

# A Report on a recent visit to Haskeir Island, North Uist, 26<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> June 2005

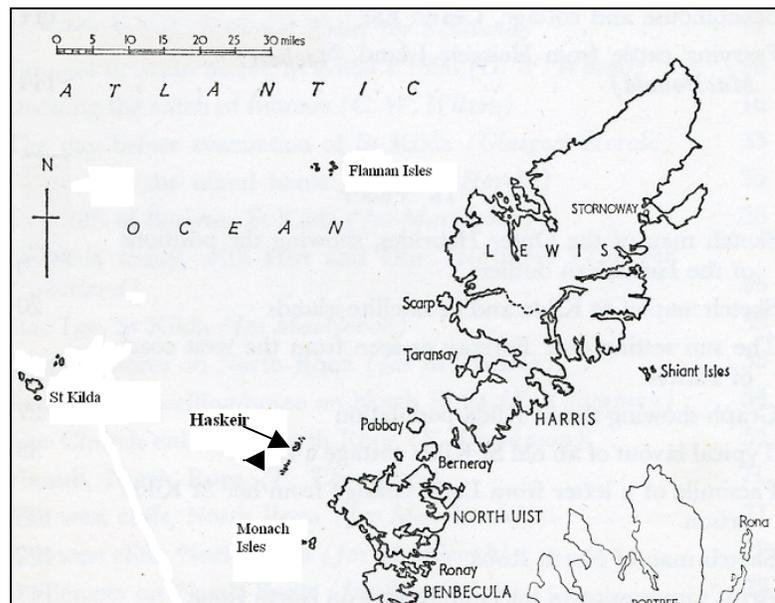
by Nigel R. Winn

## Aims of the expedition

- 1) To record any evidence of human occupation.
- 2) To survey and provide a record of all breeding birds.
- 3) To investigate and prove any possible breeding of Leach's storm-petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*)

## Description and location

Haskeir or Haisg eir Mhor (*Great Haskeir*) as it is called in Gaelic lies 6½ nautical miles WNW of Griminish Point, North Uist at a latitude of 57°42' N and longitude 7°41' W or at Grid Ref NF615820. The island, which belongs to North Uist Estates is currently designated an S.S.S.I because it is an important Grey Seal rookery and is 41 acres or 16.6 hectares in area, approximately half a mile long and less than a quarter of a mile wide at the widest extremity. It is located 111 km from the deep water of the continental shelf (1000 m isobath).



The original Norse name was Haf-skerr (*Deep-sea Skerry*) and it has been variously spelt or referred to over the years: Haysker (Monro 1774), Hayelskyr na Meul (Blau's Atlas 1654), Hawsker-Rocks/Heiskir n' Manich (Martin 1703), Havelschyer (Buchanan 1751), Haw-Skeer (Macaulay 1764), Haveskera (Monipennie 1751), Haveltskyre (Irvin 1819), Hyskere (Knox's Tour), Hasker (Gordon 1928), Oigh-Sgeir<sup>1</sup> (Freeman 1940), Heisgeir Rocks (Thomson 1970), Haisgeir (Ferguson 1984), Eilean Hasgeir (O.S. Map 18 1996 ed). None of these must be confused with Heisker (Heisgeir) or the Monach Islands some 10 miles away to the South or Hyskeir or Oigh Sgeir which lies South West of Canna.

Haskeir Aag or Haskeir Eagach (*Notched Haskeir*) a group of five jagged rocks rising to a maximum of 83ft are also part of the archipelago. They lie one mile to the south-west across a deep-water channel and have small quantities of breeding seabirds (S.C.R.2002). It is reputed there was once a Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) colony here a long time ago (Freeman 1940).

<sup>1</sup>The reasons Freeman refers to Haskeir as Oigh-Sgeir remain a mystery.

The island is hornblend Lewisian gneiss with occasional layers of quartz and consists of two main masses: the North Castle Plateau and the Southern mass rising to a maximum of 123ft where the N.L.B (Northern Lighthouse Board) constructed a lighthouse in 1997. Both are separated by a sloping uneven rocky waist where at one point an amazing sea tunnel bisects the island from West to East over which is formed a natural “rock-bridge”. According to *The Sailing Directions for the West Coast of Scotland* (Admiralty 1874) the tunnel is 140 ft long and 34 ft broad.

The flat and fertile North Castle Plateau is fortified by a nasty overhanging rock where it drops to the waist leaving the only safe access from the seaward side at the entrance to the East Liamp geo. There is also another spectacular sea arch at the north end of the island, as well as a collapsed sea cavern and a raised storm beach some 110 ft above the sea. The Southern section has two rounded hills sloping gently eastwards and several flat areas used as “wallows” by grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) in their breeding season.

