

Tour Report Autumn in the Scottish Highlands 8 – 15 November 2025

Otter



Red deer stag



Flock of redshank



Red squirrel



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Saturday 8 November 2025

Travel and meeting day

Due to a couple of late cancellations, the group size had reduced to just a couple by the start of the week. MD had travelled up to the Highlands the night before in preparation, and after breakfast, headed up to Inverness to collect the remaining two guests: one from the airport and one from the train.

With a gap in between the two pick-ups, MD took the first guest for a quick spot of birding at Alturlie, looking over the Inner Moray Firth. Despite the tide being far from ideal and the drizzly weather, plenty of birds were still around, as we noted wigeon, teal, lapwing, redshank and a few curlew along the shoreline, along with the omnipresent gulls, in the form of herring, common and great black-backed.

Picking up the second guest from the Inverness Airport Station, we then headed straight back to Grantown-on-Spey and our accommodation for the week - the Grant Arms. Despite the weather on our journey south, the autumnal colour was splendid, with the buttery yellows of the beach perfectly complementing the different shades of orange present among the birch and larch.

Arriving at our delightful base, the guests then settled into their rooms, before all three reunited at 6.45 pm for an introductory chat from MD and to formally welcome them to the hotel. The briefing was not just an opportunity to get to know each other, but also the perfect occasion for the members to familiarise themselves with how the week would run, to learn about the week's itinerary and for MD to answer any outstanding questions. A brief tour of the hotel's facilities then ensued, before the group took their seats in the dining room for a delicious three-course dinner.

Fully satiated, and after long journeys from various parts of the UK, the group headed off to their rooms for the first overnight.

Sunday 9 November 2025

Day 1:

Strathdearn: Corrievorrie Farm, Road to Farr and Forest Carpark, and then Spey Dam to Garva Bridge.

Initially, MD had planned for the first day to be spent up on the Black Isle, but with the weather forecast looking marginally better for Monday than on Tuesday, MD decided to take the group instead to Strathdearn. After breakfast, he met up with the two guests and headed off towards the A9. The noisy jackdaws were immediately noted as left Grantown behind, with the weather grey, overcast and almost windless. Joining the A9, the group then headed up and over the Slochd Pass before turning off towards Strathdearn, 'AKA the Valley of the Raptors', in the heart of the Monadhliaths.

Crossing over the Findhorn River, we then turned up into the Strath. Once again, the autumn colours here were nothing short of sensational, with the trip's first raptor being a red kite, when spotted above the car. Stopping at the first location, close to Corrievorrie Farm, the very first bird to be observed was that of a female sparrowhawk, before a rain shower temporarily put paid to any more raptor sightings. With the rain receding, a buzzard was next to be picked up, before a couple more red kites were spotted over the hills and across the valley. Continuing the theme of 'more common raptors', MD then picked up a female kestrel, before a flock of newly-arrived redwing passed our position. Pigeon-wise, the usual population of feral doves were present down in the valley, along with a smattering of woodpigeons.

Moving on next to the parking spot by the road to Farr, another scanning session produced more buzzards and red kites, before we picked up a couple of distant ravens further up the valley. The weather was also proving challenging, with constant squalls moving through, and conditions also becoming far windier than had been predicted. Deciding that to keep moving would be the best strategy, we then drove further up and to the forest carpark, where we all warmed up with a hot drink, as we took in the impressive surroundings. Almost immediately, MD picked up a few red deer stags on the hills, with their antlers standing clearly out

against the grey sky whenever they lifted their heads. More buzzards and kites were noted here too, but the regular rain squalls were conspiring to dash our hopes of spotting any airborne eagles. Deciding a walk would do the group good, MD took both guests up to the ruined buildings north of Carn Mor, but with the rain now periodically quite heavy, we were unfortunately unable to pick out any mountain hares hunkered down in the heather.

Returning in slightly bedraggled fashion back to the car, we decided to cut our losses and head instead for Spey Dam further south, and were utterly delighted to see the weather finally improving as we passed through Kingussie and Newtonmore. Turning off the A9 and looking down on Lochain Uvie, MD managed to pick out three whooper swans on the water, with a quick masterclass then ensuing as to the differences in bill patterns between that of our resident mutes and the whooper swans, freshly in from their Icelandic breeding grounds. Turning off at Laggan, and into the wilderness once again, simply huge numbers of red-legged partridge and pheasants were observed as we drove along the approach road to Spey Dam. Here too, we picked up a much closer red deer stag than we'd previously seen at Strathdearn.

