

SCOTTISH ISLAND CRUISE: WILDLIFE, HISTORY & CULTURE

MAY 14 – 23, 2011



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Gannet

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TOUR REPORT
SCOTTISH ISLANDS CRUISE
May 14–23, 2011

By Andrew Whittaker

VENT's 2011 charter around the Scottish Islands was to follow a similar route to our successful 2007 and 2008 cruises. However, one extreme westerly weather front after another forced us to completely revise our itinerary. Despite this, the *Quest* and its exceptional crew made this cruise exciting and a great success with many unforgettable highlights for us all.

Sea conditions put us in at the deep end on our first night; however, we successfully arrived at the unique, most remote Scottish Island of Saint Kilda. The fascinating and remarkable human history centered on Village Bay combined wonderfully with optional time for meandering hikes amid the old crofts and cleits—complete with Saint Kilda Winter Wrens—to soak up the unique atmosphere of this double World Heritage Site. Certainly a trip highlight that can be easily missed, this island rates as one of the most difficult to land on in the UK! Upon landing, after a short search we enjoyed point-blank views of the endemic Saint Kilda Wren, breeding Northern Fulmar, Great Skua, Black Guillemot, Common Eider, Atlantic Puffin, Eurasian Curlew, Northern Wheatear, and the Scandinavian race of Lesser Black-backed Gull. Offshore, we steamed close to a stack containing countless thousands of Northern Gannets.

As it turned out, the *Quest* was the last ship to land, and after our departure it was over seven days before anyone got on or off the island by sea!

After another overnight, we docked into the shelter bays of the Inner Hebrides at Tobermory, Mull. Here we had an exciting exploration by bus, birding the hotspots of the island. The highlight was a spectacular scope study of our main target, the massive White-tailed Eagle. We had a pair perched near their nest, and the youngster fledged in the previous year also put in an appearance. In the afternoon we cruised past Fingal's Cave (hidden in the fog) for afternoon birding on Iona. Here, we all had fantastic encounters with the much-wanted Corn Crake, and heard its unusual voice before visiting the historic Abbey. That night we departed for the Outer Hebrides.

Some of the best-preserved archaeological sites in Europe are found here in Scotland, and we were lucky to visit several. The highlights were on the Outer Hebridean island of Lewis, with a visit to the Callanish Stone Circle, and to Gearrannan, where we discovered what life was like for native Gaelic people who lived in the rebuilt traditional low dwellings called Black Houses.

A bonus was a splendid Zodiac cruise around the uninhabited seabird reserve of Shiant Isles. Some birding highlights this year included the Gray Heron colony and magnificent Inverewe gardens; watching diving gannets fishing close in shore; and a majestic Whooper Swan, followed by breathtaking Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits and close shorebirds in full breeding plumage frantically feeding at high tide on Orkney at Castle Mey. In the Inner Hebrides, we all got good looks at the Corn Crakes on Iona, and found ourselves immersed in early Christianity. Another highlight was our exciting visit to Saint Kilda, where the last Great Auk was caught in 1840 on Stac an Armin (unfortunately, only to be clubbed to death after being tied up for three days because the bird was thought to be a witch responsible for bringing a huge storm.)

This was a very special voyage to remarkable places and remote islands, thanks to the expert guidance of all of our excellent *Quest* team of leaders. Our quirky little ship with its able crew and compatible group of traveling companions became a friendly and happy base for a truly memorable week of great birding, typified by immense numbers of seabirds and many localized breeding birds, combined with phenomenal world-class historical sites and a perpetual backdrop of breathtaking scenery.

VENT'S SCOTTISH ISLANDS CRUISE

Aboard the M.S. QUEST

Tour Notes

May 14 Group arrive in Scotland

May 15 Meet group at Glasgow airport and transfer by buss onto Oban where we join and embark on our good ship the "Quest". Night at sea sailing towards the remote island of Saint Kilda.

May 16: Morning on Hirta, Saint Kilda historical visit, hiking and birding (St. Kilda Winter Wren). Afternoon circumnavigation of other islands for closer views of seabird colonies especially the spectacular Gannet Colony. Night set sail for shelter of the Inner Hebrides.

May 17: Arrive at Tobermory, Mull- board bus to bird main target White-tailed Eagle. Afternoon depart for Iona via Fingles Cave. Afternoon birding Ioana (Abbey & Corncrakes); depart for the Outer Hebrides.

May 18: Arrive at Stornoway, Isle of Lewis for a full day of birding and archaeology on Outer Hebrides, visiting Callanish, Dun Carloway and Garenin. Visiting Butt of Lewis and it's magnificent seabird cliffs and Loch Stiapabhat Nature Reserve. Overnight towards North Uist.

May 19: Arrive North Uist with zodiac tour around the Shiant Isles. Afternoon coach trip to visit North Uist exploring the RSPB (Royal Society For The Protection Of Birds) Balranald Reserve. Overnight sail onto the Isle of Skye.

