

While I was out Birding with a friend of mine Andy, during his visit to the IOM in December 2012, I quizzed him over where would be a good but different place to go. As luck would have it, he was planning a trip to the Outer Hebrides the following May and asked if I'd like to join him. The Hebs are one of the 'Big 3' Birding destinations in the UK, the other 2 being The Scillies and Shetland. Of course, I nearly ripped his hand off and the invitation also included Wendy...if she was up for it. Having 3 of us would mean the whole package would be cheaper and as Andy said, "The more the merrier!" When I got home I ran it by Wendy, who was both excited and scared about the idea initially but excitement won over and she said to count her in. There was NO way she was going to miss out on opportunity like that so I set about trying to get it sorted, which wasn't easy. Unfortunately Andy couldn't get the time off in late May, which would have been prime time, so we'd have to go a couple of weeks earlier than he'd have liked but hopefully it wouldn't matter too much.

My 1st hurdle was trying to find a cottage and looking around they all looked old fashioned, damp and a bit like something you'd find in a museum. If we were going we wanted to stay somewhere at least better than the cottage I'd booked for our last minute Cornwall trip in 2012. That had been my only accommodation blunder to date and I wasn't up for another. After trawling through website after website I managed to miraculously find what looked like an absolute beauty on North Uist. It looked modern, clean, really nice and even had WIFI!! Andy was happy with my find and totally shocked that such a great cottage existed on the Hebs, so I booked it in a flash! Working out our flights was no easy task either and there was no quick way to get us there. Flybe's timetables had changed so it meant it would be impossible to get to the Hebs on 2 flights and in only 3 hours anymore! I ended up having to book 3 flights to end up at Benbecula, with us having to fly south to Birmingham 1st before flying back up north to Glasgow. This meant the journey would take nearly 8 hours instead.....Urrghhhh. I have a combined total of hardly any flights ever and Wendy had never paid much attention what was going on around her when she'd travelled in the past. It was going to be like the blind leading the blind, until we met up with Andy at Birmingham, as thankfully he's no stranger to travelling. My biggest issue was that I hadn't flown for donkey's years and didn't know how I'd handle it after all that time. For what we could potentially see in the Hebs I'd have to pull myself together or miss out on a once in a lifetime experience.

I kept thinking of all the lifers we could get such as Corncrake, White-tailed Eagle, Otter, Long-tailed Skua (if the wind was right) and whatever else could turn up. There was also a long staying and extremely rare Harlequin Duck near where we were staying so we were keeping everything crossed that it would stick around until we got there. Needless to say that the little **** cleared off a few days before we were due to arrive as did the reported Ring-necked Duck and the Snowy Owl, so obviously our Jinx was still going strong. There was absolutely nothing being reported on BirdGuides in the Uists on the run up to our trip, which was an all too familiar scenario, so we were becoming increasingly worried that it was going to be ANOTHER of those weeks! Meanwhile in Wales, Andy was being unusually optimistic, which was worryingly out of character. He seemed scarily confident that there'd be loads of things about but as usual we weren't easily convinced. Photographically speaking it should at least be quite productive with breeding and passage Waders in summer plumage, Corn Bunting, Arctic Skua as well as Short-eared Owl and Snipe regularly being captured sitting out in the open on fence posts. Not only that but there was also a (slim) chance of finding the nationally rare Belted Beauty Moth. Unfortunately it would be too early for the breeding Red-necked Phalaropes to be back or to witness the famous Machair in all its glory, which was a real shame.

As the trip grew closer there were plenty of issues going round in our heads. With the Islands being so flat and bush/treeless where were we going to take a WC break? Would our hand luggage containing all our camera gear be OK to take on the plane especially the

small Loganair aircraft? What places should we visit? Would Wendy get caffeine withdrawal? What were we going eat? We were pretty sure that the small Co-op wouldn't have Soya milk, Lactofree milk, Lactofree cheese or decaf tea. Wendy could only hope that they had lots of vegetables and lentils so she could knock up some soup or something and although it wouldn't be quite as hard for me it was anyone's guess what I'd find! :/. It was certainly going to be very interesting and looking like we'd have to be both resourceful and creative....Uh Oh! As with all our recent holidays the weather forecasts were looking dreadful for the week with rain and high winds predicted for every day! Aarrghhhhhh! We hoped more than anything that these forecasts were wrong.

Friday 3rd May

Having set the alarm for 5am we got up reluctantly and started getting ready for our stressful day of travelling. I'd been awake since 4am clock watching and with so much to think about the night before we hadn't gone to bed as early as we should've done, so we certainly weren't feeling spritely. After a bit of last minute packing we were finally ready to go and after dropping my car off at my Dads he gave us a lift to the Airport. Our luggage was checked in to go straight through to Benbecula so that was at least one worry off our minds. It was very quiet at Ronaldsway and our flight left on time.



Climbing out over Langness

We were both a bit worried about the flight, which was more obvious with me as my hands were pouring in sweat! The flight was fine but the thick cloud cover approaching England ruined the view but as we went over Birmingham the clouds broke so I was like a kid looking at all the exciting things down below. My point and click camera didn't do too badly at taking photos through the window either.



Over Birmingham

Even though it was clear coming in to land at Birmingham it was quite bumpy but I wasn't bothered and even quite enjoyed it while Wendy didn't, as landing is the bit she hates. I couldn't work out why it was so bumpy, as it was totally clear but a mate told me later that it's just standard for a Dash8-q400 and nothing to worry about. We landed at Birmingham at 9.20am. One flight down, 2 more to go!

This was where we had our longest wait, as our flight wasn't due to leave until 12.30pm so we had bags of time to kill. Birmingham doesn't have a transit/airside section unfortunately, so we had to go into the main terminal but we found a Costa so Wendy went straight there. Feeling a bit peckish we got some toast and sat down to do a bit of people watching and I texted Andy to see where he was. Andy was driving up from Cardiff, as he also couldn't fly from Cardiff to Benbecula in two stops, so we were crossing our fingers that he didn't hit any traffic problems on the way. It was a lovely morning with the sun shining outside and it was obvious that the majority were off to sunnier climes as they were mainly in summer gear and flip-flops. This started to make us anxious, as we had a bad feeling about the weather in the Hebs and we certainly weren't dressed for the beach nor had we packed anything vaguely summery! After our toast we wandered off and spotted 3 very red-eyed and happy Rasta's looking very confused at the bottom of an escalator. Just as 2 of them decided to walk away their mate jumped onto it. When they turned around they noticed he wasn't there until they found him travelling upwards. He tried his best to walk back down the ascending escalator but quickly gave up, while his two mates stood there killing themselves laughing. Very funny. I realized that this was the way to security and where we needed to go so we stepped on while the guy who'd just gone up had to go straight back down again.

I wanted to get up to the departure lounge as soon as possible so we could find out where our gate was and relax. The initial security bloke at the entrance was trying to deal with a foreign lady in front of us who was frantically saying, "I just need to catch him!" He replied, laughing, "We're all trying to catch someone love!" It turned out that she was demanding to be allowed through to departures to find her friend, even though she wasn't travelling. In the end he told the woman in no uncertain terms to bugger off!! Hahahaha. When we got to the baggage check area I was amazed at how many aisles there were and how friendly the staff were too. Wendy was asked if she was wearing boots, which she was (walking boots), so he gave them the once over. I wondered why mine weren't checked too and asked him why, although I think he really meant women's high-heeled boots. He jokingly

said, "Why would you be wearing boots?" so I said, "You never know I might be gay!" That stumped him.....Skillzzzz :). Going through security there was some kind of staff training going on and Wendy's well used and been everywhere rucksack went straight off to be checked over. I found this highly amusing especially as they were taking swabs from the outside. It was more like being in a Hospital than an Airport! I was expecting the lady to say, "Hmmm there's faecal matter on this swab!" or something equally humiliating but luckily whatever they did find on it got the all clear. There were loads of shops in the departure lounge area too, which was great as boredom was already setting in, so we had a good wander around. Wendy amused herself and embarrassed me by trying on all the most ridiculous sunglasses she could find but having not heard anything back from Andy we were starting to get worried. I was also worried about where our gate was, so I suggested going up the corridor that said gate 1-20, as I thought these might be the UK gates. At the very least we could work out our gate and then go back to the departure lounge. Amazingly round at the gates there were even more shops and a Wetherspoons! Talk about excellent facilities. We headed over to Wetherspoons so Wendy could try to calm her nerves with a Rose Spritzer while we relaxed on a big comfy sofa. It was really quiet in the area, which was nice and chilled out. After a while I checked my phone again while glancing around and was amazed to see Andy walking our way! How on earth had he found us? Good skill or pure luck I'm not sure :). With everyone together we could start to relax and as we did our stomachs started to rumble. Andy had cleverly made himself some sarnies and had also brought a whole pack of choccy biccies, which he offered around. Om nom nom :).

Our flight to Glasgow was also on time and we left Birmingham at 12.35pm on a very nice Embraer 195 Jet. These were the last type of aircraft I'd worked on before being made redundant at Flybe and having always wanted to travel on one I was quite excited. The weather forecast was showing as awful just north of the English border so all my hopes of looking down at the aerial views were shattered once more....Boooooo! The only (sort of) excitement on the flight was when Andy, who'd been given the seat opposite us, pointed out Alex Mcleish who was sitting a couple of rows in front of us. Wendy didn't have a clue who he was but I couldn't help wondering whether he still had a job after getting the sack from Aston Villa. The landing at Glasgow was in horrible weather with a nasty crosswind but the aircraft handled it perfectly, which was a total contrast to the Dash 8 from the Isle of Man.

We only had a 50minute wait at Glasgow before our final flight and we were able to stay airside. The only problem was that after having walked all over the place with no signs telling us where to go, we realized there were no shops or decent Cafes and it was absolutely freezing. I could only assume the domestic departure pier was shortchanged on these facilities. We had no idea which gate we needed to head towards and none of the screens had our flight displayed on them yet. Using my sad knowledge of aircraft I could see some, which were of the type we'd be going on, so we headed for that area. Eventually after walking about 15 miles we found a screen displaying our flight but still no gate number, so we sat down and waited for some more info to appear. By then we were starving but the only Café up there sold nothing either of us could eat so, after Wendy's 1st Karl Pilkington stop of the trip, we had to settle for sharing a Grab Bag of Quavers and a chocolate bar from WHSmiths. When we got back from the shop Andy had some bad news.....our flight to Benbecula was delayed by 1hour 30mins.....Noooooooooooo! While Wendy and I's negativity had kicked in, Andy was staying positive saying, "Noooooo it'll change, it'll change". 30minutes later his optimism had turned to anger, which had possibly rubbed off from me, as I could see a Saab 340 sitting at the gate looking fine. This made no sense as, if the flight was delayed, it would surely be due to a faulty aircraft so there should've been engineers working on it but it was just sitting there. Grrrrrr! With even more time to kill we decided to wander around to see if we could work out where our actual gate was. We must've been up and down the pier about 3 times but in the end we

gave up and slumped back down near the monitor we were at before. Andy looked at the monitor again and said, "Errr what?" I had a look and was also confused. The delay message had gone and it was reading, "go to gate *". Gate *? Where the flipping heck is Gate *? We'd all started to panic a bit as there was now only 15 minutes till take off and we had no idea where gate * was. Still, if Andy hadn't checked the monitor when he had we wouldn't have even known! We grabbed our stuff and I suggested heading towards the gate at the end, near where a small Saab 340 was parked up again even though we'd found nothing last time. This time round though we spotted a small sign pointing through a tiny door to gates 1-3. Thinking gate * might be a temporary gate used near gate 1 we rushed down the stairs to find the Flybe/Loganair area. AHA! Sure enough on the monitors there were only three flights, Sumburgh, Barra and Benbecula! Wahey.....sorted. Shortly after the screen changed to show "Go to gate 3" and our plane was ready to board. What a palaver that was! With the lack of shops/cafes/signs and everything else we were not impressed with Glasgow airport, especially when compared to Birmingham.

As we handed over our boarding cards Andy had obviously taken some brave pills and decided to ask the woman why the aircraft was now going on time. Her reply was short but certainly not sweet and she snapped, "Cus it is!" Charming! Hahaha. We all piled into the aircraft but not surprisingly we were missing a few passengers, who'd obviously also thought it was still delayed, but eventually they were found and hurried onboard. Some of the blokes, thinking they still had 1 hour 30 minutes to kill, had literally just bought themselves a pint and had downed them as quickly as they could. Most of the passengers were big hardy looking Scotsmen who were obviously going over to work and there was a total lack of any other females apart from Wendy and another woman who'd been found shopping in duty free.....typical! :P. After that bit of confusion and bad info we took off at 3.30pm and into the black clouds of Glasgow. This made our climb pretty bumpy but still not as bad as the Dash 8 and this plane was very small in comparison. Again I was disappointed at the thick cloud cover, as I'd imagined the scenery over the west coast of Scotland to look amazing. It didn't really matter though, as we'd been given the seat next to the propeller so there was no window there anyway. Urghhhh. The rest of the flight was very pleasant and we even got a free tea/coffee! The Stewardess also had a plate of biscuits, which I refused thinking they would be about a £2 each but I quickly realized that they were free as well.....Doh! I wouldn't be making that mistake on the way home! The clouds started to clear just as we were on our approach to Benbecula, which was when ½ the men on the plane decided that the pints they'd just downed needed to come out and a queue formed for the toilet! Wendy came out with another corker when, at an altitude of about 6000ft, she said that she could see some white birds flying past. I had to laugh when I broke the news that it was the droplets of rain being blown across the window.....Hahahahaha! Brilliant! We were gutted that we had no window to look out of so we had to look forward across the aisle or backwards, nearly breaking our necks. What we could see though was amazing and didn't disappoint. We could see nothing but the 100's of Lochs that dominate the Islands and at 4.05pm, even in the nasty weather, it was another cracking landing. We stepped off the plane into the wind and rain, which is exactly the type of weather we'd feared would greet us :(All my worries about flying over the past god knows how many years had just been blown out of the window, as I'd really enjoyed it all especially the landings :).

The airport looked hilariously tiny but I was still worried about where to go to collect our bags, if they'd even got there at all! I needn't have worried, as the baggage collection was directly to the right of the entrance and our bag was the first to appear. Woوو.....excellent service. After getting our stuff I wandered over to Andy, who was talking to the Laing Car Hire rep. A couple of minutes later I noticed her walking off so I said, "Bye" and proceeded to pick up two sets of keys from the table. Nearly straight away I thought, "Eh up?" but it was too late and another Car Hire firm rep said, "Excuse me they're my keys!" Dohhhh, how embarrassing! I wandered outside feeling like a right plank and realized that Andy

had already gone out with our rep to be shown to the car.....with the keys!! We'd been given a Nissan Note, instead of the Ford Fiesta we'd booked, but all our bags and cases fitted in fine.

As we headed off to our B&B for the night I took the wrong turning from the car park and ended up practically on the airfield...Oops! From the car park we saw a **Lapwing** being mobbed by a **Raven**, **Black-headed Gulls**, loads of **Meadow Pipits**, **Herring Gulls** and proper (not feral) **Greylag Geese**. There were **Starlings** hanging around the Terminal building and the 1st thing we noticed was that they sounded totally different to any Starlings we'd ever heard before. There were also **House Sparrows**, **Blackbirds** and as we drove away from the Airport we came across some lovely summer plumage **Black-tailed Godwits** which were extremely twitchy and flew off as soon as I stepped on the brakes. On one of the Lochs were **Mute Swans** and in the fields were oodles of **Wheatear**, **Redshank**, **Oyster Catchers**, a **Greater Black-backed Gull**, **Hooded Crow** and a displaying **Snipe**. Carrying on along the narrow roads a very nice male **Hen Harrier** floated across the fields. The roads on the Islands are mainly single track with passing places dotted along them but it wasn't long before I'd got used to it, which is more than could be said for the car! The steering was ridiculously loose and was pulling to the right so much that I had to cling on to the wheel. I also had to keep tapping some loose trim back together but worst of all was that the brakes were very unresponsive so we crossed our fingers that I wouldn't need to slam them on in a hurry.

We arrived at Ardnastruban House on Grimsay at 4.28pm and after unloading the car and walking up the path to the front door we were greeted by Stuart and Margaret the owners. They seemed extremely nice and showed us to our very comfy and clean rooms that were even en-suite! We were then offered tea or coffee and although we'd planned to go straight out after dumping our stuff we had our arms well and truly bent. It was so horrible outside that it seemed like a good plan and Wendy was probably having caffeine withdrawal by then anyway. I thought I'd risk a normal cup of tea with normal milk.....well what harm could it do me? When Margaret reappeared she'd really pushed the boat out for us and had prepared a huge plate of biscuits, chocolate brownies and slices of buttered fruitcake to go with our drinks. Wendy was still in the room and when she joined us her eyes nearly popped out of her head at the amount of food on the table. Andy and I had already started tucking in and were happily munching away at the chocolatey stuff, whereas Wendy went straight for a piece of fruitcake. She was very impressed and even had a second slice. All 3 of us sat contentedly at the lounge window and had a scan of the feeders in the garden seeing **Chaffinch** and a good number of **Greenfinch**, which was nice to see in comparison to the lack of them back at home. There was also **Skylark**, more Wheatears and another male Hen Harrier, which apparently was a regular, floated straight past the window in front of us :).



View from the B&B window

We already knew that we'd definitely stay there again and Stuart and Margaret were really helpful and gave us loads of information about the area and local Wildlife. They even gave us suggestions for places to eat and recommended a restaurant called 'Stepping Stones' which served huge portions. This appealed to both Andy and I, so that was our plan for later sorted. We felt so relaxed we could've happily stayed there in the warmth chatting to our hosts all night but we tore ourselves away to go and explore and see what was about.

