

Tour Report Isle of Mull Wildlife Photography 9-16 May 2025

White-tailed eagle



Corncrake



Common guillemot



Atlantic puffin



Compiled by Bret Charman

Friday 9 May 2025

Day 1:

Glasgow to Oban; Ferry to the Isle of Mull

The meeting point for the group this year was in Glasgow, and so I stayed over the previous night to pick up the group. One member was staying at the same hotel as me, while I met the rest of the group at Glasgow Central Station. Due to parking restrictions, it took a little time to get everyone to the van as it was too big to fit in the multi-storey car park.

Once we were all aboard, we set off through Glasgow and the motorway until we were winding our way up the western shores of Loch Lomond. This stunning area of Scotland is spectacular on a bright sunny day, as today was. In fact, it was forecast to be a wonderful week of weather on the Isle of Mull, with warm sunny days expected.

We arrived in Oban with plenty of time before our afternoon ferry, and so the group had time to explore the town, while I went to the supermarket to buy a few essential supplies for our stay at Killiechronan House. The ferry departed on time and we were soon on our way across the Firth of Lorn to Craignure. We were one of the first vehicles off the ferry and were soon following the main coastal road around to Salem. Here we turned off across the neck of the island and drove the short distance to Killiechronan House.

Pulling up at the house just before 6.30 pm, we were able to show everyone to their rooms and settle in a little before our first dinner together as a group. Several of the group went for a little stroll as Alexa and I made a plan for the week ahead. After a long day of travel, we decided to spend the following day following the southern circuit.



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Saturday 10 May 2025

Day 2:

Southern Circuit of Mull

We awoke to a glorious morning, enjoying a wonderful breakfast at Killiechronan, before loading up the van and heading out along the southern shores of Loch Na Keal. We stopped periodically scanning the shore, open water and skies above for any sign of resident wildlife.

The weather was incredible, but this would mean that wildlife would be harder to find. From the shoreline we had distant views of great northern diver, wheatear, oystercatcher, curlew and common sandpiper. As we drove slowly along the loch, we spent the whole time scanning the water, looking for any signs of otter.

We carried on until we crossed over the pass and back down to Loch Scridain. Opposite the Tiroran Community Forest is a white-tailed eagle's nest, and we could just about make out the head of an eagle on the nest. Admittedly, these were extremely distant views.

The morning seemed to be running away from us as we stopped frequently, trying to find the island's magical wildlife. It was a blisteringly hot day and it certainly made things much trickier than usual.



We stopped for lunch with the most stunning views, stonechats in the surrounding bushes, skylarks singing overhead and curlews calling in the distance. Sadly, despite the warm weather, there were few insects on the wing, but the midges had started to make an appearance.

After lunch, we worked our way along the main road through Glen More, before arriving on the shores of Loch Spelve. Here we saw our first hen harrier of the trip, watching them flying low across the moorland, before disappearing down to the ground.

After a long day out in the field, we decided to head back to the house, arriving at about 5.15 pm, giving us plenty of time before dinner. We went for a walk along the coast (near the house), hoping to find the resident

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otter on the loch. But alas, tonight we were not in luck. It was a quiet start to our time on Mull, but with weather as good as this, we really couldn't complain. Tomorrow will surely provide us with more wild wonders in this magical part of the UK.

