

Tour Report

UK - The Splendours of Wester Ross

24-29 July 2021

Guillemot



Suilven from Lochinver



Roseroot



Fulmar and chick



Compiled by Mike Bagshaw

Tour Leader: Mike Bagshaw with five participants

Day 1: Inverness to Badcall Bay

Saturday 24 July 2021

Weather: Cloudy in the east, sunny in the west.

After morning pick-ups we escaped Inverness city centre. South Kessock Local Nature Reserve was our first port of call for a circular walk and a whiff of sea air. Wild celery was spotted growing in a brackish pond and amongst the foraging herons and oystercatchers were some interesting corvids – hybrid carrion/hooded crows as we are in their crossover zone.

First stop heading west was Rogie Falls for a circular woodland walk, the high point of which was watching Atlantic salmon leaping the falls. One of the group managed to catch the event on film. After lunch at Tarvie Cafe we admired more cascades on the Blackwater River at Silver Bridge.

Loch Droma sits on Scotland's watershed with the River Droma flowing out of it westwards. A stop here revealed an interesting acid moorland flora with all three common heathers, some carnivorous plants, spotted orchids and bog myrtle. Beyond Ullapool a very different flora was seen at Knockan Crag with thyme, yellow saxifrage and alpine lady's mantle growing on limestone. We also enjoyed the geological information display here which explained the local 'Moine Thrust'.

Clear skies allowed great views of the rugged mountains of Inverpolly and Assynt as we headed north over Kylesku Bridge to our home for the next three days at Badcall Bay. Once checked in at the Eddrachilles Hotel there was time for an evening walk despite the midges. A high spring tide had brought fish into the bay which red-throated divers and two harbour seals were feeding on.

Day 2: 'The Mad Wee Road'

Sunday 25 July 2021

Weather: Early mist, afternoon sunshine.

Normally, our second day would be Handa Island day but, as there are no ferries on the sabbath, we brought day three forward. After a normal 8am breakfast and a trip to the post office in Scourie we retraced our drive of yesterday, southwards.

A right turn after Kylesku Bridge took us onto a tiny single-track road known to the locals as the Mad Wee Road because of its extreme hills and bends. We followed it to Drumbeg but were denied views across Badcall Bay by thick sea mist.

Further along the coast at Clashnessie a very low tide allowed us a decent walk on the beautiful beach there. Above the high-water mark, monkey flowers, Lewisian gneiss boulders and a dead seal were photographed while down at the water's edge were shorebirds and storm-washed seaweeds. The birds were dunlins and ringed plovers and the seaweeds a variety of brown kelps and wracks.

The northwestern extremity of the peninsula we were exploring is Stoer Point and its lighthouse was our next objective. Wheatears and ravens showed themselves on the grassy clifftop with black guillemots, fulmars and shags on the cliffs below and odd gannets cruising past offshore.

Visiting the remains of the Pictish broch at Clachtoll was always on the itinerary but today's experience was made much more interesting by Marion's archaeology magazine article. It went into great detail about the domestic items discovered during recent excavations here.

Our late lunch hour was spent in Lochinver where Hugo sampled one of its famous pies and the rest of us had coffees in Angel's Coffee Shop, made by Angel the Russian barista herself. A visit to the Highland

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Stoneware workshop followed, having been inspired by the dining room crockery at our hotel. This side of the loch also gave great views of the iconic Suilven mountain.

Late afternoon saw us heading homewards but with a brief diversion to visit the ruins of the 16th century Ardvreck Castle and nearby Calder House, its 18th century replacement. Last stop of the day was just past Kylesku Bridge where we walked along the shores of Loch Glendhu for a mile or so to view its resident colony of harbour seals hauled out on the rocks. Curlews and arctic terns also graced the scene.

Day 3: Handa Island

Monday 26 July 2021

Weather: Misty but warm with sun later.