Following on past the dam, we then stopped at Garva Bridge by the Spey, primarily to appreciate both the landscape and revel in the day's best weather. Constantly scanning, once again, MD eventually managed to pick up a very distant pair of golden eagles. Despite being at least a couple of kilometres away, the terrific polarised light enabled us to easily pick up both the eagles' distinctively flat wing profiles and their characteristic soaring technique. And at one point, we could even see the golden sheen on their napes, which gives these majestic raptors their name.

Buoyed by finally having caught up with the eagles, we then drove further up General Wade's Military Road to the large sitka spruce blocks, where we noted a large herd of what appeared to be mostly red deer stags. Turning round at the point where we could go no further, we then looked down to the Spey's flood plain, to find at least seven sika deer, including a couple of stags, that had obviously left the security of the plantation to feed out in the open. A couple of red deer were close by the sika too, enabling the group to appreciate the clear size difference between our native red and the introduced sika. Here, MD was also able to talk about the hybridisation issue between both species, which may well in the future be a real threat to the continued integrity of the 'Monarch of the Glen'.

As the light was now beginning to fade, we retraced our steps, but on the way out, took a moment to enjoy the Highland cows close by the roadside. Here too, in the dusky light, we also managed to locate at least four brown hares as they fed and chased each other in the fields close to the river. Driving back to Grantown in the dark, we eventually arrived back at the hotel at around 5.45 pm, giving everyone a full hour to relax and refresh before reuniting for dinner. First order of the evening was to compile the day's checklist before once again tucking into our three-course meal. Fully satiated, we then bid goodnight after our first action-packed day in the Scottish Highlands.

Monday 10 November 2025

Day 2:

North Kessock - Redcastle, Chanonry Point, RSPB Udale Bay, Jemimaville (lay-by), Top road to Cromarty & Loch Flemington

Looking out of the windows at breakfast, it looked to be very wet, but with the promise that it would hopefully clear later on. Setting off at 9 am for our day up on the Black Isle, the usual jackdaws and rooks were seen on our drive across to the A9. Driving over the Slochd Pass, the weather was nothing short of appalling as we battled through a snowstorm. But upon dropping back down to sea level towards Inverness, the weather appeared to have improved a touch, meaning the North Kessock Bridge was just about visible as we crossed over onto the Black Isle.

Heading first to the RNLI Boat station, located under the bridge itself, it was still raining hard, but despite the heavy rain, we could just about see eight long-tailed ducks (mostly female) located on the water close by. The coastal road to Redcastle is undoubtedly one of the best spots to look for otters, but the very wet

conditions made spotting anything at all quite tricky. Stopping next at the 'Max Headroom Car Park', we watched a flock of around 50 lapwing hunkered down in the rain, with a solitary redshank in their midst. There were also plenty of wigeon scattered along the muddy shoreline, while a couple of grey seals were also noted bottling further out. While in the scrub around the car park, a number of chaffinches and singles of both robin and blue tit were all recorded. Moving further along the road, a number of carrion crows were also perched up while waiting for the rain to stop, along with a flock of oystercatchers feeding in a newly-planted barley field on the other side of the road.

Continuing further westwards, the weather slowly began to show small signs of improvement, and stopping briefly at Redcastle's estuary, large numbers of redshank and a couple of curlew were observed feeding out in the bay. In the small hamlet of Redcastle itself, MD then noted a hooded crow flying into a garden. Taking a moment to briefly relocate the hoodie, it suddenly became obvious that a bird feeder was also present in the garden, with both species of sparrow also feeding on the nuts. MD declared this to be the first time he'd ever found tree sparrows at this location. And while taking in the sparrows here, we also recorded the trio of coal, great and blue tit, along with chaffinch. The trip's first pink-footed goose was also recorded here, when a singleton flew over, calling noisily as it went.

Leaving Redcastle, it also appeared that we were mercifully leaving the rain behind too, as we headed north. And just before reaching the main road taking us towards Chanonry, we spotted a large finch flock constantly switching between feeding in a field and roosting in a tree. Taking some time to check the birds out, we were hoping for brambling, but on this occasion could only pick out chaffinch. Also on the way to Chanonry Point, and near the village of Avoch, we spotted our first large flock of around 300 to 400 pink-footed geese feeding in a barley stubble field, but due to the heavy traffic along the road were unable to stop. Even at 30mph, however, the guests were nevertheless able to see the species' trademark chocolate-coloured head and small pink bill.

