

NIOC trip Dumfries and Galloway 20th November - 22nd November 2015

Participants Garry Wilkinson, Ray Bennett, Sam Martin, Carol Gillespie, Gerard McGeehan, Rhona Dennison, Ronnie Snoddy, Sandy McWilliams and Martin McClenaghan.

Our ferry left Larne on Friday morning on a generally dry crossing. Nothing much was observed during the crossing until we reached Corswall Lighthouse, where we started seeing guillemots and razorbills in small numbers along with kittiwake, fulmar and common gulls. A single gannet was seen as we turned into Loch Ryan. At the mouth of the loch we saw both red throated and great northern divers along with common eiders, common scoters, black guillemots, cormorant and shag. Ronnie spotted a common dolphin before Gerard noticed a peregrine flying across the loch. Apart from black headed gull, herring gull and great black backed gull nothing much else was encountered before we docked.

A short detour to Penwhirn gave us our first of many buzzards before we drove to Broadstone Road and McCulloughs point. Here we had close views of common scoter, scaup, Slavonian grebe, redshank, eider and merganser.

We then drove to the Wig where we saw a large flock of golden plover, knot, curlew, oystercatcher, ringed plover, lapwing, wigeon, mallard, linnet, goldfinch, meadow pipit, stone chat and a very obliging flock of about 150 twite who allowed us to herd them up to the awaiting assembled birders. After lunch we headed to Ken Dee RSPB marshes and our first red kites near Lauriston. The first hide gave us close views of two nuthatch, two great spotted woodpeckers and numerous blue, great, coal and long tailed tits. Twelve whooper swans were in the lagoon with mallard, teal and goldeneye. When we arrived at the second hide all of us except Sam got close views of willow tit and another nuthatch. Two bullfinch gave prolonged views from the hide. At the invitation of Chris Rollie we then had a welcome coffee break at the RSPB offices at Crossmichael before headed to our accommodation for the next two nights, the Hetland Hall Hotel at Mouseauld.

This eighteenth century building was in private ownership until 1974 before becoming a catholic boys school then a hotel in 1985. The new owners took over in 2014 and have ambitious plans for restoration.

After a hearty breakfast on Saturday morning we met up with Martin and proceeded to Caerlaverock WWT centre via Clarencefield where we saw several flocks of pinkfeet and barnacle geese along with numerous parties of field fare and redwing. The birds started to mount up here with green winged teal from the tower hide, ring necked duck and gadwall from the visitor hide, tree sparrow, lesser redpoll, yellowhammer from the feeders, a very distant short eared owl spotted by Sandy and an outstanding close encounter with a water rail. A male hen harrier gave us a lovely but distant fly pass. We had lunch here at the Peter Scott trail where the rail was.

Our next destination was Mereshead RSPB reserve and more good birds. Close fly past views of a stunning male hen harrier, little grebe barnacle geese, pintail and a fantastic quartering short eared owl. Two fly over barn owls driving back to our hotel was a nice finale to the day.

Our final day in Galloway while not overflowing with birds stood out in quality not quantity. We started at Lochmaben with a peregrine causing havoc with the ducks and meaning the goo sanders we were after we're miles away. A female sparrowhawk added to the confusion. We then drove to Cairn of Grobdale and after a small wait a magnificent adult golden eagle appeared over a hill about one mile away. We all watched it soaring before it landed on a prominent rock. It then flew towards us carrying prey and crossed the road in front of us. Elated we then journeyed on to the New Luce and the moor road to Cairnryan. Here we had a male and female hen harrier, a fast and elusive male merlin and another short eared owl which climbed ever higher until we lost it. Tide was out at Loch Ryan so we decided to finish at West Freugh airfield and we were not disappointed.

En route we encountered a small group of Greenland whitefront geese. At the airfield we didn't wait long for our first hen harrier a close ringtail. I then spotted a distant barn owl but despite constant observation we could not locate it. Meanwhile Sandy spotted another barn owl. Another two ringtail harriers appeared and then a beautiful short eared owl performed in front of us for a full fifteen minutes. Another short eared owl appeared for a grand end to a super birding break.

Garry Wilkinson