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SUMMERTIME BIRDING IN THE UK. JUNE 2010

What made Stephanie and I decide to go birding in the UK in their mid summer? Traditionally this is the time when British birders hang up their binocs and await the excitement of the Autumn and Spring migration times to get back to ticking.

Well, we had several reasons – to escape from both the World Cup’s vuvuzelas and the bitter Highveld winter, see family and friends, and ... Stephanie’s major motivation... get to see Puffins.

June/July are the key months for breeding seabirds around Britain’s coast, and for a long time Stephanie’s wish list has included seeing Puffins with neatly arranged rows of tiny eels lined up in their bills ready to feed to their young. Our month long trip started with a plan to get as up close-and-personal as we could with these charming clown-like birds, aptly nicknamed “the sea parrot”.



After much research and route planning, we found a specialist birding operator based in Scotland, Healthierlea Birding, which included a trip to a tiny and remote north western island reserve of Handa in their 5 day itinerary, a key breeding site for Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Skuas. Staying in their luxury country hotel base with expert guides to drive us around to find such Highland specials as Capercaillie, Ptarmigan, Dotterel, Black and Red Grouse, Golden and White tailed Eagles, instead of us wandering around Scotland trying to locate these alone – made this seem like the good idea of the year! Our Highland Fling was booked, and proved a really great investment as we would

never have achieved a fraction of what we did without their expert local knowledge and access to key birding areas. It was a really great start to British birding, and despite a surprisingly relaxed pace, we found every target bird except the black grouse – this being extra tricky once the lekking season is over.

We were very fortunate to enjoy clear and generally fine weather, especially for the boat trip to Handa. A sturdy inflatable enabled us to circle the island with amazing views of the birds on the steep cliff faces as they whizzed back and forth above us, or floated lazily on the (thankfully) calm sea swell. The first bird spotted afloat was... a Puffin, which made eyeball contact with us before diving - gone fishin' ". From there, things just got better, we landed, walked across the island to spend the afternoon sitting on the cliff edges watching the thousands of birds going about their feeding, preening and regular squabbles about





whose fish it actually was, amazed at their precariously rocky perches on the vertical cliff faces. The Puffins nest in burrows on the cliff tops, and to see these birds zoom with fish-filled beaks into their burrows amongst the colourful wild flowers in bloom, at high speed to avoid the robbery-intent gulls, was more than marvellous. At take-off their gaudy red feet are outspread like twin rudders, and then tucked up as their bullet-like flight gets underway.

Later on our independent travels back south, we took another tiny boat out to the Farne Islands

and here got up even closer to Puffins by the thousands. (At the 2003 count, 55 674 pairs were breeding on these bleak Northumberland coastal islands).we overdosed on seriously amazing Puffin views during the day, but left still spellbound by these delightful birds, craning for every last look as we chugged back to the mainland.

Pre-warned, and thanks to sturdy headwear, we survived the vigorous aerial bombing attacks on us as we walked around Inner Farne, by Arctic Terns defending their chicks that wandered around at our feet and which we had to be very careful not to tread on.

Farne Islands are a photographic mecca, and if our boat had sunk, the amount of equipment aboard would have made it a VERY expensive day for insurance companies. The passengers looked more equipped to start a rocket war than take photos, with their enormous lenses, selection of scopes and general paraphernalia wedged aboard with their bearers.



Apart from Farne, British birders need scopes... the UK birds are not as obliging as those we are used to locally, and proved extremely shy, diving into the lush summer foliage as soon as closer views were attempted.

Birding In Scotland is not easy! Our guide traipsed us around a Cairngorm mountain for 7 hours, with us,only finding a Dotterel with chicks and 10 minutes later a single Ptarmigan - over 5 hours into the day's trek up and down the rocky slopes and over the remnants of snow drifts – almost as we'd given up hope and were on our descent.



We started our trip in Hampshire where my family live. The small reserve just down the road in Titchfield near Southampton gave us Black-tailed Godwit, Green Sandpiper, Mediterranean Gull and even Bearded Reedling.

We headed north to visit friends in Wales stopping off to bird wherever possible, more often than not at a RSPB reserve. RSPB deserves a special mention for the fantastic facilities they provide throughout the country to conserve, educate and entertain, and their really

birder/photographer-friendly hides set an example that more should follow.

Our first outing after meeting up with our Welsh buddies was Gigrin Farm . Gigrin Farm lies just outside Rhayader in mid Wales in the heart of Red Kite territory. It is regarded by many as the best place in Europe to watch and photograph Red Kites. The story of the Red Kites in the UK over the last 20 years has been heralded as a conservation success. In 1989 there were as few as 50 breeding pairs, all located in Wales. Today numbers are estimated at over 2000 breeding pairs with strongholds in Wales and Scotland but with good numbers in both the south and north of England.



Gigrin Farm first started a kite feeding station in 1993 following a request from the RSPB as kites were roosting at Gigrin during the winter and numbers visiting the station have risen from around a dozen in the first year to over 400 during winter today. The Red Kites seen at Gigrin are all native to Wales and are not introductions from continental stock as is the case in other parts of the UK. In fact



DNA results have revealed that all those tested were the descendants of a single female.

The Welsh Kite Trust tag numbers of kites before they fledge and these tags were visible on many of the birds I photographed .

On the day of our visit there were probably 50 or so birds in the air an hour before feeding time (the birds are fed at 3.00pm every day- the afternoon being chosen so that the birds must forage for themselves during the early part of the day). Numbers increased as feeding time approached until there were several hundred flying around the five hides, two of which are specialised photography hides.

