

Tour Report

Autumn in the Scottish Highlands

29 October - 5th November 2023

Sunset over Findhorn Bay



Otter



Waxwing



Black grouse



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Day 1: Arrival Day

Sunday 29 October 2023

Tour leader Mike Dilger (MD) drove up to Inverness before collecting the various members of the group from both the city's train station and airport. The later arrival of some guests gave MD the opportunity to take the first two birdwatching at Alturlie, close to the airport. Here the highlights were a couple of Slavonian grebes and distant views of long-tailed ducks, in addition to the usual fare of wigeons, mallards, teal, redshanks, curlews and oystercatchers - all of which would be seen later in the week with the full complement of six guests. Once all were eventually present and correct, MD drove the group to the Grant Arms hotel to settle into their rooms for the week.

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

Day 2: Strathdearn - Corrievorrie Farm, CP by Road to Farr, Forest carpark (Coignafearn), Top CP, Road to Farr Spey Dam (near Laggan) & Spey Bridge

Monday 30 October 2023

The long-term forecast suggested that the week would effectively be a 'curate's egg' i.e. good in parts! With the weather calm and clear for the first couple of days, before the arrival of Storm Ciaran down south, MD was keen to hit the ground, or at least the reserves, running...

Waking up to their first full day in the Highlands, all were surprised to see a frost and clear skies - no doubt the calm before the storm! With the weather looking so good, MD suggested that the Monadhliaths were the obvious destination, with raptors as the main focus of attention. Once the minibus was duly loaded, we set off with MD driving across towards the A9. Just east of Carrbridge we noted three greylag geese as they flew over us, while the usual array of pheasants, rooks and jackdaws were present in almost every field we passed.

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. The first place we stopped at was at the lower end of the valley close to Corrievorrie Farm, where we quickly spotted three buzzards on the wing. MD took this to be a good sign, telling the group that 'raptors lead to raptors'. While we waited for the day to warm up, a small flock of eight or nine lesser redpolls flew past, instantly identifiable by their buzzy flight calls.

The sun rose slowly, creating thermals and the raptors began to lift off. First up was a distant red kite, followed by a possible white-tailed eagle, but this bird proved difficult to identify with any certainty as not only were we looking directly into the sun, but the bird was also incredibly distant. Somewhat easier was a second red kite, which flew right over the road in front of us. Deciding that trying a different location was the best strategy, we moved on to the parking area by the bridge to Farr, where we subsequently saw three red kites, a buzzard and a raven on the wing.

The next was a male kestrel, which was picked up by one of the group while it hovered, with another sub-adult male close by, suggesting that the latter bird must have been last year's offspring. By now, winter thrushes were all over Speyside, so it was of little surprise when a flock of redwing, with a couple of larger fieldfares, whizzed past while we focussed on scanning the ridge lines.

Moving yet further on up the valley, and close to Glenmazaran Estate, we observed three red-legged partridges feeding along the roadside verge, along with a male blackbird and a third kestrel. When we

stopped at the Forest Car Park, conditions looked to be perfect for raptor spotting, and it quickly proved so when MD picked up an adult golden eagle from behind the large crags to the west of the road, which proceeded to drift right over the group's heads. Temporarily disappearing behind another ridge line, it then reappeared and, to the delight of all, suddenly began to display. Flying high initially, it plummeted in a teardrop stoop, before shooting back up again - almost like going down and up the U-bend of a toilet! At one point it was briefly mobbed by two kestrels, which looked utterly minute by comparison.

Deciding that we'd like to take a closer look, we crossed the wooden bridge and then walked across the upland pasture to the second bridge. While we were looking for hares, the same goldie suddenly reappeared, flying along the ridge line with two buzzards in hot pursuit until it eventually disappeared behind a belt of conifers. What fabulous views! With hills all around us, we carried out a thorough search of the surrounding moorland, before duly picking up a couple of feral goats and a single red deer stag. Here, too, we watched a grand total of fourteen ravens playing in the wind along the line of fells away to the south. Unfortunately, on this occasion, MD couldn't pick out a mountain hare, declaring this to be a tough time to look for them as they hadn't quite started turning white yet.

While walking back to the minibus, we got caught in a rain flurry but still managed to obtain quick views of a male crossbill perching on top of the conifers adjacent to the carpark. On the drive back down the valley, we saw two female goosanders on the River Spey below the road, before we took the steep road up the valley side to Farr. Stopping at the end of the forestry track to look for crossbills, we had to take lunch inside the minibus as the wet weather continued.

Deciding to quit Strathdearn while we were ahead, we headed for a brief pitstop at the Three Bridges Cafe in Tomatin. On the way out of the strath, a red squirrel crossed the road in front of us, and while we were using the facilities, a small flock of lesser redpolls occupied a conifer adjacent to the carpark. During our brief stop here, we also managed to spot three or four siskins in flight, while watching a few chaffinches feeding on the mast of a beech tree. MD then pointed the minibus in the direction of Spey Dam, although a few red-legged partridges and a single jay were the only birds of note during the journey south.

After passing both Kingussie and Newtonmore, we took the road to Laggan. Here, a second jay crossed the road right in front of the minibus, with MD declaring this to be a tricky bird to catch up with in Speyside. Carrying on up to, and past the dam, we saw a couple of red deer stags feeding over the back of the moorland. With the rut still very much underway, MD suggested that these were males who had been patently unsuccessful in securing a harem. By now, the weather was completely clear, with wall-to-wall sunshine, and upon driving past the sitka spruce plantation, we stopped briefly to watch a sika boe deer feeding with its calf at the forest edge.

