

Scottish Highlands & Islands | Trip Report

June 10 – 22, 2022 | by Michael Marsden



With guides Mark Warren, Jenna Barry, Kevin Shaw, and Michael Marsden along with participants Carol, Catherine, Christa, Fred, Glenn, Jeff, Judy, Kevin, Llayna, and Robert



Saturday, June 11

Arrivals | Culloden Battlefield | The Mountview

After breakfast at our Inverness hotel, the Presidio Inn East, we met Kevin and Jenna, two of our expert and affable Heatherlea guides, for our first day of birding. Our initial destination was the historic Culloden Battlefield. This was where, in 1746, the Jacobite rising against the Hanoverian monarchy came to a tragic end. The combined forces of the Duke of Cumberland, George II's son, crushed those of Edward Charles Stuart. Some 1600 soldiers were killed, almost all Jacobites, in less than an hour. The battlefield is their graveyard. Despite that, and despite the cold and windy weather, Culloden was a delight with a fascinating indoor exhibition on all aspects of the battle, and with trails and explanatory signs throughout the grounds. Particularly poignant were the cairns erected to commemorate each Scottish clan which fought in the battle - not all on the same side!



And the battlefield itself gave us our first views of several characteristic birds of the region - Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Linnet, Greenfinch, and Pied Wagtail in the grasslands, and Common Buzzard, Red Kite, Common Gull (which really is the common inland gull here) and Common Swift overhead. From there we drove the short distance to Clava Cairns, another historic site but with a very different history. Here is a Bronze Age burial site, dating back some 4000 years, with astonishingly well preserved passage graves, cairns and standing stones. It's now in a woodland setting, probably very different from the original but, for us, with the advantage of a new habitat and so new species, including Song Thrush, Chaffinch, Blackbird and, more unexpectedly, Spotted Flycatcher. We then made our way to the Moray Firth at Alturie. Here were Black-headed Gulls, Common Terns, Eurasian Wigeon, Red-breasted Mergansers and strikingly handsome Shelducks on the open water, and Eurasian Oystercatchers, Carrion & Hooded Crows, and a single Eurasian Curlew on the shingle and mudflats. A picnic lunch at Loch Flemington followed. This is a freshwater wetland replete with new species - Tufted Duck, Least Grebe, Moorhen, Eurasian Coot and memorable views of a singing Reed Bunting.

After a quick detour to the airport to collect Robert and Christa, we started our journey to the Mountview at Nethy Bridge, our hotel for the next 5 nights. On our way we stopped briefly at Broomhill Bridge on the River Spey, where Bank Swallows were hunting for insects and some of us came across a delightful Yellowhammer. The Eurasian Oystercatchers on the river here were enjoying a very different habitat from their American cousins. The Mountview proved a delight - an impressive mansion in a woodland setting with a friendly staff, wonderful local food, and a bar with a nicely selected range of wine, beer, and of course whisky! Nethy Bridge itself has a maze of walking and birding trails, the most productive of which were those along the River Nethy, just a brief distance from our hotel. On our first evening, we were entertained by a succession of Great and Blue Tits at the Mountview's feeders, views of Roe Deer in the surrounding fields, and those who ventured the river trail enjoyed views of Willow Warbler, Grey Wagtail, Dunnock, and Eurasian Siskin. A memorable end to our first day's birding.

Sunday, June 12 Abernethy National Nature Reserve

After breakfast, and for some another walk along the river trail, we headed for the pine forests of the Abernethy National Nature Reserve. Yesterday was Kevin's only full day with us, but happily Jenna stayed with us and we were now joined by Mark, who continued to be our second Heatherlea guide for the rest of the tour. The Two



Lochs Trail at Abernethy is the epitome of Highland pine-forest birding and a wonderful introduction to a new habitat. Here we came across many of its characteristic birds - Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Tree Creeper, Tree Pipit and, best of all, Crested Tit. Nearby is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve at Loch Garten. Renowned as the first U.K. Osprey nesting site to be made accessible to the public (in the early 1960s), it now boasts a well-equipped observation center with knowledgeable staff and closed-circuit television of an active Osprey nest. Other memorable sights at Loch Garten were of Eurasian Siskins, Red Squirrels, and a magnificent Great Spotted Woodpecker at the Center's feeders, and a pair of Common Redstarts with a juvenile at the car park.