The weather was still pretty grim when we left at 5.21pm but not as grim as we knew it would be the next day. The forecast was for gale force winds and heavy rain so we wanted to make the most of the evening ahead of us and think about that later :/. We weren't 100% sure where to go but in the end we decided to stay near to the Restaurant on Benbecula. We thought our 1st port of call should be the infamous Stinky Bay and on the way we saw **Grey Heron, Shelduck, Red-breasted Merganser, Buzzard, Pied Wagtail, Curlew, Mallard** and a huge flock of **Golden Plover**. We were off to a good start but although there'd been nothing reported recently we all had our hopes pinned on Stinky Bay to produce something a bit special during the course of the week. We did however hope that it didn't live up to its name too much, surely it couldn't be that much worse than Stinky Dubh down at Langness?

Even though the weather had cleared a bit, we were pushed for time so we pulled up, stayed in the car and wound the windows down for a quick scan of Stinky Bay.



Stinky Bay

As the name suggested it was pretty stinky from the tons of rotting seaweed and definitely worse than we were used to. Scurrying around amongst the orange seaweed feeding frantically were loads of the usual waders. There were **Ringed Plover** and summer plumage **Dunlin**, **Sanderling** and **Turnstone**. Flying over and diving into the sea itself were **Arctic Terns** and we also found a summer **Great Northern Diver**, which we rarely see in that plumage back home. One thing we were quite excited about was seeing all the Divers and Waders in their fine breeding plumage. There wasn't much else about so we thought we'd move on, as we knew we'd be going back for a better look sometime soon. Driving away we just couldn't believe our eyes when we saw a car with a Manx registration plate coming towards us! What the.....?

Looking at the map we found a road nearby leading to a place called Aird, which looked like a bit of a promontory so we headed straight for it. It was somewhere we'd never heard of and thought it could be worth a check. We passed more Lochs seeing **Tufted Duck**, **Linnet**, **Collared Dove**, pairs of **Shoveler**, Red-breasted Merganser and some **Wigeon**. We heard them 1st but ended up with a **Whimbrel** flying along side the car, as if it was racing us. There weren't many **Swallows** about yet but in the distance we could just make out a single Martin in with them, but it was too far away to ID.

By 6.30pm we arrived at Aird and got out for a wander down the sandy track to view the beach. There was another Great Northern Diver in the sea very close to the rocks and Andy and I reckoned it would be possible to get near to it for some shots. Wendy wasn't so keen by then as she was feeling really cold, hungry and tired but was happy enough to hang back and leave us to it. Andy shot across the slippery rocks like a rocket whereas I wobbled, slipped and staggered my way for about 5 yards until I took a decking and slammed my elbow on the rocks. Great! Luckily I'd kept my camera away from them so after a quick check that nothing was hurting too badly I bravely carried on, what a hero! :P. By the time I got to the waters edge Andy was already filling his boots but when I eventually got into position to get some shots I realized that the bird was in a moult state and looked a bit messy around its head.



Great Northern Diver

When I got up from taking pics Andy asked if I'd seen the **Long-tailed Ducks** out in the bay. I'd been so engrossed in taking GND shots that I'd totally missed them so had a quick look.....very nice :). Andy had actually managed to get a very nice a shot of an adult male in summer plumage :O. I hadn't realized he'd been so jammy until I asked him for some of his pics for the article in mid June!



Long-tailed Duck

When we returned to the car Wendy was sitting shivering on a picnic bench with her teeth chattering, as I had the car keys in my pocket....Oops! It wasn't really that cold outside but lack of food and tiredness must've taken its toll. I asked her if she'd seen the Long-tailed Ducks but she'd been too busy fighting off hypothermia to have noticed. Back in the car I put the heaters on full blast so that Wendy could stick her feet against them to bring her totally numb white/purple toes back to life :/.

When we arrived at 'Stepping Stones' it must've been about 7.15pm and the restaurant, although not packed, was quite busy. We were shown to our seats, ordered our drinks and then handed a menu each. Andy and I were easy to please but there wasn't anything for Wendy other than a baked potato. She'd asked if the lentil broth, which she really fancied, was veggie but wasn't in the least bit surprised to find that it wasn't. Our drinks arrived and Wendy eventually started to thaw out as she slurped on her Spritzer. When our food was put down in front of us we didn't know where to start, the portions certainly lived up to Stuart and Margaret's description of being HUGE. Wendy's baked potato seemed to grow in size the more she ate and when she'd had enough it hardly looked as though she'd touched it. Andy made light work of his and even polished off the remaining chip mountain that I just couldn't fit in.....he must have hollow legs!

With incredibly full stomachs we left at 8.30pm to find that it had turned into a beautiful sunny evening. The light was perfect so when Andy spotted a **Short-eared Owl** slowly floating over a nearby field we stopped to try for some shots. Although we didn't get any the nice light was making everything look really impressive, which was a perfect scene to end the day.



Benbecula

There was also 8x **Red Deer** up on a hill, silhouetted against the skyline, which is always nice to see. Having failed to get any decent pics of the Owl there we headed straight for Committee Road, which is renowned for its SEO's. I'd heard and read a lot about this road since Andy had mentioned the Hebs way back in December and the pics Photographers get from there of Owls are amazing, so we were all hoping we'd get the same chance. Driving along the road we spotted **Stonechat**, **Common Sandpiper** and **Moorhen**.

Amazingly it was still quite light outside but only 2 degrees when we got back to the B&B at 9.45pm and Wendy made a beeline for the shower. We'd been reminded to fill in our breakfast list for the morning when we got back but there was so much choice it was hard

to decide. When we were asked again we realized that Stuart and Margaret probably wanted to settle down for the night before having to get up early to cook it for us! Having filled in our menu and handed them over we crashed out in bed and watched a bit of TV before falling asleep.

Saturday 4th May

When we woke up it was 5.30am and we could hear the wind and rain hammering on the windows of our cosy rooms, so thought better of getting up and went back to sleep instead. Eventually at 6.30am we woke again feeling worse than we had done an hour ago. Andy was raring to go out for a wander so I put on my waterproofs to join him.....hardcore or what? :P. Wendy on the other hand made herself a coffee and grabbed her bins to admire the view and did a spot of 'Bed Birding' through the window in the warmth. Lightweight! :P. There was a Starling that seemed to be nesting under the roof of the B&B and its favourite perch was just above the front door. It was making some very strange sounds indeed, like a foreign language. Maybe they all speak Gaelic? Breakfast was to be served at 8.30am and we still had plenty of time to kill so Andy and I set out on our walk and stepping out of the door I nearly got blown over by the gale force wind. Hmmm.....it was probably a very bad idea but we ploughed on anyway. With no plan in mind we just decided to walk up the road to the Sea inlet. As we got to the main (but still single track) road we scanned some distant trees and spotted 2x **Mistle Thrush**. Beyond the trees was a vast expanse of Sea Lochs and rocky outcrops covered in heather. While I took in the scenery, which looked very different to anywhere I'd been before, I spotted 2 huge birds flying low and slowly out towards an inlet. I got Andy onto them and even though they were a good distance away there was no doubt that these could only be a pair of **White-tailed Eagles!** Brilliant and on our first proper day :). I instantly thought, "Uh Oh, Wendy's going to be gutted she's missed this." as they'd have been a lifer for her! They then disappeared behind some higher ground so we carried on our walk towards the causeway. Within seconds the drizzle became constant then heavy, it wasn't the best. Normally I'd have been soaked through by then but luckily my Dad had persuaded me to borrow his £300 super dooper 'Paramo' jacket for this holiday and I was soooo glad I had. The rain was rolling off me like beads so I was still dry and it was blocking the wind superbly. Annoyingly this means I'll have to shell out the cash for a Paramo before next winter now but they're definitely worth it.....Urghgh! We pushed on for another 10minutes but decided to cut our losses and give up as Andy was well and truly soaked and I was starting to get hungry.

We arrived back at the B&B like two drowned rats! As we walked up the path to the front door we could see Wendy waving at us from her bed with her bins around her neck.....Hahahahahaha! She eventually got up as well and washed her hair to save some time later. Andy and I sat chatting in the lounge until we were brought our tea, coffee and orange juice. Having had no problems from the tea the day before I couldn't resist another one. Andy had ordered the full English, Wendy toast with mushrooms and tomatoes and I'd just gone for toast, as I didn't want to risk having a full bowl of cereal with normal milk as well. We were then given yogurts, a selection of cereals and a mountain of toast and started to tuck in. Andy started with a yogurt and I set about demolishing some toast while Wendy saved hers to go with the rest. Breakfast was cooked to perfection and unlike some fry-ups there was no grease in sight. Wendy was stuffed after hers but Andy then went on to have a bowl of Museli, on top of what he'd already had. It was already becoming apparent that he could certainly put his food away, how jealous am I! After chatting to Stuart and Margaret for a while and meeting their lovely big softie of a Border Collie we knew we'd have to make a move. Wendy wrote some nice words in the Visitor's Book and just as we were about to get our stuff Margaret came in with a lemon cake she'd baked for us to take with us. That was such a nice gesture and we couldn't thank them enough for

making us feel so welcome. They have a lovely home and had been perfect hosts, who we'd happily have spent the rest of the week with. If we ever go back to the Hebs and need a B&B we'll be going there without a doubt :).

After saying our goodbyes we left at 10am and trundled our cases down the path into the rain to the car, nearly being blown away by the strong wind. The forecast had been bang on and it was definitely a horrible day but we weren't going to let that stop us. We'd been really worried that we'd hit a bad time for Corncrake, as none had been reported, so imagine our relief when a report came in of one from the Bay Head Shop from the day before....Phew! This was great news as Corncrake was one of our main reasons for wanting to go the Hebs in the 1st place. Hopefully this would be the start of them returning for the summer and we crossed our fingers that we'd catch up with some before we left. We couldn't get in to our cottage until 3pm so we had plenty of time to go out and explore and our 1st plan of the day was to visit RSPB Balranald. This is a brilliant place for seawatching when there's a strong westerly wind and with the conditions being right it seemed the obvious choice. I'd always wanted to go there to see the 100's of Skuas streaming past and was hoping I'd finally get to see a Long-tailed Skua, although we reckoned we were a couple of weeks early. It's also a farm, which is managed in the traditional Hebridean way, so there's lots of wildlife and breeding birds in the fields too. On the way we saw **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and a **Redwing** flew into a field from a roadside bush. There were 2x **Whooper Swans** on one of the Lochs we passed and we were, already loving the place.

It was 10.37am when we arrived at Balranald and after making use of the WC's at the Visitor's Centre and listening for Corncrake, with no joy, we decided to drive down to the coast as it was so horrible outside. The garden outside the Visitor's Centre is famed for having Corncrake showing well in it but it was just too early for them to have returned and the vegetation still looked too short as well. At the small car park overlooking the beach the prospect of getting out of the car wasn't enticing but it was inevitable, as we needed to be out on the rocks to stand our best chances of seeing anything. Even with the grey and murky sky the sea still looked a lovely turquoise blue colour, unlike at home.



Balranald beach

We had a quick scan out to sea before getting our stuff together and were totally surprised when a **Great Skua** flew straight over the car, which looked promising. We could see loads of Waders down on the beach and a **Gannet** over the sea so we bit the bullet, grabbed our cameras and headed off along the coastal track. Andy was off like a rocket through the

driving rain and gale force wind and was out on the rocks in next to no time. Wendy and I followed but were much slower as we're too weedy to battle hard against the wind! :). Our glasses were already covered with rain making our view out of them frustratingly limited. As we fought our way through the wind I noticed a Skua heading north across the bay and in our general direction. We got our bins on it and I could clearly see the very long streamers flapping about in the wind "**Long-tailed Skua!**" YES! My 1st lifer of the trip and on our 1st day.....brilliant :). I hadn't expected we'd stand any chance of one so was absolutely over the moon especially with it being a lovely adult. It'd been ages since I'd had a lifer on a holiday so this was a welcome sight. It wasn't a lifer for Wendy, who'd seen one at Langness a few years ago, but she was still very happy to have seen another. Our next problem was alerting Andy, as he was 70-80 yards away but although I shouted and waved my hands he just couldn't hear me over the wind. I ended up having to resort to whistling through my fingers and amazingly, even though I hadn't done it for years, I belted out a foghorn level whistle. Luckily Andy heard it so we then had to do Long-tailed Skua impressions and point him to where the bird was. What a palaver! Luckily Andy isn't a dimwit and understood us perfectly and got onto the bird as well. Hurray :). Up near the point was an area of washed up seaweed, which was alive with small waders and looked like a bustling Ant's nest, there was so much going on. As we skirted around them we found some nice summer plumage **Purple Sandpipers**, which again we'd never see at home. Being deep amongst the orangey seaweed and in horrible light we didn't think they'd make for a good photo at all but Wendy managed to get quite a nice one.



Purple Sandpiper

At the famous Aird an Runair point (the most westerly point in North Uist) Wendy and I tried our best to huddle behind the rocks, in an attempt to shelter from the wind and rain but there was no escape and it seemed to hit us from every angle. Hard man Andy wasn't bothered though and just sat there taking the full force of it! Hahaha.



Aird an Runair

The constant drizzle meant that our glasses were already practically impossible to see out of and our bins were wet and steaming up. It was quite unpleasant but we managed to count 20+ **Arctic Skuas** passing by in total including one group of about 8. It really was an impressive site. A few more Great Skuas went past, which I got a record shot of but there didn't seem to be any Pomarine Skuas, which is what Aird an Runair is famous for.



Great Skua

I started to worry that we were misidentifying the Greats as Juv Poms, as they can be easily mistaken, but after double checking later on they were all just Great Skuas.....weird.

While we waited for more Skua passage I decided to pass the time by scanning the bay. Maybe the Harlequin Duck had moved and was around there somewhere? Yeah right :/.

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of something dark, which dived and I had to look twice as a long thin thing slipped into the water. Initially I thought, "No way, surely not?" but there was nothing else it could be. I told Wendy and Andy what I reckoned I'd just seen and got them onto the position. We all scanned but there was no sign of anything until Andy said, "There's a **Shag** there." As the minutes passed I even started to doubt myself and I could tell Wendy and Andy weren't 100% convinced. I scanned desperately just for my own sanity until I spotted it again on the surface plain as day, albeit quite far out. Eventually Andy and Wendy got onto it as well, so all 3 of us were over the moon to be watching an **Otter**. This was the 2nd thing we'd gone to the Hebs especially to see and a lifer for both Wendy and I :). For some reason we'd never envisaged seeing one in such harsh conditions but there it was, reminding us of what well adapted creatures they are. Allowing us a brief glimpse from time to time we kept one eye on it while we carried on looking out into the bay. The Otter definitely looked as though it was heading our way so we just had to brave the bad conditions, sit tight and wait. A **Fulmar** made an appearance as well as **Kittiwake**, **Razorbill** and a **Grey Seal** but all our attention turned to the Otter as after disappearing for ages it unbelievably reappeared just off the end of the rocks we were crouching behind! We all raised our cameras and fired off some shots but it was too close for my 500mm lens.....Disaster! Wendy was laughing with her shorter 300mm lens and ended up with a really nice shot.



Otter

I then realized that I couldn't hear Andy's shutter going and instead was a tirade of swear words. I was left with a dilemma, keep shooting or help a downed comrade? Being the nice guy that I am (:P) I stopped and shouted across to Andy to see what was going on. His 7D had come up with error 99 but I couldn't for the life of me remember what it meant! I suggested he tried all the standard fixes like pulling the battery out etc. but none of it worked :(. Eventually Andy realized it was due to his loose teleconverter and by the time he'd fixed it the Otter had gone past us. Noooo! It did seem to be hugging the rocks though so we thought it could be trying to find a place to haul out.

As it swam past us, it became apparent that it'd clocked us but did indeed want to get out and who could blame it! Knowing that it wouldn't be able to with us there we moved off but Andy thought it might've been heading for a small freshwater Loch that he'd seen an Otter on 4 years ago. As we walked out to it the drizzle turned into a massive downpour.....Urrghhhh! As well as getting soaked ourselves we realized that our camera gear wouldn't be able to take such a drenching, so we hunched up against a small bank and

covered our gear over in the hope it would stay dry. While we sheltered there I noticed that we were next to a rocky and shallow gulley that lead straight into the sea. Maybe this was the route the Otter used to get from the Sea to the Loch?



Balranald

We hung on for about 20 minutes with no further sign of the Otter and when there was finally a break in the heavy rain we decided to head back to the car.

We were back in the shelter of the car at 12.45pm and I stuck the heaters on so we could try to warm up and hopefully dry off a bit. We were totally soaked and freezing but luckily Wendy had some tissues in her rucksack so we could at least dry our glasses and bins off and eventually see again! It had all been totally worth it though being lucky enough to have had that brief encounter with the Otter. By then all we wanted to do was get to our cottage so we could get changed and unload the car of our cases.

I was pretty confident that I knew where the cottage was and after driving the 5 minutes from Balranald I spotted a likely looking candidate and pulled over. The sign outside wasn't reading 'Tranquil Sands' and there was a car parked outside so we presumed it was the wrong house. After driving for another 5 minutes we realized that we had no idea where to go next, so I ended up making a call the owner to ask for directions. Annoyingly it turned out that we'd been at the right house all along and the house name was in Gaelic!Doh! He also told me, "Most people recognize it from the photo." Bah....thanks for that! We also came to the conclusion that the car must've belonged to the cleaner. As we drove back we crossed our fingers that the cleaner had gone but the car was still parked outside so we still couldn't get in :(Driving around, to waste time, we finally managed not to spook some Black-tailed Godwits and got some shots out of the car window.



Black-tailed Godwit

Wendy then spotted a small Wader flying over, amongst a flock of Golden Plover, so we thought we'd go and check them out. Could this be similar to Cornwall 2011?

Unfortunately we lost the waders into some fields miles away so we'll never know :(After that I pulled over to view the Loch near the house but it was so far away that we couldn't really see what was there but we did spot some Arctic Skuas flying over the Dunes in the distance. Wendy then very casually chirped up with, "Oh Look.....on the fence." We had a look and couldn't believe she'd been so calm when we saw a **Corn Bunting** sitting there. This is a very exciting bird for us Manxies but little did we know, the Hebs are caked in them! Starting to get impatient I took another spin past the Cottage and we all cheered when we saw that the cleaner's car had gone, which meant that we could finally move in.....Yey! :).