Stopping at the ridge over the Spey, we quickly picked up a large herd of red deer hinds on the hillside behind, which was accompanied by the sound of the stags roaring. Moving further along the road, we managed to locate a further five stags that had obviously been ousted from the rut. This gave MD the opportunity to explain the terminology behind antlers, and how a stag could be termed 'a royal', as in the famed painting 'The Monarch of the Glen'.

As we drove out with the light slowly fading, we saw a final golden eagle along the crags to the east. Everyone managed to catch at least a glimpse of this majestic bird, before it disappeared behind the ridge line. And on the drive past the last block of sitka spruce plantation, we saw a group of three feeding quietly along the forest edge. One of these individuals was definitely a young male, or 'pricket', judging by its pair of short antlers. A little further on we spotted another new mammal for the trip, in the form of two brown hares, which had recently emerged from the forest to feed under the cover of dusk.

With time marching on, we began the drive back to Grantown and while passing through Laggan, everyone managed to see a very strangely marked blackbird as it flashed past the minibus. Appearing almost black and white like a magpie, this was obviously a leucistic individual, and while most of the group (including MD) had seen blackbirds with the occasional white feather, no one could ever recall having seen a bird quite like this one. While a debate ensued on 'animal oddities', MD drove back to Grantown, where a

welcome hour of rest and relaxation proceeded the compiling of the day's checklist and another fine three-course meal.

Day 3: Black grouse lek, RSPB Loch Garten, Dell of Abernethy Woods, Forres, Burghead, Hopeman Harbour, Burghead & Findhorn Bay

Tuesday 31 October 2023

With the weather still calm and still, MD had arranged for an early morning meet-up to visit the black grouse lek nearby. We gathered at 07:00 for the short drive round to the lek at Ferness and, with dawn breaking, managed to pick out three males on the lekking court. Despite this being fewer than might be expected in spring when the lek is always at its most active, we were able to watch them displaying - even more so when a fourth bird flew in, obviously ruffling the feathers of those already in situ. As the light was so good, the birds' white vent feathers and red combs were very obvious, and this was a new species for many of the group. While we were watching the grouse, we heard a stonechat calling, but with hunger taking over we headed back to the hotel. During the short drive back, we spotted four greylags were spotted over the road, and the week's second sighting of a brown hare completed our early morning's work.

After breakfast we round to RSPB Loch Garten, picking up blackbird and fieldfare hawthorn bush with berries on the way. After parking we walked through the pine forest and up the main path to see what was coming to the feeding station set up by an ornately carved bench. Coal tits were present in abundance, along with fewer numbers of chaffinch and the occasional blue and great tit. A great spotted woodpecker was the next bird we saw, before a red squirrel paid a brief visit to the feeders - but cresties were proving glaringly and annoyingly absent.

After a crestie-free hour, MD decided that it might be better to try elsewhere, so we moved around to the Dell of Abernethy, where there is a different set of feeders. As we were walking the short distance from the parking area to the feeding station, the decision to change sites was rewarded when the first crestie of the trip flew in for a couple of brief visits. Although we wanted rather more prolonged views, this was nevertheless a good result. Before we made our way back to the minibus, we heard crossbills calling overhead and spotted a female great spotted woodpecker.

Leaving the forest behind, we drove to the town of Forres to enjoy the invasion of waxwings, which were being reported at numerous locations along the Moray coast. We soon tracked down a large flock on the suburban street of Ferry Road - most of them were roosting in one of two tall trees, as small groups periodically peeled away to feed in the street's ornamental rowans. The food was so abundant that redwings, fieldfares and blackbirds were also present, but most people only had eyes for the waxwings! MD managed to take a phone photo of the main flock and, by counting the dots back at the hotel, estimated that there must have been at least 169 birds present!

Thrilled with such terrific views, we continued onwards to the coast, with Burghead our first port of call. We stopped initially at the harbour, where close-up views of two winter-plumaged back guillemots were a most pleasing find, while around the fishing boats, we counted a total of five turnstones. Also present were a number of shags that looked decidedly unwell - either as a result of bird flu or as victims of the current storms out to sea - and even worse was to come along the tideline of the inner part of the harbour, where at least half a dozen dead shags could clearly be seen amongst the flotsam. With the tide still high, we climbed to the viewpoint above the harbour for a view over the firth, which had the added benefit of being a bit more sheltered from the eastern wind. Out at sea there was a considerable swell, with long-tailed ducks, eiders and common scoter bobbing up and down on the waves like corks.

Returning to the minibus for lunch, we tucked into our sandwiches while MD scoped up a small high tide roost of waders consisting of around 30 redshanks, a couple of turnstones and a single knot. Round at the promontory, the swell was surprisingly heavy too, but despite the waves, we were still able to pick up two

red-breasted mergansers, in addition to the usual fare of eiders, long-tailed ducks and (mostly female) common scoters.

