х
European Rock Pipit			х			х		х			
Meadow Pipit		х	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Common Chaffinch		х	x	x	x	x	х	х	x		х
Common Linnet			x	x		x			x		
Twite									x		
Lesser Redpoll						x		х			
European Goldfinch			x	x	x	x	х	x		x	
Woodchat Shrike				x							
Eurasian Siskin		х						х			
European Greenfinch		х	x				х				
Eurasian Bullfinch											х
Red Crossbill		х									
Common Reed Bunting						x					
SPECIES	13/08	14/08	15/08	16/08	17/08	18/08	19/08	20/08	21/08	22/08	23/08
Bank Vole		х									
Red Squirrel		х	x								
European Rabbit	x	х			x	x	x	x			
Brown Hare			x			x	x				
Mountain (Blue) Hare					x						

Otter								х		х	
Harbour Seal			х					х			х
Atlantic Grey Seal			х	х		х			x		
Bottle-nosed Dolphin											х
Harbour Porpoise			х								
Red Deer							х	х	x		
Roe Deer	x		х			x					
Reindeer							x				
Wild Goat							х				
Creeping Ladies Tresses		х									
Black Darter		x									
Emerald Damselfly		х									
Scotch Argus		х									х
Fox Moth Caterpillar				х							
Ivy Mining Bee				х							
Alpine Ladies Mantle					х						
Fir Clubmoss					х						
Red-legged Shieldbug					х						
Marmalade Hoverfly					x						