There is no grazing or pasture on Haskeir but both Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) and Sea Arrow-grass (*Triglochin maritima*) are abundant. Vast beds of sea-plantain (*Plantago maritima*) are interspersed with clumps of sea-pink or thrift (*Armeria maritima*) on dark rich peat.

Haskeir is surrounded by amazingly clear ultramarine water and the submerged wall on the North Loch is considered to be one of the best dive sites in the United Kingdom.

## **Human Occupation**

“The Big Men of Haisgeir” sons of Odrum are still mentioned in both songs and North Uist folk-lore (Ferguson 1994) and although there is no conclusive evidence it has been suggested by MacAulay (1998) that Haskeir was a strategic island base for the Sjo-Same visiting the Western Isles.

There is some historical evidence that link sightings of the “Finmen” or Seal-people with a little know tribe of Norwegian Same (Lapps). Outcast from the main inland body of Sjo-Same they are thought to have adapted a pelagic nomadic lifestyle spending most of the time at sea in ocean going kayaks and in calm weather could easily have made the sea crossing from Norway to Shetland and then onto the Hebrides via Orkney and the North cost of Scotland. It is believed family groups gathered seasonally bringing their kayaks ashore feeding on fish, seabirds, eggs and seals.

It is conceivable that the island could have supported a seasonal population probably up on the flat fortified area of the North Castle well protected from Atlantic storms and sea spray. More importantly there is a spring giving fresh water. The protein rich diet could have been supplemented with vitamins by eating sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) and Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) which are present.

Seal-hunting has been associated with Haskeir for many centuries and was first recorded in 1549 (Monro 1774). There is no written evidence of the island ever supporting a permanent human population however there are some traces of occupation with the remains of a small drystone bothy built into the side of a rocky knoll of the North Plateau. The origin of this is not known but it is suggested that it was that of a tinker who wintered here around 1830 (Beveridge 1911). Local historians report that the tinker was in fact a musician who went to Haskeir to tune his violins and be “in tune with nature”.

One new and previously unrecorded discovery was that of a grave at the side of a knoll on the southern part of the island. It was discovered by chance being well concealed with grass and sea-plantain (*Plantago maritima*). As there was hardly any soil cover it was made up of piled rocks similar to the

graves of whalers buried on Arctic tundra. Its origin is uncertain and further expert investigation is needed for confirmation.

There are also some traces of another drystone structure sheltered against a rocky knoll near the grave. It is completely ruined and hard to discern but would have been a much larger structure than the bothy and was well protected from the prevailing winds by the outcrop which was used as the rear wall.

## **Logistics**

The party of six successfully landed on the island on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2005. It had been planned to stay for a minimum of three nights but this had to be curtailed to two due to the onset of bad weather.

It was a rough crossing and once out of the shelter of Griminish harbour a large swell was running with a fresh south-westerly breeze. The idea of surveying the five Haskeir Eagach rocks en-route had to be abandoned.

A landing was effected at the entrance of the East Liamp Geo, the narrow neck which separates the North Castle Plateau from the rest of the southern end of the island. Once ashore the whole North End is difficult to access from the landward side as the only route up is by negotiating the nasty overhanging rock followed by scrambling up some grassy ledges which were so concentrated in nesting fulmars any access this way was out of the question. The only option was to swim across the geo in dry suits and scramble up the wet rocks. This was an easier and safer option to gain access to this part of the island.

This obstacle has prevented many naturalists and visitors over the years from reaching the plateau. Even J.A. Harvie-Brown in his well documented visit of 1881 fails to record the presence of a “flat green plateau” with bothy and freshwater spring as he could obviously not access this area sending up instead his friend “U” for a very brief look (Harvie-Brown & Buckley 1889). Robert Atkinson also describes in detail how he avoided climbing this rock by landing directly from a boat during his second visit in 1953 (Atkinson 1980).

We decided the best place to camp was a flat area on the grassy slopes leading up to the lighthouse. The sea plantain here was incredibly dense but we were well isolated from any nesting fulmars. It was a struggle to carry our heavy equipment over the rocky waist of Haskeir and across the “rock-bridge”. A landing nearer the Southern End would have been a more sensible option and a lesson for any future expeditions.

