

Tour Report

UK - Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise

16-22 June 2021

White-tailed eagle



Bottlenose dolphin



Tobermory



Razorbill



Compiled by Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with ten participants

Day 1: Dunstaffnage – Tobermory

Wednesday 16 June 2021

Weather: Sunny with light winds from the SW

Our itinerary stated to meet at Dunstaffnage Marina pontoon at 1.30pm but, as the whole team had arrived early we were able to board soon after 13.00 and move into cabins.

Alan the skipper introduced himself, John the bosun and Andrea the chef before giving us a tour and safety briefing of Seahorse II - our home for the week. We set sail at 2pm to steam past the Isle of Lismore and up the Sound of Mull with the glorious weather. Guillemots, a lone gannet, distant arctic terns and grey seals brightened the afternoon and we rounded the end of Calve Island to enter Tobermory harbour at 6pm.

Lovely garlicky aromas from the galley boded well and, sure enough, tea when it arrived at 7pm was delicious – pork, kale, nut roast, creamy mushrooms and rice with fruit crumble and custard to follow. All washed down with a nice Merlot. Once our food had gone down, Alan ferried us into Tobermory on two RIB journeys. Setting foot on Mull for the first time we did a brief tour of the closed gift shops and sea-front, returning just as the midges were waking up. Bed at 10.00 pm.

Day 2: The Isle of Coll

Thursday 17 June 2021

Weather: Sunny with light winds from the SW.

Andrea's tasty breakfast raised everyone's spirits this morning. The crew weighed anchor at 9 o'clock and Seahorse II slipped out of Tobermory harbour. A small islet off Calve Island had shags and both greylag and Canada geese but the search for the known white-tailed eagles at Ardmore Point proved fruitless.

Alan steered the boat to the northwest and we headed for Coll, just visible on the hazy horizon. Three hours later we arrived to steam down the coast, past Aringour, to anchor up near the southern end of the island at Loch Breachacha with its distinctive skyline of two castles.

A rogue rock with its own breaking wave kept us well out of the bay so the two dinghy trips into Castle Farm were quite long and our walk only started at 3pm. The route to the RSPB reserve took us along the farm track where we admired a male reed bunting and interesting bog flora (kingcup, cotton grass, water mint, and heath spotted, northern marsh and lesser butterfly orchids). On the road out the beach proper, *machair* had developed and the plants became even more interesting (yellow rattle, thyme, eyebright, pyramidal orchid and carpets of bloody cranesbill). Attention was quickly drawn away from the flora by the appearance of three very exciting birds - a female hen harrier quartering the fields and two white-tailed eagles soaring way up in the sky

With time pressing, we cut across the two young lady farmers' fields back, after a brief appreciation of Crosspool beach. Although they never allowed themselves to be seen (as usual) the three corncrakes that we heard shouting at each other from various patches of scrub were a delight. Back at 'Castle Bay', the tide had gone out and Alan was already on his way to pick us up. A wet feet (and more) adventure followed getting the whole team into the RIB and away back to Seahorse II.

In tune with today's maritime theme, our evening meal was sea bass in orange sauce with most folk sloping off to bed soon afterwards.

Day 3: Lunga

Friday 18 June 2021

Weather: Sunny and calm.

The day started with what's becoming our new routine – 7.15 up on deck to check for wildlife, 7.30 cup of tea, 8 o'clock sit down with everyone for breakfast. With that formality over Alan and John raised the anchor and pointed Seahorse II to the southeast aiming for the Treshnish Isles. The Dutchman's Cap was an obvious profile but we were bound for its neighbour, Lunga.

Guillemots dotted the sea all the way from Coll and puffins became more frequent the closer we approached Lunga, coming into anchor around the back of Fladda to avoid submerged rocks. Before landing to explore the island on foot, having the luxury of our own dingy allowed us to approach the enormous bird colony on the cliffs of Harp Rock from the sea - a magical experience with the water around the boat teeming with birds.

Once on land we made our sedate way up the hill to 'Puffin Terrace' where we joined the few day-trippers already there to snap away with cameras aimed at the ridiculously close puffins and eat our sandwiches. The party then split with some folk exploring the rest of the island. The landward view of Harp Rock turned out to be just as spectacular as from the water with great close-up views of guillemots, shags, razorbills and kittiwakes. Up on the summit of the island were wheatears and a pair of feisty great skuas.

