

# *Words and Deeds*

Holiday to Idyllic Islay  
19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017  
Led by Aquila Ecology

## **Descriptive report**

In the depths of winter, in the week when Storm Doris gusted in, I was on a bird-watching trip to Islay – great planning! However, we were spared the worst of Doris’s wrath, being subjected to just a whistling wind overnight and waking to a sprinkling of snow in the morning – our last day on the island. The Scottish mainland, though, hadn’t been so lucky, and as we drove back from Kennacraig the snow was falling “hypnotically” – according to our driver, somewhat worryingly.

But that’s starting at the end; to start from the beginning: we had a calm, if rainy, two-hour ferry journey over to Islay, spotting great northern divers, guillemots, razorbills and other species on the water. Our base was Red Lodge, nestled in a vast wilderness of heather, with a river running past. Andrea Hudspeth, tour organiser/wildlife enthusiast/guide/driver/cook, spotted otter signs – the ‘jelly’ they emit from their anal glands (mmm, lovely) on the paths leading to the river – but, despite setting up a couple of trail cameras, we didn’t capture one on film at the lodge, although the chaffinch and robin were only too pleased to display themselves for one of the cameras (or possibly the food we’d left in front of it). Another bird that showed itself well for us from our vantage point at the lodge was a beautiful male hen harrier – which totally disrupted breakfast one morning when the cry went up: “Hen harrier! Hen harrier!” A scramble for spectacles (me) and binoculars (just about everyone) and a rush to the lodge’s panoramic windows followed, and we stood entranced, watching the raptor scouring the heather for its breakfast.

Accommodation at the lodge was warm and comfortable, with Andrea – aided by Terry Williams of our own RSPB group (super spotter/kitchen assistant/fount of wildlife-related knowledge – dishing up really tasty vege and non-vege fare at breakfast and dinner and making packed lunches as we were out birding all day, every day (well, apart from the afternoon when it \*really\* rained, when we retreated to Bowmore’s shops for an hour).

It wasn’t all rain, though – and that’s the beauty of Islay: you can see the rain rolling in, but also the sunlight following close behind it – and rainbows are a daily, sometimes hourly, occurrence.

For anyone who has read this far thinking, “Yes, great, but what about the \*\*\*\*\* birds??, here’s a list of what we saw (birds and other wildlife):

- Barnacle goose
- Bar-tailed godwit
- Black guillemot
- Blackbird
- Black-headed gull
- Brent goose
- Brown hare
- Buzzard

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Chaffinch  
Chough  
Collared dove  
Common gull  
Common scoter  
Common seals  
Common toad  
Cormorant  
Curlew  
Dunnock  
Eider  
Feral goats  
Fieldfare  
Fulmar  
Goldcrest  
Golden eagle  
Golden plover  
Goldeneye  
Goosander  
Great black-backed gull  
Great northern diver  
Great tit  
Greenfinch  
Grey heron  
Grey plover  
Grey seals  
Grey wagtail  
Greylag goose  
Hen harrier (adult male)  
Hen harrier (ringtail)  
Herring gull  
Hooded crow  
House sparrow  
Jackdaw  
Kestrel  
Lapwing  
Lesser black-backed gull  
Linnet  
Long-tailed duck  
Mallard  
Meadow pipit  
Mistle thrush  
Mute swan  
Otter  
Oystercatcher

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Peregrine  
Pintail  
Purple sandpiper  
Raven  
Razorbill  
Red deer  
Red-breasted merganser  
Redshank  
Redwing  
Ringed plover  
Robin  
Roe deer  
Rook  
Shag  
Shelduck  
Skylark  
Snipe  
Song thrush  
Sparrowhawk  
Starling  
Stonechat  
Teal  
Tufted duck  
Turnstone  
Twite  
White-fronted goose  
Whooper swan  
Wigeon  
Winter moth  
Wren

And here's a link to Aquila Ecology's interactive trip report:

<http://www.aquilaecologyscotland.co.uk/birdingholidays/idyllic-islay/>

We didn't have to work hard to see all this wildlife; we spent our days driving leisurely around the island, either 'spotting' from the car and then pulling over for a closer look, or driving to a pre-decided spot, often along the coast, and spending some time scanning the waves. Both techniques paid off handsomely, thanks to our guides' previous visits to the island and their general enthusiasm for and knowledge of the local wildlife.

My highlight from the first technique was also my 100<sup>th</sup> bird for the year: a golden eagle riding the thermals by a distant mast on a hilltop. We stopped for a while to watch it and then drove on, rounding a bend and seeing it again, near where we'd planned to stop and look for choughs. They weren't around but, hunkered down on a hillside, a juvenile eagle was being harassed by a pair of ravens – bonus!

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As for the second technique, well, that brought about a magical encounter – although we had to visit the spot a couple of times and wait patiently for a long time (it's not always easy, this wildlife-watching lark). Finally, on the penultimate stop of our last day, at Bunnahabhain, with the snow-covered Paps of Jura to our right, Terry whispered that he'd spotted an otter swimming in the sea, quite close to shore. I eventually trained my bins on it, and it put on quite a show, swimming along parallel to the shore, surfacing then submerging, and finally came onto the rocky beach to eat dinner, a shore crab. It stayed for a while and then slid back into the water and disappeared, and we set off for our last stop before boarding the ferry back to the mainland with a spring in our steps and a song in our hearts (just me?).

## **A note about the RSPB sites on Islay**

There are two RSPB sites on Islay, The Oa and Loch Gruinart. The former is a windswept clifftop, offering a good circular walk to the American Monument (which commemorates the loss of two troop ships in 1918) and down the other side, and Andrea, Chris Cachia Zammit and I saw fulmars on the opposite cliff, feral goats just below us, a pair of ravens, Highland cattle, a large flock of twite and other bird species. Terry had stayed in the car park with his scope and bins, observing that we were on a birding holiday and not a walking one, and his decision proved to be a good one, not just on The Oa, but also when Andrea, Chris and I later went for a walk along the white sands of Machir Bay (where we carried out an impromptu beach clean). On each occasion, when we returned to the car, windswept but happy, Terry had seen – amongst other species – a number of golden eagles, a hen harrier, and even a kestrel (an extremely rare bird on Islay). We *\*weren't\** jealous at all...

Loch Gruinart is a more managed site compared to The Oa: there's a small visitor centre, with displays and leaflets, toilets, and a tea/coffee/hot chocolate machine – which we made good use of on a couple of occasions. We timed our two visits to coincide with dusk, hoping to see the choughs come in to roost, and we weren't disappointed as these gregarious, noisy birds flew into and onto the barn where they spend their nights. We were also fortunate to observe three brown hares interacting (it's that time of year, folks). From 'chough roost', it was just a short drive to the estuary where the island's 37,000 barnacle geese fly into roost each winter evening – what a sight and sound!

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## Photos

Our first golden eagle encounter (20<sup>th</sup> February 2017)



Taken by Chris Cachia Zammit

Scouring the sea (20<sup>th</sup> February 2017)



Taken by Chris Cachia Zammit

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Andrea and Chris picking up plastic and other rubbish at Machir Bay (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017)



Taken by Debra Williams

Can you see anything? Me and Andrea (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017)



Taken by Chris Cachia Zammit

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Otterly magical! (23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017)



Taken by Terry Williams (with a smartphone via his scope – impressive use of technology)

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