

Tour Report

UK – Isle of Mull Wildlife in Autumn

24 – 31 October 2021

Grey seal



Eurasian otter



White tailed eagle



Red deer



Compiled by Sarah Malcolm

Images courtesy of Sarah, Melissa, Paul, Brian, Sue & Guy

Tour Leaders: Kate Humble, Dave Sexton & Sarah Malcolm

The Isle of Mull in Autumn is a wild and spectacular place. It's an island of rainbows and raptors, otter and deer. The dramatic glens, tranquil lochs, rugged seas, and sheltered woodland provided us with varied environments to explore on foot, on road and by boat. We made the most of the mixed weather, being able to do everything we hoped to on the itinerary and seeing white-tailed eagle every day!

Knock House made a delightful base for our stay and the routine of busy days, fireside evenings and delicious meals from Poppy became a most welcome one.

Mull was certainly the place to be. During our week, we shared this small island, not only with Kate & Dave but also Iolo Williams, Megan McCubbin & the Autumnwatch team and Simon King all in search of the same thing, spectacular wildlife!



Day 1: Oban to Knock House, Mull

Sunday 24 October 2021

Weather: Rainbows, heavy showers, intermittent blue skies

Whilst the forecast had looked utterly dreich for the week as we drove into Oban the sun was shining on the bay. Some had ventured to Oban for a pre-tour night and most of us met near the ferry port to gather tickets, offload luggage, and explore the town before our 15:55 departure. An expected sighting and one not on the species list was STORM:

STORM, a ten-metre-tall goddess of the sea, has emerged from the deep to encourage us all to celebrate our seas, care for our coastlines and empower us all to put the environment first. She is made from entirely recycled materials.

We then boarded the CalMac Ferry and gathered on the top deck in case we spotted any cetaceans on our 45-minute crossing. On arrival into Craignure we met our tour leaders Kate and Dave.

The half hour transfer to Knock House took us along the north-east coast of the island to Salen, where we peeled inland to cross the narrow waist of Mull and arrive at Knock House. Enclosed by Loch Ba on the east and Loch Na Keal on the west, Knock House provided an excellent central location for our base.

The light was drawing in as we arrived, so after meeting Kim, the Head Housekeeper, we settled into our rooms. Regrouping in the Cèilidh Room, where the log fire was roaring, we tucked into some canapés whilst Dave & Kate described their experiences of Mull.

After the first of chef Poppy's many exquisite meals, we all retired for our first night of the tour.

Canapés – Smoked salmon on bread / tomato salsa on crouton / courgette fritter

Main – Portuguese chicken / brown rice / green beans

Dessert – Chocolate fondant



Photo by Brian

Day 2: Loch Ba and Loch Na Keal

Monday 25 October 2021

Weather: Changeable weather with a downpour at one moment and sunshine with blue breaks in the sky with rainbows the next

With waterproofs on and binoculars around our necks we gathered in front of Knock House at 9:30. It didn't take long before Kate spotted our first white-tailed eagle of the tour! The adult bird soared over Loch Na Keal to our west.



Photo by Sue

Setting out on foot we were joined by Mull geologist James Westland. Our destination for the day was Loch Ba and as we wandered down the scenic track, James gave a brief explanation of the geology of the island. James also pointed out The Loch Ba Ring Dyke (LBRD) which is one of the classic geological features in Mull and has been described as "the finest ring dyke known to science" and is of international significance. It was formed as the result of molten magma filling an arcuate fracture when the central block subsided, forming a caldera. This occurred towards the end of the igneous activity in Mull and represents the last major igneous event.