The Kites are fed beef –fit for human consumption we were told and they buy up to a quarter tonne per week depending on the number of kites visiting. This is paid for by a four pound entry fee (10 pounds for the photography hides) and the day we were there the place was nearly full.

The meat arrives at precisely 3.00 pm on a tractor and is scattered over an area 20 metres by 20. The crows and ravens (and a few jackdaws) are the first to arrive closely followed by the common buzzards which show the kites that all is safe, and they immediately start to swoop low over the crows' and ravens' heads in an attempt to get them rise from the field with food whereupon they can make chase and rob the crows in mid flight.

Some kites will simply swoop in, grab meat in their talons and make off with the meat held tightly beneath the tail. They will then find some clear airspace (to avoid being robbed by another kite) and will eat the meat whilst flying.

The aerial dexterity of these incredible robbers is due to their large wingspan (up to 1.7metres) and relatively low body weight (males 28-42 oz, females 35-56 oz). They breed from April to July reaching sexual maturity





at 2-3 years. They lay 1-3 eggs which they incubate for 45-50 days. The action lasts for about an hour and it is truly breathtaking trying to photograph these incredibly agile, fast flying birds as they swoop over the buzzards and grab food with movements almost too swift to be seen. An hour and 20gig of photographs later and it was all over and we left with our Welsh friends who live 20 minutes up the road and didn't know the place existed, still excited about one of the best avian experiences we have ever had.

Next on the list was Red-billed Chough. A long drive along the South Wales Coast to St Govans Head where, drenched by the only rain we had in 4 weeks, we finally found 3 soaking wet Choughs on a Pembrokeshire cliff top.

We continued north to visit an old school pal I have known for just on 60 years in Carlisle, but we could not pass the Leighton Moss RSPB Reserve in Lancashire without stopping. Black-headed Gull is the most common gull in the UK but having seen it only once in South Africa it was great to get some shots. From there we visited the Cumbrian coast at St Bees Head where we picked up a nice Peregrine before arriving back in Carlisle –my schoolboy home for 15 years. There is good birding here down on the Solway Firth at Campfield Marsh and on the Scottish side at Mersehead but mainly in winter when the overwintering wildfowl arrive.



Our trip with Heatherlea from their base at Nethybridge covered both east and west coasts of Scotland. We started in Abernethy Forest finding Crested Tit and Scottish Crossbill plus a lonely female Capercaillie.

We then visited the West coast- Ullapool and Mellon Udrigle for Golden and White-tailed Eagle and Handa for the Auks and Puffin. The Cairngorms gave us Dotterel, Ptarmigan and Red Grouse. We then moved east along the shoreline of the Moray Firth to Findhorn and Spey Bays for Common Eider, Goosander, Merganser and Black-throated Diver, before turning inland once more to find Slavonian Grebe, Dipper and Golden-eye on the lochs.



Travelling south after a brilliant five day trip- highly recommended for anyone who likes comfortable slow- paced birding (the Cairngorms aside) which some chose not to do and birded locally in the bus instead, we headed down the East coast of Scotland, through Edinburgh and out past North Berwick and Bass Rock- a huge offshore Gannet colony. South of Berwick on Tweed you arrive at Seahouses the departure point for the Farne Islands- a must for anyone birding in Northern England and Scotland.



Back in England we were heading for the Peak District but not before stopping at Fairburn Ings RSPB Reserve near Castleford. No really special birds here but a nice reserve – well worth the visit.

A pleasant two days were spent with friends near Bakewell and then we were back on the road heading for Rutland Waters home of the Breeding Ospreys and the famous Rutland Bird Show. Another great birding spot- the Ospreys nest on specially erected poles in the middle of the lake- requiring a 500mm lens with 2x

converter but that aside we had Ruddy Shelduck (uncommon in the UK) Black-tailed Godwit , Common Redshank, Green Sandpiper, Eurasian Reed-warbler and Northern Lapwing.

Criss-crossing the UK in a southerly direction we headed for Bristol and more friends. With them we birded the Somerset levels - spotting the ONLY Little Bittern then in the UK, followed 5 minutes later with sightings of the (Eurasian)Bittern twice flying low over the reeds to a suspected breeding site.

From Bristol we returned to Southampton- what next we said??- well an American vagrant had been spotted down in Devon and we needed Cirl Bunting there too. So it was off to Prawle Point where we had great views of the rare and highly localised Cirl Bunting .

We were coming to the end of our month long stay and one bird remained on my must –see list – The Dartford Warbler and while Stephanie travelled up to London to see her mum I headed for Poole harbour and the surrounding heathland where an obliging Dartford Warbler popped out of the gorse on hearing the playback.



We notched up an impressive 155 species in our 4 weeks, covering around 3500 miles, north south, east, and west. The UK bird list totals vary, but generally include around 280 species thanks to the migrational invasions and summer visitors: a score boosted to over 500 only by rare vagrants, seen once and probably never again!



As 2 Brits who forsook their country of birth many years ago, this trip was a truly memorable one, with the lovely and widely varied countryside scenery at its summer best (thanks to the unexpectedly excellent weather), facilities that were clean everywhere and in full working order, great food (pubs now seem to rely on good food for a living to compete with the stringent drink and drive laws), generous hospitality and of course, the best of British birds.. the Puffins!