Full of another delicious Eddrachilles breakfast, 9:15am saw us head north, via Scourie post office again, to the tiny harbour of Tarbet. Here we got the first boat of the day out across the narrow sound to Handa Island. Despite the sea mist we caught glimpses of eider ducks with chicks and the very exciting sight of two great northern divers near our landing beach.

The very helpful, resident volunteers from the Scottish Wildlife Trust assisted us off the RIB then led all the passengers over to their base for an introductory talk. With the mist clearing a little and accompanied by Natalie the traveller and a family of four from London, we walked across the interior of the island via the ruins of its village, deserted after the potato famine in the 1800s. Its inhabitants now are skuas – both British breeding species of great and Arctic. Very close views (and excellent photos) were possible because the birds were guarding nearby chicks so refused to move from their rocky perches. Handa is one of the most southerly breeding sites of Arctic skuas and has both colour phases (dark and pale).

Although we could hear and smell the thousands of seabirds on arrival at the big cliffs, views were unfortunately obscured by thick mist. We were however able to see nesting guillemots, razorbills and puffins on some of the closer ledges near the Great Stack.

Further around the circular coastal path we had good views of fulmars caring for their fluffy, well-grown chicks, and heard the wailing of grey seals in Boulder Bay. In the warming sun lizards emerged to bask on the boardwalk and at one point Mike found an adult burnet moth, its yellow and black caterpillar (both poisonous) and some birdsfoot trefoil, the food plant source of the cyanide that they use.

Back at the beach there was time for Hilary and Mike to have a refreshing swim in the sea while we waited for our return boat back to the mainland. The short drive from the harbour to Badcall got us back in time for a welcome afternoon tea in the hotel. Later, after another delicious evening meal, a short, coastal constitutional at high tide delivered the now expected gannets, seal, herons and midges.

Day 4: Badcall Bay – Gairloch

Tuesday 27 July 2021

Weather: Cloudy with occasional heavy showers.

They were clear skies for our last Badcall Bay pre-breakfast walk this morning during which we saw mallards, herons and a harbour seal.

After saying our final farewells to the staff at Eddrachilles we loaded up and headed south over the Kylesku Bridge. A brief stop was made at the uninspiring looking Scottish Water substation near Elphin where the surrounding limestone flora was examined, and a fragrant orchid photographed.

Just after entering the old county of Ross and Cromarty (we had been in Sutherland) a detour right was selected, taking us under the impressive little mountain of Stac Pollaidh on the way to the Coigach Peninsula. A scenic circular tour took us to Rubha Mor viewpoint first where we marvelled at both the spectacular panorama of the Summer Isles and atrocious spelling and punctuation errors on the information board.

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Snacks and hot drinks were enjoyed at Port a Bhaigh campsite where we also spotted an eider duck family close to shore.

Back on the main road, we managed to synchronise our arrival at Ullapool with a torrential downpour. Fortunately we were indoors enjoying lunch during most of it. Driving east to Corrieshalloch caused us to catch up with the rain so we waited for it to move on before exploring the gorge. Everybody braved the exposed bridge and viewing platform followed by an enjoyable woodland trail stroll with buzzards soaring overhead and aspen tree leaves shivering in the breeze.

The remainder of a day's drive to Gairloch took the rest of the afternoon, travelling down Little Loch Broom, around Gruinard Bay with its famous 'anthrax' island and past the World War II sites of Loch Ewe. We booked ourselves into the bustling Old Inn and enjoyed the rest of the evening there.

Day 5: Exploring Torridon and Gairloch

Wednesday 28 July 2021

Weather: Early heavy rain, sunny spells for most of the day then late heavy rain.

A poor weather forecast may have caused a change to the planned itinerary for the day but it didn't stop two of the group going for their now daily pre-breakfast swim, or another group member's walk up Flowerdale.