## **Survey of breeding birds**

### Trends over the last century

The biggest decline appears to have been in the puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) population Harvie-Brown reported in 1881: “the tops of the higher portions E. and W. are clothed with dense hummocks of seapink, sea-campion, and other rock-plants, forming admirable ground for the innumerable Puffins which burrow in every conceivable direction beneath” (Harvie-Brown & Buckley 1889). Entirely absent in 1939 (Freeman 1940) 50 pairs max in 1952 (Atkinson & Roberts 1955). In 2005 we could only find 3 occupied burrows (all in rocks) (See Table 1) although 27 birds were rafting offshore. Harris (1984) relying on D.M. Bryant as a source states that a few hundred birds occupy most of the available habitat but there is no mention of when.

Northern Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) have increased from 4 pairs (Orde 1919), 62 pairs in 1939 (Freeman 1940), 259 occupied nests in 1949 plus another 49 on the central of the five stacks (Fisher 1952), 500 pairs in 1952 (Atkinson & Robert 1955) to a maximum of 1621 pairs in 2005. Most are nesting on the grassy interior of the island in high concentrations and have had no or negligible human interference over the years.

Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) had a large colony in 1868 and 1952 (Elwes 1869; Atkinson & Roberts 1955), were absent 1881 and 1939 (Harvie-Brown & Buckley 1889; Freeman 1940). 70 individuals were present in 2005 nesting on the South-west point near the lighthouse. Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) were recorded breeding in 1939 (Freeman 1940) and a Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) in 1952 (Atkinson 1955)

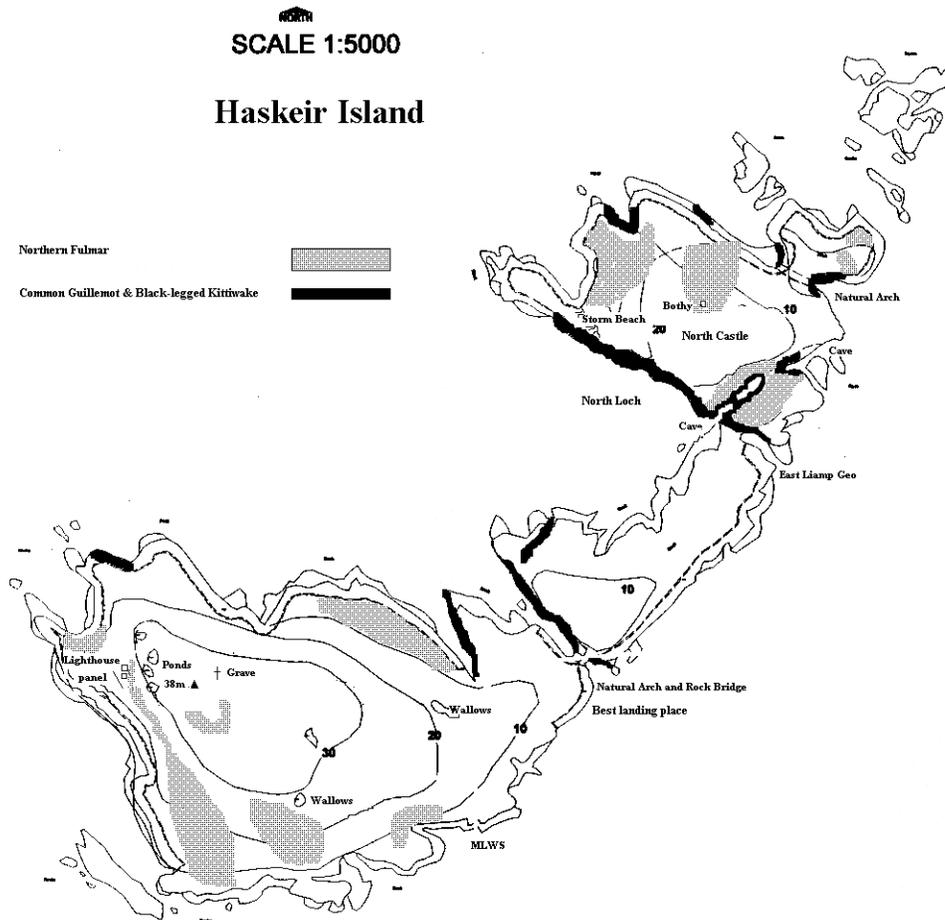
Common Guillemots (*Urea aalge*) appear to have declined from < 2000 in 1939 (Freeman 1940) to 1176 in 1987 (S.C.R.) to 760 in 2005. Most other species seem to have been fairly constant though a high number (130) of non-breeding European Shags (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) were present on the island. Other birds recorded were raven (*Corvus corax*) rock pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*), eider (*Somateria mollissima*), rock dove (*Columba livia*).

