

# St Kilda & the Western Isles

**June 18<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009**

Participants: Tony Crilley, John Willis & Tony Stewart

## Introduction

This trip had been planned primarily to visit the St Kildan group of islands, a world heritage site, lying some fifty miles west of Harris and the remotest part of the British Isles. It would give us the opportunity to see the spectacular sea cliffs & stacks and explore the extraordinary human history of the islands. Ferry restrictions meant that five days were needed to ensure we had a chance of achieving our goal. Ferries to and from the mainland, do not run on a Sunday. This is out of respect for the religious beliefs of the islanders.



The boat operator allows you a two day window to get to the islands. The trips are very much weather dependant due to the extreme and hazardous sea conditions that are the norm rather than the exception. The forecast was poor and the optimism was in short supply as we left the Newcastle and headed for the Western Isles.

## Thursday Evening 18.00pm

We had already dipped both species of Eagle by the time we got to the ferry terminal at Uig on the Isle of Skye. The Caledonian McBrayne ferry departed Uig on time and headed for Tarbert on the Isle of Harris. The crossing across the Minch was estimated at 1 hour and 40 minutes. The weather was diabolical and the sea rough, but we braved the elements hoping to see a selection of seabirds and cetaceans.

Sea conditions limited the opportunity for Cetaceans and Petrels, but there were lots of common seabirds to keep us entertained with Gannets, Puffins, Fulmars, Auks and Gulls all in abundance.

We arrived at Tarbert and headed north into Lewis for our base for the first evening at Kershader. We were booked into the Ravenspoint Hostel on Loch Erisort ([www.syha.org](http://www.syha.org)) located in the Southern Loch Region.

We had to telephone Angus Campbell owner and operator of Kilda Cruises ([www.kildacruises.co.uk](http://www.kildacruises.co.uk)) to ascertain whether or not our trip the following day was on. We already knew that the conditions would prevent us sailing to St Kilda as the sea swell was quite large and it came as no surprise when he informed us that our first window of opportunity had been firmly slammed shut.

## Friday 19<sup>th</sup> June

The new day began as the previous day ended with a severe low gripping the islands. The decision to postpone the St Kilda proved to be the correct one as strong winds whipped up the sea and the waves rolled in.

We left our digs and decided to head towards the seabird colonies of the extreme north of Lewis. First birds of the day were two close Ravens, Willow Warbler, Robin, Blackbird and Collared Dove. On the nearby Loch were Common Sandpiper and Oystercatcher.

Within 5 minutes of leaving the hostel we had our first Golden Eagle of the trip with superb views gained of this magnificent raptor. An Oystercatcher was on the bird's tail, calling loudly and doing its best to harass and drive the threat away. As the Eagle moved over the moor, it caused panic among the local birds with Common Snipe, Lapwing, Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Meadow Pipit and Wheatear all taking flight calling loudly.



- Golden Eagle

We drove north to Sandwick Bay close to Stornoway Airport. There were lots of birds in the bay with the highlights being Dark Phase Arctic Skua, and two species of summer plumaged Diver – Red & Black throated. There was a massive feeding frenzy close to the shore with dozens of Gannets and Arctic Terns taking advantage of the rich pickings. As ever the marauding Gulls were in close attendance waiting to take advantage of any unsuspecting bird.



- Shag

We drove to Tiumphan Head, but the wind prevented any decent bird watching. The sea battered the shore and it was quite risky approaching the cliff edge to see the Fulmar colony. The cliffs held Kittiwake, Shag, Guillemot, and Razorbill. A single Great Skua patrolled the cliffs looking for any opportunity for a meal.

We left Tiumphan Head and headed north to the Butt of Lewis. Again the wind put paid to any meaningful bird watching and with the sea conditions being so rough, cetacean spotting was impossible. The Butt was alive with seabirds and onshore were Rock and Meadow Pipits with a single Wren singing loudly above the wind.

We headed west through driving rain and added Greylag Goose and Golden Plover as we went. Another Golden Eagle en-route gave great views with a Raven in close attendance. We missed the RSPB reserve and its breeding Red-necked Phalaropes at Loch Na Muilne due to lack of homework.

At Bernera we stopped at the Iron Age settlement at Bosta Beach and had Several Wheatear and Black Guillemot

Enthusiasm was on the wane as we headed down to Uig Bay. We had a brief stop at the Clannish Stones, an ancient structure, and a remarkable and solitary Bronze Age circle. This is one of the most important archeological sites in Outer Hebrides. As the longest day drew ever closer hippies and druids had converged on the area to celebrate the summer solstice. Apparently this is the new Stonehenge.

Close to Uig Bay two Golden Eagles gave superb views as they flew incredibly close overhead. A single Curlew was in a nearby meadow. Eventually we arrived in Leverburgh on the Isle of Harris and our base for the next couple of days. The ever present rain showed no sign of abating. We had added another Red-throated Diver, and on the beautiful estuaries of South Harris were 2 summer plumaged Greenshanks. Near to the Bunkhouse were another Greenshank and a Tufted Duck.

#### Leverburgh 19.00 pm

At last the weather showed signs of calming as we checked into our bunkhouse, with a Cuckoo calling nearby. Our base was to be the Am Bothan Bunkhouse at Leverburgh and it proved to be an excellent choice ([www.ambothan.com](http://www.ambothan.com)). Am Bothan is a 5 star independent bunkhouse. Once again we rang our skipper Angus Campbell who informed us that conditions were improving fast and he was confident that he could get us to St Kilda.

#### Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> June

Incredibly the new day was calm and clear. We made our way to the dock at the quayside where we met our skipper Angus. Two boats were to make the journey with around 20 hardy souls on board. We departed at 08.00 after our obligatory Health and Safety briefing. The swell was still quite big from the previous day's storms. We were assured that once in deep water the sea would settle down making the crossing more comfortable. Most people on board opted for the comfortable indoor seats but we decided to stake out the rear of the boat to optimise our chances of a wildlife encounter. This proves to be a wise choice as everyone indoors succumbs to seasickness.

Black Guillemot was present in the harbour and ten minutes into the 2 and half hour journey a single Storm Petrel was seen. There were lots of birds seen from the boat with the undoubted highlights being 11 Storm Petrels, Two Leach's Petrels and three Manx Shearwaters.

The gods were looking down on us as we approached the archipelago. The sun was shining brightly and spirits were high. We approached Village Bay on the main isle of Hirta and dropped anchor. We then transferred to an inflatable boat for the short hop to the pier. As we disembarked a St Kilda Wren (*trogodytes troglodytes hitensis*) was singing loudly and we soon located the subspecies of the mainland Wren which is larger and greyer and a slightly different song than its mainland cousin. (<http://www.kilda.org.uk/mice-wrens.htm>). There are over hundred pairs of Wren on Hirta and hopefully it will become a candidate for full species status.





- Hirta Village

We were met by the National Trust Warden who gave an informed talk about the history of the island and its status as a World Heritage site. The Warden alerted us to the presence of a pair of Snowy Owls which were located on the far side of the island at Glen Bay. We were under orders not to disturb the birds and to view from distance. They had not been showing because of the constant harassment by the resident Great Skuas. To reach the view point meant a steady climb to the top of the 1000 ft hill. Sadly the Owls did not show probably because of the 200+ pair of Bonxies resident in the Valley which took great delight in swooping down on you at every opportunity.



- Great Skuas – Hirta Island (top photo shows Stac Lee in background)



Great Skuas dominated the valleys on the west of the island with over 200 breeding pairs present. The moors held Meadow Pipit, Snipe and Golden Plover and many Northern Wheatears. Collared Dove and Rock Dove were also seen along with a couple of Dark Phase Arctic Skuas.



Northern Wheatear, "Pure" Rock Dove  
& Golden Plover





We were nearing the end of our 4 hour stop on Hirta and there was just time to visit the islands museum detailing the history of the incredible islanders and how they lived a meagre lifestyle harvesting seabirds and eggs. We departed Hirta at 15.30 and set off for a voyage around the stunning sea stacks of Hirta, Boreray, Stac Lee and Stac An Armin. The islands are the remains of a 4 mile diameter super volcano and the peaks that are left are the highest sea cliffs in the UK. There are 65000 pairs of Gannets which is the biggest Gannetry in the world and 65000 pairs of Fulmar the oldest known colony. In total there are 750000 seabirds colonising the islands and the sight, sounds and smell make it an unforgettable experience.



- Stac Lee & Gannets

As we departed the sea stacks a single Basking Shark was seen but sadly submerged before everyone on board could get onto it.

The journey back to Harris was equally productive with more Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters being seen, with a single Leach's Petrel showing particularly well as it flew alongside the boat and off around the rear. We eventually reached Harris at 19.30. The boat fare of £180 on paper seemed a little steep, but comparing it against an almost 12 hour trip and the amazing sites we witnessed it was worth every single penny and I would recommend it to anybody. Angus Campbell runs a very professional and well regulated operation and you get a full refund if the boat fails to sail.



- Gannets (Boreray)

Walking back to the digs from the quay we had two fly over Red-throated Divers.

#### Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June

The weather was back to normal with poor visibility and rain. Over breakfast we thanked our lucky stars that we had got the break when it was most needed with the weather and we were still on a massive high with the previous day's events.

We set out for the Isle of Scalpay hoping for Corncrake and Corn Bunting but sadly the weather got the better of us. We gave up and headed back onto Harris and set off for moorland area and a walk which led to Reinigeadal. The Lochan held Red-throated Diver and Stonechat and Meadow Pipit were on the moor. As we approached the coast the path dropped steeply to the shore on a sheltered Bay. There was a single Grey Seal hauled up on the beach and 4 Otters fed nearby. A single Golden Eagle flew along the nearby crags. Very little else was added to the list during the remainder of the day, but late afternoon at Leverburgh brought another close Golden Eagle and Two Common Buzzards.

#### Monday 22nd June

We departed Harris on the 07.30 ferry bound for Skye. There were plenty of common seabirds during the crossing together with a Storm Petrel, 14 Manx Shearwaters and a Sooty Shearwater. A single Common Dolphin was also seen.

We arrived at Uig and headed home to Newcastle

### Conclusion

Our ambition of getting to St Kilda was achieved so it was mission accomplished. But it became so much more than a trip to an island with the sheer scale and drama of the place adding to an unforgettable experience. Yes the weather put a damp squib on things but when we needed it most the sun shone brightly and the sea calmed just enough to get out to the islands. Fantastic!!!!



- Orca II