

# Tour Report

## Scotland–The Wild Wonders of Skye

11-17 June 2022

White-tailed eagle



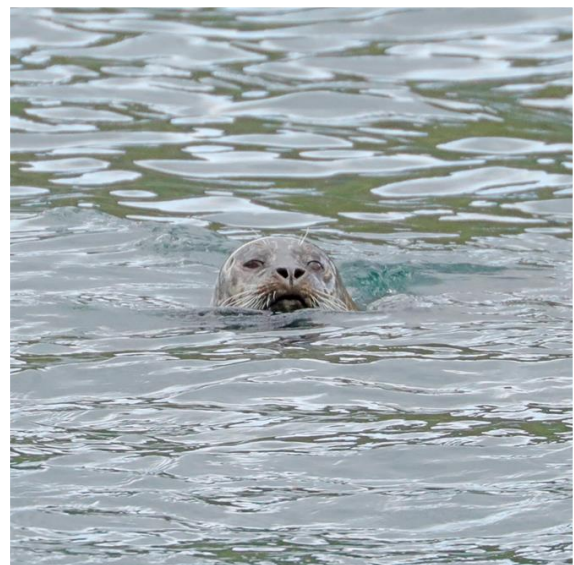
Atlantic puffin



Bottlenose dolphin



Harbour seal



Compiled by Ian Loyd

Tour Leaders: David Lambie and Ian Loyd

Our first Wild Wonders of Skye tour unfortunately coincided with an unseasonably wet and windy week on the island. Despite the challenging weather we still had a great week with some very memorable sightings, including 13 different white-tailed eagles in total, across the group. Although there was often low cloud, we could still enjoy some of the dramatic mountain landscapes that this diverse and scenic island is known for. Although the weather was not always ideal, we still experienced a Skye full of eagles!

### **Day 1: Inverness to Duisdale**

**Saturday 11 June 2022**

*Weather: Strong winds, mostly heavy rain.*

Some of us met in Inverness while others made their own way to Skye independently. From Inverness we took the northern route to Skye across the Black Isle spotting a couple of red kites, before continuing through the birch woodlands of Garve.

We made a stop at a woodland in Strath Bran where we could admire a female osprey sat atop her huge nest constructed on the top of telegraph pylon. This is an unusual location for an osprey nest in Scotland, but perhaps it will become a more familiar sight in the coming years, as the birds take to more man-made structures. We had a good view of her through the scope and then set off again passing through the wild and windswept valley of Achnasheen and along the shores of Loch Carron. Although the weather was both wet and windy this afternoon, we still had a few close sightings of red deer from the roadside. We arrived at our base, the Duisdale Hotel in southern Skye at 17:00. The weather was still wet after our first dinner, so we decided against an evening walk today.

### **Day 2: Kylearhea and Sandaig Bay**

**Sunday 12 June 2022**

*Weather: Strong winds, intermittent heavy rain and some sun in the afternoon.*

Today, we started with a drive to the village of Broadford where we stopped at the local shop to stock up on a few items for later in the day. During an initial scan of the shoreline of Broadford Bay, we soon spotted an otter feeding on something amongst the seaweed. It was very relaxed and had dried most of its fur off rolling around on the seaweed and rocks. We all had a good view in the scope and binoculars before it made its way into the water and swam further along the coast. From here we travelled to the edge of the Sleat Peninsula, where the single-track road to Kylearhea took us through some spectacular mountain and moorland scenery. A roe deer ran across the road, and further on we found a pair of coal tits calling from a sheltered clump of eared willow by the roadside. As we arrived at Kylearhea, a pair of female red deer (hinds) were trotting across the heather and bracken moorland just behind the car park.

We then walked the forested track to the main Forestry Commission hide overlooking the narrow and fast flowing waters of the sound of Sleat. Along the way, a cuckoo was regularly calling, and we also observed several goldcrests, chaffinch, willow warbler, blackcap, and siskins within the mixed coniferous and broadleaf woodland. Looking out from the hide we had a good view across the sheltered sound and rocky shore below us where numerous common (harbour) seals were hauled out and some could even be heard giving short contact calls. At one point a small group of common seals came porpoising (jumping out of the water) fast along the coast, creating excitement as they gave an excellent demonstration of their surprisingly energetic and acrobatic swimming abilities.

