

## Tour Report

### Autumn in the Scottish Highlands

22 – 29 October 2023

Waxwings



Red deer stag



Harbour seal



Short-eared owl



Compiled by Mike Dilger

## **Day 1: Arrival in Alturlie and drive to the hotel**

**Sunday 22 October 2023**

With a full complement of seven guests for the week, tour leader Mike Dilger (MD) drove up to Inverness before collecting six of the group from both the city's train station and airport, with the final guest making his own way to the hotel by car. However, with one guest arriving late due to a delayed flight, this gave MD the opportunity for to fill in time with a spot of birdwatching at Alturlie close to the airport with five of the guests.

On the southern shores of the inner Moray Firth, the tide was deemed just about ideal as MD pulled up along the water's edge to see what might be present. In the field on the landward side a flock of six greylag geese and a larger flock of lapwings were the first birds to be noticed, with MD explaining that the geese were probably Icelandic breeding birds that would be spending the winter here.

On the seaward side, it was good to see that wildfowl and waders were in plentiful supply, with wigeon by far the most numerous species of duck to be represented. Further out we noted a couple of female goldeneye in between frequent bouts spent fishing underwater. Along the water's edge, at least 50 redshank were present, along with lesser numbers of oystercatchers and curlews. Standing out from these three common species were a couple of bar-tailed godwits, with two grey plover an excellent additional find. Representing the corvids, there were jackdaws, rooks and a few hooded crows along the shoreline, in addition to both a pied wagtail and a small flock of linnet which passed overhead.

Moving a little further east (to Alturlie Point) we spotted a few long-tailed ducks out in the firth, while we also noted the first grey heron of the trip. Driving back to the airport to pick up the final guest, we observed both blackbird and mistle thrush in the roadside hedgerows, while the drive back to the hotel, with six guests, was considerably brightened by the sight of hundreds of pink-footed geese etched across the sky in large, wispy skeins.

After everyone had settled into the hotel, the group reconvened in the comfortable surroundings of the Grant Arms bar, as MD formally welcomed all seven guests. This briefing was not just to get to know each other, but also an opportunity to talk through Covid protocols, discuss the week's itinerary and to answer any of the guests' questions. A brief tour of the hotel's facilities followed, before the group took their seats in the dining room for a delicious three-course dinner.

## **Day 2: Strathdearn in the Monadhliaths - Corrievorrie Farm, Road to Farr, Forest CP, Top CP, Spey Dam & Bridge over Spey**

**Monday 23 October 2023**

Waking up to our first full day in the Highlands, everyone was surprised to see a considerable frost and clear skies, particularly given the destructive presence of Storm Babet here the previous week. With the weather looking fine, MD suggested that the Monadhliaths were the obvious destination, with raptors to be the main focus of attention. With the minibus loaded up, MD drove across to the A9. Conditions in Speyside could best be described as 'freezing and foggy', but eventually the weather began to improve. On crossing the Findhorn River, a slow drive up the valley and into the heart of the hills ensued, with MD declaring the Monadhliaths to be possibly the best place to watch raptors in Britain.

Our first stop was at the lay-by near Corrievorrie Farm, but with very little wind and temperature still too cold for thermals, there was little bird activity. A perching buzzard indicated that most raptors were only just beginning to wake up, and attention switched to a couple of grey herons as they flew past with food, while a cormorant was also spotted flying downriver. In the trees nearby both blue tit and great tit were added to the list, before MD suggested that while waiting for the morning to heat up and the raptors to lift off, it might be worthwhile killing time by looking for crossbills in the sitka spruce plantation along the road to Farr.

Turning out of the valley bottom and up the west bank, we soon reached the plantation high above the

river, and picked up five or six sitka deer almost immediately in the deforested section away to the west.

Introduced to Britain from the Far East in around 1860, this shy and retiring species has become a mainstay in some locations, including the Highlands, where it is most commonly encountered along the margins of conifer plantations.

With the sun still out, the first buzzards on the wing indicated that the temperature had already begun to rise steadily. While watching the buzzards, MD managed to pick up a few crossbills in the top of a sitka spruce. The group watched two brick-red males and a greenish female sunning themselves in the tree-tops before a scan of the neighbouring trees revealed another eight or nine individuals.

Suddenly, as one, we all spotted a huge bird flapping straight towards us - an eagle-sized bird. We watched in awe as an adult white-tailed eagle proceeded to fly over the pylons only around 50 metres above our heads - what a view! This was, of course, a new species for many in the group, and while all had hoped to see this species, few had expected to see it at such close quarters. Possessing quite a pale head, which tends to be a characteristic feature of older birds, this is definitely the more uncommon of our two resident eagles on Speyside. Before we dropped back down into the valley, we saw a few skeins of pink-footed geese high over the hills, presumably in the process of migrating further south. We also picked up our second species of deer, in the form of two female roes, close to the road as we descended to the river again.

By now, conditions appeared much more favourable for raptors to take flight, and this was reflected by the increased number of buzzards on the wing, with a hunting kestrel, too. MD began driving to the forest carpark, stopping initially to watch a goosander fishing on the river, only to stop for a second time for a golden eagle high over the road. As the bird still possessed white-linings, MD estimated it to be no more than three years old, and we only properly appreciated its size when it was suddenly chased by a couple of buzzards - the goldie was at least twice the size of its irritants. We celebrated managing to bag both species of eagle within an hour at the forest carpark with a hot drink and a biscuit, in full sunshine - what an incredible hour's birding!

While we were enjoying our drink, a small flock of siskin flew past, and we saw a second kestrel and another buzzard on the crags immediately west of the road and plantation. MD then managed to pick up yet another goldie. Due to the dark underwings and tail, this individual was clearly an adult, but only showed briefly before disappearing behind the same crag. Fortunately we picked it up again as it reappeared on the other side, this time as it was being chased by around 15 ravens. At one point, while watching the action, MD was able to briefly see golden eagle, kestrel and buzzard all in one binocular view!

