

Tour Report

Scotland – Autumn in the Scottish Highlands

31 October – 7 November 2020

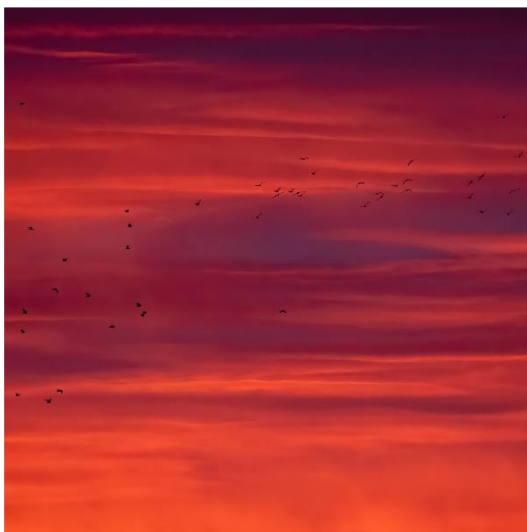
Red deer



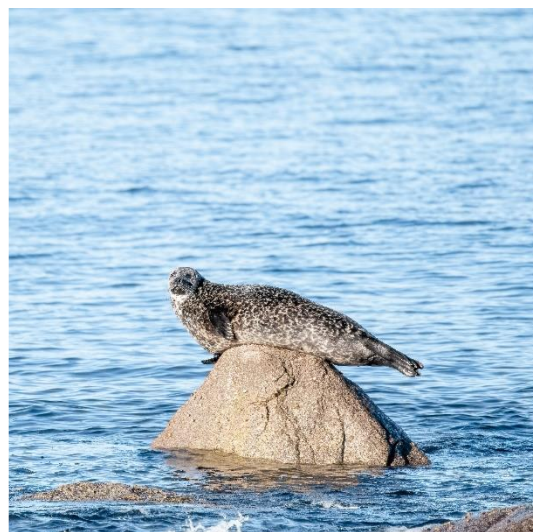
Golden eagle



Sunset



Harbour seal



Compiled by: Mike Dilger
Deer, seal and sunset image by Heather Wiles

Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with four participants

Day 1: Saturday 31 October 2020

Convening in the comfortable surroundings of the Grant Arms bar, Mike welcomed all four guests to the hotel. This briefing was not just to get to know each other, but also an opportunity to talk through Covid protocols, discuss the itinerary of the week and for Mike to answer any of the guests' questions. A brief tour of the hotel's facilities then followed, before the group then met up for a delicious three course dinner.

Day 2: Sunday 1 November 2020

Black Isle: Muncloch, RSPB Udale, Chanonry Point, Cromarty, Jemimaville, North Kessock, Old Spey Bridge to New Bridge

Waking up to a wet and blustery first day, and with the coast and its wildlife more resilient to the vagaries of the weather than elsewhere, Mike suggest the group head north to enjoy the delights of the Black Isle. Crossing the Kessock Bridge, over the mouth of Loch Ness, the guests were firstly surprised to hear that the Black Isle was not in fact an island, but a peninsula jutting out into the Moray Firth. The wind and rain did not prevent the group from wildlife-watching *en route* either, as a red kite was spotted nearby the Tollie release site, followed by a jay crossing in front of the minibus, while a male bullfinch was disappointingly only seen by Mike.

Munloch Bay is a small estuary opening up into the much larger Moray Firth on the east of the Black Isle and can give excellent, if distant, views of a number of species difficult to spot elsewhere. Despite the poor conditions, skein after skein of pink-footed geese overhead proved a great start to the week, along with a large flock of redwing and fieldfare observed moving further south. As both winter thrushes were calling, this gave the perfect opportunity to get to grips with their distinctive, if very different flight calls as they headed inland.

After a quick break at the small fishing port of Avoch the group made their way to RSPB Udale. Here the tide was rising quickly enabling close views of a number of birds as the mud in front of the car park rapidly diminished. Here, at least 20 ringed plover were noted in a small flock, in addition to high tide roosts of at least 300 oystercatcher and around 40 curlew. Redshank were also dotted around the marsh and a flock of approximately 40 lapwing at the far end of the estuary represented an autumn high for this fair-weather wader. Wildfowl were also well represented in the form of hundreds of wigeon in full breeding plumage and a lower number of teal, which were more prevalent in the saltmarsh creeks. Both species can also be quite noisy too and so formed a major component of the estuary's soundscape.

Also amongst the more common wildfowl at least four shelduck were also observed, and then on the rising water, two red-breasted mergansers and two winter plumaged Slavonian grebes drifted into view, at a distance of no more than 30m from the appreciative group. Also on the saltmarsh, a single hooded crow was picked out amongst at least four carrion crow, reminding the group that we had moved west of the Great Glen. Two grumpy grey herons were additionally spotted on the edge of the flock of at least 800 pink-footed geese, which were slowly rousing themselves prior to departing for breakfast in the barley fields further inland. Finally a small flock of at least six linnet were picked up on the fence line running along the edge of the reserve.

