

# Ardnamurchan Peninsula, Scotland 7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> April 2019

Trip report by John Wright. Email: johnpw2@tiscali.co.uk

## Background

We, that is me and two friends, Paul Baker and Max Hellicar, decided to look for European (Scottish) Wildcat. We decided on Ardnamurchan in Argyll and Bute, as we thought that at the present time Ardnamurchan would give us the best chance to come across this elusive mammal. We were aware of the current situation regarding the very low number of Wildcats remaining in Scotland – if indeed there are any 100% pure Wildcats left. But nevertheless, it was worth a try and it is an area of Scotland none of us had spent much time in before so it would be interesting from that angle. Furthermore, we knew that in general the area was very good for other wildlife.

We gleaned information on Ardnamurchan from various reports on mammalwatching.com and the book 'Where to watch mammals in Britain & Ireland' by Richard Moores. To that end we spent most time spotlighting on the B8007 particularly the rush fields and the scree slope sections.

I have seen European Wildcat in Northern Spain and Eastern Poland; Paul has seen them in Northern Spain, but it would have been a new mammal for Max. Unfortunately, we didn't see a Wildcat, in fact the only cat we saw was by some houses, an obvious domestic with a collar on. So, disappointing that we didn't see a Wildcat but nevertheless an enjoyable short trip with some good mammal watching. Maybe next time we will try an autumn visit and see if we have better luck at a different time of year.

The weather was surprisingly good being calm, sunny and warm everyday but with a slight chill at night. It got dark around 20:45 and light around 06:15.

We flew from London City Airport to Edinburgh and had a pre-booked hire car. We stayed 5 nights in a self-catering cottage in Branault which is in the western area of the peninsular.

## Daily diary

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup>. The afternoon drive from Edinburgh was uneventful but we did see a **Roe Deer** not far from the airport, a few **Grey** and **Common Seals** in Loch Sunart and **Red Deer** on the Ardnamurchan peninsular. We stopped off for a

short while in the village of Strontian to look at an American Black Duck. Of interest the hills to the north of Strontian lead was mined in the 18th century and in these mines the mineral strontianite was discovered, from which the element strontium was first isolated. We arrived at our ideally situated cottage in Branault at 20:45.

We went out spotlighting from 22:10 to 00:15 driving from our cottage up and down the B8007 as far as the Ardnamurchan Natural History Visitor Centre at Glenbeg. Apart from **Red Deer** the best we had was a **Badger**.

Monday 8<sup>th</sup>. We spent most of the day on the Isle of Mull and even went on a boat trip to watch White-tailed Sea Eagles. Which also provided good views of at least 50 **Common Seals** hauled out on numerous islets, plus a few **Grey Seals**. There was also some **Red Deer** on the surrounding hills along with a Golden Eagle.

Back on the mainland we went spotlighting 22:15 – 00:35 and saw **Red Deer**, a **Fox** a **Wood Mouse** and best of all a decent view of a **Pine Marten** approximately one mile east of the Natural History Visitor Centre.



Common Seals

Max Hellicar

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup>. During the day we saw plenty of **Red Deer** in the open areas in the western area of the peninsular. A visit to the Ardnamurchan Lighthouse produced a brief view of a couple of **Harbour Porpoises** which were seen only by Max. The lighthouse at the Point of Ardnamurchan is the most westerly point on mainland Britain. We had good views of a White-tailed Eagle early in the day and later a pair of Golden Eagles were nice to watch as we sat on a hill in the sunshine. From late afternoon till dusk we checked out a couple of bays to look for otters – eventually getting a brief and rather poor view of an **Otter** at around 20:00. We also saw a few **Common Pipistrelles**.



Otter

Max Hellicar

We went spotlighting from 22:30 – 01:00 and drove as far as Salen where we drove a 2 mile stretch of road twice from Salen towards Acharacle. It wasn't a good night as all we saw was **Red Deer**.



Red Deer

Max Hellicar

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup>. In the morning we checked out the bays and rocky foreshore at Kilchoan for otters. But found only some **Common Seals** loafing on the rocks. We then went to the Ardnamurchan lighthouse again and were pleased to watch a loose pod of around 12 **Harbour Porpoises** slowly making their way south round the headland. After visiting several areas during the day and only seeing **Red Deer** we eventually made our way to the bay where we had seen the otter on Tuesday, the first bay west of the Natural History Visitor Centre. This time the **Otter**, or another one, showed much better and for longer at around 19:45. We also had a few **Common Pipistrelles** and a couple of **Natterer's Bats**.



