

# Honeyguide

## WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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**Mull**  
**26 June – 3 July 2023**



### Holiday participants

Sue and Peter Burge  
Jan and John Croft

**Leader:** Ruth Fleming from Mull Magic [www.mullmagic.com](http://www.mullmagic.com).

Ruth was also joined on several occasions by her friend Jonathan Keefe.

Report: words by Sue Burge with additions by Ruth Fleming.

Photos by Ruth Fleming, all taken on the holiday.

Cover: guillemots on Lunga; elephant hawk-moth, puffin and oyster plant.

Below: the group.



The holiday was based at the Western Isles Hotel in Tobermory [www.westernisleshotel.com](http://www.westernisleshotel.com)



Tobermory, with the Western Isles Hotel top right.

As on every Honeyguide wildlife holiday, we contributed to a conservation project. The conservation contribution of £40 per person, supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, totalled £190 for the RSPB's work on Mull. The total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 is £148,107 (to August 2023).

David Sexton, RSPB Scotland Mull Officer, says: "Thank you once again for the donation - it is very much appreciated."



## ILLUSTRATED DAILY DIARY

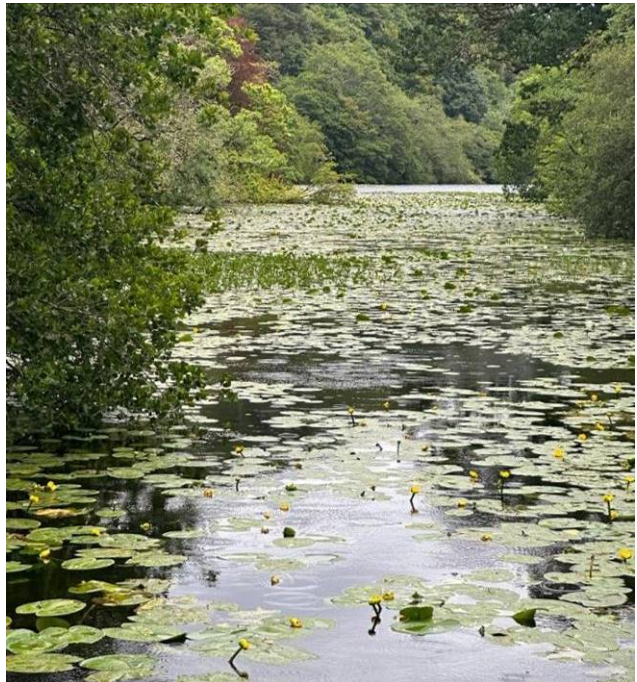
### Day one, 26 June – arrival

We arrived to a mix of sun and showers, then walked through sunny streets of Tobermory for a little retail therapy. We are staying in a Victorian hotel perched on the hill above the colourful houses and have a comfortable large bedroom with a view of the harbour and bobbing boats. At seven o'clock we met Ruth, Jan and John to discuss plans for the holiday.

### Day two, 27 June – Aros Park

Rain was hosing down, as forecast, so we went for a walk in the local woods to Aros Park. There was no sign of midges, one advantage of the very wet cool weather, and the waterfalls were in full flow. We did not find any sundew despite trying hard. However, we did see a fine display of acid-loving mosses, lichens and ferns. Ruth showed us bog myrtle and explained how the scent of the crushed leaves is supposed to keep away midges. We explained to Ruth that we had no expectations of identifying plants that were not in flower – a useful Honeyguide rule! Unfortunately, there was also a lot of the very invasive *Rhododendron ponticum* which the gardeners are trying to get rid of using herbicides applied through holes drilled into the trunks.

Wood sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*) gave Peter a perfect opportunity to tell the story of the Greek archer, Teucer. Hector flung a rock at Teucer which hit his neck above the collar bone. Teucer's hand went numb, and he dropped his bow. This is the first description of a nerve (brachial plexus) injury in the literature!! We got very wet. The supply of hot drinks that Ruth had secreted in the back of the van were extremely welcome. After lunch of hot soup and delicacies such as haggis toasties at An Tobar's café, we retreated early to the hotel to dry off.



The hoof fungus was spectacular and there was a Mull Magic Monet moment with the waterlilies out on Lochan a'Ghurrabain, the crouching loch.

### Day three, 28 June – moths, Loch na Keal and Glen Seilisdar

We started with a visit to Jonathan's moth traps at Arle. Yes, there were two of them. He had set up one in his garden and one in adjacent woodland (also his garden). A large number of moths had been caught (see photos on next page). Our favourite was undoubtedly the buff-tip which looks exactly like a birch twig. The garden includes a wonderful meadow with butterfly orchids, heath spotted orchids and a great assortment of other wildflowers.

