

Birding Abroad - North Uist

12 to 18 June 2025

The island of North Uist lies in the centre of the Outer Hebrides. It is characterised by a 'drowned' landscape, created by a mix of fresh water lochans and tidal saltwater inlets. Higher ground is covered by a patchwork of moorland peatbogs, heather clad hills and steep sea cliffs, whilst the western margins are defined by long swathes of pristine white sandy beaches and extensive areas of nutrient rich 'machair' - a Gaelic word referring to the fertile grassland plain just inshore of the coastal dunes complex. The whole area is a paradise for birds and wildlife. Joining us in the remote north-western realms of the British Isles were Penny Chambers, Deborah Cook, Jean Cook, Dave and Sue Cropper, Pat Degnan, Peter and Mary Henderson, Dorothy Jackson, Bob and Pat Martin and Jenny Symes. Lance and Nick were the Birding Abroad leaders.



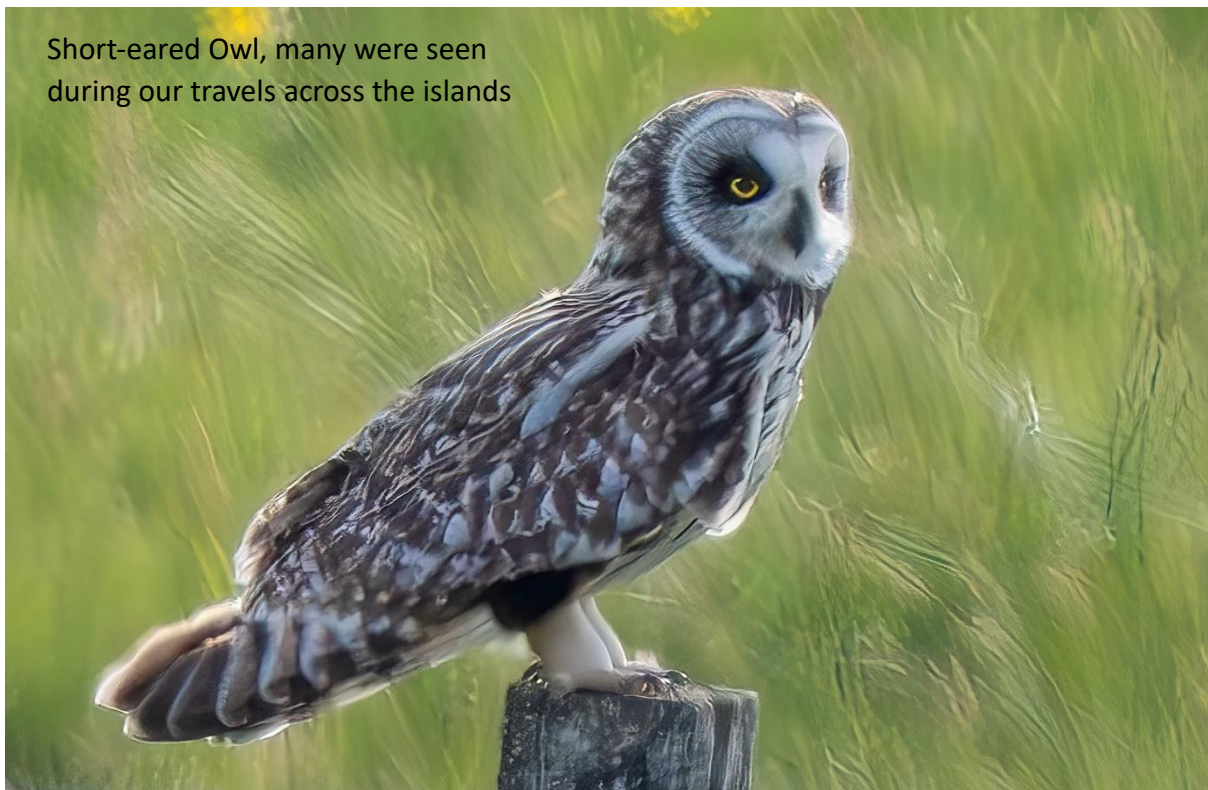
Thursday 12 June: Group members assembled in Inverness the previous evening, travelling north from England by various methods of transport including car, train and even by air. Shortly after breakfast, pick-ups ensued and we set off in tandem heading westwards through the highland glens on a drive of just over one hour and a half to the Kyle of Lochalsh. The weather was fine and mild, the scenery quite stunning. Scotland's countryside of verdant hills, forests and valleys looked truly wonderful. Soaring Red Kites and Common Buzzards were logged, and we could hear the songs of various passerines, including Blackcaps and Common Chaffinches, though most noteworthy was the relative abundance of Willow Warblers compared to back home in England where they are scarce these days. We crossed over the road bridge to the Isle of Skye, actually two bridges linking the mainland to Skye, with the islet of Eilan Ban being used as the stepping stone in the middle of Loch Alsh.

