



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT ISLAY

14TH — 19TH FEBRUARY 2016

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MONDAY 15TH FEBRUARY – *Cold, frosty and sunny, 2C*

After meeting up last night in Carlisle, we rose early this morning to complete our journey northwards to the port of Kennacraig on Scotland's west coast. It was a very cold and frosty morning, and once we cleared Glasgow and headed along the west side of Loch Lomond, we were surrounded by snow-capped mountains – dramatic scenery in the most beautiful of weather. After a quick refuelling stop at Lochgilphead, we drove along the west shore of Loch Gilp where a large white gull caught our eye, bathing in one of the estuarine channels – a juvenile **Glaucous Gull**! We knew one had been seen recently in the area, so it wasn't a huge surprise, but nonetheless very nice to catch up with and we had great views too. We arrived in good time to Kennacraig, and were soon watching **Black Guillemots**, **Red-breasted Mergansers** and **Common Goldeneye** in the harbour, all under cloudless blue skies. We had a cooked lunch on the ferry, and then it was straight out on deck to seawatch as we sailed along West Loch Tarbert. Straight away we were seeing **Great Northern Divers**, and totalled at least seventy on the crossing including an amazing flock of forty birds, plus several **Red-throated** and a single **Black-throated Diver**, half a dozen **Slavonian Grebes**, many **European Shags** and several each of **Common Guillemot** and **Razorbill**. A single **Black-legged Kittiwake** was also noted, and as we passed the Island of Jura, with its famous 'Paps' dusted with snow, an adult **White-tailed Eagle** was perched on a rocky lochside knoll. **Red Deer** were seen grazing the Jura hillsides and distantly over the hills, a **Golden Eagle** was circling, mobbed by three corvids – not a close view, but nice to get under the belt so early.



Glaucous Gull, Lochgilphead 15th February

Reaching Port Askaig ahead of schedule, we were soon motoring across the island and of course, seeing our first flocks of geese! **Barnacle**, **Greylag** and **Greenland White-fronted Geese** were to be seen grazing in the roadside fields as we passed, and of course **Hooded Crows** and **Common Buzzards** were everywhere. After arriving at our cottages near Port Ellen, and getting everything unpacked, we had about an hour and a half of daylight remaining to make the most of. From our cottages, over a welcome cup of tea, we could scope a big flock of **Fieldfares**, see a pair of **Reed Bunting** and watch more **Greenland White-fronted Geese** grazing, before heading back up to Loch Indaal for a dusk

vigil. Here the **Barnacle Geese** had come in to roost, with many hundreds sleeping already on the sandflats. Large numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits and Eurasian Wigeon could be seen, as well as a few **Pale-bellied Brent Geese**. A **white-winged gull** flew low in across the mud, but dusk was falling rapidly and we couldn't be sure of the species, though we were leaning heavily towards Glaucous. We tried to relocate it in the failing light, but the gull roost was just too distant. Nevertheless, it had been a long and busy day!

TUESDAY 16TH FEBRUARY – *Wet and windy, 6C*

A challenging day today with gale force winds and heavy rain from start to finish. We were lucky in some respects, as no ferries ran today, but it was certainly tricky trying to birdwatch in these conditions. However, we started the day with a bang, heading up towards Bridgend on the 'high road' across the boggy moorland. Just after the turning the Bowmore, a subadult **Golden Eagle** appeared from nowhere and flew low over our van, its yellow feet visible like a pair of boxing gloves! We span the van around in the next available spot and headed back to an area of clearer visibility, but could only see a Common Buzzard and Common Raven. Starting to wonder if we'd made a mistake, the eagle floated up over the ridge, dwarfing the buzzard who valiantly began to mob it! We had super views of it over the next ten minutes, especially when it drifted down low over the moor by the roadside – a tremendous view!

