

Tour Report

Scotland – Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise

24 – 30 June 2019

Atlantic puffin



Arctic tern



Harbour seal



Black guillemot



Tour Leader: Nick Acheson

Day 1: Monday 24th June 2019

We gathered this afternoon at Dunstaffnage Marina, met one another, and soon enough we were taken on board Seahorse II by our perfectly charming crew: Peter (captain), Andrea (chef) and Leo (boatswain). As we waited to board we saw our first birds of the tour. There were common eider females with ducklings in the harbour, alongside one or two black guillemots, and overhead there were always herring and common gulls. In trees behind the Marina buildings we heard singing goldcrests and there were plenty of siskins.

Undeterred by the cool grey weather, we set sail for Tobermory on the island of Mull. The crossing introduced us to many of the birds which we would see repeatedly thereafter, including common guillemots, kittiwakes (technically black-legged kittiwakes I suppose), shags in abundance (titter ye not), a number of moulting Canada geese (whom we considered rather inappropriate to the terrain) and innumerable arctic terns.

Perhaps the most striking animals we saw however (aside from sprinkling of grey and harbour seals) were countless thousands of moon jellies floating past us, accompanied by many fewer lion's-manes. We spent our first night on Seahorse II at anchor in Tobermory harbour (beside an outlandish craft belonging to a US billionaire). It should also be said that we spent our first night (as every subsequent night) full of Andrea's perfectly delicious food and extremely cheerful on account of the crew's generosity with beer and wine.

Day 2: Tuesday 25th June 2019

Yesterday's looming grey clouds and occasional drizzle had lifted by this morning, meaning that our early exploration of Tobermory was bathed in bright sunshine. We went our separate ways to visit the shops and attractions or simply mooch along the pier and look for wildlife. Possibly the wildest creature we met was a long-haired man on a small boat who — bringing his boat with him — had upped sticks from North Norfolk some years ago to build a croft on a patch of moorland and live by hunting and fishing. He regaled us with tales of an Armada galleon sunk in Tobermory harbour and of his adventures.

From Tobermory we set sail for the island of Coll. As we made the crossing the wind became ever stronger. Despite the sea around the islets off the northeast tip of Coll heaving with shags and kittiwakes, with fulmar, Manx shearwater, great skua, guillemot, razorbill, puffin and gannet all in the area too, Peter rightly decided it would be unsafe to cruise around the islets in the tender. So we headed south down the east coast of Coll to anchor in Arinagour harbour where we were met by a handsome pair of red-throated divers on the water, among herring and great black-backed gulls.

After lunch we went ashore for a lovely walk, not, however, before mistakenly landing at the foot of the massive ferry pier, clambering onto the barnacle-coated concrete and leaping over a locked gate at the top of a wooden gangway (before I went to plead for the key from the harbourmaster). Our walk on Coll was lovely, passing as we did through the village, along the edge of the rocky shore and into woodland and grassland (some of it with a hint of machair about it). Here we saw and heard plenty of new birds including lapwing, lesser redpoll, sedge warbler, willow warbler, northern wheatear and song thrush.

On our return we more sagely used the public quay and again in the evening were amazed by the delicious food which Andrea cooks in her little galley.

Day 3: Wednesday 26th June 2019

To escape from the continuing cold northerly wind, early this morning (at 0630) Leo lifted the anchor and we set sail for Ulva Sound, between Mull and the beautiful island of Ulva. Before doing so some of us had been lucky to see the tour's first arctic skua, a dark-phase bird which powered past the boat with all the grace and attack of its species. The crossing was again full of gannets, guillemots, arctic terns, kittiwakes, common gulls and much more. The biggest highlight was a small group of common bottlenose dolphins

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which briefly joined us at the bow. A few of us were also lucky enough to see a northern minke whale just once.

We anchored by Ulva's one tiny settlement (population three adults and two children, down from several hundred in recent history). Before lunch we took a cruise in the tender, visiting a lovely waterfall on the coast of Mull, passing islets covered in breeding arctic terns and stopping by a number of harbour seals hauled out or bobbing in the beds of wrack. Despite searching very hard we were unable to find an otter with them. Returning to Seahorse II we saw two magnificent birds for the first time, though both were distant. Three golden eagles were soaring along the nearest ridge on Mull and close by were a number of ravens.