With most of the rocks still covered at Burghead, MD suggested that it might be worthwhile making the short journey around to Hopeman Harbour to see if it was any more sheltered from the easterly wind. As we passed a large barley field en route, a large flock of linnets and a single yellowhammer alternated between feeding in the stubble and perching on the telephone wires above. It was slightly less windy at Hopeman, so we proceeded to scan the rocks on the other side of the bay from the harbour and eventually managed to pick up distant views of two or three purple sandpipers, in amongst a much greater number of turnstones. Also on the beach were a few more turnstones, along with the three common species of Highland gull: great black-backed, herring and common gull.

We drove back to Burghead, and with the tide by this time far more favourable, our persistence was rewarded with a view of a purple sandpiper much closer on the exposed rocks, along with a single knot, turnstones and oystercatchers. The purple sandpiper is considered a breeding bird of the high Arctic, and any birds that overwinter in the UK are thought to come from Canada, Greenland or northern Norway. This represented a new species for many in the group and, delighted to have finally bagged a good 'purp', MD took the group back west and across to Findhorn for the last stop of the day.

On the way, we passed a large pig farm east of Kinloss, where MD picked out a lesser black-backed gull while driving at 30mph! This tends to be a rare winter resident in the Scottish Highlands, as the vast majority of breeding lessers head to either southern England, Spain or Portugal for the winter. On arrival at Findhorn Bay Nature Reserve car park, with the tide at almost its lowest ebb, MD marched out into the bay and onto the mud with everyone in tow to finish the day in style.

The light was, by this time, low on the horizon, and with dark scudding clouds present the conditions looked almost apocalyptic. Those waders closest to the saltmarsh were redshanks, oystercatchers and curlews, but a couple of hundred metres further out a flock of around 200 golden plovers was mixed in with a lesser number of diminutive dunlins. Even further out in the channel a vast flock of wildfowl consisted primarily of pintails and wigeons, the former clearly identifiable by being head and shoulders above the latter.

In the skies above, skeins of pink-footed geese passed over periodically, adding to the surreal atmosphere, before a flurry of rain had us scuttling back towards the carpark. Despite it being cold out in the middle of the estuary, this was a scintillating end to the day, and with the clocks having gone back the previous night, darkness descended quickly as we drove back to the hotel after another packed day.

Day 4: Garmouth, Spey Bay, RSPB Loch Spynie & Lochindorb

Wednesday 1 November 2023

Despite being situated well away from the centre of Storm Ciáran in southern England, the Highlands also felt the impact and a cold and windy day was on the cards. Initially MD had planned to take the group up to Spey Bay, but decided to pop into Garmouth on the west side of the river first. While passing through Cromdale, we saw a buzzard on the wing. However, the rest of the drive was dominated by jackdaws, rooks and flocks of winter thrushes.

On arriving at Garmouth, the conditions were, if anything, even colder and windier than inland, with the pits holding nothing more than a female tufted duck and two female goldeneyes. On the shingle ridge behind, a flock of rock doves hunkered down out of the wind, while a redshank whizzed past us at a rate of knots. While trudging back to the minibus, we spotted a song thrush hunkering down in the gorse, before we headed around to the other side of the delta.

Just south of Spey Bay, the fields can be very productive for farmland birds, with the large barley fields close to the village of Bogmoor holding lapwings, a healthy number of curlews and a few common gulls.

Parking just short of the turn, we inspected the birds on the telephone wires, which resulted in good views of two corn buntings and three or four yellowhammers. One of the corn buntings began to sing its characteristic song, which sounds just like a jangling bunch of keys - an increasingly rare sound in the British countryside these days. While we were listening to the corn buntings, a few goldfinches flew past, quickly followed by a couple of linnets. On the short walk back to the minibus, along the footpath, we heard a skylark while it rose bravely from the barley stubble, and we also added a dunnoek to the list after spotting it along the hedge line.

After a very productive farmland session, we parked at Spey Bay before taking the short walk across to the viewpoint over the river mouth. With the tide still rising, we saw a female long-tailed duck diving close in while further out, three or four goosanders and a number of shags were busily fishing across the wide river mouth. In the middle of the channel, the braided shingle banks provided a refuge for a large gull roost, consisting of great black-backed and common gulls plus a single cormorant. This lone cormorant gave the group an opportunity to compare and contrast the difference between this species and the closely related shags that were feeding close by. A few of the group managed to spot a grey seal, before it promptly performed a disappearing act!

Elsewhere in the bay, a small flock of roosting redshanks was present, along with a few dunlins and a single turnstone, with wildfowl represented by a few wigeon. After warming up with a hot drink back at the minibus, everyone jumped back in and MD drove back inland to RSPB Loch Spynie. On the approach to the reserve along minor roads, the surrounding barley fields held a large flock of mostly greylag geese, but with a scan of the birds we picked out at least half a dozen smaller and daintier pink-footed geese, with their chocolate-covered heads and dairy pink bill.

It was raining lightly as we pulled into the reserve car park, but this didn't seem to bother the birds at the feeding station close by. Hiding under the one feeder with a roof was a red squirrel, while the bird feeders held blue tits, great tits, coal tits, a female greenfinch and chaffinches. A great spotted woodpecker also paid a visit, while two tree sparrows represented a good find in amongst the more numerous chaffinches.