We then birded some freshwater habitats, including Deshar Pond. By just about every one there were flocks of Greylag Geese, some with young, and Northern Lapwings, iridescent in the afternoon light and a particular favorite of Catherine's. Other birds included Little Grebe, Eurasian Coots, Moorhens, Goldeneye with ducklings, Eurasian Oystercatchers and Horned Grebe, a particularly rare breeding bird in Scotland. Singing Willow Warblers charmed us during a brief walk-through birch woodlands by the Strathspey Steam Railway Station (sadly, for Fred, trainless today), where we also came across a Ring-necked Pheasant. Our final destination was Lochindorb and its sweeping moorlands, a landscape much appreciated by Lleyna. Here we had splendid views of Red Grouse, including a pair with at least 4 chicks. There were also several waders in the area with chicks - Eurasian Curlew, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Northern Lapwing. Other birds included Mistle Thrush and the dapper Stonechat, as well as brief views in squally rain of a pair of Arctic Divers on the loch. On the way back to Mountview, those in Mark's van were entertained by a Golden Eagle being harassed by a Common Buzzard. And that evening there was a calling Tawny Owl in the hotel grounds, sadly never to be heard again, at least by us.

Monday, June 13

Dell Wood | Craigellachie Nature Reserve

This morning Kevin took us to one of his favorite nearby birding patches, Dell Wood - an enchantingly light-dappled woodland of birches and other trees. Here were Wood Pigeons, Chaffinches, Eurasian Robins, Common Redstarts, Great and Blue Tits, and a surprising number of Coal Tits - all birds we had seen before, but all warmly welcome sights. Less expected were 3 overhead crossbills, members of a complex of species that has still not been satisfactorily resolved. We then drove on to the picturesque Old Spey Bridge at Grantown. The highlights here were the antics of a White-throated Dipper hunting for stoneflies and insect larvae in the river, and wonderful views of elegant Gray Wagtails with their young. House Martins and Barn Swallows flew above us, while we watched Goldeneye and Common Merganser swimming in the waters.



We had a picnic lunch at yet another picturesque location, a lake south of Boat-of-Garten, where we were particularly fortunate to get prolonged views (from a safe distance) of a pair of Horned Grebes with their two young. The afternoon welcomed us with Tree Pipits and crossbills at Badaquish, and yet more glorious birch woodlands at Craigellachie National Nature Reserve. The habitat here is much more extensive than Dell Wood and so supports a greater range of species, including our two targets - Wood Warbler and Pied Flycatcher. We soon heard the elfin song of the warbler, but never managed a sighting. The flycatcher, thankfully, was much more co-operative, allowing the photographers prized shots of both male and female birds. The other delight here was a feeding flock of characterful Long-tailed Tits.

Tuesday, June 14

Carn Gorm

Our goal today was the summit of Carn Gorm. The funicular railway has not been in operation for some time, so the only option was a 2-to-3-hour hike along a somewhat at times rocky and steep trail. As a result, only half the group opted for the hike with Mark, while the others chose to do some more leisurely birding (and shopping!) with Jenna. Fortunately, we were all able to drive in the vans as far as the car park at the Ski Center. And even around here, the birding was good, with co-operative Ring Ouzels and a White-throated Dipper. But our main target birds - Rock Ptarmigan and Dotterel - were likely at only higher elevations. Early encouragement on our walk was wonderfully close views of Snow Bunting, including an adult male in all his glory. After that, it wasn't long before we came across a ptarmigan - a female with 5 youngsters!

We never did see a Dotterel, but any disappointment was far outweighed by an almost ecstatic reaction to being in such a high austere place of hard granite and arctic tundra (listen to Delius's *Song of the High Hills* for a musical evocation!). Even attempting to eat our picnic lunches in the wet, cold, windy weather with the cairn as our only protection could not erase the feeling. Jeff indeed considered the experience to be the highlight of the tour. Our drive back to Mountview was relatively uneventful other than for great views of a couple of calling crossbills at Loch Morlich. Those with Emma enjoyed the delights of the Insh marshes and Loch Insh itself, where they watched a female Osprey incubating eggs with her mate on alert close by. And in the hills above Dainahaitnach, they viewed both Common Buzzard and a distant pair of Golden Eagles.

