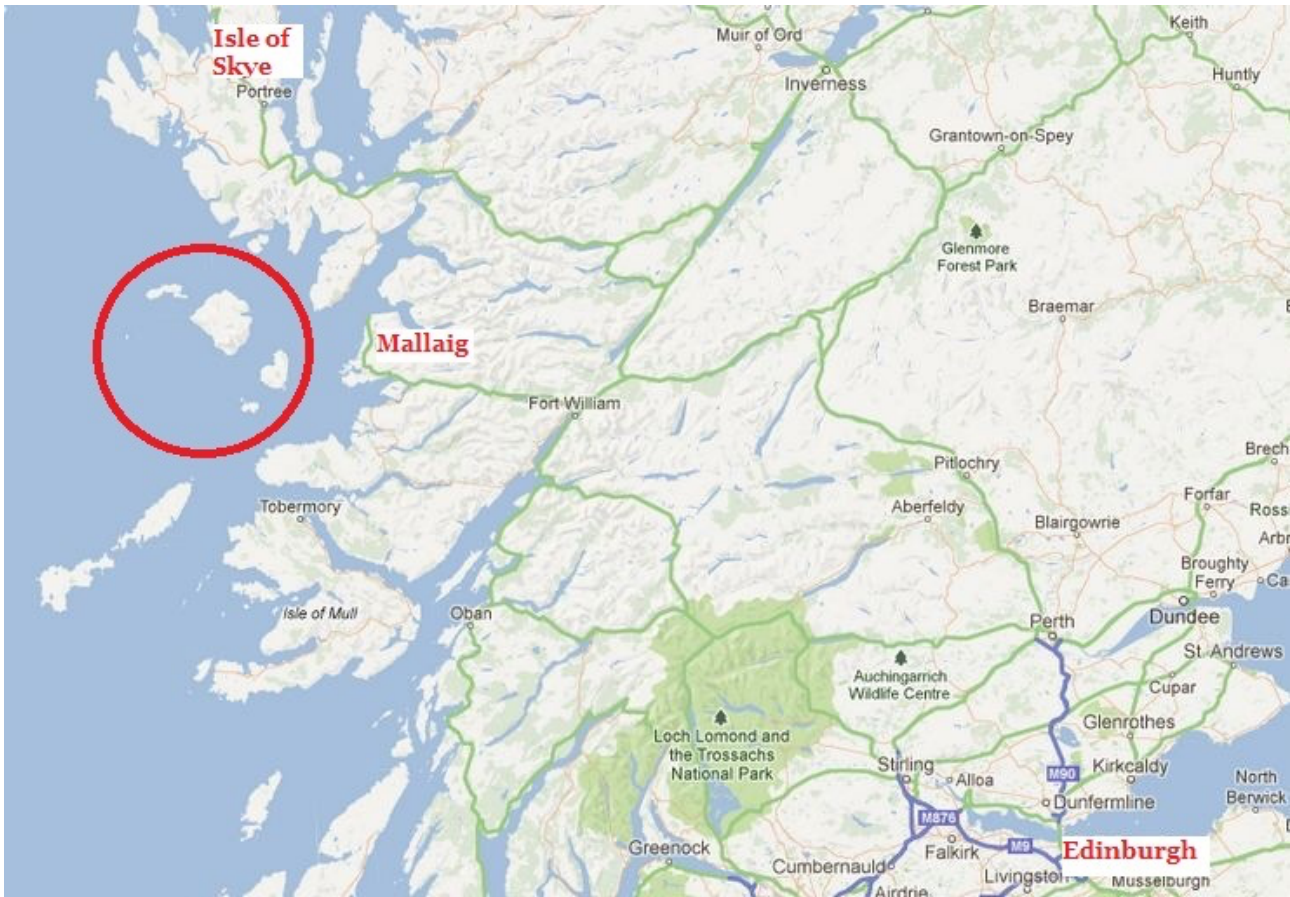


**HEBRIDEAN ADVENTURE  
ISLE OF EIGG AND CANNA**  
25th May - 29th May 2013



Tour Participants: Paul Collins (leader) and seven clients

**Day 1 : Arrival / Eigg**

**Saturday 25th May**

After meeting the group in Glasgow, we drove westwards to Mallaig. This is surely one of the most stunning driving routes in Scotland and, in my opinion, the UK as a whole - with the wonderfully evocative landscapes of Dumbarton, the imposing Glen Coe valley, Glenfinnan (home to the viaduct and the “Harry Potter” bridge), and Corrour, where we had our first glimpses of Scottish red deer. Once at Mallaig, we took the Caledonian Macbrayne ferry across to the Isle of Eigg, the nearest of four islands that make up this Inner Hebridean archipelago dubbed “The Small Isles”. Whilst some sat downstairs in the restaurant enjoying its famed cheesy chips, the rest of us passed the short crossing by sea-watching on deck, treated to close rafts and fly-bys of **manx shearwaters, eiders, puffins, razorbills, black guillemots** and smatterings of **fulmars, shags, and arctic tern**. A **common dolphin** was glimpsed by a lucky few.

