## FIELD REPORT

## WILD SCOTLAND Aboard the *Greg Mortimer*MAY 25–JUNE 6, 2022

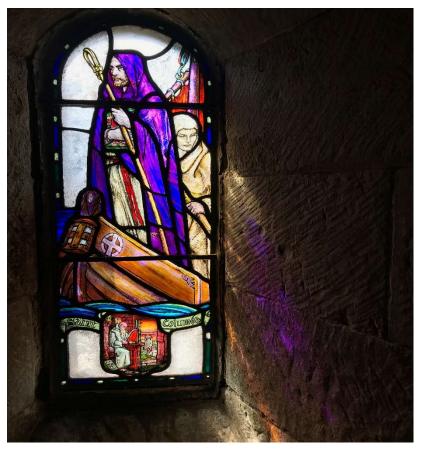


Atlantic Puffin; visiting Fair Isle was the Puffin Highlight of the tour © Brian Gibbons

LEADER: BRIAN GIBBONS LIST COMPILED BY: BRIAN GIBBONS

## WILD SCOTLAND ABOARD THE GREG MORTIMER

Our Wild Scotland cruise was one of contrasts. We lived aboard a superbly designed expedition vessel, the *Greg Mortimer*, and toured the windswept islands near and far from the Scottish mainland. Walking ashore from our Zodiacs, we explored ancient dwellings of the Norse and Scots dating to nearly 5,000 years ago. They lived more simply than we did, but they lived well for their time. The famous Scottish weather greeted us only briefly at Loch Coruisk and while landing in St. Kilda but scattered to broken clouds, then clear skies and light winds for the majority of the cruise. Wildlife greeted us at every stop: garden birds in lona, seabirds at every cliff and one old broch, dolphins in the Hebrides, a Minke Whale at North Rona, and one odd duck at Fair Isle. Great meals and wine fueled our explorations during our travels. Lighthouses topped every island and headland and provided evidence of more recent human history, as they dated from the nineteenth century and onward.



Stained glass (not original) from St Margaret's Chapel built in the tenth century in Edinburgh Castle © Brian Gibbons

We started our explorations on the Royal Mile in Old Town Edinburgh, terminating at the castle, which has been built, captured, occupied, destroyed, and rebuilt over the centuries. With a commanding view of the city and Firth of Forth, Mons Meg, the gigantic cannon, looms silently over town. After a quick lunch of fish and chips we boarded buses bound for Troon, where we met the peculiar-looking *Greg Mortimer* with its X-bow design. A few Common Eiders and a Black Guillemot beat us to the pier and would be our regular companions at nearly every island.

Approaching lona, we could see the giant ancient abbey dating from the sixth century CE. The nunnery in town was in ruins, but the birds didn't mind; starlings nested in every hollow in the old stone walls. The trees

and gardens of Iona hosted a good variety of songbirds that we wouldn't see much more of during our cruise. Right at the landing we had a Peregrine Falcon that chased a large shorebird for several minutes, circling up before spiraling down. The sandpiper managed to dodge many passes by the Peregrine and eventually made it safely to the shoreline rocks, where it

undoubtedly was exhausted. The charming European Robin, vocal Meadow Pipit, a snail-smashing Song Thrush, blackbirds, wrens, and Greater Whitethroats all put in appearances while we were ashore. We saw our first rookery, inhabited by Rooks. A few miles away, we cruised past the opening to Fingal's Cave that was framed by spectacular basaltic columns. Up on top of Staffa, rolling grassy fields fell away to the cliffs; here wildflowers flourished, and Atlantic Puffins burrowed to usher in the next generation of little clown-



Robin at Iona © Brian Gibbons

billed auks. In the late evening sun after dinner, we ship-cruised the Isle of Lunga, where hundreds of Common Murres, Razorbills, Atlantic Puffins, and Black-legged Kittiwakes were in the frenzied beginnings of their breeding season.

