

Black-browed Albatross on Sula Sgeir – the ultimate twitch

October 2005: I was idly flicking through the latest issue of *Birding World*. It hadn't been a fantastic autumn by any stretch of the imagination and once again there was a distinct lack of mega-rarities in the recent sightings section. I moved onto the articles, and turning to page 382 I suddenly took a sharp intake of breath: '*The Black-browed Albatross on Sula Sgeir*' by Martin Scott. I eagerly devoured the short piece and its gripping photos. It described how an adult Black-browed Albatross had been present during the previous summer in the Gannet colony on Sula Sgeir, a tiny inhospitable rock in the North Atlantic, some forty miles north of the Butt of Lewis. This rock, some half a mile long and 200 feet high, is covered in 10,000 breeding Gannets and the albatross had been discovered in August by 'guga hunters', a band of men who visit the island to collect Gannets as a source of winter food under licence.



Sula Sgeir, 40 miles north of The Isle of Lewis - half a mile long, 200 metres high and one of the most inaccessible twitching locations in the British Isles.

Realistically there has only ever been one twitchable Black-browed Albatross in Britain, a bird that initially summered on the Bass Rock, Lothian in 1967, before relocating to a Gannet colony at Hermaness, Unst, Shetland from 1972-1995. Back in 1995, I was only ten years old, my birding was in its infancy and I hadn't even heard of "Albert"! The years passed and I became an ever keener twitcher, but although Black-browed Albatrosses were occasionally reported fleetingly in British waters, I resigned myself to the fact that I would probably never see one. What was more depressing still was to read of the albatross massacre occurring in the southern oceans at the hands of the long-line fishing industry. Never-the-less I returned time after time to the *Birding World* article and stared longingly at the crippling photos of this majestic bird sitting with the Gannets just off northwest Scotland. The butterflies fluttered inside. Surely it must be possible to get to Sula Sgeir?

May 23rd 2005. Thus far, a twitchable Calandra Lark on the Isle of May had been the highlight of an otherwise very slow month. This evening was quiet in the office at Rare Bird Alert where I was doing the bird news. At 8.40pm I picked up the phone to hear Martin Scott calmly announce "...the albatross is back on Sula Sgeir". My heart raced and the butterflies fluttered again as I began to type the 'Mega Alert'. The albatross was being watched building a nest in the Gannet colony this very evening, and fifty or so people on a week-long wildlife cruise were watching it! Shortly all the UK twitchers would know. Surely it was going to be possible to get there?



Sula Sgeir Gannet Colony where some 10,000 Gannets breed. Still hunted by a small group of hunters known as Guga's, they first discovered the Albatross in August 2005

For a small group of twitchers, that news hitting their pager was the beginning of a torrid month of constant phone calls surrounding logistical nightmares. At times it really looked like there was no way of getting to Sula Sgeir at all, and let's face it, even if you did, it was of course plausible that the bird might not be on its ledge. The lighthouse maintenance crew wouldn't take us, we couldn't fly onto the island, and any voyage by sea was incredibly weather dependent. Yes - there were a few boats for charter, but they all kept saying "we'll only go if it's flat calm, and we'll have to turn back at the first hint of a breeze in the forecast". Add to this that there were many keen people all vying for the limited number of places on any potential trip. Weeks passed, plans came and went. For those who spent hour after hour tirelessly on the telephone, night in - night out, the ceaseless cycle was one of closing options and new problems. However, I am not referring to my experience here – for I had it relatively easy, I was "merely" trying to pass my final year exams at university! Simply knowing that the albatross was back, yet out of reach, hurt – and hurt a lot. It was a pain that just wouldn't go away. Looking back, I can't help feeling that the minutes I spent daydreaming about it whilst sitting in each and every exam was time that I should have put to better use!

By mid June the exams were over, and I could refocus on how to get to Sula Sgeir. I worried, and fretted some more, but found no answers. It seemed that we had contacted just about every boat in northwest Scotland - and this twitch just wasn't going to happen. Another Scottish Islands cruise vessel called in at Sula Sgeir as part of their week long itinerary. The bird was still present, but we had no way of reaching the island. Frustration was setting in.

Finally - a glimmer of light at the end a long, dark tunnel - Stewart Hinley had found a ship that really looked like it would take ten of us to Sula Sgeir over the last weekend of the month. The ship was a 26.5m rescue vessel built for NSSR (Norsk Selskab til Skibbrudnes Redning or Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue), now re-fitted as a tourist boat and run by Gordon Fitton and his wife Chris. They were



Our more than adequate vessel for the 'ultimate twitch'

soon to set sail for Norway and Iceland for the season but they had a couple of days to spare before departure and for the right money – they'd do it. The twitch was on!

In the early hours of Friday 22nd June I embarked with Richard Bonser, Alan Clewes, Andy Clifton, Ian Foster, Stewart Hinley, Andrew Holden, Steve Keightley, Richard Taylor and Vicky Turner. It soon became apparent that this wasn't going to be a journey without creature comfort as we could enjoy Sky TV, en-suite cabins and even our own cook. Safely aboard it was time to kick-back and relax as we began our journey north.