Wednesday, June 15

Birding by Boat

This was the day for our boat trip to the seabird colonies of the R.S.P.B.'s reserve of Troup Head. The cliffs here reach as high as 300' and stretch for over 2 miles. They are home to an estimated 40,000 seabirds, including the



only mainland gannetry in Scotland. Our boat, the *Seacat* out of MacDuff, could not accommodate us all so we went in two groups - some with Mark in the morning, others with Jenna in the afternoon. Very happily, the cold windy weather we'd experienced so far (when the rest of the U.K. had been basking in a heat wave!), finally gave way to a warm, sunny morning. The seas were calm and both groups had unforgettable views of thousands of Gannets, Common Murres, Guillemots, Northern Fulmars and Black-legged Kittiwakes both on the cliffs and in the waters around the boat. The skipper was able to get us close to all the birds and took particular care to give us wonderful views of a colony of at least 80 Puffins, many perched by their nesting burrows. And the experience was not just visual. As Jenna commented, the sights, the cacophony and the pervasive guana smell really were an assault on all the senses!

Other birds seen from the boat included Common Loon, Common Eider, Common Scoter, Great Cormorant, Shag, and best of all, a handful of immaculate Black Guillemots. But birds were not our only targets of the boat trip. The waters around Troup Head are particularly rich in cetaceans, and both trips enjoyed views of the magnificent Minke Whale. Harbor Porpoises (one with a small calf) and both Rissa's and Bottle-nosed Dolphins were other species we came across. The dolphins swimming and playing in the wake of the boat was one of Carol's favorite memories of the trip. Both groups spent most of the rest of their day at Spey Bay and Cullen (with its delicious ice-cream). Birds seen included Common Ringed-Plover, Sandwich Tern, Common Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, and Yellowhammer. Mark's group also briefly birded around the impressive ruins of the church of St John the Evangelist at Gardentown, which dates to 1513.

Thursday, June 16

An early start this morning to get to a traditional Black Grouse lek by dawn. It was well worth losing an hour's sleep! When we arrived, we were able to watch the birds from a safe distance on the opposite side of a road. There were 11 grouse at the lek and we delighted in their displays and bubbling songs. A little later at Ballindalloch we came across their cousins, Ring-necked Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge, both originally introductions to Britain but now well established here. On our way to our next destination, Mark somehow caught sight of a distant shape while he was driving that he thought might be an owl. And he was, of course, right - a perched Short-eared Owl that was not easy to pick out even with binoculars! This proved a fortuitous stop as we additionally got great views of a Common Snipe and a Eurasian Kestrel. Capercaillie was our target bird in the pines of Carn Bad Luibhean. But sadly, their numbers have decreased precipitously in recent years and they have become very difficult to see, so we were not that surprised to miss them. They have after all been



extirpated in Scotland before and current populations are the result of re-introductions. We were compensated for our efforts by views of Eurasian Treecreepers, Goldcrests, Chiffchaffs, crossbills, a hunting Red Kite, and a handsome Eurasian Jay – Kevin’s pick of the 94(!) new species he saw on the tour.

Our afternoon was spent in the wonderful Findhorn Valley. The grasslands here are a magnet for raptors, and we came across Common Buzzards, Golden Eagles, a Red Kite, and a flyover Peregrine Falcon. Other birds included Northern Wheatear, Common Cuckoo, and a flock of 25 Eurasian Curlew. Red Deer, a Brown Hare, and a flock of feral goats were among the other wildlife we came across here.