The following morning, the Isle of Skye beckoned us ashore at Rubh' an Dunain, an ancient Viking site where they constructed a simple fort and an amazing canal linking the loch to the sea, presumably to protect, hide, and repair ships on the loch. This was the site of the first found Common Sandpipers, the Old World relative of our Spotted Sandpiper. Gray Heron, Northern Wheatear, Meadow Pipits, and White Wagtails livened up the loch. As usual, the shore was alive



The Callanish Stones on the Isle of Lewis © Brian Gibbons

with the cries of the Eurasian Oystercatchers. Around the ship all morning were perhaps a hundred or more Common Dolphins, our only sighting of the trip. Ominous gray skies greeted us for our hike to Loch Coruisk. Some of us heard our first Common Cuckoos near the loch, but otherwise the cloudy skies kept the birds quiet save for the squawking Arctic Terns settling territories. The clouds playing on the surrounding mountains and the loch's water tumbling down to the sea made for fabulous scenery.

The next morning, we had a long Zodiac ride to land on Lewis, home of the Callanish Stones, a ring of standing stones initiated in 2900 BCE. On our way to Carol's lecture, we had a great view in the scope of a fine yellow male Eurasian Siskin. Common Chaffinch was also noted. We were further delayed by our first Black-headed Gulls, Northern Lapwings, and Common Redshank. In the gardens around the monument we found European Robins, Eurasian Blackbirds, European Goldfinches, and Barn Swallows. In the afternoon we visited Bostadh, a reconstructed sod-roofed house duplicating home life from the Iron Ages. Outside, a Eurasian Wren sang, and we had our first encounters with European Stonechat, a family group. Late in the evening, we shipcruised the Flannan Isle, where Northern Gannets nest and a lighthouse still shines. In the late nineteenth century John Love explained the mystery of three men who disappeared without a trace. John kind of ruined the mystery with a rather straightforward explanation of a rogue wave



St. Kilda; the cleits in the foreground were used for food storage - think yummy fulmar. The *Greg Mortimer* in the background © Brian Gibbons

washing them off the landing. Even on our calm transit, the waves were a riot on the rocky coast, giving John's theory some weight.

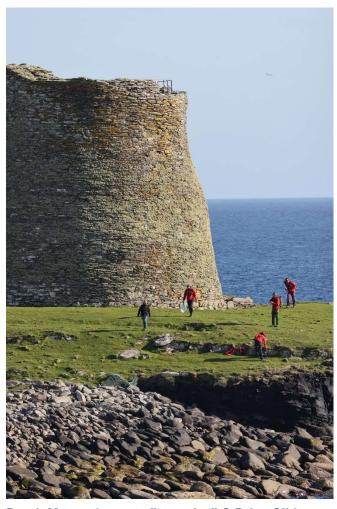
Next, we sailed into the Atlantic to a remote and tiny archipelago with thousands of years of human history. In a protected bay, we anchored in St. Kilda, whose green slopes were dotted with ancient cleits and stone walls. Cleits are sod-roofed stone structures that were used for storing food, like fulmars, oil-laden Northern Gannet chicks, and probably murre eggs. The hillsides of Hirta, the main island, were verdant, as apparently it rained for weeks before we arrived in Scotland. The ancient breed of Soay sheep, while rather ragged-looking, were actively grazing the green hillsides. A trio of Lesser Redpolls was a nice surprise amongst the newer buildings used by the military. We watched a Common Snipe on one sod roof as it dropped out of site, possibly to a nest. Meadow Pipits, Northern Wheatears and, of course, European Starlings and their squawking young in every crack were present. The St. Kilda subspecies of Eurasian Wren was fairly common, singing from rock walls and old cleits. Out of place seemed a Eurasian Collared-Dove calling on a roof. After lunch we took a Zodiac cruise around Dun, a



Razorbill © Brian Gibbons

smaller island with thousands of puffins nesting in the rolling hills at the top of the cliffs. Great masses of puffins were resting on the water and swirling overhead as they settled into their burrows for the summer. Northern Fulmars, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Common Murres, and European Shags occupied every nook, cranny, and ledge on Dun. In the evening we ship-cruised around every stack and island of St. Kilda, taking in some of the 60,000 pairs of Northern Gannets that call St. Kilda home for the summer.

