

Scotland

June 1-21 2023

Logistics preparations

On departure we only had a rough idea on the places we wanted to visit. Since we had 3 weeks, we were quite flexible and thus planned only a few days ahead. We went with our car, fully equipped for camping, adding to our flexibility. Scotland proved to be very suitable for camping in the car as we found many places that allowed to park up for the night. Sometimes places were clearly marked with a sign “no overnight parking” but there were always options close by. We very often found public showers that were clean for a small fee. The app park 4 night was often used to find a suitable place to spend the night. If we felt a spot was too sensitive (close to homes or the risk of disturbing wildlife) we moved on. No traces were left behind and trash found upon arrival we picked up.

Our preparations were made by reading different reports on mammalwatching.com, cloudbirders.com, checking observations on observado.org and Inaturalist.org. Some reports on Mammalwatching.com said there was some good whale- and dolphin tours on Mull but no mentioning of which companies. We booked a tour with Turus Mara to Staffa and Lunga and a whalewatching tour with sealife mull. Both were booked only a few days before as we were flexible.

We wanted to book the ferry from Rotterdam to Hull but these need to be booked well in advance and we were too late. We decided to take the ferry from Calais to Dover. This meant more driving and leaving home earlier but we lost no time in Scotland.

<https://www.turusmara.com/>

<https://sealifemull.co.uk/>

Weather and climate

We prepared for all kinds of weather. The British and Scottish weather can be quite infamous. Lucky for us we had 3 weeks of really good weather. The first week it could be a bit chilly but then it got warmer. The last few days were getting a bit hot but these were spent in the Cairn gorms, so it was still agreeable.

One drawback of going from the beginning till mid-June is it gets dark really late, if at all. At midnight it was still not fully dark and the sun was back up at 4 am. Because of this we were not very motivated in doing night drives for species we had seen often in Belgium.

Besides the sun not wanting to set there was the issue of Midges. They are present throughout Scotland in various densities. Starting at around 8-9 pm until 8-9 am. Some evenings they were in full force, sometimes very little. Only 1 or 2 nights we had none. Sitting outside covered by midges is no fun so we retreated into the car mostly at 9. Waiting another 2 hours for dusk to go spotlighting is no fun either.

Isle of Mull

We took the ferry from Oban to Craignure. We saw a **Grey seal** during the crossing. On the Isle of Mull we stopped at several places to look for Otter but could not find any. We did see **Red deer** while driving. We drove to Fionnphort as there should be Mountain hare. We walked around in the evening but had no luck. The next day we had a tour planned to Staffa and Lunga (Thresnish Isles) with Turus Mara, departing at the Ulva ferry crossing. These islands are mostly famous for Finian cave (Staffa) and seabird colonies with Puffins (Lunga). We hoped to see some marine mammals along the way but had no luck. The boat was not really designed to do so as the seats on the top deck were facing inwards and from the inside it was difficult to look outside. Lunga was a magnificent place, teaming with birds. We did see an **Otter** feeding between the rocks at Lunga.



On the way back they stopped at a place known for seals and we saw several **Grey seals**. The crew from the tour were knowledgeable about the different islands, history and wildlife present. Marine mammals were not a focus on this tour.

The day after we had booked a tour with Sea life Mull. This one departed from Tobermory. A 4-hour trip to see marine wildlife. This boat was better equipped for a pelagic. Plenty of room on the top deck but you are behind the bridge. So, my advice is to stand at the lower deck at the front end of the boat. We changed midway from the top to the lower deck.



During departure we got a brief overview of the possible species and how to recognize them. Upon leaving port we looked for Harbour porpoise which is commonly seen. Some participants saw one but only to brief to be admired by others. Not long after leaving port we encountered our first **Minke whale**. Eventually there were at least 2 and possibly 3 individuals. Later on, we saw some big dorsal fins. Someone suggested Risso's Dolphin and not much later they called that **Risso's Dolphins** were spotted. We saw a pod of maybe 6 or more individuals breaching and getting quite close. Risso's dolphin is pretty rare on these tours, the crew said.