By late afternoon the island was very crowded with day-trippers and we were all 'puffed out' anyway so decided to head off to our next island and sheltered anchorage for the night - Ulva. The anchor chain rattled down in the narrow strait between Ulva and Mull and we settled down for an evening of eating, drinking and recording the day's events.

Day 4: Ulva, Staffa and Iona

Saturday 19 June 2021

Weather: Dull morning, brighter afternoon. Light winds.

The start of our three-island-day was, as usual, scrambled eggs. After breakfast, Alan agreed to a short dingy tour around the north side of Ulva in search of eagles, seals, otters, etc. It proved to be a good decision with Canada and greylag geese, oystercatchers, curlews, common sandpipers, and herons on show. Just after spotting a red deer stag that bolted on seeing us, one of the group spotted an eagle perched nearby.

For the next half hour, we all watch entranced as it launched into the air, displaying its white tail, and circled our boat to return to its perch – almost as if it were deliberately showing off. Some fabulous photos were taken. After following it across the bay to where a pair of diminutive hooded crows launched brave mobbing attacks, we headed through a swarm of moon jellyfish over to Eas Fors waterfall for a close-up, sea-level view. Harbour seals watched us as we watched them en route back to the ferry slip on Ulva where the team disembarked.

The rest of our morning was spent pottering around the grounds of Ulva House, through surprisingly mature woodland and a rich flower meadow containing buttercups, speedwells, red and white clover, bistort, pignuts, flag iris and wild celery. Lots of common woodland birds made a pleasant change from the week seabirds.

Lunch was sandwiches but eaten on board while we steamed out to Staffa to join the hordes of day trippers. We did the standard tourist walk round to Fingal's Cave and watched a group leap from the rocks into crystal clear water. Once they left we were able to enjoy the grand geology in relative solitude, accompanied by our own choral version of Mendelssohn's famous tune. Crowds were also successfully avoided up at the trig point



on the island summer where a fabulous 360° panorama was enjoyed, and a birds eye view of four green sea kayaks below.

Back on board our next port of call was Iona, a mere hour and a half away with an approach from the south to avoid shallow water. With just enough time available before tea to explore Iona village, John ferried the team in on the dinghy and dropped us on the Calmac slipway. A pleasant stroll through the neat and tidy village took us to the abbey – which was sadly closed - and adjacent graveyard where homage was paid to John Smith a rare ‘honest’ politician. Back on the dingy, via the impressive ruins of the nunnery, John gave chase to 7 dolphins we had spotted from the quay. We caught up with them near Seahorse II accompanied by much excitement, took photos and identified them as bottlenose dolphins.

Andrea forgave us for being slightly late for tea which was another magnificent affair (seafood lasagne and garlic bread). The usual gin/whisky and early night followed.

Day 5: Loch Buie

Sunday 20 June 2021

Weather: Cloudy with sunny spells. Freshening N wind.

All week the weather forecast has had Sunday down as the worst day of the trip but it certainly didn't dawn as bad as we thought. Having said that, with everything on Iona still likely to be closed, it being the sabbath, we decided to move on straight after breakfast.

Once around the corner to the south side of the Ross of Mull, our boat was sheltered from the northerly wind, and we were blessed with fine views of the ferocious looking Torran Rocks and the Isle of Colonsay in the distance. As we steamed eastwards under very impressive volcanic cliffs we were once more graced by the presence of a pod of bottlenose dolphins – probably the same individuals as yesterday.

This was definitely golden eagle country but, despite scanning the rocky skyline doggedly, we had no luck. At least the ever-present guillemots and puffins were there to cheer us up. Beyond Carsaig Bay with its famous rock arches, Loch Buie loomed into view, our haven from the weather and anchorage for the rest of the day and night.

After lunch our crew dropped the team ashore to explore, with most folk heading over to Moy Castle, followed by a circular walk taking in the large freshwater Loch Uisg . Amongst the new species encountered on our walk were sand martin, whitethroat, yellowhammer, rabbit and fallow deer. A part-leucistic blackbird posing as a jay had us confused for a while.

Back at Loch Buie we rejoined the chilled coffee drinkers, dodged the ‘beware of adders’ signs and radioed base for a pick-up. Chicken and mushroom pie revitalised tired legs at teatime.

