

Tour Report Islay & Jura in Autumn 26 October – 1 November 2024

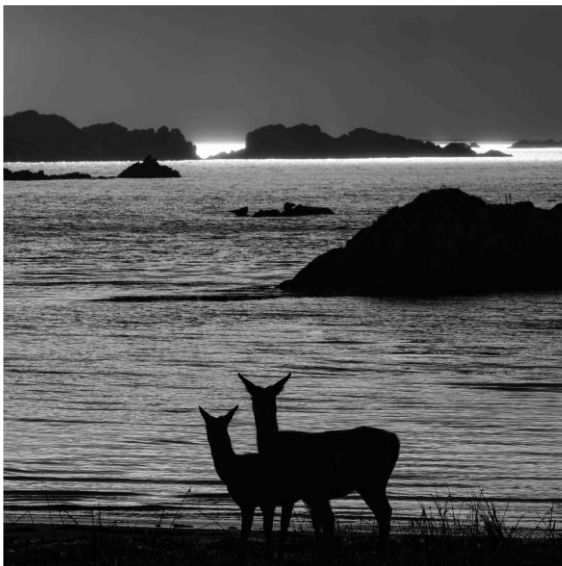
Red deer



Kildalton Cross



Red deer



Barnacle geese



Photo Credits to Carole and Paul Nicholson

Compiled by Simon Pawsey

Day 1:**Sunday 27 October 2024**

Weather - overcast, light drizzle.

With a minibus full of luggage we set off from Glasgow airport to start our Islay and Jura adventure. First things first though, we had a ferry to catch and it was not going to wait for us. So although we made a couple of comfort stops at a viewpoint and at Inveraray, we made good progress to arrive in plenty of time for our ferry.

Once on board, we made for the restaurant. Calmac's fish and chips didn't disappoint and then it was up on deck for some sea watching. As we sailed through the narrows of the Mull of Kintyre there great-northern in various stages of plumage scattered across the calm sea. We saw razorbills, guillemots, common gulls and kittiwakes, though the sea was generally quiet. A very brief and very large leaping bluefin tuna was an unexpected sight, though they are becoming more frequently seen off the west coast of Scotland.

We arrived on Islay to heavy rain and poor visibility, so it was straight to our hotel with plenty of time to unpack and relax before our evening meal.

Day 2:**Monday 28 October 2024**

Heavy low cloud, drizzle, poor visibility down to 1/4 mile at times.

On our first full day on the island, we headed out before breakfast at 0700hrs in darkness. Coming out of the hotel we could hear the sound of barnacle geese 'yapping' at the head of Loch Indaal. As the light slowly improved we took a route along the west shore of Loch Indaal. There were hundreds of barnacle geese roosting and feeding on the saltmarsh and we could just make them out in the dim light. The tide had turned and was going out. Parking up alongside the loch we watched turnstones, ringed plover, curlew, oystercatchers and redshank feeding on the strand line of the beach. We talked about where these waders had come from and that most, if not all, were migrants from Iceland and possibly even further north into Greenland. Offshore there were red-breasted mergansers, with a male displaying two females. In the distance through the drizzle and reduced visibility we could make out a small flock of common scoters. Where a freshwater stream was entering the loch, common and herring gulls were bathing and washing salt out of their feathers.

After breakfast, we followed the road around the head of Loch Indaal towards Bowmore. As we left Bridgend we found a male merlin perched in a tree right alongside the road. As is often the case when you find a good bird there was nowhere that was safe to stop! The merlin took to the air and we followed the little falcon along the road, as it moved from perch to perch. Eventually, we found somewhere to stop, trained a scope on it and then it flew!

At the head of the east side of Loch Indaal we briefly had a female hen harrier over the road and she disappeared into some scrub. There were good numbers of wildfowl on the loch, which included wigeon, teal, and pale bellied-brent geese. Bar-tailed godwits and curlew were feeding in the shallows, and we discussed some of the finer points of godwit identification. Behind us, a flock of starlings were very vocal and the local robin was clearly displeased about the presence of a cat. After picking up some supplies in Bowmore we headed towards RSPB Loch Gruinart. On the B8017 at Lyrabus, a male hen harrier drifted across the moor, appearing through the drizzle like a grey spectre. Further up the road, a distant female sparrowhawk caused terror amongst a very large flock of wood pigeons, which eventually settled shoulder to shoulder on some telegraph wires, causing them to visibly bow under their weight. Gruinart Flats were quiet, with small flocks of barnacles and greater white-fronted geese scattered around the fields. A little egret was feeding in one of the drainage channels and a large flock of golden plover wheeled over our heads a number of times, calling as they did so. Round and round they went as golden plover frequently do, before eventually deciding on a field to settle in. The lapwings were restless as well, though we couldn't pick out any predators. We called into the visitor centre and then made our way to the south and north sides of the reserve on foot. The floods on the flats were well populated with wigeon, teal and some

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shoveler and pintail. We picked up a female ruff, also known as a 'reeve' busily feeding in amongst the sedge grass. It was time for a cup of coffee and some hob nobs, so we drove to Ardnave at the head of Loch Gruinart. This area is reliable for red-billed chough and it wasn't long before we had close views of two of these charismatic corvids feeding on delicious fresh cow pats, and calling and flying in front of us, giving some excellent photo opportunities.

