

Islay February 2019



February 20th : Sandwich Bay to Islay

The group left the Observatory at 5 a.m. and had a straightforward run up to Gatwick with the ever-efficient Airport Connections. Our Easyjet flight to Glasgow was delayed by an hour but the flight itself was quicker than scheduled – did the pilot *really* put his foot on the accelerator?

At Glasgow Airport we met with Peter and the mini-bus was then duly collected from a large company based about 20 minutes away in Clydeside. Peter and Ken came back to the airport to collect the group and then we were on our way in dreich conditions out of the city and north along the shores of Loch Lomond, then off through the sea lochs and mountains of Argyll. We stopped for lunch at the Loch Fyne Centre and again for a short stretch of the legs at historic Inveraray and, near the journey's end, at Tarbert. Here we saw the first 'good' birds of the trip in the form of 5 **Black Guillemots** out in the harbour. From there it was a short journey to the ferry terminal at Kennacraig and, with night fast approaching, there were some rather nice sunset effects through the now-lifting clouds. A **Red-throated Diver** was swimming around the jetty as the M. V. Isle of Arran appeared from the south to take us across to Islay. A smooth crossing, landing at Port Askaig, and then across the dark island to the hotel at Port Charlotte for a decent night's sleep in this very comfortable hotel set overlooking the outer reaches of Loch Indaal.

Thursday February 21st: Port Charlotte, northern Loch Indaal, Bridgend, Bowmore, The Mull of Oa and return

Yesterday's rain had cleared overnight to give a dry, cool day, with the wind strengthening from the east-south-east.

After a good night's sleep and a substantial hotel breakfast, the group was able to set off at 9 a.m., working its way around the northern shores of Loch Indaal. A range of typical winter birds were seen offshore, including both **Red-throated** and several **Great Northern Divers**, **Red-breasted Mergansers**, **Common Eiders** and later, nearer to Bowmore, a small group of **Greater Scaup**. At least one **Slavonian Grebe** showed itself distantly to some members of the group and four **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** were in the shallows. Near Bridgend we came across the first large groups of **Barnacle Geese** with several thousands flying in to their roosting site on the mudflats there, an impressive sight. While watching these, a distant **Golden Eagle** was picked out and a little later, two more.



By late morning we had arrived at Bowmore, the largest town on Islay, and a good re-fuelling site and then on across the flat expanses of the peat bogs of the Duich Lotts. From here we turned south onto the Oa. Fields by the side of the road near Nerabus held a lot of **Barnacle Geese** and searching through the flock revealed the presence of one of the large wild **Canada Geese** that turn up in most winters on Islay – this one is usually known as **Todd's Canada Goose**. It was still present on the same site some while later in the day as we left the area. We drove down the Oa, across increasingly wild and remote country, until we reached the RSPB land near the Mull of Oa. A climb up across coastal moorland and bog took us to the American Monument and then a cliff walk led us back to the vehicles in due course. Along the walk we encountered a few birds – it was nice to see a small flock of **Skylarks** around the car-park and later a flock of about 200 **Twite** were found in a field sown by the RSPB with winter seed. In days gone by (but well within living memory for some of the group!) flocks of this size or more were normal every winter on the salt-marshes at Sandwich Bay Point, but not any

longer... **Hooded Crows** were commonly found, especially around the supplementary feeding areas for the hardy cattle that live out here on the Oa farmlands. Along the cliffs, some members of the group were fortunate enough to find a **White-tailed Eagle** and amongst the very few seabirds, a couple of **Northern Gannets** were reported offshore and **Northern Fulmars** were occupying nest site in one or two places.

As we left the Oa, a fine male **Hen Harrier** crossed over the road in front of us and one or two **Common Buzzards** were seen. By this time, the afternoon was well-advanced and the light beginning to go, so we started heading back to the hotel. Good views were had of **Greenland White-fronted Geese** in many of the fields and some of the group were lucky to have views of a male **Merlin**.



Back at the hotel later in the evening, the group enjoyed a really good meal before heading for bed after a full and active day.

Friday February 22nd: Port Charlotte, Bridgend, Port Askaig, Bunnahabhain and Loch Gruinart.

A cool day, with a nagging and strengthening wind still blowing from an easterly quarter, and grey skies throughout. At least the rain held off, apart from a few spatters in the late afternoon.

We explored the north-eastern side of Islay to-day, calling in briefly at Bridgend Hotel to order our lunch-time food before setting off on the road to Askaig. A **Grey Wagtail** was found on the river, a **Barn Owl** was seen by some a few miles outside of Bridgend and a number of the farmland fields held groups of geese, predominantly **Greenland White-fronts**.