Friday, June 17

Benromach Distillery

A pair of non-birding highlights today - fish and chips at a traditional Scottish pub, and malt whisky at one of her renowned distilleries! We began at the Benromach distillery where, despite the early hour, some of us enjoyed a tasting of three different qualities of their Speyside malt. The setting, with its gardens and traditional buildings, was delightful. From there we drove to the picturesque coastal village of Findhorn to bird the marshes and mudflats of the Bay. Although it was high tide, with consequently little shorebird habitat, we came across an array of species, including Pink-footed Geese, Common Merganser, Eurasian Wigeon, Grey Heron, Dunlin, and a pair of Shelduck with 7 chicks. In and around the coastal scrub were Yellowhammers, Tree Sparrows, and Greater Whitethroats. Findhorn’s Kimberley Inn provided our fish and chips lunch, together with its ideal accompaniment, at least for the non-drivers - a pint of perfectly conditioned cask ale. After lunch we visited the Roseisle Forest, an area of pines planted in the 1920s which now provides valuable wildlife habitat for, among other species, our target Crested Tit. After much effort one was eventually located, happily but unusually at eye height, and just about everyone managed to get satisfactory views. From there we visited Burghead, once the Pictish capital of the region with the ruins of a fort dating back over 1200 years. A Gray Seal in the harbor was a welcome sight. Our last stop of the day was the delightful R.S.P.B. reserve at Loch Spynie. From the hide overlooking the lake, we watched Eurasian Wigeon, nesting Black-headed Gulls with young, and our only Gadwall of the trip. The surrounding woodlands held Greenfinches, Chaffinches, European Goldfinches, Eurasian



Siskins, Yellowhammers, and Tree Sparrows at their nesting box. Best of all, though, a volunteer was filling feeders with hazelnuts while we were there, and we had unsurpassable views of munching Red Squirrels.

Saturday, June 18

Isles of Mull

Sadly, our last breakfast at Mountview, but we had the wonders of the Isles of Mull and Iona to look forward to. We initially headed west to Corran, where we caught a ferry across the narrowest point of Loch Linnhe, the longest fjord in Scotland, to Ardgour on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. We watched Common Eiders from the boat on the brief crossing, but several Black Guillemots on and around a dock at Ardgour was our lasting memory from here. Driving south on the Peninsula, we enjoyed distant views of a mist-shrouded Ben Nevis and, with the help of our guides, the conundrum of distinguishing Common from Arctic Terns in a mixed feeding flock near Sallachan. At Lochaber we boarded our second ferry, this time across the Sound of Mull, to reach the Isle itself.

Mull is one the great treasures of Scotland, a wildscape of mountains, moors, grasslands and wetlands, ringed by a seemingly pristine coast. This made it ideal as one of the sites for the White-tailed Eagle re-introduction program. The eagles at one time nested throughout much of the northern and western coasts of Scotland, but numbers declined precipitously, and the last native pair nested on Skye in 1916. Since the mid-1970s birds from Norway have gradually been released in their historic range, many of which have bred successfully, and there are now over 130 pairs in the wild. In our first afternoon we came across two White-tailed Eagles, one an adult with a distinctively pale head. Other birds included Golden Eagle, Common Buzzards, Hooded Crows, and lots of Greylag and Canada Geese, many with young. We spent the late afternoon in the picture-postcard town of Tobermory renowned for its colorful harbor-front buildings. It really was charming with its traditional shops and pubs, including a surprisingly well-stocked bookshop - and the opportunity for yet another tasting of malt whiskies at the Tobermory Distillery! After that, it was time to head for the welcoming Glenforsa Hotel, where we were to spend the next three nights.



Sunday, June 19 Treshnish Islands | Staffa

A rather cold and windy start to the day, mitigated by the glories of a full Scottish breakfast. The focus of the day was a boat trip to the Treshnish Islands and Staffa off the west coast of Mull. We had, however, time to do some birding on our way to the boat at Ulva, which we took full advantage of. The highlight, particularly for John, was a pair of White-tailed Eagles close to their nest at a traditional site. A trespassing Common Buzzard was, Mark suggested, perhaps attracted by the prospect of scraps of food around the nest. Other birds included a drumming Common Snipe, a pair of Northern Wheatears with a chick, a Common Loon on Loch Na Keal, and a Sparrowhawk at Ulva.

Our boat was endearingly named the *Holy Lass* and provided an ideal vantage from which to watch the spectacular plunge-dives of gannets in the surrounding water. Our first stop, Lunga, was a delight. The high cliffs held lots of Common Murres, Razorbills, and Northern Fulmars, while Puffins had their nesting burrows on the grassy cliff tops. Perhaps the most vivid of all our happy memories of the trip, will be of our sitting on the grass eating our picnic lunches within just a few feet of scores of seemingly unconcerned Puffins around their burrows. Just about everyone agreed this was one of their favorite experiences of the trip. No-one lives now on Lunga. There are, however, the remains of several blackhouses, traditional homes originally with stone walls and thatched roofs, which were abandoned in 1857. While visiting these, Christa heard a Corn Crake calling from the grasslands. It seemed to be within a yard or two of us but defeated all our efforts to see it. Despite this the experience was one of Christa and Robert's most vivid memories of the tour. A couple of nearby Twite, another new species for the trip, was a welcome bonus.

