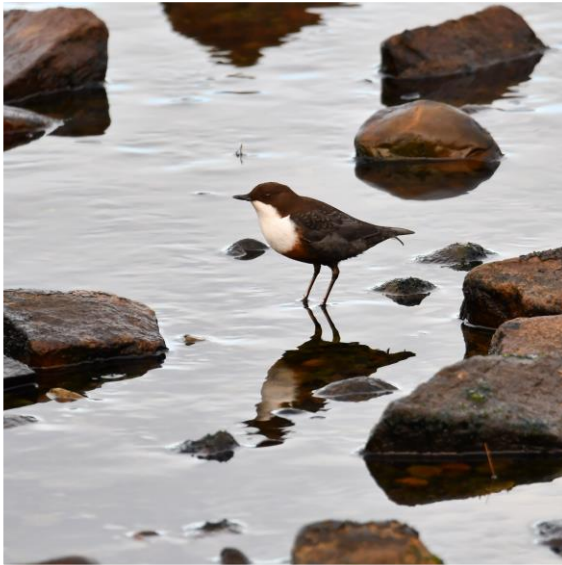


## Tour Report Autumn in the Scottish Highlands 9 – 16 November 2024

Dipper



Red squirrel



Mountain hare



Golden Eagle



Images by David Ashcroft

Compiled by Mike Dilger

With a full quota of seven guests for the week, tour leader Mike Dilger (MD) drove up to Inverness, before collecting five members of the group from the city's train station, with the last two making their way to the hotel under their own steam. Back at the hotel, everyone checked in and settled into their rooms, with the plan to meet in the bar at 6pm so MD could formally welcome one and all to the hotel.

The briefing was not just to get to know each other, but also an opportunity for the group to familiarise themselves with the organisation of the week, 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.

### **Day 1:**

**Sunday 10 November 2024**

Strathdearn - Corrievorrie Farm, carpark by the road to Farr, Forest carpark (Coignafearn), Top carpark, Spey Dam (near Laggan) & RSPB Inch Marshes

With intermittent sun and rain forecast, the group set off after breakfast for the Monadhliaths and Strathdearn, with raptors the day's main focus of attention. As MD drove towards the A9 the first raptor of the trip was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a buzzard, when one was spotted worming in a field near Carrbridge. The group then passed over the Findhorn River, before taking the road up to Coignafearn and into the heart of the hills, whereupon a red squirrel crossed the road just in front of the minibus.

As the weather began to improve a couple of red kite were picked up when they flew over both the road and minibus just short of Corrievorrie Farm. Stopping in the lay-by there, up to five red kites were quickly picked up, with MD commenting that even three or four years ago, a single sighting of this species would have been a notable event. Also while here, a singing robin, a couple of pheasant and a few flyovers of chaffinch were both noted and added to the list.

Continuing to scan the hills to the northeast, a single raven was observed over the hills to the east, while one of the guests additionally found a buzzard perched on a pylon. Focus then switched back to the hills as a large flock of fieldfare were seen moving up the valley. With no eagles located here, MD made the decision to move to another good stopping place, by road to Farr. Here the spawning salmon proved to be of great interest to the group, with females appearing to be laying their eggs in the river's gravelly beds. Some of the fish were well over half a metre in size, and with couple of spawned-out dead fish present as well, MD joked the only other thing the scene needed was a couple of grizzly bears catching the fish!

As nothing more than a couple of ravens and a small flock of goldfinch were noted here, the group then headed off once again, this time to the Forest Carpark, where three goosander were picked up along the river en route. Taking a hot drink break in the carpark, an adult golden eagle was subsequently picked up as it came up from behind 'Kestrel Crags', before flying across the front of the hill and disappearing back over the top. As the sun had briefly emerged at this point, all were able to see the golden colour on the bird's nape, from which the species derives its name. MD then picked up a second, very distant goldie, before a third - this one a sub-adult bird - appeared once again above kestrel crags. A buzzard was also airborne, enabling all to see the very obvious size difference between a 'tourist eagle' - aka a buzzard - and a proper eagle! With a small amount of white in the wing and a pale sub-terminal tail band, MD estimated this last eagle to be either two or three years of age.

Thrilled with the plethora of 'goldie' sightings, Md then picked up the calls of crossbills flying over, as a couple of females perched in the nearby Sitka spruce and just long enough to be enjoyed by all through the scope. Taking a walk over the bridge, the group then headed up towards Carn Mor, where at the second bridge we proceeded to scan for mountain hares - but to no avail. As a result, the wildlife interest here suddenly turned to that of some dog lichen and meadow waxcaps. Once back at the minibus, we then drove up to the Top Carpark, where we proceeded to have a lunch in the minibus while waiting for a rain squall to pass. Deciding to quit Strathdearn, a couple of mistle thrushes were picked up close to the Glenmazaran Estate, along with plenty of chaffinch and another buzzard.