Just over one hour later we arrived into the port of Uig. Here we had a leg stretch and some lunch before boarding the Caledonian MacBrayne car ferry on the mid-afternoon sailing to Lochmaddy on North Uist. The usual gulls, mainly European Herring and a few Great Black-backed were loafing around the harbour as well as two quite stunning Black Guillemots. With our vehicles safely stowed, we made our way to the ship's viewing deck to check what birds were present. As we sailed away into the sea area known as the Little Minch, we passed close to several more Black Guillemots, their black summer plumage with bold white shoulder patches showing nicely. The sea was calm, with hardly a sign of any swell, so it was easy to see the many rafts of sea birds. Watching from the port side of the boat, we very conservatively estimated auk numbers at 200 Common Guillemot, 30 Razorbill, 45 Atlantic Puffin and six Black Guillemot during the crossing. Mid-way across, 25 Black-legged Kittiwakes were feeding, mainly adult birds but with some second-calendar year individuals also present. A small number of Arctic Terns sped by. A couple of Arctic Skuas, dark and pale phase, harried the other birds and it was good to see a majestic and powerful Great Skua in the mix, a species which has declined around these northern waters due to avian influenza and threats like climate change and prey depletion. Other birds seen were just a single Northern Fulmar and 50 Northern Gannets, some of the latter plunging from on high, but mainly sitting in small rafts on the sea. Just a couple of Manx Shearwaters flapped lazily by at mid-range, perhaps the lack of wind creating less suitable conditions for them this afternoon. Brief but best of all was a Minke Whale which surfaced in a few rolls at mid-distance, and six Common Dolphins which were breaching closer to North Uist. As we approached Lochmaddy at around 4.30 pm, Dorothy spotted a distant adult White-tailed Sea-eagle soaring over the land, and a group of 11 Red-throated Divers took off the sea and did a welcome fly-past.



We returned to our vehicles when summoned by the ship's captain and disembarked, taking the main road south across the island to the Temple View Hotel at Carinish, a tiny hamlet in the southern part of the island, close to the road causeway to Benbecula. Here we were warmly greeted by our hosts, Katie and Alex and after settling in and a nice coffee, we set off for a birding session, eager to make the most of the weather which had turned much greyer during the late afternoon. Our destination was Baleshare, a nearby flat tidal island, connected to the 'mainland' of North Uist by a short causeway. Here crofting, characterised by grazing cattle and sheep, helps to sustain a few residents as the practice does on all the Uists. A Common Buzzard pair had their nest with two young situated above the front door of a deserted farmhouse, and a Common Raven and three Hooded Crows flew over as if to investigate this sudden arrival of people. Eurasian Oystercatchers seemed to be everywhere, family parties and rival pairs constantly on the go, a sight which was to become familiar every day. Sounds carry far in this wild open terrain, and we could hear the calls of various waders, including 'drumming' and 'chipping' Common Snipe, with Common Redshanks making alarm calls to warn their recently fledged young of potential danger. Just being near to so many breeding waders was super and a little further on a Dunlin began its aerial display, singing its modulated 'pea-whistle' trills as it circled and sometimes hovered. Two Whimbrel flew over calling, one straight over our heads, either a local breeding pair or perhaps late migrants staging before an onwards journey to Iceland. A Short-eared Owl ghosted in and flew around before settling on a fence post. This was the first of many sightings of this fabulous species during the tour, a daily favourite amongst the group. On the ground we spotted a pair of Northern Wheatears and several Meadow Pipits. A Corncrake began singing as we set off to return to our hotel though being late, we decided to leave it for another time.