Next we headed up to Bunnahabhain, to check the small harbour there for Otter. A **Great Northern Diver** was floating close to the shore, but there was no sign of our quarry, so we retreated to the relative shelter of the Islay Mill on the Sorn River. Here many common woodland birds were around, including Coal Tit and Treecreeper, but we couldn't find any Dippers on the river – a spectacular flock of **Barnacle Geese** were in the fields behind the woods though. Coffee and cake was a welcome distraction, before we called in at Bridgend to use the toilets and there we bagged up a pair of **Dippers** by the bridge! The rain was relentless, so we decided to head up to the RSPB reserve at Loch Gruinart and make use of the hides there for a bit of shelter. This was probably the peak of the storm, as we could only open half the flaps for fear of the roof being ripped off by the wind! Nevertheless a nice selection of wildfowl included close views of **Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese**, Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail and a nice **Whooper Swan**. A couple of Common Snipe, two Red Knot and a party of Common Redshank were also noted, plus a single Skylark. We had to be brave in the end though, and battle our way back up to the car park!



Barnacle Goose, Gruinart 16th February

We lunched at Bruichladdich, where we had hoped to find waders along the shore but had to make do with a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers along the windswept beach. We had arranged a tour of the distillery in the afternoon, which was a great way to shelter from the weather, but of course the tasting session afterwards pretty well put paid to the thoughts of doing any more birding afterwards! We returned to base about 1630, having made the best of a pretty awful day – tomorrow could only get better!

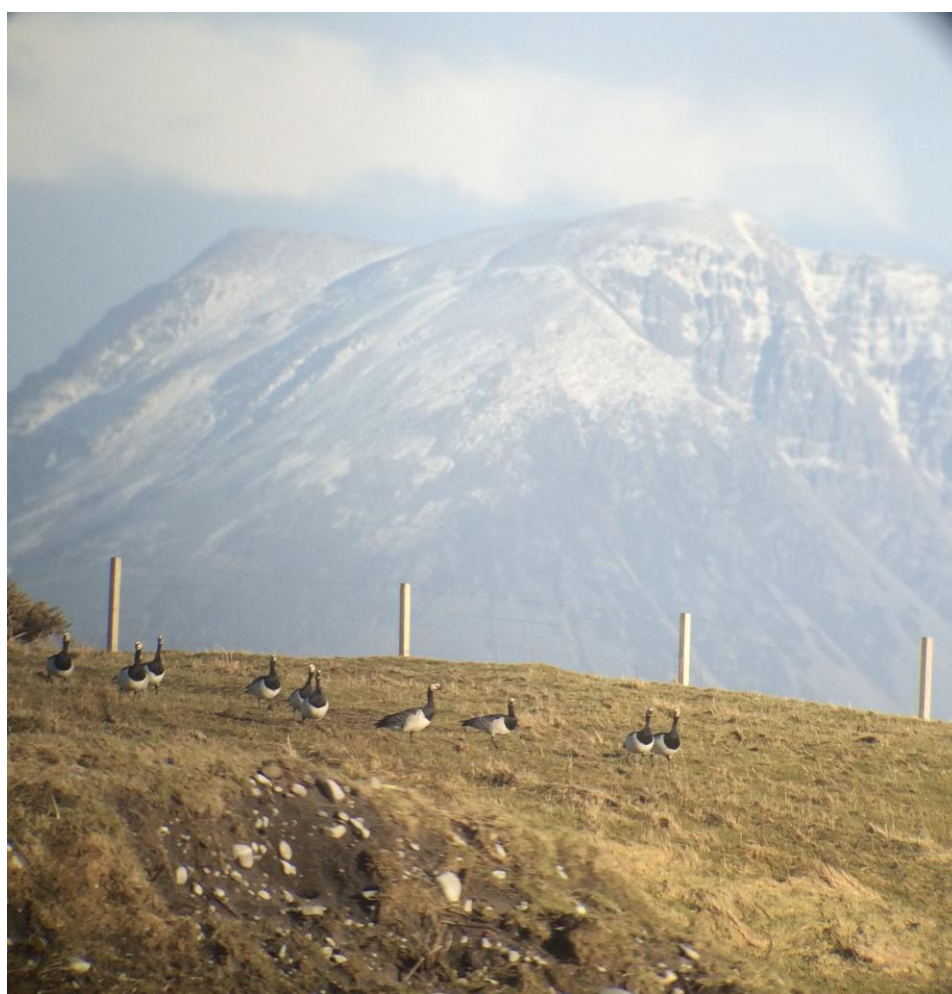
WEDNESDAY 17TH FEBRUARY – *Moderate SW winds, wintry showers, 3C*