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While availing ourselves of the facilities at the Three Bridges Cafe in Tomatin, the birders in the carpark picked up the trip's first blue and great tits, while MD taught the group the call of siskin in flight. The minibus was next pointed in the direction of Spey Dam, where hundreds of rooks and jackdaws noted during the hour-long journey southwards. Travelling past both Kingussie and Newtonmore, we then took the road to Laggan, and soon picked up a brown hare in one of the fields adjacent to the River Spey. There were, as per usual, hundreds of pheasants in the farmed fields here, along with a large number of red-legged partridges, and as we approached the small carpark by the bridge over the Spey at least a dozen red deer stags were spotted. With these stags having patently reformed the bachelor club, it was patently obvious that the autumnal rut was already over.

Carrying on over the bridge we headed up to where both the plantation forests run alongside the road and the moorland opens up, before suddenly chancing on a young male sika deer at the edge of the first forest block. Usually preferring to stay hidden in the forest, this individual was conveniently out in the open and so gave everyone the opportunity to compare and contrast this introduced species with that of the native red. Further up a single red deer stag on the edge of the moorland looked every inch 'the Monarch of the Glen', while on the way back down to the river a buzzard was observed atop a larch tree.

By now the light was already beginning to fade, and as we passed the 'hare field' the number on animals had jumped to two. While observing the hares, a female roe deer at the back of the field made for our third species of the afternoon. Deciding to head for Insh Marshes to see if we could pick up a harrier coming in to the roost, a couple of rabbits were also noticed while passing through Kingussie.

Arriving at the site, we proceeded onto the roof of the new hide, which has recently been rebuilt since having burnt down in 2022, allowing all to enjoy super views across the southern part of this wetland reserve. Here, the southern part of the Monadhliaths also form an incredibly picturesque backdrop. Meanwhile, down on the marsh below, five whoopers could be clearly picked out, while teal and mallard were also present, in addition to a large greylag flock in the pastures at the back. The reserve also has a couple of feeders in front of the hide, and in no time we'd picked up all three common species of tit, along with fly-bys of chaffinch and redwing. MD then heard the soft 'piuu' call of a bullfinch behind the hide, with some of the guests managing a few glimpses of a bird that can never be guaranteed in the Highlands.

It was then just at the point of getting dark, that MD suddenly spotted a male hen harrier quartering the marsh, with most of the group able to follow it across the landscape until finally disappearing out of sight - what a great way to end the trip's first full day. Driving back to the hotel, the guests then had some downtime before reconvening to both compile the day's checklist and enjoy a fine Grant Arms dinner.

## **Day 2:**

**Monday 11 November 2024**

Black grouse lek, RSPB Loch Garten, Dell of Abernethy, Anagach to Old spey Bridge & Dava Moor, plus Lochindorb

With the weather much improved on the previous day, MD had arranged for an early morning meet-up to visit the black grouse lek near by. Gathering at 6.45am, a quick drive around to the Ferness lek ensued, and with dawn breaking, the group managed to pick out four males on the lekking court. However enjoyment of these birds was short-lived, when sheep on the lek appeared to spook the birds.

Determined for more prolonged views of this terrific species, MD then drove across Dava Moor and around to the Jesus Saves lek, where a grand total of eleven displaying males were counted. Despite being much more distant than the Ferness lek, this was nevertheless a very handsome number for a location that usually plays second fiddle to its more illustrious counterpart on the other side of the moorland. Certainly those who had never observed a lek before were very excited to understand the behaviour as MD explained how the polygamous mating system of black grouse works.

Returning back to the hotel, all enjoyed a late breakfast before next heading off for RSPB Loch Garten, in an attempt to catch up with the ultimate Highland specialist - the crested tit. On the way, a couple of large,

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mixed jackdaw and rook flocks were noted in the surrounding fields, while a number of redwing passed overhead. Arriving in the reserve's carpark, we headed straight for the ornate bench, with a calling 'crestie' heard on the way. MD then put some sunflower hearts out on the bench and the group were quickly deluged by coal tits and chaffinches, with lower numbers of blue and great tits. While waiting to see if a crestie would deign us with its presence, a number of guests hand-fed the coal tits, while MD also picked out the calls of passing crossbills, the screeches of a couple of jays and the explosive 'tchick!' of a great spotted woodpecker.