After a quick break at Rosemarkie to use the facilities, we then drove straight to Chanonry, before heading for the point. And we had barely left the car park before MD noted the trademark fins of bottlenose dolphins scything through the water just beyond the point. Stopping dead in our tracks, we then proceeded to watch with delight as a pod of around five bottlenose dolphins, including at least two juveniles, moved into the bay at a distance of little more than 50m from our location. The conditions here were also flat calm, enabling us to see the dolphins incredibly well whenever their fins or heads broke the surface. While watching the dolphins, a small flock of turnstone also flew straight past the point, before dropping inconveniently out of sight. But wither looking in vain for the sunstone, we did manage to catch up with a far more obliging flock of around five ringed plover, while they fed along the strand line, with a single rock pipit in tow. Also out in the bay, a number of cormorants could be seen drying out their wings on a couple of large buoys.

Walking next round past the lighthouse wall, and onto the point itself, we quickly picked up good numbers of winter-plumaged guillemots feeding out in the bay, before four goldeneye flew past. Scanning out, a few bobbing heads of grey seals were also clearly visible, while in the direction of Rosemarkie MD picked out a single red-throated diver was picked out, busily feeding amongst half a dozen shags. Much closer in, we then took a moment to watch three rock pipits feeding along the tideline right in front of us, as a few herring gulls loafed around on the water.

Walking the other way back to the car park, we then headed straight to our next destination of RSPB Udale, which looked out over Cromarty Firth in the north of the Isle. Timing our visit carefully to ensure we were there a couple of hours before high tide, we were instantly confronted with huge numbers of birds from the very moment we drove into the car park. It was also, by now, flat-calm and very clear, as we settled down to tackling the variety of birds in front of us. Both out on the water and on the muddy peninsula, the first birds to be noticed were the huge numbers of pink-footed geese, while lots more noisy, mobile flocks were also constantly on the move. The usual high tide roost of around 300 oystercatchers was present too, while both wigeon and teal were abundant across the site, with MD taking time to teach the guests the whistling call of the former and the subtle 'prrt!' call of the latter. Slightly further back, a flock of around a dozen redshank had also formed, with more clearly visible through the scope across the firth. Also along the estuary margin, a couple of herons were found, along with a single great black-backed gull sitting on a tyre.

And much closer to our position, MD helped the guests pick out a few common gulls from amongst the larger and more numerous herring gulls.

Meanwhile, out in the bay, at least 70 or 80 shelduck were clearly visible in front of a much larger flock of pink-feet, before a flock of around 150 curlew then provided a delightful distraction as they flew directly over our heads, undoubtedly on their way inland to feed. Also on the water and just in front of the group, a single little grebe and a lone female goldeneye were next to come under our collective gaze. Then suddenly all the birds flushed as one, as MD quickly pointed out a peregrine falcon dashing across the mud in an unsuccessful attempt to catch lunch!

Taking a moment to enjoy our own lunch, along with a warming drink, we then moved a little further along the coast to the lay-by just beyond the village of Jemimaville. Here we were able to gain distant views of the regular overwintering population of around 400 greater scaup, with the scope also helping the guests to differentiate between the black, white and silver males & the brown females with a noteworthy white ring around the base of their bills. Elsewhere in the bay, we enjoyed excellent views of both male and female long-tailed ducks, along with around three winter-plumaged Slavonian grebes. With this stretch of water providing rich pickings, we were also rewarded with a flock of eider, along with a much smaller number of red-breasted mergansers. And finally, before leaving, a much closer Slavonian grebe was enjoyed by all.

Driving onwards to Cromarty, via the 'top road', which passes through barley fields, it appeared uncharacteristically quiet until right at the end of the road, where we encountered a large flock of finches perched high up in a beech tree. Scanning through them with the scope, we estimated at least 400 present, of which around three-quarters appeared to be linnet, with the rest being goldfinch. While working our way through the finch flock, we also picked up a calling raven.

Back in the car, we then dropped down into Cromarty, and after using the facilities, headed round to the town's cinema, which offers a fine view of the stretch of water out towards North and South Sutor. While driving round the harbour, we noted a small flock of starlings, while out on the water, a number of common guillemots, a single red-throated diver and more grey seals were noted. Looking landward, a single pied wagtail was spotted on the cinema roof, before moving around to the town's main promenade, where a single black guillemot in winter plumage represented a good find, along with far closer views of eider ducks.