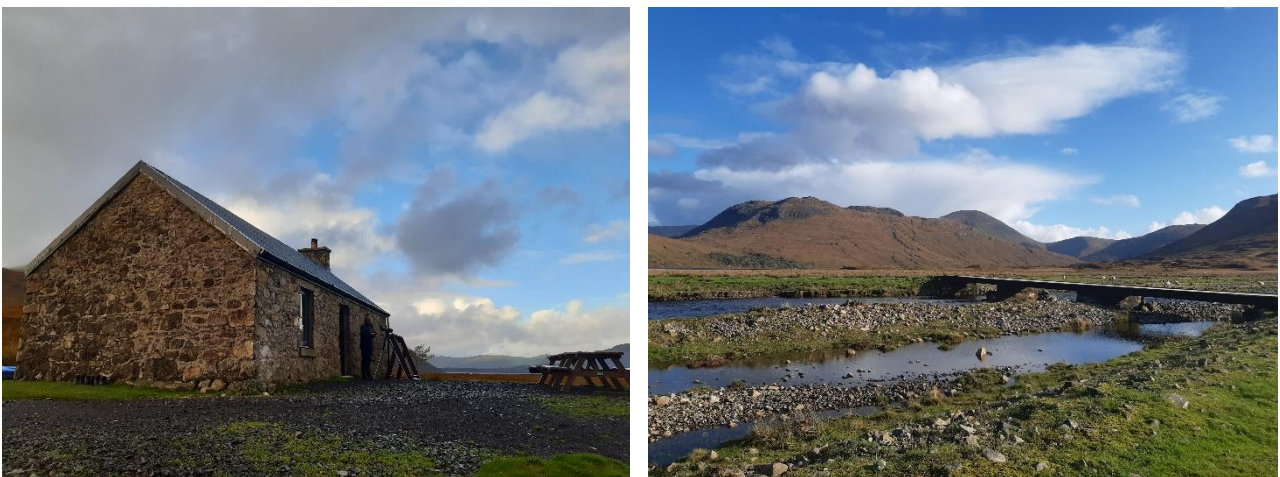
Whilst our walk was interrupted by a huge head of cattle passing along the track, we scanned the hills for wildlife and saw our first red deer, a young male whose head poked over a mound to spy and a fallow deer.



James also shared with us the names and folktales of the area. As we approached one particularly bent tree on the loch bank, he explained how its reason for being bent in such a fashion was because when a man encountered and fought the ghost of the headless horseman, he had to hold onto the tree so not to be pulled away. Legend holds that the headless horseman, a man named Ewen decapitated in a clan battle at Glen Cainnir on the Isle of Mull, haunts the area.



Admiring the iconic and dramatic landscape, we were caught in an almighty downpour which put our waterproofs to the test and after hopping over a few streams we approached a bothie. Piling into the bothie by the loch, the log burner was pumping, and we enjoyed a hot cup of tea or coffee to warm ourselves back up!



From this sheltered spot Dave set up his scope and we all scanned for raptors. Here is where, in 1985 the first reintroduced white-tailed eagle fledged and Dave began his work on the project! However, it was golden eagle that we watched flying across the loch.

After packed lunches, our first hen harrier of the tour joined our shore, and we watched her hunting nearby.



Photo by Sue

Returning to Knock House, either on foot or by pick-up, we regrouped. The first group were dropped off along Loch Na Kiel and managed a brief sighting of otter before the second group joined.

Starter – Pan fried scallops / celeriac puree/ crispy chorizo

Main – Venison steak/ chestnut puree/ roast new potatoes / honey roasted butternut squash / beetroot / juniper red wine jus

Vegetarian - Cauliflower steak

Day 3: Southern/Central Circuit – Loch Scridain & White-Tailed Gin

Tuesday 26 October 2021

Weather: Heavy Showers and high wind

Today we were scheduled for a boat trip to the Treshnish Isles, but the weather was not allowing, so our itinerary was rejigged! Instead, we donned our waterproofs and set out in the minibuses along the south shore of Loch Na Keal. As we drove slowly, scanning the kelp strewn shores, an otter lay unmoving in the water close by. Slowing to a stop, in the merciful quiet Mull roads, all of us had an excellent view of this obliging otter. Realising we were friendly observers, the otter proceeded to put on an excellent display, climbing on top of a rock to allow us a full view, before returning to the water and scouting for food.



Photo by Brian

Pulling into the Tiroran Community Forest, mostly comprised of Sitka trees, we looked just briefly before a juvenile white-tailed eagle soared directly above us.



We stopped by Kilfinichen Bay to scan for waterbirds, some catching a first sight of a dipper as well as good sightings of buzzard, heron, curlew and oystercatcher. Continuing, we followed a beautiful track, vibrant with autumn colours to the Tiroran Estate. Here is where we retreated from the rain to taste the delights of the Whitetail Gin Distillery. A pair of eagles nesting close by is the inspiration behind the family-owned Whitetail brand.

Welcomed in by Labradors Colonel Mustard and Captain Hastings. We enjoyed a cup of tea/coffee and our packed lunches before returning to the buses and driving along Loch Scridain towards Craignure. As we drove across a rain-soaked glen, we watched a young red stag chasing a hind and young.

A special thanks to one of the group for arranging Autumnwatch for the group this evening. Everyone sat by the fire to watch Megan McCubbin, who was presenting live just less than half an hour's drive away!