After a fabulous lunch of wraps, taken in the blazing sunshine on the rear deck, we went to an equally fabulous walk on Ulva. Though the wind made birding a little hard, we did see our first spotted flycatchers and we heard several coal tits and a singing tree pipit. A splendid raven also flew low overhead. However, apart from the exquisite sunshine and lovely views, the real highlights for most of us were the flowers and insects. There were numerous golden-ringed dragonflies in the bracken, where we also saw one female large red damselfly. The Odonata were eclipsed by the Lepidoptera, however. There were plenty of dark green fritillaries flitting over the sunlit bracken and wherever there were birches we saw speckled woods and a few green-veined whites. Sunny grassland held small heaths and meadow browns and a green hairstreak even landed close by giving us an excellent view. We also made the acquaintance of a few singing common green grasshoppers and a handsome green tiger beetle who scuttled along the path ahead of us.

Among the abundant wildflowers, highlights included heath fragrant, heath spotted and northern marsh orchids, round-leaved sundew, pale butterwort, bog asphodel, bell heather, cross-leaved heath, heath speedwell, heath bedstraw, pignut, sanicle, yellow pimpernel, enchanter's nightshade and wild garlic.

On our return to the boat, a couple of you went for an expedition in the sea kayaks with Leo. In addition to having a wonderful time, you added a new bird to our list in the form of a common sandpiper. Curiously some of us had heard a singing common sandpiper from the boat and wondered where there was a freshwater stream by which it could nest. Late in the evening, after dinner, some members of the group briefly saw otters along the shore.

Day 4: Thursday 27th June 2019

This morning we set sail from Ulva quite early, though not before our first shelducks had flown over Seahorse II. The crossing to the charming island of Staffa took less than an hour, during which many puffins and plenty of other seabirds were seen, though a pod of short-beaked common dolphins was undoubtedly the highlight. We anchored off Staffa and were quickly ferried ashore by Peter and Leo. Peter then stayed ashore with us and went with those who first chose the path to Fingal's Cave. Some others went first in the opposite direction, towards the island's most accessible puffin colony.

The island was charming and full of lovely birds including rock pipits, meadow pipits, twite, skylark and drumming snipe. The puffins here were delightful, though later we would be so absurdly spoiled by the puffins of Lunga that they would somewhat pale by comparison.

Other highlights of Staffa included heath spotted orchids, a red admiral, a painted lady, common blues and a northern emerald dragonfly. We even managed to see a northern minke whale and a harbour porpoise from the shore, on the glassy flat sea. When Leo collected us from the jetty he took us into Fingal's Cave in the tender, only possible due to the amazing calm of the water, and something which the crew had not achieved previously this year. Needless to say it was magnificent.

Following our visit we set sail for Lunga in the Treshnish Islands, dropping anchor just offshore. Even before the engine was turned off, we heard a corncrake singing from machair at the base of the island's cliffs. We listened intently and scanned every rock visible in the hope of seeing the tireless singer, and Peter may well

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have had a glimpse, but we were eventually lured away by the smell of another fantastic lunch from Andrea.

After lunch, in blazing sunshine, we went ashore on Lunga with Leo. Having made a slightly more adventurous landing than usual (onto a barnacle-clad rock), we were almost immediately eye to eye with nesting puffins and were enchanted by their cooings and doings. Thereafter some of us walked considerably further to the island's large colony of kittiwakes, shags, guillemots and razorbills. They had superb views of them all, even being pecked by shags nesting next to the path and being near-deafened by the din of kittiwakes.

The rest of us went to the top of the cliff above where the corncrake was singing. We could clearly hear it singing beneath us and could see where it probably was, but corncrake came there none. We did however hear a singing whitethroat and see wheatears and meadow pipits and plenty, plenty, plenty of puffins.

Returning to Seahorse II we again set sail, for our night-time anchorage off Bunesan on the Ross of Mull. Along the way we saw many of our friends, including gannets, kittiwakes, guillemots and black guillemots but a highlight for many was a very close minke whale. Even the whale was perhaps eclipsed by a magnificent Fata Morgana mirage, stretching right across the horizon.

Those who stayed up to see the sunset at our anchorage were treated to two distant pairs of otters along the shoreline.

Day 5: Friday 28th June 2019

We had breakfast this morning at our anchorage off the Ross of Mull, setting sail for the famous island of Iona when we had finished. We anchored close to the shore of Mull and at 11:00 Leo ferried us to the jetty on Iona, where we would spend much of the day. We chose to split up, with some opting to head to the north point, some scaling the highest peak, and several crossing the island to The Machair.

Needless to say, we were all charmed by Iona. And we were blessed with a day of flawless – indeed scorching – sunshine to boot. Each of us chose a gorgeous spot in which to eat a wonderful packed lunch, prepared by Andrea with her typical care and flair, and each of us delighted in flowers – including meadow cranesbill, northern marsh orchid and heath milkwort – birds – including rook, jackdaw, stonechat, sand and house martins, redshank, ringed plover and a singing corncrake – and the wonderful scenery and history of Iona. Some, who had their lunch next to a beach where some young Dutch men were bathing, saw a little more scenery than they were expecting.