Day 6: Loch Buie - Loch Spelve (with a detour via Kerrera)

Monday 21 June 2021

Weather: Sunny with a fresh Northerly breeze all day.

Alan the skipper went above and beyond the call of duty this morning, getting up at 6am to ferry a team of otter hunters ashore. We walked through the ‘snake pit’ and around to near Moy Castle where low tide allowed us to walk out to Eileen Mor via its smaller neighbour. Eyes were peeled for giveaway ‘V’ shapes in the water but all we saw were pied wagtails, herons, oystercatchers and a pair of common sandpipers.

Back on board we sat down for a welcome breakfast. This morning's Plan A was adapted after an updated weather forecast. With too much wind scuppering a visit to the golden eagles of the Garvellach Islands, Seahorse II hugged the coast of Mull north eastwards.

To be fair, the cliffs of Laggan Forest were spectacular and looked well capable of supporting their own eagles, but none were seen. Just before the entrance to Loch Spelve the Skipper steered us due east across the Firth of Lorne to anchor in the lee of Kerrera Island for lunch. After another of Andrea's delicious creations the whole team went ashore and strolled to the prominent Gylen Castle. What a spectacular site it occupied, made all the more atmospheric by the pair of white-tailed eagles that soared above it.

Back on the boat, it was over to Loch Spelve again, this time with high water allowing us passage inside and past its extensive mussel farms to anchor at the northern end near Ardura. Our third shore excursion of the day took us through the rhododendron and sphagnum moss dominated woods around Ardura House, serenaded by chaffinches, blackcaps and willow warblers. A detour up the Lussa River added grey wagtail to our week's bird list and photos of a red deer family. We retreated when the fawn that couldn't jump the fence to escape us began to panic.

The main road took us to the mussel farm headquarters where Alan picked us up saving a long walk back. Fish curry for tea then bed.

Day 7: Loch Spelve - Dunstaffnage

Tuesday 22 June 2021

Weather: Sunny and calm.

As we have grown accustomed to, today dawned sunny and calm – ideal for a gentle chug across Loch Spelve. Alan negotiated the narrow tidal channel an hour before low-water slack but Seahorse II easily coped with the swirls and eddies.

Once out into the Firth of Lorne again, we enjoyed an hours relaxed sailing northwards past Oban, with the usual guillemots dotting the water and our second gannet of the week cruising behind the boat.

Back in Dunstaffnage Marina the eiders were still there with their ducklings a week older and doubled in size. Once docked we thanked the brilliant crew, said our fond farewells and started our various journeys south at the end of a brilliant trip.



Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>							
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓		✓			
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓		✓		✓	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓					✓	
4	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓
5	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>						✓	
6	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>					✓		
7	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓			
8	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓	✓	✓	
9	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanut</i>	✓					✓	✓
10	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				✓	✓		
12	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓					
13	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓		✓		✓	



14	Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>		✓					
15	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haemoptapus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓					
17	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓		✓	
18	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓			
19	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
20	Common redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		✓					
21	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius</i>		✓	✓	✓			
22	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓				
23	Mew (common gull)	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓				
24	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
25	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓			
27	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓		✓			
28	Common murre (guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Razorbill	<i>Alca torcda</i>		✓	✓				
30	Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
31	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓	✓			



32	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓					
33	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
34	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
35	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>						✓	
36	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>				✓			
37	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>				✓			
38	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
39	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓			✓	
40	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	✓		
41	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓					
42	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>					✓		
43	European blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					✓	✓	
44	Willow warbler	<i>Phloscopus trochilus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
45	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓	✓	✓		
46	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		✓	✓		
47	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				✓	✓	✓	
48	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		✓		✓	
49	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>						✓	

50	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓					
51	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i>		✓	✓				
52	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓	✓		
53	White (pied) wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							✓
55	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
56	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	✓			
57	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				✓	✓	✓	
58	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓		
59	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓			
60	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>				✓			
61	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓					
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA							
1	Common bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncates</i>				✓	✓		
2	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					✓	✓	
4	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				✓		✓	
5	Fallow deer	<i>Dama dama</i>					✓		

6	Feral goat	<i>Capra aegagrus</i>							✓	
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