Scotland – The Isle of Coll in Summer

Naturetrek Tour Report 1st – 8th May 2023



Mossy Saxifrage



Loch à Mhill Aird



Moss Carder Bee



Spring Squill

Tour report and images by Greg Smith

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Summary

A week of wonders at the start of May on the Hebridean island of Coll, with an expert local guide. We clocked up 97 species of bird including local specialities like Corncrake, Arctic Skua, Twite and White-tailed Eagle. We were shown over a hundred varieties of plant on the machair and moorland as well as rare insects and fungi. The boat trip to Lunga provided a unique experience in the company of 100s of Puffins and 1000s of Guillemots and Kittiwakes. On two occasions we were lucky enough to encounter Basking Sharks and Minke Whales. On top of all this, we saw some striking Hebridean archaeology and learned much about this gem of an island. We were all left keen to return!

Day 1 Monday 1st May

Gathering in Oban

It was sunny and calm as we (seven intrepid Naturetrekkers and Greg our guide) met at a hotel in Oban – the gateway to the Hebrides. Before dinner, we strolled along the esplanade up to Dunollie and back through the woods overlooking Oban Bay. We watched our first 'Scottish mammal' fishing in the sea – unfortunately, it was only a chocolate Labrador searching for a stone in the shallows. Of more interest were the Black Guillemots (known locally at Tysties) swimming a little further offshore. On the roadside was a vast glacial erratic supposedly decorated with cup marks which only the keenest 'eye of faith' could surely discern. We could, though, all see the great sea stack (called Fingal's Dog Stone) perched high above the high water mark – our first evidence of Scotland's post-glacial rise out of the surrounding seas.

"I've got a Blackcap!" called Judy and we all turned to catch sight of the scratchy songster. "Make the most of the Great Tits and Blue Tits" urged our guide, noting how unlikely we were to encounter them on our island home in the coming week. Equally uncommon on a treeless isle, are the woodland plants we were enjoying: among them Enchanter's Nightshade, Three-veined Sandwort and Wild Garlic. Above our heads, the cliffs of 400 million year old sandstone conglomerate (made up of large chunks of older volcanic rock) loomed over us – mere youngsters compared with the three billion year old rocks that Coll had in store.

The ninth of our group, Gwen, was delayed on the train, so we were one light as we headed into town for supper and sunset over the bay from our restaurant windows. The outline of a Grey Heron silhouetted on the rocks was our last bird of the day.

Day 2 Tuesday 2nd May

Glasdrum Wood and the ferry ride to Coll

After a leisurely breakfast, we headed out of town via the M&S food hall to gather some lunch items. Then it was a 20-minute drive to Glasdrum Wood NNR, one of the jewels in Scotland's wild crown. Another Blackcap greeted us as we arrived and in the distance across the bay a Great Spotted Woodpecker drummed incessantly.

The woodland floor was covered in wild flowers: Primroses, Dog Violets, Wood Anemones and Bluebells. We stood on the woodland ride which, in a month's time, would be heaving with rare butterflies but this early in the season there was little to see. Greg did point out the first flowering grass of the spring: Sweet Vernal Grass, with its delicate flower heads and sweet vanilla taste.

As we ascended the woodland path, the change in geology to more acid conditions was revealed by the appearance of Heather, Bilberry and Tormentil. Here, we were wowed by three fat blundering Dor Beetles, scarabs with electric blue undersides. The cascading song of Willow Warblers kept us company while, in the distance, a Cuckoo called and gradually approached our location. A Garden Warbler sang melodiously triggering some discussion about how best to distinguish it from Blackcap.

We next came to a boggy plateau with a zone of ancient, multi-stemmed Alders, coppiced in the past for their charcoal and potash. The plateau was edged by Hazels, whose long gland-tipped hairs were revealed by peering at them the wrong way down a binocular lens.

A boggy hollow had our guide collapsing in delight as he pointed out the orange fruiting bodies of the Bog Beacon, looking like tiny Belisha beacons. This fungus lives off the dead and dying vegetation at the bottom of bog pools and is not often encountered.

Glasdrum is one of Scotland's finest Atlantic Oak woodlands (which are sometimes referred to as the Atlantic rain forest). To us they will always be 'the hanging gardens of Glasdrum', as every ancient oak was festooned with epiphytic mosses, lichens and ferns (including Common Polypody, Hard Fern and the Tree Lungwort *Lobaria pulmonaria*). There were even young trees of Holly and Rowan growing in the branches. Gwen said it reminded her of Bromeliads in a tropical rain forest.

Back by the car park one of the birds we'd hoped to hear was there to greet us - a Wood Warbler with a blast of coin-spinning song. Unfortunately, a feisty nest-building Willow Warbler soon chased it away.

Lunch on a picnic bench was accompanied by honking Canada Geese and yelping Common Gulls while in the distance a couple of ducks were revealed (by the wonders of modern telephoto technology) to be drake Goosanders. We drove around the old road (freshly tarmacked) to get a closer view, only for the ducks to have crossed back across the bay – but we did get better views of the Common Sandpipers and a drake Red-breasted Merganser so all was not lost!

The short drive back to Oban was relatively uneventful though a low-flying Buzzard by the water got our hearts racing (we were thinking "Osprey!")

Next, onto the ferry and a three-hour cruise to Coll. The Black Guillemots were in evidence again as we set off, this time fishing beside the ferry showing off their red feet in the clear water. Once out of Oban Bay, we started to see the Tysties' larger cousins (the Common Guillemots) and several Gannets in the Firth of Lorn.