Invigorated by these stellar sightings, MD drove the group up to the top carpark. Here we noted a few buzzards before picking up a kestrel as it flew down the valley. It was, in turn, attacked by a peregrine, which, up to that point, must have been quietly sitting on the crags somewhere. Our astonishing raptor day then continued unabated when MD picked up a female (ring-tail) hen harrier along the crags. Although we only saw it briefly at first, we relocated it a couple of minutes later, allowing all to see the white ring around the bird's rump that is such a diagnostic feature of the female members of this uncommon and much-persecuted raptor.

While the birds of prey were showing beautifully, the same could not be said of the red deer rut - which should have been well under way - we saw just a single stag on one of the ridge lines. As we were driving back down the valley, we spotted a single roe deer was recorded before opting for one last scan of the ridge lines at the small plantation by the road to Farr. Here we spotted a displaying male sparrowhawk, which was then joined by a hovering kestrel and yet more buzzards. In the trees close by we saw a small party of long-tailed tits, followed by a small party of crossbills which whizzed past while calling. Scanning towards the river MD found yet another species of raptor - in the form of a red kite. Unbelievably, we then picked up a third golden eagle overhead, which looked to be even younger than the previous two, due to the clear white band still present in its tail. This eagle was then mobbed by at least three buzzards, as we

revelled in our fourth eagle of the morning.

On the drive out of the valley, we opted for a brief pitstop at the Three Bridges Cafe in Tomatin, which gave us the opportunity for a late lunch. While tucking into our sandwiches, a few crossbills flew over and MD briefly located a siskin in his scope. We were also able to enjoy a robin singing, before MD then pointed the minibus in the direction of Spey Dam.

As we headed south, a jay crossed the A9, before MD stopped briefly at Laggan for a refreshment break. Winter thrushes appeared in good numbers here, as a single calling fieldfare flew past, followed by around 15 redwing. We then picked up the day's second sparrowhawk overhead while it was being chased by a couple of carrion crows, making for a brief but very profitable stop! On leaving Laggan, the road to Spey Dam was plastered with pheasants, with release pens obviously close by, while we also saw red-legged partridge as we joined the River Spey once more. Past the Spey Dam, we observed a large flock of redwing feeding on the ground, before we drove over the Spey Bridge and upwards towards the higher section of moorland.

A little further up the road we finally caught up with seven stags feeding down in the valley, with MD surmising that these males had been 'surplus to requirements' in the rut. Behind us, it was obvious from the loud roaring echoing around the hillside that the rut was still very active, and with a bit of scanning we eventually managed to spot at least 40 or 50 hinds grazing, no doubt being guarded by an incumbent male. MD then picked up a merlin against the crags, but so briefly that the guests unfortunately missed it. By now dusk was approaching rapidly as we turned back towards Grantown, but not before MD had pointed out another 'ring-tail' hen harrier as it quartered the moorland. As we drove past the lower plantations close to the dam, we saw a female sika deer, complete with four young, along the forest edge. One of the youngsters had a pronounced limp and looked a shoo-in for eagle food.

As we passed the river once again, a flock of small birds in the roadside trees suddenly went crazy, which pre-empted the speedy arrival of a goshawk as it ripped past the minibus. This was the group's tenth raptor species of the day – which MD declared must surely be a record! And the good sightings didn't stop there, as we came across around five brambling (along with a larger number of chaffinch) in some roadside birches, before ending the day's sightings with three brown hares in the fields a little further down. Driving back to the hotel in the dark, MD commented that it had been, quite possibly, the best raptor day in the Highlands that he could ever recall!

### **Day 3: Road to Ferness & Jesus Saves Stone, RSPB Loch Garten, Dell of Abernethy, Old Spey Bridge, Dava Moor & Lochindorb & Cairngorm Mountain**

**Tuesday 24 October 2023**

With the weather due to remain cold and fine for one more day before the anticipated arrival of Storm Ciaran, MD met up with guests at 07:00 for the quick drive around to the black grouse lek, located on the road to Ferness. As we drove around in the pre-dawn light, a woodcock flashed briefly through the headlights before a black grouse whizzed past as we approached the parking spot.

Peering through the pre-dawn gloom, we could just make out the black blobs of two black grouse, but far more alarming were the sheep all over the lek. The presence of sheep always tends to disturb the lek, with the result that the only two birds that had bothered to turn up then abandoned it for the morning. This was nothing short of a crying shame, however MD had another card up his sleeve, in the form of knowledge of a second lek.

As we crossed Dava Moor and around Lochindorb en route to the second lek, we saw both a red grouse in the road and the sorry sight of a dead mountain hare by the roadside before arriving at the 'Jesus Saves' lay-by. Happily the grouse were still present here and despite being far more distant than at the Ferness lek, we counted a grand total of six black grouse, and everyone was able to see them displaying through MD's scope. In the small lochan just behind the lay-by we saw three mallards and a single greylag, and as

we watched the grouse a flock of eighteen fieldfare passed overhead. But as by this stage we were ravenous, we decided to head back to the hotel for a much-deserved full Scottish breakfast!