I pulled up outside at 2.35pm and as I got out I heard a Corncrake calling!!! I quickly shrieked at Wendy and Andy to get out but the Corncrake shut up straight away. Yet again I got the feeling they were both a bit suspect and I started to doubt myself, maybe it was some crazy scratchy gate.....Dohh! We gave up quickly as we were very excited to see what we'd find when we opened the door. We let ourselves in to our HQ for the week and it was even nicer in reality than it'd looked on the website.



Living room

After putting the heating on, lugging all our stuff in and taking off our wet clothes we finally sat down to relax for a bit. Wendy cracked open the lemon cake given to us by Margaret earlier and was very impressed. It was a proper lemon cake with real lemon in it and probably the best she'd ever tasted. Margaret certainly knows how to bake an incredibly nice cake :). Unfortunately for me, after 2 days of having normal milk and tea my IBS had started to kick off big time so I was starting to feel decidedly crappy :(. After I'd taken some pills and we'd all dried out and unpacked our stuff it was getting late so we headed out before tea.

We drove off at 3.55pm back to nearby Committee Road hoping for another go at a SEO shot and on 1st glances it looked dead, although a herd of Red Deer were taking an interest in us.



Red Deer

Wendy then chirped up from the back seat, "It's rubbish, there's no birds here, it's ****!" Closely followed by, "Oh, there's one, on that post." Haha. Strangely, this approach seems to work every time and sure enough there was a Short-eared Owl sitting on a fence post in the open. We grabbed our cameras and went to open our doors to get out but the Owl flew, headed straight for us and over the car.....Grrrrrrr! We carried on up the road, found 2 more and this time they were displaying and 'wing clapping', which was brilliant to see. I managed to get a record shot of one of them hunting but it was a bit far away to get the kind of shot I really wanted.



Short-eared Owl

After that we thought we'd better go to the shop and see what we could find in the line of edibles for the week.

At 4.35pm we parked up outside the Co-op and traipsed into the unknown. Wendy grabbed some veggies, stock cubes and eventually after searching high and low found the lentils. Before going to the Hebs one of her biggest concerns was what she was going to do for breakfast, as she didn't think anywhere would sell Soya Milk. She couldn't believe her luck when she spied some in the chiller cabinet and even let out a mini cheer in celebration. Andy was alerted to the celebration so proceeded to shout out, "YEAHHHHH!" at the top of his voice in the middle of the shop! Hahaha.....the idiot. There was no Lacto-free milk for me though, so it looked as though it would be toast for my breakfast but amazingly there was everything else including Quorn and Linda McCartney products. Sorted! Andy set about grabbing as many bargains as he could and ended up with enough stuff to feed an army with and at a fraction of the price of ours. Little did we know he was King bargain hunter! After we'd got all our essentials we headed back and were puzzled by some random people in their garden waving at us as we drove by. We made a quick detour back to Committee Road hoping to be able to get some better shots of the Owls but had no luck. We'd already had our luck of the day so I suppose we were pushing it for more. On the way home I brilliantly took the wrong turning and ended up getting us lost.....Doh! Maybe I should have taken the Sat nav!

Back at HQ at 5.50pm we were starving, so it was straight to the kitchen to make a very quick tea of beans on toast.



Kitchen

Andy however, set about making a very healthy meal of mince and gravy, boiled potatoes and carrots.....for 4! Yet again he made light work of it and even had room for pudding :O! While we were cooking we still had an eye on the window and saw another male Hen Harrier and a **Merlin**, which zoomed past the house and vanished over the Sheep fields. We'd already seen more Hen Harriers, in just 1½ day's than we'd see in months on the IOM. After tea Wendy was planning to chill out and have a shower but Andy and I had other ideas. One thing Wendy was worried about was that if we went out without her she'd miss out on something good but she just didn't have the will to do anything else so took the risk and disappeared into the en-suite.



En-suite

At 6.45pm Andy and I headed back to Balranald, where the weather was a complete contrast to earlier in the day. The wind had died right down and the sun was trying to break through so we decided to head straight back to the Waders to try for a decent Purple shot. We sat down and let them come to us but although the Dunlins were happy wandering around within 10 foot of us, the Purple Sandpipers were happier further away. After about 1 hour and having taken around 100 shots of Dunlin we gave up and headed home. This was my best shot.



Dunlin

We got back to HQ at 8.45pm to find Wendy contentedly watching TV while sipping on a Spritzer in her PJ's on the sofa.....very chilled :). We assured her that she hadn't missed much and after going through some of our rapidly increasing photos we were all knackered so packed up and went to bed at 10.25pm.

Sunday 5th May

At 6.45am we woke up to the sound of the wind blowing a gale and when we peered outside it was grey and overcast again :(. Andy had very optimistically been up at 5am but when he'd seen the weather had thought better of it and went back to sleep until 6am and then read Teletext until 7am. I didn't even know Teletext existed anymore! :P. While we were getting ready Andy went outside to listen for the Corncrake I'd heard the day before. Wendy was in the kitchen making sarnies when I received a text from him saying that he'd just heard it. AHA I was vindicated :). I was in the bathroom so had to try and shout to Wendy to let her know. Finally she heard me so I passed on the news and she bolted out of the house to join Andy. The pair of them stood there for a while but it had, yet again decided to go quiet.



Wendy and Andy looking for Corncrake

Wendy was the only one of us that hadn't heard it yet but our biggest nightmare was that we'd be going home having only heard and not actually seen one. It looked like they weren't calling as much as they should be, as they'd literally just arrived back, but hopefully during the course of the week they'd be more established and in full swing. We weren't holding any hopes though :/.

When we set off at 8.28am it had started to rain again but we wanted to go back to Balranald first. My IBS was even worse than it'd been the day before and I was in a bit of pain but hoped that more pills would sort me out. At least I knew for definite that I'm lactose intolerant and vowed that I'd try Wendy's horrible Soya milk on my porridge the next day. We had a quick listen for the Visitor's Centre Corncrake 1st when we arrived at 8.39am but heard nothing, although Wendy spotted a big fat **Rat** in the garden. On the track to the beach we could hear a Corn Bunting nearby so we found it and stopped for some pics out of the car windows. We were very happy, as the bird sat singing for us for about 10minutes allowing Wendy and Andy to get some decent shots. Lucky for them maybe but unfortunately for me, I was on the wrong side of the car.....Boooo! Wendy was very happy with the shots she ended up with.



Corn Bunting

It eventually got bored and flew off so we carried on to view the beach. There were 4x **Bar-tailed Godwits** feeding on the shoreline, which was a good new addition to our list but from what we could make out there wasn't much happening. We only saw 1x Great Skua and another Great Northern Diver so we got the impression that we'd been incredibly lucky the previous day. There was a guy with a scope approaching us so Andy asked him if he'd seen anything but like us he hadn't. After adding **Guillemot** to our list we called it a day and headed back to see if we could better our Corn Bunting shots. Yet again we could hear them but couldn't see them despite our best efforts. Knowing that their numbers had declined from the terrible weather in 2012 we were quite pleased when we realized that there was a few more than we'd 1st thought....Phew! As I drove away, bizarrely we could still hear the Corn Buntings but after a while we worked out that it was actually the car doing a great impression of one! Further down the road I slammed on the brakes, or tried to, when we spotted a Snipe on a fencepost. Andy had been waiting 4years, since his 1st visit to the Hebs, to try again for that particular shot and it was on his 'to do' list. As I stopped and he raised his camera to go for it.....the Snipe flew! :(By then it had started to rain again and was looking pretty grim outside but we carried on to our next stop of the day, which has some good migrant trees and is where Tour Guides go for Otter.

We arrived at the Hotel car park at Langass and sat in the car to view the trees with the windows down, so we could listen for any calls. There was no way we were getting out and going for a walk in the pouring rain and gusting wind but we picked up **Chaffinch** and **Wren** while we waited for it to ease off. Wendy noticed a sign for a Bar/Restaurant and the thought of proper coffee was drawing her in. Finally at 10.10am the rain started to become lighter so we grabbed the window of opportunity and set off before it got worse again. Our 1st impressions had been that the area was dead but after a couple of minutes we started to see movement in the trees and found a couple of Warblers flitting about. When they came into view we found that there were a good few **Willow Warblers** and **Goldcrests** in there as well as a **Robin** and a single **Chiffchaff**, which isn't a common bird on the Hebs by any means. We couldn't pull anything else out the trees so we continued down the path, which lead to an area of moorland on a hill by a Loch.



Langass

We had a good look round but there wasn't much else about apart from a passing **Sparrowhawk** and more Red Deer up on the hill. When we were heading back Andy spotted a huge Caterpillar so we all went over for a look. It wasn't one that either Wendy or I had seen before but Andy ID'd it as a **Drinker Moth Caterpillar**. We'd both love to see the actual moth, as it's pretty impressive, but that would have to do us for the moment :P. After having a good look we headed back to the car park hearing **Pheasant** and seeing Greenfinch on the way. Wendy was still craving that coffee fix so we took a wander round the back of the Hotel looking for a way in. We could only find a rather formal entrance to a reception desk so she decided that she'd rather do without after all and we all piled back into the car and left at 11.10am. Just around the corner we had a lovely view of a Buzzard flying low over the car and it wasn't long before we'd arrived at our next stop.

It was blowing a gale when we arrived at the relatively big harbour town of Lochmaddy at 11.26am and we didn't envy the passengers on the ferry as it sailed out into the rough sea. This was another place, which was meant to be good for Otter, so as we'd well and truly caught the Otter spotting bug we thought we'd give it a go.



Lochmaddy

We sat in the car viewing the bay first but there wasn't much about so we didn't stick around. Wendy had noticed a sign for 24hour toilets and a Café in a building nearby but when she went over the entire place was in darkness and locked up....Uh Oh! We'd forgotten that it was Sunday, which meant that being on the Protestant side of the Uists everywhere would be closed! Dohhh. That knocked that idea on the head so we moved off following B&B Stuart's instructions to reach our destination and parked up by a gate at the side of a dirt track at 11.46am. The path lead past some trees and over to a dodgy looking rusty suspension bridge, Wendy had obviously taken some brave pills as she trotted off onto it first.



Rusty Bridge!

It looked OK so we all piled on, which caused it to start a worrying wave like motion made worse by the strong wind!! I felt like Indiana Jones for a minute but we all managed to get across safely! We followed the track along the coast until we found a small round stone building with a turfed roof and gate over the doorway. We went through the entrance in the pitch dark, which opened up into a lighter room inside. The light was coming from a small round glazed hole in the back wall and on the opposite wall was a white screen. It was in fact a Camera Obscura, which reflected an image of the Loch (Loch nam Madadh) inside.....cool!



Inside the obscura

Back outside Andy wandered off up the path and as we were both needing a WC break I nipped round the back while Wendy kept a look out. She was next up and after she'd finished she was dying to show someone what she'd just found. There was nobody about though, as I'd wandered off too, so she had to wait. When I got back she was really excited to show me her find, which she was certain was fresh Otter poo! I had a look and interestingly, it was so fresh there were still bubbles in it so we waited for Andy to return.



Otter poo

When we showed him we all had a better look at it finding bits of crab shell as the main component. Being the only willing volunteer, he bent down, had a sniff and said it had a strong fishy smell.....Bleurrghhh! He agreed with Otter but the most annoying thing was that the creator of the poo must have just deposited the evidence literally a couple of minutes before Wendy had found it and had possibly even been scared off by us approaching....Grrrrrrrrrr! We'd seen no sign of any Otters apart from this so it must've known we were there and was lying low :(We gave up in the end with just the poo as a reminder as to how tantalizingly close we'd been to our target.

It was much windier on the way back to the car and Wendy actually got blown off the track at one point! Going back over the suspension bridge was dodgy so we had to hold on to the rail tightly as we went. Wendy spotted a nice **Red-throated Diver**, which was quite close in but, as usual, it dived and reappeared miles away. We were back at the car slightly windswept at 12.40pm and headed off to our next stop where we planned to have our lunch. On the way I saw something close to the road on a Loch and pulled over for a look. There was nothing there when we stopped so Andy got out for a scan. This move was looking like a waste of time and I started to think I'd been seeing things so when Wendy got a beat going (ala Spaced), to the tick of the indicator, I duly joined in to bide the time. Andy finally gave up and got back in the car and wondered what on earth we were doing hahaha! Wendy then found that the bird we'd been looking for must've been the very distant Red-throated Diver that'd popped up right at the back! The hire car was proving to be even more rough around the edges than I'd first thought. Not only were the brakes exceptionally unresponsive but I'd realized that the tracking was so bad that if I let go of the wheel it actually drove itself round right hand corners!

When we arrived at Loch Euphort it was 1pm and we all stayed in the car to eat our lunch, while scanning the hills and moorland around us.



Loch Euphort

Although there were sunny patches overhead it was still raining and very windy so it wasn't as tempting a walk as it should have been. We'd been told about the Loch by Stuart from the B&B who'd mentioned that it was really good place for seeing Otters. As we ate our lunch I saw something big fly over the road about 500 yards away. I called out to the others, "Eagle!" so they both nearly spat out their food and got onto it. We watched as a **Golden Eagle** soared slowly over the hills with something in its talons but for reasons unknown to us it dropped the food and carried on until it had vanished out of sight.....weird! We were all pleased to have seen the bird especially as it was somewhere random and not at the site we'd pin pointed for them. We finished our sarnies noticing an Arctic Tern flapping over the car and a nice male Red-breasted Merganser on the Loch next to us.

At 1.25pm when the rain had eased off again we bailed out of the car and headed down the road to a footpath, which lead to our next site.



Otter site

Andy was off like a rocket again, while we took it slowly admiring the scenery around us, or maybe we're just a pair of dithering idiots? :). A group of 5x Red-breasted Merganser's flew over as we skirted round the Loch on a boggy path through the dense heather. We had a pleasant surprise when a **Greenshank** came hurtling round the corner towards us making a right racket. Andy backtracked on himself to ask us if we'd seen it, as it turned out he'd practically stepped on it just ahead of us! Wendy called me back to show me some more Otter poo she'd found so at least we knew we were in their territory. Down at the Loch itself it was pretty quiet and although we scanned and scanned not even 3x pairs of eyes could pull out a single Otter :(There was a small Island on the Loch but to reach it meant walking over some precariously slippery and often unstable rocks but after getting so far Wendy was the 1st to decide to turn back. It was still blowing a gale, which was gusting enough to blow you over so I didn't get much further. Andy was miles ahead of us hopping from rock to rock at speed but after getting near to the end he found he couldn't go any further. Not because he's a total wussy like us 2 but he'd stumbled across a Mute Swans nest and didn't want to disturb them. We all headed back and Andy and Wendy stopped to look at some Lichen on the rocks and found the grim remains of 2x Mute Swans on the way (not sure what had happened to them though). By then it was absolutely boiling (:O!) because the sun had finally put in an appearance through the clouds.

We were back at the car at 2pm and after seeing another Redwing we took a spin around the area stopping for pics of the scenery around us.



Loch Euphort

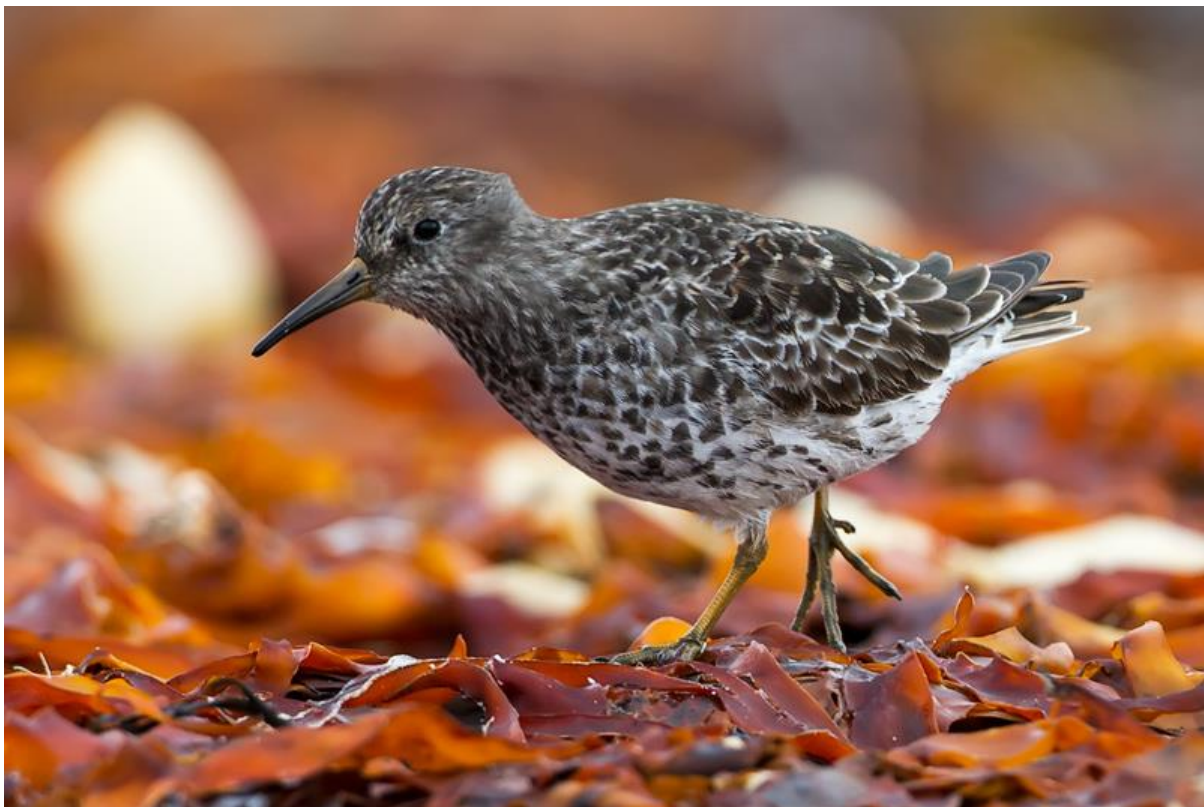
Having imagined the terrain to be mainly flat it was surprising how hilly it was in places, which made for some undeniably stunning views. As we drove away from Loch Euphort Wendy spotted an odd looking, trap type thing with a grass roof. She thought it could've been for Hedgehogs, as we knew that the Hebs were trying to reduce their numbers to give ground-nesting birds a better chance. Once the pesky Hedgehogs are caught in the traps they're then relocated so none of them get hurt during the scheme. We don't know what it was but Wendy's theory seemed feasible. We had no more plans for the day so decided to return to Balranald as it was literally only 2 minutes from the cottage and it would be high tide. On the way we passed a Loch with a male Red-breasted Merganser on it displaying very close to the road. The funny thing was that there were no females in sight so we don't know why he was displaying....maybe it was a practice run? We were all desperate for a decent RBM shot and although a lot of them had been close enough we hadn't even contemplated it yet as we always seemed to be shooting into the sun.....Grrrrrrrr! I slowed the car down and as the bird swam under the road bridge we got in position. Surely it would appear right next to us on the other side of the bridge with the sun behind us? No, it didn't! It somehow, with magic powers, realized we were there, turned round under the bridge and swam back the way it came.... ARGHGHGHGH! We carried on and ended up talking about Civet Coffee, which is coffee beans that have been eaten and passed through a Civet Cats digestive system.....Yuk! It probably stemmed from Wendy trying to decide how desperate she was for a coffee and concluding that she'd definitely draw the line there. Tiredness and caffeine withdrawal must have been creeping in when she shrieked, "**** Eagle!" I slammed on the brakes but Andy and I cracked up when she said, with a very red face, "Urrghhhh it's a Heron." This wasn't quite as good as her Kangaroo in the Highlands but considering we were all feeling a bit worse for wear by then we let her off :P.