Mightily pleased with our haul, we began heading back south, and in the little light still available, we popped into Loch Flemington (close to the airport). Here we managed to add mute swan, coot and moorhen to our list before it became too dark to birdwatch! Arriving back at the hotel at around 5.30 pm, we then met up in the dining room, after an hour-long break to enjoy a delightful meal, with the day's checklist following quickly afterwards.

Tired after a long but successful session on the black Isle - all agree it has been the ultimate day of two halves!

Tuesday 11 November 2025

Day 3:

RSPB Loch Garten, Dava Moor & Lochindorb, Anagach Woods & Inshriach hide

Waking up to a frosty, windless morning, the group headed straight off to RSPB Loch Garten to take advantage of the good weather before it would deteriorate later on. Parking up, we had a look at some of the understory plants, such as bilberry, cowberry and heather on the way to the visitor centre, before then stopping at the ornate bench. MD then attracted the coal tits down to feed out of his hand with some bird-feed he'd brought along, before both guests then took the same opportunity to enjoy this unique and humbling experience for themselves as well.

Putting some more food down on the bench as well, the cold weather then saw an immediate uptick in the number of birds coming down to the free handout on offer, with great tits and chaffinch quickly picked out

from in amongst the far more numerous coal tits. And then after a little more than a couple of minutes, a crestie suddenly made an appearance. Unusually, it didn't call, so it initially caught everyone by surprise, but fortunately, what appeared to be the same bird then returned to grab some food on at least seven or eight different occasions, giving everyone stellar views of this cracking bird from a distance of just a few metres away.

Thrilled with such a terrific sighting of this bonafide Highland superstar, we next walked up to the feeders close to the visitor centre, where plenty more coal, great and blue were seen, along with brief views of a great-spotted woodpecker. We also heard a few crossbills 'chipping' overhead, but on this occasion could not see them perched anywhere obvious. Walking back out the way we'd come in, we then saw the 'great spot' again, confirming it to be a male bird, before heading back towards Grantown.

Having secured the morning's main target, we then paid a quick visit to the Old Spey Bridge to look primarily for dipper, but as it was so foggy here, meaning we could barely see the water, we headed instead over to Tomvaich Woods to look and listen for crossbills. Parking up but the entrance, MD picked up the call of another crested tit right by the roadside, before the group then took a walk up and into the forest. It was very welcome being able to warm up, but despite picking up a few coal tits and briefly hearing crossbill flying unseen overhead, nothing else of note was noted here.

With the weather now steadily closing in once again, we next headed off to Dava Moor, whereupon five meadow pipits were spotted on the telephone wires at the junction between the main road and the moor. Driving across to the loch, we then spotted a flock of around ten goldeneye close in, enabling us to easily pick out the handsome males from the somewhat dowdier females. Following the road past the forest and onwards to the other side of Lochindorb House, we stopped in the lay-by for both a hot drink and to scan down across the water, picking up a flock of around ten greylag geese and four tufted ducks in the process. Mallards were also present much closer to the shore, while the occasional goldeneye could also be picked out at the back of the loch, whenever they surfaced for a breather. Before hopping back in the car, we were somewhat surprised to spot a single great-spotted woodpecker flying out of the woods and across the moor, presumably to a patch of trees elsewhere.

Driving over to the road to Ferness, very little was seen on the way, so MD suggested that perhaps the best option would be to drive back again for a second look. This proved to be a good call as we quickly located a pair of stonechats by the road. Initially, the male was spotted by the road, but after a little bit of persistence, we located the female too, with everyone obtaining good views through the scope. Buoyed by this welcome find, we then continued further along, before catching sight of a male red grouse flying into the heather ahead of us. Stopping the car, we could suddenly hear them calling around us, and eventually, MD managed to locate a single male poking out of the heather, as this bird was also lined up in the scope.

Heading back around past the house once again, we picked up probably the same large flock of goldeneye we'd seen earlier, but this time they were much closer in, with the number now having swelled to thirteen. By now, however, the much-threatened rain had arrived and so we headed back to Grantown for a short walk in the woods at Anagach. Parking up by the entrance to the woods, we scanned the feeders of a house nearby, but the only visitors appeared to be coal tits and chaffinch, so we headed for the hotel's feeders instead. Admiring the lichens and bilberry on the way, the usual suspects around the feeders were coal, great and blue tits, along with robin and chaffinch. Unfortunately, on this occasion, no red squirrel was to be seen, so we headed back to the hotel for a short break before our high tea.