Short-eared Owl, many were seen during our travels across the islands



Back at the hotel we enjoyed a fine evening meal, all home cooked, accompanied by a refreshing drink or two. It had been a long day but we were here at our remote destination, worth every mile of the journey. The so-called nautical twilight lingered until well after 11 pm, a strange but beautiful blue-grey hue outside our bedroom windows.



Friday 13 June: The weather was a little showery this morning, with the forecast for it to brighten up, so after breakfast at 7.30 am we set off an hour later, returning initially to nearby Baleshare. Here we relocated the singing Corncrake, but it remained aloof out in the damp flowery pastures. A female, Red-breasted Merganser was on small lochan where two Sand Martins were feeding, and waders were again active all around us. We moved on northwards and drove more slowly from Bayhead around the Paible loop, a circuit or more accurately a square of small roads which surround attractive freshwater lochans and the larger Loch Sanndaraigh. Here we spotted our first three Whooper Swans of the tour, all adults. Tufted Ducks were the most numerous *Aythya*, with Grey Lag Geese also common, but no rare wildfowl on this visit. It was nice to see so many Common Gulls, with several small colonies in the vicinity, the adults being quite cute looking birds as gulls go. A lone Common Greenshank was feeding at the edge of a small pool whilst Northern Lapwings appeared to be everywhere. Our excitement levels rose when a female Hen Harrier drifted by, the species still doing well on Uist, their protection being recognised and adhered to by the local communities. A short walk down a lane surrounded by lovely flower-strewn meadows produced another Corncrake, and with patience, this bird decided to walk across the track in front of us. It continued to sing,

still partially visible in the grass, before once more disappearing into the lush vegetation quietly swaying in the breeze.

We moved on to Balranald, where we had a short walk along the coastal path bordering the picturesque sandy bay at Hougharry, before having our picnic lunch. A few waders were feeding on seaweed at the tide line, including seven Common Ringed Plover and three Ruddy Turnstone. Amongst the rocks on the shore were a female Common Eider with several young and a pair of Common Shelduck with three young. We progressed towards the Aird an Runair point, a famous sea-watching site, where sometimes, earlier in the spring, many skuas can be seen heading around north-west Britain to their Arctic Circle breeding grounds. Scanning offshore produced 14 Manx Shearwaters, a winter-plumaged Great Northern Diver, a Northern Fulmar, and a few auks including 10 Razorbills, two Common Guillemots and a Black Guillemot. Offshore to the south we could see the uninhabited Monarch Islands. These rugged low-lying isles are home to sea bird and Atlantic Grey Seal colonies, the extensive machair there being grazed in summer by sheep taken over by Uist crofters. A single Atlantic Grey Seal did pop up just offshore for us to see. A pair of Rock Pipits and a pair of Northern Wheatear were already feeding young, and a Dunlin was displaying. Our tally of Corncrakes for the morning was at least seven territorial birds in this part of the island.

The weather had cleared and so we decided to visit the raptor viewpoint on the Committee Road in the middle of the island. Unfortunately, the weather quickly turned 'mizzly' and birds were rather sensibly staying down, ending our hopes of a few birds of prey. It had been a productive day, so we returned to our hotel at 5.30 pm with some of the group venturing out again to Baleshare for another brief birding session. The tide was up mid-way on the causeway and here were a group of 40 Bar-tailed Godwits, all except one appearing to be grey, likely first-summer birds. Six Sanderling were also present and a pair of Little Grebe on a small lochan were also new for the trip.