As we continued, we had some more minke whales when they called there had been a sighting of Humpback and we headed that way. Not much later we could admire the blow of the **Humpback** and several deep dives with the charismatic tail coming out of the water.



As the Humpback was further out at sea than they normally go, our trip took 1,5-2 hours longer than expected. They did ask if anybody needed to be back before searching for the Humpback. They really went out their way for the Humpback showing, they have a really motivated crew and are willing to give people the best experience possible. Grey seals were encountered now and then.

Ardnumarchan Peninsula

The 7th of June we took the ferry from Tobermory to Kilchoan. This is the Ardnumarchan peninsula of which Richard Web wrote a detailed report on mammalwatching.com. It should be good for spotlighting as there is hardly any traffic. We tried to watch for Dolphins from the lighthouse but only saw Grey seal. Driving to the east we saw a group of about 30 Red deer.

Further east there is the Garbh Eilean wildlife hide. We arrived late afternoon and found around 20 **Harbour seals** resting on the rocks and small islands in the bay. It should be best at low tide as there are more places for them to rest. Some rustling in the bushes gave away the presence of a **Common shrew**.



Inverness

Our next stop was Moray Firth, near Inverness. Chanonry point is apparently famous for Bottle nosed Dolphin as they hunt fish with the incoming tide. Parking places are very limited and when we arrived there were none available. With rain approaching we decided to head for the South Sutor car park east of Cromarty. Scanning from the car park we saw **White-beaked Dolphins** late in the evening.

The next day we tried again at Chanonry point but it was high tide and only some Grey seals were around. We then decided to do some chores and try later in the day at Fort George. Upon arrival at Fort George, we noticed that it was very difficult to get a good view on the narrow part of the bay. It is possible to walk along the beach but it is a narrow strip between the water and the fort and you risk getting stuck with the incoming tide. So be careful!

We asked inside the fort about the possibilities of seeing Dolphins from here and one of the employees, Callum, was extremely helpful. Turns out he had worked in conservation of big cats. He took us to the spot where they do Cetacean surveys where we had a great talk and stood there for several hours. Unfortunately, without any Dolphins. If you visit the fort, give him my regards.



Loch indorb

Upon arrival and by walking around we saw many rabbits. In the evening we did a nightdrive and found 3 **Mountain hares** on one of the roads going north from the Lake. Besides this it was a very nice place to relax for some time. Even during the day we could see **Roe deer** in the Moor. There were also some nice birds around.



Cairngorms

We first visited Loch Garten which is very famous for the Osprey. The visitor centre is a very nice place to relax. They have several feeders which attract Red squirrels but we did not see any there. The following mornings we tried our luck for capercaillie. During these morning walks and short drives, we frequently saw **European hare**, Red deer and Roe deer next to the road. One **Red squirrel** ran over the road early morning and walking in the forests surrounding Loch Garten we saw one on a feeder. Our very last stop in Scotland was Loch of the Lowes. In a previous report we read that this is a good place for Beaver and when we got there the volunteers confirmed. Telling us the reserve and hides remain open when the visitor centre closes and where the Beaver would be coming from.

During the day there was a lot of activity at the bird feeders and a **Wood mouse** was more than happy to eat the fallen seeds. Apparently, a Pine marten visited as well sometimes albeit not for the seeds. From the hides we saw **Fallow deer**. The individuals along Loch of the Lowes don't really have the characteristic spots of Fallow deer but have a greyer fur. We saw several including a Fawn.

In the evening we got in the top hide as the water was quite turbulent due to the wind. And indeed. A **Beaver** swam by as predicted by the people from the centre.



After the Beaver had passed, we tried to find a spot with a lookout on the feeders for Pine marten. Birds were still active but it was difficult to find a suitable spot. Since we had a long day of driving ahead going back home, we went back to the car, finishing our trip in Scotland.

Species list

Common name	Latin name
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>
Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>
Common Shrew	<i>Sorex araneus</i>
Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Gray Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>