We were greeted on arrival at Eigg’s pier by a few **black guillemot**, common in the bay, some female **eider** with young, and the first of many **grey** and **harbour seals**. **Meadow pipits** flitted across in the cornflower fields, and eyes were peeled for twite. The most prominent feature of the island is An Sgurr, the dormant volcano which we would be climbing tomorrow. Our accommodation, Eigg Yurting and Camping, run by the lovely

Sue and Neil Hollands (and their dog Rosie), afforded impressive views over Laig Bay and towards the Isle of Rhum. Like a blessing, two **cuckoos** called as we pitched our tents, flying back and forth across the field and singing throughout the afternoon and well into the evening.

After a warming coffee or nip of whisky, we took an evening stroll with cameras down to Laig Bay and the Singing Sands beach - so named for the squeaky sound that the black volcanic sand makes when you walk on it, much to everyone's delight. A scan of the beach with binoculars showed far end of the beach **oystercatchers**, a **common sandpiper**, **1 shag**, **2 rock pipits** and a **curlew**. A couple of **arctic terns** were diving out over a quiet sea, with no signs of guillemots or divers. Just as we turned back to our campsite, a **golden eagle** soared overhead into the hills, a great first sighting and a first for everyone in our group. Also of interest to those new to Scotland were **hooded crow**, a charcoal grey version of the black carrion crows we are used to farther south.

As we enjoyed a warming dinner with whisky back at camp, a little **wren** joined us and hopped around our camping stove. In addition to the constant backdrop of serenading **cuckoos**, numerous pairs of **song thrush** and **dunnock** sang out from the stone walls. A **sparrowhawk** high overhead was a nice bird to round off our first day.

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## Day 2 : Eigg

Sunday 26th May

Enjoying a leisurely breakfast of pancakes shortly after a spectacular pink sunrise across Laig Bay, the group were quick to add a superb male **hen harrier** and a **buzzard**, giving us our 3rd and 4th raptor species of the trip. The two **cuckoos** had sung intermittently all night and accompanied us down to Laig Bay for a morning of photography.

The black volcanic sand beach, with its infinite burnished rock pools teeming with sea-life such as **water hog-lice**, provided an endless source of fascination for the macro photographers in our group. Laig Bay is renowned for its impressive geological features and prehistoric scenes,; and the receding tide creates fractal patterns on the sand which stretch out like fingers towards the distant Isle of Rhum - a paradisiacal scene for landscape photographers and artists.

After several hours of leisurely photography, we ate lunch on the benches by the beach, soaking in the view of the bay. A few **sand martins** had chosen to nest in a dune bank nearby, and we watched them as they flew in and out of their freshly made nest-holes, sometimes perching on the telegraph wires overhead with abundant **barn swallows** and swooping close by to feed on the midges. Birds along the beach were similar to yesterday, with the addition of 2 **wheatears**, 3 **ringed plovers** and a few **pieb wagtails**. **Rabbits** were frolicking along the grassy dunes and on the hillsides.

After lunch, we walked along the island's main road to An Sgurr volcano, approximately an hour away by foot. Even in the relative heat of the midday sun, the bird feeders of the nearby Lageorna Restaurant, Eigg's only restaurant, fed a constant stream of **siskin** and **coal tit**, some of the most approachable ones we'd ever seen.

Ascending An Sgurr, a primitive moorland landscape, we saw two more **golden eagles** and a **buzzard** along the foot of the volcano, and a singing **cuckoo** which displayed well on a stone wall near a beautiful field of **bluebells**. At the summit, a **raven** was a pleasing discovery. Our return evening journey along the road produced a few insects: **peacock butterfly**, **rode beetle** and **dung beetle**, and of course the constant **cuckoo**.

As we reached camp, the heavens opened, so we retreated for dinner at the Lageorna Restaurant. Despite a limited menu, we enjoyed a dinner of excellent locally caught fish and wine and excellent conservation.

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### Day 3 : Eigg / Canna

Monday 27th May

The rain continued throughout the night, but by dawn had significantly cleared, just in time for our final morning exploration of Laig Bay. That said, the threat of further stormy weather might mean a ferry cancellation and thereby an extra day on Laig...

