



Scottish Ornithologists' Club
Scotland's Bird Club
Established 1936

Clyde branch outing to Ailsa Craig

13 July 2024 (1230-1800)

Leader: Zul Bhatia

Participants: 12

Weather: Mainly overcast with occasional sun and calm waters. Temp 14-16°C. Light easterlies.

No of species recorded: 32 (see list below)

All twelve of us met in Girvan and ahead of getting on board the boat most had some of their packed lunch watching some of the birds visible from the car park, including **Eider**, **Mute Swan** and **Jackdaw**. Around 1230 we climbed aboard the 'MFV Glorious' in Girvan Harbour and skipper Mark McCrindle soon had us underway for Ailsa Craig. As we made our way slowly out of the harbour, we watched 3 **Redshank** and a couple of **Black Guillemot** on the breakwater as we headed out to sea. Zul did some introductions and welcomed the three people for whom this was their first SOC outing.



Ailsa Craig Outing group

It wasn't long before we started to add more seabird species to our outing list. We saw two groups of half a dozen **Shags** as we got into open water and soon watched a handful of **Gannets** diving offshore. As we got further out a few **Manx Shearwater** started to appear. Initially we saw them in ones and twos, then fours and fives, then a string of a dozen effortlessly gliding just above the water. It wasn't long before we had 40 or so of these feeding in one area. Several hundred were seen as we crossed, often close enough to admire their tube noses. We started to see other species like **Guillemot** too including an adult bird with a very recently fledged juvenile fresh from jumping off the ledge

where it hatched. Then as we got closer to Ailsa Craig, we saw our first **Puffin** on the calm water and most of the group managed to get good views through their binoculars. Puffin numbers on the island have recovered over the last 30 years following the rat eradication work led by Bernie Zonfrillo. You can read more about that work [here](#).

Sandra, who was part of the boat crew, told us that as well as Puffins, they'd had good sightings this summer of harbour porpoise and common dolphin, and to keep an eye out for Minkie Whale which had been seen recently in the area.

We hadn't seen any cetaceans so far, but we had had regular sightings of both **Herring** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and once we landed, we could see that both species were successfully breeding on the rocky shore of Ailsa Craig.

The waters just off shore appeared to be a creche to many recently fledged juveniles of both species and were loafing around while others, still on dry land, were stretching their wings. Several **Great Black-backed Gulls** were seen too, a pair of **Oystercatchers** and at least one **Rock Pipit** near the pier.

As we climbed from the boat to the jetty, the boatman explained that we had two hours on the island which allowed the group to split up. Some stayed low and were able to explore along the shore and amongst the rusty rails of the old narrow-gauge railway - while others went high and climbed up to the remains of the 16th century castle keep and beyond towards the Ailsa Craig summit. A few of us saw the blow from a whale which was perhaps the Minkie - but sadly there were no further sightings.

We weren't alone on the granite volcanic plug either. A couple had kayaked out earlier in the day to climb to the top of Ailsa Craig (340m), while two others were doing some bird survey work. Another party were hard at work giving the automated light house a fresh coat of white emulsion and carrying out other repairs on behalf of the Northern Lighthouse Board.

Once we were all back together, awaiting the boat, we exchanged notes accompanied by the continuous calling of the adult and juvenile Gulls. A few **Harbour Porpoises** and some **Grey Seals** were seen just off shore while higher up, sightings included **Wren**, **Meadow Pipit**, **Pied Wagtail** and some saw a **Willow Warbler** too. Out at sea, amongst the regular waves of sea birds, at least one **Fulmar** went past. We grabbed a quick group photo before the boat moored against the jetty again.

A great afternoon so far was about to become spectacular – literally. At 4pm we climbed back aboard 'MFV Glorious' and captain Mark headed off anti-clockwise to give us a trip around the whole island.

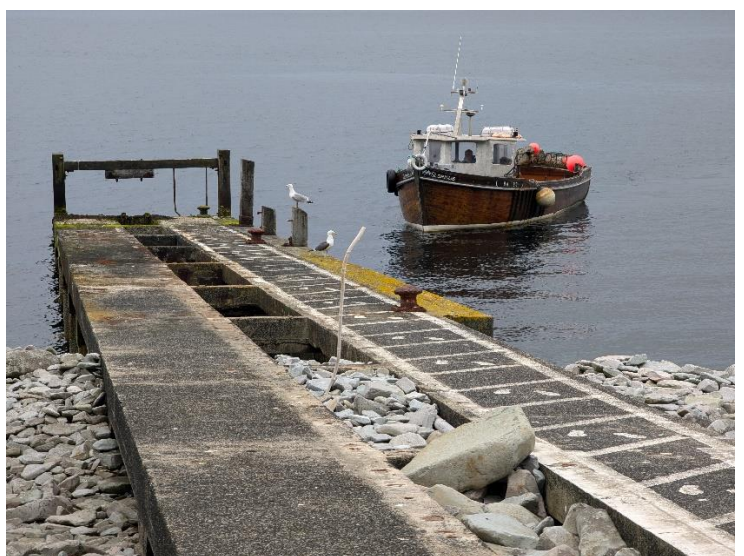
Once we got beyond the first of the disused Fog horns the cliffs came into view – they were alive with birds! We saw a juvenile **Peregrine** speed past just as we got to the first of the **Kittiwake** colonies.



Puffin (© Mary Gilbert)



Manx Shearwater (© Zul Bhatia)



MFV Glorious' (© Kevin McCormick)

There were more Shags, with their young, perched on the boulders on the shore and, higher up, the cliff faces were full of Guillemots and a few **Razorbills**. We saw good numbers of Puffins both on grassy knolls and on the water. It was hard to take it all in. Huge numbers of Gannets breed on the island and we soon saw a stack of a couple of hundred Gannets in the air, close to where several thousand more were on the cliffs. This truly was a sea-bird extravaganza. Something that everyone who is interested in birds should come and witness if they get the chance.



Gannets on the Ailsa Craig cliffs (© Zul Bhatia)

The boat crew pointed out other sights of interest, like the north face where the granite for every Olympic curling stone comes from, and the south face where other granite is quarried. We also saw Little Ailsa (a small stack just off shore) complete with nesting seabirds.

Before too long we were back around near the lighthouse again and we started sailing back to Girvan. We were again treated to the sight of hundreds of Manx Shearwaters as we made the crossing, affording us arguably even better views than at lunchtime, with many on the water close to the boat. Plenty Gannets, Shags, Guillemots, Black Guillemots, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen too. As we admired views of Arran, we also watched half a dozen **Common Dolphins** jumping out the water to catch our attention, trying to out-do the Shearwater spectacle.

As we got close to the Ayrshire mainland the crew showed off a couple of lobsters that they had caught in creels while we were on shore and allowed some of the group to hold them while the rest of us admired their stunning deep blue colourings at close quarters.



Common Dolphin © Mary Gilbert

Around 6pm we docked again in Girvan harbour and were back on dry land. As we thanked the boat crew and headed back to our cars, we all commented on what an extraordinary SOC outing it had been. One that will live long in the memory.

If you fancy a similar experience don't hesitate to book up with Mark – detail are here on his webpage <http://ailsacraig.org.uk/>

Manx Shearwater was new to the outings list which now stands at 168 species. Puffin was also a star as the only other ones we had ever seen on an outing were two very distant ones during the outing to St Abbs Head and Lothian coast in August 2022.

Kevin McCormick, July 2024

32 species of birds were recorded on SOC Outing to Ailsa Craig (& Girvan) on 13 July 2024.

Mute Swan	Razorbill	Jackdaw
Eider	Black Guillemot	Rook
Oystercatcher	Puffin	Carrion Crow
Redshank	Fulmar	Willow Warbler
Kittiwake	Manx Shearwater	Wren
Black-headed Gull	Gannet	Starling
Common Gull	Cormorant	House Sparrow
Herring Gull	Shag	Pied Wagtail (yarrellii)
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Peregrine	Meadow Pipit
Great Black-backed Gull	Feral Pigeon	Rock Pipit
Common Guillemot	Woodpigeon	

Other species recorded

Rabbit
Common Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Grey Seal
Whale sp. (possibly Minkie)



Drone shot of the Ailsa Craig cliffs and Gannet colony (© Richard Humpidge)