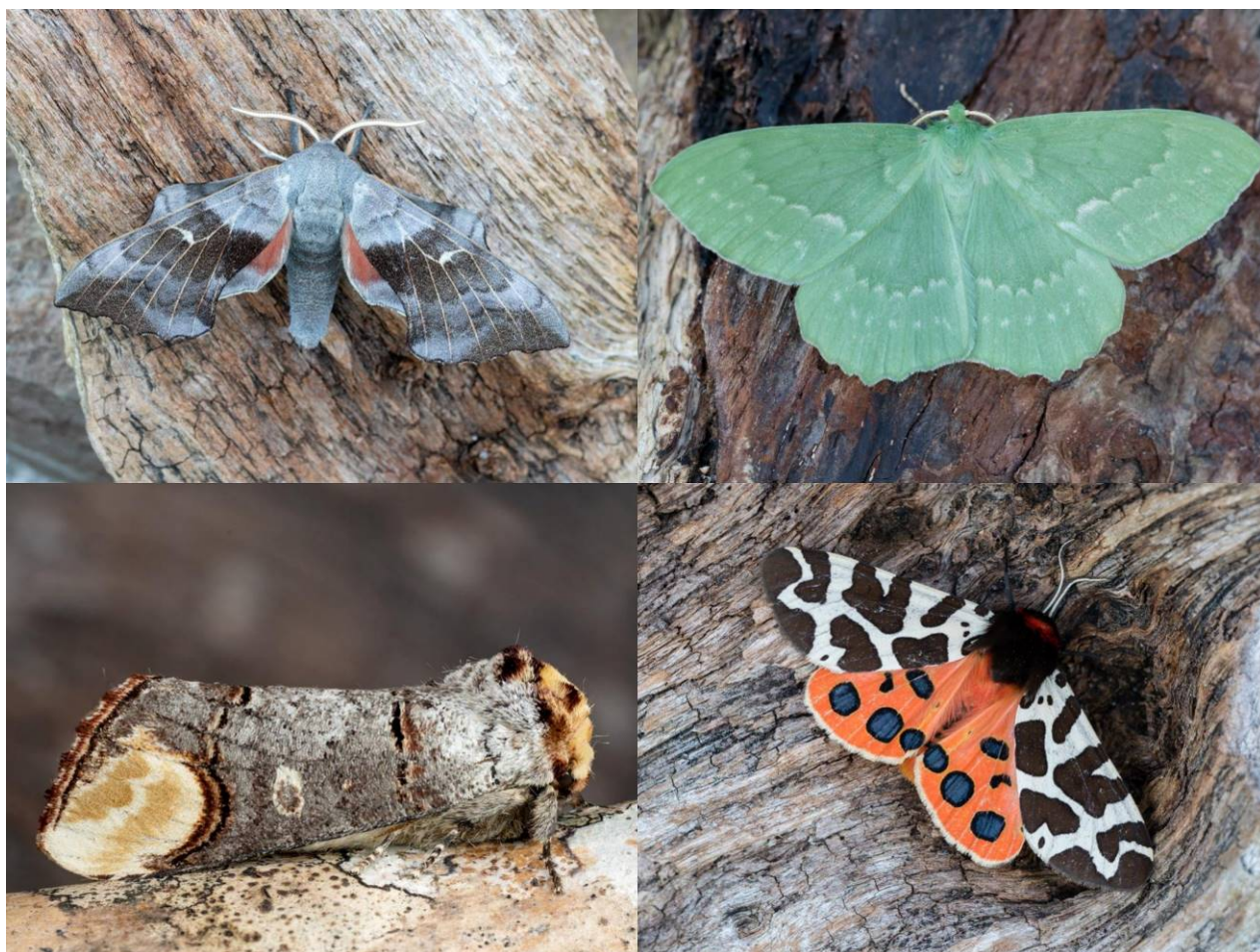
As the wind was blowing and the weather not that clement, we opted for a drive around the coast to Loch na Keal rather than a boat trip. Jonathan came with us, and we benefited from his local knowledge and botanising skills. A fine oyster plant was growing on the shingle beach (flowers resemble those of lungwort) and Jonathan also pointed out another rarity, albeit not the most exciting of flowers: Smith's pepperwort. Rain came down in a fine drizzle, but this did not deter the group. Oystercatchers



White-tailed eagle on a distant spit.



were calling and flying, shelducks and mallards were bobbing on the sea and Jonathan spotted a white-tailed eagle on a distant spit. We drove up the coast to get a better view before it finally took off mobbed by gulls. A seal made a brief appearance. We were also struck by the magnificent displays of foxgloves as we drove along the coast road.



