

## Birding in the Outer Hebrides, 3rd to 16th June 2015 - Brenda & Derek Parkin

White-tailed and Golden Eagle, four species of Skua, Red necked Phalarope, three species of Diver, and our target bird the Corncrake, coupled with wonderful scenery. What's not to set on this great adventure! The principal islands in the chain that marks the Outer Hebrides are Lewis, Harris, the Uists, Benbecula, Eriskay and Barra.

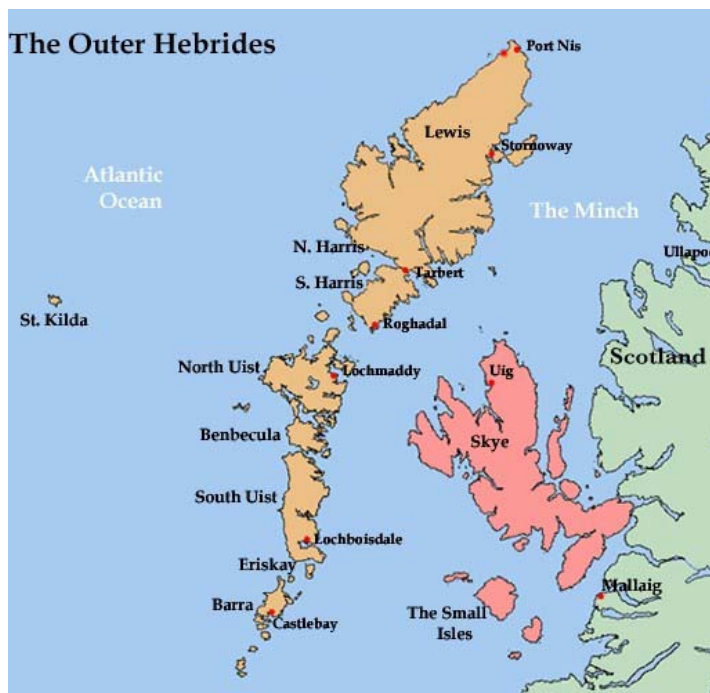
A short hop on a ferry from Skye brought us to Tarbert on Harris. The crossing takes an hour and 40 minutes and produced Manx Shearwater, on a previous visit we saw Storm Petrels.

We like Harris for its mountains, sea lochs and long sandy beaches and it has reputedly the highest density of Golden eagles in the whole of Europe. A drive through Northern Harris with a brief incursion into Southern Lewis took us into a particular favourite - Southern Lochs country. Minor roads lead out to the rugged east coast with tiny settlements looking out to the Shiant Isles. Seaforth Head has White-tailed as well as Golden eagle. We had a wonderful view of the former as it flew towards and over our car.

On our second day we followed narrow roads with passing places to reach sandy beaches at Hushinish and Lukentyre on the west coast. A pair of Red throated Diver, Black Guillemot, the ever present Arctic Terns and Eider were the highlights.

Our three night stay alongside a sea loch with comfortable B&B and fine food at the Isle of Harris Inn over, we drove the short distance through South Harris to join the ferry at Leverburgh for the short crossing to the island of Bernera, linked by causeway to North Uist. Single Black throated Diver and a huge roost of Shag were sighted. We chose to drive swiftly through Bernera but talking to other visitors we gathered that it has a lot to offer in the way of walks.

However, we had our sights on the Balranald RSPB Reserve, originally set up to protect the Corncrake and Phalaropes. We chose to use a rough track to drive out to Aird an Runair headland. A mere 100 yards out to sea was a resting Great Northern Diver and on the beach were c200 Sanderling (some in breeding plumage) feeding on insects in the washed up seaweed - a common sight we were to find. A marked trail from the centre passes this point en route to a large Arctic



White tailed Eagle (juvenile) - Paul King

flight down to the nest site, a mere 200 yards from the road. Later we stopped off to watch a female Golden eagle and its month old chick on a nest 200 a.s.l and only half a mile distant, through telescopes set up throughout the season by Sheffield birder Alan Fawcett.

Tern colony. A pair of Corn Bunting were heard and then seen on the way back. The point is one place to witness the passage of four species of Skua, but usually in the latter part of May when the north-west winds occur. Our own Shaun Radcliffe saw 90 Pomarine Skuas on 27th May this year and he informed me of a sighting of 300 Long tailed Skuas on 25th May. Of our visits, three have been in early June and one in May, although fine, the persistent winds were easterly on that occasion.