A fine evening meal ensued, before we retired ready for next day.

Saturday 14 June: Thankfully the weather had improved, so this morning we returned after breakfast to the Committee Road. Here we reasoned that after variable weather the previous day, raptors might be up and about. Sure enough the first birds we noted were two Golden Eagles, both adults or near adults. One spotted by Pat was perched on rocks only 300 metres away, whilst the other was perched on the skyline, with a pair of Eurasian Curlew circling and trying their best to distract the bird away. Hen Harriers put in a good showing, with two males for us to admire. A Common Cuckoo was singing from a patch of woodland and a parcel of 14 Red Deer grazed on the hillsides. Eurasian Golden Plover breed only thinly on North Uist so it was nice to find what was to become a regular bird, sitting on top of a moorland hill, its mournful song carrying across the rough uplands.

Our main destination today was Berneray island, situated by the Sound of Harris on the northern tip of North Uist. Our route took us towards Newton where an adult White-tailed Sea-eagle flew over the road giving excellent views. We paused at the scenic bay at Port nan Long, where a few Common Eider were out on the sea before crossing the causeway to the pretty isle of Berneray. A comfort break gave us the time to take a short walk near the small

harbour and here a splendid summer-plumaged Great Northern Diver was just offshore. The bird looked immaculate (see photo below), and we spent some time just admiring the patterns as it dived just off the quay, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Just a few of these birds spend the summer here, though there are many more to be found in the winter before the majority return to Iceland for the summer.



We drove over to the parking area near West Beach and the weather was perfect, feeling warm at 22 C, with no wind and gloriously sunny. The machair terrain was shimmering with daisies and buttercups, and we enjoyed our picnic lunch on the grass and in our comfortable folding chairs. Once fully sated, we had a pleasant walk out to West Beach, the white sands effusing a wild Caribbean quality. The sea beyond was an azure blue, and we spotted a couple of more distant non-breeding plumaged Great Northern Divers. Two Great Skua flew over the distant moorland. Nearby at Borve we found the machair to be home to a small colony of Arctic Terns, about ten sitting birds, though at least 90 were loafing on the mud flats near-by, constantly flying over our heads on their way back and forth. Such a fabulous bird. Here too were eight Little Terns, picked out by their distinctively different calls as they sallied around the bay. A solitary Brent Goose appeared to have been left behind by others that had long departed for the Arctic. We continued to the north-east of the island, visiting the Lamraig thatched cottages and walking the bay near the Youth Hostel. The islets offshore were ideal for Common Seals and four were duly located lazily lounging on rocks.

It was time to head back towards our hotel, distances on North Uist meaning that nowhere is more than 45 minutes or so drive away. En-route back over the Committee Road, two more

White-tailed Sea-eagles were seen, bringing the day total to five. Again a few of the group had another look at Baleshare before evening meal and afterwards several of the group walked out to the Trinity Temple at Carinish, a ruined 13 century Augustinian nunnery. It is here or nearby, that the 1601 battle of Carinish was fought, a Scottish clan feud between the Macleod and MacDonald families. The coastal views from here were quite stunning especially as the sun set, undeniably stark but with an absorbing and haunting quality.



Sunday 15 June: This morning proved cloudy but dry. After breakfast we set off south over the causeway to Benbecula. Our drive took us past moorland and pastures where Short-eared Owls seemed to be hunting around every corner, so a focused 'day-count' began. A couple of Hen Harriers were also noted as we drove along.

Eventually we drew alongside a grassy bordered freshwater loch where we waited patiently in the hope of seeing a Red-necked Phalarope. We were rewarded when a female, the brightest of the sexes flew in and began feeding on the water's surface only a short distance away. Spellbound, we watched its unique feeding behaviour as it performed rapid circular motions to draw food to the waters surface. Moments later the male flew in (pictured overleaf), the pair staying a while before flying further out into the main lake and finally away to unknown waters over the horizon. Though a common in the Arctic, Red-necked Phalaropes are rare as a breeding species in the UK, with fewer than 25 pairs. It is amazing to think these birds come here for the summer all the way from wintering grounds off the Pacific coast of South America as demonstrated by recent research using satellite tagging.



