



This newsletter has been designed to enable you to get an idea of what kind of experience you will have should you join us on one of our cruises.

1 May | Sea eagle chicks die A sad start to the main season with news that two 1-day old sea eagle chicks, born to birds which featured heavily in the BBC Springwatch programmes, have died. Dave Sexton, RSPB Scotland's Mull officer, thinks the nest may have slipped and the tiny chicks tumbled out. The birds will not breed again this year. Despite the sad news this will be the first year since 1999 the adult eagles have failed to raise youngsters. Read more on the Wildlife Extra news page by clicking <http://www.wildlifeextra.com/springwatch-eagles.html>.

2 May | St Kilda in sight? Chalice and Hjalmar Bjorge both started cruises today. We advertised the eight night "Island Adventures: Hebrides & St Kilda" aboard Chalice and it filled so quickly we decided to double up on Hjalmar Bjorge. This also filled up! So both boats will be hoping to deliver the same itinerary which includes our first visit of the year to St Kilda. The weather was amazing today, as it has been for the last few days, very hot, sunny and still. It is meant to last until the weekend so hopefully this will be time enough to reach "The Islands on the Edge of the World". Then again the weather quite often doesn't do what the forecast says it is supposed to...



Above left: Chalice pulls off the Railway Pier astern of Hjalmar Bjorge and, right, Hjalmar Bjorge follows. Photos: Hannah Thompson

3 May | Eriskay eagle Hjalmar Bjorge departed Tobermory this morning just ahead of Chalice. A couple of minke whales were seen north of Coll on the way out to the Sound of Barra. The plan was to travel straight out to St Kilda but conditions were much windier around the Outer Hebrides than any forecasts had predicted. Mark decided Eriskay would be the most suitable place to spend the evening and overnight so that is where Hjalmar Bjorge is tonight.

A walk on the island rewarded with sightings of otters and, as guests were enjoying their dinner, a golden eagle flew overhead. Chalice is at Vatersay for the night, a beautiful anchorage (right). Tomorrow morning both Chris and Mark will compare weather forecasts with what is actually happening and will decide on the best course of action from there.

Photo: Chris Jackson



4 May | Kilda quickie Hjalmar Borge got out to St Kilda this afternoon despite poor conditions and a rather grim forecast. Guests got about three hours ashore on the main island of Hirta before their evening meal. The journey in was quite an adventure as a diversion had to be made due to the range undertaking exercises in the area. About 17 miles south west of St Kilda a pod of seven common dolphin were seen.

There was dolphin activity earlier in the day as Hjalmar Borge, on the way through the Sound of Barra, made contact with our old friends that reside in and around the area - a pod of bottle-nosed dolphins that have varied in number over the years between about five and nine. Six were seen today as they bow-rode the boat and appeared to welcome us back at the start of a new season. Mark says there is a little one amongst the group which could be last year's calf we called "Cyd" after our original ships dog.

5 May | Starter for ten That's an early start at St Kilda followed shortly thereafter by a Gale Force 10 weather warning! There was a tour round the islands and stacks of St Kilda for Hjalmar Borge guests this morning followed by a push for the Sound of Harris. Chris and his guests aboard Chalice spent last night at the lovely Monach Islands. Frustratingly they could see St Kilda in the distance but the forecast indicated that all aboard would be subjected to a very unpleasant journey there and back so they decided not to risk the crossing. With gale warnings announced by the coastguard today both boats were keen to get back from the Outer Hebrides and across the Minch for more sheltered waters, probably around the Isle of Skye...now known as "Eilean a' Cheò" if you read the papers!

This story was somewhat misrepresented in the press implying that the English name "Skye" would be banished in favour of its Gaelic name. In fact the Gaelic name (pronounced "ellan-uh-cheeyaw") refers to one of 22 electoral divisions and was suggested by Skye and Lochalsh councillors (or "barmy officials" if you read The Mirror) in 2005.

In Oban today guests joined Elizabeth G for a "Lochs and Bens" cruise. Amongst those onboard were Susan, an old schoolfriend of Hannah's whom she had not seen for 20 years, and her new husband Stephen. Congratulations to them on their recent marriage and let's hope the weather is not too terrible for their week long honeymoon cruise.