Tucking into our delicious and very filling high tea, and with dusk quickly descending, MD then drove the group down to the hide at Inshriach, south of Aviemore, where we met our 'guide in the hide', David. By now it was raining heavily, but this didn't prevent at least five different badgers from coming in to feed on the peanuts left out. We also saw a wood mouse darting out into the open for a nut on a few occasions. However, despite the pine marten having made an appearance just the evening before, on our visit, we left empty-handed. We had nevertheless enjoyed our time in the hide, and after returning to the hotel, delighted in the cheese and wine left out for the hardy trio. Tired after such a long, but rewarding day out in the field, we then bid goodnight to prepare for our second day on the coast.

Wednesday 12 November 2025

Day 4:

RSPB Loch Spynie, Lossiemouth Caravan Park, Lossiemouth Harbour, Roseisle CP, Burghead Harbour & Burghead Promontory

With the forecast suggesting it would be another wet day, the group headed straight to RSPB Loch Spynie, near Lossiemouth, after breakfast. However, upon arrival, we were pleasantly surprised to find that, for once, conditions appeared better than expected. We were also delighted to see at least three red squirrels at the reserve's feeding station, which just happens to be located right next to the car park. Here, the squirrels provided the most marvellous entertainment, as we watched them both feeding and interacting with one another. The squirrels were amply supported by a nice mix of birds, with coal tit, chaffinch, great tit, blue tit, robin and dunnock all duly picked up, in addition to a few more tree sparrows. A single female house sparrow in amongst the feeding throng was a surprise here too, with 'the tree' generally the more common of the two sparrow species at this relatively remote and cracking reserve.

Walking down to the hide, a pair of whoopers were immediately noted front and centre, with one of them - almost certainly the male - constantly making quiet, bugling notes while displaying to its mate. Mute swans were also present in abundance here too, including some immature birds from the class of 2025. Over at the back of the loch and closer to the reeds, a few tufted ducks were spotted, along with a sprinkling of mallard and cormorants and a pair of little grebe. A pair of goldeneye also appeared intermittently, while on the other side of the loch, a single female long-tailed duck appeared to be sleeping on the water. And just before leaving the hide, we were surprised to see a jay make a brief appearance when it flew above the reed-bed.

Walking back to the car park, we then drove out along the bumpy track, noting that the adjacent hedgerows contained plenty of birds. And while most of the loose flock appeared to be tree sparrows, we also briefly spotted a single female reed bunting in their midst. Stopping again a little further along and next to the pig fields, we then took a moment to distinguish between the rooks, jackdaws and carrion crows, while the herring, black-headed and common gulls were also abundant. Here too, at least six great black-backed gulls were standing head and shoulders above the rest of the birds, with MD commenting that this species tends to be uncommon away from the coast. On the other side of the track, a small flock of starlings were additionally observed feeding on the ground, while a single hooded crow and a male pheasant completed our haul.

Moving over to the East Beach carpark at Lossiemouth and close to where the river enters the firth, there were a huge number of birds along both the estuary and beach. First to be observed were at least eight or nine bar-tailed godwits feeding along the water's edge, with MD explaining that these birds would have recently returned from their breeding sites up in the arctic and sub-arctic tundra of northern Scandinavia and Russia. Elsewhere, in the water, three goosander in full breeding plumage (including two spanking males) represented another good find, while even closer to our position were singles of redshank and curlew. From our position, abundant numbers of wigeon and lower numbers of teal could be seen across the estuary, along with the usual trio of herring, common and great black-backed gull as well.

Continuing to scan, a grey heron was next to be added to the day list, while at least eight or nine ringed plover were running around on the beach, with another little grebe in the water. Following a tip-off, MD then took the group round to the Lossiemouth harbour wall, where we counted a mighty impressive 19 purple sandpipers 'rock-climbing' along the sea wall parapet, in between being flushed off by waves. This was probably the highest number MD had seen in one flock during his time up in Highland. Here too, a winter-plumaged common guillemot was close by in the water, while eight common eiders were also feeding in the bay. The eider were particularly interesting when diving down for mussels, with it fascinating to see a female bring one up to the surface, before then proceeding to swallow it whole.