Up into the Sound of Mull and Kittiwakes and Razorbills appeared fleetingly - though we weren't alarmed at the brief glimpses: we knew that the week ahead held the promise of unrivalled views! The gull action developed here with three Lesser Black-backs to contrast with the ubiquitous Herring Gulls. A large flock of immature Common

Gulls appeared innocent enough until our guide spotted an adult Little Gull among them - sadly too late and too distant to get anyone else onto it. A cracking spring bird in Scottish waters!

Two huge cruise ships disfigured the bay at Tobermory but soon decent numbers of Manx Shearwaters appeared as we headed out beyond Ardnamurchan. In the open sea towards Coll, a pair of Eiders flew close beside the boat and then a cry of "Basking Shark" went up. The entire upper deck ran to the port side of the boat to look (I swear the boat tipped alarmingly!) and we watched the shark cruising at the surface showing both dorsal fin and tail fin, the distance between them emphasising the size of the beast (the largest fish in the northern hemisphere).

A couple of Puffins flew alongside the boat (their necks seemingly dipped down under the weight of those huge bills) and then Sue spotted a large, sleek shape in the ship's wake - a Minke Whale. After several minutes, it resurfaced but gave us only very distant views.

We were sorry that the voyage had come to an end as Arinagour (our home for the week) came into view. We checked in at Tigh na Mara where our welcoming hostess Paula showed us our rooms and the facilities, not least among which was the picture window in the dining room framing a perfect view down the bay. We had an hour to unpack and settle in before Greg was back to lead us on the short walk up to the Coll Hotel for dinner.

A couple of House Martins were flying up and down the main street in the company of some Swallows, the former an irregular presence on the island according to our guide. But even more irregular is a summer plumage Long-tailed Skua, complete with tail streamers, which Greg then pointed out flying low over the cottages. It took him a good while to recover from the shock and delight at this observation and he couldn't help but tell everyone we met that evening all about it.

After a delightful meal at the hotel, we enjoyed the pleasant stroll back to the guest house where an early night beckoned following our busy day.

Day 3 Wednesday 3rd May

Boat trip to Lunga and the Treshnish Islands

A slow breakfast was followed by a stroll through the village with Lesser Redpolls buzzing overhead. We convened at the Middle Pier to meet Struan our boatman for the day trip to Lunga – he had been delayed on his run up from Oban this morning because he had had to drop off some painters at a lighthouse. Such is life in the Hebrides!

The group was joined by two locals, Sarah and Jane, to help with the landing at Lunga though the first challenge was presented by the extreme low tide here on Coll which meant we had to descend a precipitous and seaweedy ladder to get into the boat. Once this was safely achieved, and we'd had our boat safety talk, we set off, passing a summer plumage Great Northern Diver in the bay. Soon Common Guillemots appeared in the sea around us and slowly built up as we approached the Treshnish Islands, 30 minutes to the south. In contrast to the auks' whirring wings, Manx Shearwaters cruised effortlessly low over the water around the boat.

A shout of "Fins!" from Stephen drew our attention to a couple of Harbour Porpoise which did their usual

disappearing act as soon as we slowed the boat. The next shout of "Fins!" turned out to be shorthand for "Puffins!" which were now all around the boat. One each of the three auk species together in a group would have made a great photo but the Razorbill dived before we could line them up.

As we pulled in beneath the cliffs on Lunga the sea was thronging with seabirds in their thousands: Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Shags. Our first Bonxie (Great Skua) of the trip flew above the boat causing panic among the seabirds.

We dropped anchor in the bay and Struan confidently rowed us to the island in a small dingy from which we disembarked with varying degrees of indignity onto the rocky volcanic shore. Here Thrift and Scurvy Grass greeted us and, as we clambered further inland, these were joined by Bluebells, Primroses, Lesser Celandines and Sea Campion. A pair of Rock Pipits watched our progress up to the first platform where the highlight of the trip was awaiting us.

Over a hundred Puffins were loafing around on the clifftop before us - so close that some photographers with long lenses had to step back in order to capture the whole bird. This is the perfect time of year to spend time in the company of these Puffins because, in a month, they will be too busy feeding their young to waste time standing around on the clifftop. Here they seem perfectly relaxed in human company, occasionally gathering grass for their nests (held like green sand eels in their bills), or billing in greeting with their mates.

After an hour of these delights, we headed further along the cliff, passing Shags and Razorbills sitting on their nests within touching distance but seemingly equally untroubled by our presence. One of the Shags was sporting a numbered colour ring which (we later discovered) it had been given in 2015 when ringed as an adult as part of a study into adult shag survival rates.

A singing Twite drew our attention as we approached our destination, the Harp Rock. Here, a raucous cacophony of 10,000 seabirds greeted us, as did their fishy stench! In striking contrast to the bustle and hubbub of the bird colony, a man stood on the clifftop immediately opposite practising his Tai Chi moves.

Sue sat down to take it all in and was joined on her rock by an amorous pair of Razorbills who embarked on an extended bout of copulation. "Get a room!" someone jovially exhorted them.

The return walk was no less entertaining as a cracking male Wheatear sang scratchily while undertaking an exuberant display flight. Also performing were some Grey Seals whose ghostly voices wafted to us across the water.