After well over an hour of waiting, to no avail, MD suggested the group head instead to the feeders at Dell of Abernethy. Taking a hot drink while waiting at these feeders, this proved to be a good call when a single 'crestie' called, before then dropping onto the feeders for a full five minutes, and to the obvious delight of the group and relief of MD.

Leaving Dell with a spring in our step, we then headed straight down to the woods at Anagach, which is located between the hotel and the River Spey. Starting off at the feeders, MD was able to talk about the history of the forest, which are now managed by the community as a hugely important local asset. Here the classic Caledonian trio of understory plants were present in abundance, as MD showed the guests bilberry, heather and cowberry. At the feeders a number of coal, blue and great tits were coming down to the huge feeder present, but having already spent a large part of the morning staring at feeding stations, MD suggested the group go for a walk instead.

Opting for the green route down to the river, everyone was able to revel in the lichens, mosses and ferns along the way, before rejoining General Wade's Military Road and taking the steps down to the River Spey. From the river bank three female goosander were spotted, before the group then took a slow amble through the woods and onwards to the old bridge. Just before the gallery when woodland changed to meadow we saw a large flock of chaffinch feeding on the beech mast, and as most birds were male this enabled MD to tell the group about how Carl Linnaeus (the Modern Father of Taxonomy and Binomial Nomenclature) used to call chaffinch the 'bachelor bird' in his native Sweden, as the smaller females disappeared further south in the winter. A little further on at least half a dozen siskin were also spotted coming to drink from some slack water at the edge of the river - it was obviously thirsty work eating seeds!

Moving into the meadow, MD was able to point out a single melancholy thistle still in flower, this being both the symbol of Scotland and a species that is barely recorded south of the border. Along the line of trees at the back of the meadow, a large flock of redwings could be seen on the move, in conjunction with a number of chaffinches and singles of both blackbird and mistle thrush. Once up on the old Spey bridge, all were able to fully appreciate both the incredibly fast flow to the river and the autumn colours along the banks while MD ran back for the minibus.

Taking our lunch in the comfort of the Grant Arms, we were also able to take another hot drink before heading for a drive over Dava Moor and taking in Lochindorb along the way. Passing redwings and starling en route, we dropped down off the main road and immediately found a pair of stonechat, with the male perching up particularly well. We had, however, no luck in finding red grouse, but by scanning the western end of the loch with MD's scope soon identified at least half a dozen goldeneye (males and females), a few mallards and a flock of around 20 tufted ducks.

In the fading light we also found a couple of perching buzzards, before then heading back to the hotel. After a break to relax and refresh we reunited once more for the day's checklist. Following dinner, Mark Pearson then gave an excellent talk on 'sea ducks' which was well attended by all the WW guests, and would prove excellent preparation for our planned trip later in the week to Roseisle on the Moray Coast.

### **Day 3:**

**Tuesday 12 November 2024**

West coast - Glascarnoch, Dundonnell, Gruinard Bay, Laide, Aultbea & Mellon Udrigle

Usually MD preferred to leave the much anticipated day on the west coast until towards the week, but with Tuesday looking like the only settled window in that direction, all seven guests boarded the minibus at the

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earlier time of 8.15am for the long, but hopefully fun day ahead.

Initially misty in places, this soon passed as MD took the group onto the A9 and up and over the Slochd Pass. Dropping down to Inverness the group then carried across both the Black Isle, where a red kite was spotted, and the Tain Peninsula. From Garve onwards the scenery becomes ever more fabulous and stark, and after a brief pitstop at Glascarnoch Dam to stretch our legs, made our first proper stop at the viewpoint looking over the head of Loch Broom. After scenic photos were taken, we then dropped down to Dundonnell, which is situated both at the head of Little Loch Broom and at sea-level. Here MD set up his mobile café, as teas, coffees and biscuits were consumed while scanning the crags for eagles.

As there was virtually no wind and the sun was frustratingly hidden behind a low bank of cloud, this made conditions far from ideal for spotting raptors, but it did, however, give us an opportunity to scan for other birds. Almost immediately MD picked up an incredibly close dipper in the burn right alongside the carpark, with the photographers in the group thrilled with the opportunity to take photos of this charismatic bird at such close quarters. Further out on the grassy floodplains a large flock of greylag could be seen, while out on the estuary the usual trio of oystercatcher, curlew and redshank were picked up in fairly short order. Along the water's edge a number of hooded crows, common and black-headed gulls could be seen, while MD was also able to locate a single sleeping greenshank.