The terrain here also supports good numbers of breeding waders, and we were able to watch displaying pairs of Dunlin, Common Snipe and Eurasian Curlew, with many more Common Redshank, Northern Lapwing and Eurasian Oystercatcher. A Common Gull colony was very active, the adults having many downy chicks, with a pair of much larger and more fierce Great Black-backed Gulls looking after their own hungry chick. Several pairs of Arctic Tern were breeding, and we noticed a Little Gull, a first-summer bird, daintily feeding over the water - quite a surprise. Two male Eurasian Wigeon and two female Common Teal were additions to our bird list.

Arctic Skua seem to appear quite randomly at various parts of the Uists, and here two birds dashed through the skies and towards the sea. We then had a good walk in quite windy conditions along a track towards a freshwater loch in the centre of the island, where there were a few Red-breasted Mergansers, a fly over Black-throated Diver, and a pair of Hen Harriers, which seemed to be nesting nearby. We had already seen a few Northern Wrens each day, but it was nice to see them close up and also listen to their songs which Dave rightly pointed out sounded a little different to those back home. The phrasing was more stuttering, drawing out the loud song. With a slightly darker appearance than the mainland form, this sub-species, *hebridensis*, is quite distinctive. Common Stonechats had youngsters amongst the heather.

Lunch was taken al fresco again just off the causeway back to North Uist, mostly in the hope of spotting a Eurasian Otter in the tidal creeks. We were out of luck on this occasion.

During the afternoon we returned to North Uist and drove the Lochportain road, a wide sea loch amidst a landscape of smaller freshwater lochans. Another two Arctic Skuas dashed over before a Eurasian Otter was spotted, much to the delight of the mammal lovers amongst the

group. Feeding playfully amongst tidal kelp beds, the animal remained at a distance, but it was a relief to finally see one! A pair of Common Sandpipers were added to the wader list. The day total for Short-eared Owl ended up at 14, pretty good we thought, and Hen Harriers reached seven, including three males.

Monday 16 June: The day began grey with light intermittent drizzle which continued most of the morning. We had booked a boat trip on the Lady Anne out of Kallin harbour on Grimsay for late morning, so filled our time beforehand with a couple of hours along the Locheport road which reaches into the watery wilderness of the eastern part of the island. Here we enjoyed another encounter with a Eurasian Otter playing in kelp beds. It gave us the run around, one minute being submerged, the next its head and tail showing, before disappearing again for a few minutes. We manoeuvred around the loch getting slightly better views before the otter eventually slipped away. A Red-throated Diver was also seen before it was time to drive to Grimsay and down to Kallin harbour.

Whilst waiting for the boat to arrive a Black-throated Diver flew over the harbour and remarkably two Eurasian Otters were playing together just offshore offering brilliant views. Most the group then boarded the Lady Anne with the skipper Nye and his knowledgeable wildlife guide Rosie giving us a safety briefing and information on the route we would take. Once out into the Bagh Rubha strait which separates Grimsay from the island of Ronay, we came across a group of seven summer-plumaged Black-throated Divers, all feeding together. We carefully drew the boat alongside to get what can only be described as astonishingly close views. The beauty of these birds when seen close is truly marvellous.



Yet more of these birds showed later as we hugged the Ronay shore, the day count rising to an impressive 13. Several European Shags were sitting on islets where at least 12 Common Seals were resting, and here Common Terns easily outnumbered the Arctics. Close encounters with Black Guillemot and a resting Arctic Skua were also enjoyed.

The skipper took us towards an area frequented by a pair of White-tailed Sea-eagles, with the male spotted sitting atop its huge nest.



Shortly he flew down to take a fresh fish provided by the skipper giving the group fantastic views.