Back at our rocky harbour, Struan was waiting to row us back to the boat. Once safely on board, we were treated to a grand tour of the Treshnish Isles, taking in Fladda and the Cairn na Burghs. Over Fladda, three White-tailed Eagles rose majestically, pursued by a lone and rather brave Raven. The rocking boat gave our photographers a challenge to capture images of the four of them together.

More prosaically, a pair of Canada Geese had taken ownership of a tiny rock around which we could now see our Grey Seals: vast bull-headed creatures crashing around in the water. Among them large groups of Eiders swam serenely, the males bright and showy while the females merged almost invisibly into the seaweed.

We went through the gap between Cairn na Burgh Mòr and Cairn na Burgh Beag, where vast defensive walls and garrison quarters were built during the Napoleonic wars. Here a pair of Purple Sandpipers were spotted hugging the base of a rock, and an extraordinary sea arch, like the eye of a giant stone needle, came briefly into view.

Our return journey to Coll was relatively quiet, with just a short detour to take in another fabulous Great Northern Diver in its summer finery. While back in the bay at Arinagour, two terns flying around, one Arctic, the other Common, provided us with a chance to compare and contrast the two.

Day 4 Thursday 4th May

RSPB Totronald, the machair and Hogh Bay, followed by an evening on the New Pier

The next day dawned cloudy with a cool breeze, which followed us around all day. The journey out to the RSPB reserve at Totronald, to search for the elusive Corncrake, was enlivened by discussion of the previous day's dinner, a haggis-filled Chicken Kiev which was wryly renamed Chicken Coll-ev and Chicken McKiev. Views of Hen Harrier, Cuckoo and Stonechat from the minibus distracted us from the food chat on the short drive.

At Totronald we soon heard a Corncrake, but seeing one in the vast fields of tall vegetation was another matter. So after enjoying views of Lapwing, Redshank and Brown Hare, and hearing the occasional see-sawing of a Snipe, we retired to the RSPB warden's garden - a Corncrake hotspot and sun trap. White-tailed Bumblebees and Moss Carder Bees at the Dandelions provided a distraction while we scanned the tall grass before us. Occasional brief snatches of the unmistakeable 'crex-crex' calls kept our anticipation building and eventually (after we'd been here for nearly two hours), our guide spotted one - a brief head-up, head-down glimpse, but enough to get us all looking at the right clump of grass. The bird's subtle plumage matches its skulking nature, all greys and browns with subdued honeyed tones of pink and grey. Not that we got to see such detail, though we did all manage glimpses of the bird as it slunk about. Such is the nature of Corncrake-watching! Our lunch was interrupted by the local Starlings shouting a warning shortly before a Sparrowhawk ploughed through the garden but was otherwise uneventful.

After lunch we headed out into the sand dunes to enjoy the first blooms of the machair. The highlight was undoubtedly the Mossy Saxifrage: pretty, white, starry flowers held aloft on slender red stems peering through its ubiquitous mossy companion *Rhytidiadelphus triquetrus*. Other floristic delights included Cornsalad and Common Milkwort, and we were shown the striking opposites of 'thrum' and 'pin' flowers among the banks of Primroses. Among the vegetation, Brown Garden Snails and Heath Snails occurred in abundance, a fact which had not gone unnoticed by the local Song Thrushes to judge from the shell fragments which we found around an anvil stone.

The highlighted grass today was Marram - a true ecosystem engineer, uniquely adapted to colonise and stabilise the bare blown sand on dunes such as these. Leslie told of a village on the Moray coast which was engulfed in sand after the Marram on its dunes had been cut for thatching. The cool breeze kept us walking and we were soon at the lovely Hogh Beach where White and Pied Wagtails were enjoying the flies on the rotting seaweed, along with Dunlin, Sanderling and several Ringed Plovers.

A ringing call drew our eyes heavenward, and a large flock of Whimbrel flew over the bay, wheeling round and coming in to land briefly on the vast expanse of wet sand like so many tiny Cranes.

As we walked down the beach we delighted in the warm, smooth textures of the different rocks deposited here by the melting glaciers 10,000 years earlier - gneiss, granite and sandstone - all sand-blasted smooth by the endless tides.

The journey home today gave us lovely views of Brown Hare and Golden Plover in the fields by the airport - the latter resplendent in their black bellies and golden, spangled backs. Over the village, Greg was distracted by a raptor labouring across the rooftops being pursued by the local Hoodies. A brief glimpse but sufficient for him to see that it was a Honey Buzzard - an overshooting migrant a long way from its usual haunts.

After dinner a stroll down to the New Pier confirmed that the cold breeze was still blowing and in the big seas a forlorn and bedraggled Common Guillemot (one of last year's youngsters) was struggling to keep its head above water while its nearby parent looked very much at home. A flock of 25 Dunlin and a couple of Whimbrel laboured past the end of the pier and a pair of Red-throated Divers came down into the bay to fish. Meanwhile, on a distant shore, we picked up a pair of Shelduck hunkering down out of the blow.

Day 5 Friday 5th May

Killunaig, Chapel Beach and Loch à Mhill Aird

The day began with sightings of two local celebrities: a famous Scottish rugby player and an ageing Highland cow with a crumpled horn, the face of the local gin distillery.

A short drive brought us to the graveyard at Killunaig where we looked at some ancient graves and heard the tragic story of the SS Arandora Star, before heading down to the beach. Our regular helpings of Great Northern Diver, Red-breasted Merganser and Whimbrel were once again served up, as was a tombolo, a striking sand spit linking the beach to an offshore island. It steadily grew as the tide fell.