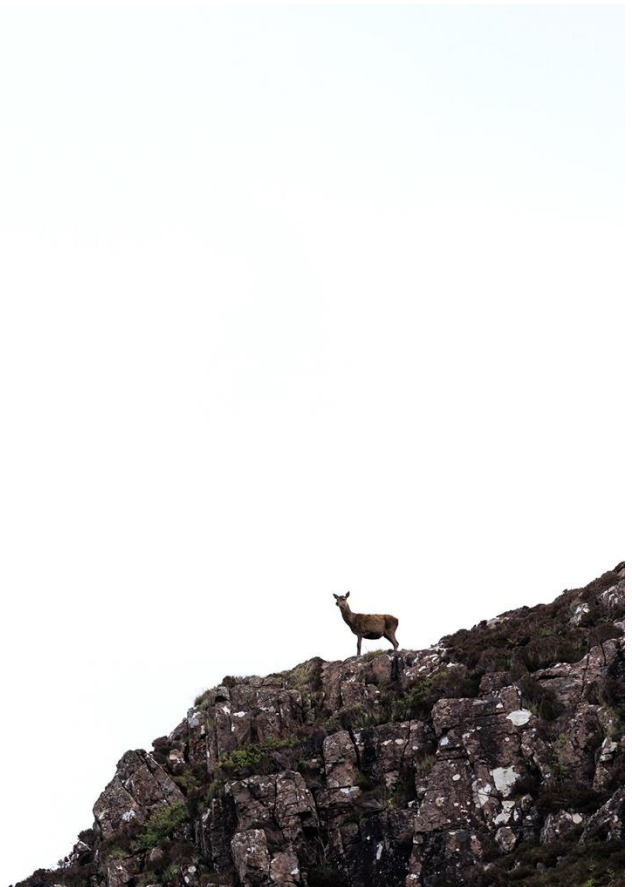
Sunday 11 May 2025

Day 3:

Loch Na Keal, Mull

There was a little rain overnight, and we awoke to a gloomier start (the only day forecast to be like this all week). We enjoyed another excellent breakfast before loading up in the van and driving along the north shores of Loch Na Keal and the coastline opposite the Isle of Ulva.

We started with views of curlew, grey heron and great northern diver, while a buzzard was flying low past the vehicle. Driving to Torloisk, we turned around and headed back to Eas Fors waterfall. On our way, we spotted some deer high up on the hills above, providing some stunning, simple photography with the silhouettes of the deer.

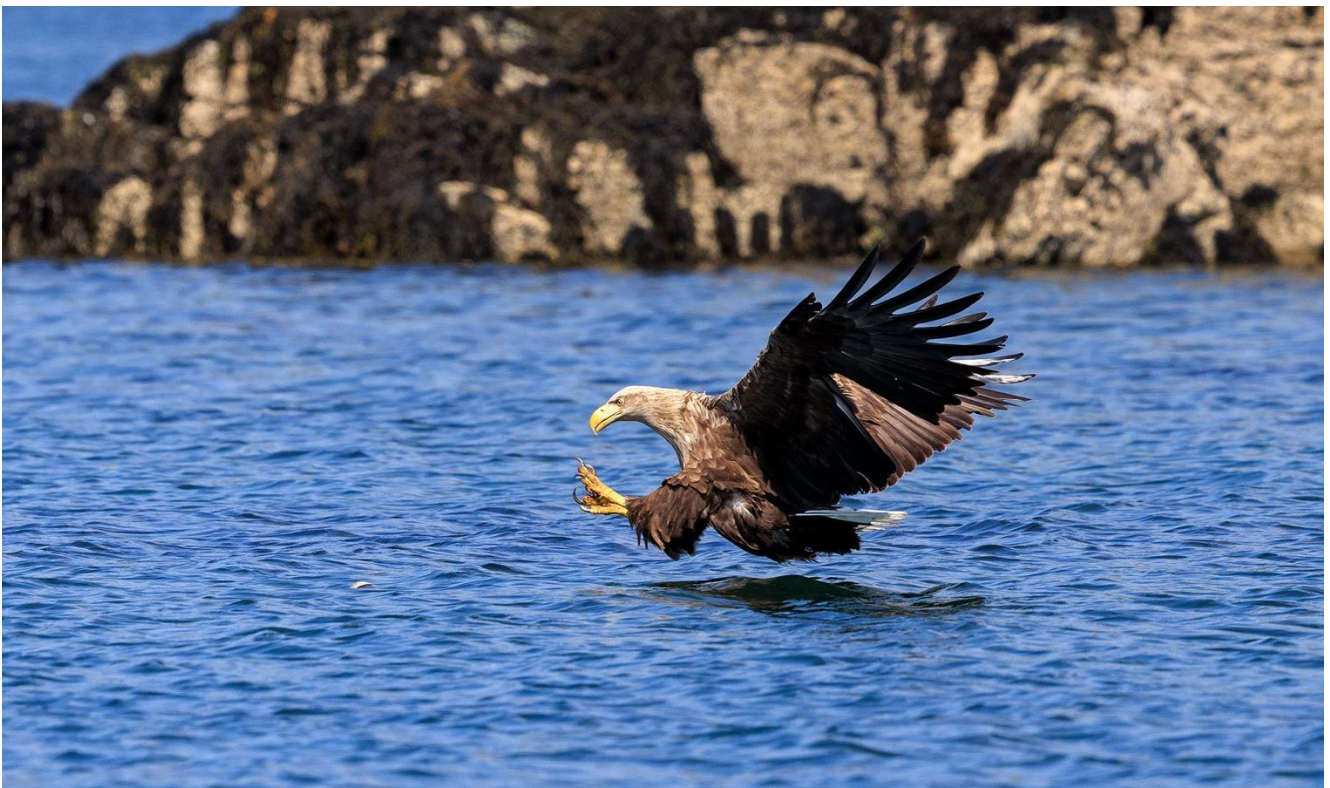


Once we got to the waterfalls, we were able to photograph this stunning geological feature. What makes the falls particularly popular are the old-growth coastal rainforest oak trees that line the banks.