Despite the water being well out, due to the state of the tide, we were still able to scan the inshore areas and pick up three red-breasted mergansers and plenty of shags. Here too, a couple of meadow pipits flew over, while a noisy flock of house sparrows made their presence known from the hotel behind. Up along the ridge-line behind the hotel a number of red deer could also be seen through the scope, before MD then suggested they move along for a closer view of the shore from a well-positioned lay-by 500 metres along the road. From this advanced position we were able not only to see (and hear) the greenshank, but also locate two small flocks of feeding ringed plover and curlews. Finally a drake wigeon and a couple of grey herons were found before heading off to Gruinard Bay.

Arriving at the famed lay-by, which looks out over Gruinard Island, we then began to scan the water for divers. As per usual, at this time of year, the flock of around 200 barnacle geese were in the improved fields to the northeast, and in no time at least three or four great northern divers were picked up between the mainland and the island. A number of these divers were in different plumage states, allowing all to appreciate a species that is not only decidedly scarce down south, but is an exceptionally rare breeder in the UK. Additionally a single black-throated diver was also picked up, allowing MD to explain the differences between these two eminently confusable species.

After a good deal of scanning MD was also able to find a single winter-plumaged back guillemot (or tystie), while a number of shags could also be seen in the water. One of the guests then picked out a single common seal hauled out on the rocks just below, and while a scan of the island could not produce a 'white-tail', it did deliver a very distant peregrine in flight.

After a very successful session at Gruinard, we then moved along to the coast at Laide, where we scanned the bay for otters, but on this occasion without luck. However, by way of recompense, we did manage to pick up a number of harbour seals, along with ringed plover, mallard, teal, oystercatcher, curlew and a couple of grey herons. Then one of the guests picked up two very distant raptors way back towards An Teallach, which with the help of MD's scope were subsequently identified as an adult and sub-adult white-tailed eagle.

Moving around to the jetty on the other side of the bay, we then took a delightful lunch on the slipway, while also managing fabulous views of a very close great northern diver, along with a couple of hooded crows and some shags on the rocks. Rather than heading round next to the beach at Mellon Udrigle, MD then took the group to look for more raptors along the road between Aultbea and Mellon Charles. And after a refreshment stop in aultbea the group then took a slow drive along the coast, where we encountered a couple of buzzards and two hovering kestrels.

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As the wind had began to pick up considerably, we then headed back towards Gruinard, only to stop again a short while later to enjoy a herd of feral goats eating the prickly gorse by the roadside. Arriving back at the hotel at around 5.30pm, we then reconvened at 6.30pm to compile the checklist and take dinner after a long, but successful day.

**Day 4:**

**Wednesday 13 November 2024**

Hopeman Harbour, Roseisle, Burghead - west Beach & Promontory, Findhorn Bay Nature reserve.

With the tides finally more favourable for a visit to the coast, we set off up to Moray after breakfast. With Hopeman Harbour our first port of call, we passed Burghead and at Cummington took in a stubble field with a large number of woodpigeon and curlew. In the town itself, plenty of starlings and house sparrows were noted on both the chimney pots and gutters, before we eventually arrived at the harbour wall.

Looking over the wall and across to East Beach, the tide as we expected, was fully in. Here gannets were observed out to sea, presumably having come from the gannetry of Troup Head further along the coast. Casting our eyes across the bay and to the rocks on the other side, a number of turnstone were then picked up, along with a couple of sanderling. However, on this occasion, no purple sandpipers could be seen, possibly due to disturbance from the numerous dog walkers, who appeared oblivious to the fact that the birds were being continually disturbed.

Out at sea a large raft of eiders was also present, with seemingly equal proportions of ducks and drakes, while both cormorants and shags were also present. We then saw a flock of redshank flying into the bay and straight onto the rocks, before these waders, which are nervous at the best of times, were also disturbed by another dog walker. Beyond the rocks, MD was also able to pick up a single bar-tailed godwit feeding along the beach.

Moving a little further west along the coast, our next port of call was Roseisle, and on the way we marvelled at the numerous skeins of pink-footed geese passing overhead. Once parked up in the conifers, we walked up onto the mound in the dunes, where we joined forces with Mark Pearson, who was leading 'Sea Duck Week' for the hotel with a number of guests. In no time everyone, was enjoying great, if distant views of velvet scoters, with common scoter also passing by. This also gave everyone the opportunity to put into practice what they'd learnt earlier in the week from Marks talk on sea ducks.