7 May | North to Nevis Some news from Big John who is skippering the Elizabeth G on a "Lochs and Bens" cruise. The boat departed Oban on Saturday and by the evening the wind was howling so Tobermory was the obvious place to shelter. On Sunday morning guests walked the coastal route from Tobermory to the very pretty Aros Park and after lunch three of them walked out to the lighthouse at Rubha nan Gall beyond the town. Around 1630 the wind had dropped and John took the boat over to Loch Drumbuie to look for a sea eagle nest near the entrance that we have recently been told about. Sure enough an empty nest was spotted so John turned the boat around and did another slow pass into the loch entrance so guests could take another look. After dinner our two expert birding guests, Patrick and Dicky, saw an eagle (probably the nest's occupant) fly directly over the boat with a buzzard in hot pursuit.

After an evening in Loch Drumbuie the weather is better today so Elizabeth G is heading north to Loch Nevis. No doubt a few pints will be quaffed in The Old Forge tonight. This pub, on Knoydart, which can only be accessed by sea or a lengthy hike along a rough track, can now lay claim to being Britain's remotest hostelry since the grumpy officials at Qinetiq banned members of the public from The Puff Inn on St Kilda.



Chalice was at Canna today, as was Hjalmar Bjorge. Chris' guests enjoyed a walk up Compass Hill and saw the first orchids of the seasons amongst the veritable carpets of bluebells (previous page). Photo: Chris Jackson

8 May | The early bird... Mark marched some of his Hjalmar Bjorge guests off for a brisk pre-breakfast walk this morning to be rewarded with a sighting of a pair of golden eagles. A sea eagle was also seen and this was "captured" by guest Ken, photo right. Chris headed down to the Cairns of Coll where huge number of Manx shearwaters were seen skimming the water. Lots of puffins were also seen at sea. Chalice headed into north Loch Sunart for lunch where guests were delighted by the variety and volume of birdsong coming from the oak woods. Red-throated divers were seen. Photo: Ken Hodgson



Hjalmar Bjorge then headed into Loch Drumbuie (Droma na Bhuidhe) where a sea eagle was seen on the way in and guests got the opportunity to explore the little island of Ornesay. Hjalmar Bjorge joined Chalice in the loch where Chris took this lovely photo, below. Photo: Chris Jackson



Elizabeth G departed from Inverie this morning and had a fairly smooth run over to Loch Scavaig where John anchored and guests had a walk to Loch Coruisk. Nestled at the foot of the Cuillin mountains it was no surprise everyone thought the location was amazing with breathtaking scenery and, just to top it all, eagles were spotted by some of the guests. The boat then cruised past the old shark station on the island of Soay (pronounced "Soy") and arrived at Canna in sunshine with time for a second walk. A sea eagle thoughtfully flew above the boat as it was tied up at the pier.

9 May | Dolphin delight Elizabeth G left Canna harbour after breakfast today and cruised slowly along the south coast of the island looking for puffins. Common dolphins joined the boat and bow-rode for a few miles to the delight of all onboard. The plan had been to head round the north west of Mull to Lunga at the Treshnish Isles but the forecast is giving cyclonic five to seven which is not good for this route. The vote instead was to make for Lochaline to look for otters.

10 May | Cyclones 'n' circles Chalice and Hjalmar Bjorge finished their first lengthy charter of the season in Oban today. Chalice spent last night in Loch Spelve awaiting the effects of that unpleasant cyclonic forecast. It didn't come to much but did spin the boat through 360°. This experience ended a day which saw passengers, with guide Hugh, walk

from Lochaline out to Inniemore Bay and Ardtornish Castle. They stopped to collect more of those "devil's toenails" fossils which were discovered on the last Chalice cruise. Elizabeth G is due back in Oban tomorrow marking the end of Big John's first Hebridean Wildlife Cruise as skipper.

12 May | Double departure Two cruises starting today with Chalice leaving from our normal port of Oban with a group of guests onboard for a specialist wildlife photography holiday. Elizabeth G is picking up a party in Mallaig today. This departure point was requested by the full boat charter party as they are hoping to explore the Outer Hebrides and know the seas around the Inner Hebrides very well already. If a full party books the whole boat then it is possible to work from alternative ports where feasible.