A fantastic days birding today, helped by the fact the weather was a great deal better than yesterday! We knew we were off to a good start when a superb ringtail **Hen Harrier** drifted across the road in front of us as we headed north from Port Ellen, surprisingly our first of the trip – it wouldn't be the last! There were some large flocks of **Barnacle Geese** on the 'high road' this morning, and we had a look through them all to try and find something more unusual but couldn't. Taking the road along the northern shore of Loch Indaal, we headed up towards Loch Gorm and then out to Machir Bay. As we approached, we could see a storm coming in from the Atlantic, and indeed we had to sit in the van a few minutes as a sleet shower came bustling through, dropping the temperature considerably! It was bitterly cold then as we headed across the fields towards the clifftop – flocks of **Greenland White-fronted** and **Barnacle Geese** were all around in the fields and soon we could hear our target birds calling – **Red-billed Choughs**! Two birds flew in and landed ahead of us, before drifting off towards the beach – more views would follow later. On a small lochan, a juvenile **Glaucous Gull** was resting, but we then spotted a second bird about half a mile north feeding in the dunes, presumably the original bird that had been present here several days. The cold wind here made it difficult to stand still for long, so we beat a hasty retreat and drove down to the beach car park. Here a wonderful flock of 25 **Choughs** were feeding, and we had great views as they floated around us calling. A walk along the top of the beach gave us further good views of them, while a mixed flock of Common Ringed Plovers and Ruddy Turnstone were on the shore. Over coffee back at the car park, we had superb views of one of the **Glaucous Gulls**, strutting its stuff across the fields by the beach road, but it quickly disappeared back behind a dune ridge and wouldn't be photographed.



Whooper Swan, Loch Ardnave 17th February

Heading back to Gruinart, we stopped at the RSPB car park to use the facilities and spent a bit of time scoping the flats from this high vantage point. A couple of **Whooper Swans** could be seen, a few Reed Buntings were by the feeding station, and a nice Grey Wagtail was seen, but it was otherwise quiet so we carried on down the road towards Ardnave. The lochan at the end of the road gave superb views of Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Common Pochard, Little Grebe and several **Whooper Swans**, the latter in particular looking stunning in the now brilliant light. A walk up towards the point produced a **Great Northern Diver** on the sea, and then a superb ringtail **Hen Harrier** floated right across the track in front of us. This prompted a stop and scan of the hillside on the far side of Loch Indaal, where we could now see the stunning snow-capped Paps of Jura, and we picked up three **Golden Eagles** together soaring over the low heather-clad hills – a bit distant though! Further along the track, the excitement continued as a white-winged gull drifted across the dunes ahead of us – slighter build, longer wings and an all dark bill signalled a juvenile **Iceland Gull**, which we had good scope views of as it made its way off towards Ardnave Loch. Another small group of **Choughs** were on the clifftop here, were several groups of Barnacle Geese were grazing, all to a dramatic coastal backdrop with the island of Colonsay visible in the background.



Barnacle Geese and Jura, 17th February

Lunch back at the car park saw out another sleet storm, but it soon hurried through and we took another walk along the edge of the loch to the farm, now under blue skies. A super flock of about two hundred European Golden Plovers included one or two birds already in breeding plumage. Another ringtail **Hen Harrier** was making its way along the top of the ridge, and then a stunning male drifted by at close range, flushing the plovers and spending several minutes quartering the ground in full view before landing on a knoll of heather. Walking up through the farm, Skylark, Rock Pipit, Reed Bunting and Redwing were noted before we reached the spectacular shoreline with huge breakers crashing over the offshore skerries and a half mile of immaculate sands complete with scuttling