Suitably replete, we left the hotel at around 09:30 before briefly stopping off at the pharmacy in Grantown. This impromptu stop enabled one of the guests to point out a couple of collared doves and some house sparrows. Our next destination was RSPB Loch Garten, and in the trees surrounding the carpark we were able to quickly identify chaffinch, blue and coal tit before walking into the reserve proper. Just beyond the main entrance, we saw the first red squirrel of the trip while it was crossing the path, but unfortunately, it didn't appear willing to hang around for long enough to have its photograph taken. We carried on to the sculpted bench, located just before the visitor centre, where the peanut feeders were proving a huge hit for large numbers of coal tit, along with lesser numbers of chaffinch and great tit. After a patient twenty minute wait, however, we were rewarded when the first crested tit turned up. Having made one visit, it then proceeded to come back a number of times in quick succession, allowing everyone to see this rare Caledonian speciality extremely well. While waiting for the crestie to make another appearance, we spotted a great spotted woodpecker in the nearby trees, and a bank vole as it dashed out to feed on some spilt grain. Walking back to the carpark, we had a brief look over Loch Garten, primarily to take some scenic shots, although we saw a few mallards and a single drake wigeon at the back.

We then took the minibus over to the nearby Dell of Abernethy, primarily to use the facilities, before MD suggested taking a hot drink in the woods. On walking the short distance to the feeders, we were surprised and delighted to find a red squirrel already in residence. After the squirrel had left, the birds quickly returned: with coal tits, chaffinch and another crestie all in the space of just a few minutes. The individual crestie here was much noisier than the one we had seen earlier at Loch Garten, which gave everyone an opportunity to hear its distinctive dry trill. While watching the feeders, we located another great spotted woodpecker and heard the calls of at least two bullfinch from somewhere in the undergrowth. Walking back to the minibus, MD also took a moment to show the three classic plants of the understory: bilberry, cowberry and ling, and everyone appreciated the rich assemblage of lichens found here.

While driving back out of the Dell, we noted a small flock of goldfinch and a continental blackbird, before picking up a couple of mistle thrush on the telephone wires running alongside the road. With the plan to spend some time on Dava Moor in the afternoon, MD suggested making a quick stop at the Old Spey Bridge in Grantown first to look for dipper. Unfortunately we were unable to locate this species and had to make do with a couple of female goosander fishing in the river instead. While on the bridge we also managed brief views of two siskin in a nearby tree before driving over to Dava Moor and Lochindorb.

Turning onto Dava Moor, we quickly located one of the habitat's key species: a male and a female stonechat, before stopping just short of the loch to enjoy our lunch. While tucking into our sandwiches we watched a female red grouse consuming her own lunch of heather! Carrying on towards the loch, we came across a second pair of stonechat and a mistle thrush, before being treated to terrific views of two male red grouse as they crossed the road right in front of our stationary minibus. It was particularly interesting to see the birds' white feathered feet and tarsi, which are more usually obscured in the heather, and everyone was able to see the males' red combs clearly.

With hardly a breath of wind, the loch resembled a huge mirror. Looking out towards the island fort, we quickly picked up four goldeneye, with at least one male present in their ranks, before MD then heard a single lesser redpoll as it flew over. More wildfowl were at the southwestern end of the loch, comprising a few mallard, more goldeneye and at least 15 tufted duck. And, in a first for October, even noted a few midges - presumably due to the exceptionally calm conditions. We also saw a couple of red deer hinds, which MD declared to be a most unusual sighting for this location.

By now it was mid-afternoon, and with the weather still fine, MD suggested taking a drive to Cairngorm Mountain carpark to enjoy the views. As it was still a touch too early (and too mild) in the year for the snow buntings to be forced down to the carpark from high up on the mountain, and the funicular was out of action once more, we had to settle on this occasion with scoping up the mountain from the carpark. We

saw a number of fieldfare feeding high up on the mountain, but with little else of wildlife interest we voted to enjoy a cuppa in the café. Jumping back in the minibus after our café stop, we headed down to Loch Morlich to enjoy the gorgeous view back towards the Cairngorm Range during that period known to photographers as 'the golden hour'.

On our return to the hotel, everyone had an opportunity for an hour's relaxation before meeting up to compile the day's checklist and enjoy a delicious hotel dinner

**Day 4: Munlochy, Avoch, Chanonry Point, Cromarty, RSPB Dale Bay, Jemimaville, Top road to Cromarty, North Kessock to Redcastle road**

**Wednesday 25 October 2023**

Meeting after breakfast for an 08:30 start, and with one guest staying behind to recover from a cold, the group of six, with MD at the helm, headed off to the Black Isle. Despite being cold, wet and misty in Grantown and for most of the way to Inverness, the fog had been replaced by blue skies by the time we reached Munlochy Bay.

The tide was almost all the way in as we jumped out of the minibus, with MD able to point out three yellowhammer on the telephone wires which marked the boundary between the road and the large barley fields leading down to the estuary. Scanning the bay below, we watched in awe as a huge flock of pink-footed geese rose off the loch, with many landing in another barley field a little further north. Birds, as usual at this site, were very distant, but with the help of MD's scope, we picked up a large number of teal and wigeon along the margins, with around fifteen bar-tailed godwit. We also noted a large mixed flock of oystercatcher and redshank in a high-tide roost, along with a smattering of dunlin.

Further back on the saltmarsh MD noted two greenshanks, an uncommon passage migrant in autumn, and we saw calling skylarks picked up as they flew over the barley field. Moving on to use the facilities in the small port at Avoch, a little grebe represented a good find inside the harbour. Elsewhere in the bay we noted a few diving shags, along with a small raft of eider duck, while herring, common and great black-backed gulls loafed around, as they waited for the tide to recede.

Moving on to Chanonry Point, we spotted a grey heron as we drove across the golf course, before reaching the carpark. On the landward side of the point, conditions were astonishingly calm, and we saw plenty of shags feeding, along with a remarkably close black guillemot - or tystie - which looked very frosty in its distinctive winter plumage. While we picked out a few winter-plumaged common razorbills on the water, a ringed plover whizzed past us, before continuing towards the point.