A party of terns came into the bay: three Arctic Terns, with a bouncing flight as if dangled on elastic, and a Little Tern, whirring like a clockwork toy.

The beach here was littered with huge boulders, a dumping ground for glacial travellers comprising a variety of different Scottish rocks. Our guide took the opportunity of a well-marked specimen of banded gneiss to explain this particular rock type's starring role in the geology, geography and landform of the island.

We worked further along the beach observing the different types of kelp washed up on the strand (with unusual names like Furbelows, Dabberlocks and Cuvie) when suddenly we found ourselves walking on a carpet of tiny jellyfish stranded by the receding tide.

On the rocky intertidal we were shown a basalt dyke: a magmatic intrusion two metres wide running down to the sea, eroded into a series of octagonal steps. Next, we spotted a pair of Shelducks in the bay, no doubt prospecting for a suitable rabbit burrow in the dunes in which to nest.

We now headed up into the dunes ourselves to visit an ancient Bronze Age 'cist' burial site, which had been exposed in the sands after a storm in the 1970s.

We lunched back at the van, inspired by the encouraging messages individually hand-written on our paper lunch bags by Paula our host, such as: "Be the reason someone smiles today". Taking his lead from this, Greg munched on a specimen of Biting Stonecrop and caused us all to smile as he grimaced and spat out the bitter, burning bit of botany.

In the afternoon he led us up into the boggy moorland heart of the island along a track which, a spot of forensic botany revealed, was composed of robbed beach material, as evidenced by the number of shoreline plants (principally Thrift and Sea Plantain) growing here half a mile from the sea.

The moorland flowers were also putting on a show with male and female plants of Mountain Everlasting, with their fluffy white and pink pom-poms (respectively), the violet-blue of Heath Milkwort and the hard black spikelets of Black Bog Rush.

A patch of wet bog provided three species of insectivorous plants: the large yellow star-fish rosettes of Common Butterwort (some of which were already in flower), the tiny flesh-coloured rosettes of Pale Butterwort and the lollipop leaves of Round-leaved Sundew.

Next, we found the finger-sized caterpillar of a Drinker moth. Notwithstanding its cloak of spiky hairs, this beast is a favourite with the local Cuckoos.

Our route took us past some interesting antiquities: lazy beds and walled exclosures, an ancient shelter stone and, high on a hill, two Iron Age burial cairns. From the latter vantage point, we enjoyed views across the rolling landscape of moorland, bogs and lochans and beyond to a couple of ships visible in the Minch. A handy smart-phone app revealed their destinations to the curious: one was on route to nearby Barra; the other, a container vessel, was (more unexpectedly) bound for Kings Lynn. Heaven knows what it was doing up here!

Two migrant female Sparrowhawks cruised past, probably wondering how they'd ended up in this wilderness far from the nearest sparrow.

We dropped down a precipitous hillside to a large loch where we saw a carpet of White Water Lily leaves on the surface and the underwater rosettes of Water Lobelia and Pipewort (a national rarity) - none of which would be in flower for several weeks. From here we headed back to the minibus, with the weather in soggy pursuit, stopping only to admire the variety of crustose lichens on the rocks (among them the Map Lichen *Rhizocarpon geographicum* and a thick white one going by the name *Circinaria calcarea*) and the ruined cottages of an abandoned village.

Back at our guest house Gwen (who had been unable to join us out in the field today) told us that, having had a Song Thrush's anvil stone pointed out to her on the previous day, she had actually seen one in action on her morning walk through the village.

Our meal this evening was served at the Island Café – it was a sign of how good the food was that Paula, our chef extraordinaire at the guest house, chose to eat here as well on her evening off.

Day 6 Saturday 6th May

Craft market and shops, village walk, then Loch Ronard and Fiskary Bay

Our guide had arranged some retail therapy for us to start the day: the local craft market was being held at the community centre and we were left pondering how we could fit all the honey, sweatshirts and local gin that we had bought into our cases!

A spot of birding therapy around the village followed and this gave us views of Red-throated and Great Northern Divers, more Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers, and a locally scarce Black-headed Gull. At the local woodland, we had a nice array of songbirds including Lesser Redpoll, Grasshopper Warbler, Goldcrest, Whitethroat and Dunnock. Our guide got unreasonably excited by a Chiffchaff and a Wood Pigeon (neither of which is common on the island).

After lunch in the sun in the garden of our guest house, we headed up to a roadside loch (Loch Ronard). Here we walked around the edge of the loch where we saw a pair of Canada Geese (recent arrivals on the island) and two pairs of Teal. The moorland vegetation included Lousewort, Bilberry and Hare's-tail Cotton-grass, while the exposed muddy shore of the loch was carpeted with Sundew. A few Rowan trees were sprouting among the Eared Willow and here a lovely showing of Wood Sorrel was evident. Our guide tried to get us excited by the subtle intricacies of the Purple Moor-grass and its hairy ligules, but we preferred the vanilla-flavoured delicacy of the Sweet Vernal Grass on Day 1.

A Common Lizard shot across the path in front of one member of the group, as we turned and headed down a track towards the seashore. Along the track the sun had brought out some insects with Green-veined White butterflies, the Bracken-loving Brown Silver-line moths and, best of all, a couple of Green Tiger Beetles in a metallic green and gold livery. An Eared Willow bush on the side of the track was covered in distinctive black-spotted and pink-flushed caterpillars which a check in the field guide confirmed were Magpie moths – if these all pupate successfully there will be plenty of the day-flying adults here in the summer!

