

Mull Adventure

By Mike Bloomfield

Mull, Iona and Strontian

For some time, I've been wanting to add some Scottish specialities to my British lists so, when the opportunity came, over the Spring bank holiday period this year, it was a chance not to miss. The objective for me was a couple of lifers and a chance to photograph golden and white-tailed eagles; also to have visual contact with a corncrake, which I've only heard before, in Sweden.

However, the weather for that weekend wasn't great but everything was arranged so three of us set off early Friday morning with a plan to take in a couple of rarities en-route. The first, at St Abb's Head, north of Berwick –on-Tweed, was a lesser scaup. It was a beautiful morning, if a little cool, but the scaup was nowhere to be seen. It's a lovely spot though, with an inland lake, cliffs, with nesting sea birds and a pair of peregrine falcons enjoying the updraft from a stiff onshore breeze. Ah well, at least we tried!

The second target was a white-winged black scoter which has been around for some time at Musselburgh. We did see this bird in 2018 but the Firth of Forth was rough on the day and views were poor even when fairly close on a high tide. The bird was diving with common scoters so it was very difficult to pinpoint where the bird would surface and also not be obscured by a wave. The weather was still fair when we arrived but our bad luck continued when we noticed the tide was low and chances of finding our target out in the estuary were extremely slim. No time to waste as we had a ferry to catch and another target before then, so it was back on the road towards Oban.

Our next stop was Glasdrum National Nature Reserve (a few miles north east of Oban), a woodland area and probably the only British location where you can find the chequered skipper, despite trial introductions elsewhere. The conditions were perfect and it didn't take us long to find this small attractive butterfly which nectars on bluebells and bugle. Also found at the site were several small pearl-bordered fritillaries which



remain a rarity in central and eastern parts of England. Next stop Oban for the ferry to Mull and our B & B in Salen.

Saturday was cold and wet with light rain all day, as forecast, and we already knew our boat trip to photograph eagles had been cancelled following a telephone call received after we left Musselburgh. Plans scuppered, we decided to drive around the southern circular route on the island to see what birds we could find. These included raven, golden eagle, white-tailed eagle (juv), great northern diver, hooded crow, arctic tern and a close encounter with three cuckoos (probably two males and one



female) – noisy! You can get an idea of the weather from the cuckoo picture with drips on the wire. The camera even picked up the fine rain drops which show as white speckles on my original, if not on this copy. All in all, not the day we had hoped for but you can't rely on the weather and, on reflection, we came to the conclusion that the eagles wouldn't be attracted to the boat in such damp conditions anyway.

The forecast for Sunday was a little better and brightening up from the west for our trip to Iona. It was still damp as we drove westward for the short ferry ride and a heavier shower came again as we arrived but the stiff breeze soon moved it away and we even had a little sun. A short walk down the road to the left from the quay, towards the fire station, was all we needed to hear a corncrake calling from the iris patch in the field behind the station. Hearing is one thing, seeing is another! Very frustrating knowing the bird (only one) was tantalisingly close but so difficult to pin down in the long grass and flowering yellow irises. Eventually we picked out a head and then a brief glimpse of the bird in shorter vegetation before disappearing again into the vegetation. This was my best picture – better than nothing, I suppose. We went to two other



known spots nearby but with no success and were led to believe, following conversations with other birders, that the population had crashed from the 2018 estimated numbers. Other sightings included a great skua (bonxy) and rock dove, if you assume there are no feral pigeons on Iona!

Back on Mull in the afternoon and in improved weather, we enjoyed much better views of golden eagle at a nest site high on a rock scar although not near enough for photos and later, great bins views of white-tailed eagle, this time adults also in the vicinity of a nest site.

A short ferry ride back to the mainland from Fishnish to Lochaline on Monday morning allowed us to take the short route north to Strontian where a drake black duck has been in residence for some years and this was evident, once we found it upstream from the village, by the strange looking mallards in the same vicinity, obviously having a great time in Scotland although it does now have a dodgy leg and limps. Maybe too much malt on the way back from the local hostelry!



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