Deciding to check out the seaward side, MD took the group around to the point via the coastguard cottages, where we added both house sparrow and wren to the week's list. Along the strand line, we noticed a rock pipit first of all, and MD pointed out the bird's distinctive 'wheest!' call as it took off.

Now positioned at the point, we set about scanning the surrounding water and our efforts were rewarded almost immediately as three drake long-tailed ducks flew past. This is a handsome breeding bird of the Arctic tundra, and the Moray Firth is considered one of its most important overwintering sites in the British Isles. Eider were present here too; a large flock of around 500 in the middle of the firth. While most of us focused on the ducks, one of the group happened to be looking the other way just at the right time to notice a distinct 'V' in the sky, and we wheeled around in time to watch twelve whooper swans pass directly overhead.

Out on the water, we watched a couple of harbour seals 'bottling' - a technique whereby just their noses poke out of the water, while their bodies remain below the surface in a vertical position, which allows them to rest when out at sea, while still able to carry on breathing. We spotted a second winter-plumaged black guillemot on this side of the peninsula, while further out, we could see more long-tailed ducks as they flew around the bay.

Returning to the minibus, MD drove the group to Cromarty - the Black Isle's most northerly village. After parking on the seafront, we all enjoyed a cuppa while checking out the cormorants and feral pigeons roosting on the giant oil rigs moored up in the firth. With the tide slowly ebbing, we recorded another rock pipit on the beach, along with the seemingly ever-present shags and eiders a touch further out. MD then picked up two new birds for the trip: three red-breasted mergansers, followed by a couple of winter plumaged Slavonian grebes. The latter species proved a bit tricky to spot, as they spend most of their time below water, but eventually, everyone was able to achieve good sightings of this rare winter visitor from breeding sites primarily in Scandinavia and Iceland.

We drove straight to RSPB Udale, by which time the tide was receding quickly as we took in numerous birds scattered across the salt-marsh. A large high-tide roost of oystercatcher, lapwing and redshank were the first, while a few dunlin and ringed plover fed along the muddy fringe. Further out, we could see curlews as they probed for lugworms and ragworms at the water's edge. Wildfowl were represented by a large flock of wigeon, most of which were already on the water, plus a lesser number of teal, while we also spotted four red-breasted mergansers from our vantage point in the carpark.

Slightly further back on the marsh a single Canada goose represented an unusual find for Udale, in addition to a few greylag geese and a single (possibly injured) pink-footed goose. A flock of golden plover appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and put on quite the show as they twisted and turned, before finally touching down on the salt marsh. Suddenly, the plovers were up again, causing everyone to look for a possible peregrine, but the cause of the disturbance was a sparrowhawk, and with most birds realising this species was not a threat, order was quickly restored. Gulls were well represented on the marsh, with the three common coastal species joined by a few winter-plumaged black-headed gulls - a species of gull that is invariably far more common in southern Britain than in the Highlands.

With the tide now a substantial way out, we retraced our steps eastwards to Jemimaville, a small coastal hamlet which also happens to be the best place to catch up with a large overwintering flock of scaup, perhaps best described as a 'marine version of the tufted duck'. We observed a flock of around 40 or 50 close to the road, before discovering a much larger flock of 600 to 700 further out on the water. The sudden appearance of a flock of around 70 to 80 knots kept us royally entertained while we took it in turns to watch the scaup through MD's telescope. Other waders were well represented in Jemimaville's small bay as well, with bar-tailed godwit, curlew, redshank and oystercatcher all added to our tally. Before leaving, the white wing flashes of two passing ducks immediately identified the owners as belonging to goldeneye.

MD then took the backroad up and over to Cromarty, as this is frequently a productive hunting ground for a range of farmland birds that are often tricky to see elsewhere. As we zig-zagged up the hill, we encountered around a dozen redwing as they fed in a hawthorn tree, while a few pink-footed geese fed nervously in a barley field just behind. Along the telephone wires a touch further up we spotted a single fieldfare, along with a flock of linnets in a roadside bush, before the highlight of this short diversion was provided by a pair of corn buntings seen feeding in amongst a flock of chaffinch.

As we headed back towards North Kessock Bridge, a large flock of around 700 common gulls was a notable count, but the highlight of the drive south was provided by two rooks chasing the trip's third sparrowhawk. Underneath the North Kessock Bridge, with the tide virtually at its lowest, we set about scanning for otters. Apart from the usual fare of oystercatchers, herons, gulls and shags, the only bird of note was a winter-plumaged guillemot out on the water. Our next stop was at the carpark adjacent to Charlestown, where in addition to teal and wigeon, we saw a winter-plumaged black-throated diver in the middle of the firth.

As we drove slowly on towards Redcastle, a mixed flock in a roadside garden revealed a new bird for the trip - a couple of greenfinch - in addition to a number of starlings and redwings. Finally, on reaching the estuary at Redcastle we spotted a red kite, but with dusk approaching we headed back towards Grantown and the A9, arriving back in ample time for an opportunity to rest before reuniting to compile the day's checklist as a precursor to a fine dinner.

## Day 5: RSPB Loch Spynie, Lossiemouth Harbour, Hopeman Harbour, Burghead, Roseisle, Speyside Wildlife Hide – Inshriach

Thursday 26 October 2023

We woke to blanket fog in Grantown, and with the Moray coast the destination of choice, the hope was that further north conditions would be somewhat more favourable. The first power of call was RSPB Loch Spynie, close to Lossiemouth, with the drive immeasurably improved by the stunning autumnal colours of birch, beech and larch trees that lined the way.