A couple more specks of islands occupied a day on our way to the Shetlands Sula Sgeir and North Rona. The lighthouse on top of Sula Sgeir (Gannet Rock) looked very modern, but the



**Broch Mousa, home to "stormies" © Brian Gibbons** 

cairns were primitive and still being added to by the Guga men, the locals who are still allowed to harvest a few gannets in the fall for tradition. We saw from the Zodiacs every square inch of land occupied by gannets, evenly spaced to prevent pecking from their neighbor. The narrower ledges were full of murres, and every nub had a messy kittiwake nest perched on top. All these seabirds made for a multi-sensory experience; sight, sound, and . . . smell were all involved in the visit to Sula Sgeir. Just a few miles up the Atlantic we came upon North Rona's rolling grassy slopes that fell away to a few cliffs and rocky coastline. Up near the light, while still on Greg Mortimer, I noticed a couple of gulls divebombing something. I figured it was a predator and was surprised when I scoped up the target of their ire-a White-tailed Eagle, our first and only of the trip. We enjoyed scope views and could appreciate the bulk of this massive bird, as well as its massive yellow beak. Cruising around the island we saw many Gray Seals with their blocky heads popping out of the surf; a few seemed curious, but most disappeared with a splash. For aquatic highlights, our time

spent with a feeding Minke Whale, sometimes amongst the Zodiacs, was tops. We could hear its explosive exhalations, even though this is the smallest of the baleen whales. Finally our time was up, and we made our way back to the ship and on to the Shetland Islands, leaving the Gaelic influence behind.

The Shetlands were controlled by the Norse for six centuries. Our first landing was at the Jarlshof Archaeological site, exposed by storms more than a century ago and remaining well-preserved because of its inundation by soil centuries ago. Four thousand years of human history were exposed before us, ending with the more recent Viking longhouses that date from the ninth to the fourteenth century. With the relatively low bird diversity of the northern latitudes we visited, we spotted few new birds but enjoyed the Black Guillemots, Great Skuas, and chattering Arctic Terns. Our next island in Shetland was Mousa, home of the most famous broch in the world; standing more than 40 feet tall and purely of drystone construction, it is a testament to the engineering that went into the building some 2,500 years ago. While listening to Carol's description of the occupants' lives, I noticed a faint rising chatter that stopped and repeated itself constantly; it was the call of the nesting European Storm-Petrels deep within the walls of the ancient Broch of Mousa. For a couple thousand years the crevices and hollows within the stone walls have ushered in the next generation of "Stormies." This was an avian highlight of the trip for me, a unique experience.

Foula has many more birds than human residents. We saw many Great Skuas and a couple of

Red-throated Loons. The avian highlight for me was the "roding" Common Snipe, where the displaying birds flew up and down in a wave pattern accelerating on the downward flight, extending their two outer tail feathers to make their unique sound. The detritus of the seafarers, the classic red phone booth, and machinery all made for great photography subjects. The rusty excavator even hosted a Eurasian Oystercatcher nest! Harbor Seals splashed and chased and seemed to be enjoying themselves in the protected waters around the pier. We saw stacked peat as well as active stacking to allow the peat to dry for several months so that it can be used as fuel. The afternoon Zodiac cruise around Papa Stour had exquisite conditions. We zipped into tiny sheltered bays, went under



Common Snipe in display © Brian Gibbons

arches, and explored many caves with their clear waters washing the kelp back and forth. We

saw a couple of Ruddy Turnstones and Common Ringed Plovers. The shags here were on nests, and their plumage was the brightest we'd seen, black feathers with a greenish sheen.