It really is a sensational place, and it was the perfect place to enjoy our packed lunches after everyone had their fill of photographing the different levels of the falls.



After lunch, we headed to the Ulva ferry pontoon, where we would be hopping aboard our vessel for the afternoon. We were going to be on the water for the next few hours, as we hoped to photograph some of the resident white-tailed eagles found along the area's magnificent coastline. We set off, and almost immediately we had our first chance at photographing the high-speed swoop and snatch of a female eagle.



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Over the next few hours, we had multiple views as several different birds made attempts to pluck the fish from the water. With the bright sun, it was challenging photography, but with another boat trip later in the week, we had more chances to hone our skills.



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We did a full circumnavigation of the Isle of Ulva, returning to the jetty in the late afternoon. Other notable species we saw when out on the water included buzzard, great northern diver, common (harbour) seal, common tern, black and common guillemots, shags and common eider.

After a long day enjoying some of Mull's finest wildlife, we returned to the house for another delicious dinner prepared by our fantastic chef, Hannah. We'd been spoiled by the weather gods, and tomorrow we would be out on the water once again.

Monday 12 May 2025

Day 4:

The Treshnish Isles

We had a slightly earlier start today as we were heading out to the Treshnish Isles. These beautiful islands are famed for their geology, history and spectacular seabird colonies, and it was the birds that would be our primary focus today.

After breakfast, the group were busy prepping for the day ahead, including making their lunches and packing their bags. Soon, we were on the road, driving the ten minutes or so to the embarkation point. It was a little cloudy this morning, but it was calm and warm, which was a good sign for a long day trip. As we set off towards the Isle of Staffa, the clouds were thinning, but the swell was no issue at all. There was no little swell that when we approached Fingal's Cave, we were actually able to take the boat right inside the cave's entrance.



After enjoying the spectacular geology, we carried on to the Isle of Lunga, where we disembarked and slowly made our way across the rocky foreshore and up the slope to the plateau. Here we had the day to enjoy the Atlantic puffins, razorbills, northern fulmars, shags and common guillemots, filling our memory cards with these charismatic seabirds. However, it is important to note that there was a particularly special bird which

put on quite a show for us. More on that later.