En route, we saw large numbers of rooks and jackdaws in the fields, however on approaching Findhorn, it was the huge skeins of pink-footed geese overhead that took centre place in our attention, with MD judging that the high tide was forcing the geese off the estuaries and inland to feed. As we passed through the town of Elgin, a roadside holly bush with lots of berries revealed three blackbirds, a robin and a coal tit in its midst, and as we approached the reserve we spotted a red squirrel crossing the road. We also saw a magpie was also spotted here - a decidedly scarce bird across the Highlands.

In the arable fields surrounding the entrance to the reserve, large numbers of gulls and corvids were once again present along with a big flock of greylag geese. The carpark at Loch Spynie is often an excellent location for both birding and squirrel spotting due to the presence of an array of feeders. Despite most of them being empty, we were delighted to find a red squirrel ransacking the last of the remaining food from one such device.

An impromptu birding session quickly followed, revealing in the process chaffinch, goldfinch, greenfinch and coal tit, with at least four tree sparrows making a very welcome addition to the week's burgeoning list. Taking a stroll down to the hide at the edge of the loch, we were thrilled to observe five whooper swans as they passed noisily overhead before MD picked up a single song thrush.

As we settled into the hide, there were plenty of birds on the loch, and we duly noted mallard, tufted ducks, several goldeneye, a few coots and a family of mute swans. The tern platform was also the perfect roosting spot for a posse of cormorants, while MD pointed out a single drake pochard, which is a decidedly unusual species to see this far north. A solitary juvenile whooper swan was swimming at the rear of the loch, along with a single moorhen. Also sheltering at the back of the loch was a mixed flock of wigeon and teal, while much closer in a female scaup represented a good find for a species more regularly encountered on the coast. Completing the set of waterbirds, a little grebe was another addition to our list.

During our walk back through the forest, a small mixed flock moving through the trees unearthed both blue and great tit, with a flock of long-tailed tits also picked up here on call. A little further on, we eventually spotted a goldcrest, which we had previously heard calling, in the top of a conifer. Hearing a honking noise that was neither greylag nor pink-feet above the trees, we looked up to catch sight of around 20 barnacle geese flying towards the coast - with MD declaring this to be 'a great find for Speyside'.

Opting for one last look at the feeders before leaving for the coast, we recorded a great spotted woodpecker before a couple of people caught sight of a treecreeper, which everyone subsequently saw when it made a second appearance a couple of minutes later. With it now high tide, the next location was the harbour at Lossiemouth, where MD had hoped to find purple sandpipers. However due to the effects of Storm Babet, which had hit the Moray Coast hard the week before, the residual swell out at sea meant that waves were still breaking over the sea defenses. We drove around to Hopeman Harbour to see if conditions were any more favourable and, despite the waves surging here too, we were still able to count eight shags, nine turnstone and a single redshank on the harbour wall. A quick scan out across the choppy sea revealed a large movement of long-tailed ducks, plus an adult great northern diver in full breeding plumage. Everyone eventually managed to gain good views of this charismatic species, which is relatively uncommon on the east coast, and despite having been recorded in British waters during every month of the year is still not known to have ever bred here. MD explained this species was also known as 'common loon' by birders from North America. A raft of eider was present on the water here too, while a pied wagtail and a few more turnstone



showed up on the east beach, adjacent to the harbour.

Driving around to Burghead, we noted the usual army of worm-eating oystercatchers on the town's football pitch as we headed straight to the northeast promontory. Just off the point we were thrilled to see large numbers of common scoters bobbing around in the sea, the vast majority of which were female. Alongside the scoter were good numbers of both eiders and long-tailed ducks, and with the tide now beginning to reveal the rocks below, a few turnstones arrived to discover what tasty morsels the sea had left behind.

Then one of the group said 'I've got an owl here!' and went on to explain that she'd watched it fly in off the sea, before it passed right over her head. Fortunately it then pitched down, obviously exhausted, onto a grassy bank close by and MD quickly confirmed it to be a short-eared owl. While it is known for 'shorties' to cross the North Sea in winter, in order to overwinter here, to witness one coming in off the sea was nothing short of spectacular! And what a treat to watch it on the ground, from a distance of no more than 50 metres! While the owl recuperated in the grass, our attention turned back to the birds on the rocky promontory. Despite being unable to pick out a purple sandpiper, we were nevertheless able to enjoy a greater number of turnstone, along with a small flock of around a dozen knot, which had just flown in - presumably from further along the coast. Almost forgetting that the owl was there, we turned around for one last look before departing, but it had slipped away as quietly as it had arrived.

Stopping for a toilet break on the harbour side of the point, the photographers in the group were delighted to find another winter-plumaged guillemot feeding within the harbour at a distance of no more than 10 metres, while in the harbour entrance, there were close views of both feeding shags and eiders. It was, however, sad to see a few dead shags by the jetty, with the jury out as to whether these had died as a result of bird flu or the tumultuous conditions caused by Storm Babet the previous week. Moving over to the carpark facing both Roseisle and Findhorn, we then watched three rock pipits flitting along the sea wall, as well as spotting a few more turnstone.

Looking out across the bay, we enjoyed lunch while scanning the beach for waders, with oystercatcher, turnstone, around 30 bar-tailed godwits, half a dozen ringed plover and a few redshank all noted. Another good find in amongst the godwits was a single sanderling - which added yet another species to the increasingly handsome week's tally. With the tide now more favourable back on the promontory side, we had one last look for purple sandpipers, to no avail, before catching sight of a few juvenile (first or second year) gannets way out at sea. MD surmised that these birds must have been on their way to Troup Head further along the coast, which possesses a large gannetry during the breeding season.

Moving on to Roseisle, we parked amongst the trees before taking the short walk up on top of the dunes to scan the sea. This is generally the best location along the Moray coast for spotting velvet scoters, but despite the relatively flat conditions, the tide was at such a low ebb, it made it very difficult to spot anything without a scope. In addition to the omnipresent shags, we saw a number of long-tailed ducks and common scoter. We then picked up a single male velvet scoter, with its white wing lining just about visible even from a great distance. MD also managed to pick up a winter-plumaged black-throated diver, but with these expected to be showing well on the west coast, and with the mammal hide beckoning in the evening, the group headed back to the hotel for a break before high tea.