In fact, the sea looked positively calm and blue and, apart from the occasional light drizzle, it looked like a fine day was promised. **Siskin** were busy on the restaurant bird-feeders, and a **sedge warbler** reeled in a small patch of reeds. A couple of hours or so were passed enjoying the slow rhythm of the sea on the shore, and making additions to our portfolio of fractal photographs, before we had to return to the pier for the midday sailing. The walk to pier offered some very productive birding - a colourful variety of finches (**siskins**, **goldfinches**, **chaffinches**, **greenfinches**) were prevalent along the road and the woodland edges, whilst from every bush there was at least one **willow warbler** or **wheatear** to be seen or heard. A **golden eagle** flew mesmerisingly low, our fourth sighting of the whole trip; and a **raven** perched photogenically on the roof of a rusty barn.

But the best was yet to come, as we were suddenly alerted to a grating noise, best likened to a cross between a duck quacking and someone running their finger along a comb. A **corncrake!** We scanned in vain for this very elusive bird, possibly catching a glimpse through the tall cornflower and bluebells, but with little time to get to the ferry pier, it was evident that a very long wait would be needed to have any chance of locking eyes on this rare rail.

At the pier, another late spring migrant, a very handsome male **whitethroat**, scratchily called from atop a gorse bush. A **spotted flycatcher** on a fence post was a nice find, and even better yet was a much louder grating from a second **corncrake!** Again we keenly scanned the bluebells and rock terraces for signs of the song's maker, but try as we might, could not get a clear sighting. Our dashed hopes were forgotten by the welcome appearance of a flock of **twite** - a "lifer" for everyone in our group. This small finch looks drab at a glance but is very attractive under closer scrutiny, with buff and pink tones underneath and an endearing face with stubby beak. The eagle-eyed among the group noticed a few **redpoll**, similar to twite but with the addition of a red crown, among these.

With two hours to kill on the ferry to Canna, the most outlying of the Inner Hebridean islands, everyone partook in sea-watching (and cheesy chips of course) and enjoyed the views of passing Rhum. The ship's large deck area offered us a prime viewing area for fly-bys of **Atlantic puffins**, **manx shearwater** (appropriately shearing the waves on their long wings), hooting **eider ducks**, **common guillemot** and a few **black guillemot**, a lovely

boldly-marked equivalent of its common cousin. A **common dolphin** was glimpsed and quickly vanished beneath the waves, whilst two **harbour seals** stayed a little longer for everyone to enjoy as they bobbed up and down in the sea swell. Approaching Canna's pier, a **great skua** came almost too close for comfort as it spied the cheesy chips of one of our group.

Stewart, the warden of Canna Island, met us and took our bags to our accommodation, some 20 minutes up the road which winds alongside the inlets. The island on the surface is completely opposite to Eigg's hilly landscapes and white sand beaches - whereas Eigg, we had agreed, had felt positively Oceanic at times, its fractal sands, green velvet rocks and azure rockpools like somewhere in Australia, Canna's landscape were more Nordic. **Golden eagles** and smaller **buzzards** were all a remarkably common sight, with up to 4 eagles in view at one time, and even joined by a moulting **hen harrier**. **Twite** flocked around the fields, allowing sustained views, and a commoner sight here it seemed here than on Eigg.

Golden eagles and buzzards entertained us as they wheeled against the pink sunset sky. With the sky still well lit for another couple of hours, we strolled down to Sanday Island, Canna's quieter, smaller neighbour. It is possible to walk across Sanday, accessible by footbridge, without seeing a single person. We glimpsed a **pipistrelle bat** near the water, and various waders feeding along the shore such as **common sandpipers**, **ringed plovers** and **dunlin**. A few inquisitive **harbour seal** watched us as we crossed over, along to Dun Beag, where we'd be trying for puffins and guillemots tomorrow. Most of our group bounded on ahead to photograph the cliffs in the setting sun, whilst a few of us watched a pair of **great skuas** - which, in typical skua fashion, decided to dive-bomb us. A quick scour of the southern cliffs towards Tarbet showed a few **ravens**, **swift**, **wheatear**, and a **piebald wagtail**. Quite surprisingly, a **buzzard** flew over with a **Canna woodmouse** in its talons: an island endemic found nowhere else on earth!

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#### Day 4 - Tuesday 28th May - Exploring Canna

Glorious weather, so we were up early for a dawn stroll on Sanday to watch the sunrise. A distant **great skua** harassed some **common gulls** - at least not us today. Along the west fringe of Sanday we found 3 **ringed plovers**, a few female **elder** and the odd male bird too, more **oystercatcher**, **wheatear**, **rabbits**, and best of all two **golden eagles**. **Swallows** were starting to emerge around 6am, busily flitting around an old barn with nesting material. A **starling** had also taken up residence in the corrugated roof, flying in and out with food for its chicks, so several hours was passed at a distance photographing its antics.