Taking our lunch at Roseisle, we then positioned ourselves on the dunes looking out over the sea, but in this

exposed spot, the wind made it tricky to see much clearly. But despite the conditions, we did manage to spot a few gannets passing, while MD also picked out very distant velvet scoters in flight, along with a kittiwake. Deciding Burghead might be more sheltered from the prevailing wind, we made the short hop back east, stopping first at the car park to look out across the bay. With the tide now coming in quickly, and the bay indeed tucked out of the worst of the wind, we quickly spotted a high tide roost of around 30 turnstone, three redshank and two purple sandpipers on the breakwater by the entrance to the town's small harbour.

Looking next over towards the corner of the bay, at least a dozen more bar-tailed godwits could be seen, along with a few oystercatchers, yet more ringed plover, a curlew and a single knot. This enabled MD to talk about the key distinguishing feature when identifying knot in winter plumage, being that 'they have no distinguishing feature'! Suddenly looking out to sea we spotted loads of gannets piling into the water in an obvious feeding frenzy, before a flock of around a hundred long-tailed ducks flew past our position and around the headland. Also by scanning further out into the bay, MD was able to line up a small flock of around 15 common scoter for the guests while the ducks rested on the water surface.

Moving around to the promontory, it was unusually far more exposed here, with the sea looking positively wild. A little bit of sea-watching produced a pair of red-breasted mergansers and a sprinkling of guillemots, eiders and shags, but with it now so cold, MD took the group back to the hotel, via Findhorn. With a little more time to relax than usual, the group then reconvened at 6.45 pm for dinner and the checklist, followed by a superb talk by Mark Pearson on sea ducks for the hotel's 'Sea Duck Week'. Buoyed by such a fascinating talk, we all then headed to bed, in preparation for a day that would hopefully take in a variety of sites not yet visited during the course of the week.

Thursday 13 November 2025

Day 5:

Findhorn Bay LNR, Findhorn Dunes, Spey Bay, Bogmoor, Carrbridge, Dell of Abernethy & Dava Moor

After breakfast, the group set off at 8.45 am for a day that MD intended to split between the coast and a couple of inland sites. The first point of call was a very grey, cold and windy Findhorn Bay, and with the rain mercifully appearing to be holding off, we donned our coats, hats, gloves and boots before setting off across the saltmarsh and onto the mud.

We had barely walked any distance before spotting a flock of at least a hundred curlew feeding relatively close in, while a kestrel hovered above the saltmarsh. Moving further into the bay, there were obviously huge numbers of birds further out, with at least 300 pintail along the water's edge, in addition to a much larger number of waders, which were mostly composed of redshank, oystercatcher and dunlin. A flock of at least 70 or 80 bar-tailed godwits were also present along the waterline, before MD then picked up a small flock of around a dozen golden plover as they flew past. A few pink-footed geese were also present, amongst the more numerous wildfowl and waders. Looking over the back and towards the west of the bay, a healthy population of shelduck were also picked up.

As we scanned out, we suddenly saw virtually the entire wader flock take to the air, but on this occasion were unable to pick out any obvious predator. And as it was also, by now, decidedly cold, we took the birds' departure to do the same ourselves. Driving the short distance to the Findhorn Dunes carpark, we briefly used the facilities before then taking in a hot drink, with our entertainment kindly laid on by a pair of stonechat and a robin. We then ventured over the dunes to have a look out over the sea, but with it by now decidedly wet and windy, scuttled back to the car instead for a drive to Spey Bay. Noting a very large flock of redshank close in along the eastern end of Findhorn Bay as we left the village, one of the guests then spotted our very first magpie of the trip - which tends to be a very localised species in Highland, making it sometimes hard to track down.

Driving through Bogmoor, we were hoping to pick up yellowhammers on the wires here, but due to the strong wind, the birds were obviously keeping their heads down. Stopping by the top field and just before the coast, we did, however, spot a large number of feeding curlew and lapwing. At Spey Bay, we then took

in (another) hot cuppa in the delightful cafe, but as it was so cold and windy, we only conducted a brief birding session here. While overlooking the estuary, we managed to spot four female goldeneye, a few goosander and a couple of red-breasted merganser, in addition to the large number of gulls roosting on the island in the middle.

Heading back inland, we stopped once again briefly in Bogmoor, where a large finch flock provided us with a pair of greenfinch, in addition to the more numerous chaffinch and trio of tits. Back in Speyside, MD then took the guests off to see the famous bridge at Carrbridge for the first time during the trip, whereupon a short, impromptu walk around the houses provided some of us with brief views of a single goldcrest in a larch tree.