Fair Isle hosted the largest Atlantic Puffin colony we were able to visit at point-blank range. At one point, I had lain down to get some photos of confiding puffins, only to be surrounded by the colorful-billed critters. Taking to the air in masses, they circled and landed again right in front of us. It was a spectacle that I was so taken by that I couldn't pull myself away to visit the town. Wheeling overhead in the wind, the occasional Great Skua spooked many puffins, but they returned quickly, chattering amongst themselves, sometimes four or five gathering at a burrow entrance, seemingly negotiating the year's owner. The cliffs just below the puffin burrows hosted



A few of the thousands of Atlantic Puffins we observed at Fair Isle © Brian Gibbons

hundreds of nesting fulmars that would rise on the wind and disappear out to sea. This was a wonderful experience that everyone enjoyed. After a short crossing we made it to the Orkneys at Papa Westray. I led a few birders through farm fields and out to the coast, where we found a monument to the Great Auk. In 1813 one was found here and promptly shot! For living birds, we found Parasitic Jaegers, Eurasian Oystercatchers, Razorbills, murres, and Eurasian Skylarks. Those who followed Carol for the history lesson were treated to the oldest preserved stone dwelling in Northern Europe, the Knap of Howar, 3500 BCE. The residents of this neolithic farmstead grew barley and wheat, raised cattle and sheep, harvested shellfish, and fished.



Common Murres disputing cliff space; note the left bird is "bridled" © Brian Gibbons

Our final landing in the Orkneys was at the dock in Kirkwall. The birders were on bus three, and we had the very entertaining Ann, who was bird aware. She kept getting sidetracked from the amazing archaeology by birds! Along the way we saw nearly one hundred Mute Swans and a dozen Tufted Ducks, both new birds for us. First, we made our way to Skara Brae, another ancient seaside community with well-preserved houses from thousands of years ago, discovered after a storm washed the preserving beach away from the site. The birds were distracting, as always; Bank Swallows zipped overhead while Ann informed us of the history of this amazing place. On the little bay, a trio of Common Loons dived while we were watching. After touring the site, we scoped a fine singing male Reed Bunting before returning to the bus to head for the next site. The Ring of Brodgar is another circular pattern of monoliths erected thousands of years ago. Covering more area than the Callanish Stones, we were unable to walk between them, as the site forbade it. While encircling them we called a Eurasian Skylark that hovered and sang right in front of us before wandering away to do other skylark things. Another Reed Bunting allowed everyone to count it, and a rather cooperative Sedge Warbler did the same. Before long we had to return to Kirkwall to finish our journey to Aberdeen, a busy commercial port. Sailing south of the Orkneys, I again failed to find a whale or shearwater, but smooth sailing makes the misses easier. Thanks for traveling with VENT to "Wild Scotland." I look forward to our next birding adventure, wherever in the world that might be! -Brian Gibbons

## **ITINERARY**

- 27 May 2022 Old Town Edinburgh and the Royal Mile, Transfer to Troon, boarded *Greg Mortimer*
- 28 May 2022 Iona landing, Staffa landing for some, Zodiac cruise for others, Ship cruise past Lunga Island
- 29 May 2022 Loch na h-Airdel landing visit to Rubh'n Dunain, Landing at Loch Coruisk
- 30 May 2022 Callanish Stones and Village landing, Bostadh landing
- 31 May 2022 St Kilda Hirta island landing in the morning, Zodiac cruise in the afternoon around Dun, ship cruise evening around all islands and stacks of St Kilda
- 1 June 2022 Sula Sgeir Zodiac cruise in the morning, North Rona Zodiac cruise in the afternoon
- 2 June 2022 Jarlshof landing, Mousa Broch landing in afternoon
- 3 June 2022 Foula landing, Papa Stour Zodiac cruise in the afternoon
- 4 June 2022 Fair Isle landing in the morning with Puffins, Papa Westray landing afternoon
- 5 June 2022 Orkneys, Kirkwall dock then Skara Brae and Ring of Brodgar
- 6 June 2022 Aberdeen Port and departures