The journey was largely uneventful, with a magpie and a three red-legged partridge the only sightings of note. Back at the hotel, the group reconvened in the restaurant at 16:30 for a mountain of food, washed down by a delicious selection of cakes! Back in the minibus, we drove to Inshriach, just south of Aviemore, to find our 'guide in the hide', Harris, waiting for us. Greetings completed, we slotted straight into the hide to see what would turn up.

Once Harris had placed the food it didn't take long for the badgers to arrive - two initially, before their numbers quickly swelled to four. A wood mouse was also spotted, but it spent little time in the open, preferring instead to dart out for a peanut before heading for the safety of the timber back wall of the feeding stage.

As more badgers arrived we counted a grand total of eight, with Harris reckoning this to be the entire compliment of the sett. But it was not all about mammals, as we heard both a female mallard and a tawny owl during the course of the evening. On this occasion, however, the pine marten was a no-show, but with the badgers entertaining everyone, we thanked Harris and headed back to the hotel for a delightful supper of cheese and wine.

#### **Day 6: Spey Bay, Roseisle, Forres, Findhorn Bay LNR, Burghead, Findhorn Bay LNR**

**Friday 27 October 2023**

Starting out a touch later than normal due to the late finish the previous evening, MD whisked the group back up to the Moray coast, with Spey Bay the first port of call. On the way we saw the usual array of buzzards, corvids and skeins of pink-footed geese as we headed up to the coast. Passing through the village of Bognor, just south of Spey Bay, we also noted a good number of curlews feeding in the fields.

The arable land here is considered excellent for an array of farmland birds, and as we passed the large barley fields we encountered a single corn bunting on the telephone wires. There was, however, nowhere to park, so we parked a little further on, before walking back. Now able to enjoy the birds, in fairly short order we recorded three corn buntings, a couple of yellowhammers and a single meadow pipit. The finches were represented by chaffinch and goldfinch.

Pleased with our haul, we returned to the minibus and drove the remaining short distance to Pey Bay carpark. On jumping out, MD noticed a swallow fly past, which was incredibly late for this species, with the vast majority of these summer visitors surely now back in Africa.

Moving to the lookout over the river mouth, we set about seeing what was present and were rewarded with three female long-tailed ducks and a couple of ringed plover on the shingle banks. With the water level still high, a large roost of great black-backed gulls was present, along with one cormorant, while shags and goosander could be seen fishing busily. Over at the back of the delta, on the Garmouth side, a small mixed flock of wigeon and redshank waited patiently for the mud to be revealed once more, while a dunnoek represented another new bird for the week when we spotted one feeding at the base of some gorse.

Moving onto the shingle ridge, we felt the blast of the cold easterly wind, so we stopped only long enough to watch a few long-tailed ducks and common scoters flying around before making a tactical retreat to the sanctuary of the minibus. During a quick drive back to Roseisle we spotted a roe deer, then took up our position on the dunes once more to see what we could spot. While the tide was much closer in than last time, the birds were still a long way off, but we eventually managed to find two distant velvet scoters, in addition to common scoters, a black guillemot and a slightly closer-in black-throated diver.

Following a tip-off about an influx of waxwings along the Moray coast, MD took the group off to the nearby town of Forres to see if we could catch up with a flock reported the day before. Heading for Ferry Road, we could both see the flock on the top of a beech tree and hear their trilling even before we had even parked the minibus! Roosting primarily in the tops of two trees, they would fly down to eat the berries from ornamental rowan trees lining the road and we were utterly entranced by such a fabulous bird. Every now and then we could hear their trilling call over the passing traffic, and both birders and photographers were in seventh heaven with this enchanting species. In fact, there was so much food here that we spotted blackbirds, redwing and fieldfare on the few occasions we were able to tear ourselves away from the waxwings. One homeowner was even kind enough to let us watch from his garden for a better view when the waxwings were up in the trees.

After driving over to Findhorn Bay Nature Reserve car park for a celebratory lunch, we drove back to Burghead, primarily to look for purple sandpipers. With the easterlies continuing to blow, the promontory was pretty exposed, which forced everyone to hunker down behind the minibus as we searched the rocky platform for any unusual waders. We were soon able to pick out oystercatcher, redshank, turnstone,

curlew and a small flock of knot, but no purple sandpipers were anywhere to be found. However, with persistence, MD eventually managed to find one at relatively close quarters, which was enjoyed by all and represented a new bird for most of the group. Out on the water, we eventually spotted a red-throated diver in winter plumage, along with at least two great northern divers - in essence, it had been well worth coming back!

MD then drove back to Findhorn Bay, the last stop of the day, and with a tide at a low ebb, we walked bravely out onto the mud to see what we could find. The first birds we encountered on the mud were the usual trio of curlew, oystercatchers and redshanks, but as we approached the channel a huge flock of around 500 pintail suddenly came into view. Suddenly, everything took flight as we caught sight of a peregrine flashing across the estuary, but having not caught anything it disappeared out of view and the birds settled back on the mud. Dunlin, golden plover, bar-tailed godwits and a wheeling flock of knot appeared in turn, with MD spotting eight shelduck towards the back of the estuary. A small group of five dark-bellied brent geese represented another good Speyside find, with MD speculating that the week's total was now beginning to look like a potential record breaker!

Quitting while we were ahead, and with the light rapidly fading, we trudged back across the mud to the minibus for the short trip back to Grantown, after another stellar day. That evening a certain pink bird dominated the chat!