We turned off at Finlaggan and drove down to the historic site there, the ancient home of the Lords of the Isles. The coniferous woodland and hillsides above Finlaggan is a good location

for seeing **White-tailed Eagles** and, after a while, some of us got onto an adult bird sailing along a distant ridge while being mobbed by the local pair of **Ravens**. The **Eagle** later did a 'fly past' for us, followed very shortly after by a first-winter **Golden Eagle** going in the opposite direction and showing the distinctive white flashes at the bases of the primaries and the black terminal tail band. Several **Common Buzzards** and a displaying **Sparrowhawk** completed quite an impressive list of raptors at this viewpoint.

We continued a few miles more to arrive at Port Askaig, with the mountains of Jura rearing up on the opposite side of the Sound. Here we found several **Black Guillemots** at a very reliable site for this species on Islay and several **Shags** were out in the fierce tide race. The best bird was a young **White-tailed Eagle** which flew over the port area, being given some grief from a local pair of **Herring Gulls**.

From Port Askaig we drove up one of Islay's many one-way roads leading to the coast, in this case to the distillery at Bunnahabhain, a wonderfully remote and attractive site with views across to the cloud-capped Paps of Jura. Birds were few here however, with a few **Shags**, a **Great Northern Diver** and a few waders to show for our journey, but an impromptu visit to the distillery shop was well-received by all who took part.



A pre-arranged lunch of soup and sandwiches was taken back in the cosy Bridgend Hotel before we took the back road across to Gruinart, where we spent the rest of the day exploring the flatlands that make up the RSPB Reserve and then on to Ardnave sand dunes and loch. There was a lot to see in the area, even though the light was not too good. On the RSPB Reserve a wintering **Green-winged Teal** was seen on several occasions, a new bird for some, and a **Little Egret**, still quite a good bird for Islay, also showed itself. A range of other ducks included a number of **Pintail** and some **Northern Shoveler**, plus a few wintering **Whooper Swans**.

Ardnave produced a decent-sized flock of **Red-billed Choughs** as soon as we arrived at the edge of the sand dunes and these were seen well. On the loch itself, a group of 8 **Whooper**

Swans were on the far side, while small numbers of **Goldeneye** and a few **Tufted Ducks** were out on the choppy waters. A female **Tufted Duck** had lengthy hard looks devoted to it, but it turned out not to be anything more exotic.

Saturday February 23rd: Port Charlotte, Bruichladdich, northern Loch Indaal, Bowmore, Gruinart, Loch Gorm area and Machir Bay

Interesting weather to-day, with almost all varieties thrown at us at some time or other, from cold, dreich misty conditions first thing, to heavy rain by late morning, then clearing and the wind dropping to give a calm evening and a brilliant star-lit sky for the night time.

We covered some areas we had visited before on our way to Bowmore to buy sandwiches for our lunch. The rocky shores in front of Bruichladdich distillery were again searched for the normally reliable **Purple Sandpipers**, but to no avail – perhaps unsurprising in view of the waves crashing over the rocks there. A **Great Northern Diver** was offshore and later we saw a few more of these impressive birds. Around the head of Loch Indaal we again added such species as **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Eider**, **Greater Scaup** and in Bowmore itself a couple of **Slavonian Grebes** were not too far offshore. Yesterday's large gatherings of **Barnacle Geese** in the Bridgend area had largely dispersed and we therefore had no luck in tracking down any wild **Canada Geese**.

The Woollen Mill was visited, admired for its quirky nature and the skills of the craft weavers that work there, while on the stream and in the woods around, a number of birds were added to the group list. These included a couple of **Dippers**, 2 **Tree Creepers**, **Coal**, **Great** and **Blue Tits** and some **Siskins**.

We arrived at the Gruinart RSPB Centre for lunch time. Some in the group walked down to the hide and added a new bird to the list in the form of a **Greenshank**, but there was no sign of the **Little Egret** or **Green-winged Teal** to-day.

We then drove westwards around the northern shores of Loch Gorm through an area where intensification of the farmland is in evidence. More fields are now sown to arable, presumably to grow barley for malting, while a lot of the old mixed-grass meadows appear to be leys now, planted with just a limited range of highly productive (for farm animals) grass species. Some excitement was caused when two **Golden Eagles** appeared briefly along a ridge line, but otherwise, bird life was quite scarce until we arrived at the dune and beach area of Machir Bay. A large roost of several hundred **Common Gulls** held a striking pure-white leucistic specimen, a bird which had apparently been present for a while at this site. Small numbers of **Common Ringed Plover**, **Ruddy Turnstone** and **Oystercatchers** were feeding in the same area and a group of **Red-billed Choughs** also put in an appearance. As the group left the area, a male **Hen Harrier** also flew near to the mini-bus.