After walking down to the hide overlooking the loch, everyone just about managed to squeeze in, and enjoyed the added benefit of getting into the dry. There were plenty of birds to keep the group entertained, and we picked out a single drake pochard - an uncommon bird in the Scottish Highlands. In fact, there was an abundance of wildfowl here, with goldeneyes, tufted ducks and teal all present in good numbers. A scan further out into the loch unearthed at least three female shovelers plus another unusual find: a female greater scaup. Elsewhere, and on the tern raft, plenty of cormorants were drying their wings, while mute swans were also dotted around the loch. In addition to the mutes, we also noticed a solitary immature whooper swan along the reeds at the back, begging the question of whether it had been orphaned, as most first-year whoopers tend to spend the first winter with their parents. With most of the bird interest confined to the loch, those looking above were rewarded with a brief view of a carrion crow chasing a sparrowhawk. Our final bird, before walking back to the carpark, was a kingfisher as it whizzed past the hide - yet another uncommon bird in the Scottish Highlands at this time of year.

With a couple of the group keen to photograph some of the birds coming to the feeders, we took lunch back at the minibus. The first birds we noticed on this second visit were four tree sparrows and a blackbird before all eyes diverted to a newly arrived red squirrel. All of a sudden, a female great spotted woodpecker flew into the same feeder as the squirrel, with a hilarious stand-off ensuing between them - which was ultimately won by the squirrel.

All of a sudden, a second squirrel appeared out of nowhere, and both proceeded to chase each other around the trees before a third joined the melée. This third squirrel appeared, both smaller and therefore younger, and deferred to the other two when they started eating again. With Loch Spynie having been hugely profitable for sightings, we hopped back into the minibus for the slow drive back towards Grantown.

Returning via Dava Moor, it was decidedly foggy and there was intermittent rain, but we stopped by Lochindorb to see what was present on the water. We quickly identified the usual pair of diving ducks, plus

at least 20 tufted ducks and maybe half that number of goldeneyes. Slowly working our way around the loch, we spotted a small covey of red grouse hunkering down in the heather. With the minibus serving effectively as a hide, were able to clearly see the differences between the two sexes, eventually counting three males and three females as they fed quietly on the heather tops.

As we carried on around the loch, the rain eventually started to abate, and we spotted two calling ravens flying over the moorland and another covey of grouse a little further along. Despite the birds having put on a great show, once again, we had no luck spotting mountain hares, so we headed back to the hotel, and the extra half hour gave the group time to rest, relax and dry off before reuniting to compile the day's checklist and for another Grant Arms dinner.

Day 5: Black Isle - Avoch, Chanonry Point, Cromarty, Jemimaville, RSPB Udale Bay, Redcastle to North Kessock, Hide at Inshriach

Thursday 2 November 2023

With the weather once again looking decidedly mixed, the group were 'wheels rolling' in the direction of Inverness by 08:30. As we drove over the Slochd Pass, it was distinctly foggy, with low cloud continuing not only all the way to Inverness, but also totally engulfing the firth just beyond. Looking for otters at North Kessock had been our first plan of action, but the weather conditions made this a total non-starter, forcing us to continue further north. However by the time we arrived at the coastal town of Avoch it had finally begun to clear so, After a short refreshment break, we drove onwards to Chanonry Point.

We began by scanning the inner side of the firth, where - despite the low state of the tide - the flat conditions made spotting anything straightforward. The first birds we identified were two winter-plumaged black guillemots very close to the shore, along with a smattering of shags and at least half a dozen eider ducks. We also saw house sparrows were in the bushes around the car park, as well as a flock of goldfinches and a single redwing in one of the gardens backing onto the car park.

Moving on, conditions at the tip of the peninsula were just as calm, and we quickly picked up both common and black guillemots on the water, along with the omnipresent shags and eider ducks. All of a sudden MD spotted some fins cutting through the water, with it quickly becoming obvious that they belonged to two or three harbour porpoises, rather than the more commonly encountered bottlenose dolphins. As dolphins often kill porpoises, presumably because they compete for the same food, this was potentially a very dangerous place for the porpoises to visit. But with the bottlenose dolphins usually much further out to sea at this time of year, we could only presume they must have assumed the coast was clear! Re-emphasising that this sighting was really unusual, MD declared that this was the first time he'd ever seen harbour porpoises in the inner firth.

We then recorded a second species of mammal: a couple of harbour seals. Both individuals were 'bottling' at the surface - a technique whereby just their 'noses poke out of the water, while their bodies below the surface maintain a vertical position, which allows the animals to rest briefly when out at sea, while still being able to carry on breathing.

Ducks then moved centre stage as we spotted a single red-breasted merganser fishing close to the beach, before four male long-tailed ducks and a single female goldeneye whizzed past the point and into the firth. Further out to sea, with the help of the a scope, MD was able to pick out a single grey seal - with its characteristic Roman nose profile, while a flock of shags fed synchronously.

Jumping back into the minibus, we carried on to the port of Cromarty looking out over the Cromarty Firth. Parking by the seafront in front of the pub, we had a cuppa and a scan to see what was about, picking up eiders, shags and red-breasted mergansers, while a pair of long-tailed ducks close in presented a great opportunity to enjoy this handsome winter visitor from its breeding grounds in the high Arctic. MD explained that 'old squaw' was the old North American name, presumably due to the male's feathers looking fit to adorn an Indian headdress. There were a few more common guillemots further out, while a

quick scan of the static oil rigs out in the bay revealed a number of cormorants drying their wings on the anchor chains.