**Table 1. Haskeir Recent Seabird Counts**

Species		Year		
		1987 (Tasker)	2002 (Parsons& Mavor)	2005 (Winn et al)
Razorbill ( <i>Alca torda</i> )	Ind	61	140	151
Puffin ( <i>Fratercula arctica</i> )	Ind	17	25	3 AON
Northern Fulmar ( <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> )	AON	830*	950*	1621
Herring Gull ( <i>Larus argentatus</i> )	AON	15	1	5
Great black-backed Gull ( <i>Larus marinus</i> )	AON	17	6	4
European Shag ( <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> )	AON	78	27	33
Black-legged Kittiwake ( <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> )	AON	306	283	305
Great Skua ( <i>Stercorarius skua</i> )	Prs	-	1	2
Common Guillemot ( <i>Uria aalge</i> )	Ind	1176	691	760
Arctic Tern ( <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> )	Ind	-	-	70
Common Tern ( <i>Sterna hirundo</i> )	Ind	-	22	-
Black Guillemot ( <i>Cepphus grylle</i> )	Prs	-	-	3
Arctic Skua ( <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> )	Prs	-	-	1

\* The 1987 count was done entirely by boat and in 2002 the North Castle was not accessed. Therefore the count for this species could possibly have been low for these years.

**Figure 1. Haskeir Island: Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) (Density > one pair per 2 m<sup>2</sup>), Common Guillemot (*Urea aalge*) and Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) distribution.**



## **Search for Leach's Petrel (*Oceanodroma Leucorhoa*)**

Haskeir has long been suspected as a breeding station for Leach's petrel (Atkinson 1948). A single bird was put out from a hole at the base of the dun of the North Plateau in 1939 (Freeman 1940). Atkinson was one of the very few night visitors spending six hours on the North Castle in 1952.

Other night visits have mainly been limited to kayakers en-route to St Kilda (Mitchell 1990; [www.stornowaycanoes.org.uk](http://www.stornowaycanoes.org.uk)).

### **Night 1**

26<sup>th</sup> June 2005,

Weather conditions: *foggy with poor visibility and drizzle.*

Our first aim was to establish the presence of any birds. The whole southern section of the island was covered and it soon became apparent that birds were present. Most of the activity was in a small "sheltered valley" directly behind the lighthouse. First calls were heard at 11:45 pm. Birds were present giving many flight "chatter calls" and responses were coming from **within** the ground. Most responses were from deep within boulders strewn over this area where many fulmars were also nesting, most still on eggs, making further investigation difficult.

The playing of a male chatter-call tape had a negative effect in luring more birds sometimes to the extent of frenzy. Single birds were also recorded calling from within the main areas of plantain around the campsite and from the outcrop on the higher knoll. Most activity has ceased by 02:55 am.

### **Night 2**

27<sup>th</sup> June 2005

Weather conditions: *foggy with poor visibility.*

Two members returned to observe the same area again and at no stage was any tape played. Activity started around 11:55 pm. Birds were homing giving flight "chatter calls" and responses were coming again from within the ground. Another two members tried to access the North Castle Plateau to assess any possible activity there. A large swell was running cutting up the geo and it was not possible to swim across, so it was decided to abandon this for the next night. All activity ceased by 2:45 am.

### **Day 2 and 3**

27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> June 2005

Weather conditions: *warm and sunny good visibility*

A full survey of the whole island (both Southern End and North Castle Plateau) was undertaken during day light hours over two consecutive days. This involved following closely the prescribed method of playing both male and female "chatter call" tapes (Gilbert *et al.* 1998). The results from this were very disappointing and no responses were recorded at any time during the three days.

## **Conclusions**

It is quite possible that a number of birds present on both nights were wandering non-breeders possibly attracted by the light. Also on night one some birds were undoubtedly lured by playing the tape. The fact that calls were coming from within the ground would strongly suggest that birds are breeding. However further investigation was restricted by the constraints of the licence. A figure of 25+ pairs would be a speculative estimate of the current population.

**Party:** Barbara Brodie, George Brown, Alan Hardwick, Barbara Jones, Neil MacInnes, Nigel Winn.

### **Acknowledgments**

The Seabird Group (Funding), George MacDonald and North Uist Estates (Permissions), Niall Johnson (Rib charter), SNH (Licensing and Consultation), Matt Parsons JNCC (SCR Figures and tapes), John Randall, Mike Carrier, John Skilling.