We spent the rest of the afternoon on the volcanic island of Staffa. Here the main attraction was a walk along the cliffs to Fingal's Cave with its hexagonal basalt columns similar to those of the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. The legend is that they are each the end of a series of stepping stones built by Fionn McCoull so that he could walk from one country to the other without wetting his feet. The lasting avian memory of Staffa was of a distant perched Great Skua spotted by Mark. It was a pity that this was our only sighting of these magnificent piratical seabirds, locally known as Bonxies.



Monday, June 20

Isle of Iona

Today we took the regular ferry from Fionnphort to the wondrous Isle of Iona, very different both in geology and in atmosphere from any other place we visited. Its pervasive air of peace and tranquility seemed to be reflected even in its birdlife - wrens, robins, finches, thrushes, and wagtails all lined the streets we walked. Our target bird, though, was Corn Crake, and we soon heard their distinctive calls from a flower-rich meadow that had surely never seen pesticides. But, as on Lunga, we never even glimpsed the bird itself, despite our being able to isolate almost to the square foot where it must have been. But it was not perhaps inappropriate that on this island birds, for once, should take a secondary place. Most of our time was spent in and around the Abbey, and several of us took advantage of a guided tour. St. Columba and his companions established a monastic community here in 563CE, which soon developed as a center of learning and focal point for the spread of Gaelic Christianity. The Book of Kells was almost certainly written there in about 800, before being taken, during the Norse raids, for safe keeping to Ireland. The oldest extant building, the exquisite St. Odhran's Chapel, dates back only a little over a thousand years! Very different is the Church of Scotland's austere Parish Church of Iona, designed by Thomas Telford in 1828, but it was in the trees by that church that we saw the greatest variety of birds. Back on Mull, during the drive to our hotel, we came across a last trio of species for the day - a Common Snipe perched on a post, a juvenile Whinchat, and a handsome Eurasian Jay.

Tuesday, June 21

Departures

A leisurely last day of birding as we traveled back from Mull to Inverness during the summer solstice. Before we left Mull, however, we came across two last unforgettable sights. The first was prolonged views at close range of an otter hunting, grooming itself, and seemingly just enjoying life on the shores of Loch Spelve. The other was another hunter, this time a Short-eared Owl as it quartered the moorlands in search of rodents. Much of the afternoon was spent, a little like the otter, in enjoyable laziness, watching others work the locks of the Caledonian Canal at Fort Augustus, and then exploring Nessieland and the other tourist delights of Drumnadrochit (including some delicious ice-cream!). From there we drove along the A82, following the northern bank of Loch Ness, to Inverness and to our hotel, where we gathered for the last time over dinner to share happy memories of our trip.

Scottish Highland Scenic (Kevin Krajcir - KK), Puffin (Mark Warren - MW), Photo-op! (Catherine Cummins - CC), Pied Wagtail (Kelly Groves - KG), Castle Scenic (KK), Stone Monument (KK), Yellowhammer (MW), Song Thrush (KK), Crested Tit (MW), Fairie Sign (KK), Osprey (MW), Willow Grouse (Judy Buckham - JB), Oystercatcher (JB), Common Redstart (KK), Snow Bunting (MW), Pink Flowers (KK), Pied Flycatcher (MW), Crossbill (MW), Risso's Dolphin (MW), Colorblock Homes (KG), Northern Gannet (MW), Scottish Highlands Scenic (JB), Dunnock (KK), Great Black-backed Gull (KK), "Bridled" Guillemot (KG), Red Squirrel (MW), Colorblock Homes Panoramic (JB), Ship (JB), Harbor Seals (KK), Boats (JB), Seabirds on Ledge (KK), Sheep (JB), Puffin (KK), Razorbill (JB), The Abby from St. Oran's Chapel (JB)