

## **'FAMILY TRIP' TO THE ISLE OF MULL – WITH A LITTLE BIRDING INCLUDED! 16-19 MAY 2003**

### **Steve Holliday plus Julie & Jenny**

**16<sup>th</sup> May:** Set off from Newcastle at 5.00am, full breakfast in Lochearnhead at 8.15am and arrived at Oban for 10.30am; comfortably in time for the 12.00pm ferry. A few Common Buzzards and Hooded Crows were seen en route north of Edinburgh. Several spl Black Guillemots were in Oban harbour with some resting on the harbour staiths. The 45 minute ferry trip produced Gannet, Kittiwake and Guillemot and 4 Common Buzzards were seen over Mull as we cruised into Craignure.

Also travelling from Newcastle for the weekend was Paul & Tony Stewart, Paul Cassells and Mike Damant. Already on Mull were Gordon Wilson and Jenny Holland.

On arrival, Gordon quickly led us to a **White-tailed Eagle** nest site at Grass Point. After a short wait an adult flew in, landed at the nest side and fed the remaining single young (apparently one other had recently died). The adult then perched on a nearby stump and gave good, if distant, views. The weather was pretty poor, with heavy rain being a feature of the weekend. The surrounding area of stunted Birch trees and open glades held Redstart, Tree Pipit, Wood Warbler and Redpoll, with Blackbird and Chaffinch being common. Other birds seen in the general area included Grey Heron, Shelduck, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Buzzard, Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper and Hooded Crow.

At 2.30pm we travelled to our B&B at Salen. The B&B was excellent value and ideally placed (Aros View @ £18.50ppn and run by Mrs Eilidh Allan a super host: tel 01680 300372 or 07810 747431).

At 4.45pm an evening drive to Loch na Keal produced a spl Great Northern Diver, 2 Red-breasted Merganser, Herring Gull, Black Guillemot, a few Wheatear and Song Thrush, and a Grey Wagtail en route back to Salen. The jaunt being cut short by rain at 5.35pm. The Salen Hotel provided a fine meal that evening.

**17<sup>th</sup> May:** A 9am start and a drive down to Fionnphort (via Craignure) saw us just make the 10.15am ferry to Iona. Around Salen were Willow Warbler, House Sparrow and Siskin. Apart from several common species such as Swallow, Pied Wagtail, Robin, Dunnock etc, other species seen along this very scenic but often tortuous drive (various stops) included Shelduck, Mallard, Eider, Common Buzzard, Oystercatcher, Black-headed & Common Gull, Cuckoo, Whinchat, Stonechat, Mistle Thrush, Whitethroat and Coal Tit. Apart from the local driving conditions (akin to playing 'chicken' at 50mph, though most drivers do 'give and take'), Highland Cattle also blocked our way at one point!

The adult return ferry fare was £3.50 and £1.75 for the juvenile. Again, drizzle hampered things slightly with birds seen such as Shags, Gannets, Herring Gulls, Kittiwakes, Guillemot and Hoodies during the 20 minute voyage.

On arrival at Iona, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Sedge Warbler (at least 3 counted), House Sparrow, Jackdaw and Goldfinch were all quickly noted. I was determined to walk to the Abbey as swiftly as possible, apparently the best site for **Corncrake**. Before I reached there, however, I heard one calling from an allotment within the village (near the Parish Church). Another 15 minutes later and I gave up trying to see the bird. After convincing the attendant collecting entry fees for the Abbey that we weren't actually going inside, she allowed us to walk through to the seaward side of the Abbey grounds. Indeed, the kind attendant also pointed out that the footpath, also 'dog-legged' right and back into the village thus negating the need to retrace our steps. In no time at all, we had 3 Corncrakes calling very loudly at point blank range, between the Abbey and the sea. For 20+ minutes I just sat down and enjoyed what must have been a common experience 50 years ago, with the birds seemingly calling from all directions. Rock Dove, Wheatear and Meadow Pipit were also noted here. I resisted the temptation to try 'too hard' to actually see a Corncrake! Back in the village and another Corncrake was calling loudly in fields behind the Spar shop – making 5 in total. A view over sea from the ferry terminal produced 12 Commic Terns (probably Common).

The ferry back to Mull (around 12.30pm) saw PS et al just arriving on Iona; they apparently heard around 8 Corncrakes in the area.

We decided to take the scenic route back to Salen, via Loch na Keal. Raven and Tree Pipit were added along the way. The views all around were spectacular but on entering the mouth to Loch na Keal the cliff views here were special. Looking out to sea, it was possible to see Staffa (and Fingal's caves) and the Treshnish Isles on the horizon. There appeared to be Common Sandpiper and Wheatear territories every 100m around the shore of Loch na Keal. Other species seen were Kestrel, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Great Black-backed Gull, Black Guillemot, Rock Pipit and Pied Wagtail. We bumped into GW and JH at the eastern end of Loch na Keal, and GW had just seen a Golden Eagle at distance over the northern hills. Whilst chatting (3.50pm) I picked up a **White-tailed Eagle** coming from the Loch Ba area and drifting slowly over to the north. The white tail suggested an adult. Again, rain forced an early finish and a short drive back to the B&B enabled me to catch the second half of the FA Cup final on TV (pity!).