From the hide we also saw a distant black guillemot, oystercatchers, shags, grey herons, and several gull species. We then retraced our steps back to the car park and descended to the slipway where we waited for our turntable ferry crossing. A large moon jellyfish, a female bullfinch and several inquisitive grey and common seals joined us while we waited for the ferry to take us across to Glenleg on the mainland. After a quick stop for a coffee and cake, plus a singing whitethroat, we then drove along the rugged coast to Sandaig Bay.

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On arrival at Sandaig, the weather improved, and we all enjoyed a nice but short spell of sunshine for our walk down the narrow woodland track to the bay. We passed through both conifer plantation and some native downy birch woodland and along the way some of the group saw golden-ringed dragonfly, small pearl-bordered fritillary, and several green-veined white butterflies. A common sandpiper was characteristically bobbing up and down on the edge of the bubbling brook that feeds into the bay. We stopped to learn about Gavin Maxwell's home here and his adventures raising orphaned otters.

We then spent some time soaking up the views of the small Sandaig Islands and picturesque coastline as well as scanning for otters, before making our way back up to the road. A small flock of lesser redpolls and a buzzard were seen as we made the return journey. We then returned across the Kylerhea narrows on the ferry and made our way back to the hotel as the weather deteriorated.

### **Day 3: Small Isles – Canna and Rum**

**Monday 13 June 2022**

*Weather: Moderate winds, heavy and regular rain showers, overcast most of the day.*

Today we set off early to the small fishing hamlet of Elgol, passing the mighty Cuillin mountain range en route. As we passed the shores of Loch Slapin, a vivid blue-grey male wheatear was seen on the short, grazed grassland along with a couple of snipe, a pair of displaying lapwings and several oystercatchers, while a small flock of rock doves and goldfinches were feeding nearby. It was then time to set off on our boat trip across to the remote small Isles. The weather was not as calm as we would have hoped, as the sea was still very choppy from a storm that had passed through a few days earlier. We found more sheltered conditions around the island of Soay where we spotted a few terns, most likely Arctic.

We then crossed the open water to Canna, seeing some small numbers of gannets and manx shearwaters gliding over the waves along the way. At least two different great skuas flew inquisitively close to the boat giving everyone a great opportunity to see their striking white wing markings and thick barrel like chests.

On arrival at Canna, we first took a slow cruise along the sheltered northern coast of the island, where we could look up on to the towering sea cliffs above us. Here we felt truly immersed in the spectacle of the seabird colony as hundreds of guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, shags, and puffins surrounded us. At each level of the cliffs, we could see a different assemblage of birds with the colourful and comical puffins clumsily landing on the lower grassy banks, rows of noisy guillemots jostling for position on the first ledges, snowy white kittiwakes tucked into every nook of the higher cliff and razorbills and some fulmars higher still on the most inaccessible ledges. In addition to watching all these birds, we could also enjoy all the sounds that come with being amongst a 'seabird city'.

While watching the seabirds, a golden eagle also suddenly appeared from over the top of the impressive cliffs, just long enough for everyone to see it circle before it headed back over the cliff tops and sadly out of sight.

We then docked in the sheltered harbour at Church Bay on Canna and made the short walk to the lovely cafe for hot drinks and our lunch. A small flock of twite were feeding on the grasslands near the harbour and rock pipits, oystercatchers, eider, and greylag geese were all busy tending to young chicks along the shore. After lunch we set off again by boat and enjoyed some close views of several grey seals hauled out on the rocky islands around the bay.

Next, we made our way across to Rum, first stopping to see the dramatic remains of the shipwreck of the French trawler Jack Abry II before heading into Loch Scresort to see the impressive Kinloch Castle. The dramatic landscape of Rum was sadly only partially visible today due to the low cloud and rain, but we learnt about the history of the island, its long-term red deer study and how local people are living on the island

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today. We then returned to Elgol, seeing rafts of manx shearwaters, more skuas and a couple of red-throated divers on the way.