Moths galore. Top: poplar hawkmoth, large emerald. Bottom: buff-tip, garden tiger.

We stopped for lunch where we could sit on rocks looking out to sea. Round-leaved sundew and lousewort were found in adjacent marshy ground. Our afternoon expedition took us over Glen Seilisdar (the Glen of the Irises) where we viewed a white-tailed eagle nest and we had a fine view of the adult drying its wings. It was not clear if the nest was empty as we could not see the chick.

Ruth was well supplied for a tea stop and we tucked into tea and cake out of the back of the minibus. We also found heath spotted and fragrant orchids. We had fantastic views of otters at Loch Scridian: an adult and two cubs were dipping and diving close to the shore. The final stop for the botanists was to look for moonwort and to our delight we were successful. We were home by 5:30 after a great day.

#### **Date four, 29 June – Treshnish Isles**

Unfortunately, Jan's back was playing up so John and Jan had a day back at base. The sun was shining when Ruth, Jonathan, Peter and Sue set off to sea at 9:45. We had an hour on the boat but fortunately for those who do not have great sea legs, the sea was not too choppy. Sue had a brief view of a porpoise. First stop was Staffa with the dramatic basalt rock formations of Fingal's cave. We disembarked and opted to walk up the path to the top instead of taking the more treacherous path down to the cave itself. Jonathan was quick to spot a snipe and several twite. Oystercatchers – prima donnas of the bird world – were displaying and calling. Four puffins were bobbing on the sea, and we found nesting fulmars. Plants included Scots lovage (another rarity), thrift and the ubiquitous bell heather. The sun shone so we admired a common blue butterfly.

We re-embarked for the 20-minute trip to Lunga where, after anchoring and disembarking, we made our way across boulders and a shingle path before climbing up the steep hillside to 'puffin world'. What an amazing place. The puffins realise that it is much safer to emerge from their burrows in the presence of human visitors. Puffins were pulling at the grass and taking the stalks into their burrows. One or two were bringing back sand eels, presumably to young in the nest. It was such a treat to be so close to these comical, lovable birds. We also saw the occasional very smart razorbill. We sat and watched them for some



time while we ate our lunch. The birds were completely unconcerned and in fact one puffin even came over to investigate Jonathan's boot and trousers, too close to be photographed with Jonathan's camera.



Ruth was equally surprised. "Despite the fact that I go to the Treshnish Isles several times a year, I've never experienced the close-up encounter we had over our lunch. A puffin literally invaded our space and came over to entertain the group. We always maintain a respectful distance from the birds, and keep the requisite five metres away from the burrows. But one solitary puffin decided to come and check us out, even trying out the texture of Jonathan's trousers!"

After our leisurely lunch, we walked along the cliff path to Harp Rock to be greeted by the spectacle of the huge breeding colony of guillemots, packed shoulder to shoulder on the cliff face. The sights the sounds and the smells were memorable. As well as guillemots we saw occasional razorbills and kittiwakes, some with fluffy chicks. A skua looking for a tasty meal was perching high above the colony. Plants included sea campion, thrift (mainly over), meadowsweet and ragwort that was covered with distinctively stripy cinnabar moth caterpillars. We left after a marvellous two-hour visit for a much less bumpy boat ride back to Tobermory when we had views of both grey and common seals.



Guillemots, including one of the 'bridled' form in the centre; razorbills.



### Day five, Friday 30 June - Glengorm Estate

Another damp day but the Honeyguiders were not deterred. We drove to Glengorm Estate and walked past the impressive castle now with up-market self-catering apartments. We were able to enter the large walled garden which is devoted to growing fruit and vegetables. Once it must have contained magnificent herbaceous borders. A cat, sheltering from the rain, slept peacefully next to the cacti and succulents in a small glass house. We walked the short path to the three Glengorm standing stones. By the early 1880s only one was upright but two were re-erected in 1942.



Standing stones, and a sense of today's weather; cat among the succulents.

The very welcome Glengorm café provided excellent lunch and shelter from the persistent rain. Ruth adds that here John remarked that his Isle of Mull cheddar quiche was the best quiche he'd ever had. After a Paddington hard stare from Jan, he changed his statement to "Isle of Mull cheddar quiche is the best quiche I've ever paid for!"