Ducks, Geese & Waterfowl	Anatidae	
Graylag Goose	Anser anser	First at Iona, seen six days
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus	Papa Westeray
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	In the Orkneys where common
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	Rick had one on a long walk
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	Fairly common
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	Kirkwall in the Orkneys
Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	Seen almost every day
Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis	A rare summer visitor, Fair Isle
Pigeons & Doves	Columbidae	
Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	Actual Wild Types seen in the remote islands
Common Wood-Pigeon	Columba palumbus	Mainland, Lewis & Orkneys
Eurasian Collared-Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	On the ship! Sula Sgeir, St Kilda, Shetlands & Orkneys
Cuckoos	Cuculidae	
Common (Eurasian) Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	Heard Lake Coruisk, seen by some Callanish
Rails, Gallinules & Coots	Rallidae	
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	Near Skara Brae

Oystercatchers	Haematopodidae	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	Common seen daily on coast, fenceposts, fields and roofs!
Plovers & Lapwings	Charadriidae	Terresposes, neras una rocie.
European Golden-Plover	Pluvialis apricaria	A couple quick flybys, Isle of Skye & Callanish
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	Callanish, Shetlands and Orkneys
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	St Kilda, Shetlands and Orkneys
Sandpipers & Allies	Scolopacidae	
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	Papa Westray and best views in Orkneys
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	St Kilda, Shetlands and Orkneys
Ruff	Calidris pugnax	
Sanderling	Calidris alba	Sula Sgeir, best looks at Mousa beach
Dunlin	Calidris alpina	St Kilda, Papa Westray
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	Displaying birds seen well on Foula
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	Isle of Skye at Rune Dunain
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	Best looks in the Orkneys
Skuas & Jaegers	Stercorariidae	
Great Skua	Stercorarius skua	Common on most islands, numerous on Foula
Parasitic Jaeger	Stercorarius parasiticus	St Kilda, Papa Westray & Orkneys
Auks, Murres & Puffins	Alcidae	
Common Murre (Guillemot)	Uria aalge	Abundant, "bridled" individuals noted too
Razorbill	Alca torda	Common seen seven days
Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle	Seen most days on larger islands, stays close to rocky coasts
Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica	Thousands seen, we all love puffins!
Gulls, Terns & Skimmers	Laridae	
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	Seen every day at sea and nesting on cliffs
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	Seen most days later in the cruise
Common Gull	Larus canus	Common along the coasts
(European Herring Gull)	L. a. argentatus/ argenteus	Common along coasts
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	Common

Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	This big bruiser was fairly
		common, daily
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea	Common breeder on the islands
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis	One seen by a couple folks Papa Westray
Loons	Gaviidae	,
Red-throated Loon	Gavia stellata	Flybys seen by everyone, Rick saw one on a loch
Arctic Loon	Gavia arctica	Flyby a couple days Callanish on Lewis
Common Loon	Gavia immer	Iona & Skara Brae in the Orkneys
Northern Storm-Petrels	Hydrobatidae	
European Storm-Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus	Heard in the crevices of Broch Mousa, what an experience!
Shearwaters & Petrels	Procellariidae	
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	Common at sea and nesting on cliffs of every island
<b>Boobies &amp; Gannets</b>	Sulidae	
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	A few huge colonies visited, 60,000 pairs at St Kilda!
Cormorants & Shags	Phalacrocoracidae	
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	Small numbers around larger islands
European Shag	Gulosus aristotelis	More numerous than Great nesting on cliffs
Herons, Egrets & Bitterns	Ardeidae	
Gray Heron	Ardea cinerea	Isle of Skye & Callanish
Hawks, Eagles & Kites	Accipitridae	
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	Lewis near Bostadh, seen from the ship
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	A single scoped bird on North Rona
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	Glimpsed from the bus near Glasgow
Falcons & Caracaras	Falconidae	
Eurasian Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	Edinburgh Castle
Merlin	Falco columbarius	
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	lona chasing a shorebird! St Kilda
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	Edinburgh on the Royal Mile
Eurasian Jackdaw	Corvus monedula	Edinburgh, Troon & Orkneys
Rook	Corvus frugilegus	Iona & Orkneys
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	Edinburgh & Troon
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	Common on most islands