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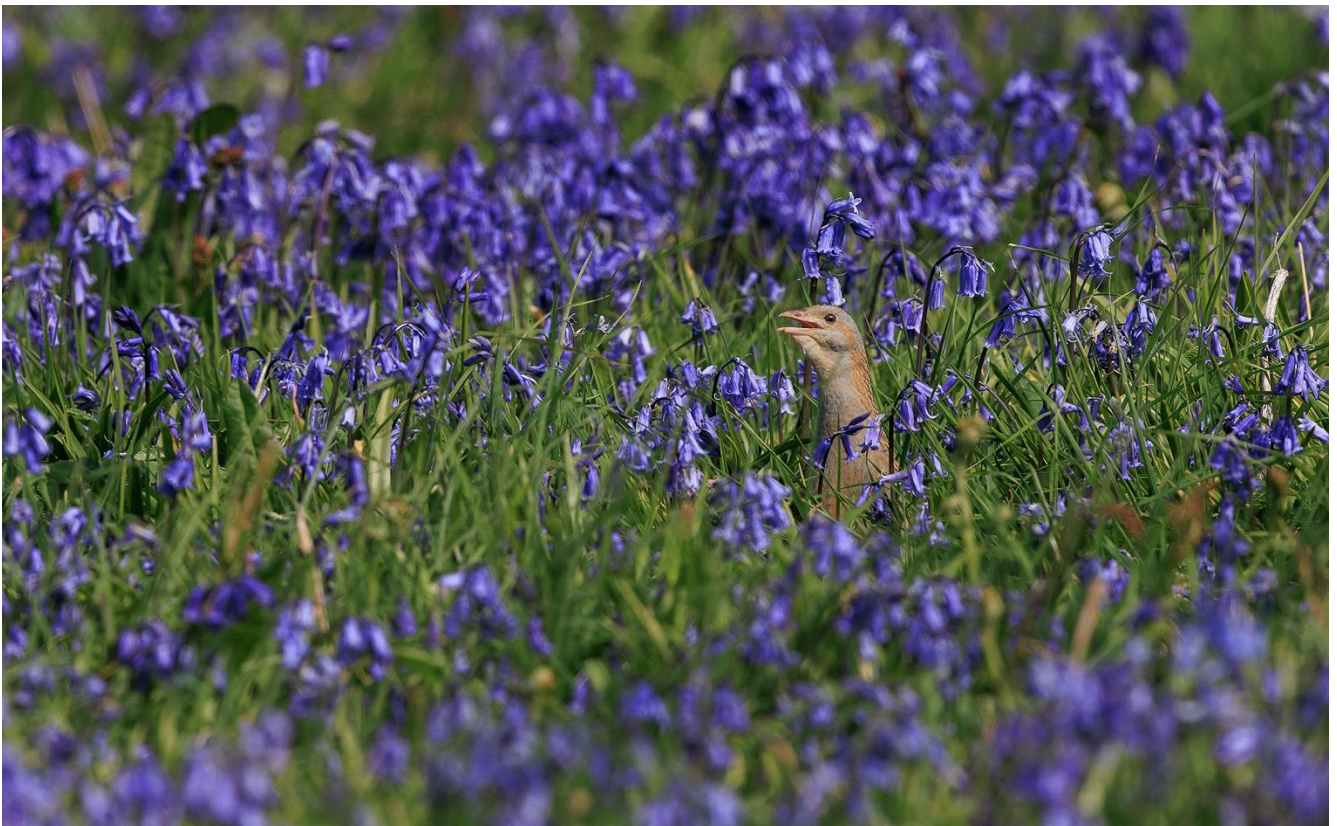
We were able to build up an impressive portfolio of imagery of all the seabirds, and despite the bright weather, the photography was particularly rewarding.



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The surprise sighting and wonderful photography opportunity was of a corncrake calling from a patch of bluebells. These incredibly rare birds are typically very shy and remarkably hard to spot, let alone photograph.



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What a wonderful day we had. As the afternoon was speeding by, it was soon time to make our way down from the plateau and cross the rocks and wait for the boat. We were soon back on the water and making our way back towards Ulva and the jetty. On our way back, there was a white-tailed eagle perched up on a rock on Ulva, providing us with another view of these spectacular birds.

Upon our arrival back on shore, we walked back up to the minibus and drove back to the house for a very well-deserved dinner.

Tuesday 13 May 2025

Day 5:

Northern circuit of Mull

We awoke to another glorious day on the Isle of Mull. It was among the warmest Mays on record so far, with remarkably low levels of rain. Following the normal morning routine, we enjoyed breakfast and made our packed lunches before heading out to explore the north of the island.

As we worked our way past the Ulva, continuing west on the coastal road, we came across greylag geese, rock doves and goldfinches. We kept our eyes peeled for otters as we slowly made our way west, but still they were keeping themselves hidden. The warm sunshine and long summer days seemed to be keeping the otters away until darkness had fallen.

We continued on and around the headland to Calgary Bay, arguably one of the most beautiful beaches in Scotland. It had been another quiet morning so far, but it was absolutely beautiful. Upon arrival at Calgary Beach, we parked up and enjoyed a wander through the protected area of machair grassland. This rare habitat is only found in a few areas of Scotland's west coast and in Ireland, too.



After our walk, we used the picnic benches to eat our packed lunches, and we even treated ourselves to the

local ice cream. We knew that the afternoon would likely be even quieter, so we made our way back to the house for a rest, with the plan to head out again after an early dinner.

Hannah cooked us another wonderful meal, and we were soon out again, in the cooler temperatures and lower light levels. We knew that this would give us a much better opportunity to find otter, as well as a host of other wildlife that call this magnificent area home. We were lucky enough to find some shelduck, many greylag geese with their goslings and after a lot of scanning, we finally had views of otters, three of them out in the loch.

The sunset by this point was absolutely exceptional, and as we watched the sun dropping down over the islands to the north-west, an otter popped up close enough to photograph.