### **Day 7: West Coast - Glascarnoch Dam, Dundonnell, Gruinard Bay, Aultbea, Mellon Charles, Mellon Udrigle, Laide**

**Saturday 28 October 2023**

Our much anticipated day on the West Coast had finally arrived, and with it an early start, as six guests boarded the minibus for a long, but hopefully fun day ahead. Around the hotel we saw collared dove, jackdaw and starling as we set off into a grey morning, with the promise of finer weather where we were heading.

Close to Carrbridge, we came across a dead mountain hare which was being busily consumed by corvids, and had not gone unnoticed by a local red kite that was circling above the road. As we drove north on the A9 towards Inverness, the weather began to improve, and we spotted a buzzard and two more red kites on reaching the Slochd Pass (405m). Passing over the Black Isle onto the Tain Peninsula, our first stop - primarily to stretch our legs - was at Contin. Here, we saw siskin, along with more buzzards and kites, while taking a refreshment break.

While driving through Garve, we were able to see the slowly changing habitat as remote mountain moorland suddenly dominated the surroundings. After passing Glascarnoch Dam, our next stop was at the small car park that afforded a commanding view down to the head of Loch Broom. With the easterly winds, it was perishingly cold, but MD still managed to pick up a distant adult white-tailed eagle away to the north, while a couple of the group, who happened to be looking the other way, recorded a merlin as it shot low over the moorland.

A little further on, close to Feinn Bridge and the huge mountain of An-t-Allach, we encountered a couple of red deer stags and two hinds close to the road. We then dropped into the small hamlet of Dundonnell at the head of Little Loch Broom, where we deemed a hot drink essential to keep the bitter wind at bay. The tide, however, was well out, although we noted oystercatchers, curlews, hooded crows and common gulls along the distant shoreline. Over the salt marsh a couple of meadow pipits flew past, while we could hear house sparrows chirruping away from the hotel behind.

Following the shore of the loch, we passed through the hamlets of Badcaul and Badbea, noting feral goats feeding by the roadside before we stopped once again at the viewpoint that looked out over the Summer Isles away to the north. Despite the terrific views, the direction of the wind made it biting cold, giving us just time to spot six or seven ravens flying past before we had to jump back into the relative warmth

offered by the minibus. At the lay-by that looked over Gruinard Bay, however, it was far more sheltered and we had time to scan the water between the mainland and Gruinard Island properly. Despite the island having been badly burned in spring 2022, MD remarked how quickly it had greened up once again.

Shags were the most numerous bird here, but after a bit of scanning, we picked out both a summer-plumaged and winter-plumaged great northern diver. With the former so close to the shore it also allowed us great views. A couple of black-throated divers were also seen much further out in the bay, while a couple of harbour seals were also seen close to the rocks below our position. Much further to the southwest, a much larger flock of around 20 black-throated divers seemingly swam and dived in apparent synchrony, while the usual flock of 250-300 overwintering barnacle geese was visible in the improved fields away to the north.

Moving along to the pull-off area overlooking the beach at Laide, we were immediately able to see at least 40 ringed plover on the beach, along with a smaller number of curlew, redshank and oystercatcher. For the mammal watchers, there was plenty of interest, too, as at least a dozen harbour seals were resting on the rocks at low tide. Grey herons were also present, but despite a careful scan we couldn't find any otters, with MD suggesting that the beach's east-facing aspect meant they had probably decided to fish elsewhere.

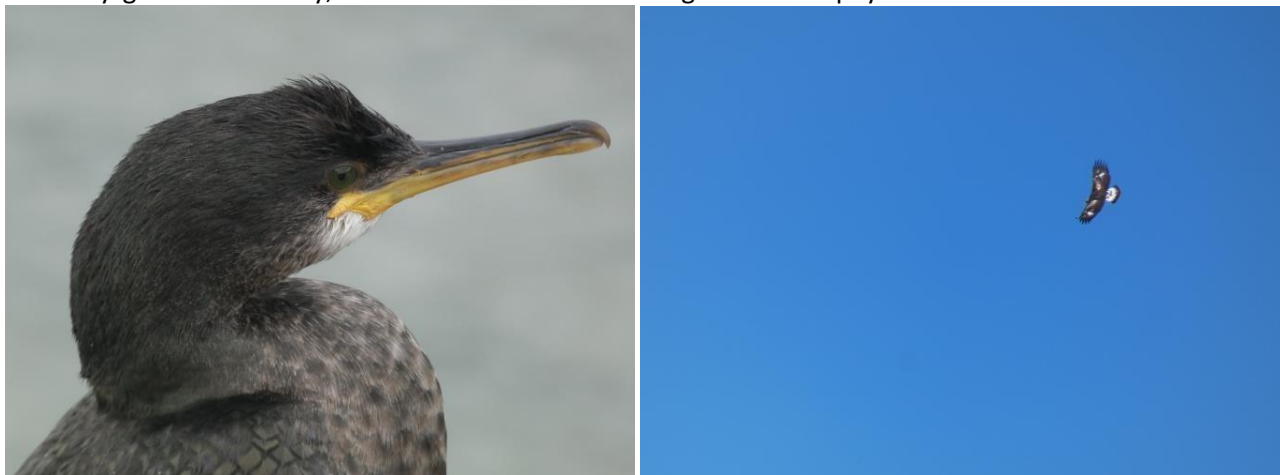
As we drove up and over to Aultbea, the garden with feeders opposite the hotel had chaffinch, greenfinch and goldfinch all queuing up for a free handout, while behind the hotel we observed at least three rock pipits as they chased each other along the shingle beach. With the hotel's wall offering some much-needed shelter from the wind, we enjoyed our lunch while simultaneously watching a small flock of six red-breasted mergansers put on a good show as they sailed past.