We wandered over the machair, looking down onto Loch Gruinart. There was a small flock of waders sat on the end of a skerry, which included curlew, bar-tailed godwit and that most elegant of waders, a greenshank. We then picked up two further greenshanks feeding in shallow water, with one bird repeating its haunting 'chui chui' calls.

Loch Gorm was our next destination and we drove anti-clockwise around the loch. Visibility was poor, but we had excellent views of a brown hare and flocks of barnacle geese and lapwings in the fields on either side of the road, with a large skein of barnacles flying right over our heads.

We visited Machair Bay, which although virtually birdless, was beautiful nonetheless and presented some very atmospheric photo opportunities, with low mist shrouding the surrounding hills. Kilchoman-ruined church near the bay proved to be an inspired stop. Just as we arrived, the sun broke through the dense low lying clouds, bathing the church and the surrounding fields in soft golden autumn light. It was just the tonic we needed after a day's birding in hard weather with limited visibility. The cameras came out and we snapped away, making the most of the albeit brief appearance of the sun.

We saw another female hen harrier as we made our way back to Bridgend in fading light, but she quickly dropped over a ridge and out of sight. We enjoyed a wonderful first full day on Islay in some challenging weather conditions.

Day 3:

Tuesday 29 October 2024

Overcast, low cloud, intermittent drizzle, some bright spells.

Shortly after leaving the hotel, we stopped once more at the head of Loch Indaal. As we arrived the barnacle geese were just settling on the flats, with the tide starting to go out. They appeared unsettled and the reason was two adult white-tailed eagles sitting on the tide line, with two large flocks of barnacle geese either side, giving them plenty of personal space! There were large numbers of wigeon, teal and very distant common scoters, with curlew, redshank, bar-tailed godwit and some flocks of knot wheeling around in the distance.

We then headed towards the Mull of Oa at the south end of Islay. As we climbed up from Port Ellen onto the moors the cloud sat low and heavy, reducing visibility down to a few hundred yards in places. Nevertheless, we were undeterred and set off on foot across the Oa to visit the American Monument. The monument, situated high on the cliffs of the Oa Peninsula, is a reminder of the American soldiers who lost their lives in Islay's waters during World War One. In February 1918 The Tuscania was torpedoed by a German submarine just off the Oa Peninsula. Eight months later the Otranto was sunk during a heavy storm just off Machair Bay.

The weather conditions on our walk to the monument were very changeable, from thick mist to clear and bright in a matter of seconds. When the mist cleared, the vista from the monument was spectacular. A peregrine was perched like a sentinel on top of a distant ridge looking out to sea, and a male snow bunting was a very welcome find feeding in amongst the rocks by the monument, and a lifer for some of the group. Back at our van, coffee and hob nobs had rarely tasted better. There was a small flock of twite feeding on some feeders at the car park and some very good candidates for 'pure' rock doves were sat on a dry stone wall. As the mist briefly cleared over a distant ridge, two golden eagles took to the air, but it was difficult to get sustained views as they kept soaring into the low cloud. They briefly put in a reappearance dropping out of the cloud with one bird performing an undulating display flight. We then made our way slowly along the southeast coast of the island, passing through the small townships of Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg,

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also home to some of the most celebrated single malt whiskies in the world. The coastline along this stretch was beautiful, with the road running alongside picturesque bays. The water was calm and the light at times was superb, giving some fabulous photo opportunities. With the tide rising, conditions were ideal for finding otters. We scanned and scanned and then scanned some more, but as they often are, they were elusive. Other wildlife more than compensated though. A female red deer and her calf watched us warily from a beach by the roadside, but although we were close to them on foot, they were not disturbed and we all took the opportunity to get some photos. We had a flock of two to three hundred redwings flying over us, maybe Icelandic birds moving down the west coast of Scotland having just arrived on Islay. Each bay we stopped at had at least one great-northern diver and small parties of red-breasted mergansers. Harbour seals were hauled out on the skerries and we caught up with some common species like long-tailed, blue and coal tits.