Our main plan for the day was to visit the northern part of Canna, around the little chapel and Celtic cross, and then cross over to the puffin colony at Dun Beag and Dun Mor. The woodland that covers much of the island look unassuming at first glance, but a minute's walk up the narrow trail which winds through it produced a startling display of **bluebells** mixed with strong smelling **wild garlic**. Unable to resist, I pulled up a few of the latter to eat, not quite pulling up the cloves, but the roots were tasty enough, first sharp and then with a lovely sugary after-taste. There was also some very succulent **mint** - we made a refreshing iced mint tea to accompany our lunch. One of our group placed some nuts and dried fruit atop a stone wall to see if it might attract any birds (a herbivorous golden eagle



perhaps, she hoped!), but in the end it wasn't such a futile idea: first a **wren** came along, clambering along the stones and taking a quick peek, but it didn't seem overly keen of pineapple; then a couple of bickering **wheatear**, one which promptly flew off, leaving the other with nothing better to do than inspect some of the nuts which had been disturbed in the process. Lunch wouldn't be complete without a **cuckoo** calling somewhere in the woods, and we were astonished to see a **pipistrelle bat** swooping around in broad daylight.

After lunch, we headed onto Sanday for seabirds. The walk took approximately an hour cutting across the island, with just **lapwings** wheeling most of the way, and the ubiquitous **rabbits**. A small patch of reedbed, surrounded by washed-up debris, hosted a **reed bunting** and **sedge warbler**, making opportune use of this rarely found habitat. Reaching Dun Beag around 3pm, we saw plenty of **common guillemots** and, higher up on the cliff face, a few **fulmars** on nests. We spent some pleasant time photographing the birds flying around, spotting the occasional **gannet**, **shag**, **razorbill** or dainty **kittiwake** in the corner of our viewfinder.

Continuing a little further along to Dun Mor, a rock stack inaccessible by foot so best watched either from these cliffs or from the birdwatching rib trips, we found a few **shags** on the lower rocks - and finally some passage of **puffins**, the star attraction for those who had accompanied me here, nesting atop the Dun Mor stack.

Our walk took us on a loop around the northerly slopes of Sanday, towards the lighthouse, where another pair of **great skuas** are reported to breed. The male bird was strutting his stuff, wings stretched out far behind him. We found a good spot to sit and watch the birds from a distance, and down below there was a group of rocks which, upon further inspection, revealed 11 **harbour seal** sleeping peacefully. We were able to watch these for quite a while, until we realised that it was getting close to 6pm so time to start returning to camp for dinner. Our return walk just got a couple of **shelduck**, some **ringed plovers** among the **lapwing**, another single **gannet**, and when taking a water break, someone found a pair of **large red damselflies**, very attractive insects with iridescent green heads. **Pipistrelles** over the bridge marked the arrival of evening - some 6 hours since we had seen the pipistrelle at lunch.

Our last evening in the Isles, ending with a sublime eagle watch session - **Golden eagles** and **buzzards** overhead in good numbers - and the local party of **twite**, now interspersed with 2 **redpoll**. On this lovely still evening, it was clear that Canna would be truly missed, for its unique wildlife of course but perhaps more so for the astonishing sunset which it offered us as a parting gift. The sky filled with flushes of pink, lilac, turquoise, a soft palette of creamy yellows and whites. **Manx shearwaters**, a bird which no longer nests on Canna due to the invasion of brown rats within the last century, called eerily from distant Rum as the new day dawned.

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## Day 5 : Canna / Departure

Wednesday 29th May

An early morning walk at 6am along the south cliffs produced a smattering of **golden eagle** overhead, 3 **ravens**, flocks of **twite**, **rock pipits** and **pie wagtails** in great abundance along the shoreline; and on the sea, 5 **black guillemots** and a single **gannet**

quite nicely interacting with **arctic terns**. For the entomologists of the group, common **Heath moth** were of some interest but outshone by a shiny **oil beetle** and **click beetle**.

After our early start, we had a leisurely morning of photography in the bluebell and garlic gardens of Canna House, and on the beach. Those by now tired of photography instead skimmed stones and "fished" for **crabs** in the shallows. The **red breasted merganser** was back, nearer to shore this time, as well as the 3 **ringed plovers** and **oystercatcher** group.

All set to return to Glasgow, the 2.5hr crossing back to Mallaig gave us our last pelagic opportunity - to add to the usual tally of **black guillemots, common guillemot, razorbills, puffins, manx shearwaters, grey and harbour seal**, we saw a couple of **kittiwake** among huge throngs of **greater black backed** and **herring gull**.

