

West Scottish Highlands, September 2026

Gary Meaney

At the beginning of this summer my partner and I decided to take a quick September trip to Scotland's Ardnamurchan Peninsula and Isle of Mull in search of pine martens, otters, and white-tailed eagles. Ultimately I wasn't successful in seeing any of these primary targets, partially due to unforeseen complications, but it proved a lovely and memorable trip nonetheless. We had booked a rental car far in advance, but that arrangement fell through a mere two days before takeoff. A late night spent on the laptop was enough to figure out a convoluted sequence of public transport legs that at least allowed us to get to the reserved hostels and back. I knew, of course, that wildlife watching opportunities would be restricted without the car, but I gave it my best shot nonetheless.



Glasgow

The first night of the trip was spent in Glasgow, and the standard urban avian fare were easily seen: rock pigeon, carrion crow (lifer), mallard, and lesser black-backed gull (a lifer, possibly due to me not putting much thought into gull identification in years prior). Immediately after beginning a spotlighting session in the local park, we were greeted with an abundance of **brown rats** - the first mammal of the trip - but no hedgehogs or badgers.



Brown rat

Ardnamurchan Peninsula

The next morning, we woke up early and got on our first bus - the E5 to Fort William. On the three hour journey, I spotted a golden eagle, identifiable from its enormous size, dark distal wing surfaces, and gold neck plumage. The only photo I could manage was unfortunately quite terrible, what with being taken at long range from a moving bus. After a couple hours' layover in the quaint Highland town of Fort William, we boarded our second bus - the 506 towards Kilchoan. It confidently drove on to the diminutive Corran-Ardgour ferry and began rattling its way through the bumpy roads of the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.

My eyes were peeled throughout the journey, and although the bus passed a number of known otter hotspots (at speed), none were seen. I did observe some **grey seals** resting on rocks, as well as common chaffinch, common buzzard, grey heron, great cormorant, mute swan, hooded crow, Eurasian siskin, common eider, and Eurasian oystercatcher. After checking in to our accommodation, I resolved to walk west towards some sites with supposed chances of otters,

red deer, and northern divers. After about three hours of walking, I did not see any of the above, but did manage to observe a young **harbour seal** paddling in the lough. It was so small that I briefly thought I had managed to spot an otter! On the bird front, I added the following to the list: little grebe, Eurasian curlew, and red kite. There are also some very picturesque Highland cows outside the Ardnamurchan Natural History Centre.



Harbour seal

The evening was spent back at our hostel (the Ardnamurchan Bunkhouse) with eyes glued to the garden. This is one of the residences in Ardnamurchan that pine martens regularly visit (there are quite a few such houses, especially if peanut butter is involved). We watched patiently from 20:45 to 23:00, but alas luck was not our side that night. A domestic cat proved the only visitor. My understanding is that this is somewhat unusual for the Bunkhouse - martens apparently appear on most nights around this time of year.

The morning after, we got a lift from Glenborrodale to Kilchoan. Our driver said she'd seen a red squirrel earlier that day. If you're trying to emulate this route without a car, be advised that the only bus option for this leg departs in the mid afternoon, which may leave you with very little time on Mull. I'd recommend contacting your host for contact details of locals who provide lifts, or booking a taxi far in advance. European robin, white wagtail, great tit, greylag goose (lifer), and song thrush were seen in our brief Kilchoan layover. A 35 minute ferry trip then took us to Tobermory, Mull's largest town. Bye bye Ardnamurchan!

Isle of Mull

With a few hours to kill in Tobermory, we had time for both lunch and a quick boat trip with Tobermory Bay Tours. From the boat, we had great views of both **harbour seals** and a lone **grey seal**. A female **red deer** was also visible - surprisingly, the only deer of the trip. The tour operators had seen a perching white-tailed eagle just an hour prior, but we were unable to relocate it. We did manage to observe common shag, common gull (lifer), great black-backed gull (lifer), and herring gull. The tour guide was great, I can wholeheartedly recommend Tobermory Bay Tours.



Harbour seal



Red deer

The third and final leg of public transport on day three was our 494 bus to the hostel in Dervaig. I saw a **European rabbit** outside the hostel. Shortly after checking in, I went for a walk scanning the local lough, which I'd been told can harbour both otters and eagles. I did not see mammals on this excursion, but did get to add house sparrow, wood pigeon, collared dove, dunnock, European starling, barn swallow, and red-breasted merganser (lifer) to the trip bird list.