While here, a bonus bird was also present, in the form of a single male surf scoter, which is a North American species that occasionally finds its way to Britain each winter in very small numbers. The males have a distinctive white patch on their nape and after a good deal of looking, a number of the guests eventually managed to obtain a glimpse of this bonafide rarity. Closer in, red-breasted mergansers and a few long-tailed ducks were also present, while gannet continued to pass in a westerly direction.

Bidding farewell to Mark and his guests, we then hopped back east to use the facilities at Burghead, before decamping to the carpark looking over Burghead Bay. Here, and with the tide receding, MD managed to pick up at least 50 bar-tailed godwits feeding along the water's edge. Also present in amongst these godwits was a single knot, with MD reminding the guests 'that the key distinguishing feature of knots is that they have NO distinguishing features'. Also further along the beach was a flock of gulls, with herring, common and great-black backed all observed in amongst the throng.

Moving next around to the promontory that looks northeast out into the firth, there was, by now, plenty of rock revealed by the receding tide, and almost immediately MD was able to pick out three purple sandpipers from in amongst the more numerous turnstone. Also on the rocks were a number of redshank, with MD able to show the guests the winter plumage of oystercatcher, with their distinctive white 'chinstraps'. Out on the water, eider were present here in good numbers too, with numerous birds additionally seen passing beyond the point and further out.

Suddenly the focus of attention passed from feathers to fur as one of the guests spotted a mink running

across the beach, which is of course an invasive species from North America. Presumably there must have been a resident family there, as MD recalled having seen mink here on at least a couple of occasions previously. Before leaving, a single red-throated diver was briefly located by one of the guests, but disappeared before all the guests had the opportunity to see it. Nevertheless with the key target species of purple sandpiper already 'bagged', MD next drove the group around to Findhorn Bay for one of the highlights of the trip - a walk out into the bay.

With the tide now well out and conditions looking good, the group headed straight out into the middle of the bay. The number of birds out in the bay was simply huge, meaning we barely knew where to look first, so we started with the flock front and centre, which was a tight mass of over 500 pintail, before then taking in the several hundred golden plover located just behind us. As per usual, redshank, curlew and oystercatcher were all present in good numbers, and behind the pintail we then noticed a flock of 700-800 dunlin present as well.

Further off to the west, but still within the bay, a number of shelduck feeding in the mud were next to come under our collective gaze, while a flock of several thousand pink-footed geese were roosting even further out, prior to presumably heading off to feed inland. The final bird to be picked up in this 'wader-fest' was a swirling flock of around 40 or 50 knot that suddenly appeared, having been presumably obscured by the larger pintail. And with the light slowly fading, the afternoon was made even more memorable by the sight and sound of several hundred 'pinks' passing overhead.

Walking back to the minibus, we then headed briefly to Findhorn Dune to use the facilities, and while there managed to add one more species to the trip list, with the discovery of a couple of magpies - which are still an uncommon species in the Scottish Highlands. Heading back to the hotel after a most successful day, the group met up an hour later for checklist and dinner, before then being entertained by Mark Pearson's second talk of the week on 'Turtle doves in Yorkshire'.

## **Day 5:**

**Thursday 14 November 2024**

Black Isle - RSPB Udale Bay, Jemimaville, back road to Cromarty, Cromarty & the slipway, Chanonry Point & North Kessock to Redcastle Road. Dava Moor.

Opting for an earlier than usual breakfast in order to take advantage of the state of the tides, the group left at 8am for the drive up to the Black Isle. The forecast indicated the day would start cloudy, with the promise of more sunshine later on in the day. Taking the group over the North Kessock Bridge and onto the 'isle', MD then explained that the Black Isle was not actually an 'island' but a peninsula, with the precise reasons why it had originally been called 'black' had been lost in the mists of time.

As per usual, gulls and corvids were common in many of the barley stubble fields across an area that has been labelled 'the breadbasket of Scotland'. Arriving at our first destination, which was RSPB Udale, the high tide was still around 90 minutes away, which meant that plenty of birds were already crowded onto the remaining section of salt-marsh, which also doubles as a high tide roost. Most prominent here were the oystercatcher and redshank, while further back a flock of lapwing could also be observed, and right at the back a smaller number of curlews. Behind the oystercatcher, a mixed flock of dunlin and knot were also present, but only visible when they moved.