Lunch duly finished, we made the short drive along to Mellon Charles, spotting a collared dove, some starlings, a few greylag geese and a single little grebe on the way. Although we didn't see any more eagles were spotted, our recompense came in the form of a few ravens and a male stonechat on the way to the beach at Mellon Udrigle. A lovely but cold walk ensued as we used this opportunity to carry out a spot of geology - in the form of Mellon's famed glacial roche moutonnée. With time now against us and a long drive ahead, we set off, via another quick look at Laide, where the last bird of the day - and indeed the trip - was a grey plover. But with dusk descending, we headed back east for a late, last dinner and final session with our checklist which marked the end of a fun and incredibly productive birding week.

#### Day 8: Departure Day

Sunday 29th October 2023

With trains and flights to catch in the middle of the day, unfortunately, we had no time for any last-minute dashes to nearby reserves. After loading the minibus after breakfast, we said goodbye to one guest who was driving home, and the remaining six were whisked off to catch their trains and planes. After fond farewells, all safely got on their way, after one of the best birding weeks in Speyside that MD could ever recall.



Pictures from left to right: close-up of a shag and a sub-adult golden eagle in blue sky. (© Irena Henderson)

# Checklist for Autumn in the Scottish Highlands



	Common Name	Latin Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	<b>BIRDS</b>								
1	Brent goose	Branta bernicla						✓	
2	Canada goose	Branta canadensis				✓			
3	Barnacle goose	Branta leucopsis					✓		✓
4	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Taiga Bean Goose	Anser fabalis							
6	Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
7	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor				✓	✓		
8	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus				✓	✓		
9	Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna						✓	
10	Wigeon	Mareca penelope	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
12	Pintail	Anas acuta						✓	
13	Teal	Anas crecca				✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Pochard	Aythya ferina					✓		
15	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			✓		✓		
16	Scaup	Aythya marila				✓	✓		

17	Eider	Somateria mollissima				✓	✓	✓	
18	Velvet Scoter	Melanitta fusca					✓	✓	
19	Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra	✓				✓	✓	
20	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis	✓			✓	✓	✓	
21	Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Goosander	Mergus merganser		✓	✓		✓	✓	
23	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator				✓		✓	✓
24	Black Grouse	Lyrurus tetrix			✓				
25	Red Grouse	Lagopus lagopus			✓				
26	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		✓			✓		
27	Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata						✓	
29	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica				✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer					✓	✓	✓
31	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis				✓	✓		✓
32	Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus				✓			
33	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Gannet	Morus bassanus					✓		
35	Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis				✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓		✓	✓	✓	
37	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos		✓					
38	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		✓		✓			
39	Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis		✓					

40	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		✓					
41	Red Kite	Milvus milvus		✓		✓			✓
42	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla		✓					✓
43	Buzzard	Buteo buteo	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
44	Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus					✓		
45	Coot	Fulica atra					✓		
46	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	✓			✓			
48	Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria				✓		✓	
49	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	✓						✓
50	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula				✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Curlew	Numenius arquata	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica	✓			✓	✓	✓	
53	Turnstone	Arenaria interpres					✓	✓	
54	Knot	Calidris canutus				✓	✓	✓	
55	Sanderling	Calidris alba					✓		
56	Dunlin	Calidris alpina				✓		✓	
57	Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima						✓	
58	Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola			✓				
59	Redshank	Tringa totanus	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Greenshank	Tringa nebularia				✓			
61	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓			✓	✓	✓	
62	Common Gull	Larus canus	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓

63	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus				✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge				✓		✓	
66	Razorbill	Alca torda				✓			
67	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle				✓	✓	✓	
68	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto			✓		✓		✓
71	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco					✓		
72	Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus					✓		
73	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major			✓	✓	✓		
74	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		✓					✓
75	Merlin	Falco columbarius		✓					✓
76	Peregrine	Falco peregrinus		✓				✓	
77	Jay	Garrulus glandarius		✓	✓				
78	Magpie	Pica pica					✓	✓	
79	Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Raven	Corvus corax		✓					✓
84	Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus						✓	
85	Coal Tit	Periparus ater		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	



86	Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus			✓				
87	Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓		✓	✓	
88	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓		✓	✓	
89	Skylark	Alauda arvensis				✓		✓	
90	Swallow	Hirundo rustica						✓	
91	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		✓		✓	✓		✓
92	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus					✓		
93	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes			✓	✓	✓		
94	Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris					✓		
95	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	Redwing	Turdus iliacus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
99	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos					✓		
100	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	✓		✓			✓	✓
101	Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			✓				✓
103	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus					✓		
105	Dunnock	Prunella modularis						✓	
106	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓				✓	✓	
107	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis						✓	✓
108	Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus				✓	✓	✓	✓

109	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla		✓					
111	Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula			✓				
112	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓			✓			
114	Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret			✓				
115	Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra		✓	✓				
116	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
117	Siskin	Spinus spinus		✓	✓				✓
118	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra				✓		✓	
119	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella				✓			

	<b>MAMMALS</b>								
1	Common pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pipistrellus					✓		
2	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		✓					
3	Brown hare	Lepus europaeus		✓					
4	Red squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris			✓		✓		
5	Field vole	Microtus agrestis							
6	Wood mouse	Apodemus sylvaticus					✓		
7	Common seal	Phoca vitulina				✓			✓
8	Grey seal	Halichoerus grypus						✓	
9	Weasel	Mustela nivalis						✓	
10	Badger	Meles meles					✓		
11	Red deer	Cervus elaphus		✓	✓	✓			✓
12	Sika deer	Cervus nippon		✓					

13	Roe deer	Capreolus capreolus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Reindeer	Rangifer tarandus			✓				
15	Goat	Capra hircus							✓