

The 2018 David Boyd Event

Part 4 : The North Uist Machair





SATURDAY 23 JUNE 2018

Another fine morning started with another excellent breakfast. This time 2 smoked haddock poached in milk served with 2 poached eggs. Delicious! especially as I asked for a few sautéed potatoes to soak up the milk. The eggs were nice and runny. As we all know it is important not to hurry breakfast.

We had only to drive a few miles to Nunton Steading but we managed to be late. The talk had already started but Matt made a point of giving us a special welcome. Needless to say Anne and Roma who had finished breakfast when we had barely started were already at the meeting. 'The five' were looking more like 'the two' and 'the three'

One unfortunate thing about being punctual is that there is no-one there to appreciate it.

All the SRGC members had gathered in the hall of the centre to listen to Matt's talk on the Machair; how it is formed and how it is farmed. The Machair is quite different from the peat land on the east of the islands.

There will be a separate report in this series about our trip, specifically on the Machair.

Our party started to arrive at windy Balranald. Note the ruined houses and church. We saw more of these on North Uist than on South Uist





RSPB RESERVE AT BALRANALD

It seemed that we were going to have a windy afternoon ahead at Balranald RSPB reserve on North Uist. Therefore we consumed more coffee and cake at Nunton to fortify us for the trip. The lemon cake was especially tasty.

The route to Balranald which lies on the west coast of North Uist took us through Balivanich, the largest town or really the only town on Benbecula, all the others communities being loose aggregations of houses and crofts. Balivanich sits beside Benbecula airport which doubles as a civilian and military facility. Passenger planes share the runway with ultra-modern top secret planes. Benbecula airport runway is only the third in the UK to be lit by LEDs. (light emitting diodes).

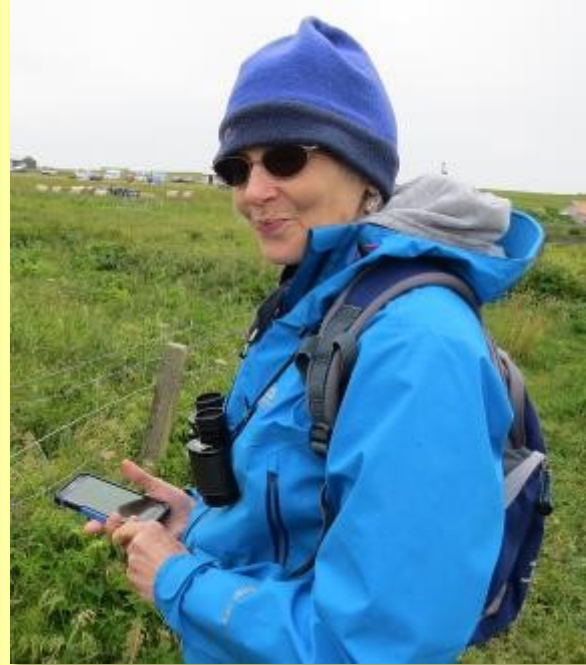
We drove over the causeway onto North Uist from Benbecula. We commented again at just how good the roads are in the Western Isles. As we left the main road on the west of the island, we realised the advantages of having Matt's local knowledge. He guided us to places which would otherwise not have found and up narrow tracks which we would have imagined were private, despite Scotland's famed 'right to roam'. I don't believe it is a 'right to drive'! The people of the islands seem to welcome exploring visitors. We did not see any "private" or "keep out" signs.

At each of Matt's locations we found wonderful

beaches and a wide range of plants. We also heard many birds. One disadvantage in having 41 people and 15 cars descend on a quiet machair is that the sensible birds immediately retreat. The ones which are left are the skylarks and oystercatchers. The former are a delight to listen to, evoking childhood memories of walks in the Lomond hills above Falkland in Fife. The screeching, continual call of the oystercatchers is less melodious than the skylark's song. Nevertheless we enjoyed watching them, especially those in family groups.







At Balranald on North Uist, we parked on the Machair on the shore of a huge bay, which was protected on north and south by headlands and out to sea on the west by two islands. In the shelter of the dunes an old farmhouse had been converted by the RSPB into a small visitor centre. Inside we delighted to find Corncrake and yellow bumblebee pin badges for sale. The information boards were very helpful. One sign that this "abandoned" settlement has been a working community was the old church and cemetery on a knoll above the centre.

Here we ate our own picnic lunch. Other members bought sandwiches etc from the Dunes Catering café. It was sad to see that several buildings here were in a state of disrepair, unlike the rest of the islands where most old houses had been modernised alongside newly built homes. The day was slightly overcast and windy but just over the machair, the ground fell away through low dunes to reveal a fabulous white sandy beach. In the distance on the western horizon we could just discern the higher hills on the horizon. The highest of these is Eaval which is 340 metres high, about 1000 feet. Although this does not sound high, it dominates the otherwise flat, very flat land of North Uist.



The white sands , dunes and machair at Balranald beach,

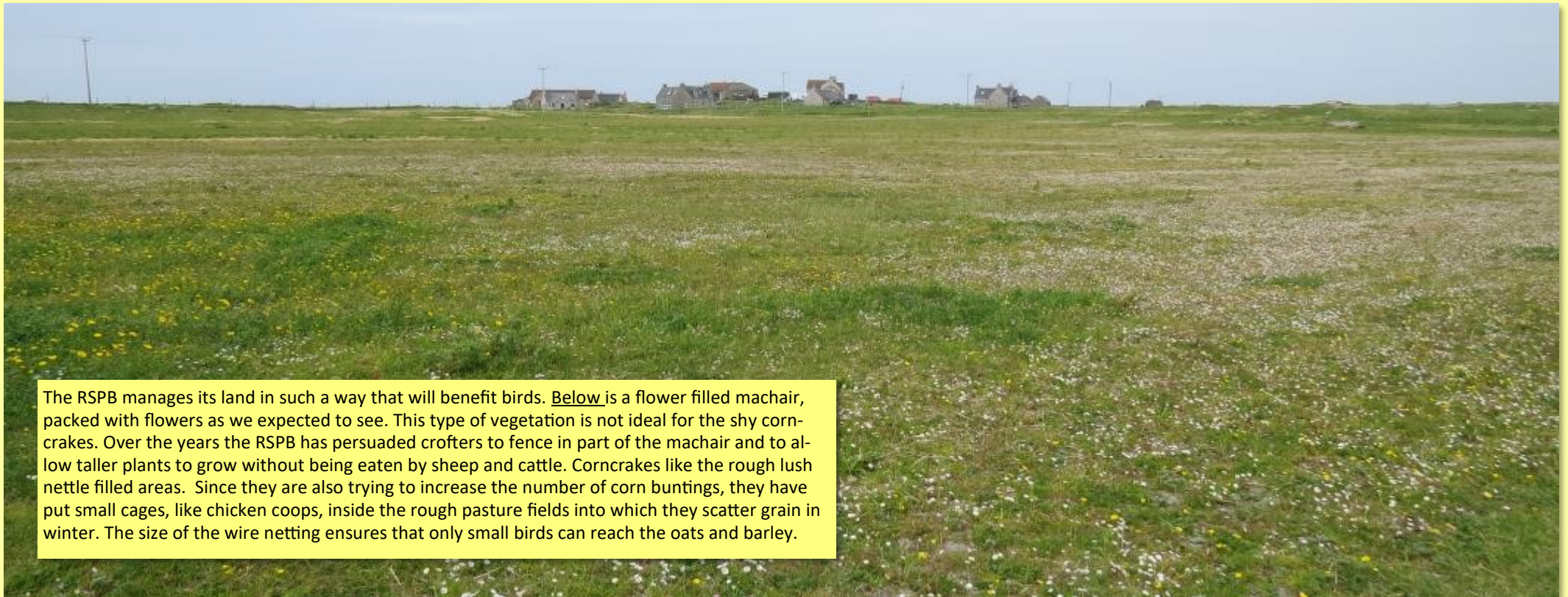




In the absence of the reserve warden Matt explained the layout of the reserve and its plants and birds. Several of us heard the call of the fabled corn rake. I thought I had until Camber Trott showed me her phone onto which she had recorded the cornrake call!

Matt then led us round part of the reserve where the star plants were orchids and violas. He explained that the ugly patches of nettles and rough vegetation in corners of some fields were left uncut deliberately to provide safe shelter for the corncrakes. Several small species of bird depend for winter food on traditional farming methods, especially the method of cutting, binding and stocking of corn sheaves, which are later built into stacks with the grain inside. Over winter sheaves are removed as needed. The wee birds get their share from spilt grain. Nowadays corn is put into cages like hen runs and only birds small enough to get through the wire netting can reach the food grains. We explored and botanised round the reserve where we found many interesting orchids.





The RSPB manages its land in such a way that will benefit birds. Below is a flower filled machair, packed with flowers as we expected to see. This type of vegetation is not ideal for the shy corn-crakes. Over the years the RSPB has persuaded crofters to fence in part of the machair and to allow taller plants to grow without being eaten by sheep and cattle. Corncrakes like the rough lush nettle filled areas. Since they are also trying to increase the number of corn buntings, they have put small cages, like chicken coops, inside the rough pasture fields into which they scatter grain in winter. The size of the wire netting ensures that only small birds can reach the oats and barley.

Daisies (*Bellis perennis*) flowering in profusion. Among the daisies there are corn marigolds, (*Glebionis segetum*, formerly *Chrysanthemum segetum*), white clover (*Trifolium repens*), violas (*Viola tricolor* ssp. *curtisii*) and occasional orchids (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*, *D. fuchsia* & *D. incarnata* ssp. *coccinea*)





Corn marigolds, (*Glebionis segetum*, formerly *Chrysanthemum segetum*)



Viola tricolor ssp. *curtisii*



The machair is cultivated in a two year rotation. Two year ploughed and two years fallow. In the corn meadow which is the cultivated part of the Machair. In the fallow years a succession of flowering plants colonise the ground. In cultivated years flower seeds, harvested with the barley, oats and rye, get sown at the same time as the grain. This is why there are such well flowered machair meadows. In the top picture there are a few special Hebridean native long headed poppies *Papaver dubium* ssp *dubium* which differs from the mainland corn or field poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) in that the island native has long seed pods while the mainland form has round seed pods.





Lotus corniculatus



Dactylorhiza incarnata ssp. *coccinea*





Dactylorhiza purpurella?
Northern Marsh Orchid



Dactylorhiza incarnata ssp. *coccinea*

Photographing *Dactylorhiza purpurella* x fuchsia?



OUR SIDE TRIP TO NORTH WEST NORTH UIST

Since we wanted to see a bit more of North Uist, Anne, Andrew and I departed from the schedule and made our way north along the A865 to see more of North Uist. We chose a circular route which would bring us back by Beinn a Charra to the historic Westford Inn in time for dinner. A couple of miles north of RSPB Balranald we saw a sign for the National Trust for Scotland St Kilda Viewpoint. This was up on Clettrevall Hill close to the community of Hosta. The viewpoint had a telescope which I decided was broken as I could not see through it. More helpfully there was also an embossed indicator board illustrating the various places to be seen and the offshore islands including St Kilda.

Below the viewpoint, the hill falls steeply to the flat lands of north-western North Uist. You can see a few of the myriad lochs and lochans which in winter spread over much wider areas. The St Kilda archipelago is on the horizon above Andrew's head but hardly visible in these pictures.





The narrow road passed Loch Hosta and a township of the same name. As it twisted and turned, rose and fell we saw a patch of flowers by the waterside. Each stem was about two feet tall, hundreds clustered together.

These were not native but hybridised incomers from the America which now thrives in the Hebridesan wetlands. These were colonies of *Mimulus* hybrids, their yellow flowers edged in scarlet. At home I am used to seeing smaller plants of *Mimulus luteus* but nothing as spectacular as these Uist hybrids of *M. guttatus* x *luteus*. Growing in front of the was the biggest patch of Forget-me-nots I have seen. The blue of these enhanced the overall orange appearance of the monkey flowers.



The spectacular *Mimulus guttatus* hybrids growing by a lochan near the community of Hosta





Potentilla palustris (Marsh Cinqufoil) thrived beside the lochs in many parts of the islands but was especially abundant here. Owing to the lack of trees and consequently tree bark, Marsh Cinqufoil was formerly used in tanning leather and fishing nets.. The roots were boiled up in vats to make the tanning solution. It is said that it would take a man whole day to dig up enough roots to make an infusion. Tormentil and Water lily rhizomes were also used. This may explain why where it occurs it is plentiful. I like its unusual dark maroon flowers. The colour reminds me of the modern trend with Astrantias.



WOOL AND COTTON ON THE SAME HILLSIDE



The summit of Clettrevall Hill was windswept. It seems to be a good place for communications aerials. The sheep got some shelter in the long grass on the leeward side of the hill. They probably preferred the white clover to the cotton grass.



Looking west from Clettrevall Hill

By this time the sun had come out and it sparkled on the tiny lochs. As the road climbed higher the view got better until at last we reached the viewpoint. I always thought St Kilda was very very far away but it turns out it is only very far away!And that depends upon where you are when you ponder the question. There they were, several islands sitting on the horizon. The furthest north, Soay was flat topped; St Kilda (or Hirta)next to it had a distinct hill, topped by a mast. Further south three small bumps broke the horizon, southern parts of Hirta perhaps?. No detail could be discerned but it was quite magical to see the famous islands. Many years ago Bob Bryan from Pitcairngreen collected, propagated and distributed several clones of St Kilda heather. I remember him at the Chelsea flower show, dressed in his kilt with a piper by his side. Bob was a contemporary of Jack Drake and Will Ingwersen. Since we were alone on the hillside road we encountered more birds. Several curlews flew over uttering their distinctive call. A shy ringed plover crept through the tall grass by the roadside and the odd peewit passed nearby. the hill was topped by several masts surrounded by a chainlink fence with Ministry of Defence signs. There is a bit of humour there !.....we did not meet the minister of de fence!



Some house have better views than others. Often a new house had been built beside an much older one.

View west towards St Kilda





Up on Clettrevall Hill where we were the only people it was very quiet with only the occasional gust of wind. There we saw many more birds. Among these were Curlews, Lapwings Oystercatchers and maybe a wagtail.



Returning to Hosta at the foot of the hill, we continued along the north coast and stopped above Loch Scolpaig to admire the wee castle on the Loch. Beside the road we found several *Dactylorhiza maculata* and a few louseworts.



Dactylorrhiza maculata (Heath Spotted Orchid)





Lychnis flos-cuculi (Ragged Robin)



Pedicularis sylvatica (Lousewort)





From here on we were tourists. We stopped to admire the huge expanse of sandy beach at Sollas. On the north of the bay sits the island of Vallay. Anne Chambers announced her intention to walk across the sand to the island. There is a path marked on tour map so perhaps the route is easy to follow. According to "walkthehighlands" web site, "This exciting tidal walk heads across wet sands and mud flats to reach the now uninhabited island of Vallay. Pass the ruins of impressive Vallay House and the farm to cross the island to a sandy bay and the ruins of an ancient chapel." She'd be stuck if the tide came in! This coast is remarkable especially when viewed from the hillside above. Our route took us past one of the only forests on North Uist, over the hills and back to the main road.



Fine Dining at the Westford Inn on North Uist.



We were earlier than some at the **Westford Inn**. CAMRA rates the Westford highly and points out " *The Georgian listed building has been licensed since 1896 and is situated on the beautiful island of North Uist which forms a part of the Western Isles and faces out onto the Atlantic Ocean, next stop USA!*" Our party was spread out through the whole Inn. Every available chair had been commandeered for us. The meal was superb! We had chosen our meal on Friday morning so several of us forgot what we ordered but Matt had our orders to hand and kept us right. I had soup followed by the biggest thickest steak I have had outside the USA. Succulent, tasty, tender, consumed, it was all of those. I expected a wee bowl of Cranachan as desert but was startled to have a sundae of Cranachan, cream, ice cream and raspberries placed in front of me. Roma had the same delicious problem to solve. We triumphed! On the north western edge of the country we enjoyed one of best meals we have ever bought. Just to note, others including Julia and Ian raved about the seafood platter.

After a rest it was time to return to South Uist and the Orasay Inn for a comfortable nights rest.