On the water itself, large numbers of wigeon were present, while the teal were mostly confined to the salt-marsh's creeks. Scanning through the wildfowl on the water, MD was surprised to find a drake shoveler, which represented an unusual find this far north, while a couple of red-breasted mergansers were also feeding out in the bay. Geese were once again a common feature here too, with a large roosting flock of 'pinks' out in the estuary, while large skeins were continually passing over the heads of the group to add to the atmosphere.

Happy with our haul, MD then took the group along to Jemimaville, where the group quickly found the overwintering flock of around 200 greater scaup, with MD explaining this was probably the best place to

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see this duck species in the entire British Isles. As the sea-state here was decidedly calm, MD also managed with the scope to pick out at least two winter-plumaged Slavonian grebes, with another three or four closer to the Invergorden (northern) side of the estuary. Finally looking further east, and towards Cromarty, a distant flock of long-tailed ducks was also picked up, while a couple of grey heron flew lazily past.

Rather than head straight to Cromarty, MD took the group upwards to an area of land managed principally for arable crops. Climbing up to the 'top road' and with barley stubble fields either side, we then stopped to have a look at the birds on the wires. Almost immediately we heard both skylarks and a small flocks of linnets passing overhead, with all the half-dozen birds on the telephone wires subsequently identified as yellowhammers. Another bird that looked subtly different then landed on the wires, which was immediately identified as a tree sparrow, but unfortunately this bird flew back into the hedgerow before everyone had managed to get a good view through the scope. However MD suggested the best opportunities for tree sparrows would both lie elsewhere and later in the week.

Moving slowly along the road, a further 30 or 40 birds seen along the telephone wires were mostly yellowhammers, with a couple of reed buntings and a single corn bunting making most welcome entries onto the week's list. But even better was to come further down, as we linked up with a flock of at least 500 to 600 linnet, which were constantly switching between feeding in a weedy field and perching on the wires. In addition to this flock, another separate grouping of 200 plus birds was observed feeding elsewhere, with MD declaring this to be the highest number of linnets he'd ever seen anywhere.

After lunch on the seafront at Cromarty, MD suggested the group move around to near the jetty, where the sea would be more protected from the wind, making spotting easier. And this proved to be a smart call, as almost immediately MD picked up a group of bottlenose dolphins in between the Sutors that mark the eastern end of Cromarty Firth. Despite the distance, all the guests managed to see both dolphins leaping clear of the water and what appeared to be lunge-feeding at the surface, with at least half a dozen dolphins present.

One of the guests then picked up a red-throated diver as it flew past, while a couple of winter-plumaged razorbills were also picked up on the water. Reluctantly leaving the dolphins, and with the weather now delightful, we drove the short distance along the coast to Chanonry Point. Parking up, and with the tide now quickly dropping, we walked around to the point, noting the starlings on the lighthouse roof on the way. At the point, we quickly picked up a large flock of eider and a lower number of long-tailed ducks, and MD was also able to get the guests on a much more obliging red-throated diver than we'd previously managed up to that point. Scanning around, at least three bottling grey seals were observed as well.

Heading back to the minibus, MD then drove the group to their last destination of the day - North Kessock. This is known as one of the most reliable locations to observe otter, and starting under the bridge we then drove slowly towards Redcastle. Making frequent stops to scan along the water's edge, we quickly picked curlew, redshank, oystercatcher, wigeon, teal and hooded crows along the intertidal zone, while the water provided sightings of red-breasted mergansers, shags and a drake goldeneye. But unfortunately the only mammal we managed to observe, on this occasion, was grey seal.

Heading back to the hotel, MD suggested after dinner that perhaps the guests would like to accompany him on a short drive across Dava Moor to look for mountain hares. With all keen to take MD up on this offer we met in the foyer and headed over to the moor. Exciting, MD had also managed to loan a thermal imaging scope, but this was not initially needed when a woodcock was flushed off the road, due to having been illuminated in the minibus' headlights for all to see. Chuffed with having 'bagged' a bird seen infrequently at best, the scope then quickly picked up a mountain hare hiding in the heather, which all managed to see well once it had been lit up by torchlight. The scope then came in use again, when four roosting red grouse were picked up while hunkering down in the heather - with MD declaring the piece of kit to be a game-changer!

Before reaching the loch, MD then turned the vehicle around and almost immediately we came across another hare in the headlights. Unlike the other hare, this one was right by the side of the road, enabling to

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notice that while its legs and ears were already turning white, its body was still the typical sandy colour seen throughout the summer months. After around five minutes the hare then lolloped off into the darkness, making it instantly the highlight of the trip so far for a number of the group as we headed back for a celebratory drink at the hotel.