The journey to Sula Sgeir would take us about 24 hours, and Friday was spent alternately enjoying the breathtaking scenery of the Western Isles, eating wonderful food prepared by the cook, Jan, or, in my case, sprawled on the sofa to avoid sea-sickness! However, for what should have been a relaxing, enjoyable voyage through some of the most gorgeous landscape Britain has to offer, there was a distinctly nervous feeling in the air. I for one just couldn't unwind. We had all paid in excess of £450 for the privilege of being here, but it was not that causing my unrest. It was far more basic. Whilst the albatross had now been seen by two different 'cruises' in the past month, and our chances of seeing it were probably very good, we knew that at some point, sooner or later, bird would be away on a fishing trip. If that coincided with our arrival, we'd be staring at an empty ledge, knowing that a Black-browed Albatross had been there perhaps only minutes before, and that it would, likely as not, be sitting there again within hours of our departure. I tried to play out each scenario in my head – but the elation of seeing the bird was too much to comprehend, and I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to dip.

The afternoon progressed, and we were like children trying to pass away the hours on Christmas Eve, not knowing what to do with ourselves, willing the clock to fast forward. At 5.30pm I was in my favourite mariner's position, stretched out on the sofa, when I suddenly heard Richard Bonser bellow my name in an incredibly panicked voice. The crew probably thought someone had gone overboard! Awakened in a trice I bolted upright from my horizontal

position. What was going on? Had he just found the albatross? He couldn't have, we weren't due to get to Sula Sgeir until tomorrow morning. His next two words sent my heart pounding " BRIDLED TERN " I flew to my feet, and raced along the deck. Realising that I had no bins around my neck I grabbed Richard's and saw a dark-backed tern flying away from me. All I could make out were pale brownish upperparts and a distinct greyish cast to the mantle - the dull light was ideal for judging colour tones. The bird appeared distinctly paler and greyer than the Sooty Tern I had seen just under a year ago but I couldn't see its underwing pattern, or head - I began to panic; a massive life tick was slipping away.

Suddenly through all of this I realised that Andy Holden was asleep in his cabin, blissfully unaware of what had just flown past his porthole. I couldn't stay on deck whilst he snoozed... I raced downstairs, summarily dragged him from his slumber, and dashed back to the deck just in time to get brief views of the bird as it flew at right angles to the boat and disappeared into the distance. Andy could barely speak... untickable views of a true mega, and I that's where I was too, I couldn't tick the bird on what I had seen. In reality – it was a disaster. The skipper made a valiant attempt to relocate the tern, but it was not to be. Andy Clifton, who had found the bird, and Richard Bonser and Ian Forster who were also on deck at the time, were obviously elated – they had seen it fly by at very close range. Alan Clewes had banged his head during the frenzy and blood was pouring from an open wound. It was a bizarre scene; none of us could quite relate to what had just happened. Andy Holden and I were stunned. We cursed ourselves for not being on deck. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It wasn't just that I had untickable views of the bird, but I had also missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to find a Bridled Tern in the UK – that was worse! There hadn't been a twitchable one for over 15 years.

Now, it was all the more imperative that I saw the albatross. The tern disaster would surely fade in the annals of time so long as the albatross quest was successful. If not, then dipping on both would surely create a synergistic bombshell which I would struggle to recover from.

The journey north continued, and as we entered the open water past the Butt of Lewis we felt the surge of the North Atlantic swell... We were within reach – but would the bird be there? With anticipation mounting the hours of darkness passed slowly and although I managed some sleep, by 3.30am I was wide awake again and back out on deck as we approached a formidable looking rock looming out of the dawn. It was Sula Sgeir! We had arrived!

The skipper slowly took us around the west end, close to the gannets. Ten pairs of anxious eyes scanned and rescanned. Gannets everywhere. The boat turned and we retraced our pass, not once, or twice, but ... I don't know how often we meticulously scanned every ledge. It wasn't looking good. Where was the damn bird? I was praying that either I clap eyes on it myself or somebody would shout that they had it. Neither happened. My heart was slowly and inexorably sinking. This couldn't be happening; we couldn't dip!

Persevere we must, and after an absolute eternity, at 4.45am, Andy Clifton yelled "I think I've got it". He had glimpsed what he believed to be the bird, but unfortunately the boat had moved slightly and the ledge was now out of view. The skipper turned the boat but it seemed to take forever as we back-tracked to where Andy had thought he had seen it. We scanned anxiously,

eyes locked onto the area that he described, just gannets – and more gannets, and then suddenly there it was! The Black-browed Albatross – in full view! We were watching a Black-browed Albatross in British waters, perched on the rock just a few hundred feet away! The relief and joy were beyond words. The sun was rising behind Sula Sgeir, a now much more impressive rock, and with a crisp northerly breeze across our faces, we were thrilled to finally be watching this beautiful, near-mythical creature. Watching it preen, showing off its radiant bill and mascara brow, and on occasion, standing and revealing its sturdy pink legs as it waddled into a new position. It was truly fantastic. I wanted to bottle this moment - forever. All tern woes had sailed out of my head; what could ever beat this experience.



Black-browed Albatross on Sula Sgeir 23-June-2006 (Stuart Hinley)

At 6.20am, after enjoying prolonged and decent views, we began our long voyage home. Now, with the pressure off, we could savour the wonderful scenery of the west coast of Scotland, and as we passed through The Minch everyone was on deck, all hoping for a repeat performance by the Bridled Tern. But deep down, we all knew it would never happen. We had already used up more than our fair share of fortune that day.



Sunrise over Sula Sgeir – a fitting end to our 'ultimate twitch'

Stuart Piner (June 2006)