The heather clad hills of Ronay were grazing grounds for several Red Deer, shown below. All too soon it was time to return to port, but what a boat trip we had enjoyed!



The weather was beginning to look bleak, so we returned to our hotel and had lunch there. Not wanting to be beaten entirely by the rain, we had an afternoon drive back to the Red-necked Phalarope site and again enjoyed some nice views, which ended with three birds together. It didn't seem as though the poor weather was going to relent, so we had an early finish back to the hotel. It was interesting to talk to one of the staff members about life on the island, how the Gaelic language is taught in schools and the determination of some of the younger generation to keep the old traditions going. That evening a coffee and walnut birthday cake made specially by one of the islanders was brought out for Jenny and we all enjoyed a piece!

Tuesday 17 June: This morning the weather started rather drizzly, but gradually improved as we explored the north-western reaches of North Uist. Driving around Paible again, two calling Corncrake were logged before we headed to the St Kilda viewpoint close to Clettrevall Hill. With visibility poor, we had no realistic chance of seeing the distant archipelago, but we enjoyed panoramic views over the peat bogs below where various waders were displaying, and a White-tailed Sea-eagle flew in. Above us the round dome of the air defence station dominated the skyline. This radar site tracks missiles fired from the test range on South Uist, as well as listening for hostile craft which could try to breach NATO defences from routes over

the Arctic. Nearby we enjoyed another encounter with a Corncrake. The bird was calling close to our vehicles, before taking flight and passing straight past us – quite a sight to see a flying Corncrake so close!

Further east along the coast we found a European Turtle-dove sitting on a fence post close to some Eurasian Collared-doves – another nice surprise as we don't see many these days down in England. We continued on to Grenitote where we had lunch bordering the picturesque bay. The saltmarsh produced a group of 10 Twite, a species which had so far eluded us. The birds fed close by on seed heads and their distinctive buzzing calls could be clearly heard. Common Linnets had featured each day as we toured around so it was pleasing to finally catch up with the so called 'Mountain Linnet'.

Continuing towards Clachan Sands, we stopped to watch a Golden Eagle soaring over the hills. Once at the beach we enjoyed views across the sweeping white bay and another Twite showed nicely. A pair of Little Terns were fishing offshore, the sea here shallow and a sparkling blue. The Committee Road beckoned one last time as the weather brightened up for our journey back to our hotel. We were not to be disappointed with another fine Golden Eagle repeatedly soaring along the ridge nearby and sometimes almost overhead. Butterflies coming out in the afternoon sun were Green-veined White and Painted Lady.

Once back at the hotel we enjoyed another fine evening meal and thanked our hosts Katie and Alex for their hospitality throughout our stay.



Wednesday 18 June: It was time to check-out after breakfast and say goodbyes to our hosts before we drove over to Lochmaddy ready for the ferry back to Skye. In Lochmaddy several of the group visited the Taigh Chearsabhagh museum and café and had a brief amble around the village. Here at least six Redpoll were engaged in aerial song flight, four Eurasian Siskin were feeding, and several Sedge Warbles were carrying food to their youngsters in the nest.

The ferry pulled out of Lochmaddy at 12.15 pm just as a couple of Red-throated Divers flew over the harbour. Further out to sea we again encountered lots of auks, including a minimum of 90 Atlantic Puffins mainly in ones and twos, occasionally small parties of five or more. There was more breeze than on the outward crossing and this may have encouraged more Manx Shearwaters to fly from their floating rafts and some 125 were counted on the journey. The scenery around was stunning and we felt sad to be leaving these wonderful islands. Once back onto Skye, we set off back to Inverness arriving there about three hours later to our respective hotels, saying a fond farewell to each other as the tour concluded.

The next day was a travel day by various means back to England and home.

Thanks go to all the group for helping to make it a special, fun and enjoyable time on North Uist, a splendid part of the British Isles. Thanks go to Pat for preparing the packed lunches each day and to Bob and Peter for allowing use of their photographs in this report.