Common Raven	Corvus corax	Most numerous in Orkneys
Tits, Chickadees & Titmice	Paridae	Wost Humerous in Orkneys
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	Iona
Larks	Alaudidae	IOHA
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	Hoard many times: long & Ding
-	Alauda ai verisis	Heard many times; Iona & Ring of Brodgar were well seen
Reed Warblers & Allies	Acrocephalidae	
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus	Iona for some, Ring of Brodgar
	schoenobaenus	in Ornkeys for most
Martins & Swallows	Hirundinidae	
Bank Swallow (Sand Martin)	Riparia riparia	Skara Brae in Orkneys
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	Seen several times, oddest
		place was Sula Sgeir
Common House-Martin	Delichon urbicum	Iona and Orkneys
Leaf Warblers	Phylloscopidae	
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	Iona and heard at Callanish
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	Photo by Ed in Shetlands
Sylviid Warblers, Parrotbills &	Allies Sylviidae	
Greater Whitethroat	Carruca communis	lona
Wrens	Troglodytidae	
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	Common
Eurasian Wren (St Kilda)	T. troglodytes hirtensis	St Kilda
Eurasian Wren (Fair Isle)	T. troglodytes fridariensis	Fair Isle
Starlings	Sturnidae	
European Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	Common
Thrushes & Allies	Turdidae	
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	lona where we saw and heard
3	,	one using an anvil to smash a
		snail! & Callanish
Eurasian Blackbird	Turdus merula	Seen on most larger islands in
		small numbers first at lona
Old World Flycatchers	Muscicapidae	
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	Iona & Callanish
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola	A small family group at Bostadh
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	Common in rocky areas
Accentors	Prunellidae	Common in rocky areas
Dunnock	Prunella modularis	Iona in the garden
Old World Sparrows	Passeridae	iona in the garden
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	Common
-		Common
Wagtails & Pipits	Motacillidae	Common on most ideads
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	Common on most islands
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	The most regular passerine on islands

Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus	Seen along rocky coasts
Finches, Euphonias & Allies	Fringillidae	
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	Callanish
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	Iona & Callanish, most were
		uncooperative
Twite	Linaria flavirostris	Iona, Isle of Skye, Shetlands
Eurasian Linnet	Linaria cannabina	Iona & best looks at Skara
		Brae in Orkneys
Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret	St Kilda
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	Edinburgh, Iona & Callanish
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	Callanish a fine male in the
		scope
Longspurs & Snow Buntings	Calcariidae	
Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis	A single male, seen by a few
		folks at St Kilda
Old World Buntings	Emberizidae	
Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	Orkneys at Skara Brae & Ring of Brodgar
Mammals		
European Rabbit ( I )	Oryctolagus cuniculus	Abundant in Orkneys
Brown Hare	Lepus europaeus	A few seen around Orkneys
Squirrels	Sciuridae	
Baleen Whales	Balaenopteridae	
Minke Whale	Balaenoptera acutirostrata	North Rona a great study at a
		feeding animal, seen from
		Zodiacs
Dolphins	Delphinidae	
Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis	One hundred or more around
		the ship early in the voyage
Risso's Dolphin	Grampus griseus	Sula Sgeir, fleeting glimpses
Common/Harbor Seal	Phoca vitulina	Many seen on Zodiac cruises
Gray/Atlantic Seal	Halichoerus grypus	Many seen on Zodiac cruises