

Trapped sprats, dolphins and roaring stags

Late in the day, I could see the gulls hovering just beyond the pier (29/9). I grabbed a fishing rod and went to investigate. My lure (a 2 inch silver Toby) had hardly hit the water when I hooked the first fish. Three casts later: 4 mackerel for supper.

The mackerel were feeding on sprats. Over the following days they were part of one of the most exciting wildlife spectacles of the year. As I cycled home in fading light, shoals of mackerel could be seen boiling the surface of the sea around the sides of the loch all the way from Charleston to Fasaig; further out I could just make out the shapes of dolphins.

At dawn the next day, the south-easterly wind was unseasonably warm (18°C) and the sky spectacular as I cycled back in wearing only shorts and a T-shirt. By mid morning however, it was raining heavily as a cold front passed over. As part of the fisheries trust's survey of smaller rivers, we explored the South Erradale burn in search of juvenile fish. Salmon are said to have been caught in this burn years ago. We found eels and wee trout: the largest a male fish with a large head, shaped just like the pictish salmon on the Gairloch Museum's logo. No juvenile salmon were recorded. The river looks big enough to support salmon; however, stray adult fish may be too vulnerable in the river to survive long enough to spawn. On the wires around the grassy fields were flocks of starlings and goldfinches (50+). A juvenile Hen Harrier was reported from nearby earlier in the month.

The wind had died away again by the following morning (1/10). To the north of Melvaig, a White-tailed Eagle took off from a headland and circled a couple of times before landing again. We watched each other. A seal surfaced; further out to sea a line of Barnacle Geese flew low over the water heading south. I paddled out and met a group of Risso's dolphins, perhaps 10 or 12 animals in all, spread over a km or two of sea in ones and twos. They surfaced three times before diving deep for several minutes. I drifted, and got quite a surprise when a mother and calf surfaced and blew only about 15m from my kayak. Risso's dolphins have large dorsal fins and blunt heads with white scarring from battles with squid which they feed on. That's the first time I've seen them.

To the south, in Loch Gairloch, many mackerel were caught for the freezer, as feeding frenzies continued around the loch. A Minke Whale was seen by several people quite far up the loch. At sunset, a pod of 50+ Common Dolphins was seen from the Melvaig Inn, heading north.

That night, beneath starry skies, stags could be heard roaring through the wee hours (2/10). After daybreak, the seas were still calm and there were many gannets diving in. A line of filter feeding mackerel could be seen ruffling the water surface, extending from Alltgrishan to beyond the headland north of Melvaig. With binoculars we could see Great Northern Divers, Common Dolphins in the distance, and the first of three Basking Sharks. We walked along the road to the lighthouse stopping from time to time to watch the sharks. Four Eider drakes flew by. A southerly breeze strengthened, ruffling the sea. The sharks were also feeding in the silvery lines where currents converge and zooplankton is concentrated.

We had lunch on the rocks in the lee of the knoll just beyond the lighthouse, in sunshine. Several Puffins, two Red-breasted Mergansers, a juvenile Kittiwake and various other birds flew by. A Grey Seal bobbed up. Oystercatchers piped from offshore rocks. In the distance, beyond the sands of Camus Mor, a White tailed Eagle circled up above a skyline of the Sutherland mountains, and glided out of view.