Canape – Chicken croquets / salsa verde & caramelized onion with goats cheese crostini
Main – Scottish salmon / cashew & sweet potato quinoa salad
Dessert – Basil & olive oil panna cotta / crystalised pine nuts / strawberries

Day 4: Northern Circuit - Aros & Tobermory

Wednesday 27 October 2021

Weather: scattered showers and windy

Visiting the Killechronan layby we watched in the distant shore the white tailed eagle. Driving to Salen, we stopped for a comfort break and a spot of birding. Slightly further around we stopped and looked back towards Salen, a beautiful light turned the bay a metallic silver which was interrupted by a porpoising harbour seal.

Our next stop was Aron Waterfall. Undeniably impressive, this wide and thunderous waterfall was a great place to photograph.

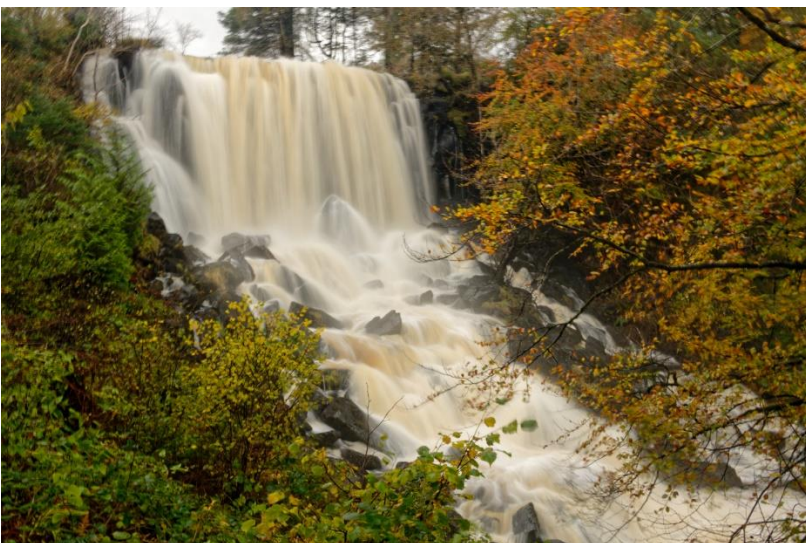


Photo by Melissa



Continuing, we stopped at the tranquil Aros Park for a walk around the lake, enjoying a cormorant drying out its wings and goldeneye on the water.

Only a short drive from here we stopped at the attractive and colourful town of Tobermory. Built as a fishing port in the late 18th century, now the main town on Mull, it's famous for being the location of TV series 'Balamory' – chosen by the BBC because of its beautiful location, and, more importantly, its multi-coloured houses.



Photo by Sue

With two hours to explore some took a walk towards the lighthouse whilst others visited the whiskey distillery, shops and cafés.

Our afternoon took us around the north of Mull. Looking back to the unusual pencil spire of Kilmore Church in the town of Devaig, we spotted and proceeded to have excellent sighting of hen harrier in the open ground between us and the church.

With outstanding scenery along the dramatic road, we saw red deer stags and more hen harrier as we looped back to Loch Na Keal and Knoch House.

In the evening we gathered in the Cèilidh Room where Donald Bisset who manages much of the estate and who was to guide us the following day.

Starter - Japanese style ceviche

Main – Slow cooked pork belly / cauliflower cheese/ tender stem broccoli

Day 5: Glen Forsa

Thursday 28 October 2021

Weather: Dry with occasional sun

Heading out with Donald we were able to drive through part of the Benmore Estate which was not accessible to others except by foot. Driving through a spectacular glen, the peaks on either side were busy with raptors. Hen harrier, golden and white-tailed eagle traversed the ridge line and even passed above us.



Tracking up the wide and gentle river we saw dipper before arriving at another bothie. A log burner and hot drinks awaited us inside. Stretching our legs, we went on foot up the road and then, led by Donald, off-track to come close to two red deer stags, who lay-up exhausted from the rutting season.



After returning to the bothie for hot soup and packed sandwiches, we continued to Loch Na Keal where we enjoyed some beautiful sunshine as we scanned for wildlife.

Canape – Dressed crab on toast & crispy quail egg

Main – Lamb or veggie tagine / spiced cous cous/ aubergine salad

Dessert - Crème Brûlée

Weather: Calm. Clear skies and dry

With the weather more favourable we were able to enjoy our boat tour just in time! With a relaxed morning, setting off at 9:00 we made our way to our trusty layby at Killiechronan to scan for white-tailed eagle who remained on their distant beach.

Continuing onto *Eas Fors Waterfall* which translates as *Waterfall Waterfall* – *Eas* meaning water and *Fors* being falls in Gaelic and Norse. This waterfall was intersected by the road and fell directly into Ballygown Bay, the body of water between Ulva and mainland Mull. *Ulva* translates to *wolf* in old Norse.