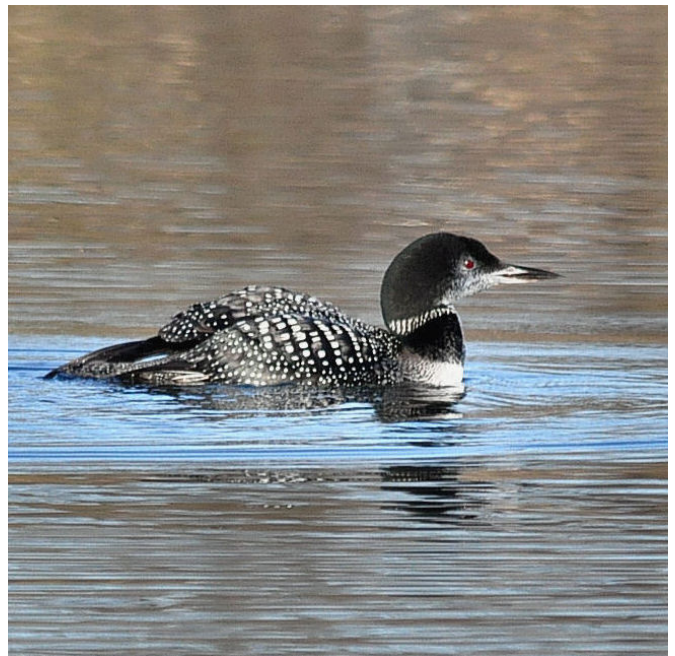
Our accommodation for the next two nights lay only a short distance away at Cnoc an Torrain (Knockintorain). Interpreting Gaelic names on the OS maps can be tricky and we had some difficulty finding Benview Guest House overlooking Sanday, where our only sighting of Corncrake occurred. The following day we visited the Committee Road (built to relieve poverty in the 19th Century) which cuts across the middle of the Island and always produces hunting raptors.

Two Short eared Owls and male and female Hen Harriers were seen before we witnessed a food pass and the short



The next we moved to another Guest Houser on North Uist. After a brief visit to Grimsay Island (Shaun and Julie's haunt) we set out for more birdwatching at one of only two known sites for Red necked Phalarope on the Islands at Loch Mor, near Balivanich. We had a brief view of one Phalarope, six Black tailed Godwits in fine breeding plumage and a pair of Twite (a numerous bird). Nearby Culla beach produced several Whimbrel in 2012 but only common waders, viz. Sanderling, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Turnstone on this visit. Our accommodation was Bonnieview at Carnish where the owners, together with their animals, appeared on Monty Hall's TV programme on self-sufficient living on Crofter's land. Baleshare, near Clachan is another beautiful beach with a good variety of waders.

The following day we were determined to nail the Phalaropes, of which four to seven had been reported, and were immediately successful in getting good views of a pair of copulating on Loch Mor, near Griminish. Another good site discovered on earlier visits is Ardivachar Point, south of Benbecula. We were soon on to a pair of Great Northern Divers and three Velvet Scoters were feeding, whilst a Whimbrel was heard. Crossing to the east coast at Peter's Port we were too late to see a family of Otters, but were consoled with a pair of displaying Golden Eagles.



Great Northern Diver - Brian Vickers



Black-tailed Godwit - Brian Vickers

We left North Uist in cold, drizzly conditions after checking for further waders on pristine sandy beaches and after a welcome hot drink at the Kildonian Museum and cafe followed a short road east to the sea at Loch Eynort, where we knew White-tailed Eagle bred. By now the sun was out and so were a pair of distant birds.

A two-night stop near Lochboisdale enabled us to explore new sites in South Uist. First up was a one-mile drive across Askenish golf course - designed in 1891 by "Old" Tom Morris (famous as an Open champion), around the natural features of the sand dunes and machair. Whilst eyeing the beach for waders a Peregrine flew over. A brief trip along the causeway to the island of Eriskay produced another close-up of a White-tailed Eagle harassed by Ravens as it made its way to a sea cliff nest.

A ferry leaves Eriskay for our final destination of Barra and on the crossing a Basking shark was sighted for which the boat stopped. Lots of Gannets, having flown from St. Kilda and our only sighting and our only Great Skua of the trip were seen. Eoligarry, north of the ferry terminal and beyond the aircraft beach landing is good for passerines not found elsewhere, viz. Sedge and Reed Warbler, Stonechat, Whinchat, Reed Bunting and Common Whitethroat. Castlebay, the main settlement has a causeway link to Vatersay which is picturesque and has a

wide variety of species. In addition, a landing on Mingulay is possible whilst staying in Castlebay and the circular boat trip we did in 2008 produced both species of Eagle.

On our final night, whilst looking out of our room at the Isle of Barra Beach Hotel, four Common Bottlenose Dolphins swam into the Bay and performed synchronised leaps out of the water, much to our delight and a fitting end to a wonderful two-week holiday on the Outer Hebrides.

The final ferry back to the mainland at Oban takes five hours and produces good numbers of Manx Shearwater, as well as a scenic sail past Rhum, Skye and Mull. Although it has been known to be a rough crossing, we have not had a bad crossing on any of the ferries over four visits. An alternative would be to backtrack to Lochmaddy on North Uist and return via Skye. We can thoroughly recommend the Islands for scenery, hospitality and most of all the birding. A mixture of weather can be expected, although we cannot complain having had good enough conditions each time.