### **Future**

An expedition is already planned for July 2006 and any interested parties should contact the writer for further details at Biggins Forge, High Biggins, Kirkby Lonsdale, Carnforth, Cumbria, LA6 2NP, Tel: 015242 72881.

Any relevant information on the history of Haskeir, particularly past visits, would also be of interest as a detailed booklet on Haskeir is to be published by the Islands Book Trust.

## REFERENCES

Admiralty 1874 *The Sailing Directions for the West Coast of Scotland*

Atkinson R. 1980. Shillay and the seals. Collins & Harvil, London. pp49-62.

Atkinson R. 1948. Leach's Petrel. *The New Naturalist- A Journal of British Natural History*. pp110-114.

Beveridge E. 1911. *North Uist: its archaeology and topography, with notes upon the early history of the Outer Hebrides*. Edinburgh, pp. 59, 67-68.

Blaeu J. 1654. *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Sive Atlas Mars Pas Quinta*. Amsterdam.

Buchanan G. 1751. *History of Scotland*

Cramp S., Bourne W.R.P. and Saunders D. 1974. *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*. Collins. London

Elwes H.J. 1869. The Bird-Stations of the Outer Hebrides. *Ibis ser,2*, vol. 5: 20-37

Ferguson, D.A. 1984. *The Hebridean Connection*.

Fisher J. 1952. *The Fulmar*. London. 210-211.

Freeman R.B. 1940. On the Birds of the Islands of Oigh-Sgeir and Causamul, North Uist. *British Birds*, 33: 330-332.

Gilbert, G., Gibbons, D.W. and Evans, J. 1998. *Bird Monitoring Methods: A Manual of Techniques for Key U.K. Species*. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Sandy. pp 60-63.

Gordon S. 1933. *Islands of the west*. London. "Hasker: the deep-sea skerry", pp.87-92. [First published, with slight differences, in the Scotsman, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1928]

Harris M.P. 1984. *The Puffin*. T. & A.D. Poyser, Calton. p39.

Harvie-Brown J.A. 1880. On the mammalia of the Outer Hebrides. *Proceedings of the Natural History Society of Glasgow*, 4, Part I, 1878-1879 [pub.1880]:88-107.

Harvie-Brown J.A. & Buckley T.E. 1889. *A vertebrate fauna of the Outer Hebrides*. Edinburgh.

Haswell-Smith H. 1996. *The Scottish Islands*. Edinburgh.

Irvin 1819 *Historiæ Scoticæ Nomenclatura Latino-Vernacula*

Islands Book Trust. 2003. *Curiosities of Art and Nature- An annotated edition of a description of the Western Islands of Scotland*.

Lloyd C., Tasker M.L. and Partridge K. 1991. *The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland*. T& A.D. Poyser, London.

Macaulay K. 1764. *The history of St Kilda...* London, pp.5-8.

- MacAulay J.M. 1998. *Seal-Folk and Ocean Paddlers-Sliochd nan Ròn*. The White Horse Press, Cambridge.
- Martin M. 1698. *A late voyage to St Kilda...* London, "1673" [1703], pp 66. Reprinted, Stirling, 1934, pp 404.
- Martin M. 1703. *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland...* London "1695" Reprinted, Stirling, 1934.
- Mitchell P.I., Newton S.F., Ratcliffe N., Dunn T.E. (2004) *Seabirds Populations of Britain and Ireland*. T& A.D. Poyser. London
- Mitchell W.R. 1990. *St Kilda- A Voyage to the Edge of the World*. Oban Times. pp 63-65.
- Monipennie J., 1757 *History of Scotland*. Edinburgh.
- Monro D. 1774. *A description of the western isles of Scotland called Hebrides...* Edinburgh, 1774. [Reprinted in Martin's *Description of the western islands of Scotland*. Stirling, 1934, pp 512-513]
- Orde A.J.C. 1919. Fulmars nesting at Haskeir. *The Scottish Naturalist*, 1919:166.
- Roberts B. & Atkinson R. 1955. The Haskeir Rocks North Uist. *The Scottish Naturalist*. Vol 67:9-18.
- Scottish Mountaineering Club Guide. 1952 *The Islands of Scotland*. Edinburgh. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. p167.
- Seabird Colony Register (S.C.R) *Joint Nature Conservation Committee* (1987) Aberdeen
- Thomson F, 1970. *St Kilda and other Hebridean Outliers*. David and Charles. Newton Abbot.
- St Kilda (July 2000) [www.stornowaycanoes.org.uk](http://www.stornowaycanoes.org.uk) [accessed 20/10/2004]