Sanderlings. A flock of 22 **Choughs** wheeled in, and began swooping down over a series of rabbit burrows along the dune edge and amazingly, we saw the cause of their anxiety – a big dog **Otter** trying to sniff out the rabbits! It almost nabbed one, but it nipped away, and the Otter slid back down the sandy cliff and disappeared, not to be seen again. Turning our attention to the beach [but not before flushing another ringtail **Hen Harrier** off a dead rabbit in the gulley below] we enjoyed watching the Sanderlings, but also found about half a dozen **Purple Sandpipers**, including one quite near on the rocks below with Turnstones. A group of Common Eiders were offshore in the surf – there just seemed to be no end to the great sightings today! The **Hen Harrier** swung by us again as we walked back, and **Choughs** were flying all around us at the car park while we enjoyed a welcome cuppa in the afternoon sunshine. It was now almost 4pm though, and we only had time for one more quick excursion along the eastern side of Loch Gruinart to end the day. We were thinking perhaps more raptors, and indeed we saw another two **Hen Harriers** including a wonderful male right alongside the van, but these were not the highlight! This was provided by a magnificent sight, of over 250 **Twite** feeding in the glow of evening sun, in a rough field by the roadside. When they flew up to the overhead cables, it really was an amazing spectacle, and sound! They ended up in a tree in the front garden of a croft nearby, where we were able to park alongside them and marvel at the incredible volume of buzzing and twittering! A great way to end the day!



Golden Plover and Chough, Ardnave 17th February

THURSDAY 18TH FEBRUARY – *Heavy showers and sunny spells, 4C*

A really cold day today in biting winds, but it didn't stop us enjoying some superb birds and dramatic hebridean scenery. We left early this morning, as we wanted to arrive at Bridgend merse before it was fully light, in order to view the roosting **Barnacle Geese** having their morning wash and brush up before heading out for the days feeding. This was a spectacular sight, with many thousands of geese present – we really had our work cut out searching for that elusive Cackling Goose! Alas, despite our best efforts, we couldn't find one – perhaps the bird seen recently has either been shot by Scottish Natural Heritage, or moved on. Many Bar-tailed Godwits were also on the estuary, and the usual party of Pale-bellied Brent Geese were in the surf a bit further along Loch Indaal towards Uiskentuie. Here we found a sheltered spot to scan the shore in between wintry downpours, and managed to pick

out two distant **Long-tailed Ducks**, lots of Common Eider and singletons of Common Scoter and **Slavonian Grebe**. Further west along the beach, we could see a white-winged gull loafing around, so we sped along for a closer look! The bird turned out to be a superb juvenile **Glaucous Gull**, and we ended up getting point blank views of it roosting on a shingle bar on the loch shore – but crikey it was cold here!



Glaucous Gull juv, Uiskentuie 18th February

At nearby Bruichladdich, we found the **Purple Sandpiper** flock resting on the rocks with Common Ringed Plover, and counted eight birds in total before the breaking surf flushed them to an alternative roosting place. Another downpour confined us briefly to the van, before we had another scan of the sea loch from then end of the pier. **Great Northern Divers** were plentiful, two more Common Scoter were seen, as well as Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Goldeneye and Common Eider. A Rock Pipit displaying to its mate was a hardy soul indeed, given the fact that the next black cloud and accompanying sleet shower was bustling in off the ocean. It soon cleared again though, as we made our way back along the loch and on to Ballygrant, where we would then take the so called 'glen road' over the moors. The weather brightened, and a ringtail **Hen Harrier** was soon found quartering the tussocky grass by the roadside, with another seen further along which may have been a different individual. Over the more distant ridge, not one but two **Golden Eagles** appeared over the ridge, and were on show for several minutes as they hung on the wind in hunting mode. The cold meant that we were not keen to linger out of the van for too long here though, so we carried in down the glen and back to the cottages for lunch.



Purple Sandpipers and Ringed Plover, Bruichladdich 18th February

The afternoon would be spent in the south of the isle, principally on The Oa peninsula, a wild and exposed headland which offers some of the most dramatic coastal scenery Islay has to offer. We sat out yet another sleet storm at the car park at the far end, but with a nice break in the weather then reaching in off the Atlantic, we set off on a circular walk up to the American Monument. A party of about thirty **Twite** were in the fields here, and Common Buzzard and Common Raven were frequent throughout the walk. At the top, as well as the spectacular views to Northern Ireland and the Rhinns of Islay, we heard the familiar call of the **Chough** and watched two birds tumble past us on the wind. Another six were seen a little further round the cliffs, where many hundreds of Northern Fulmar could also be observed on the rocks below. Distantly, looking back along the road from Port Ellen, two more **Golden Eagles** could be seen, hunting low over the fields at Coillabus for a good while – they would have been just above the road we had earlier driven down! We just completed our walk, as the heavens opened again – we had been lucky to dodge that one!