What a fabulous evening in a truly magical setting. After enjoying the majesty of what Mull has to offer, we made our way back to the house, driving carefully to ensure that we had no animals crossing the road in front of us.

Wednesday 14 May 2025

Day 6:

Eagle boat trip Loch Na Keal

Waking up to another glorious day on Mull, we followed our usual breakfast and packed-lunch routine before meeting at the van for our morning activity. Today, we were heading out on the water once again, but this time for our second white-tailed eagle charter.

It wasn't long before we were down at the jetty by the Ulva ferry and boarding the boat for our session on the water. We were treated to some fantastic white-tailed eagle encounters and some wonderful photography opportunities, particularly as the light was a little bit softer this morning.



It wasn't just the white-tailed eagle that made an appearance; we were also lucky enough to watch a golden eagle at a distance as they soared along the ridgeline on the south side of Loch Na Keal. With such beautiful conditions, it was another fabulous day to be out on the water. Other highlights on the trip included views of gannets diving on bait fish, common seal and black guillemot.

Having had another action-packed morning and with the afternoon only getting warmer again, we decided that it would be a better option to head back to the house for some editing and downtime. We arranged another early dinner before heading out once again when the temperatures had dropped and the light levels were lower.

We didn't have any luck with otters this evening, but instead we had views of ringed plover, merganser and northern wheatear. Although there weren't really any photographic opportunities, it was truly a magical evening filled with birdsong and beautiful light on the spectacular surroundings.

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Thursday 15 May 2025

Day 7:

Cetacean watching cruise from Tobermory

We awoke to another beautiful morning, with magical light on the hills across the loch from the house. Having another fabulous breakfast, we packed our bags for a cetacean watching trip departing from Tobermory. Once everyone was ready, we were on the road and driving across the neck towards Salen and then along the main road to the island's main settlement. Tobermory, among Scotland's most famous towns, is a charming place, and after the trip we would have a little time to explore.

We were soon aboard the boat and heading out into the Sound of Mull, heading west out towards the Isle of Coll. The seas were calm and we worked hard scanning for any signs of a minke whale. We did have some harbour porpoises making a brief appearance, but then for a long while the seas were remarkably quiet.

Finally, our luck changed. The crew spotted a large pod of common dolphins ahead of us. It turned out to be a super pod, and we were blown away by the incredible sightings we were treated to. Seeing so many dolphins, surrounding the boat, bow riding and enjoying life was something to remember. Alexa, who is an expert in cetaceans, highlighted just how rare this sighting was and we should make the most of every moment.

After spending a prolonged period with these magnificent marine mammals, it was time to turn back and start our voyage back to Tobermory. As we crossed the open water, we finally caught sight of a minke whale. One minke whale turned into three, maybe even four, and we enjoyed some wonderful views as the streamlined whales briefly surfaced. What a fabulous trip, and although it was challenging for photography, it was a superb way to spend the day.

Upon our return to Tobermory, we had a little time to walk around and enjoy the town in the glorious weather. Everybody was delighted. We had arranged another earlier dinner with Hannah to ensure we could head out one last time when it was a little cooler. Maybe tonight we would strike gold with the otters.

This time we headed along the north shore of Loch Na Keal, driving to the Ulva ferry, always scanning, trying to see if we could find an otter hauled out on the rocks. Alas, we didn't have any close views, but it is possible we had a couple of sightings as we slowly made our way back to the house.

What a week it had been, with some stunning encounters and memorable photography opportunities. Although the otters were elusive, we could not complain about the extraordinary weather we had been treated to.

Friday 16 May 2025

Day 8:

Isle of Mull to Oban; drive to Glasgow

We had an early morning ferry to catch from Craignure, and so we skipped breakfast this morning. Some snacks were available and tea and coffee were served, but we were soon ready to depart. We said our goodbyes and thanks to Alexa and Hannah for all their hard work. Alexa's knowledge of the islands, the wildlife and the people makes her help invaluable on a trip like this, and I couldn't have done it without her.

And so, we drove along the main road to the ferry, catching our scheduled departure and enjoying a smooth sail across to Oban. We disembarked quickly and headed to the supermarket to get some coffee and breakfast, too. It was then a couple of hours' drive down to Glasgow, where I dropped the group off at either the airport or Glasgow Central Station. We all said our goodbyes and I wished everyone a safe journey as I started my own journey home.

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