Otter

Digi-scope photo by Paul Baker

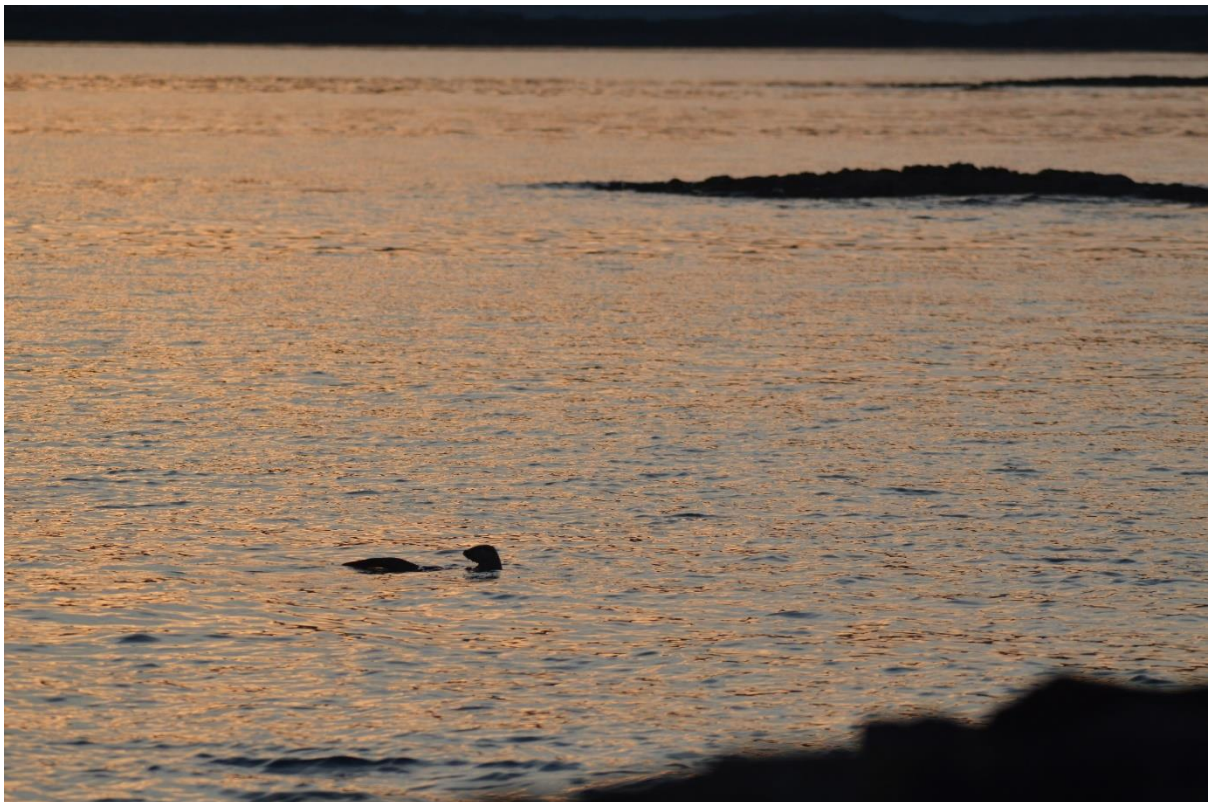
Out spotlighting again in the evening from 22:30 to 02:30. We saw two **Foxes** a **Wood Mouse** and on the Salen to Acharacle road had super views of a **Pine Marten**. It stood in the road when we stopped and even started trotting towards us before slowly making off into the roadside trees.

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup>. A leisurely day driving around various locations. At midday on Loch Sunart we found an **Otter** in a bay approximately one mile east of the Natural History Visitor Centre, the otter performed superbly for us. Late afternoon we drove to Ockley to check the area to see if it was worth a go spotlighting later that night. Off a headland near Ockley we spotted four **Bottlenose Dolphins**. In the early evening we checked out the area around the ferry terminal at Kilchoan seeing **Common Seals** and a **Harbour Porpoise** that gave us excellent views as it swam close by to the shore. We then saw an **Otter** on a small islet before it slipped into the sea. We watched it for 20 minutes or so fishing in the flat calm sea as the sun began to set giving everything a warm orange/red glow – very atmospheric. We started spotlighting at 22:15 and as well as the B8007 we did the road to Ockley but we didn't see anything apart from a few **Red Deer**. We packed it in around midnight.



Otter above and below

Max Hellicar



Friday 12<sup>th</sup>. We saw a few **Red Deer**, **Common Seals** and a **Grey Seal** whilst we were still on the Peninsular. But by late morning we were making our way back to Edinburgh and our late afternoon flight back to London City Airport.



Above and below Red Deer

Max Hellicar





This domestic cat was the only cat we saw on the trip.

Max Hellicar

**Mammals 13 species:** Wood Mouse; Common Pipistrelle; Natterer's Bat; Red Fox; Badger; Otter; Pine Marten; Roe Deer; Red Deer; Common Seal; Grey Seal; Bottlenose Dolphin, Harbour Porpoise.

**Best Birds:** Pink-footed Goose, Black Duck, Great Northern Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Manx Shearwater, White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Merlin, Hen Harrier, Puffin, Black Guillemot, Rock Dove, Long-eared Owl.

**Other:** Common Lizard, Common Toad, Palmate Newt.

End