Some feedback emailed by Susan, one half of the honeymoon couple who finished their holiday on Elizabeth G yesterday. She wrote, "Highlight had to be the dolphins riding the bow of the boat. How I didn't push Judithe overboard as I rushed in my excitement to the front to photograph them I don't know, as the boat was bouncing and I knocked into her twice!" Susan added that she had gone home weighing an extra 1/2 stone, thanks to the generous onboard catering, and said she was, "impressed by the amount of effort put in by Nic, Tracy and John to ensure we all got the most out of the trip." Kudos to the crew - not only was this Big John's first cruise as skipper it was Tracy's first trip as cook. Great that she was working with Nicola, who is not only an experienced crew member and cook but was also a friend of Tracy's before she joined us. You go girls! Now that Big John has proved himself as a First Class skipper we figure it is safe to release this photo - John in the galley doorway of Hjalmar Borge wearing Ylva's beanie hat and Jackie-O sunglasses. Don't even ask... Photo: Ylva Powlett



13 May | Light fantastic Chalice cruised round Ardnamurchan Point today and into Loch Moidart. This is not a usual haunt but it is a very pretty location. On the north side is Eilean Shona, an island owned by Richard Branson's sister! The photography holiday guests undertook an evening raid on Castle Tioram, on the south side of the loch, which provided some amazing photos of a spectacular rainbow which looks more like the Northern Lights than a daytime phenomenon. Photo: Chris Jackson



14 May | Monach memorial Rob's guests aboard Elizabeth G are particularly interested in the history of the small and, now uninhabited, islands of the Hebrides. After leaving Mallaig on Saturday and spending the night on the west side of Skye they arrived at the Monach islands yesterday and spent time on the most westerly island in the group. Today they spent a full morning on the main island where they discovered a grave and headstone, dated 1918, of a crewman from a German U-boat. From here the group travelled to Scarp where they went ashore in the afternoon.

A slightly random email arrived in my inbox today. It says "re: Hjalmar Borge. You've got the best cook in the world on your boat. Look after her. Love Jez" which is a really sweet sentiment but I have got absolutely no idea who Jez is!!!

15 May | Shark sighted Chris' guests aboard Chalice spotted the first basking shark of the season today off Coll. The day started at an impossibly early hour (beginning with "05") so the photographers could catch the very early light of day on Canna. There are lots of orchids out now (right) and the bluebells in the wood are absolutely stunning. Unfortunately the eagles were still in bed (who can blame them?!) but everyone was entertained by some redpoll on the top of the cliffs. The sea was eerily flat and once underway again quite a few porpoises were seen as well as the basking shark. Photo: Chris Jackson



The boat then cruised to "Puffindom" aka Lunga at the Treshnish Isles. Everyone was delighted by the sight of a puffin seeing off a rabbit out of its burrow and guests asked Chris if they could stay tonight and go back ashore in the morning for more superb sightings of perky puffins.

16 May | Church in a cave After a night at Taransay Elizabeth G cruised south to the islands of Rona and Raasay on the north east of Skye. Rona was especially fascinating to the historians onboard as they visited the Church Cave also known as Giant's Cave. When the island church was built in 1878 regular worships in the cave ended with the last official service being held in 1970. However, upon seeing seating and candles, our guests concluded that the church cave is still used on an informal basis. Guests also went ashore on the tiny islands between Rona and Raasay where they discovered historic ruins.

Yesterday Elizabeth G had visited the Flannan Islands. It was impossible to land anyone on the east side of the main island as conditions have to be pretty much perfect to achieve this. Rob took Elizabeth G round to the west instead where four intrepid guests hurled themselves onto the island. It was too risky to land everyone so those remaining onboard were taken instead to explore a large cave by the steps whilst the four daredevils roamed the island. On the way back from the Flannans, travelling to Taransay, the vessel was accompanied by dolphins identified as white-beaks. Common dolphins were also seen today as the vessel crossed the Minch.