The rain continued after breakfast as we drove over Kerrysdale to Loch Maree. There was nothing to see at Slatterdale but at the Beinn Eighe Visitor Centre, as the rain has stopped, it was decided a leg stretch was in order. We followed the NNR Buzzard Trail, finding juniper and various fungi en route.

A welcome lunch was had at Stowvold's Cafe in Sheildaig, sat outside in the all-too-brief sunshine with views across the bay to Sheildaig Island. Sadly, the white-tailed eagles that nest around the other side of the island didn't show themselves today.

After lunch we retraced our steps to Gairloch then onto Inverewe where everyone sauntered around the world-famous gardens created by Osgood Mackenzie in the 19th century and now looked after by the National Trust for Scotland. Hugo even managed a brief visit to the nearby Russian Arctic Convoy Museum as well.

4pm found us all back at Gairloch Harbour ready for another bad weather alternative activity – one of the group in the Gairloch Museum and the rest of us on a glass-bottomed boat nature tour. Steve the skipper took us around a few local islands for a couple of hours, showing us an oystercatcher family, a small group of harbour seals, herons, gannets and a great skua. As we sheltered under the boat awning from the rain he pulled up his creel to show everyone the different species of crabs caught. Bizarrely at no time was the transparent boat's hull mentioned although we did catch sight of starfish on the seabed through it.

Day 6: Gairloch – Inverness

Thursday 29 July 2021

Weather: Warm and sunny morning, cloudy afternoon.

They were gannets diving into the sea at Gairloch beach during two of the group's now customary early morning swim. Rain had set in after breakfast and check-out though, so plans for us all to walk on the beach were abandoned.

Instead, we set off along the same route as yesterday stopping this time at the 'Trails' car park by Loch Maree. With the weather brighter we followed the marked 'Woodland Trail' up the flank of Beinn Eighe through gorgeous mature pine and birch forest. Cowberry, horse's hoof fungus and long-tailed tits were notable sightings.

Back in the 'Wildlife Mobile', we headed eastwards, over the watershed and back to the Blackwater River Valley. A short detour off the main road towards Strathpeffer brought us to Loch Kinellan, a rich lochan, well-

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known for its waterfowl. Sure enough, a stroll to the far end revealed many tufted ducks, teal, coot, little grebes and, the site's famous rarity, Slavonian grebes. We also saw our only red kite of the week, soaring overhead.

After lunch at the Deli on the Square in Strathpeffer, the rugged valley of Strathconan was the last port of call and final chance to try and spot one of those elusive eagles. We drove as close as possible to their known nesting crag but unfortunately none were in sight during our short stay. One consolation though – the trackside vegetation at our viewing point had feeding scotch argus butterflies on the wing.

Late afternoon was all-too-soon upon us, so Mike had to drop everyone off at their various Inverness hotels at the end of a fine week.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>						
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus alor</i>						✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓	✓	
4	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						✓
5	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
6	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	✓	
7	Willow ptarmigan (red grouse)	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			✓			
8	Red-throated loon (diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
9	Common loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓			
10	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓			
11	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						✓
12	Horned (Slavonian) grebe	<i>Podiceps auratus</i>						✓
13	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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14	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓		✓	
16	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		✓	
17	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>						✓
18	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
19	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓
20	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
21	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓				
22	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓				
23	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓			
24	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓					
25	Mew gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓			✓	
26	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
27	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Arctic tern	<i>Stella paradisaea</i>		✓	✓		✓	
29	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			✓		✓	
30	Parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			✓			
31	Common murre (guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓			

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32	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓			
33	Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓				
34	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica.</i>			✓			
35	Rock dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>		✓				
36	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓		✓		
37	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓		
38	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓					
39	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓				
40	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓			✓		✓
41	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓		
42	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓		
43	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓		
44	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓		✓		✓
45	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</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>				✓	✓	

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50	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓		
51	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓		
52	White (pied) wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓		
54	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓			
55	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				✓	✓	
56	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓			
58	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA						
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>					✓	
2	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓				
4	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓				✓	

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