From Ulva Ferry port we boarded our boat, the Hoy Lass, at 11:00. The tour was guided by Ian Morrison and Fin from Turus Mara - a family-run business, established in 1973 and have been visiting Staffa and the Treshnish Isles for almost half a century - took us out on the Hoy Lass.



We secured the upstairs outer deck of the boat and sailed to Fingal's Cave. The dramatic sea cave on the uninhabited island of Staffa, in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, is known for its natural acoustics. The sea was quite rough, so we couldn't enter the cave but admired the hexagonally jointed basalt columns whilst listening to *The Hebrides, Op. 26 "Fingal's Cave"* by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) sounding from the boat's speaker.

From Staffa we crossed to the Treshnish Isles; Lunga, Flagga and Cairn na Burgh Mor. In spring, these isles are an important breeding site for sea birds such as Atlantic puffin. In autumn, all the isles are littered with grey seal pups, and we walked on Lunga where some saw a peregrine falcon. Ancient remains of a hill fort remained intact – a remarkable testament to the building to withstand such harsh weather for many hundreds of years.



Photo by Sue

Arriving back to Ulva Ferry Port at 4:00 we drove back to Knock House, turning into our layby along the way to see a perched white-tailed eagle and otter in the loch.

Starter – Lobster tortellini / shellfish bisque

Main – Scottish sirloin of beef / dauphinoise / green beans

Day 7: White-tailed Eagle

Saturday 30 October 2021

Weather: Mostly sunny with occasional shower. Low wind

The sun came out on the final full day on the tour. Due the size of our boat for the white-tailed eagle trip, we split the group in two. group one, with Sarah headed to Ulva Ferry Port. The waters were so calm that they mirrored the blue sky and white clouds beautifully. As we waited in this peaceful place, we watched an otter swimming and hunting nearby.



At 10:00 we met Martin and Alex and boarded the Lady Jayne. It wasn't long before our first of several white-tailed eagles joined us. It was an amazing privilege to see this enormous bird up close, to distinguish its yellow eyes and appreciate its size.



Photos by Paul

Whilst group one were on a morning boat trip, group two led by Dave and Kate explored Loch na Keal and successfully found a mother and cub otter.



Photo by Melissa

Meeting at Ulva ferry we switched activities and group two boarded the Lady Jayne with Kate to enjoy fantastic white-tailed eagle sightings as well as dolphin! With Sarah and Dave Group one returned to Knock House for lunch before driving to Clachandhu Beach where we strolled along the idyllic beach and saw a distant otter.



Photo by Melissa

With prosecco in hand and the fire burning in the Cèilidh Room we were joined by local musicians who played Scottish folk tunes on the accordion and fiddle.



After dinner we ventured outside to witness the unbelievably clear skies – with no light pollution we saw the Milky Way and shooting stars.

Canapès – Goat's cheese / chicken momo's

Main – Pan seared sea bass / chorizo bean cassoulet / mangetout

Dessert – Mulled white wine poached pear / orange mousse



Photo by Sue

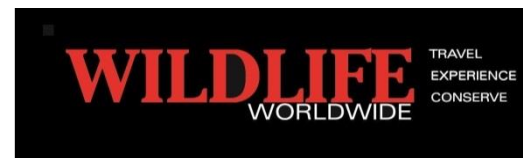
Day 8: Departure

Sunday 31 October 2021

Weather: As we had a leisurely breakfast and finished backing the rain was pouring outside

Saying our goodbyes to the excellent team at Knock House and to Dave, we drove to Craignure to catch our ferry across to Oban and end our Wildlife of Mull in Autumn Tour!

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>								
1	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>						✓		
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>					✓			
4	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>					✓			
5	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						✓		
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓			✓		
8	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>						✓		
9	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
10	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	✓	✓		
11	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓	✓			
12	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓		✓	✓		
13	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓	✓			
14	Slavonian grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>					✓	✓		



15	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
19	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓					
20	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
21	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>						✓		
25	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓		
27	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						✓	✓	
28	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						✓		
29	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>							✓	
30	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓				
31	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

34	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓	✓	
35	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓		
36	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>					✓	✓		
37	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>						✓		
38	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>					✓	✓		
39	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓				
40	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
41	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						✓		
42	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
44	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓	✓			
45	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	✓			
46	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓	✓			
47	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓			
48	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					✓	✓	✓	
49	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				✓	✓		✓	
51	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
52	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	

53	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
54	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓			✓		
56	White-throated dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					✓	✓		
57	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓				
58	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
59	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓					
60	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓					
61	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓					
62	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					✓	✓		
63	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓	✓		
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA								
1	Eurasian otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
2	Fallow deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>					✓	✓	✓	
5	Harbour (common) seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
6	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>							✓	