At Balranald we could see that the Waders had all been pushed up the beach due to the high tide so it was looking good. Andy and I walked over to sit on the beach to wait for them to get closer to us for some shots while Wendy wussed out and stayed in the car.



Heading into the wind at Balranald

She could see that there were rain clouds coming in and dog walkers so she didn't fancy our chances much. As she sat there she found herself dozing off from time to time and kept waking up with a horrible feeling that having seen Otter on our 1st day bagging a Corncrake was totally off the menu. She was convinced that we'd be going home having only heard them :(. Luckily for Andy and I the rain held off and although the dark clouds did kill the light a bit the amount of small waders on the seaweed was staggering. There were easily over 500 birds and all of them were so much, more tame than back at home. We sat down and had Dunlin and Turnstone surrounding us within minutes. Being a bit choosy, we were both waiting for some of the other birds to come closer, which eventually they did, allowing Andy and I to fire off a few shots.



Purple Sandpiper

There were also a few small birds feeding on the seaweed and even a Meadow Pipit came close enough to get a shot.



Meadow Pipit

A Great Skua flew right over our heads and I was worried that Wendy hadn't seen it but fortunately she'd been between naps at the time and had clocked it too. The weather started to take a turn for the worse and the light was all but gone for photos, so we packed up and wandered back to the car. It was 4.30pm and we had no other plans so we decided to call it a day and head for home.

We were back at HQ by 4.45pm, which was early but the rain had started pelting down and we were tired and hungry by then. Talk about good timing! Wendy went outside for a listen and heard the infuriating Corncrake for herself calling from somewhere in the fields. My IBS had kicked off big time but I was already running out of pills so I was getting slightly worried, which didn't help matters. Andy and Wendy started to get tea on the go but Wendy couldn't work out how to use the oven to cook mine. She'd tried everything in the manual and eventually had to resort to getting Andy to help. He bashed a few buttons and the thing sprang into life! Sorted :).

After tea I felt so rough that I decided to stay in so Andy went out by himself. Wendy couldn't wait to put her feet up and went off for a shower while I tried to relax. After she'd finished I went off for one too but when I turned it on the water was cold. I tried everything but it wouldn't heat up so I gave up. When I turned the bathroom doorknob to get out it fell off and as I tried to put it back on, the lock bar slipped straight through the other side of the door and fell on the floor.....Uh Oh! I was now stuck, locked in the en-suite at the back of the house with nobody around, so I started to shout for help. My mobile was next door so I couldn't even text anyone to get me out and there was no sign of Wendy. I was starting to picture them finding a stack of bones in the en-suite in 6 months time but after about 15minutes of shouting and banging on the door I heard her shouting back to me. HURRAY I was saved! After she'd put the bar back and I'd refitted the doorknob I could finally escape and wouldn't have to resort to eating toothpaste to keep me going after all.... Phew. It turned out that she'd been outside trying to see the Corncrake, which was calling again so hadn't heard me. Disaster over I tried the bath in the other bathroom but the water was cold in there too. It didn't make any sense because the water was on

constantly until 10pm so there should've been enough. Thoroughly sick of the whole situation I resigned myself to a cold shower just to have done with it. As if that wasn't annoying enough, when I went to put the dishwasher on it wouldn't work either and refused to let me program it unless it had a 4hour delay.....Grrrrrrrrr! It would have to wait till the morning in the hope that it would recover from its breakdown. I emailed the owner to let him know about the dodgy lock in the en-suite and he replied quickly to say that someone was coming to change some of the door handles on Wednesday anyway so he'd ask them to have a look.

Andy was back by 8.30pm and as we all sat admiring the sunset from the living room window 5x Mallards flew over, heading towards the Loch down the road. I gave them a 2nd look, which turned out to be a good move and I called out, "**Pintail!**" A lovely male Pintail was right at the back of the flock, which was another bird we hadn't expected to see.....brilliant! That was it, we were going to have to walk down to the local Loch at some point to check out what was down there. If there was a Pintail in with the Mallards then what else went there to roost? Wendy made a call to her Mum who'd seen her 1st Swift of the year at Pooil Vaaish while she was out walking. We'd be lucky if we got to see a Swift during our week as even the Swallows and Martins were still very thin on the ground. Wendy had been outside for a listen and even though it was dark the air was filled with the lovely sound of Snipe, Redshank and Lapwing but by 11pm we were all knackered so went off to bed.

Monday 6th May

At 5.57am Wendy couldn't sleep any longer and got up to go straight out for a listen. Instantly she could hear the Corncrake calling but it sounded like it had moved from the field over the road to one much further down. Having already decided that she wasn't going to see one she was determined to give it her best shot anyway, so she wouldn't be going home kicking herself for not trying hard enough. It was raining again but fortunately the relentlessly strong wind, which had battered us up until then, had dropped right off. We had our breakfast and Andy surfaced at 6.45am having stayed in bed when he'd heard the rain outside. He'd really wanted to get some early morning outings in but the weather had not surprisingly stopped him in his tracks. Before we left for the day Wendy went out again but the Corncrake had gone quiet. We left HQ at 7.40am with one thing on our agenda.....we were going to find a viewable Corncrake if it killed us so our 1st plan was to check out the Bay head report.

We parked up at Bay Head Stores at 7.50am where I also needed to get more petrol but we were so early it was still closed. Andy was 1st outside and straight away he could hear the Corncrake calling from over the road in some very lucky person's garden.....what a garden tick!



Corncrake garden

Wendy and I could hear it too so we all grabbed our cameras and started walking towards it. We could hear another bird calling from the opposite side so we presumed there to be 2 in the area. By the time we were standing by the garden fence at the roadside it became obvious the 2nd bird was in fact just an echo from the bird we were hearing just feet away from us. The narrow road was really busy with traffic and some of the lorries were scarily close as they whizzed past, nearly knocking us off our feet! We stood for ages trying to pin the bird down but the little **** kept moving around without us seeing any sign of it.....Aarggghhhhhh! Even though the garden was really overgrown we just didn't know how it was managing to move around so much without us seeing anything but it was successfully outwitting us every time. Our eyes felt like they were going to pop out of our heads and the concentration we were putting in for nothing was driving us mad. It had been right under our noses on a few occasions but when it moved right to the back of the garden we thought it would be a good time to give up.

We just couldn't tear ourselves away in the end, as it felt like we were giving up too easily, so Andy decided to try it from a different angle further up the road. Not long after he got a bit agitated and tried to get our attention. He'd just seen it for a split second but by the time we'd run over it had gone back into the undergrowth again. Typical! We thought we had its position pinned down to behind a tree so it was all eyes on deck. Wendy spotted a **Bank Vole** as we waited and then.....PANIC! In the blink of an eye she saw the Corncrake run out from behind the base of the tree and straight round the front before vanishing again on the other side. Thinking I might be able to outwit it I tried to view from a different spot where I could see up the side of the garden. Try as I might I couldn't pin it down so Wendy had just nabbed herself a lifer whereas I hadn't.....Nooooo! One thing was for sure, they were definitely even harder to see than we'd bargained for and they couldn't half move when they wanted to. We stuck at it for a bit longer but eventually realized that it just wasn't playing so we called it a day and headed over to the shop to get petrol and some junk to keep us going for the rest of the morning. The people running the shop were amazingly friendly, which was a refreshing change to back at home and all the customers going in were commenting on hearing their 1st Corncrake of the year :). It was nice to see that the locals appreciated the birds as much as we did. We drove away knowing that we'd be back for round 2, I HAD to get a view of it!

With Corncrakes on the brain it seemed only right to try Balranald Visitors Centre again so we headed straight there. We arrived at 9.10am and Wendy was looking forward to the

use of the WC's as much as anything else. Imagine her horror when we saw the 2x Tour Guide vans and a long queue for the toilets! :P. There was no sign of any Corncrake calling, never mind strutting its stuff in the garden for all to see.....Bah! Since we were at Balranald and had no other concrete plans for the day, as the weather forecast was dodgy, we decided to do the full walk around the reserve. This would take in the fields, out to the rocky promontory and then round to another bay and back again, which was about 2-3 miles in total.



Balranald fields

It'd been so horrible outside on our past visits that we'd been missing out on the reserve proper, so we were glad of the reprieve. The 1st thing we noticed on our walk through the fields was the good number of singing Corn Buntings. Having only been able to see the ones around the Visitors Centre previously it was nice to see how well dispersed they were on other parts of the reserve. There were Meadow Pipits and Skylarks everywhere near the footpaths as well as loads of Waders feeding further away in the fields. We carried on through a field of Cows to get down to the path leading to the beach but ½ way through it we realized we were lost. There was no gate at the bottom to get out of, so after a quick detour and a check of the digital OS map on my trusty phone we ended up back on track. As we approached the beach a flock of Greylags flew over, heading inland. We'd seen 100's of Greylags but for some reason I scanned through them with my bins. I wasn't expecting to find anything else so was totally amazed when at the back I found a single **White-fronted Goose**, which was another unexpected bird for the trip! I shouted it out to the others who got onto it quickly and we watched it until the flock landed in a field out of sight.....Cool :). I even managed to get an OK record shot as it went over our heads :).



White-fronted Goose

Coming out over the dunes and onto the beach we were right next to Traigh Lar, which was the rocky outcrop on the left of the bay where the male Harlequin Duck had been all winter. Seeing as it had disappeared a couple of days before we'd arrived and there'd been no reports since we didn't waste any time looking for it. We just hoped that this decision wasn't a massive mistake!



Near Traigh Lar

We could see plenty of Gulls sitting on the rocks so had a quick scan through them. There'd been an Iceland Gull reported from there but there was no sign of any white-winged Gulls amongst them. The walk along the white sand produced nothing and by then our optimism levels were dropping off a cliff.



Balranald beach

In the distance, Wendy had spotted a small group of Gulls, which had taken off from a bay round the corner and were heading over towards the rocks in the sea. She had a quick look and then said, “Eee arr.....that Gull looks very white to me!” I got onto it and was very pleased to see that she’d found the **Iceland Gull** :). Over by the rocks where we’d normally park up Wendy shouted over to us, “OMG what the.....?” We wandered over to where she was squatting down looking at something. In a small pool were 100’s of tiny black insect things floating together on the water like a raft, which looked remarkably like poppy seeds! She pointed out that the rocks were also covered in 1000’s more but we had no idea what they were, so she got some pics. Andy could only think they were Springtails but said they didn’t look like any he’d seen before.



Springtails in a rockpool

As we reached our favourite watch point at Aird an Runair (where we'd seen the Otter) we found the Tour Guide group had taken up residence out on the rocks where we'd stood. It was good to know that we'd worked out where the proper place was by ourselves. Typically, as the sun was out, there was no sign of the Otter but there were loads of Arctic Terns displaying over the grass. The path lead us towards a pool where 2 of the Terns were diving in and catching small fish so we stopped. Positioning ourselves on the surrounding rocks we sat for ages trying for some shots.



Arctic Tern Loch

Try as we might we couldn't really get anything amazing and this was the best one I managed after a lot of effort!



Arctic Tern

The Terns eventually gave up and seemed happy to sit motionless on a rock so we packed up and left them to it. We carried on and were pleasantly surprised to find a couple of nice **Twite**, which looked like they were on a mission to get somewhere and quickly. Further

along, as we skirted another cove we heard a familiar sound and looked up to see a flock of **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** flying out to sea, obviously about to make their journey North. I wondered if this route was the same one our wintering Brents take when they head home? Wendy then found a pellet on the ground so she and Andy stopped for a look.



Pellet forensics!

Wendy found a stick and started to dissect it and they ended up finding the remains of a small rodent, including a skull, so we presumed it must've been a SEO pellet. After that we carried on round the 2mile loop path. It reminded me a bit of Scarlett back home and I got vaguely interested in the Geology for a second but quickly got bored. The best theory I could work out was that it must have some sort of volcanic history, just like Scarlett.



Volcanic?

After getting a bit lost we eventually found the other lovely bay which, is also supposed to be good for Otter so we had a scan.



Balranald

We didn't spot anything different, so headed back in the direction of the Visitor Centre. The walk back to car threatened rain but fortunately we managed to dodge it, so luck had been on our side for a change. Back at the car at 12.40pm we were absolutely starving so grabbed our lunch. The Tour Guides had obviously had the same idea and they were all having lunch too. We were horrified when we noticed that every single one of them was wearing a 'Paramo' coat, which made us paranoid about wearing ours :/. It was like looking at the 'Paramo Club's' annual outing and it certainly wasn't the coolest sight in the world!

At 1.05pm, as the weather had closed in we decided to head north as far as we could go, via a place where Andy had seen not just 1 but 7x Cuckoos 4years ago. On the way we saw something that we didn't quite understand. In a field was a dead Grey Heron, presumably shot, hung up on a fence in the crucifix position....WTF? Further down the road was a Greylag displayed in the same manner :/. We can only think that it's something the Farmers do to protect their crops when they're vulnerable, but who knows? Whatever it was we didn't like it much and it made for a grim picture. The scenery up the west coast of North Uist was very impressive, like no place we've seen on a holiday before and we couldn't help pulling up every 5minutes to take pictures :)



North Uist

We pulled up on the Cuckoo road and had a look and a listen, but there was nothing, so we started to worry that we were too early for even the Cuckoos to get back before we left. The next place we wanted to check was Maciain Quarry, where we'd been told was a good place to see White-tailed Eagle but when I pulled over the heavens opened and it started throwing it down. Andy and I got out of the car and went for a look but the only thing of interest we found was a Fulmar, which felt weird as we were as far inland as we could get on the Hebs.

After our thorough soaking, Otternish was our next stop and when we arrived it was still raining. We drove over the very optimistic causeway, which had a big sign saying, "Caution Otters crossing!" This sounded very promising but as usual we were in the right place at the wrong time and didn't see any. There were more GND's in the bay though but predictably they were too far off to get any pics. We all really wanted to get a good summer plumaged GND shot as we'd be unlikely to have the chance again anywhere else but we weren't holding our hopes for that either. We kept driving further north and on to Bernaray, which is the most Northern Island connected to the Southern Islands and I pulled over in a suitable spot at 2.14pm.



Causeway to Bernaray

Looking out to sea we found a **Black Guillemot**, which was nothing more than a tiny black speck lost in the vast expanse of water. Yet again we saw no Otters and our hopes of getting another chance to see one were fading fast as well. When we approached Ardmaree Stores Wendy's coffee radar must've been going nuts. There was a sign for 'The Lobster Pot Tearoom' and she wasn't leaving without going in.

I pulled over and we all bailed inside and had a good look around the shop first. There was some pretty good stuff in there including more Quorn products, local award winning wines and something I'd been on the look out for since arriving. In the fridge was a pack of Lorne (square) Sausage and having not had any since the first time I'd tried it at the Heather Centre Cafe in the Highlands I had to buy it. I also noticed a Plain Loaf, which I'd never tried, sitting on the shelf so that was my very local tea sorted.....Om nom nom :). Wendy, being a massive big kid, had been deliberating over buying a toy Otter, with Andy saying that if she didn't want it he'd have it for a pressie for his daughter. Wendy felt bad taking it so went over to the counter to ask if they had any more thinking that if they didn't then it was Andy's and if they did then everyone would be happy. Luckily they had more so that was that, another addition to her soft toy mammal holiday family. We then all headed through to the Tearoom and sat down at a table to read the menu. Wendy's face fell when she saw that they didn't do Cappuccino so she had to make do with a cafetiere instead and Andy ordered some chocolate cake. I was stumped and couldn't decide between the chocolate cake, toast or sausage bap. I presumed it would be Lorne Sausage so I wouldn't have to buy the stuff in the shop for my tea after all. When I ordered I was told that toast was only on the breakfast menu and that the sausage was just normal sausage so I asked for some chocolate cake too. Unbelievably Andy had just got the last slice.....Noooooooooooo! Bakewell Tart was about all I could have and although it was OK and did the job I couldn't help drooling over Andy's cake so he very kindly saved a bit for me :). After we'd finished I went back to the shop bought my Lorne Sausage and plain loaf then found out they were both out of date the day before!! Brilliant :(.