As we were preparing to move a little further down the coast, a swallow surprised everyone by flying along the seafront and right past us - obviously a juvenile, due to its short tail streamers. MD thought this to be the first swallow he'd ever seen in Britain in November! The car park at Jemimaville lies just a few miles further west, and after parking the group were able to enjoy an overwintering flock of greater scaup - perhaps best described as a 'marine version of the tufted duck' - out in the bay., MD pointed out the difference between the males, with their pearl-grey back and flanks, while the brown females had a white ring around the base of their bills - which made it look as if their beaks had been stuck on with chewing gum!

Other wildfowl were present too: a few mallards and a healthy population of wigeons, and MD managed to pick out three winter-plumaged Slavonian grebes. These rare winter visitors were constantly diving, which made them tricky to spot at times, but with a little persistence most of the group eventually managed to get good views of these smart little birds.

With the weather now beginning to cloud over, we hopped the short distance further west to RSPB Udale. Here, the rising tide was just about high enough to get the most out of our visit, and we began scanning the saltmarsh, the mudflats and the bay beyond. Most noticeable was the large roost of oystercatchers and bar-tailed godwits, with a number of knots clearly present too. And standing head and shoulders above all these birds, the occasional roosting curlew was easy to pick out. In the foreground, close to the carpark, large numbers of wigeons and teal congregated along the water's edge, with at least 30 ringed plovers and around a dozen dunlins running around on the salt marsh just behind. Adding to the wader tally, a flock of around 50 redshanks was roosting behind the oystercatchers and godwits, while goose interest was provided by a single greylag and some pink-footed geese. MD suggested that these were most likely to be birds that had been shot and injured, rendering them unable to fly. This became an even more likely scenario when we spotted two shooters on the other side of the bay, with their gunshots regularly scaring the birds into the air. At one point, we saw a teal shot from the sky - which MD declared was a scandal right alongside such an important reserve.

As the tide continued to pour in and cover all but the highest reaches of the salt marsh, the waders became concentrated into a really tight group, making for a wader-fest. These were then joined by a flock of around 200 lapwings, while a little grebe was also seen feeding in the water close to the carpark. On spotting a male stonechat in one of the bushes by the carpark, MD followed it as it flew west of the periphery of the saltmarsh, and was surprised to come across a male kingfisher perched on the top strand of an adjacent wire fence. He called over the group so that everyone was able to get a superb view of the bird which is decidedly uncommon in the Highlands in winter. A little further along the same fence- was a perching meadow pipit. Delighted with such a good find, we then saw a flock of at least a dozen long-tailed tits feeding in the alder trees close by.

Jumping back in the minibus, we drove south and along the shore of Inverness Firth. On the way to Redcastle, we spotted a single jay as it crossed the road in front of us, and by the time we rejoined the coast, the fog from earlier in the day had been replaced by rain. Undeterred, we drove slowly along the coast road that connects Redcastle with North Kessock, and saw a couple of long-tailed ducks and shags from the minibus, before we spotted a couple of winter-plumaged Slavonian grebes. Unlike at Jemimaville, where the birds had been quite distant, these were so close that everyone was able to notice their red eyes, which are such a distinctive feature of this species throughout the year. During the drive, wildfowl interest was also provided by sightings of wigeons, mallards and teal.

Around a third of the way to North Kessock, a large flock of finches suddenly erupted out of an ash tree, before landing in a large field running along the other side of the road. Stopping for a look, we were thrilled to find at least 30 bramblings in amongst the greater number of chaffinches. While they fed on the ash keys, we had terrific views of the bramblings, and this was a real highlight - not only of the day but of the week so far!

The return journey was largely uneventful, and once back at the hotel, we reconvened in the restaurant at 16:30 for high tea, comprising a main course followed by a delicious selection of cakes! Back in the minibus just before 19:00, we set off for Inshriach, just south of Aviemore, for an evening in the hide. On the way to meet Harris, our 'guide in the hide', we saw a barn owl briefly in the headlights near Drumuille. This was a complete bonus! After meeting Harris before travelling on Harris was waiting for us, and once greetings were over, we slotted straight into the hide to see what would turn up.

Once Harris had placed the food out it didn't take long for the badgers to arrive, with the number quickly swelling to five. We also saw a wood mouse but it spent little time out in the open, preferring instead to dart out quickly for a peanut, before heading for the sanctuary of the feeding stage's timber back-wall. On this occasion the pine marten didn't show, but no-one could have been disappointed by the show the badgers put on, and after thanking Harris, we headed back to the hotel for a delightful supper of cheese and wine.

Day 6: Black Isle - Under Kessock Bridge to Charleston CP, Anagach Forest to Old Spey Bridge, Insh Marshes RSPB Reserve – lookout

Friday 3 November 2023

Following breakfast, with wet conditions forecast once again, we set off undeterred back up to Inverness, with the express hope of catching up with an otter. As we crossed the Slochd Pass, the weather looked particularly bad once again, but everyone was relieved to see the fog absent over the Beaully Firth, with nothing more than a thin drizzle in the air as we crossed to the Black Isle.

Starting underneath the North Kessock Bridge, around 90 minutes after low tide, we began scanning the shoreline for the telltale signs of otter - such as a 'V' shaped wake in the water or the otters' 'porpoising' technique while swimming. Across the water, on the Inverness side, MD picked up a flock of around 25 goldeneyes, and we also noted a couple of harbour seals. Grey herons, looking just like grumpy fishermen, were dotted all along the shoreline, while a small group of teal was in the pools amongst the seaweed. MD spotted a red-throated diver as it flew past the group and out to sea, but there was no evidence of otters anywhere.