May 20: Isle of Skye morning visiting Duvegan Castle and birding its wooded gardens. Afternoon exploring the wonderful Inverwe gardens and birding the woods. Steam to Orkney.

May 21: Arrive Caithness, Orkney where at Scrabster port we board our bus to explore this fascinating island and its birds. Visit Broubster Leans RSPB Reserve and seabird colonies at Dunnet Head, latter a visit to Castle of Mey owned by the late Queen mother. Night sailing onto the famous city port of Aberdeen.

May 22: Disembark at Aberdeen in morning, transfer to Glasgow, or Inverness for folks continuing on Scotland in Style land based tour.

BIRDLIST

Key

H= Heard

Duckes, Geese & Swans (*Anatidae*)

Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*)

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)

Whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*)

Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*)

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*)

Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*)

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)

Black Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*)

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*)

Pheasants & Partridges (*Phasianidae*)

Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*)

Loons (*Gaviidae*)

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)

Shearwater & Petrels (*Procellariidae*)

Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*) – Good looks

Gannets & Boobies

Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

Comorants (*Phalacrocoracidae*)

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

European Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns (*Ardeidae*)

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Hawks, Eagles & Kites (*Accipitridae*)

Eurasian Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)- A trip highlight, with stunning scope studies of a pair of these magnificent raptors near their nest. They were joined later by an immature bird fledged from last year.

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – A distant nesting adult

Falcon & Caracaras (*Falconidae*)

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Rails, Gallinules & Coots (Rallidae)

Corn Crane (*Crex crex*) – A trip highlight to get everybody on this skulker, amazing to think it migrates to Africa and back each year to these remote Scottish Isles! What an incredible voice!

Plovers & Lapwings (Charadriidae)

Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

Oystercatchers (Haematopodidae)

Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

Sandpipers & Allies (Scolopacidae)

Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Leader only.

Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)

Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*)

Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) – A stunning flock in full breeding plumage. These birds were of the boldly marked and striking Icelandic race.

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) – Many in spectacular breeding plumage. Rarely seen away from the arctic breeding grounds.

Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) _ H

Common Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*)

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)

Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*) – After some searching Steve and I were lucky enough to find a breeding plumaged bird. Another trip highlight for me as I had never seen a bird in this lovely breeding plumage.

Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)

Gulls, Terns & Skimmers (Laridae)

Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

European Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)

Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)

Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) – A lone bird offshore was a good find.

Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*)

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

Skuas & Jaegers (Stercorariidae)

Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

Auks, Murres & Puffins (Alcidae)

Common Murre (*Uria aalge*)

Razorbill (*Alca torda*)

Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*)

Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) – Great looking bird.

Pigeons & Doves (Columbidae)

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Common Wood-Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*)
Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

Typical (*Strigidae*)

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Swifts (*Apodidae*)

Common Swift (*Apus apus*)

Crow, Jays & Magpies (*Corvidae*)

Eurasian Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*)

Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*)

Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*)

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*)

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)

Larks (*Alaudidae*)

Sky Lark (*Alauda arvensis*)

Swallows (*Hirundinidae*)

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*)

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

House Martin (*Delichon urbica*)

Chickadees & Tits (*Paridae*)

Coal Tit (*Parus ater*)

Great Tit (*Parus major*)

European Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

Wrens (*Troglodytidae*)

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) –

Saint Kildas Wren (*Troglodytes t. hirtensis*) – This endemic subspecies had an estimated population of only 200 pairs in 2002. We had close observations of a cooperative singing male. This species may well be a good candidate for a future split given its larger size, heavier barring, grayer color and different song from mainland birds.

Kinglets (*Regulidae*)

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*)

Leaf Warblers (*Phylloscopidae*)

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)

Reed-Warblers & Allies (*Acrocephalidae*)

Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*)

Old World Warblers (*Sylviidae*)

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)

Greater Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*)

Old World Flycatchers (*Muscicapidae*)

Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*)

European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)
Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*)
Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*)

Thrushes & Allies (*Turdidae*)

Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
Song Thrush (*Turdus Philomelos*)
Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*)

Starlings (*Sturnidae*)

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Accentors (*Prunellidae*)

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)

Wagtails & Pipits (*Motacillidae*)

White (Pied) Wagtail (*Motacilla Alba*)
Rock Pipit (*Anthus petrosus*)
Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*)

Buntings & Sparrows (*Emberizidae*)

Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) – ‘A little bit of bread and no cheese’ great to see them doing well here and a bird that brings back childhood memories of birding British farmland.

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*)

Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) – A localized, but once common bird in all of the UK. We found this right at the last minute on that so windy day!

Siskins, Crossbills etc. (*Fringillidae*)

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)
European Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*)
Lesser Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) – H
Eurasian Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*)
European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)
Eurasian Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*)
Eurasian Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Males are simply stunning birds.

Old World Sparrows (*Passeridae*)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

Mammals and other interesting records

Rabbits & Hares (*Leporidae*)

European Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)
Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)

Seals (*Phocidae*)

Common / Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)
Gray / Atlantic Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)