Having successfully wasted some time out of the rain we drove away at 3.12pm and carried on northwards. We were originally hoping to have a walk around Bernaray, as it has a massive and famous long white sandy beach, but due to the weather we opted for driving as far north as possible instead. Driving through a small hamlet called Backhill Andy spotted some **Common Seals** lying on some rocks so we all bailed out to get some pics of the area and hopefully the Seals.



Berneray

Although they knew we were there they were totally unfazed, or possibly just too lazy, and posed for us nicely allowing Wendy to get this shot.



Common Seal

After that we reached the furthest northerly point we could and stopped for a scan of the bay. There were Terns fishing along the shoreline and Andy reckoned there was Little Terns amongst them. He got out of the car and walked down to the beach in the pouring rain, as he wanted to get some pics whereas Wendy and I took the sensible option and stayed put in the car.



Andy at Berneray

There was indeed **Little Terns** with them and after a while he also found a **Common Tern**. Andy returned to the car, soaked through but with some shots of the Terns to further confirm the identifications. We left at 4.04pm but before we left Berneray I wanted to have a gander at a Loch, which I'd noticed on the map. We took the nearby turning and found ourselves at Loch Bhrusda.



Loch Bhrusda

The wasn't much there apart from a large expanse of water but suddenly all the waders in the area started alarm calling and freaking out. We all assumed there must be a Peregrine about so started looking until I picked up a large dark bird flying in and was surprised to see a Great Skua bombing through. Not something we'd associate with causing panic amongst the Waders back home!

Heading back down we stopped off just before the causeway for a look around.



Berneray

It was all very pretty and 'Oldy Worldy' with thatched crofts dotted about but the otherwise idyllic view was slightly spoilt by the Harris ferry sitting there in the background. I wouldn't have fancied going on it in rough seas, as it looked a bit top heavy to me!



Harris ferry

As we drove back over the causeway there was a Red-breasted Merganser, which looked close in but it just wasn't close enough to get anything decent.



Red-breasted Merganser

Back on North Uist we rounded a corner and saw a SEO out hunting so we tried to follow it. It was sticking to the coast in the direction of the bay but when we pulled up at the end of the road we'd lost it :(Just as we were thinking of leaving Wendy spotted a Great Northern Diver, which was really close in so, not to let a great opportunity pass us by, we went for it. We all grabbed our cameras and jumped out of the car, when it dived, and ran down the headland. When it resurfaced we all stopped dead, until it dived again, when we legged it down to the rocks as close as we could physically get. We all got into position down at the water's edge, waited for it to come up again and started firing off the shots. Wendy got a nice one of it flapping.



Great Northern Diver

There were some more Divers in the bay but while Wendy and I were focusing in on the bird right in front of us Andy had spotted something else. It was miles out and not easy to ID so he took a record shot, which confirmed his suspicions.....**Black-throated Diver**. Very nice :).

Just before getting back in the car we heard a Song thrush singing and Andy pointed out that this meant it was a **Hebridean Song Thrush**, which is a sub species all on its own. On the way home we decided to try Committee Road again for Short-eared Owl. Yet again we failed to get one close enough for any shots but this time we saw one flying off with what looked like a Vole.....very smart. We also saw a female Hen Harrier heading towards the trees with nesting material.

Finally at 6.15pm we were back at HQ and dying for our tea. I knocked up my sausage sarnie pretty quickly and I have to say it was very nice and I'm still here to tell the tale even though it was past its best. Andy prepared and tucked in to a humungous meal for 4 again.....we still don't know where he puts it all as he is a rake! It was a gorgeous evening so Andy and I decided to take a walk down to our local Loch, Loch Paible, where we'd seen the Pintail heading for the night before. Wendy stayed in to have a shower and as we'd travelled light we'd already run out of clean clothes so she needed to do some washing. She also wanted time to put her feet up and chill out with a glass of Spritzer while she had the chance.

We couldn't work out where the footpath was so stuck to the fence lines as best we could until we came across a field full of Cows, Calves and a Bull!!! We were both a bit worried about this, although not about the Bull. We were more concerned about the Cows freaking out when they're protecting their Calves. We took a monster detour and luckily got round them all without any trouble. Loch Paible is a shallow Sea Loch, sort of like an Estuary, which supposedly used to be land locked until it was drained by putting in an opening in the dunes. This only made it possible for the sea to come in so it is how it became a Sea Loch! Before we'd gone away I'd read that there'd been some smart birds there like Broad-billed Sandpiper and Pectoral Sandpiper and we could see why. There were birds everywhere including at least 300 Dunlin feeding around the gap in the dunes. We headed over for a look at the beach, just in case the Harlequin Duck had made it's was down there. It was only about 2-3 miles down the coast from where it had spent the winter but we didn't see anything other than more Little Terns and another Male Hen Harrier. Andy found some seaweed-covered rocks so went rock pooling but disappointingly found nothing. We headed back managing to avoid the cows again and got home in one piece! :).

While we'd been out Wendy had gone outside to get some pics of the sunset she'd been admiring from the living room.



Sunset over Loch Paible

We were a bit pooped from the long day so called it a night ridiculously early at 10.10pm.

Tuesday 7th May

Despite our early night we didn't wake up until 6.25am and it was a good job too. Looking out of through the curtains it was raining and blustery again, this was very worrying as the forecast had been good and we'd planned a day down on South Uist, where we would be walking a bit. Errkk! Wendy went outside and heard the Corncrake calling again but having all but given up on that bird she didn't even try to look for it. We left HQ at 8.12am and headed straight for Bay Head Stores to try and pin down the Corncrake there hoping for a better view.

Thankfully the forecast was right and it had stopped raining by the time we pulled up in the shop car park and we wandered down the road to the garden. We could hear our bird still calling loud and clear and yet again it was really close to us but we couldn't see it. After what felt like ages of trying to spot a needle in a haystack Wendy started to freak out. It had just run out from behind something and she was watching it making its way through the grass, so Andy and I legged it over. I caught the briefest glimpse of its arse but Andy was too late and it had already vanished by the time he got there.....Aaargggghhhhhh! Still, it meant I could finally claim my lifer as well but we definitely still needed a better view of it though. We then heard some Geese coming towards us and looked up to find 100x **Pink-footed Geese** flying over. Having already given the Corncrake enough time we thought we'd better make a move as it wasn't playing again and we had plans to head down south. As usual we popped in to the shop for some treats and were greeted by the very friendly staff. On the way out we noticed a guy with an RSPB logo on his van and coat so when he said, "Hello" and started talking to us we couldn't resist stopping for a chat. He was very nice and gave us some good info but he also told us something we really wished he hadn't. He said that apparently the Harlequin Duck had been showing well the day before, which was when we'd been there! We hadn't put any time into looking for it, as it hadn't been reported for ages and seemed like a waste of time. Obviously not, according to RSPB Brian.....Urrghhhhh :(. Our decision to not look for it had come back to haunt us, which is what we'd feared at the time.

When we left at 9.13am it was brightening up even more and we headed off for somewhere very exciting that Andy had told us about :P. All we knew was that if we didn't get what we were after we'd be very disappointed but since it had been 4years since he'd found them there our chances were looking slim. We pulled up in the car park and with baited breath went into the shop. This time we weren't after Wildlife but.....Sporks :). Andy had often referred to them and we just knew that we had to see the spoon/fork combo for ourselves. We wandered around the shop looking high and low but they'd obviously been a huge hit and had sold out.....Boooooooooo! :P. Just as we left Wendy noticed that the fridge was full of cans of 'Pussy', which caused a snigger or two. We can't quite work out the sales tactic behind naming an energy drink Pussy! Back at the car we were gutted that we'd failed to find the Sporks but consoled ourselves by deciding that Knorks would be much better. A (kn)ife and f(ork) combo would be a much more practical piece of kit :P. As we drove onto and through the Island of Benbecula not just 1 but 3 people in cars waved at us. We could only draw the conclusion that it was either because I look just like someone really important who lives there or that everyone was just crazily friendly :). We'd noticed it before but hadn't given it much thought but on this particular day everyone seemed to be doing it. It really was the most, friendly place we'd ever been to on any of our holidays, which was nice.

On the way to our next stop we pulled over to have a quick scan of Stinky Bay again. There wasn't anything to write home about apart from neck deep seaweed but a Long-tailed Duck made a brief appearance. It flew into the bay at speed, had look around and flew straight

out again, disappearing around the corner. On our way down south we thought we'd stop off at some dunes for a look as Andy had pinpointed the area on his map as possibly a good site to find a nationally rare Moth. We didn't have any exact location in our heads so I just found an opening at the side of the road and drove in.

We arrived at Lionacleit at 10.13am and I parked up on the grass. We didn't hold much hope as there hadn't been any reports of the Moth recently but that was probably due to the cold weather. Due to this I decided I couldn't be bothered bringing the camera gear but took the point and click just in case. We walked over to the dunes where it was relatively sheltered from the wind and quite warm. We were all on the lookout for very rare Moth but the dunes stretched for miles so surely we didn't stand a chance? The females of this species of Moth are flightless and Andy was totally focused on finding one, which would be a pretty impressive find. Wendy found a small hairy Caterpillar, which Andy said was a **Garden Tiger Moth Caterpillar**. I tested out the Macro capability of the point and click, which was supposed to be the camera's weak point, but it seemed to cope OK after I'd worked out that aperture mode and moving back and forward to focus was the way to do it.



Garden Tiger Moth Caterpillar

Andy found another and then another Drinker Moth Caterpillar so having not found any myself I was starting to feel left out and had my own Karl Pilkington stroop. I consoled myself by taking another macro shot with my point and click.



Drinker Moth Caterpillar

I walked a bit further and whinged, "I wanna find a Caterpillar!" with a bit of stamping of feet as well! I followed Andy into a large depression in the dunes and aimlessly wandered around.



Lionaclieat

Andy had covered most of it so I was just hoping to at least find my own Caterpillar. Just then something caught my eye and after my brain had processed what I was seeing I couldn't believe what I'd found. I shrieked (practically screamed) to the others, "I'VE GOT ONE!" and luckily they both picked up the tone in my voice and came running over. I'd only gone and found a male **Belted Beauty Moth**, which was a superb looking thing. It was sitting sunning itself amongst the long grass and was just hanging there, so I grabbed my point and click camera for record shots in case it flew. Andy was the only one of us who'd brought his camera with macro lens so Wendy and I were deeply regretting our decision to

leave ours in the car. While Andy was getting some shots I decided to run back to get ours, so we could also get some pics. As I ran off I said to Andy and Wendy, "Don't lose it!" I sprinted off and raced back in stupidly quick time but when I returned, totally knackered and out of breath, the Moth had gone :(Wendy had called Andy over to look at a Garden Tiger Moth Caterpillar, which had shed it's skin and while their backs were turned it had cleared off.....Aaaarrghhhh! All wasn't lost though and my little camera had actually done a very good job of capturing a good image of a Moth that we're unlikely to ever see again :).



Belted Beauty

Andy then went off to resume his search for a female (of the Moth variety :P) with no joy and apart from a **Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly** we found nothing else. Very happy with our brilliant and total fluke of a Moth find we headed back to the car and left at 11.10am.

At 11.30am we had got onto South Uist and decided to turn off at Ardivachar, where I thought we'd have a look for the recently reported Kumliens Gull. We had absolutely no info about where it had been seen so it was a total gamble. All I knew about Ardivachar was that it was a promontory on the west coast, where some good stuff gets reported from time to time.



Ardivachar

There were 16x Pale-bellied Brent Geese in the sea and loads of Bar-tailed Godwits on the shoreline, some of which were in summer plumage, but they were all too far away for any pics. There was no sign of any interesting Gulls so we decided to knock it on the head and move on. We were already starting to feel hungry but it was too much of a hard decision as to whether we should have our lunch so we put it off.

Up till then we'd not even given a thought to how people bank on the Islands so were very interested to see a mobile Royal Bank of Scotland van parked up at the side of the road. We realized that we hadn't seen a single Bank since arriving so, for the locals, that must be it.....crazy. Further down the road we heard another Corncrake really close and the grass in the field looked short enough to make it look doable. If we didn't pin this one down there was no hope!



Ardivachar Corncrake field

When we got out of the car the calls, which had seemed so close, were in fact further away than we'd 1st thought and coming from the longer brown grass. We stood for ages just hoping for a glimpse of its head, poking out but again it was proving an impossible task.

We gave up in the end and headed over to Hebridean Jewellery, which is a shop in an area where birds are often reported from on BirdGuides.

It was 12.17pm when I pulled into the car park and we were absolutely starving by then so we cracked open our lunch. The sky was blue and the white sand on the beach in front of us made for a pleasant view while we ate our sarnies.



Ardivachar

Wendy was still craving a coffee, although she was doing surprisingly well without, but as we drove off at 12.45pm Andy spotted a sign for a Café at Hebridean Jewellery and Wendy stared longingly out of the back window. Too late! Hahahahaha :P. We'd noticed that the majority of cars on the narrow roads were being driven rally style, by women. Why were they all in such a hurry? My most obvious theory was that due to the ratio of men to women being so top heavy the women must all very busy working as ladies of the night zooming around to get to their next job. The others weren't convinced :P.

Next we found ourselves at another well-known place for migrants. It's nothing more than a small garden at a crossroads but it had some nice looking trees and cover, so we pulled over for a look. Andy and I got out and walked down the road to view the trees while Wendy stayed by the car to get some pics and say "Hello!" to the little Horses grazing the area.



Loch Druidibeg

We didn't find much in the garden apart from a Willow Warbler and yet again we could see that if we'd hit a good week there could've been anything in there. When we got back Wendy was talking to and stroking a Horse, which could've been a very bad move as she's allergic to them!

At 1.07pm we were at Loch Druidibeg reserve and as we set off down the road a Golden Eagle drifted over us, which was the closest we'd ever been to one before. If we'd arrived 30seconds earlier and were just a bit further down the road it would've gone straight over our heads! We joined the footpath into the reserve and it wasn't long before we realized that it was going to be a challenge, as it was very boggy under foot.



Loch Druidibeg

We could just imagine how many midgies there'd be later in the year and thanked our lucky stars that we'd miss out on that particular highlight. We could tell that due to the cold spring the place wasn't as alive as it should be and Andy, as usual, with no fear ploughed his way through the ankle deep water while we skirted around it as best we could.....pansies! When we were at Birmingham Airport Wendy had noticed that the upper part of her

walking boot was coming away from the sole so she'd had to be careful not to get them wet, which was easier said than done on this particular holiday! Of all the times to notice though.....Doh! Andy suddenly stopped and bent down to turn a huge rock over so we went over to see what he was doing. He'd found a pretty cool looking Caterpillar so we all tried for some pics and noticed that there was in fact 4 of them. He wasn't 100% sure on the ID but reckoned they were **Magpie Moth Caterpillars** and after putting them up on Ispot, when we were all back at home, his guess had been spot on.



Magpie Moth Caterpillar

It just goes to show how much you miss out on if you don't go that extra mile to look. After Andy had heaved the rock back into its original position we carried on, finding another huge Drinker Moth Caterpillar in the heather. He also found a couple of interesting flowers and got some nice photos of them.



Marsh Violet



Wood Sorrell

There was nothing else about and when we hit a particularly boggy section we decided to turn back. The scenery was particularly impressive there though so we filled our boots with point and click shots.



Loch Druidibeg

Back at the car it was already 2pm and we still had loads on the agenda so we couldn't hang around. We decided to drive to the end of the road anyway just to find out what was there and to see if we could see where Loch Druidibeg met the sea.



Loch Druidibeg

Not long after we'd set off we saw another Kestrel and Andy saw an orange Butterfly/Moth flying over the road. He reckoned it could easily have been an Emperor Moth and as this was a moth that both Wendy and I had wanted to see for ages I slammed on the brakes. Andy grabbed his Butterfly net, which up until then had been redundant and we all bailed out. As we did another came belting towards us and shot off across the road and straight up and over a mound. Andy and I chased it round the other side while Wendy stayed put to be the look out. We walked up to the top of the mound and while we ran round like lunatics chasing the one we'd followed we could hear Wendy shouting, "Here's another one!" from the bottom. She called out 2 more but despite our best efforts we just couldn't move quick enough to pin them down never mind catch one! Andy was 100% certain that they were Emperor Moths and said that they were probably homing in on the pheromones

given off by a female somewhere nearby. We'd given it our best shot but had to walk away empty handed, so near yet so far :(. With that bit of excitement over we slumped back in the car disappointed but hopeful that we'd get another chance somewhere else. We left at 2.45pm seeing a Sparrowhawk, hunting over a hill and headed off to a plantation which we knew about that's another migrant hotspot.

Luckily it wasn't far away and we arrived at 2.52pm by which point the weather had become lovely and sunny.



Loch Einort Plantation

As we walked down towards the trees we could hear the song of another Willow Warbler but apart from that the area seemed very quiet. Wading through the deep Heather Wendy flushed a tiny little colourful micro Moth and stopped for a pic when it finally settled again. Micros are always difficult to ID but we reckon it's always worth a shot and even if we failed there's always Ispot :P.



Micro moth

We just couldn't pull anything out from there and with the exception of a pair of Hen Harriers there was nothing else. Yet again it was a great area but there just wasn't any migrant activity happening, so we headed back to the car. As we did Andy had another orangey Moth fly over but he missed getting it in the net by only a few feet. Arrgghhhh.....so close! Disappointed again, we left at 3.15pm hoping that our next stop wasn't going to let us down as we'd pinned all our hopes on it for getting another lifer for Wendy. Passing a Loch we stopped outside a house when we spotted a pair of Common Sandpipers at the bottom of the garden on the grass at the side of the road. As we all reached for our cameras the birds flew.....Typical!

It must've been getting on for 3.30pm when we approached Loch Einort and over the huge hills Wendy spotted a large bird soaring high up in the sky.