Moving west along the shoreline, we were able to add curlew and redshank to the day's list before MD suggested making a prolonged search at Charleston car park, which, in his experience, represented the best opportunity to find one. Working the edge of the seaweed, one of the group asked "What's this?" To which MD - with the scope - replied "Otter!" Everyone quickly latched onto the individual otter working its way along the water's edge, watching with great excitement. Continually diving, then popping back up close by, it eventually surfaced with a large fish and proceeded to carry its wriggling prey onto the seaweed. It then spent the next 15 minutes devouring this huge meal in clear view, with everyone filling their boots as they took it in turn to watch through the scope.

After finishing such a large meal, the otter obviously needed a sleep, and we took it in turns to watch it sleeping in amongst the seaweed. As its pelage slowly dried, it was fascinating to see turn both browner and fluffier, with MD suggesting that the otter's behaviour marked it out as being a male. Eventually waking up, the otter had a stretch on top of a rock before starting to fish once again. A quick glance at a watch indicated that we'd been watching it for over an hour! We were momentarily distracted by a flock of lapwing, which swooped in before the birds dropped down water level, with clear views of the otter as it fished behind them - what a terrific session!

Driving back over the bridge flushed with success, we made our way south down the A9 before taking a comfort stop in Carrbridge. A spot of birding here enabled us to add collared dove to the week's list, along with dunnock, robin and a trio of finches: gold, chaffinch and green.

After driving round to Anagach in Grantown, we took a walk in the woods, where MD talked about their history: they are managed by the community as a hugely important local asset. Here, he pointed out the classic Caledonian trio of understory plants: bilberry, heather and cowberry. At the feeders, we saw a great spotted woodpecker before turning our attention to the coal, blue and great tits that came down to the huge feeder. A red squirrel came down to the feeding station, but with the peanut feeder at the back empty, it didn't linger. On hearing a treecreeper, we watched as one flew down to the trunk right in front of the group, and we all enjoyed stellar views of this terrific woodland bird.

Opting for the green route down to the river, we revelled in the lichens, mosses and ferns along the way, before taking the steps down to the River Spey. From the riverbank, we spotted a couple of female goosander were spotted, then took a slow amble through the woods and onwards to the old bridge. Just at the point where the gallery woodland changes to a meadow, we encountered a mixed flock of birds comprised of long-tailed tits, blue tits, great tits and a robin. From the bridge, we were able to fully appreciate both the incredibly fast flow of the river and the truly astounding colour of the autumnal trees - despite the steadily pouring rain!

As we walked back along the road to the minibus we had another view of a collared dove and a siskin flying over the road. Back at the hotel, where the staff kindly let us eat in the warm and dry dining room, we enjoyed lunch with a steady supply of hot teas and coffees. After taking a moment to reset, we jumped into the minibus again for the drive to RSPB Insh Marshes south of Aviemore. Just before arriving at the car park, we spotted a female rose deer in an adjacent field, and with the rain abating for the first time, we took a short stroll to the new hide, which had recently been rebuilt after being burnt down in 2022. Standing on the hide's roof, we all enjoyed super views across the marsh, with the southern part of the Monadhliaths forming an incredibly picturesque backdrop.

The first birds we picked out on the marsh below were grey herons and a mallard, and a single calling crossbill flew over the viewpoint. Continuing the deer theme, we found two more roe deer just in front of the glacial esker, and saw five red deer hinds out in the middle of the wetland, giving an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast these two native species. We could also see a few rabbits on the esker, which was pockmarked with warrens. MD heard a bullfinch calling in the trees close to the hide, then pointed out the aspen trees nearby. After picking up four adult whooper swans over the back of the marsh, he shouted 'Harrier!' and most of the group managed a view of a female 'ringtail' harrier as it quartered the marsh for no more than 30 seconds, to get onto, before disappearing from view.

Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed dinner before heading out on a night drive across Dava Moor. MD had never done this before, and with large parts of the moor cloaked in fog, he suggested it might never be done again! However, our patience eventually paid off, as some of us spotted a mountain hare briefly in the heather close to the road before seeing a second once much more clearly right by the main road as we drove back to the hotel. Everyone agreed that despite the poor weather, it had been a simply terrific day for mammal watching.

Day 7: West coast - Dundonnell, Viewpoint over Summer Isles, Gruinard Bay, Laide, Mellon Udrigle, Aultbea

Saturday 4 November 2023

Our much-anticipated day on the West Coast had finally arrived, and with it an early start, as we boarded the minibus for a long but hopefully fun day. Having carefully monitored the weather all week, it looked as though conditions would be excellent, with the added bonus of very light winds.

Initially, however, it was foggy, and low clouds stretched from the A9 right across the Tain Peninsula, although it eventually started clearing as we passed through Garve. On the 'other side', conditions could not have been any finer, as we were surrounded by blue skies, with barely a drop of wind. Driving through ever more fabulous and stark scenery, we passed Glascarnoch Dam, before making our first proper stop at the viewpoint looking over the head of Loch Broom. While taking scenic photos we spotted a few red deer high

up on the fell. We then dropped down to Dundonnell at sea level, where MD set up a mobile café, and we enjoyed teas, coffees and biscuits while scanning the crags for eagles.