Deciding to end the day at the feeders of Dell of Abernethy, we spotted a collared dove flying over the road in Carrbridge before a prolonged period at the feeders provided us with the usual suspects. Heading back to the hotel, and after dinner, MD then took the group across to Dava Moor with a thermal imaging scope for a hare hunt in the dark. By now it was finally clear of rain and decidedly cold, but with the help of this amazing bit of tech, we managed to see at least four or five hares lolloping around the moorland, although none came close. The signature of red grouse hunkering down in the moor was also picked up during our drive too.

Arriving back at the hotel at around 9 pm after the evening out on the moor, all then bid a prompt good night with a long day to the west coast planned for our last full day of the trip.

Friday 14 November 2025

Day 6:

West coast: Dundonnell, Gruinard Bay, Laide, Mellon Charles, Aultbea, Gairloch Harbour

After an early breakfast, and with the weather looking the best it had been all week, we set off for our west coast day at 8.20 am. It was very cold and clear, with a brief stop undertaken close to the A9 for the guests to take some frosty photos. Heading up over the high Slochd Pass, we then hit a huge snow flurry, resulting in conditions instantly turning into a virtual white-out. But upon dropping down to Inverness and the Black Isle, we were eventually able to leave the snow behind us.

Passing over the Black Isle, we could also see that snow had recently settled on both Ben Wyvis to the north and the peaks of Strathconon to our immediate south. Heading onwards to Garve, the day's first bird of prey was that of a red kite above the road, as we continued our drive westwards. By now, the sky was beautifully clear, as we began to appreciate the west's trademark wilderness, with the skyline dominated by the imposing mountain of An Teallach ahead of us. Picking up a buzzard on the way, the hope was that conditions would favour eagles, as we headed towards our first stop at Dundonnell.

Dropping down towards the loch, we picked up a couple of feral goats feeding on gorse along the roadside, before stopping for a cuppa down at the loch side and opposite the hotel. Taking in the dramatic crags on either side, none appeared to be adorned by an eagle so we moved promptly onto Gruinard Bay for a look across to Gruinard Island. While waiting for the sun to come out from behind a single stubborn cloud, we took in the regular overwintering population of around 300 barnacle geese in the fields away to the northeast. Scanning across the bay, we were also able to pick out at least three winter-plumaged great northern divers, as MD talked the guests through the key identification features that are vital for distinguishing between this species and the other duo of divers also present around Scotland's northern coasts in winter - these being the black-throated and red-throated. While scanning for more divers, MD also spotted the week's second winter-plumaged black guillemot, which in winter always appears to be more like a 'white guillemot'!

Then, MD spotted a sub-adult white-tailed eagle with a distinctively dark tail, flying from Gruinard Island over to the mainland. Unfortunately, the eagle only gave us a brief fly-by and did not reappear after crossing the road ahead of us, but it did stay in view long enough for both guests to get a reasonable look at the

second eagle species of the week. Also, as it was being chased by a great black-backed gull, this enabled us to clearly see the eagle's massive size, with MD stating that white-tails often tend to look more like vultures than eagles in flight. At this point a number of ravens flew past our position, calling as they went.

Back in the car, we moved a little further along the coast to Laide, where we stopped briefly to search for otters. But with the wind blowing into the bay, this hampered our plan, leaving us instead with a number of harbour seals in the water and a sprinkling of the commoner waders and wildfowl along the shoreline. The original idea had been to take lunch at the Laide Jetty, but with the wind making this simply too cold a place to stop, the group instead relocated straight to Mellon Charles, just north of Aultbea, where we were able to hide out of the prevailing wind. While eating our sandwiches, a couple of buzzards were seen soaring above the Isle of Ewe in front of us, before MD picked up another sparrowhawk, as we prepared to move back to Aultbea.

After using the facilities at Aultbea, we proceeded to scan across the bay and quickly picked up singles of red-breasted merganser and Slavonian grebe, while a little further out, we also enjoyed watching a flock of around five black-throated divers as they alternated resting and digesting at the surface with fishing expeditions below. Another four red-breasted mergansers then appeared much closer to our position, allowing us to clearly spot the differences between the handsome males and the somewhat plainer females.

As time was still looking favourable, MD decided that the group still had time to return to Speyside via the longer route, which takes us a touch further south and through Gairloch, before turning inland to drive up and past Loch Maree. Enjoying the stunning coastline en route, we then made a brief stop at the harbour in Gairloch, where we saw plenty of shags either resting on the rocks or feeding in the harbour. Gulls were also represented by great black-backed, herring, common and black-headed, but the star performer here was a grey seal. Having caught a large flatfish in the harbour, before surfacing to eat it, a whole raft of birds then descended in the hope of pinching a free meal, but after a prolonged tussle, the seal ended up being the winner.

