



WilderNess by Tony Marr



The end is here – but how did it all begin?

A little over ten years ago, in April 2008, the Scottish Government rejected an application to build 181 wind turbines, each 140 metres tall, on the Lewis peatlands between Ness and Stornoway – an area designated for its special wildlife. It now seems a long time ago. It was a decision I had been keenly awaiting. I was about to retire from my second career as a birdwatching tour leader (my first career having been 37 rewarding years with the Land Registry in London). After 50 visits to Antarctica I was feeling rather penguinised out, and my interest had been steadily moving northwards to the Arctic and its greater variety of birds and mammals. Working as the ornithologist on small ice-strengthened expedition cruise ships had enabled me to visit parts of Svalbard, Iceland, Greenland and Arctic Canada which are inaccessible to larger conventional cruise ships. I anticipated severe withdrawal symptoms when I reached my three score years and ten, yet judged that it had to be the right time to retire from such an addictive yet demanding occupation.

How time flies

Remembering my first visits to Stornoway as an impressionable schoolboy and a budding young ornithologist in the 1950s, I wondered if the Western Isles could still work their magic on me. Not being one to dither or swither, I decided to get on with it. In September 2008 I bought a neglected cottage overlooking the sea in Port of Ness, just two miles from the Butt of Lewis lighthouse, and moved in early in the spring of 2009. I began an intensive daily migration watch in Ness, the northern tip of the 'Long Island', as the 150-mile-long Outer Hebridean chain of islands is sometimes known. Within two weeks I had found a Kildeer (a very rare American plover) on Loch Stiapabhat, our Local Nature Reserve. I was in business!

Patchwork and the lone ranger

I had hit the ground running, and I had found the ideal 'local patch' in which to spread my wings. I had no competition, unlike Cley next the Sea, my home village in Norfolk, which was steadily filling up with birders. There were at that time four knowledgeable and dedicated bird watchers on Lewis, one being the late W.A.J. (Peter) Cunningham, respected authority on Hebridean birds and author of *'Birds of the Outer Hebrides'* (1979). He was a good friend for sixty years, who died in 2014 at the age of 96. There are now just two others, both in Stornoway, 27 miles away from Ness. To my continuing surprise, no other retired birder with a passion for watching 'vis mig' (visible migration) has moved into the area. Perhaps the weather puts people off; locals are enured to it. It's certainly unpredictable and changeable. The Butt of Lewis can be found in the Guinness Book of Records as the windiest place in Britain. The rain is either up-and-down rain, or sideways rain. Frosts, ice and snow are rare, thanks to the Gulf Stream and the amount of salt in the air. The winter days are short, but glorious summer nights with only a couple of hours of darkness have to be experienced to be believed. These extremes account for the appearance of interesting and unusual birds from all points of the compass. The list of mega rarities found in Ness in my ten years here is a long one, and has been well documented in previous issues of *fios*.

The ones that got away...

All dedicated 'patch watchers' have had a rarity slip through their fingers (if you're a bird ringer, that can be literally!). In my case, that risk of missing a really rare bird is doubled, as I've been spending only half of each year on Lewis and Harris. A very small number of special birds have been found there when I've been off the island for my winter or summer breaks. The photographs here illustrate just four of them. The Ivory Gull I identified from photos emailed to me by the Editor of *fios* one Christmas Eve when I was in North Wales. I identified the White-crowned Sparrow from a vivid description given to me by another local resident ('Its head was stripey, like a badger's'). The White-throated Needletail was near Tarbet, and was killed flying into a wind turbine (I had just returned to Norfolk for my summer holiday). And the last one is a mystery bird which was either a Veery, an American thrush, or a Rufous-tailed Robin from the Far East; my photos were too blurred for a positive identification to be made. My excuse is that I was standing on the edge of a cliff at the Butt in steady rain and a strong wind, and that my hands were shaking with excitement!

Is it *au revoir* or *adieu*?

It's time to fire up the Freelander; head for the ferry for the last time; and turn southwards on to the A9 for the 600-mile drive down to North Norfolk. I extend my greatest and warmest thanks and appreciation to all the good people of Ness who have helped and supported me in my endeavours to put the Isle of Lewis on the ornithological map. I firmly believe that between us we've done it, and most importantly, it is undoubtedly to the benefit of the birds. Thank you all so much.

Tony Marr



Ivory Gull photographed by Dods MacFarlane



White-crowned Sparrow photographed by Colin Bushell



White-throated Needletail photographed by Chris Batty
(Rare Bird Alert)



The mystery bird - was it a Veery, or a Rufous-tailed Robin?