18 May | Rough au revoir Rob dropped his guests back in Mallaig today as weather conditions worsened. Those onboard had enjoyed splendid weather at the start of their trip and reached both the Monachs and the Flannans which were on their wish list. Unfortunately it got rather rougher toward the end of the week with Gale Force 10 forecast tonight!

Chris has tucked Chalice into a bay near Craignure this evening in anticipation of those Force 10 winds. This morning was spent in Tobermory where no doubt the coloured seafront houses will be a delight to the photographers. Yesterday was spent in Loch Sunart (right) always enjoyed by our visitors, with the bonus of a couple of minke whales seen off Ardmore Point (north Mull) as the vessel returned from the Treshnish Isles. Photo: Chris Jackson



19 May | Off and on again Chalice survived the night by Craignure...the forecast Force 10 winds turned out to be a measly little Force 8. Chris berthed alongside the new sticky-out linkspan in Oban to drop off his guests this morning. Hjalmar Bjorge picked up

cruise guests in the afternoon and Elizabeth G boarded divers after bringing all the stores and laundry etc. on board. This is the first time we have used the new structure and it was a bit of an assault course amongst the engineering works but the day passed without incident except for two of the boat owners slipping on the green slimy steps which are normally underwater. After watching Hannah and Judi take a tumble one of our thoughtful crew members washed the slippery slime off the steps before the guests turned up!



After Hjalmar Bjorge left Oban and headed north John, one of our guests this week, captured the variable weather conditions in the Sound of Mull (above). Photo: John Almond

20 May | Bounteous birds Mindful of another blow due in tomorrow Hjalmar Bjorge is making gentle progress north although hopefully the vessel will reach St Kilda sometime during the week. The wind had dropped today but the sea state remained high. When the wind drops it doesn't automatically follow that the seas are calm. Common dolphins were seen west of the Isle of Rum along with a pomarine skua - these large seabirds (nearly as big as a herring gull) don't breed in the UK, they are migrants. The vessel berthed at Canna where the guests who accompanied Mark on a walk saw a golden eagle. Some guests walked in the opposite direction and they saw sea eagles at the other side of Canna. Elizabeth G is tied up alongside Hjalmar Bjorge tonight, as captured by HBJ guest Steven. Photo: Steven Chalmers



23 May | Dolphin delight Unfortunately due to the hideous sea state we had to abandon our plans to visit St Kilda this week. Mark took Hjalmar Bjorge and our cruise guests to the southern islands of the Outer Hebrides where they could see, and feel, for themselves the conditions. The vessel cruised round Mingulay but it was too rough to land. The main bay at Mingulay had swell running in from both sides which makes for an unpleasant experience to say the least. Mark pointed out that the bay was much more sheltered than the one at St Kilda and everyone agreed it was a good decision not to push out there. The boat travelled though the Sound of Berneray, turned round, and literally surfed back! The evening was spent anchored off Vatersay (next page). Photo: Steven Chalmers

Today Hjalmar Bjorge crossed from Vatersay across the Sea of the Hebrides and over to Gunna Sound, half way between Coll and Tiree. A pod of about 30 common dolphin was met half way across and they bow-rode the boat for some time, in somewhat choppy conditions, so everyone leaning over the boat to see them got soaked which they didn't seem to mind given the circumstances...



Our guests also witnessed rabbit revenge this afternoon! On 15 May we reported that Chalice guests on Lunga, at the Treshnish Isles, had been delighted by the sight of a feisty puffin seeing off a rabbit out of its burrow. Well, in a reversal of roles today, Hjalmar Bjorge passengers watched a rabbit shooing a puffin out of a burrow instead.

24 May | Ever more eagles A grey day with much drizzle and rain although not much wind. Hjalmar Bjorge guests departed from Gometra this morning and cruised round the south coast of Mull. A pair of pomarine skuas were seen at Carsaig not far from the famous Arches. Lunch was taken in Loch Buie, where Mark and Hannah lived for nine years, with a walk offered. Everyone declined, given it was rather soggy, but Mark promised to find them eagles instead. First of all a sea eagle on a nest over one side of Loch Buie, then round into Loch Spelve for a golden eagle on a nest near the mouth of the loch. Conditions cheered up in the afternoon and a short walk was taken along one side of Loch Spelve. Later guests watched a goldie being buzzed by a kestrel and as it neared dusk witnessed a goldie (it could have been the same one) being buzzed again, this time by a short-eared owl.