European rabbit

After making dinner, I headed out again for a final spotlighting session, which ended up producing some of the most exciting encounters of the trip. Bats were everywhere - I cannot identify them with confidence as I hadn't brought a bat detector, but their features were consistent with **soprano pipistrelle**. There were also abundant **European rabbits**. A poor Manx shearwater (lifer) was to be seen on a roadside - bamboozled by the artificial lights and unable to take off from flat ground. Finally, I spotted a magnificent tawny owl perched on someone's roof. Another lifer.



Tawny owl

The final day was mostly a travel day, but ended up being punctuated with some great sightings. An early 494 bus back to Tobermory was followed by the 95 bus to Craginure. Signs warned of “otters crossing”, but their promises were empty. I did manage to add some brant to the bird list, as well as seeing more **harbour seals**. Immediately after getting off the bus at Craginure we saw - of all things - a basking shark! A lifer for me. Its unmistakable dorsal fin circled around for a few minutes, a few hundred metres offshore, before diving. I'd spoken to someone who'd seen an otter here the other day, but I was unable to locate any. There is also supposedly a pair of white-tailed eagles which nest in the hills above the town. The ferry from Craginure to Oban was even more fruitful, turning up five new bird species: northern gannet, black-legged kittiwake, common murre, black guillemot, and sandwich tern (lifer). I also spotted a distant pod of **common dolphins**, the trip's final mammal species, which dove before I could grab a photo. A couple of kittiwake feeding frenzies were observed near the horizon, which can be a telltale sign of minke whales, but I wasn't able to spot any at that range. Finally, the train from Oban to Glasgow - it didn't yield any new species, but I did get a good view of a buzzard chasing pigeons.

Sightings reviewed

Overall, the three days yielded six mammal species:

- Brown rat
- Grey seal
- Harbour seal
- European rabbit
- Soprano pipistrelle (likely)
- Common dolphin

Notable misses;

- Pine marten - the odds of seeing one are seemingly quite good at the Ardnamurchan Bunkhouse, but none decided to visit us.
- European hedgehog - one of my hopefuls during the two spotlighting sessions, but no luck.
- Eurasian otter - we weren't able to access any true otter hotspots on foot or by bus, so this isn't a shock, but there were chances in Tobermory and Dervaig.
- European badger - apparently they do also visit the Bunkhouse garden, although how often I am unsure.
- Red fox - one of the possibilities when I spotlighted in Glasgow, but none were seen.
- Eurasian red squirrel - apparently common in Ardnamurchan, at least according to locals I spoke to.
- Minke whale - the kittiwake activity seen on the ferry to Oban may mean we were close to seeing one.
- Harbour porpoise - the only real chances to glimpse this would have been on coastal buses and ferries. Persistent scanning did not turn up any sightings.



I swear they're teasing me.

Of the above, the marten, minke, and porpoise would have been lifers. There are areas in Ardnamurchan where other species like Scottish wildcats can be found, but we couldn't access these without the car.

If my counting is up to scratch, we saw 43 bird species, including 9 lifers. The most notable sightings included the golden eagle, short-eared owl, and Manx shearwater. I also can't forget to mention the basking shark!

Car or no car - the final verdict

Using public transport provided both disadvantages and advantages. Compared to a car rental (especially for a surcharged young driver), it was vastly cheaper. The Scottish government is currently reducing bus fares to incentivise public transport use, so many long bus journeys cost us only two pounds each. The overall transport cost of the trip was somewhere around 50 pounds each - not bad at all for ten legs in total. Even the fact that we were able to get out to one of the most remote parts of the country with zero hitches and get genuinely exciting wildlife encounters is impressive. Every single bus, ferry, and train arrived on time. That said, the freedom of a car is a great asset in both Ardnamurchan and Mull - with one I believe we'd have come home with otter and white-tailed eagle, as well as a longer bird list and much better chances at quite a few of the missed mammals. I will come back to this area in the future with a more stable car arrangement for sure.

It's no secret that mammalwatching can be an expensive hobby, but I think with some refined planning, a West Highlands trip by bus could have incredible value for money. We had booked our accommodations with a car in mind and then had to retroactively plan the public transport itinerary around those locations. However, if you were to find a bus-accessible hostel (or wild camp) within walking distance of a known otter/eagle hotspot on Mull, and I believe you could, the trip would level up massively.

As it happens, prior to the rental crisis I was exhaustive in my research for the trip. I gathered 40+ wildlife locations in Ardnamurchan and Mull from official websites, community forums, Facebook groups, blogs, and advice from photographer friends. I've now added some more sites based on the local knowledge I acquired on this trip to make a comprehensive visual guide to seeing wildlife in the area. It might be useful for anyone planning a trip, so I've attached it [here](#)!