Ruth had arranged a visit for us to Mull Aquarium in Tobermory. In theory the aquarium was closed but it was opened especially for us. We were greeted by Andy Tait, otherwise known as Proffessor Plankton, at the entrance and enjoyed the most amazing afternoon. This is Europe's first catch and release aquarium—the fish are also visitors. After a couple of weeks, the animals which have been brought in by local fishermen or divers are returned to the sea. In the wonderful touch and feel tank we saw hermit crabs, larger crabs, sea urchins and sea anemones and were particularly amazed by the turn of speed shown by a scallop when irritated by a nosey crab. But there was much more to come and we spent 2½ hours with Andy enjoying sea creatures ranging from lobsters to a very fine octopus who obligingly swam around his tank displaying his colourful markings.

The highlight was undoubtedly an amazingly erudite and fascinating tutorial on plankton. Andy sat at his microscope and displayed the range of plankton in a small drop of seawater. We saw phytoplankton, copepods, bristle worms, sea fleas, sea snails and the larvae of numerous crustaceans all shooting about at vast speed. His Facebook page [www.facebook.com/ProffessorPlankton/](https://www.facebook.com/ProffessorPlankton/) provides daily updates and is definitely worth a look: Proffessor (yes, there are two Fs in Proffessor) Plankton. A great day despite the inclement weather ... or perhaps because of the weather.



Proffessor Plankton with group members, and some of the marine life on show.

### Date six, Saturday 1 July – Calgary Bay

Damp weather, ideal for looking at ferns. Jonathan was with us again. Our first roadside stop was to see unusual filmy-ferns – Tunbridge and Wilson's – growing on the trunks of ancient rainforest. We drove on to Calgary Bay where we wandered through the fine display of wildflowers on the machair. After an excellent



lunch in Calgary café, we explored the Calgary Art Gallery, the sculpture walk through the woods and finally we strolled along the beach to find yet more plants.

Ruth adds: "Calgary Bay was the best day out according to last year's Honeyguiders and again it didn't disappoint. The machair, a low-lying, herb rich grassland, was in full bloom and we managed to record 94 species of plant on the day (those are just the ones I can remember). The morning was spent on the beach and machair, dodging the heavy rain showers and after lunch at the café we spent the afternoon in the adjacent woodland and Calgary Art in Nature. I just wanted to say a big thank you to last year's guest, Sonia, who was a fabulous botanist and made me very competitive. I was determined to beat her 76 species seen last year!!"



Wilson's filmy-fern and Tunbridge filmy-fern. Toothed margins on the sori of Tunbridge filmy-fern help ID.

#### **Day seven, Sunday 2 July – Salen Bay, Fishnish, Garmony and Croggan**

Our last day, on which the sun appeared intermittently but there were sudden downpours, so we were glad of some cover in our vehicle. We collected Jonathan and were delighted to see a couple of red deer with a fawn in the field beside his garden.

First stop was Salen Bay for birds and common seals. We saw common tern, red-breasted mergansers, grey herons, common sandpipers, oystercatchers, curlew, common, herring and great black-backed gulls, among others.

A stop at Fishnish was to see the rare and frankly rather nondescript heath cudweed which Jonathan found for us growing on waste ground in a shingle bank next to two discarded caravans. Still, despite the unimpressive appearance, we were very pleased to meet it and to share Jonathan's enthusiasm.



Heath cudweed, moonwort (day 3); Scots lovage (day 4).

Then on to Garmony where we were delighted to see otters ducking and diving and munching fish. Two white-tailed eagles were visible in the distance, as was a herd of red deer.

After lunch, the rain briefly abated, and we decided to have a stroll along the shore trail at Croggan. Within five minutes, Jonathan picked up a distant golden eagle through the telescope. Even though it was the other side of Loch Spelve, John was beaming to see this majestic bird. But that was soon surpassed: within two minutes of our departure, a golden eagle almost flew into the minibus windscreen. We had a fantastic view as it flew right down over the roof of the minibus, mobbed by a hooded crow. All the group had really good views of this magnificent bird.

We stopped to look at Arctic terns that were nesting on a gravel spit along with waders such as greenshank and the ubiquitous oystercatchers.

Ruth and Jonathan joined us for a farewell meal in the hotel. We agreed we had had a magical holiday thanks to our marvellous guide, Ruth.

### **Holiday highlights**

Jan moth trap and eagles.

John golden eagle, view of how mighty it is. Moths morning, so interesting.

Sue puffins, heath cudweed and Jonathan's enthusiasm for this very special plant.

Peter puffins, plankton especially the bilaterally symmetrical starfish larvae which will turn into starfish with radial symmetry.



Kittiwakes and cinnabar moth caterpillars (day 4); speckled wood.