We then broke the return journey to the hotel with a stop on the edge Loch Slapin near the Kilmarie Cemetery. Here we had a scan for otters, but found red-breasted merganser, pied wagtail, greenfinch and a vocal pair of common sandpipers. We then drove on spotting a few sand martins and a greenshank at roadside Loch before arriving back at the hotel in time for dinner.

#### **Day 4: Skeabost – Bracadale and Glen Brittle**

**Tuesday 14 June 2022**

*Weather: Lighter wind, but almost constant rain, most of the day.*

Today we first set off driving north to our next base at Skeabost. After unloading our bags at the hotel and just as we were setting off to go again, an adult white-tailed eagle suddenly flew over the car park. We all quickly headed to the back of the hotel grounds on the edge of the Loch to see if we could see it again and sure enough it treated us to another fly over. Minutes later, we also saw an otter fishing out in the loch, although it was quite distant, we had a longer view of it actively hunting in the centre of the sea loch. We then set off across the peat bogs of the Totarder valley along the B885. The abundant hare's tail cotton grasses along the roadside were a clear indication of the wet landscape around us.

We then took a drive along the road that circles the secluded Amar River estuary, near Bracadale. Here we found a pair of subadult white-tailed eagles perched like gargoyles on the ridgeline close to the road. After several minutes watching them, they then took flight and treated us to an impressive talon lock and mid-air scuffle.

From here we headed north to the dramatic Glen Brittle valley, driving through the mountainous landscape here was unfortunately mostly quiet today due to the persistent rain and low cloud. We stopped for lunch and a warm drink at the Glen Brittle campsite where we had good views of sand martins, skylarks passing food, wheatears and a song thrush. We then set off back up the road and found another two adult white-tailed eagles, one was only briefly and distantly seen in flight, while the other was perched atop a dead conifer tree. We then set off for the drive back to Skeabost over the moorlands of Totarder again.

Along the way a curlew was a nice find as it gave us a good view both in flight and from atop a grassy tussock where it performed its classic bubbling call, a sound evocative of the upland bogs. While we scanned, we picked up a couple of ravens and buzzards and then a wonderful pair of golden eagles soaring high over the top of the ridges. They were quite distant, but their slow and infrequent flaps, typical of eagles were apparent and when they went below the skyline some could even pick out their beautiful golden napes. We continued seeing a few more roadside birds like stonechat, the ever-present meadow pipit and common snipe.

After dinner back at the hotel, some of the group headed out to the Waternish Peninsula where we searched in vain for the elusive corncrake. One bird was possibly briefly heard calling, but sadly no further sign was found. On the way out to the area though we did have a good view of a pair of adult white-tailed eagles circling over a hillock where we suspected some carrion may have attracted their attention.

#### **Day 5: Waternish Peninsula and Dunvegan**

**Wednesday 15 June 2022**

*Weather: strong wind, heavy and constant rain, most of the day.*

Today a small number of the group started early with a walk around the hotel grounds where we hoped to find an otter fishing on the rising tide. Unfortunately, we had no luck with the otters, but did find a fox, an albino rabbit and birds including greenshank, red-breasted mergansers and goldcrests. Unfortunately, the rain came down heavily too, so we soon headed for shelter.

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After breakfast we set off again across the moorlands to the Amar estuary. At the edge of a forestry plantation a couple of red deer hinds gave a good although short view in a clearing among the trees. On the estuary, a drake teal, was a nice surprise and we also found kestrel, ravens sheltering from the wind, greylag geese with young goslings and a brief hen harrier was also seen.

After lunch at the lovely Dunvegan Delhi, we set off further north to explore a remote section of the Waternish peninsula where some coastal views could be seen although the weather was still very wet and visibility poor. We then returned to the hotel to warm up before dinner.

#### **Day 6: Waternish Peninsula and Dunvegan**

**Thursday 16 June 2022**

*Weather: light wind, intermittent rain, sunny spells in the afternoon.*

This morning we set off early to Portree Harbour where we took our boat trip along the coast between Skye and the smaller island of Raasay. This gave us a great opportunity to appreciate the dramatic and rugged landscape of Skye's Trotternish Peninsula from the unique perspective of being on the water. We could see the black lava flows, the weathered Jurassic sedimentary rock and impressively jagged formations, left from landslides.