Our final drive of the day took us along the main distillery route, along the sheltered south-east corner of the island towards Claggan Bay. This beautiful route passes several secluded bays, where Common Seals and Red-breasted Mergansers abounded and several **Great Northern Divers** were also seen. We didn't find the hoped for Otter, but we did see a flock of 21 Yellowhammer, along with a couple of Reed Bunting, in a small game crop. At the end of the tarmac road, we scanned the bay and saw more **Great Northern Divers**, **Black Guillemots** and our first **Peregrine** of the week. The highlight though was a displaying **Golden Eagle** which came right over the valley to our side and perched on a knoll. We managed to get closer to it by driving back along the road about half a mile,

and eventually it took flight to be joined by its mate, and we watched them disappear over the ridge – our 11th goldies of the trip, and a great way to end the day.



Golden Eagle, Claggan Bay 18th February

FRIDAY 19TH FEBRUARY – *Wet and windy*

We were a little concerned this morning that the return ferry from Port Ellen might not run, looking at the weather forecast, but in actual fact the sea had not really had chance to pick up a swell and the ferry departed on time at 0945, arriving bang on schedule back at Kennacraig. Due to the rain, we spent most of the journey inside, but we did see several **Great Northern Divers** and a single **Black-throated Diver**, more Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Eider on the way back. Otherwise it was a driving day, making the long journey back to Carlisle and then on to Norfolk.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Great Northern Diver
3. Black-throated Diver
4. Little Grebe
5. Slavonian Grebe
6. European Shag

7. Great Cormorant
8. Grey Heron
9. Mute Swan
10. Whooper Swan
11. Greylag Goose
12. Barnacle Goose
13. Pale-bellied Brent Goose
14. Greenland White-fronted Goose
15. Common Shelduck
16. Mallard
17. Common Teal
18. Eurasian Wigeon
19. Northern Shoveler
20. Northern Pintail
21. Common Goldeneye
22. Tufted Duck
23. Common Pochard
24. Red-breasted Merganser
25. Common Eider
26. Common Scoter
27. Long-tailed Duck
28. Common Pheasant
29. Peregrine
30. Hen Harrier
31. Common Buzzard
32. Golden Eagle
33. White-tailed Eagle
34. European Oystercatcher
35. Northern Lapwing
36. Purple Sandpiper
37. Dunlin
38. Ruddy Turnstone
39. Common Redshank
40. Eurasian Curlew
41. Ringed Plover
42. European Golden Plover
43. Grey Plover
44. Common Snipe
45. Bar-tailed Godwit
46. Red Knot
47. Sanderling
48. Black-headed Gull
49. Common Gull
50. Herring Gull
51. Great Black-backed Gull
52. Glaucous Gull
53. Iceland Gull
54. Black-legged Kittiwake
55. Common Guillemot
56. Black Guillemot
57. Razorbill
58. Woodpigeon
59. Collared Dove
60. Rock Dove
61. Dipper

62. European Robin
63. Common Stonechat
64. Dunnock
65. Wren
66. Pied Wagtail
67. Grey Wagtail
68. Skylark
69. Meadow Pipit
70. Rock Pipit
71. Common Blackbird
72. Redwing
73. Fieldfare
74. Mistle Thrush
75. Song Thrush
76. Blue Tit
77. Great Tit
78. Coal Tit
79. Common Treecreeper
80. Rook
81. Carrion Crow
82. Hooded Crow
83. Western Jackdaw
84. Magpie
85. Common Raven
86. Red-billed Chough
87. Common Starling
88. House Sparrow
89. Chaffinch
90. Greenfinch
91. Goldfinch
92. Twite
93. Common Linnet
94. Reed Bunting
95. Yellowhammer

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