## **Day 6:**

**Friday 15 November 2024**

Spey Bay, RSPB Loch Spynie, Tomvaich Woods, Wildlife hide at Inshriach

The last full day of the week had finally arrived, but there was to be not let-up in the pace as all set off for Spey Bay after breakfast. This site is well-known for being the location where the River Spey disgorges into the Moray Firth. During the hour long drive, the usual suspects of corvids, gulls and woodpigeon were all recorded, before stopping briefly at the small village of Bogmoor. Celebrated as a breeding location for tree sparrows, they can be somewhat harder to see in the winter, and this was indeed the case on this occasion too. Nevertheless, the group while here did manage to spot a dunnock and a female great spotted woodpecker, while three collared doves and a treecreeper were also added to the week's list.

A little further north, a flock of around 150 curlew were picked up in the barley stubble fields just south of Spey Bay, before MD eventually managed to locate three corn buntings on the telephone wires with the help of his scope. While watching the buntings, plenty of skeins of pink-footed geese were observed while passing overhead, with one of the guests subsequently finding a female stonechat on the fence nearby.

Arriving at Spey Bay, and with the tide almost fully in, it was also very noticeable that the wind had picked up significantly. Walking across to the water's edge, the first bird identified was a juvenile whooper swan, while the gull flock produced at least a dozen great black-backed gulls. On the inward side of the shingle ridge a female goosander was next to be discovered, while gannets could be seen passing out to sea, with a number also observed while diving for their breakfast. Spotting some small waders, no doubt pushed into the river by the still rising tide, these were subsequently identified as turnstones.

Taking a quick refreshment stop, we then walked over the shingle ridge to see if anything notable was on the sea. Further out there were plenty of white horses, but closer in the sea was far more protected from the wind, allowing us to pick out three black-throated divers and a single red-throat. Eiders, mergansers and shags were also present, before a couple of female common scoters were observed a little further out.

With it becoming increasingly windy, MD suggested that the group abandon a walk along the riverbank, in favour of heading inland for RSPB Loch Spynie. On passing the large arable fields close to the reserve, one of the guests spotted a jackdaw on top of the backs of one of a farmed pig, much to everyone's amusement! Pink-footed geese also continued to stream over as we parked up and started a quick check of the reserve's feeders. Almost immediately a number of tree sparrows were discovered on one feeder, with a couple of guests declaring this to have been the first time they'd seen tree sparrows in over 20 years! In addition to the tree sparrows, we also managed to observe numerous chaffinch, three species of tit, another female great spotted woodpecker, goldfinch, a flock of long-tail and a few house sparrows .

Packing the sandwiches into the cool-box, we then strolled down to the hide to enjoy our lunch with a view over the loch. Immediately our first mute swans of the week were noted, while diving duck were in abundance, in the form of tufted duck, goldeneyes and a lovely male goosander. Along the fringing reed a number of dabbling ducks were also observed, such as wigeon, teal and mallard, before MD then spotted a male sparrowhawk flashing past the hide.

Lunch demolished, we then walked back to the carpark, whereupon we all delighted in a red squirrel at the feeders, with this species, up to this point, having been uncharacteristically scarce during the course of the week. Looking like a young animal, it posed beautifully for the photographers, before we headed back to Grantown, in an attempt to catch up with better views of crossbills.

Taking the guests to Tomvaich Woods, on the town's outskirts, a number of coal tits were picked up high in

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the trees while the group listened out for the crossbill's distinctive 'chup!' call. After around 20 minutes the woods were deathly quiet, but this silence was immediately and delightfully interrupted when MD heard around six crossbills passing overhead. Often they will be just flying past, but on this occasion the birds landed in the perfect viewing spot at the top of a Sitka spruce. Take our time to enjoy this rarely seen species, with then watched them feeding, alongside siskin, for at least half an hour. At one point, one of the females in the group could also be seen feeding a youngster, which presumably must have been a chick from the class of 2024. We were also able to examine whether the birds were left or right-billed, with an even split noted amongst the birds present!

Heading back, slightly earlier than usual, we then enjoyed a fabulous high tea at the hotel, before reconvening for the drive down to the hide near Inshriach at 5.30pm. Parking up, our 'guide in the hide', Harris came to meet us as we took the short walk to take our place in the hide.

Once Harris had placed the food out it took around half an hour for the badgers to arrive, with at least four or five seen in total. The mammal count was increased by the appearance of a wood mouse, but it spent little time in the open, preferring instead to quickly dart out for food, before then returning to the sanctuary of the timber wall at the back of the feeding stage. Harris also had so disappointing news to impart that the young female pine marten that tended to appear most regularly had recently been found dead by the side of the road. So it was perhaps not too surprising that our evening ended up being a marten-free night, but we could not be disappointed with the show put on by at least four badgers, and after thanking Harris, headed back to the hotel for a delightful supper of cheese and wine.

