

## SW seawatchers venture north - in search of 'banana bills' and skuas

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Late April saw Adele and I set off in the trusty campervan for the grueling 700-mile slog from Devon to Ullapool in NW Scotland. The idea was to catch the ferry to Stornoway the next day, for a quick wander around Lewis (Outer Hebrides) and a chance of White-billed Diver ('banana bill') off Lewis's now famous headlands, before heading south down to Harris and the Uists in the hope of some skua passage. Our first port of call after landing at Stornoway on 27 April is to head out to Tiumpnan Head, here we see five Risso's Dolphins offshore - a specialty of these waters. Also a few Bonxies and Arctic Skuas pass up the Minch. We then head on up to the Butt of Lewis. A text from Steve Duffield, who runs wildlife tours on the Western Isles (see <http://www.western-isles-wildlife.com/>), tells us there have been Orcas off the Butt the previous two days. Although we're without success there, the place has an air of expectation about it - no wonder it's turned up some amazing birds and



seabird passage over the years. The local breeding seabirds are passing by all the time and we also see some Harbour Porpoises.

The next day after a brief watch we walk from the Butt to Port of Ness, hoping we might yet chance upon a 'banana bill' off one of the headlands; unfortunately a very stiff south-easterly means the sea is rather choppy - calm days appear to be few and far between up here. Diver-wise, we only see Red-throats and Great Northern's. However, we 'trip' over five Dotterel and have fly-bys of four Iceland and



one Glaucous Gull. Early morning on 29 April we make the short trip down to Skigersta, where we have had 'banana bill' success before. But no, just Great Northern's on view and the sea is starting to get choppy, so we zoom back up to Port of Ness and walk out to the same headland we'd been at the previous day. Five minutes later and 'what's this'? A large diver where the bill blends with the sea! Closer scrutiny through the scope and yes it has a large ivory coloured, slightly upturned bill. A 'banana bill' at last! Not only that, but a cracking adult in full breeding plumage. While we're there a



couple of large flocks (c.400) of Pink-footed Geese pass by up the Minch.

During this and the next day, we explore Lewis further, as the sea is too rough (easterly biased winds) for more diver

searching. Out of interest we have a look at Mangersta on the west side, which also picks up good skua passage, but see little as conditions are not right. As the wind dies down we head back up to Port of Ness for a last scan for 'banana bills' in the evening. We pick up what appears to be the same individual as the previous day in the same area. But after more scanning we pick out another adult further out and at least ten Great Northern's.

With the 'banana bill' mission accomplished, early on 1 May we head down to have a look at Harris. Despite it blowing a SE gale, we are greeted with the spectacle of both White-tailed and Golden Eagle up-riding the gale as we cross the border onto Harris. The next day we drive out to the far SW of Harris at Hushinish. The wind has gone SW and we try a seawatch, but do not see any skuas. It does

look promising here though! We text Brian Rabbitts (Western Isles Bird Recorder) to see if any skuas have gone past Aird an Runair on North Uist; yes is the reply, 23 Poms!

One aspect of being a seawatcher in a campervan is that you are away from most media, so the 'longwave' shipping forecast(s) becomes a daily ritual, by which decisions are made. So we listen to the shipping forecast - it sounds promising, so the next day we take the ferry from Leverburg (Harris) to Berneray and head down to Aird an Runair on North Uist. We manage a seawatch late afternoon and see one Pom - that's one more than we saw last year!



On 3 May we walk out nice and early to to Aird an Runair; conditions look promising with a brisk SW6 which gradually veers W5 through the day. Poms are moving straight away, we watch 06:00-12:40, then passage dries up, but try again 15:00-21:00, when we get the biggest flock of the day (21, although a 17 in the morning was not bad - see picture above). In all we record 213 Poms, including 9 dark and 2 intermediate phase birds (most are pale phase).

In previous years we were fortunate to become acquainted with the skua maestro, the late David Davenport. David found that Pomarine Skua passage was generally more pronounced in the mornings and late afternoon / evening, often with a slack period in the middle of the day. David also found that day counts of 100 or more were restricted to 22 April – 26 May. This 100+ window is even more limited in Long-tailed Skuas, to 12-26 May. All these observations were reinforced again during 2009.