Big hills at Loch Einort

We stopped for a look, having calmly presumed that it was our target bird, but then started to doubt ourselves thinking that maybe it was just a Buzzard. The problem was that the whole area was so massive it was confusing our sense of scale. After watching it for while and getting some of its features into view we duly binned the Buzzard idea and watched the Golden Eagle above us. I saw this a good chance to get some shots and started firing while it was still in any kind of photographable range. Unfortunately it was still too far away so all my shots looked terrible :{.

I then spotted something to its left and got Wendy onto it. Neither of us said anything while we were taking it all in but eventually I called it, "That's a White-tail!" Wendy was standing with her jaw hanging open watching her first **White-tailed Eagle**. Finally and after many attempts she'd finally seen one.



White-tailed Eagle

Having failed to see any up in Scotland she was made up to have finally caught up with one :). While we watched both birds soaring higher and higher into a thermal she had one of her moments and said, "Oh wow, if I could stop time I'd stop it right now!" and when I turned round to look at her I was amused to see that she was actually wiping away some tears.....what a puff! Unfortunately, like is so often the case, it all ended too soon when the birds became so high up we completely lost sight of them. With that excitement we all got back in the car and drove to the car park at the end of the road.

As we were getting our stuff together Andy spotted another Emperor Moth flying over and legged it, butterfly net in hand, down into a bramble filled ditch. He'd lost it but you've got to give him credit for trying, after all he was on mission to catch us one to see properly! He searched high and low for it but there was no sign.....Grrrrrr! He then called us over to see something he'd found and thought we just might just be interested in. When we got down there he'd very randomly and spawnily found us a **Puss Moth**, which was another thing on our 'most wanted' list :). After we'd all filled our boots with pics and had a good look at it we went back to car to get the rest of our stuff.....what a Moth!



Puss moth

We saw our 1st **Hebridean Dunnock** and **Goldfinch** of the trip in the surrounding bushes and trees and another Golden Eagle flew oververy nice :). We were already very pleased as to how many of these birds we'd seen during our week and having also had a White-tailed was very impressive.

We set out on our walk at 4.22pm, which firstly took us through a Woodland area, where we saw more Eagles overhead. The Woodland opened out onto Moorland surrounded by heather covered hills with Loch Einort nestled amongst them.



Loch Einort Panorama

It was getting quite late in the day so we chose not to do the longest walk into the hills and followed the lower and shorter footpath instead. Andy spotted another Emperor Moth and went belting after it with his net but yet again it was just too quick for him. We were beginning to doubt we'd ever catch one for a proper look but we weren't going to give up without a fight. We did find another huge Drinker Moth Caterpillar munching away on some grass. We passed a group of conifers next to a Loch and could hear some very strange sounds coming from them. Wendy reckoned they were baby Herons and when an adult came flying in it became clear that it had a nest in the trees. There was also 2x Red-throated Divers out in the middle of the Loch. Further along Wendy stopped dead and squealed in delight, "Sundew!" and pointed out a nice little specimen she'd found on the bank next to the path. She quickly got a pic and we carried on.



Sundew

As we were walking I could've sworn I heard a distant Cuckoo but nobody else had and by then our stomachs were rumbling so our thoughts turned to tea. Andy and I had planned to stop off at the only Chinese on the Islands. It was on Benbecula and after drooling over the menu back at HQ we'd saved it for this day, as it was on our way back to HQ. We had no idea where it was and hadn't noticed it when we'd been to Stepping Stones Restaurant on our 1st night but apparently it was nearby. There couldn't be many places in the town of

Balivanich on Benbecula where it could be, so we crossed our fingers that all would become clear when we went back. The midgies had started to emerge on our way back to the car and Wendy was being bitten to bits so we upped the pace to get back quickly. Andy also heard a Cuckoo calling to confirm my suspicions earlier, so we just needed Wendy to hear one but at least we knew that they had started to arrive. We'd seen 6x Golden Eagles and 3x White-tailed by the end of our walk, including a Golden Eagle being mobbed by a Buzzard, which was great to see even just for the size comparison. Luckily Andy and I managed some shots of it.



Golden Eagle and Buzzard

Back at the car it was already 5.35pm but we still needed to go the Co-op for some bits and bobs and we were starving. Andy and I also wanted to have another look for the Harlequin Duck after tea following RSPB Brian's bit of gripping info earlier. Luckily there was a Co-op on the way so we stopped quickly and while he was paying Andy asked the cashier directions for the Chinese.....sorted! Not only that but Wendy found some Lactofree milk, so my IBS could be set to improve without having to suffer the joys of Wendy's Soya Milk again....waheyyy! At 6.39pm we eventually found the Chinese, although it wasn't easy. It was actually on the side of a pub, which looked like it had been closed for years and there wasn't even a sign up at the front advertising it. Andy and I went in to order our food, through the narrowest door we'd ever seen! Initially we'd accidentally tried the wrong door, which I think was someone's house...Whoops! We both ordered crispy chilli beef but the girl asked us if we wanted small or large rice. I've never been asked that question before so said, "Err.....what's the difference?" The girl shot off and came back with two different sized trays. I could see that the small one was the normal size I'd get back home and instantly said, "Small!" expecting Andy to follow suit. Obviously he was of a different attitude and gleefully said, "Large please." Hahaha. In record time our order was ready so at 6.48pm I put my foot down (as much as you can in a Nissan Note on single track roads) and raced home before it went cold. Even though we were in a hurry and totally focused on getting back as quickly as possible we still managed to add **Moorhen** to our trip list on the way :P.

We finally pulled up outside HQ at 7.10pm and Andy and I left all our stuff in the car, as we knew we were going out again. Wendy bunged some of her soup in the microwave and 3 minutes later, "Ping!" it was ready. Andy and I served up ours and his portion of rice was humungous so his tea was yet again enough for 4. He offered some to Wendy but as it had egg in it she had to say, "No thanks." His master plan soon became clear though when he said that he was going to eat half and save the other half for the next night. This plan went straight out the window though and he wolfed down the lot. Hahaha! Wendy was as usual planning on chilling out for the evening and didn't fancy our chances again but at 7.35pm after the quickest tea ever Andy and I headed out.

It was a lovely sunny evening so Andy and I headed out for another shot at the Harlequin Duck. At Balranald we parked in the furthest car park but this time we decided to walk southwards along the beach towards Traigh Lar rocks and back again checking the bay as we went. Straight off we could see a lot of Sanderling bombing about on the beach including some lovely red summer plumage birds. Andy and I tried our best to get shots of the summer plumage birds but with the poor late evening light and their sheer speed it was practically impossible. My best shot was of a winter plumage bird as it bombed past us.



Sanderling

We made it to Traigh Lar and could see some more rocks further south so we carried on, as the Duck could've been hanging around any of them. Unfortunately the walk was fruitless and we turned back having found nothing of interest. On the way back we decided to go along the top of the dunes, where there was a fence line, thinking that there might be female Belted Beauty on the posts.... there wasn't. Before going back to the cottage we decided to have a look for the reported Little Gull at nearby Loch na Reivil. We couldn't find that either so gave up and headed home and on the way back we spotted a bloke leaning over his fence watching the cars go past. Andy glanced at him as we drove past and he appeared to give us a rude gesture! Hahaha. We think he might have had a few too many, which made us wonder why he had a mobile library van in his front garden. My theory isn't publishable though! :)

When we arrived back at HQ I went to get changed before finally relaxing while Andy sat down in the living room with Wendy. When I came in to sit down I got a whiff of feet and started to feel very paranoid. I felt so bad I asked Wendy, "Is that my feet?" to which she

replied, "No, it's Andy's I smelt them when he came in." Andy readily agreed and said, "Yep my feet stink!" Hahaha :P.

Wendy went out for a listen later on and found a small micro Moth on a window. One thing, which we would've really liked, was to have brought a Moth trap with us. It was totally out of the question though, as we'd had to travel light but it would've been very interesting to see what we'd caught. We turned the inside light on to see if we could attract any more in but only ended up with another of the same. We soon gave up after realizing that it was too cold and still too early in the year so we all headed off to bed for an early night as we were tired after another busy day and had plans for an early start in the morning.

Wednesday 8th May

Waking up at 5am isn't ideal but we wanted to go straight out to Balranald as early as possible to see if we were missing out on the breeding waders by being too late? It was a lovely morning as well, which made a nice change from the rain and wind we'd been used to. There was no way that Wendy was going to be ready in time so she stayed at HQ to get everything sorted for the day ahead while we went out. So far Wendy's hunches had been right and even though she'd been torn between staying in or going out with us, she still hadn't missed out on anything. Would this be time when she wished she'd gone with us or would her more relaxed approach pay off again?

Firstly we checked the approach road at Balranald and then Aird an Runair but there was nothing new doing. We also checked the Bay Head Shop area as well thinking an earlier attempt might help us get a good view of the Corncrake. We didn't even hear it let alone see it. At least we learnt that we'd never have to get up earlier again to try and see it! It was pretty disappointing having got up and out so earlier only to find that there was less about than later in the day so Wendy had been right again! One good thing though was the weather was looking OK for the day ahead, after the forecasts had predicted rain and strong wind!

After our long overdue breakfast, Andy offered to be the driver for the day to give me the day off. At 7.33am we packed up the rest of our stuff and headed to Bay Head Stores. Although we'd already been there earlier, we wondered if it was worth a shot to see if going later would make any difference. On the way 'mobile library man' in his dodgy van drove past us and gave us his special sign again! Hahaha

Back at the Shop it was 7.40am and as we got out of the car we heard the Corncrake calling straight away! Where on earth was it earlier? Grrrrrrr! As we walked down the road we could definitely hear another bird, which made it two! We'd considered ourselves very lucky that we'd seen 1 bird but to have 2 there was just brilliant, so things were beginning to look up :). We stood waiting at the busy roadside targeting the garden again, as that was where the nearest bird was. All of a sudden Wendy started going mental, she could see it standing in the clear right at the back and called us over. She was already firing off some record shots, but trying to get a clear shot of it through the thick hedges and trees bordering the garden was totally impossible.



Corncrake

Andy and I bombed over to Wendy and could see the bird through the bushes. Even though it was obscured, I was soooooooooo happy to have finally got a proper view of one and it was calling too. The little **** then ran off and vanished :(A moment later we could hear it from the next field about 100 yards away! It must have absolutely legged it to get that far so quickly, so we all moved up the road to see if we could get a clear view. Sometimes the image you have in your head of a bird's behaviour isn't what you eventually see in reality and this was certainly the case with the Corncrake. Instead of finding it standing upright calling or, as usual not finding it all, we were very surprised and amused by what we saw. When we reached the field Andy had a look on the hedge to get a better angle on things and accidentally flushed the bird out of the ditch right in front of us! It then ran like a Roadrunner through the grass, which looked very funny indeed. We all raised our cameras and got what we could, given the circumstances but none of us were remotely happy. The bird then came out into the open only 15 yards away and stood motionless for a few seconds before belting off again. In the panic to get a decent shot I'd only gone and focused behind the bird in every single one.....Noooooooooooo! I was gutted by this, the bird was so big in the frame and I just couldn't believe I'd messed up so badly :(Wendy had made a better job of it but she was shaking from all the excitement and pressure to get a shot, which meant that it wasn't as sharp as it should have been.



Corncrake

Try as we might in all the panic we couldn't get Andy on the bird at all. Arrghhhhh! We watched the bird running off but then it vanished and somehow without us noticing it moved and ran across the road to the other side where it called again. He was a slippery little customer alright! We followed it and found that it had gone behind a huge mound so we feared that it wouldn't show again. What we'd also noticed by then was that there sounded like there was in fact 3x birds :O!

Things were starting to get silly and as we stood there depressed our patience and hope were rapidly depleting. There was a lot of calling going on but we couldn't see the birds for dust! We were starting to flag and had split up to cover more area. Suddenly we saw Andy lift his camera and I could hear his shutter going crazy. Andy called us over to look at some of his pics. He'd captured two Corncrakes flapping, possibly fighting, in the long grass and had even got one flying around and one of the shots looked pretty good too. What a jammy bugger! This meant that both Wendy and Andy now had pretty good shots of a Corncrake so I was the odd one out. Grrrrrrrr. I wanted to stay longer but we couldn't really afford to waste any more time, as we had a long day planned. We were just about to walk off when one of them reappeared from behind the mound and ran towards the garden of the house next to the field. Again we followed it in our bins and watched it duck under the fence and run into the garden. What was worrying was that there were a couple of Cats lurking about in the grass and we hoped that they wouldn't affect the birds. It continued to duck and dive behind plants running out into the open in between hiding. We were getting good prolonged views, of an albeit distant bird, which by then was a too far away for any decent shots. Suddenly it reappeared at the near edge of the fence and I took the opportunity to get a shot.



Corncrake

It then went round the back of the house into a dip and stopped calling so at 8.58am we knocked it on the head. We'd been hoping for some better views more than anything and we'd certainly come away with them as well as getting some shots and witnessing some pretty cool behavior too.

Happy with that we wandered back over to the shop to get some supplies for the day ahead. Yet again the owners were extremely friendly and by then they were even recognizing us! Having spent so long at Bay Head both Wendy and I were bursting, so we took a quick detour back to HQ for the luxury of our nice clean WC. On the way out again we drove back down the road and as we passed the shop we couldn't believe what we were seeing. After the slow start of the previous days we were finally starting to see some action and 1 of the Corncrakes ran straight across the road in front of the car! What the....? We really should've stopped and tried again but like idiots we drove on instead.....Doh :/.

Our next plan was to try Committee Road again and at 9.15am we saw our 1st SEO floating over a field. Not long after another appeared and sat nicely on a post to us but we all failed to get any shots, as it took off as soon as we started firing! For some reason my camera started to refuse to focus and I had no idea why but just hoped it was just having one of its moments. We spent what felt like ages waiting for another chance but as usual we didn't get it and ended up leaving at 10.07am, empty handed again:(. Our next port of call was Griminis Pier and at 10.15am we parked up for a scan out into the bay.



Griminis Pier

This is the place, which is meant to be great for seeing Otters and Eagles flying over but although it made for a lovely view there wasn't much about apart from 100's of Lobster Pots. Luckily we managed to spot a very nice **Cuckoo** on a post but unfortunately it made an extremely brief appearance and flew before we could even raise our cameras.....typical! We left at 10.25am and headed to Lochmaddy again for another go at finding an Otter and since it was nice weather it would enable Andy to have a proper go at Rock pooling.

On the way at 11am Wendy was very pleased to find that the Café and shop were open, so that was our 1st plan sorted. We went inside and as Andy was still on the hunt for pressies to take home with him we had a good look round. There was absolutely nothing suitable so we made our way through to the Café and sat down. We were all feeling a bit peckish but our hearts sank when we found nothing on the tiny menu that any of us fancied. Worse still was that they didn't serve proper coffee so with that revelation we all got up and walked out. There's a definite opening for someone to open a proper coffee shop in Loch Maddy!! We passed another gift shop and all bailed in to find a worse selection than in the last one so Andy was still giftless and time was running out. I found some cheap thermal socks though so as soon as we got back to the car they went straight on my feet. Having wasted loads of time we eventually parked up in the layby at 11.45am and headed straight out to the Camera Obscura on the rocks. On the way we were pleased to hear our 1st **Sedge Warbler** singing from somewhere deep in the bushes. Down at our watchpoint Andy went into the hut of shadows and came out saying that it absolutely stank of fish and had Otter poo in it.....Ooooooooooo :). Yet again we had all the evidence we needed to know that they were around somewhere, it was just a case of finding one. We hunkered down behind it to shelter from the bitterly cold wind, as even when it is nice on the Hebs there always seemed to be a biting wind! Andy made his way effortlessly over the rocks covered in lethally slippery seaweed to do a bit of rock pooling. If that'd been me I'd have taken a severe decking and injured myself more, so Wendy and I decided to leave it to the expert, even though the idea appealed to us. He looked really funny and blended in well with the rocks but Wendy made a good point when she said, "Ewww, he's gonna stink!"



Andy Rockpooling

Our hopes of seeing anything other than Andy's bum crack were dying a death and we felt like we were wasting our time looking for Otter. Andy seemed to be having fun rummaging around in the stinky seaweed though and was taking pics of all the things he was finding.



Devonshire Cup Coral

Wendy all of a sudden let out an almighty shriek, "Otter!" She'd spotted one on top of one of the small Islands but she just couldn't get me onto it. Panic set in and we shouted for Andy who dropped what he was doing and raced back up to us. Wendy hadn't dared take her bins off the Otter in case she lost it but in the end she had to, so she could get a better idea of how to direct us to it. She explained again but when she raised her bins back up she was gutted to see that it had gone :(We carried on scanning the area thinking that surely it couldn't have gone far but there was no sign. Andy gave up in the end and went back to his rock pooling and after a while I found myself dozing off :P. Wendy kept watch but it never reappeared. After Andy had finished Rock pooling, which he said had been quite

disappointing, there seemed little point in sticking around so we headed back to the car feeling ready for lunch. On the way back I stopped to look at the weird building we'd passed and wondered what it was used for, it looked very ex-military to me, especially as it had a slipway straight into the sea.



Ex-Military building?

When Andy arrived back Wendy cracked up laughing, as the knees of his jeans were absolutely filthy and soaking wet. When he got into the car she commented on the strong aroma that pervaded from him and offered to do his washing for him later. We all grabbed our lunch and started tucking in. Unluckily for Andy not only did he now stink of seaweed but he'd also forgotten to take his sarnies out of the fridge.....Hahaha! He had other stuff though and said he'd pick something up later if he got hungry.