After a blissful day on Iona, some made their way back to Seahorse II at three while others returned at four-thirty. With everyone back on board we sailed southwards to the northern edge of Colonsay. As we sailed we saw a brief northern minke whale but the highlight was the large number of Manx shearwaters we also saw. We dropped anchor in a gorgeous bay called Kiloran, with a fantastic sandy beach. We were intending to go out in the tender and the kayaks after dinner but a strong wind picked up – briefly – so our plans were postponed until the morning.

Day 6: Saturday 29th June 2019

Early this morning – before breakfast – we took a tender cruise (and some went off in the sea kayaks) and this proved to be one of the wildlife highlights of the whole trip. All around us there were guillemots, razorbills and black guillemots on the water, while jagged rocks were festooned with kittiwakes and arctic terns. In a bay both shelducks and eiders had young.

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We set sail for the Ross of Mull in absurdly calm and beautiful conditions, which were absolutely perfect for looking for cetaceans. During the first hour we saw numerous harbour porpoises and a number of minke whales. When we were reaching Mull, however, the cetacean-watching moved up as many gears as is possible. A family of around 15 common bottlenose dolphins came hurtling towards and bow-rode – joyously it seemed to us – for half an hour. We were ecstatic and many fine photographs were taken.

In the afternoon we walked from Loch Buie to Loch Spelve, along the length of the freshwater loch which lies between them. This proved to be a far longer walk than we had imagined, but was nonetheless very beautiful and rich in wildlife. The cock pheasant and rabbits on the lawn of Loch Buie House were perhaps not the wildlife we had travelled to Mull to see but they were new for our list all the same. Along the way we saw plenty of siskins and lesser redpolls and our first bullfinches, blue tits, yellowhammer and treecreeper. The bird highlight was unquestionably a male hen harrier which danced overhead, though several singing cuckoos were also a treat. There were also plenty of flowers to see, including heath spotted orchid, bog asphodel, round-leaved sundew and pale butterwort.

As we approached Loch Spelve there were numerous drumming snipe overhead, singing meadow pipits on the telegraph wires and at the end of the fish-farm pontoon (which we were eventually allowed to use) a straw-haired, always cheerful boatman to pick us up and take us back to Seahorse II.

This evening's dinner was delicious, as always, but also special as it represented 45 years of marriage for two members of the group.

Day 7: Sunday 30th June 2019

Having enjoyed spectacular weather during our week around Mull, it was only reasonable that it should rain at some point. It did so relentlessly this morning as we sailed north towards Dunstaffnage Marina and the end of our cruise. So we hunkered in the saloon and reflected on a wonderful week of wildlife, of laughter, of landscape and of superb logistics and hospitality by Peter, Leo and Andrea. Many thanks to them all, and thanks to you all for making our cruise such a joy.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS	AVES						
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓		✓			
3	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓		✓	✓
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓					✓
5	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
6	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓				
7	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>						✓
8	Red-throated loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓		✓		
9	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Manx shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
11	European storm-petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>						✓
12	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						H
13	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Northern gannet	<i>Morus Bassano's</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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15	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓			
17	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
18	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						✓
19	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓				
20	Corncrake	<i>Crex crex</i>				H	H	
21	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓				
23	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					✓	
24	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓				✓
25	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓		✓
26	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓			✓
27	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					✓	
28	Arctic skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			✓	✓		
29	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓		✓	✓	
30	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓			✓	
32	Mew (Common) gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
33	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						✓
36	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

37	Common murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
41	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Common woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓				✓
43	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓				
44	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓				
45	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>						H
46	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓			✓	✓
47	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓	✓	
48	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					✓	
50	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓				✓	✓
51	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>					✓	
52	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>					✓	
53	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	✓	✓	
55	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			H			
56	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>						✓
57	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓				
58	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				H		

59	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		H					✓
60	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		H	✓				✓
61	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓						H
62	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>							✓
63	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			✓				✓
64	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	H	✓	H	H	H
65	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓					✓
66	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
67	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
68	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
69	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H					✓
70	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	H						
71	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>					✓	✓	✓
72	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
73	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
74	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
75	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>			H				
77	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	H				✓
79	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>							✓
80	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>				✓			

81	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓	
82	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓				✓
83	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	H		✓	✓
84	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓		✓			✓
85	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>						✓
	Mammals							
1	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				✓		
2	Common bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			✓			✓
3	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
5	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	✓			✓		✓
6	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			✓	✓		
7	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>						✓
8	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓				