

Mammal Report: Ardnamurchan Peninsula and Mull, Scotland

3 - 10 October 2009

Mike Richardson

Introduction

On October 3, 2009, I visited the Ardnamurchan Peninsula on the west coast of Scotland for a week. Accompanied by my girlfriend, two friends and their baby, our primary aim was to relax and unwind away from the stresses of modern life. However, with so much wildlife to see I was unable to rest for long and spent a reasonable amount of time birding and searching for mammals.

For seven nights we were based in Mingarry near Acharacle allowing close proximity to the mammal hotspots of Ardnamurchan.

We also spent a day exploring the north of Mull using the Kilchoan to Tobermory ferry to gain access to this beautiful island.

Despite a gloomy long term forecast, the weather turned out to be excellent throughout the week, with only occasional rain showers and strong winds. Temperatures were mild although it did get cold on the night drives over the hills.

Accommodation and food

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Garmoran Square (01967 431456) in Mingarry for first class self-catering accommodation.

Eating out in October takes a little planning, as several places limit opening times or close altogether out of season.

Decent meals can be found at the Ben view Hotel and the Strontian Hotel, both in Strontian. The latter had changed hands since my last visit and is very much improved.

The Ardnamurchan Natural History Centre (01972 500209) at Glenmore deserves a special mention. Not only does it do splendid lunches and cakes, it is also a great place to chat about the latest wildlife sightings, including those of Wildcat. The owner Ritchie, may also have information on which nearby accommodation is attracting Pine Martens.

Spotlighting

The main target of mammal enthusiasts visiting Ardnamurchan is Wildcat and to see this elusive creature often requires some serious effort and often hours of spotlighting.

At this point I should mention that on my first evening drive I attracted the attention of several locals who concluded I was a poacher and swiftly informed the local estate.

The next afternoon I was stopped by the estate's Sporting Manager who questioned my spotlighting motives before filling me in on the excitement I had unwittingly caused.

It turns out that a growing deer poaching problem, together with my spotlighting technique and our choice of vehicles (Nissan pick-up and Land Rover) had separated us out from the usual wildcat spotters that are usually tolerated.

In other words, because we spotlighted using two high-powered torches from 'fast moving' 4x4's we aroused suspicion. Apparently, most Wildcat spotters favour selecting an area, parking up and working a particular scree or valley for an hour or so.

It must be said that the manager was both polite and friendly, even informing me of his own Wildcat sightings. He then requested that I email him detailing any future spotlighting trips so that the locals can be informed in advance.

In all I spent four nights spotlighting the 6 mile stretch of road from the Cala Darach to the junction with Kilmory road (NM526665) on the B8007. It goes without saying that many mammal sightings occurred whilst driving to and from this area, and every stretch of road on the peninsula has potential for producing a Wildcat or Pine Marten.

Mammals

Western Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*

Three individuals seen over two nights. The B8007 between Glenborrodale and Kilchoan seems especially good for this species.

Natterer's Bat *Myotis nattereri*

This bat seemed to be extremely common on the peninsula and was often seen in the car headlights while driving at night. To my knowledge this species is the only *Myotis* to be found on Ardnamurchan so identification was straight forward and confirmed with my bat detector.

Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*

Good numbers of Pipistrelles were seen on an evening and my bat detector ruled out Soprano Pipistrelle in several cases.

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Rabbits were numerous on Mull, especially in lowland fields. Only one was seen on the mainland, near Acharacle.

Bank Vole *Clethrionomys glareolus*

This animal was seen crossing the road on two nightdrives, both times in areas of oak woodland. On both occasions the chestnut coat was seen well enough to suggest this species over Field Vole.

Field Vole *Microtus agrestis*

Also known as the Short-tailed Vole, a single animal was seen well as it crossed a road on the shore of Loch na Keal, Mull. The grey fur and short tail were noted.

Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*

Good numbers of Wood Mice were seen on nightdrives, particularly the last one which coincided with a period of rain. Views were always brief, although the lack of confusion species made identification straight forward.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A couple of Red Foxes were noted over two nightdrives along the B8007. One animal was located hunting the bottom of a valley and it took several heart-stopping minutes to identify the predator behind the eye shine.

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*

The west coast of Scotland is possibly one of the best areas to look for these animals in the wild.

On the first morning I found a female fishing in Salen Bay which gave good views for several minutes.

A second Otter was seen fishing in Loch na Keal on the Isle of Mull the next day; again it showed well for a short time before disappearing out of sight.

American Mink *Mustela vison*

A Mink was seen briefly as it crossed the road boarding Loch na Keal. This animal is not native to the UK and its negative ecological impacts are well documented.

Pine Marten *Martes martes*

This animal eluded us through out the week despite hundreds of miles covered on night drives through suitable habitat. It seemed everyone I spoke to had seen one recently, and many guest houses had Martens visiting at night.

On the last few miles of our final night drive a Pine Marten crossed the road in front of the car. This allowed brief but superb views and finished off our holiday in style.

A road-killed animal was seen earlier in the week along the A861 near Mallaig.

Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

This animal was my number one target of the holiday and the Ardnamurchan Peninsula is as close as you can come to a reliable spot for seeing this species.

After my first spotlighting session along the B8007 I had decided to return home and had just left the area where most sightings occur. I had just started the descent into Ardslnish (the first bay) when I spotted a very large cat running along side the crash barrier. Obviously terrified by my car, the animal leaped over the barrier and into the dense vegetation in a split second.

The thick, club tail was noted, along with the black bands and tip, No white was present on the fur, and the fact the cat chose to jump the barrier instead of going under illustrates its large size.

Both my friend and I were happy this was a Wildcat and not a domestic or hybrid.

A probable Wildcat was spotted by my friend on our second night drive along the side of Loch Muddle. Unfortunately the sighting was brief and I didn't get onto the animal.

Common (Harbour) Seal *Phoca vitulina*

Common Seals were seen at several locations, including Loch Linnhe and Loch Sunart. They were also numerous around the Isle of Mull.

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Two Grey Seals were spotted along the minor road to Rhu, just off the B8008 (old Mallaig road).

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*

Two porpoise were seen well in calm seas at the Point of Ardnamurchan. The area in front of the lighthouse is a well known cetacean watch point.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Common on Ardnamurchan we saw Red Deer every day. The Rut was in full swing during our visit and some impressive stags were noted. A stag and six hinds were seen every morning from our accommodation, while the moor land south of the Natural History Centre produced very close views both day and night.

Feral Goat *Capra hircus*

I'm not sure on the ethics of ticking Feral Goats, although many mammal listers do

A small heard of scruffy looking goats was seen clinging to the cliff face bordering the A861 on our third day, and I have seen the same animals on previous visits. I am only presuming they are feral.

Other wildlife highlights

The star birds of the week were undoubtedly the raptors I saw most days. Several Golden Eagles were seen on Ardnamurchan including a pair on the minor road to Polloch. White-tailed Eagles were seen on both the peninsula and on the Isle of Mull. A male Han Harrier was noted one morning from the B8007 close to Loch Muddle.

Stuff I missed

Ardnamurchan is reputedly one of the best spots for cetacean watching in the UK. Many species are recorded from the lighthouse at the point, including Minke Whale, Killer Whale and Risso's Dolphin.

Several boat trips operate from the mainland, as well as the islands of Mull and Skye. Ardnamurchan Charters (01972 500208) were recommended to me by several people, although unfortunately my visit was too late in the season to make such a trip worthwhile.

Other mammals I missed include Roe Deer which are supposed to be common on Ardnamurchan. Red Squirrel also live in the area, although they are restricted to areas of woodland.

I had a site for a population of introduced Arctic Hare (Irish stock) on the Isle of Mull but failed to find the location, never mind the hares!