We dropped down towards the bay and, on a boggy section of path, Gwen pointed out some Marsh Violets growing through the Juniper Haircap moss.

Down in the bay we were shown a treasure trove of archaeological wonders - from Mesolithic boat noosts, to an Iron Age quayside, an ancient fish trap and a Viking shipyard. Around us Cuckoos, Whimbrels and Common Sandpipers called, two Shelducks slunk away, and a pair of Great Black-backed Gulls eyed us suspiciously from their nesting platform on top of a nearby hill.

An unmistakeable male Orange-tip butterfly flew past us causing great interest. Although frequently seen on nearby Mull, and known to be expanding its range in Scotland, this was the first record that our guide knew of from the island. How exciting!

Above a beached boat, Paul and Sue observed a dronefly feistily holding its territory. After closer inspection they were able to give it a name *Eristalis intricaria* - a lovely bee mimic with a white bum and another potential new record for the island.

We watched a couple of Cuckoos on the wires with their usual Meadow Pipits in attendance. We discussed the reason for the Cuckoo's remarkable falcon-like silhouette and Greg observed that one theory is that the unsuspecting host birds fly up to mob what they think is a passing raptor and, in so doing, inadvertently reveal the whereabouts of their nests. Or as he innocently put it: "The Cuckoo clocks the location of the pipit's nest." The reference to cuckoo clocks did not go unnoticed by the rest of the group!

Back at the roadside loch a huge furry Northern Eggar caterpillar drew our attention, but we were soon distracted by a party of skuas (two Bonxies and five Arctics) having a wash and brush-up on the water. After a while, one of the Bonxies seemed to tire of the Arctics' presence and chased three of them off. To complete the moment a pair of Red-throated Divers came into view on the far side of the loch and, over the moor, a female Hen Harrier was quartering the heather.

Day 7 Sunday 7th May

Beinn Feall, Feall Bay, Feall Dunes and Crossapol Beach

To start the day we were shown a few moths from our guide's overnight moth trap: Red Chestnut, Silver Y and *Agonopterix heracliana/ciliella* (a species we had already seen on Lunga on Day 2). Also in the trap was a bright orange ichneumonid wasp *Ophion obscuratus*. Greg explained that things only really get going moth-wise in the Hebrides in June.

Next, we headed down to the far west end of the island. Nowhere was very far away from our guest house but, on the short, slow ride, we saw a pair of Hen Harriers flying together, a couple of Cuckoos, plus Whitethroat and Greenfinch. A loo break at the airfield added Sedge Warbler, Skylark and three different calling Corncrakes; and a rocky knoll on the roadside revealed the first orchids of the trip: around a dozen Early Purples. Lovely!

We parked by the towering dunes and walked along a former WWII airstrip, now home to nesting Lapwings, Skylarks and Wheatears. A flowering specimen of Stork's-bill was new for the trip. We took two different routes up onto a grassy hill overlooking Feall Bay, the more adventurous taking in the top of Beinn Feall with its memorial to Kenneth Stewart, the last laird of Coll and, much older, a nearby chambered tomb.

In the bay, we spotted several Great Northern Divers and Shags, a small party of Eiders and a distant male Hen Harrier along the beach. While enjoying our respective hot drinks, we looked at the vegetation where we were sitting, including Bird's-foot Trefoil, Rue-leaved Saxifrage, Sea Mouse-ear and Carnation Sedge.

After coffee, we agreed to form two groups again, this time the more adventurous were to head into the machair. Here some Hebridean specialities were on offer: the delightful yellow Dune Pansy, the Many-lobed Dandelion *Taraxacum obliquum* (a Red Data Book species) and a striking, but very rare, black and bronze carrion beetle *Silpha tyrolensis*.

We reunited for lunch at the van and then walked out again, this time towards Crossapol. Here the machair was a picture of pink Stork's-bill and white Daisies. Dotted among the flowers were Oystercatchers and Whimbrel. By a broad standing stone, a pair of Twite briefly appeared before flitting away along the fence line. A Common Frog

was also seen - a relatively recent arrival to the island courtesy of a bucket of frogspawn from the mainland intended to enhance a new pond in a village garden.

As we walked further, the distinctive 'oodley-oodley' song of a Golden Plover greeted us and we soon found four of them with the other waders, and a couple of Brown Hares, among the flowers.

We joined the cows on the beach whose substantial cowpats were a contrast to the tiny casts of the myriad lugworms on display. Razor Clam and Oyster shells were also in evidence and Leslie turned up the distinctive egg-case of a Small-spotted Catshark, with long twisted tendrils to hold it to the kelp stems.

Ringed Plovers and Dunlin were in evidence as was a solitary Whimbrel standing patiently on a rocky outcrop for the duration of our visit. The shrill rasp of Arctic Terns were joined by the 'shreep' of a Little Tern, and nearby on the skerries a pair of Common Terns completed the set. As we walked round the corner, another pair of Twite appeared - and again to our frustration they beat a hasty retreat.

We walked up to the McLean mausoleum, a striking structure adorned with sandstone crosses and finger stones, which is slowly sinking into the sand. The back wall was covered in Black Spleenwort.

We next ascended a flowery hillock overlooking the bay - adorned with several 'otter palaces', well-used and probably ancient sprainting stations forming tall protuberances in the sward. One had some dry but sweetly-scented otter spraint still on it which some of the group were happy to sniff. Spring Squill, Tormentil, Creeping Willow and English Stonecrop were evident in the short sward.

