

Gairloch Wildlife Group

A springtime walk along the lighthouse road

Although never warm, the first week of May was mainly dry and sunny; by the end of the week the last snow patches on the Torridon hills were almost gone. Along the roadsides summer migrants had arrived; whilst watching a Whinchat (with Grasshopper warbler calling nearby) on 4/5; I heard the alarm call of the Great-northern diver (last of the winter birds) and turned round to see the diver paddle-flap across the water, away from an otter! The agitated diver (and a nearby shag) kept watch beneath the waves. Otters sometimes take sea birds near the shore. A second Grasshopper warbler called from rushes near Lonemore; a Wood warbler from trees near the golf course. Willow warblers could be heard from almost every patch of bushes.

A few days earlier, I watched a Common (Harbour) seal swimming below the crags at Carn Dearg. The tide was low: looking down into the water I could also see a large salmon swimming ahead over the sand. In the sunshine and shelter of the cool NE breeze, another seal, whiskers dried out, was basking on the rocks, head and tail held high. Fulmars looked down from nesting ledges nearby.

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Thank you to Paul Copestake and Gairloch High School for an interesting and useful introduction to the BTO Bird Atlas Project (26/4). Further information about the atlas, including local birds, can be found at www.bto.org/birdatlas. Anyone can register to submit records of both common and less common birds, and find out what's been seen locally and nationally; a great resource.

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On 8/5, there were 3 Dunlin, 6 Whimbrel and 4 Oystercatchers by the shore at Melvaig. 2 'comic' terns flew by. Golden plover were displaying high above the croftland; Willow warbler, Sedge warbler, Skylark, Pied wagtail and wheatears chirped and sang. In the pond the tadpoles have grown quickly, Water skaters and Whirligig beetles moved around on the surface. There were woolly caterpillars (Drinker moth?) amongst the grasses, swallows and sand martins above. A cuckoo called; three goldfinches flew by. Not to be outdone, a cock Dunnock perched on top of a fir tree, looked around, and sang.

On 9/5, the sea was calm at first and conditions were ideal for sea watching with lines of glassy water where currents converged. There were a few gannets and shags about, but no cetaceans or basking sharks. [tour boats have reported Minke whale and mackerel near the mouth of Gair Loch]. We headed along the road towards the lighthouse. Two ravens flew up from the shore; we watched a buzzard circle high up over the heather. The sun shone, the views were clear to the Outer Isles and Clisham beyond the Shiantis. But the breeze, from the north, strengthened and it was cool. By the roadside, milkwort and violets were in flower. On ledges on the sea cliffs, out of reach of sheep, were many primroses and sea pinks. A peregrine flew by.

After looking in to the very fine new Rhu Reidh visitor centre, we found some shelter around the corner from the lighthouse in the lee of a sandstone crag and had lunch looking north; with the hills of Sutherland to our right. From time to time a Gannet dived into the blue sea just beyond the rocks. A small flock of Kittiwakes (~20) drifted by. Razorbills and gulls flew by around the headland.

There were white horses as we headed back, cold wind behind. A Great skua flew by, effortlessly, finding updrafts above the sea cliffs and slopes. Next day, the Cuillins of Skye were white again; the Torridon hills dusted with fresh snow.

Forthcoming Gairloch Wildlife Group activities:

Saturday – Sunday 29th - 30th May: Gairloch Wildlife weekend. Please see other notice.

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