With the tide fully in, most birds were roosting on the higher reaches of the saltmarsh, including seven or eight grey herons plus oystercatchers, curlews, redshanks, common gulls, hooded crows, four or five turnstones, a few knots and a small flock of greylag geese. Out on the water, the complete lack of wind had turned the sea loch into a duck-pond, making it easy to pick out two or three harbour porpoises halfway down the loch. While we were watching these, an adult white-tailed eagle chased a common gull over the loch before the tables were quickly turned. Due to the lack of thermals over the water, the bird had to work especially hard to flap the short distance across the loch, before eventually disappearing behind crags on the other side - but not before everyone had enjoyed terrific views of this wonderful bird!

Proceeding a couple of miles further northwest, with the loch on our right the whole way, MD then noted what appeared to be a diver close to the road. On parking for a better look, we saw there were, in fact, three great northern divers, with one in full breeding plumage, another in winter plumage, and the final one in eclipse. One of the birds started to wail, and one member of the group used the Merlin ID App to confirm that the call belonged to the common loon - the North American name for great northern diver. Although MD had previously heard the tremulous call over on the West Coast, this was the first time he'd ever heard this species making its territorial call in the UK - what a moment! Most unusually, we also saw a red-throated diver in the water here, as this species is more commonly found along the Moray Coast rather than in the west.

Moving on to Gruinard Bay, we enjoyed nothing short of amazing weather. Out in the bay, with Gruinard Island behind, there were at least twelve great northern divers, with three black-throated divers much further out. From here we also saw a couple of winter-plumaged black guillemots, along with a red-breasted merganser and the regular overwintering flock of around 200 barnacle geese on the improved fields to the east of the bay. Before leaving we spotted a common guillemot from the lay-by, along with a much closer black-throated diver.

Further, along the coast at Laide, we scanned the bay for otters, but the tide was a little too high for optimal spotting. By way of recompense, however, we managed to pick up a number of harbour seals and two ringed plovers, along with the regular trio of coastal waders: oystercatcher, redshank and curlew. Moving around to the jetty on the other side of the bay, we took lunch in the glorious weather. While we ate we managed to spot three female common scoters, in addition to a very surprising six shelducks roosting out on the water. We also had a good sighting of great northern divers here, along with a winter plumaged razorbill. On the rocks alongside the jetty, we noted at least three rock pipits and a drake mallard nearby.

After lunch we drive the short distance around to Mellon Udrigle, and with everyone keen to walk to the trig point, we set off across the moorland. Conditions were the best MD could ever recall, with barely a cloud in the sky and virtually no wind. As we walked up to the viewpoint, the light became beautifully polarised, with the mountains of An Teallach, Benn Ghoblach, Ben Mor and Cul Mor clearly visible to the east and north. Out to sea and to the west, we could just about make out the Outer Hebrides, while Skye's Cuillin Ridge was just about visible to the southwest. Then MD picked up a large pod of common dolphins out at sea in the North Minch. The views were distant, but there were at least 50 individuals, many of which were jumping clear of the water - which made quite a spectacle that we enjoyed watching through the scope. We also spotted a distant flock of kittiwakes out on the water from here too. Dragging ourselves back to the beachside car park, we passed the renowned roche moutonnée, and MD gave a brief geology lesson on this glacial formation.

Finishing the day off at Aultbea, we stopped for a refreshment break, which allowed MD to find eight black-throated divers feeding in a flotilla out in the bay. Having struggled to see this species earlier, it was lovely to watch them all surfacing and diving simultaneously. By this time, we were a long way from the hotel, but MD drove all the way without stopping, while everyone chose Scottish songs to play on the minibus's stereo after the final full day of an unforgettable week.

Day 8: Departure Day - Loch Garten & Stathearn: Corrievorrie Farm, Road to Farr and Forest car park.

Sunday 5 November 2023

With most people not scheduled to depart until later in the day, we had an opportunity to revisit a few sites, with the priority of getting better views of a few key species - starting with crested tit! As soon as we had checked out, finished breakfast and loaded bags, MD whisked everyone back to RSPB Loch Garten.

On arrival at the carpark, it was cold, foggy and very still as we entered and walked up to the feeding station by the ornate bench. As a result of the cold, the feeders were a hive of activity, with coal tits by far the most numerically dominant bird. In a short space of time, we were also able to identify chaffinch, great tit and blue tit. A tree creeper made an appearance, giving everyone terrific views as it spiralled up a couple of trees close to the path in full view of the appreciative audience. Continuing the woodland theme, a male great spotted woodpecker also made an appearance, and MD was able to point out the red nape - the easiest way to differentiate between the sexes of this super woodland bird.

After some 15 minutes of waiting patiently, MD heard a crested tit calling from the surrounding trees, and one individual came in at least four or five times in quick succession, showing beautifully. All were utterly delighted with these views, and MD suggested a quick trip down Strathdearn to see if we could catch up with the mountain hare and see what raptors might be on the wing.

By the time we had crossed the River Findhorn, before turning up into the valley, the fog had lifted, revealing another fabulously clear day with very little wind. Driving slowly up the strath, we first stopped close to Corrievorrie Farm, picking up a single buzzard and a sparrowhawk in quick succession. As we continued up the road to Farr, we suddenly spotted a dipper on one of the tributaries coming down the hillside. Up until this point this species had eluded MD for the entire two-week period he had spent on Speyside. It's always a great bird to catch up with, and jumping out of the minibus, MD was able to position the dipper in the scope for a brief period before it flew further upstream - however, everyone managed to get great views of this classic bird of upland watercourses. Although we didn't manage to hear or see crossbills in the plantation higher up, we did get good views of a mistle thrush by the roadside.