From our vantage point we looked out into the bay, where more Great Northern Divers were fishing, but our attention was caught by a broad, black fin shortly joined by a second elongated one the characteristic features of a Basking Shark - remarkably our second of the trip. Although some distance out in the bay, we all managed decent views of it (even Stephen and Frederica who had initially declined the clamber up the knoll). Worth it for some photos and even a short video of the great beast!

Suitably impressed we headed back to the village and later went to the hotel bar, where our guide was moonlighting with other musicians in a session playing traditional Scottish music.

Day 8 Monday 8th May

Sorisdale, Ballyhaugh and the ferry back to Oban

Our final day dawned damp and dreary with a cool breeze. After packing our cases and bidding our farewells to Paula at the guest house, we took a final tour of the island in the minibus, to get a glance at those areas we'd not managed to visit in the preceding week. On route to the east end of the island, we passed another cracking male Hen Harrier and a huge (and no doubt ancient) Juniper tree cascading down a rock face. A couple of Twite on the road were rather more obliging than the previous day's offerings and we got good views also of Rock Doves (the wild ancestors of our more familiar urban Feral Pigeons). At Sorisdale we took a short walk around the ruined village, where many of the island's crofters had temporarily moved to before the clearances drove them overseas. At Ballyhaugh we added Moorhen and Little Grebe to the list for the week, before heading back to await the arrival

of the ferry. The mist really came down now and so we didn't feel guilty lunching in the ship's restaurant rather than braving it on the open deck.

As we entered the Sound of Mull, the weather lifted, and large flocks of Manx Shearwaters and Kittiwakes gathered on the sea. A Minke Whale briefly surfaced giving those of us watching from the deck a sense of its vast bulk below the surface. Just as we were telling a fellow passenger that we'd not seen any eagles on Coll this week, a White-tailed Eagle appeared above the boat flapping hard on route from Mull to Ardnamurchan. At Tobermory, a budding 10-year old naturalist, whom we had befriended, spotted the dorsal fins of a pod of Harbour Porpoise, which were typically tantalising as they surfaced twice before continuing their submarine wanderings.

Our last sighting was of a group of 26 Gannets on the sea as we entered the Firth of Lorn - a welcome sight given how few there seemed to have been this spring following the impact of last year's Avian Influenza epidemic.

In Oban, as Greg dropped us off at our respective finishing points, we said our farewells and agreed that we all wanted to come back to Coll very soon. A very special place!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

G* = Glasdrum only		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Greylag Goose	*Anser anser*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Canada Goose	*Branta canadensis*	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Shelduck	*Tadorna tadorna*			✓	✓	✓		
Teal	*Anas crecca*					✓		
Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*				✓			
Eider	*Somateria mollissima*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-breasted Merganser	*Mergus serrator*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

G* = Glasdrum only		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
*Goosander	*Mergus merganser*	G*						
Red-throated Diver	*Gavia stellata*			✓	✓	✓		
Great Northern Diver	*Gavia immer*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fulmar	*Fulmarus glacialis*	✓	✓					
Manx Shearwater	*Puffinus puffinus*	✓	✓					✓
Gannet	*Morus bassanus*	✓	✓	✓				✓
Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	✓			✓			
Shag	*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*							✓
Honey Buzzard	*Pernis apivorus*			✓				
White-tailed Eagle	*Haliaeetus albicilla*		✓					✓
Hen Harrier	*Circus cyaneus*			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sparrowhawk	*Accipiter nisus*			✓	✓			
Buzzard	*Buteo buteo*	✓						
Corncrake	*Crex crex*			✓			✓	
Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*							✓
Oystercatcher	*Haematopus ostralegus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden Plover	*Pluvialis apricaria*		✓	✓			✓	✓
Ringed Plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sanderling	*Calidris alba*			✓				
Purple Sandpiper	*Calidris maritima*		✓					
Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*			✓			✓	✓
Snipe	*Gallinago gallinago*			✓			✓	
Whimbrel	*Numenius phaeopus*			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Curlew	*Numenius arquata*		✓					✓
Redshank	*Tringa totanus*			✓	✓	✓		
Common Sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Skua	*Stercorarius parasiticus*					✓		
Great Skua	*Stercorarius skua*	✓	✓			✓		
Long-tailed Skua	*Stercorarius longicaudus*	✓						
Black-headed Gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*		✓			✓	✓	
Little Gull	*Hydrocoloeus minutus*	✓						
Common Gull	*Larus canus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Herring Gull	*Larus argentatus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	*Larus fuscus*	✓			✓			✓
Great Black-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kittiwake	*Rissa tridactyla*	✓	✓					✓
Common Tern	*Sterna hirundo*	✓				✓	✓	
Arctic Tern	*Sterna paradisaea*		✓		✓		✓	✓
Little Tern	*Sternula albifrons*				✓		✓	
Razorbill	*Alca torda*	✓	✓					✓
Common Guillemot	*Uria aalge*	✓	✓	✓				✓
Black Guillemot	*Cepphus grylle*	✓	✓					✓
Puffin	*Fratercula arctica*	✓	✓					
Rock Dove	*Columba livia*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Woodpigeon	*Columba palumbus*					✓		
Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cuckoo	*Cuculus canorus*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