We left at 1.35pm and on the way out of Lochmaddy we came across two Common sandpipers feeding on a grass verge at the side of a road! Not the usual habitat for a Common Sand but we realized that this was a great opportunity for a shot. Typically though a combination of our poor skillz and our excellent luck (not) meant the birds sensed what we were planning and shot off before we'd even picked our cameras up.....Grrrrr! Further along the road we spotted 2x Greylags close enough for pics I pulled over so Andy could get a shot. Another thing he'd regretted from his last trip 4years ago was not putting any effort into getting a shot of a proper Greylag. This was his chance but.....the birds instantly walked away and hid behind a mound. Doh! At 2.40pm we stopped off at the quarry again for a quick look but saw nothing apart from 2x Fulmar nests. We also thought we heard Redpoll but as we weren't 100% sure it didn't count. It was then that we realized that Redpoll would've been our 100th bird of the trip! Having totally expected our count to be very low on this trip 100 seemed like more of a milestone than ever and we knew we'd be struggling to get it much higher in the little time we had left. At Solas Co-op we stopped so that Andy could go on another bargain hunt. I managed to smuggle some sweets and a huge bar of chocolate to the counter even though Wendy was suspicious I was up to something. The nice lady on the till spotted what was happening and covertly scanned the choccy through without Wendy noticing :). After that we stopped at Loch Solpary for some pics and heard another Cuckoo. It definitely looked like the migratory birds were starting to trickle in but unfortunately it was all happening right at the end of our holiday.....Boooo :(.

Whilst driving in the Hebs we'd noticed that the locals didn't half bomb about on the single track roads. Normally we'd always stop, even though sometimes it should've been them giving way to us. On this occasion we'd gone well past our last passing place but the oncoming car drove straight past theirs as well, at a right old rate of knots. I held my breath and expected the worst but somehow, they managed to squeeze between us and a ditch and sped off like a rocket.....Phew!

At 3.30pm we thought we'd give Loch na Reivel another shot for the Little Gull and we all had a good look around. There was a very white Gull in one of the distant fields, which we were pretty convinced, was another Iceland Gull but there was no sign of a Little Gull. As we scanned around Wendy gleefully squealed, "**Sand Martin!**" then "**2 x Little Grebes!**" then "**100!**" She'd managed to find Sand Martins amongst the obviously new influx of Hirundines, as we hadn't seen anywhere near that many so far during the whole week. Not only that but we'd failed to find Little Grebe at any of our known sites and had given up, so these were also a good spot and put our count up to 101 :). Hopefully this was a sign that other birds had arrived so we crossed our fingers that we'd start to see some last minute movement but we had a horrible feeling that, as usual it'd all happen the day we left.

When we spotted some Rock Doves feeding at the side of road we stopped, as they were another bird Andy hadn't got a shot of yet. They were quite obliging and posed for some pics briefly before flying off. These birds are the remnants of the UK population of real Rock Doves that haven't been mixed up with the Feral Pigeon population yet.



Rock Dove

We'd only driven about 50yards when Andy suggested we check the bay out. We parked up but as I was quite tired I couldn't be bothered getting out and just viewed through the small gap in the boulders. I spotted a dark object in the middle of the bay so focused on it and couldn't believe it when it turned out to be an Otter chomping down on a flatfish. I shouted to Andy and Wendy and got them onto it too. While we all watched it eating we realized that it wasn't that far off the rocks down on the beach. Andy was way ahead of us and already grabbing his gear so we followed suit and ran down to the beach using the rocks to hide behind so the Otter didn't see us. We thought this had worked a treat but somehow the Otter must've spotted us coming and had managed to swim away without us

even seeing it! Sneaky bugger! We trudged back to the car at 4.15pm and headed off for Balranald on our way home.



Balranald Corncrake garden!

When we arrived Andy and I went into the Visitors Centre to check the reports board and our jaws nearly hit the floor when we read one of the entries. There'd been a Hoopoe earlier in the day by a Croft in one of the fields up the road :O! What the....? Arrghhhhh! In some ways the oldy worldy nature of the Hebs is good but on the other side of the coin is that the communication tech is distinctly backwards. As it was so many hours later we knew that it'd be a complete waste of time but we had to at least try so we drove straight back up the road and parked up. We knew fine well that it'd probably cleared off ages ago but it was worth a shot anyway. It was cold and grey outside but Andy went that extra mile by walking out to the main road to check some fields further away. Hoopoe would've been a great bird to end the trip with but we left empty handed.

It was 5.20pm when we arrived back at HQ and, as arranged some of the door handles had been replaced. We also had a letter through the door informing us that the water would be turned off for the whole of Monday, so we were glad we'd be gone by then. Andy had gone to get changed out of his wet clothes and when he emerged he was a bit freaked out to have found a tick on his side. Wendy and I had a look and were totally grossed out but Wendy went off to dig out the tick removers we'd packed. We'd been paranoid about getting ticks all week after Andy told us that he and his wife had been covered in them, last time he was there. I think all our winter layers had prevented any of them getting anywhere near us whereas Andy on the other hand, didn't have ½ the amount of clothing on as us and his T-shirt wasn't tucked in, making him a prime target. In turn we all tried to remove his newly acquired but unwelcome mate with the specially designed tool but the tick was still too flat to get a grip of. In the end Andy removed it himself by hacking away at it and after a good look at the tick Wendy washed it down the sink....Bleurgh!

It was another gorgeous evening and after tea Andy went out to find a phone box to make a call to home. Wendy had offered to do his washing for him but he seemed adamant that he'd be fine and had another pair of jeans in his bag. She didn't envy his wife when she was hit by the stench of seaweed when he arrived home :P. I was just too knackered to even contemplate going out again so instead I stayed in to chill out. Wendy went off for a shower and returned happy to be tick free. It was my turn next and I breathed a sigh of

relief to also be in the clear and was also very pleased that the shower worked this time :). We were all really tired after our early start, so retired to our beds for another early night.

Thursday 9th May

We were awake at 5am again but decided to doze for a bit longer even though sadly, it was our last full day on the Hebs. Wendy was up at 5.45am to find Andy getting ready to take himself out to try for the shots he'd not yet managed at Balranald. She went outside and was happy to find that there wasn't a breath of wind and it looked as though it was going to be a lovely day. She heard the Corncrake and as she watched the sunrise she took some photos, as it would be a long time before she saw views like that again.



View up the road at dawn

I finally surfaced at 6.30am but still felt totally knackered and like I could've slept all day. Andy returned depressed after his fruitless early start, the waders just weren't perching on the fence posts like he was hoping for. After he'd had his breakfast and we'd all double-checked that he'd packed his sarnies we headed out at 8.03am.

As it was forecast to be a nice day we made a late call to try the southern islands again. Maybe this time we could pin an Emperor moth down? Our 1st stop was of course Bay Head Stores and we arrived to a totally different scenario to what we'd found during the past few days. There were no Corncrakes calling at all! Uh? We wandered along the roadside but it was completely silent. It had gone from having just 1 bird and built up to 3 birds the day before but now there was none! We could only presume that the area had been just a temporary stopgap for them while they waited for the vegetation on their breeding sites to grow higher. This made us feel even luckier to have seen them there at all, so we couldn't grumble and just hoped that the local Cats hadn't had a part to play in their disappearance! After our usual visit to the very friendly shop we set off South to our next stop of the day.

We arrived at Loch Fada on Benbecula at 8.51am and were greeted by the screeching of 2x **Peregrines** high up in the thermals. There were also some **House Martins** whizzing around, which backed up our theory of the Hirundine influx the day before. As expected there was still no sign of the Red-necked Phalarope's.....Booo :(Wendy and Andy were already yawning and we hadn't even started the day yet but we carried on for another shot at Lioneclit for Belted Beauty and parked up at 9.05am.

The 1st thing on Wendy's agenda was watering the grass so after warning Andy she went ahead. I could hear her laughing and when I asked her why it turned out that she'd actually brought a worm up to the surface! Poor worm!! After that we headed off into the dunes getting pics of the Garden Tiger and Drinker Moth Caterpillars on the way. It was quite breezy again, so we weren't hopeful of finding what we'd set out to. After searching high and low we gave up presuming that the conditions weren't right and realized how jammy we'd been the last time. We'd never imagined seeing a Belted Beauty in the 1st place never mind within minutes of our 1st attempt. Andy then found a nice Wild Pansy and Wendy found a few different types of fungus so she got shots of them to ID at a later date.



Wild Pansey

Back at the car it was 9.53am and we thought we'd revisit Loch Einort and do the longer walk, which we hadn't had time for last time. Not only that but we were dead set on catching an Emperor Moth in Andy's net for us all to have a proper look at and maybe even get some pics.

When we parked up in the car park at Loch Einort at 10.30am and were getting our stuff together, a lovely Border Collie came over wagging his tail. Andy recognized the dog as they'd already met last time when he was finding the Puss moth. I had a look at his name tag and found that he was called Ben.



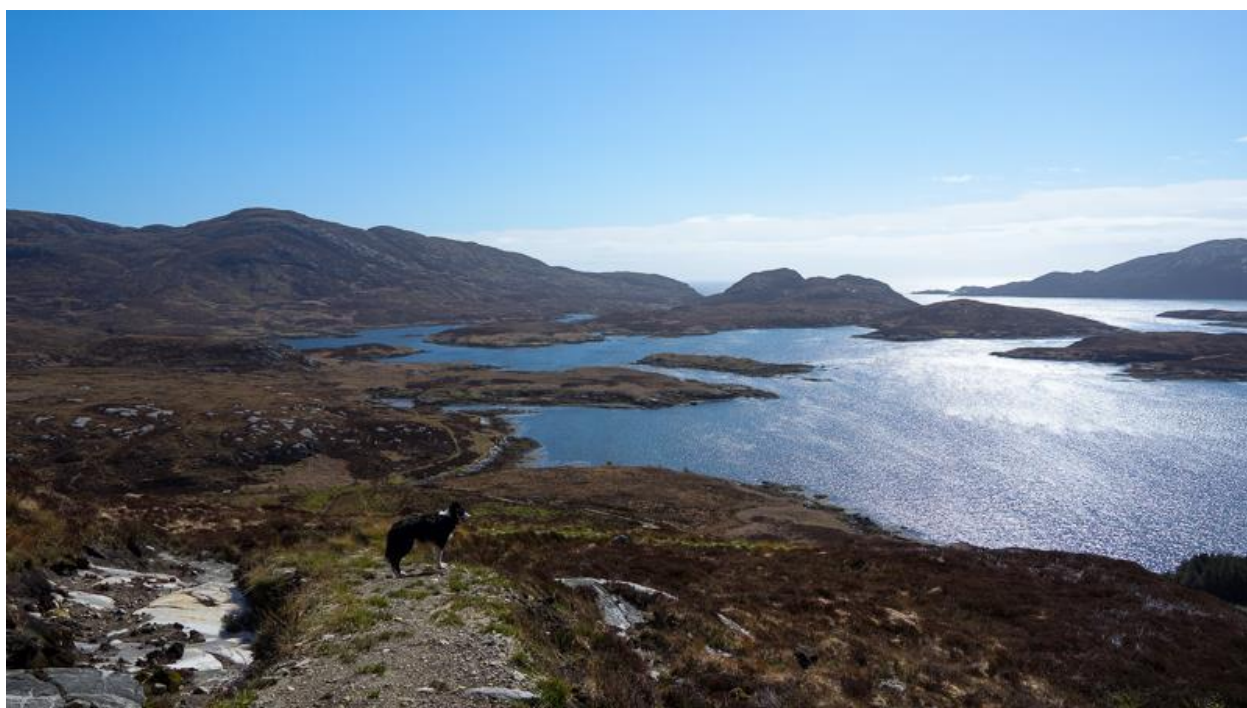
Ben

He was so friendly but the poor thing had a nasty tick right on his eyelid. While we were making a massive fuss of Ben we heard a familiar call and looked into the trees to see a lovely male **Redpoll** as well as a pair of **Siskins**. The Redpoll looked quite white and big and I suggested it could be a Mealy Redpoll. We all went over to try for a record shot but all the birds flew before we'd even raised our cameras. We then wandered back to the car park and as we approached the wood I was positive I'd heard a Wood Warbler sing. I mentioned it but both Andy and Wendy were sceptical. There was a pattern developing there.....Hahaha! Wendy and I stayed put but the only thing Andy could hear was a nearby Wren, which was doing a good impression of one right at the end of its song. As usual I started to doubt myself, as a singing Wood Warbler seemed way too much to ask for, especially in a region renowned for having very few trees! We couldn't hang around forever so started our walk back through the Woodland seeing a few **Green-veined White Butterflies** feeding on the wild garlic flowers but there wasn't a single Eagle in sight. We quickly realized that we'd added another member of our team, as Ben was up ahead eagerly waiting for us. He was to be our Tour Guide for the duration and lead the way happily up the path.....very helpful :). We couldn't complain though and we were all enjoying having him around. Further up the path we came to a weird pool where Ben decided to go in for a splash around. He made us laugh by pawing the water and trying to catch the splashes in his mouth and Wendy couldn't resist getting some pics.



Ben in the pool

Having thought that maybe he'd stay there and let us go off on our own he surprised us by continuing to lead the way up the side of the hill. The view from up there was just stunning and with the sun shining and lovely scenery, it remained our favourite place of the trip.



Ben looking out over his domain

Ben then spotted some other people with a dog down on the lower track so off he ran in search of something obviously more interesting. We all know the saying 'it's a dogs life' but it seemed particularly so for Ben who appeared to have free reign of the entire area.....lucky dog :). Andy and I reckoned we'd lost him but Wendy was convinced he'd be back and sure enough after he'd taken the wrong track down and lost the others he sprinted all the way back up the hill to rejoin us. Another Song Thrush flew over us as we carried on climbing upwards but by the time we'd reached the end of the line we hadn't seen even one Emperor moth or Eagle so we put it down to being earlier in the day. It seemed as though time of day was more important than an increase in temperature. When Andy spotted a small Moth he went running after it, out of desperation, and caught it in his net.



Loch Einort

When we had a look we found that it was a Pug of some description but not sure which.



Pug

We'd heard and seen more Willow Warblers than we had previously, which was a definite sign that there'd been some movement, so maybe Wood Warbler wasn't so crazy after all? We'd also seen Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, **Hebridean Dunnock** and a **Stonechat** by the time we were on our way back but we were very disappointed to have not hit Emperor Moth time again. Just like the 'Littlest Hobo', Ben had decided to leave us to it and had gone off with some other people who he obviously thought needed him more than us. That was the last we saw of him, which was a shame. As we walked back through the Woodland approaching the car park we heard a Cuckoo again but couldn't see it for the life of us. Andy all off a sudden freaked out and let out a shrill shriek.....like a girl :P. He showed us the back of his hand and unbelievably he had another tick sitting on it. In his panic he then

flicked the tick off himself and straight at Wendy who instantly started jumping about shrieking too. Hahahahah!

Back at the car it was 12.20am and time for lunch so we all got in and refueled. Andy took a wander down the road and came back having seen a **Blackcap** in one of the bushes. Wendy and I thought we'd better make the effort to go and look so we got out of car and went down the road to see it. Finally we spotted an Eagle high up in the sky, which was a White-tailed and shortly after we saw another Golden and although there wasn't as many we certainly couldn't grumble. Wendy had noticed that the Wren, which was hanging round the car park, was taking beakfulls of moss into a hole in the wall. She and Andy wanted to try for some shots so I sat in the car, in the shade, listening to their groans of frustration as the bird gave them the run around.....Hahahaha :P. Wendy ended up getting this shot, which wasn't what she wanted but given the circumstances was the best she could get.



Wren

The past week was catching up with me so I ended up dozing off for a bit while they were engrossed in that.....Oops! We were then approached by a woman, who was looking for her Border Collie. We all chirped up, "Oh Ben?" so she laughed and explained that he did indeed think he was a Tour Guide but that his boundless enthusiasm wasn't always appreciated by everyone. We reassured her that he'd been very much appreciated by us and that we'd thoroughly enjoyed his great company. How could anyone not like him? We told her that he'd gone off with some other people to which she rolled her eyes and said, "He'll be back for his tea, he always is." After chatting to her about his wonderful life she headed back to her house and we started to think about moving on, although we could've stuck around all day it was so nice.

On the way to our next stop we were stunned when a young teenage lad walking down the roadside in a hoodie and headphones waved at us as we drove past. Crazy! You'd be more likely to get 'the finger' from the same type back at home. We were heading to Lochboisdale (the relatively big town of South Uist) for something we'd be extremely

unlikely to pick up elsewhere. It's not every day we go out of way just to see a Jackdaw but although they may be common as muck back at home they're pretty scarce in the Hebs due to the lack of trees. For the same reason there are no Rooks or Woodpeckers but, needless to say there weren't any Jackdaws :{.

At 1.37pm we approached the 1st modern looking café we'd seen so far and Wendy's eyes lit up so we parked up and went in. Wendy obviously ordered herself a Cappuccino while Andy went for the healthy option of Irn Bru and chips (which Wendy helped him with) so I thought I'd treat myself too. I wanted a Sausage bap but they didn't do it, so thought about some Ice-cream but then thought I better not risk it with my IBS then I noticed on the counter a Mars Bar cake. It looked nice and Chocolatey so I thought I'd better add it to my Choc cake knowledge database. While everyone else was happy with their choices I found myself struggling with mine. It wasn't what I'd expected at all and was a sickly combination of Mars Bar (even though you couldn't taste it) and soggy Rice Crispies. By the time I'd nearly finished it I ended up having a massive sugar rush, which resulted in me getting the giggles in the middle of a busy Café...how embarrassing! After that we went for a scan of the ferry port but didn't stick around for long, as there was literally nothing there. By then I needed to fill the car up with petrol so I stopped at the nearest petrol station but as I was filling up I suddenly noticed they were charging 156.9 per litre for normal unleaded :O! It was 13p cheaper on North Uist and I was so disgusted at the price that I only put £5 in to keep us going for the time being. It looked like they were at the age old game of overcharging because it was the 1st petrol station passengers hit after getting off the Ferry from Oban!

There'd been a report of Mealy Redpoll at South Glendale the day before so as it was on our route to the southern most accessible point we thought we'd drop by to check it out. We arrived at 2.45pm to find a Cuckoo sitting close to us on an overhead cable but by the time we'd grabbed our cameras it flew! We had a quick look for the Redpoll but heard and found nothing so we carried on our journey south.



Driving south

By 2.55pm we had gone across the Eriskay causeway and onto the island.