A highlight of the day was a visit to the ruined church at Kildalton. In the graveyard of the church is the Kildalton Cross. It was carved in the second half of the 8th century AD out of grey-green chlorite schist, a particularly hard local stone. It is considered the finest surviving Celtic cross in Scotland and one of the most perfect monuments of its date to survive in Western Europe. It was a beautiful location for such an enigmatic monument and we all agreed it was one of the highlights of the day. Just as we were approaching Port Ellen a pristine male merlin perched on a 4.5 metre prehistoric standing stone was a great find and we got superb sustained views of this fierce little falcon through the scopes.

Our last port of call was the head of Loch Indaal just before Bridgend. There were a few hundred barnacle geese on the saltmarsh in front of us, with many more further out. Wigeon, teal, golden plover, redshank and curlew were also roosting. As the light started to fade we picked up the sound of distant barnacle geese and like a swarm they appeared in their thousands. First to our right, then another flock came in on our left, dropping down to join other geese already roosting right in front of us. The noise and the spectacle of thousands of barnacles falling out of the fading light was jaw dropping. Apart from the occasional "Oh Wow!" we stood in silence and enjoyed this wonder of nature that was happening before our eyes. It was a truly unforgettable experience and a fitting end to what had been a very rewarding day on Islay.

Day 4:

Wednesday 30 October 2024

Overcast, low cloud but rising a.m. Very low cloud p.m. but partially cleared late afternoon.

Once again our first destination was the head of Loch Indaal, hoping for a repeat performance of the previous evening. The barnacle geese were still in the same location, as well as other large flocks spread out around the tidal flats at the head of the loch. Further out two adult white-tailed eagles were once again sat with a lot of space around them! Some of the flocks of barnacles relocated and flew in to join the flock that was in front of us, providing another wonderful spectacle of a sky filled with noise and geese.

Once the geese had settled we made our way to Loch Finlaggan, the seat of the Lord of the Isles. In the loch, there are three islands, two of which lie close to the north shore. The islands contain the ruined remains of buildings. It was here that the inauguration of the Macdonald Lords of the Isles took place. The chiefs of Clan Donald chose Finlaggan as their home and the centre of their lordship from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The Lord of the Isles was one of the most powerful figures in the country, with the small islands in Loch Finlaggan a centre of symbolic and administrative importance.

Whilst we were wandering around the ruins a large flock of barnacle geese took to the air from a nearby field and flew low over our heads and away down the loch, which added to the experience of visiting this important and accessible historic sight. The Jura ferry was a complete contrast to the luxury liners that are the Calmac ferries. No chance of fish and chips on this one! Within five minutes we were on Jura and making our way along the only main access road on the island. The weather was disappointing, to say the least and the Paps of Jura and surrounding hills were shrouded in low cloud. A flock of thirty redwings was very welcome as we came off the ferry and they flew in front of us perching and feeding as they went. Red deer were scattered across the open moorlands, but birdlife was sparse. At Craighouse we called into the very welcoming Jura distillery and one or two discerning purchases were made.

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Our coffee and hob nobs stop just outside Craighouse gave us a good opportunity to scan the bays for otters. Although conditions were favourable, they were still proving very elusive. Great northern divers were visible offshore - it seems that every bay on Islay and Jura has them, as well as red-breasted mergansers and a pair of eider.

We stopped at the Tarbert Standing Stone for lunch. A flock of approximately twenty yellowhammers in a tree was a good find and prompted a discussion about what the collective noun for a flock of yellowhammers should be. Sarah came up with a 'toolbox' of yellowhammers, which we all thought was inspired. The weather had closed in and visibility was poor, so we decided to make our way back towards the ferry. A flock of fieldfares were the first we'd seen on our trip and we stopped once again at the same bays hoping for an otter, but they still eluded us. We did however make the most of the opportunities to photograph the island's red deer population on the journey back to the ferry.

We were first in line at the ferry terminal, which was just as well as not all the waiting vehicles got on. Once back on Islay, we made good progress back to Loch Indaal to try and catch the goose roost once again. Wherever the geese were on the island they must have felt settled as they didn't come in. Earlier in the day fourteen and a half thousand barnacle geese had been counted at Gruinart Flats and they obviously hadn't felt the need to relocate to Loch Indaal for the evening!

Day 5:

Thursday 31 October 2024

Overcast and drizzling, clearing in the afternoon with cloud level rising over higher ground giving better visibility.

We started our day by heading back to RSPB Loch Gruinart. The previous day 14,000 barnacle geese had been reported on the reserve. On our arrival, there was clearly nothing like that number. But there were geese and they were restless. If we stopped opposite them they took to the air. A red-breasted goose had been seen intermittently on the reserve and we scanned the flocks we could find, but we didn't locate it.

We drove along the shore on the east side of Loch Gruinart with the tide falling and thick drizzle moving in. We found five greenshanks at different places along the shoreline, as well as curlew, redshank, oystercatcher, red-breasted mergansers and little egrets. Conditions were poor with low visibility, but we managed to pick up an adult white-tailed eagle flying up the estuary towards Gruinart flats.