Along the coastline we found many black guillemots, cormorants, and shags, and a single great skua. As we approached calmer waters, a large pod of possibly up to 30 bottlenose dolphins approached the boat. This was a magical experience, and a few young calves could be seen swimming alongside their parents too. Some of the pod were particularly acrobatic and treated us with a few leaps out of the water, much to everyone's delight.

We then found several white-tailed eagles, with a pair close to the island of Raasay giving particularly good views. Both the enormous female and relatively smaller male flew incredibly close to the boat to collect the offerings of fish. Shortly after a third eagle appeared with them, this time a second-year bird still with very dark juvenile plumage. As the adult pair welcomed the juvenile on to their patch, we believe this juvenile was their offspring from the previous year.

We then headed north finding more eagles, in total six different white-tailed eagles were seen on this boat trip. We also found a couple of small colonies of common seals and several red deer were seen around the islands of Raasay and Rona. A mature stag was seen grazing the high rocky slope of a hill on Rona and as he was silhouetted against the sky, he looked very much like he was posing for the famous 'Monarch of the Glen' painting! We then returned to Portree for lunch and a chance to warm up before we set off again driving further north to see a little more of the rugged Trotternish Peninsula. We stopped briefly where the Old Man of Storr rock formation would have been visible on a clear day. Next, we visited the An Corran beach at Staffin where we found several fossilised dinosaur footprints, mostly of the herbivorous Ornithomimids embedded into the Jurassic bedrock. A pair of great skuas circled the nearby Staffin Island, a wheatear flew into view and a few interesting rock formations were also noted during our stop here.

We then headed north right around the very top of Skye where we could see slightly different landscapes including more of the typical small-scale crofts, known from this part of the island. We then had a talk from the RSPB's Corncrake Conservation Officer on the work they are doing to help improve the habitat for this fast-declining species as well as an insight into the landscapes and way of life in this remote region. After watching a few buzzards interacting in nearby fields we then made our way back to the hotel in time for a little downtime and our final dinner of the trip.

#### **Day 7: Skeabost to Inverness**

**Friday 17 June 2022**

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*Weather: Heavy rain and strong wind at first, with brighter weather around Inverness.*

Today we all said our farewells as some of the group set off for home while others returned to Inverness for their onward journeys.

(Below white-tailed eagle by Ian Loyd from our boat trip from Portree)



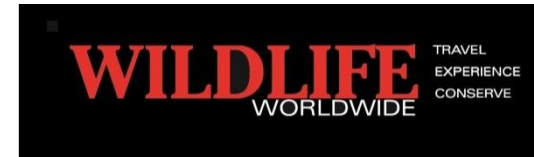
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# Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>							
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			✓	✓	
2	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>							
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		✓		
4	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓		
5	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓			✓	
6	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
7	Red-throated loon diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓				✓	
8	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓				
9	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓				
10	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓				
12	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓			✓	
13	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓			✓	
14	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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15	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓		✓		
16	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓			
17	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	✓		
18	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
19	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	✓	✓		
20	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			✓			✓	
21	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓					
22	Mew (Common) gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓			✓	✓	
23	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
24	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓				✓	
26	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			✓				
27	Common murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓				
28	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓			✓	
29	Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓	✓			✓	
30	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓				
31	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓		✓		
32	Common woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		

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34	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓	✓			
35	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				✓	✓	✓	
36	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓	✓		
38	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓						
39	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H					
40	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							
41	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
42	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓			✓		
43	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓	✓	✓		
44	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>						✓	
45	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓				
47	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
49	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓					
50	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓			
51	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		✓					
52	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓			✓		

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53	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓			✓		
55	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓		✓		
56	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓				
57	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓		✓		
58	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
59	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		✓			
60	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
61	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
62	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			✓				
64	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓				
66	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓		✓		
67	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓					
68	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>			✓				
69	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓					
70	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		✓		
71	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓		✓		

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72	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓				
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA							
1	Bottle-nosed dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						✓	
2	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
3	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓				✓	
4	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓		✓			
5	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					✓		
6	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
7	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓					
	OTHER								
1	Moon jellyfish	<i>Aurelia aurita</i>		✓					
2	Green-veined white	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓					
3	Small pearl-bordered fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>		✓					
4	Golden-ringed dragonfly	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>		✓					

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