Moving on to the Forest Carpark by Coignafearn Bridge we took a walk up the path, where MD spotted a mountain hare in the heather. Initially, we watched it from a distance of around 200 metres, but then we walked a little closer before watching it run across the hillside after a passing walker disturbed it. We didn't manage to see it again, but it was nevertheless terrific to chalk up the week's second sighting of Britain's only native lagomorph. While driving back out of the valley, we managed to spot a female goosander on the river below, as well as a few red-legged partridge by the roadside, before eventually rejoining the A9.

After dropping one of the group, who was on an earlier flight than the others, at Inverness Airport, and with our cameras and optics now packed in our bags, MD and the remaining members of the group found a nearby coffee shop to while away a pleasant hour chatting about all things wild. Then everyone bade each other fond farewells after a stellar week enjoying the very best of Scotland's wildlife in such fine company.

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
1	Barnacle goose	Branta leucopsis						✓	
2	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus		✓	✓	✓	✓		
4	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			✓	✓	✓		
5	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus			✓		✓		
6	Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna						✓	
7	Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			✓				
8	Wigeon	Mareca penelope		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Pintail	Anas acuta		✓					
11	Teal	Anas crecca			✓	✓	✓		
12	Pochard	Aythya ferina			✓				
13	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			✓				
14	Scaup	Aythya marila			✓	✓			
15	Eider	Somateria mollissima		✓		✓			
16	Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra		✓				✓	
17	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis		✓	✓	✓			
18	Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula			✓	✓	✓		
19	Goosander	Mergus merganser	✓		✓		✓		✓
20	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator		✓		✓		✓	
21	Black Grouse	Lyrurus tetrix		✓					
22	Ptarmigan	Lagopus muta							
23	Red Grouse	Lagopus lagopus			✓				

24	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa	✓						✓
25	Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata					✓	✓	
27	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica						✓	
28	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer						✓	
29	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis			✓	✓			
30	Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus				✓	✓		
31	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓			✓	✓	✓	
32	Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			✓	✓	✓		
34	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	✓						
35	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus			✓				✓
36	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus					✓		
37	Red Kite	Milvus milvus	✓						
38	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	✓					✓	
39	Rough-legged Buzzard	Buteo lagopus							
40	Buzzard	Buteo buteo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Coot	Fulica atra			✓				
42	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus			✓	✓	✓		
44	Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		✓					
45	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula				✓		✓	
46	Curlew	Numenius arquata		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica				✓			
48	Turnstone	Arenaria interpres		✓	✓			✓	
49	Knot	Calidris canutus		✓		✓		✓	
50	Dunlin	Calidris alpina		✓	✓	✓			

51	Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima		✓					
52	Snipe	Gallinago gallinago					✓		
53	Redshank	Tringa totanus		✓	✓	✓	✓		
54	Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla						✓	
55	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		✓	✓	✓	✓		
56	Common Gull	Larus canus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Herring Gull	Larus argentatus		✓	✓	✓	✓		
59	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus		✓					
60	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge				✓		✓	
61	Razorbill	Alca torda				✓			
62	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle		✓		✓		✓	
63	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	✓	✓	✓			✓	
64	Stock Dove	Columba oenas							
65	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
66	Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto					✓		
67	Barn Owl	Tyto alba				✓			
68	Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis			✓	✓			
69	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		✓	✓		✓		✓
70	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	✓						
71	Jay	Garrulus glandarius	✓			✓			
72	Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix		✓		✓		✓	
76	Raven	Corvus corax	✓		✓			✓	
77	Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus		✓	✓				
78	Coal Tit	Periparus ater	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

79	Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus		✓					✓
80	Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓			✓		✓
81	Great Tit	Parus major	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
82	Skylark	Alauda arvensis			✓	✓			
83	Swallow	Hirundo rustica				✓			
84	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	✓			✓	✓		
85	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes				✓	✓	✓	
86	Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris					✓		✓
87	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
88	Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris	✓	✓	✓	✓			
90	Redwing	Turdus iliacus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
91	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos			✓	✓			
92	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		✓					✓
93	Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		✓		✓		✓	
95	Dipper	Cinclus cinclus							✓
96	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓		
97	Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus			✓				
98	Dunnock	Prunella modularis			✓		✓		
99	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba		✓					
100	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis				✓			
101	Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		✓				✓	
102	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla				✓			
104	Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula					✓		
105	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris			✓		✓		
106	Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓	✓		✓		
107	Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret	✓						

108	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓
109	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓		
110	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓						
111	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓				
112	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓				

	Common Name	Latin Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	MAMMALS								
1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓				✓		
2	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓					
3	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>					✓		✓
4	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
5	Field vole	<i>Microtus agrestis</i>							
6	Wood mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>				✓			
7	Common seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓	✓	✓	
8	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			✓	✓			
9	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				✓		✓	
10	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminia</i>	✓						
11	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>				✓			
12	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					✓		
13	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓				✓	✓	
14	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓						
15	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				✓	✓		
16	Goat	<i>Capra hircus</i>	✓					✓	
17	Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>		✓					
18	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>						✓	