Heading back eastwards along the A832, and with the sun now setting, we stopped off at the head of Loch Maree, which takes in both the entirety of the valley below and across to the Mount Slioch immediately to the north. In essence, it is surely one of the most iconic views in all of Highland. But with darkness quickly descending, we then headed straight back to the hotel for a short turnaround, before enjoying our final dinner and checklist of the week.

Saturday 15 November 2025

Day 7:

Inverness & North Kessock to Redcastle

Following our last breakfast at the hotel, and with both guests leaving at different times from Inverness Train station and the city's Airport respectively, we loaded up their bags in the car before heading straight off to the A9. Predictably, the weather was the best it had been all week, and as the first guest had an early train to catch, she was dropped off, after a fond farewell, for her journey home.

With time to kill before the final guest was due to leave, MD suggested they head over for one last drive along the road between North Kessock and Redcastle, looking out across the Beaully Firth, to see if an otter could be persuaded to make an appearance. The conditions could not have been any more different to our previous visit to this location earlier in the week. Starting at the bridge, the usual suspects of wigeon, curlew, redshank and oystercatcher were all present, with a few long-tailed ducks and grey seals further out. Moving further along, we were then able to add a couple of birds to the trip list, as skylark was heard singing over the fields, while at least two yellowhammer were enjoyed while switching between feeding and bathing in the puddles in the 'Max Headroom' car park.

Moving yet a little further on, MD suggested they try one more spot before needing to drive to the airport and we had barely parked up before we suddenly picked up an otter feeding along the tideline at a distance

of no more than 30 or 40m! While one of the guests had unfortunately missed out on this stellar sighting, it was nothing short of a fantastic end to the week and just desserts for all the effort that had been put in during a week of 'decidedly challenging weather'! Watching what we presumed to be a dog otter, we looked on with utter delight as it then caught a couple of small fish in between numerous dives in amongst the seaweed.

Talk about 'all good things come to those who wait...!'

Cover Images by: Otter (Mike Dilger), red deer stag (© Maryann Thorp), Red squirrel (© David Ashcroft) & a flock of redshank (© Maryann Thorp).

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Checklist for Autumn in the Scottish Highlands



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS									
1	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>						✓		
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
4	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		✓	✓			
5	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓			✓				
6	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		✓	✓			
7	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					✓			
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	✓				
12	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		✓						
13	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓				
14	Velvet scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>				✓(MD)				
15	Common scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				✓				
16	Long-tailed duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓		✓			✓	
17	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
18	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓			✓	✓			
19	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Red grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			✓		✓			
21	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓							
22	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
23	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓						
24	Black-throated diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>						✓		
25	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>						✓		

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26	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓		✓		✓		
27	Slavonian grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓				✓(MD)		
28	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
29	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓				
30	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
31	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
32	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	✓							
33	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓					✓		
34	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						✓		
35	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓				✓			
36	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>						✓		
37	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	
38	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓						
39	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓						
40	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓					✓	
42	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓(MD)			✓			
43	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓				
44	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				✓	✓			
46	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		✓		✓		
47	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				✓				
48	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			✓			
49	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓				
50	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						✓		
52	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
53	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
54	Great Black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
55	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Common guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓		✓				
57	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		✓						
58	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
59	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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60	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>					✓	✓		
61	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	✓				
62	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓				✓	✓		
63	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓						
64	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	✓		✓		
65	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>					✓			
66	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
70	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	H				✓		
71	Coal tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
72	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓					
73	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
74	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
75	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>							H	
76	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					✓			
77	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H			✓		
78	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
79	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				✓				
81	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓							
82	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						✓(MD)		
83	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓(MD)				✓		
84	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
85	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		✓			
86	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	H		
87	Tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓		✓				
88	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				✓				
89	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓					✓	
90	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓					
91	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓				✓		
92	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
93	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓		✓	

94	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓					
95	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			H				
96	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			✓		✓
97	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>							✓
98	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				✓			
	MAMMALS								
1	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓						
2	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>					✓		
3	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>				✓			
4	Wood mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>			✓				
5	Common seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>						✓	
6	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓				✓	
7	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓					
8	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>			✓				
9	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>							✓
10	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓					✓	
11	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓						
12	Goat	<i>Capra hircus</i>						✓	