Returning to Loch Indaal, the main part of the group took the mini-bus to try for another look for the **Barnacle Geese** flocks along at the head of the loch, but again, apart from a group

tucked away in an inaccessible corner of the mud-flats and too distant to see, we drew another blank. Even though we then drove for several miles along the road to Port Askaig, where **Barnacle Geese** can often be seen, we only came across one flock, all of them 'Barnies'. Nearing Port Askaig the weather had cleared enough, with the sun breaking through, for good views to be had across the Sound Of Jura to The Paps, with their summits cloaked in cloud.

Sunday February 24th: Port Charlotte, Bruichladdich, head of Loch Indaal, Bowmore, Port Ellen, Lagavulin, Laphroaig, Ardbeg, Kildalton Cross, Claggain Bay and return to The Rhinns, Portnahaven and Port Wemyss.

Several members of the group commented to-day on how cold they felt and the unremitting steady breeze from the east certainly did chill our bodies.

We looked again for **Purple Sandpipers** and **Long-tailed Ducks** around the shores of Loch Indaal but failed to find either of these normally 'dead cert.' birds. It seems unlikely, but perhaps they have already made the first part of their journey north to their breeding grounds. There was a sprinkling of the usual other sea ducks and other sea-birds around the Loch and the group also had time to closely interrogate a large flock of Barnacle Geese on the mudflats just south of Bridgend. Although the light was better than in past days, there was still no sign of anything other than **Barnacle Geese**. We then went into Bowmore for sandwich-buying and were then soon on our way again towards Port Ellen by the 'top road'. A large flock of **Barnacle Geese** in a field near Glenegdale Lotts did produce a **Canada Goose**, but it was a **Todd's Canada Goose** and very likely to be the same bird which was seen only a couple of miles away near Port Ellen on February 21st.

Passing through Port Ellen we drove up the eastern coastline of Islay, passing such iconic places (for Scotch whisky aficionados at least) as Lagavulin, Laphroaig and Ardbeg. The coastline here is much more sheltered than on the Atlantic-facing west coast, so there were areas of woodland to drive through and sheltered little rocky coves. Several of these had hauled-out groups of **Atlantic Grey Seals**, plus the occasional **Grey Heron**.

A diversion off the 'main' road took us to the Kildalton Crosses, a historic site where one or two fine Celtic crosses are preserved – though you have to wonder whether it's a good idea to allow these rare survivors to be left outdoors and exposed to the weather as they are at the moment. At similar sites in Ireland, the originals have been put into the national or local museums and replicas erected 'in the field'.

While at Kildalton we found a few interesting birds including **Mistle Thrush** in full song, some **Fieldfares** and a few **Common Buzzards** but the best single bird was yet another **Golden Eagle** seen over a rocky hillside some way off, but performing very well for us. Continuing on our way north for a couple of miles we came to Claggain Bay where we stopped to eat our lunchtime sandwiches. Searches offshore revealed a couple of **Great Northern Divers** and some **Shags**, but not much else. A single **Grey Wagtail** flew over.

After lunch we travelled quickly back towards the centre of the island. Near Bridgend another **Todd's Canada Goose** revealed itself in a large flock of **Barnacles** while shortly after some of the group were treated to the sight of a young **White-tailed Eagle** flying across the machir at the head of Loch Indaal.

The group's two vehicles re-joined each other at Bolsay, an area of rough heather moorland above Port Charlotte. Playing the calls quickly brought in at least two **Red Grouse**, which showed well for several minutes. From there we travelled across The Rhinns and then down to the extreme south-west corner of Islay at Portnahaven and Port Wemyss. These former fishing villages are now largely seasonally-let cottages and the whole area was very quiet, both for people and birds, but it is an attractive corner of Islay and worth visiting for that reason alone.



Monday February 25th: depart from Islay

It was clear from the rather fine sunrise over Loch Indaal that our last day of the trip was going to be a better one as far as the weather was concerned and indeed the wind eased and it was fine, with light winds as we eventually made the ferry crossing from Port Ellen to Kennacraig on the mainland.

On the crossing, the group had the opportunity to check out the seabirds of the area. Both **Common Guillemots** and **Razorbills** were scattered about, with occasional **Northern Gannets**, almost all adult birds, passing by. A number of **Kittiwakes** were also seen and there was a rather unusual reported offshore sighting of a male **Goosander**. Closer to the mainland shore were quite large numbers of divers, especially **Red-throated**, but with the occasional **Great Northern** as well.

The journey back through the lochs and mountains of Argyll was a fairly leisurely one, since we had plenty of time to get to Glasgow. Stops were made at Lochgilphead and Inverary

before we continued on our way through this particularly scenic part of the country, arriving at Glasgow in the late afternoon for our evening flight.

Ken Chapman

26th February 2019