On the 4 May the wind is WSW6-7 with rain, later veering W6 and clearing. Conditions are difficult in the morning, we watch 06:30-13:00 and then 15:00-21:00. We end up with a day total of 237 Pomarines, the second session is the more productive when most (160 Poms, largest flock 29) pass by and also our first two Long-tails. This is our first 'four skua' day. On most days a few Bonxies pass by and there may be a light passage of Arctic Skuas, although with the latter resident breeders are also frequently seen.

The next day it's a WSW4-5 and visibility is clear; we see one Long-tail and 27 Poms between 06:30-11:00, but passage dries up. We return to watch 16:00-21:00 - after some heavy rain passage picks up producing 81 Poms and another 2 Long-tails, giving a day total of 108 Poms and 3 Long-tails.

On the 6 May a more rigorous low arrives, giving strong S-SE winds with rain. Watching is hopeless, so we return at 16:30 as the wind starts to swing round SSW7, gradually veering SW6 with heavy squalls. Passage is excellent, though we watch from the campervan due to the conditions. Between 16:30-21:30 we record 255 Poms, largest flock 37 (with other 20+ flocks of 31, two 25's & 21). To add real spice we also see 69 Long-tails (with double figure flocks of 14, 12 & 10).



For the 7 May we brace ourselves for a real storm that gets into full swing during the night. Winds are SSW-SW gusting force 11! We attempt to watch from the campervan, but it's being blasted by sea spray and machair sand and is rocking like a boat! Seawatching is extremely difficult, skuas zoom by in loose shearing flocks and are gone in a blink of an eye. If you've never seen skuas in these conditions, it's a real spectacle, they're all 'shearwatering'! But this does make identification interesting! Brian Rabbitts picks out a Leach's Petrel and later one actually flies past within a few feet of the campervan! We watch 06:00-12:00, but the conditions get too difficult, so we leave then return to watch 17:30-21:30, when the wind has died down to a mere SW8-9. We end the day with 166 definite Poms (largest flock 52 later in the day), but frustratingly put another 113 distant skuas down as unidentified (most likely Poms). We also able to identify 54 Long-tails (including a flock of 29 later in the day) and see four Leach's Petrels.



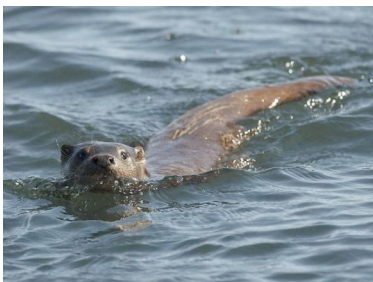
The next day we are all expecting a big passage after the storm. The wind is ideal, NW5-6 veering W6 with squalls - but it just does not happen! We watch 06:00-12:00, but we're disappointed with only 61 Poms and passage really dries up. We try again 17:00-21:30 and get another 56 Poms and two Leach's but no Long-tails. Silly being disappointed with 117 Poms, but expectations were high! Did that storm just give them a tail-wind and blast them through the previous day?

It's another good forecast for the 8 May - wind W5 with showers. We watch 06:00-11:00, but it just does not happen. After a promising start first thing, passage is then very slow and we only end up with 52 Pomarines and a Long-tail.



This was the end of our seawatching as high pressure then started to dominate and winds become easterly over the next few days. So we switch to watching the abundant Uists specialities: breeding waders, Corncrakes, raptors, Arctic Terns, Otters etc etc.

On returning home on the 18 May I cannot help myself and keep looking at the synoptic charts – it's still the Pom and Longtail window after all. Another Atlantic low develops and things look promising, they get a trickle of Long-tails (11) and Poms (19) on 21 May. Then bingo, Brian Rabbitts emails me on 23 May: 295 Long-tails (largest flock 58) and 38 Poms! Light rain, wind S4, veered W4 as front cleared with most birds coming through between 11:55-14:30.



David Davenport's previous skua work was again proved to be spot on. Just goes to show, to catch all the skua passage you need to study the synoptic charts and head up at a moments notice, or you need to live up there!