A trip up to Tobermory that evening saw us dining out at Gannets, a small restaurant on the harbour front. Apparently, the famous geordie pairing of 'Ant & Dec' had been seen the previous evening but we weren't that unlucky as to bump into them! Heavy rain forced an early retreat back to Salen.

**18<sup>th</sup> May:** We decided to drive round the northern half of the island today. During an early stop in Tobermory we bumped into GW & JH who were arranging an early departure from the island, due to the weather (one of whom was somewhat keener than the other!). Heading up to Calgary, we again met with PS et al amid some 'road-rage' (not really) and we quickly saw Common Buzzard, Cuckoo, Whinchat and Raven. J&J were particularly keen to see Calgary, being the origin of the naming of Calgary in Canada (J&J's favourite holiday location of recent years). Well, 'blink and you miss it' certainly applies here – not even a signpost with the name Calgary on it. Even the owner of the café/art shop couldn't explain why and what a missed chance for some Calgary postcards etc. The beach area saw me record Fulmar overhead and a pair of Rock Pipits. On leaving Calgary, a Twite was added near Creag a Chaisteil. The stretch down to Ulva produced an immature Golden Eagle circling with 2 Common Buzzards before being chased away by 2 Ravens. 8 Red Deer were also nearby. The scenery continued to be spectacular especially looking over the private island of Ulva and even the sun was shining. A pair of Grey Wagtails was at a small waterfall en route and House Martins and Raven were noted, amongst several other more common species e.g. Willow Warbler, Chaffinch. After passing the turn-off for the Ulva Ferry, we saw 2-3 more Common Buzzards and Ravens and a male Whinchat. A roadside stop on the northern side of Loch na Keal produced 2 immature Shags and 2 Common Sandpipers, and another hoped for experience – 2 **Otters** swimming in the water. As I shouted Jenny over (beach-combing at the time) the 2 mammals quickly disappeared (whoops). A look over the eastern flats of Loch na Keal, from the campsite, allowed me to count 16 Hooded Crows but no waders of note (presumably too pebbly).

The time was only 1.30pm and PS et al had informed me of a good area to see White-tailed Eagle just south of Grass Point, around Croggan. The drive round Loch Spelve went on forever (about 8 miles to be exact) and 4 Lapwings seen were a trip tick. We reached the end of the 'road' but had to sit out a very heavy downpour. From the car, I watched a Common Sandpiper return to her nest with 4 eggs, just before the rain arrived. Half an hour later and I ventured out for a walk. The spot here overlooks a flight path between the sea and the loch though only Eider (2f.) and Red-breasted Merganser (1pr) were seen. A Grey Seal broke the surface. Several species appeared common – Cuckoo, Tree Pipit and Wood Warbler. Great Tits were watched taking food into a tree hole, and Cormorant, Kestrel (2), Robin and Song Thrush were all seen. PS et al had been put off by the downpour and were drying off in the Craignure Arms whilst awaiting their return ferry. The return trip round Loch Spelve took place during an even heavier downpour, whilst also avoiding 'migrating' cattle en route – 2 Snipe were noted. The drive back to Salen produced 2 spl Red-throated Divers in the Sound of Mull.

That evening the three of us enjoyed Salen Hotel's speciality – pizza (good value). A clear evening and a stroll down to Salen Harbour produced 5 Shags (2 adults and 3 imms) perched on posts, 6 Eider, male Mallard, Whitethroat, Redpoll and Siskin. Scanning the nearby hillside (just to the north) I picked up a Short-eared Owl mobbing a Common Buzzard and although uncertain, I feel sure I heard a Red Grouse call in the distance.

**19<sup>th</sup> May:** 9.15am and a steady drive down the coast to Craignure for our 11.00am ferry. A brief stop near the golf course provided a spl Great Northern Diver close inshore, Turnstone, Common Sandpiper and 3 Twite.

The seawatch en route back to Oban produced 3 Manx Shearwaters (heading into the Sound of Mull), 2 Shags, 7 Gannets, Black Guillemot, 20+Guillemot, Black Guillemot, Razorbill and 3 Common Terns. The drive back home also involved a minor diversion near Coldingham, Borders to see a Crane.

**Summary:** This was a very enjoyable weekend break. Mull is easily the most scenic part of Britain I have ever visited (which includes most places between Shetland and Lands End). The weather was pretty poor throughout but didn't spoil the experience. Julie wanted to horse ride but opportunities are surprisingly limited to only one place at Killichronan and the weather effectively denied her this opportunity.

The Isle of Mull Bird Club has an excellent website ([www.mullbirds.com](http://www.mullbirds.com)) which provides a good array of information on latest reports and where to see White-tailed Eagles (including a very useful summary on ageing birds and wing-tagging activity). I would certainly like to go back to Mull again – when the sun shines!

**Steve Holliday:** email [stevholliday@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:stevholliday@hotmail.co.uk)