The bird was working hard and flying like a stealth bomber about a metre above the water. It was joined by a second adult bird and we tried to keep pace with them, but lost them in the mist, as they flew up the estuary towards Gruinart Flats. The Rhinns of Islay were our next port of call and we made our way along the east side of the peninsula towards the picturesque village and bay at Portnahaven, where we had coffee and hob nobs. We took the road back along the western side of The Rhinns just as the visibility started to improve, with clouds lifting off the hills. A golden eagle in flight is what we were hoping for and the habitat looked promising. Very quickly we found a golden eagle circling over a pine plantation. It was a juvenile bird and unfortunately dropped down out of sight before we could get views of it through the scopes. A male hen harrier then appeared ghosting across the moor in front of us and we had excellent sustained views of this enigmatic and sought-after raptor. There were lots of ravens over the ridges, but no more eagles, unfortunately.

With one eye on the clock for our ferry departure back to the mainland, we called into Bowmore for a little bit of well-earned retail therapy. We then took our lunch overlooking Loch Indaal. The head of the loch was quiet, compared to some of our previous visits, but we had good views of some knot wedged onto a tiny piece of land at high tide. Our final stop before the ferry was to the Islay Woolen Mill.

On the ferry crossing we had some dramatic light over Islay as we sailed away. It was a quiet crossing with a single distant white-tailed eagle perched on a skerry just off Jura, great northern and red-throated divers, guillemots and kittiwakes. We arrived at Kennacraig in the dark and after a short drive checked into the

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Stonefield Castle Hotel.

Day 6:

Friday 1 November 2024

Low cloud and light drizzle.

Our plan for today was to explore the Mull of Kintyre. We set off along the east coast of the Mull, following a 'B' road all the way down to Campbeltown. The tide was rising and we were about two hours from high tide when we set off. Ideal conditions to look for otters, which had eluded us all trip. We were delayed at Skipness by about twenty minutes due to roadworks. Eventually, we stopped at a scenic bay at Grogport for coffee and hob nobs. It was here that Sarah said the words we all wanted to hear - "I think I've got something in the water." Sure enough, just offshore and about fifty metres from us was an otter. We watched it fishing for five minutes until it caught a large fish and swam to the shore with it, disappearing behind some rocks. You can never see too many otters and it was a fitting way to conclude our trip. Had we not been delayed by the road works, it's likely we would not have seen this otter.

We made it down to Campbeltown and then headed north back up the western side of the Mull of Kintyre and onwards to Glasgow for what was literally 'planes, trains and automobiles'- saying our goodbyes at the airport, a long stay car park and Glasgow Central train station.

Islay had really delivered for us. We had laughed and chuckled our way around Islay and Jura and not let the miserable weather get us down. We had eaten a lot of chocolate hob nobs, enjoyed each other's company, visited some inspiring historic sights and saw some amazing wildlife. It's fair to say that we were all in agreement, it was the thousands of barnacle geese coming in to roost that stole our hearts.

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Checklist for Islay & Jura in Autumn



Mammals checklist:

Rabbit
Brown hare
Otter
Red deer
Roe deer
Feral goat
Harbour seal
Grey seal

Birds Checklist:

Brent goose	Common scoter	Golden eagle	Turnstone	Rook	Robin
Canada goose	Red-breasted mergansers	White-tailed eagle	Curlew	Carrion crow	Stonechat
Barnacle goose	Gooseander	Sparrowhawk	Bar-tailed godwit	Hooded crow	House sparrow
Greylag goose	Pheasant	Peregrine	Knot	Raven	Duncock
Greenland white-fronted goose	Red-legged partridge	Merlin	Dunlin	Great tit	Pied wagtail
Mute swan	Red-throated diver	Kestrel	Snipe	Blue tit	Grey wagtail
Whooper swan	Great-northern diver	Hen harrier	Greenshank	Coal tit	Rock pipit
Shelduck	Slavonian grebe	Red kite	Redshank	Long-tailed tit	Meadow pipit
Teal	Little grebe	Buzzard	Kittiwake	Goldcrest	Chaffinch
Shoveler	Grey heron	Oystercatcher	Black-headed gull	Wren	Linnet
Pintail	Little egret	Lapwings	Great black-backed gull	Starling	Twite
Mallard	Gannet	Golden plover	Herring gull	Blackbird	Goldfinch
Wigeon	Shag	Ruff	Common gull	Song thrush	Yellowhammer
Eider	Cormorant	Ringed plover	Common guillemot	Mistle thrush	Reed bunting
Razorbill	Woodpigeon	Rock dove	Chough	Redwing	
Black guillemot	Collared dove	Magpie	Jackdaw	Fieldfare	

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