#### **Day 7:**

**Saturday 16 November 2024**

Departure Day - Loch Flemington, Alturlie, South Kessock and Merkinch Local Nature Reserve

Before all the guests began their journeys home, they were keen to get half a day's birding in, and with five due to leave from Inverness's train station and airport, MD suggested they head up towards Loch Flemington to pick up one or two birds not yet recorded so far for the week. The weather, by now, had turned and was distinctly colder than we'd experienced all week, with the near-constant threat of rain showers throughout the day.

Heading north, huge numbers of both redwing and fieldfare were observed feeding on rowans just north of Ferness, while large skeins of pink-footed geese also appeared to be on the move, no doubt pushed off by the impending high tide. Further on, and towards Cawdor, the weather took a turn for the worse as the week's first proper rain was then seen, but this didn't appear to both a couple of mistle thrush on telephone wires, with this bird's other name being 'storm cock'! A red kite on the wing was a little more surprising however.

By the time we arrived at Loch Flemington the weather was pretty miserable, so we birded from the minibus and managed to pick up greylag geese, tufted duck, mallard, teal and the week's first moorhen. Heading next to Alturlie, which looks out over the Inner Moray Firth, a flock of around 30 redshank and three turnstone could be seen forming a high tide roost, while we also caught up with more wigeon, mallard and teal, in addition to a couple of mute swans.

For the final destination before drop-off, MD suggested South Kessock for one last attempt last otter, but no luck was had here either, with the only mammal logged being a grey seal in the water. Also taking time to enjoy a male goosander in fresh breeding plumage, MD then took the group for a quick march around Merkinch Local Nature reserve, primarily to warm up! Walking along the seawall we finally reached the first brackish pool, where wigeon, teal and mallard were present, but on the other side of the railway line, the second pool held the nice surprise of three greenshank, which were fast asleep.

Heading back to the minibus we just had time to enjoy a lovely male greenfinch before dropping the first four guests at the train station, with another guest taken to the airport for her flight home. Heading back to the hotel, with the final two guests who were driving home, there was one final treat, in the form of a flock

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of at least a thousand pink-footed geese feeding in a stubble field, along with three whooper swans. And it was this fine spectacle that perfectly capped off a week with delightful weather, great guests and memorable sightings.

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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
	<b>BIRDS</b>								
1	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			✓				
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓		H	✓	✓
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	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓		
8	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓		✓		
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				✓			
11	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓				✓	✓
13	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					✓		
14	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				✓	✓	✓	
15	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>				✓			
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				✓		✓	
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
18	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓			✓	✓	
19	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓
20	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>		✓					
22	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>					✓		
23	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓						
24	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓			H	✓	
25	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	✓	✓	

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26	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>			✓			✓	
27	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓				
28	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>					✓		
29	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	
30	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓		✓	
31	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓	✓	✓	
33	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	✓						
34	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>						✓	
35	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓						
36	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓		✓		✓		✓
37	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓				
38	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>							✓
40	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					✓		✓
42	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓			
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	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				✓			
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	✓		
50	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓			
51	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>					✓		
52	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓				✓
54	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓	✓		
59	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			✓				
60	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	

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61	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>						✓	
63	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H				✓	
64	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓				
65	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓				
66	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		H					
67	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				✓		✓	
68	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
72	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓				
73	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓				✓	
74	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓					
75	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
76	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓				✓	
77	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓		
78	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						H	
79	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H				✓	
80	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓					H
81	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>						✓	
82	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
86	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓						✓
87	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	H		✓	✓	✓
88	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓				✓	
89	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓				
90	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
91	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	
92	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>						✓	
93	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>				✓			
94	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓		✓		
95	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	✓			

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96	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
97	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	H						
98	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		H			✓		H
99	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓		✓
100	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	✓	H				✓	
101	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	H	✓				✓	
103	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>						✓	
104	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>					✓	✓	
105	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					✓		
106	Surf scoter					✓			
	<b>MAMMALS</b>								
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	Wood mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>						✓	
6	Common seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			✓		✓		
7	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓		
9	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>						✓	
10	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓		✓				
11	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓						
12	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓			✓		
13	Goat	<i>Capra hircus</i>			✓				
14	Mink					✓			
15	Pygmy shrew					✓			