G* = Glasdrum only		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
*Great Spotted Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos major*	G*						
Hooded Crow	*Corvus cornix*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven	*Corvus corax*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
*Blue Tit	*Cyanistes caeruleus*	G*						
*Great Tit	*Parus major*	G*						
Skylark	*Alauda arvensis*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	*Riparia riparia*	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Martin	*Delichon urbicum*	✓						
*Long-tailed Tit	*Aegithalos caudatus*	G*						
Grasshopper Warbler	*Locustella naevia*					✓		
Sedge Warbler	*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*						✓	
*Blackcap	*Sylvia atricapilla*	G*						
*Garden Warbler	*Sylvia borin*	G*						
Whitethroat	*Sylvia communis*			✓		✓	✓	
*Wood Warbler	*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*	G*						
Chiffchaff	*Phylloscopus collybita*					✓		
Willow Warbler	*Phylloscopus trochilus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goldcrest	*Regulus regulus*					✓		
*Nuthatch	*Sitta europaea*	G*						
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*	✓	✓					✓
Stonechat	*Saxicola rubicola*		✓	✓		✓		✓
Wheatear	*Oenanthe oenanthe*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	*Turdus philomelos*			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	*Prunella modularis*			✓		✓		
House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	*Anthus pratensis*			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Pipit	*Anthus petrosus*		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
White Wagtail	*Motacilla alba alba*			✓				
Pied Wagtail	*Motacilla alba yarrellii*			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Chaffinch	*Fringilla coelebs*	✓	✓					
Greenfinch	*Chloris chloris*		✓	✓			✓	
Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Linnet	*Linaria cannabina*			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twite	*Linaria flavirostris*		✓				✓	✓
Lesser Redpoll	*Acanthis cabaret*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reed Bunting	*Emberiza schoeniclus*			✓				✓

Other vertebrates

		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Mammals								
Brown Hare	*Lepus europaeus*			✓			✓	
Harbour Seal/Common Seal	*Phoca vitulina*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Seal	*Halichoerus grypus*		✓				✓	

Minke Whale	*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*	✓						✓
Harbour Porpoise	*Phocoena phocoena*		✓					✓
Amphibians & Reptiles								
Common Frog	*Rana temporaria*						✓	
Viviparous Lizard	*Zootoca vivipara*					✓		
Fish								
Basking Shark	*Cetorhinus maximus*	✓					✓	
Small-spotted Catshark (egg-case)	*Scyliorhinus canicula*						✓	

Invertebrates

*G = Glasdrum only		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Hymenopterae								
Moss Carder Bee	*Bombus muscorum*			✓			✓	
Common Carder Bee	*Bombus pascuorum*			✓				
White-tailed Bumblebee	*Bombus lucorum agg.*			✓				
Red-tailed Bumblebee	*Bombus lapidarius*						✓	
Oak Marble gall	*Andricus kollari*	G*						
(an ichneumonid wasp)	*Ophion obscuratus*						✓	
Dipterae								
(a species of dronefly)	*Eristalis intricaria*					✓		
Lepidopterae								
Peacock	*Aglais io*			✓				
Green-veined White	*Pieris napi*				✓	✓		
Orange-tip	*Anthocharis cardamines*					✓		
Drinker Moth (caterpillar)	*Euthrix potatoria*				✓			
Common Heath (moth)	*Ematurga atomaria*					✓		
Magpie Moth (caterpillar)	*Abraxas grossulariata*					✓		
Brown Silver-line (moth)	*Petrophora chlorosata*					✓		
Northern Eggar (moth)	*Lasiocampa quercus*					✓		
Red Chestnut (moth)	*Cerastis rubricosa*						✓	
Silver Y (moth)	*Autographa gamma*						✓	
(a flat body micro moth)	*Agonopterix heracliana/ciliella*		✓				✓	
Coleopterae								
Dor Beetle	*Geotrupes stercorarius*	G*						
(a species of carrion beetle)	*Silpha tyrolensis*						✓	
Green Tiger Beetle	*Cicindela campestris*					✓		
Molluscae								
Brown Garden Snail	*Cornu asperum*			✓	✓		✓	
Heath Snail	*Helica italica*			✓	✓		✓	
Native Oyster	*Ostrea edulis*						✓	
Razor Clam	*Ensis sp*						✓	

*G = Glasdrum only		May 2023						
Common name	**Scientific name**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Annelidae								
Common Lugworm	*Arenicola marina*						✓	

Flora (DAFOR = Dominant, Abundant, Frequent, Occasional, Rare, Not present)