Eriskay causeway

The 'Am Politition' is a pub, where Andy had mentioned he'd stopped at 4 years ago. As it was such a lovely afternoon and Wendy was fancying a ½ Shandy in the beer garden we decided to stop for a drink. It gets its name from the ship, which went aground in 1941 carrying 20,000 cases of whiskey destined for the American market. The whiskey was later washed up on the beaches and grabbed by the locals and is the story behind the film 'Whiskey Galore.' Wendy ventured inside to get our drinks and was served by the friendliest landlady she'd ever encountered while Andy and I sat outside on a bench waiting for her to bring the Irn Bru's out. We had a great view from there so we sat in the sun doing the touristy bit and chilling out.



Am Politician

We could hear some Twite calling in the background and the constant foreign chatter of the Starlings. Not being the types to hang around we were finished and heading off again by 3.22pm.

Eriskay was a very pretty island and as we reached the furthest point south at the Sound of Barra I could imagine the famous Isle of Barra being just like Eriskay but bigger.



Looking towards Barra

At the Barra Ferry car park we saw at least 15 Red-breasted Mergansers, Razorbill and 2 Twite. This is supposedly another good place for Otter and Divers but try as we might we couldn't find anything else so left at 3.35pm. Driving back over the Island I had to take a picture of one of the most densely populated areas we'd seen all week!



Eriskay

It was getting later in the day and we noticed a sudden burst in Butterflies and Moths flying about. That was it, we would head home via Loch Einort for a last ditch attempt at catching us an Emperor moth!

Back at Loch Einort it was 4.05pm and in the car park was 2x Tour vans, which had to be a good sign. We'd already worked out ourselves that it was definitely a place best visited later in the day but this made us even more certain.



Loch Einort

A Peregrine flew overhead and we counted 3x Buzzards in total. With nothing to compare them to they could easily be misidentified as Eagles.....until a gigantic Golden Eagle joined them and made them look miniscule. With no sign of Ben we headed off back through the Woodland and Andy zoomed off ahead with his net. Wendy and I stopped dead in our tracks when my suspicions from earlier were confirmed and we heard a **Wood Warbler** singing clear as a bell. We followed the sound through the trees until we found the bird flitting its way through the branches. Typically it didn't stay put for long or come out into the clear to enable us to get any shots. It was good to see it, as it was another unexpected bird for the trip and an indication that there'd been some migration movement.

When we caught up with Andy he was still frantically searching for Emperor Moths but although it wasn't what we'd set out to find he'd caught something in his net. When we looked we found that it was a **Common Heath Moth** so we tried to get some shots before it flew. They didn't really work as the Moth was against the black net so the background looked anything but natural!



Common Heath

We could hear a Cuckoo calling from nearby and spotted it working its way along the fence posts higher up on the hill. Andy was a man on a mission though and had seen an Emperor already so the later in the day theory had definitely worked. As he ran round with his net like a nutter trying his hardest to catch one, Wendy couldn't resist a sneaky pic :P.



Andy "netting"

There's always a bad side to everything and although the time was good for the Emperors it was also true of the midgies, which had started to come out in force and were eating Wendy and I alive. After putting up with them for as long as she could stand Wendy had to give in and headed off to hide in the car. She was back alone at 5.09pm and after giving it our best shot and failing again Andy and I also gave up and were back not long after at 5.15pm. Andy was well depressed and as we drove away we spotted the Cuckoo again and

an Emperor flying over the road and then another and another. They just kept on coming so I pulled over and Andy went charging down the road after them. I got out of the car and looked on in hope but saw him miss one by just inches, which was the closest he'd come all week. So near yet so far! When he returned and I drove off he stuck his net out of the window just in case. Hahaha things were getting desperate! :D.



Mobile 'netting'

We finally left reluctantly for the last time at 5.35pm knowing that we wouldn't be back as we were leaving for home the following day. We'll always have very fond memories of the place though and who knows we may even get the chance to visit again. We stopped off at Benbecula Co-op to pick up some bits for lunch the next day and then had a quick listen at Bay Head Stores. Yet again there was no sign of the Corncrakes so we called it a day and headed for home.

Back at HQ it was 6.42pm and after a quick tea Wendy started packing up our stuff and did some last minute washing before going for a shower. Andy and I went out again at 7.24pm to make use of my last night. Due to problems with the flight times Andy was having to stay an extra night so Wendy and I fully expected all the birds to arrive tomorrow lunch time when we waiting for our flight at the Airport. Andy was bound to get some good luck once the Jinxes had gone and we sincerely hoped that he did.

We went straight to Balranald, thinking that with the recent movement there could be a chance of the Corncrake being back on site. As usual there was nothing and still no Waders on fence posts for us to fill our boots with! We had a quick look around the Visitor Centre and spotted a couple of Twite singing from the fence. We took the opportunity to grab some shots, as it's not every day you have Twite sitting in front of you.



Twite

There wasn't anything else about so we had a drive to the beach car park. We were hoping the non-stop Rock Doves round there would finally pose for a decent photo but they were more flighty than everGrrrr! At the beach we probably had the highest count of waders we'd had all week including at least 1000 Dunlin, which was a site in itself. These were also more flighty than ever so we gave up very quickly on them. On the drive back out we found a Corn Bunting posing perfectly and being lit by the low evening sun. Unbelievably it was on my side for once so I filled my boots and was finally happy by getting a shot I couldn't complain about.



Corn Bunting

Further along a Wheatear was very close to the car on Andy's side so we decided to try a bit of slow 'drive by shooting.' It took a few goes but eventually Andy got some cracking shots of it. I was chuffed to have got quite a few shots on my last evening. As the light dropped below the cloud on the horizon we took it as a sign to leave. Wendy had made the most of watching the sunset out of the window for the last time and felt very hard of having to leave such an idyllic place. At 11pm and very reluctantly we all turned in for the night absolutely knackered.

Friday 10th May

Wendy was up and about at 5.56am desperately trying to get our still damp clothes dry enough to pack later. Her hopes of using the washing line were quickly binned as it was pouring down with rain and grey outside. I finally got up at 6.20am and was gutted to see that our remaining time was going to be ruined by bad weather. Worse still was that it wasn't going to improve for Andy either and the whole of the following week was looking very dodgy. We were just thankful that we hadn't booked the next week instead and considered ourselves incredibly lucky to have had some really nice days, especially as the forecast before we came away was looking terrible for the entire week. Our enthusiasm and energy levels were at an all time low so we didn't hurry ourselves to get out. After getting our lunch together we eventually made the effort and left at 8.10am.

Our 1st plan was to get petrol, as we needed to leave $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tank in the car, the same as when we'd picked it up. As usual we were greeted by the friendly owners at Bay Head Stores and felt sad that we'd back to the unfriendly IOM later in the day. There was still no sign of any Corncrakes but the petrol was only 143.9 per litre, so I filled it up without feeling ripped off. We headed to Committee Road after that hoping to salvage our failed attempts at a SEO shot.

At 8.40am we pulled up in a layby and sat in the car to wait but the view was grim, grey and wet so we weren't hopeful in the slightest. We spotted a SEO floating over the heather but it landed miles away on the hill and completely cleared off about a minute later. Another bird then flew in and sat on a fencepost further down the road so I edged the car forward. It flew and landed on a mound in the deep grass with just its head exposed.....Urrghhhh! Wendy saw it as a last ditch photo opportunity and started to fire off some shots, which weren't too bad but it was still too much to ask of her lens. I switched my lens plus TC combo onto her camera to give her a better chance. She heaved it up onto the open window and got some much better results. After initially thinking that she was crazy for even trying at that distance, I was actually quite impressed.



Short-eared Owl

Our attentions then turned to something causing a bit of kafuffle with a Gull. When we got our bins on it we saw 2x Arctic Skuas chasing the Gull about before landing on the water in a Loch. Although we weren't seeing any new birds we were at least seeing some different behavior, which was quite cool. We knew that the Skuas nest somewhere on the Hebrides and wondered if was there. It was very weird to see 2 Skuas acting like that miles inland though. With the clock ticking we couldn't afford to waste any time and left at 9.32am. Driving away from the road Wendy got some pics of the area, as it was heavily used for the peat industry.



Peat drying out

Even though it seemed to be on a commercial scale it didn't appear to have had any affect on the landscape so the Hebridean people obviously do everything in a very sustainable way.

We then went straight on to Balranald for a quick WC break and a look for Corncrake.....with no joy. It was obviously still too early in the year for the performing Visitor Centre garden Corncrakes. As it was our last chance we decided to go for another shot at Loch Na Reivel bay for Otter but when we got there it was freezing cold and dead. We knew that it would be hard to beat our 1st encounter with that Otter at Balranald but you can never get enough of seeing Otters, so we wanted to take every opportunity. Our luck was well and truly out and we were struggling to think of what to do next. With the black cloud of going home hanging over us coupled with the black rain clouds overhead we felt like we'd be better off going back to HQ and chilling out. We weren't going to give up that easily though so we decided to pay Aird on Benbecula another visit. It also meant we could work out how long it would take to get to the airport, as we would pass it on the way. Handy!

When we got to Aird the dark clouds had cleared a bit which was encouraging. We didn't have to go far before we saw 36+ Long-tailed Ducks bobbing around and diving in the rough sea. I would love to know what's so special about Aird Bay but this was the only place we we'd seen that many LTDs on the Hebs. It was too cold and windy outside to think about getting out of the car and we imagined what it would've been like if the weather had been that bad all week. Pretty depressing is our guess as it's an inhospitable place to be on bad days. We left at 10.52am feeling deflated and unmotivated so we headed to Stinky Bay to see if anything had miraculously turned up.



Stinky Bay

We scanned and scanned finding hundreds of little Waders but couldn't find anything different in with them. We found out when we got back to the IOM that a Curlew Sandpiper was at Stinky Bay at the exact time we were there! Great skills.....not! There were loads of Eiders out in the bay and Andy and I must've been getting desperate when we spent ages looking at a smaller Duck amongst them. It turned out to be just another Long-tailed Duck, which ironically we certainly wouldn't sniff at back at home but we were in the Hebs and had become disgustingly complaisant. Nevertheless Andy wanted to try for a shot so I joined him whilst trying to skirt around the smelly seaweed so as not to be mistaken for one of the great unwashed at the Airport.



Stinky bay

Wendy decided to pass on the whole event and stayed in the car where it was warmer. This was a good move as we only managed some distant record shots of the Long-tailed Ducks.



Long-tailed Duck

As we were leaving we spotted another gift shop and resumed Andy's hunt for pressies to take back with him. This time he was successful and came away with something to keep everyone happy.

By then Wendy and I were on WC look out and when we passed a weird old building with a hand written sign on the wall for 'Toilets' and Café we pulled over. It turned out to be Nunton Steadings Heritage Centre, which had obviously closed down years ago as it was all locked up and totally empty inside. It looked like it'd been a great place in its day and we just wished it'd still been open.



Nunton Steadings Heritage Centre

We wandered around the garden but there was nowhere to hide, as it was on a main road, but in doing so we found 2x Twite feeding in the grass so stopped for some pics. Try as we might none of us could get anything remotely decent, even though we managed to work our way quite close to the birds.



Twite

We could also hear a Corncrake calling nearby and thought it would be worth having a look for. Wendy and I were now bursting and although it was going to waste time, the only thing I could suggest was going back to the Dunes at Aird so Andy stayed put to try and spot the Corncrake while we were gone. When we arrived back at Aird there were people everywhere including a tour bus down at the beach!!!! We had to be very careful, so as to not have repeats of previous holiday incidents, but we successfully accomplished our mission. Phewww! The Long-tailed Ducks were all still there and quite close in so we decided that we'd have enough time to pick Andy up and go back to try for some pics.

When we got back to the Heritage Centre Andy was talking to an old Crofter who lived next door, so I went over to see what was going on. The old guy was in his 80's and his poor hands were riddled with arthritis but he was still working! He told us all about how he still dealt with the chickens while his son had taken over the harder work for him. We talked about everything including the Hebrides in the 2nd World War, which was all very interesting stuff. I could've spent hours talking to him but unfortunately we had to cut it short, as time was ticking. After that we went back to the car and shot off to Aird, taking the opportunity to have our lunch in a nice location before going to check the Ducks out.

It was already 12.47pm when we parked up, so our options of what to do were limited. After we'd eaten our food we took a walk down to the shoreline.



Aird

The Long-tailed Ducks had looked so close from the beach but down at the waters edge it was a totally different story. They were too far out and the sea was quite choppy so it was pointless, apart from to get some record shots. That was a massive downer because there were some lovely summer plumage males with their long thin tails amongst them.



Long-tailed Duck flock

We reckoned it was time to call it a day at that point as it was getting late and we didn't want to be rushing to get to the Airport. Climbing back up the dunes to go back to the car felt decidedly like hard work. We were definitely flagging and probably in need of a chill out day but the only thing on our agenda was getting back to pack up.

Back at HQ it was 1.51pm and after packing the remainder of our stuff up and sorting out the cameras it was time to go. We were really sad to leave what had been one of our best ever cottages but with not much happening and the weather forecast being so bad for the next week it felt like the right time to go.



Wendy saying bye to Fluff

After Wendy had cleverly hidden a 'Thank you' card under Andy's dinner plate for him to find later we waved goodbye to HQ and drove away for the last time :(Andy drove us to the Airport and accompanied us while we checked in and it was very obvious that our hopes of great views as we took off and flew back over the west coast of Scotland were not to be. Thick fog and rain clouds had returned and were making sure we'd see nothing. After saying, "Goodbye" and thanking Andy for inviting us he left us to it and headed off to try for a last ditch attempt at some of the birds he'd not yet got photos of. Wendy, of course, being as emotional as ever, had tears in her eyes as she waved him off.....Hahahaha what a puff :P.

As we sat waiting for our flight we had mixed emotions. On one hand we'd had a brilliant week in great company, loved the Hebs and our HQ but on the other hand the weather would have put a downer on any plans we would've made if we'd been staying any longer. Looking out of the window there was no way it was going to clear up for our take off (if we were going to take off at all) and my IBS had started to kick off again, just at the thought of travelling.....Booooooooo :(.

We boarded at 4.30pm and ended up with the emergency exit seats with a pretty poo view!



Lovely weather at Benbecula airport

I brilliantly smashed my head off the overhead locker as we sat down, right in front of the Airhostess. Urrghhh, how embarrassing! I was expecting a pretty bumpy climb out, especially being on such a small aircraft but it was fine, no problems whatsoever. Looking down on the grey clouds we headed off back to Glasgow. This time I was ready for the free biscuits and made sure I snaffled up a Tunnocks caramel wafer :).



Approaching Glasgow Airport

It was an OK landing at Glasgow, despite the bad weather and again we had the boredom of the UK terminal at Glasgow ahead of us. I decided that I wanted a magazine for the wait ahead so we had a quick look in WHSmiths. After Wendy had paid and was getting her change she had another one of her moments. She asked the cashier if she could have her change in English money not Scottish! The girl at the till looked very confused and replied with, "No cos you're in Scotland!" Wendy quickly realized what she'd said and started giggling, at which point the cashier added, "And it doesn't matter anyway, you can still spend it!" Oh dear, how embarrassing! We were pretty hungry by then so made a beeline for the limited selection Café. Wendy got herself a Rose Spritzer to lessen the blow of going

home and we shared a packet of crisps. Well, it was the rubbish Café that had nothing else edible in it! We spent about an hour there and after that we couldn't wait any longer and headed down to the departure lounge. When we arrived a member of staff asked us why we were there, which annoyed us, as it was only 10 minutes before the gate was going to be displayed and there was no one in the lounge at all!! We found a seat right under the heating outlet so we could warm up and finally boarded the flight at 7.15pm. Everything was running bang on schedule until then but we couldn't take off until 5x missing passengers were found. Eventually they were herded onboard and we set off. The further away from Glasgow we got the clearer the sky became so we had brilliant views from Dumfries and Galloway southwards. I wasn't sure whether I was allowed to take pics so didn't chance it, as the hostess was right in front of us again. We landed at Ronaldsway at 8.20pm and were quite surprised when the pilot used the short runway, as it wasn't windy at all.

Wendy disappeared at the airport leaving me to pick up the bags but luckily they came out first again. Wahey :). My Dad arrived to pick us up but Wendy was still nowhere to be seen! I had to go back into the airport to try and track her down. Eventually I found her coming out the ladies.....pffttt Women! We piled into my Dad's car and went back to collect mine so I could drive home. We were home by 9pm and set about unpacking. Normally after getting home from a holiday it's 6am and we're completely zonked out so it was a nice to be feeling fine for once! Not long after, Andy texted to thank us for the card and told me that he'd been at Balnarlald all evening because the Corncrake had finally returned to the Visitors Centre garden.....Aarrghhhhh! Typical! The blow wasn't so hard to take when he told us that he hadn't seen it though :P.

We'd travelled just 820 miles in total on our trip and after thinking that we wouldn't see many birds we'd ended up with a pleasantly surprising 106. Having always doubted that we'd ever get the chance to see one, all the work we'd put in to achieve our goal and to have witnessed such incredible behaviour, Corncrake was undoubtedly our bird of the trip. Wendy had been blown away by her emotional White-tailed Eagle encounter and I'd finally seen a Long-tailed Skua after years of trying, so it had been a week crammed with amazing stuff. It doesn't seem right to just have a bird of the trip though and we had a mammal of the trip, which was of course Otter, for all the same reasons as Corncrake. It even goes beyond that when you take into account finding the nationally rare Belted Beauty Moth, which we're pretty sure we'll never see again in our lifetimes AND not forgetting the surprise Puss Moth! There were just too many brilliant and new things we'd seen to have any preferences :).

We were extremely lucky that Andy had invited us to join him on his holiday. His knowledge of the area, massive environmental knowledge and sense of humour made the trip miles better and more enjoyable than if we'd attempted it on our own. We'd like to think that we'll be returning to the Hebs at some point and hopefully it'll be sooner rather than later.