Hjalmar Bjorge and Elizabeth G are due into Oban tomorrow to drop guests off. Hjalmar Bjorge is back out on Saturday when Rob also leaves for Norway where he is spending a couple of months running dive charters based out of Bergen.

Chalice guests had a visit to Lunga ("Puffindom") this week. Guest Richard sent lots of great photos... here is a parade of perky puffins! Photo: Richard Crossen



27 May | Minke monitors Hjalmar Bjorge has divers aboard this week and today they were diving the wreck of the "Doris" off Neist Point, Skye. As the divers were surfacing, following the dive, a pair of minke whales approached the boat and circled around several times. They really seemed to be checking out the divers and wondering what they were up to! Mark was particularly pleased to see the whales in this location as it has been several years since he last saw any around this site.



Chris finished our second "Lochs & Bens" cruise of the year in Oban today, disembarking a full complement of 12 guests on the Railway Pier. Guest Richard sent photos of birds, above: a puffin in flight, looking a bit desperate to stay in the air - well they are rather rubbish flyers, a razorbill and black guillemots known as "tysties". Below he captured the many varying weather conditions seen this week: a squall over the Treshnish Isles, bright skies and clouds over Mull and a lovely sunset in Loch Scridain on the west coast of Mull. Photos: (above and below) Richard Crossen



Rob and vessel Elizabeth G departed Oban today heading north to Corpach and the west end of the Caledonian Canal.

28 May | North to Norway Elizabeth G set off through the Caledonian Canal this morning, en route to Bergen via Inverness with, hopefully, a smooth passage across the North Sea. The distance between Inverness and Bergen is around 360 nautical miles and should take about 40 hours once the vessel leaves the canal. Rob has two months of diving charters, based from Bergen, cruising north to Sognefjord (Norway's deepest and longest fjord) as far as Måløy on the Stad peninsula. He will be back in the UK at the end of July / beginning of August.

30 May | 3 dozen dolphins Hjalmar Borge guests had a good sighting of about 35 dolphins today. They didn't bow ride this time but were seen from quite a distance across flat calm seas. The group then approached the boat and were feeding around it but didn't take much notice of it. The sighting was near Neist Point and later, by way of contrast, a nuclear submarine was seen.

One of the guests this week, Baltimore John, is in training to swim the Channel and has leapt off the boat at about 0530 each morning to swim a mile's length of laps around the vessel. He was joined this morning by cook Ylva and the two of them swam half a mile to the shore and back again. Lindsay and Mark, not to mention the other guests, were not tempted by the offer...

The group decided to give St Kilda a miss this week. Getting out there was by no means guaranteed with the weather variable and the travelling time would have meant missing dives so they opted to stay around the Outer Hebrides and Skye instead. Not-Baltimore-Irish-John captured some of the cloud formations seen this week, above. He thinks that odd ball of cloud on the right is a "cumulonimbus", a type of cloud that typically forms

around front lines and near oceans where sea breezes provide storm energy. They are associated with thunderstorms and other intense weather so, yes, that sounds about right!

Photo: John Murphy



Thu 31 May | Berthed in Bergen Rob has delivered Elizabeth G and her crew safely to Bergen. The journey across the North Sea went well although they encountered conditions close to Gale Force around half way across which lasted about six hours. As expected the boat performed well with no problems (perhaps she knew she was going home?!) and arrived in Bergen today at 1130 by which time the sun was shining. Elizabeth G has been given a berth in the part of Bergen known as Bryggen (Norwegian for "the wharf"). Bryggen is a series of Hanseatic buildings, constructed since 1360, lining the eastern side of the fjord. The area subsequently became an important trading centre which caused the wharfs to be improved. Sadly many of the traditional wooden buildings have been destroyed by fire over the years but the area thrives today with shops, restaurants museums and most importantly, for Rob's diving guests, pubs! Rob's first divers arrive on Saturday.