Scientific Name	Common Name	DAFOR abundance rating
Machair and Dunes		
Anthriscus sylvestris	Cow Parsley	O
Anthyllis vulneraria	Kidney Vetch	O
Arabis hirsuta	Hairy Rock-cress	O
Bellis perennis	Daisy	D
Cardamine pratensis	Cuckooflower	O
Cerastium diffusum	Sea Mouse-ear	LA
Daucus carota	Wild Carrot	A
Erodium cicutarium	Stork's-bill	A
Ficaria verna	Lesser Celandine	F
Galium verum	Lady's Bedstraw	O
Geranium sanguineum	Bloody Cranesbill	F
Hypochaeris radicata	Common Cat's-ear	A
Lotus corniculatus	Bird's-foot Trefoil	F
Plantago coronopus	Buck's-horn Plantain	O
Plantago lanceolata	Ribwort Plantain	O
Polygala vulgaris	Common Milkwort	O
Potentilla anserina	Silverweed	LA
Ranunculus bulbosus	Bulbous Buttercup	O
Rhinanthus minor	Yellow-rattle	O
Saxifraga hypnoides	Mossy Saxifrage	LA
Saxifraga tridactylites	Rue-leaved Saxifrage	R
Sedum acre	Biting Stonecrop	O
Taraxacum obliquum	Many-lobed Dandelion	LA
Thalictrum minus	Lesser Meadow-rue	O
Valerienella locusta	Cornsalad	O
Veronica chamaedrys	Germander Speedwell	R
Viola tricolor var curtisii	Dune Pansy	O
Grasses, Ferns, Mosses etc		
Ammophila arenaria	Marram Grass	D
Carex arenaria	Sand Sedge	A
Carex panicea	Carnation Sedge	O
Rhytidiadelphus triquetrus		D
Moorland and Bog		
Angelica sylvestris	Wild Angelica	LA
Antennaria dioica	Mountain Everlasting	O
Calluna vulgaris	Ling Heather	D
Caltha palustris	Marsh Marigold	LA
Cirsium palustre	Marsh Thistle	O
Drosera rotundifolia	Round-leaved Sundew	LA
Erica cinerea	Bell Heather	O
Erica tetralix	Cross-leaved Heath	O

Scientific Name	Common Name	DAFOR abundance rating
Eriocaulon aquaticum	Pipewort	LA
Juniperus communis	Common Juniper	R
Hydrocotyle vulgaris	Marsh Pennywort	LA
Iris pseudacorus	Yellow Flag Iris	A
Lobelia dortmanna	Water Lobelia	O
Mentha aquatica	Water Mint	O
Menyanthes trifoliata	Bogbean	LA
Myrica gale	Bog Myrtle	O
Nymphaea alba	White Water Lily	LA
Orchis mascula	Early Purple Orchid	LA
Pedicularis sylvatica	Common Lousewort	O
Pinguicula vulgaris	Common Butterwort	O
Pinguicula lusitanica	Pale Butterwort	R
Polygala serpyllifolia	Heath Milkwort	O
Potentilla erecta	Tormentil	F
Salix repens	Creeping Willow	O
Scilla verna	Spring Squill	R
Sedum anglicum	English Stonecrop	O
Thymus polytrichus	Wild Thyme	O
Vaccinium myrtillus	Bilberry	O
Viola riviniana	Common Dog Violet	O
Viola palustris	Marsh Violet	R
Grasses, Ferns, Mosses etc		
Anthoxanthum odoratum	Sweet Vernal Grass	A
Blechnum spicant	Hard Fern	O
Carex nigra	Common Sedge	O
Circinaria calcarea	(a species of crustose lichen)	O
Eriophorum angustifolium	Common Cotton-grass	LA
Eriophorum vaginatum	Hare's-tail Cotton-grass	LA
Mitrula paludosa	Bog Beacon	R
Molinia purpurea	Purple Moorgrass	D
Phragmites australis	Common Reed	LA
Polystichum juniperinum	Juniper Haircap Moss	O
Pteridium aquilinum	Bracken	LA
Rhizocarpon geographicum	Map Lichen	O
Schoenus nigricans	Black Bog-rush	F
Sphagnum cuspidatum	Feathery Bogmoss (aka Drowned Kittens)	LA
Trichophorum cespitosum	Deergrass	O
Gully Woodland		
Alnus glutinosa	Alder	O
Hedera helix	Ivy	O
Hyacinthoides non-scripta	Bluebell	LA
Lonicera periclymenum	Honeysuckle	LA
Oxalis acetosella	Wood Sorrel	LA
Populus tremula	Aspen	R
Primula vulgaris	Primrose	LA
Salix aurita	Eared Willow	F
Sorbus aucuparia	Rowan	O
Ulex europaeus	Gorse	LA

Scientific Name	Common Name	DAFOR abundance rating
Grasses, Ferns, Mosses etc		
Asplenium adiantum-nigrum	Black Spleenwort	LA
Rocky Shores, Beaches and Saltmarsh		
Armeria maritima	Thrift	LA
Cakile maritima	Sea Rocket	R
Cochlearia officinalis	Common Scurvygrass	LA
Glaux maritima	Sea Milkwort	LA
Honkenya peploides	Sea Sandwort	LA
Plantago maritima	Sea Plantain	O
Sedum rosea	Roseroot	Lunga only
Silene uniflora	Sea Campion	Lunga only
Tussilago farfara	Coltsfoot	O
Seaweeds		
Ascophyllum nodosum	Egg Wrack	O
Fucus vesiculosus	Bladder Wrack	O
Laminaria digitata	Oar Weed	O
Laminaria hyperborea	Cuvie	A
Laminaria saccharina	Sugar Kelp	A
Pelvetia canaliculata	Channeled Wrack	LA
Saccorhiza polyschides	Furbelows	O
Ulva lactuca	Sea Lettuce	LA
Glasdrum Woods		
Anemone nemorosa	Wood Anemone	O
Betula pendula	Silver Birch	O
Betula pubescens	Downy Birch	F
Corylus avellana	Hazel	O
Ilex aquifolius	Holly	O
Quercus robur	Pedunculate Oak	O
Grasses, Ferns, Mosses etc		
Athyrium filix-femina	Lady Fern	F
Blechnum spicant	Hard Fern	F
Dryopteris affinis	Scaley Male Fern	O
Lobaria pulmonaria	Tree Lungwort	LA
Polypodium vulgare	Common Polypody	LA