Crossing back inland, the farmland just south of Udale can be a good place to search for farmland birds and as the group stopped here to scan the fields a flock of at least 200 linnet flew past, chased by a large female sparrowhawk! In the trees surrounding the farmstead, a large number of chaffinches were also picked up. In addition to a single song thrush, which is a good find for a species that can be decidedly uncommon this far north. Mistle thrush, by contrast, are far more prevalent on the Black Isle, and as a couple were duly spotted on the telephone wires, this brought the total of thrush species for the morning to four! And then just before

jumping back in the minibus, the group were treated to a flyby of a number of skylarks that looked to be migrating to their winter quarters on the coast.

Chanonry Point was the next port-of-call, and the group arrived to find the shingle spit much reduced in size, due to the height of the tide. With a strong wind also present, the whole bay gave the appearance on of a stretch of water in the middle of the Atlantic during a gale rather than a sheltered firth! And certainly the small high tide roost of around 20 turnstone discovered hunkering down by the water's edge certainly didn't seem to be enjoying the conditions either. Further out to sea, a number of juvenile gannets could be seen being 'blown' into the firth and these were accompanied by two young kittiwakes, which were easily picked up, despite the awful conditions, by the distinct 'w' mark clearly visible across their wings. Picking up anything up on the sea itself looked almost impossible but one guillemot was spotted before the group unanimously decided to head to the more sheltered northerly side of the point.

Here, the inshore waters were much calmer, enabling a male long-tailed duck to be quickly picked up as it flew past, the seemingly ubiquitous cormorants and shags. A rock pipit was also observed feeding along the strandline and in the bushes by the lighthouse, dunnocks, robins and house sparrows were also noted as they hunkered down in a vain attempt to avoid the worst of the elements.

Retreating back to the minibus and mercifully out of the wind the group then returned to the Black Isle's northern shore for the smaller coastal village of Jemimaville. In the bay just east of the small village, and with the wind finally relenting a touch, the group were able to admire a population of at least 350 scaup in a large raft, in probably the best place to see this unusual overwintering duck along the entire coast of the British Isles. Further out into the firth, two distant Slavonian grebes and a single guillemot were also spotted, but were tricky to see clearly with such a large swell.

With the rain finally lessening, the team took the opportunity to jump back in the minibus for a drive back south to the small village of North Kessock, nestled below the Kessock Bridge, which boasts a fine view of the point where Loch Ness empties into the Moray Firth. This stretch of the river is particularly good for spotting otters, but despite a lengthy search no animals were picked up either in the firth or along the water's edge. The group, however, were more than compensated by the sight of a flock of around 50 long-tailed ducks feeding and bathing just east of the bridge, in addition to a little grebe close to the shore.

Returning back south to Grantown-on-Spey, there was just enough light left to visit the River Spey before dusk descended, and by parking at the old Spey Bridge the group were able to take a stroll along the north bank to the new bridge. Due to the heavy rain over the preceding week, the river level was extremely high, making views of the resident dipper incredibly brief due its normal perching (and posing) rocks being submerged. However, super views of a female roe deer proved another admirable substitute before the group retreated back to the hotel, after full-on, but rewarding first day out in the field.

Day 3: Monday 2 November 2020

Loch Garten, Malachie Loop, RSPB Inch Marshes, Laggan, Spey Dam, Garva Bridge

By the following morning, the worst of the weather had passed, and with an absence of rain, the decision was made to head for the Speyside's Caledonian forests. The first destination was the car park at RSPB Loch Garten, where the entire group had great fun feeding the incredibly tame coal tits by hand, the only known location where this up close and personal experience can be experienced. In addition to the throngs of coal tits, chaffinch and great tits were also observed as they came down to clear up any grain spilt on the floor and a male great spotted woodpecker and wood pigeons were also spotted in the nearby trees. A crested tit then made an incredibly fleeting appearance to grab some food before dash back into the forest, meaning most guests did not catch sight of this shy Caledonian rarity.

However, the lack of 'cresties' was soon remedied elsewhere in the forest, where some judicious placing out of grain eventually saw at least four different cresties coming in to the free handouts, as well as a brief view

of a blue tit - which is generally considered an uncommon species in the heart of the pine forests. While enjoying the cresties, a sudden bugling noise caused the group to spin around on their heels as all then watched a flock of 11 whoopers flying straight over the group's heads, having probably freshly arrived from their Icelandic breeding grounds. Exhilarated after such a successful morning the group then took a quick pit-stop in Nethy Bridge before returning to the forest, over towards Loch Malachie for a walk amongst the trees.

'The Malachie Loop' is a lovely circular walk, which not only encompasses some of the finest Caledonian forest within Abernethy NNR, but also takes in views across both Loch Garten and Loch Malachie along the way. This guided walk also gave Mike an opportunity to showcase a number of the characteristic plants of the forest understory, including juniper, bilberry, cowberry, cross-leaved heath and bell heather. Having previously only seen cresties coming down to the grain, the group promptly found another, with Mike declaring that "a crestie naturally encountered in the forest is worth ten attracted to handouts!". The crestie, was in fact part of a larger mixed flock, with coal tits and goldcrests amongst those also spotted as the group as trained their binoculars up into the canopy.

Also along the route, a crossbill was then heard and briefly seen as it flew over, with Mike surmising that individuals birds encountered were far more likely to belong to the Scottish endemic species rather than the more itinerant and sociable common crossbills. Taking his scope with him, Mike was also able to show the group a large party of 13 whooper swans on the far side of Loch Garten, in addition to a couple female goldeneye further along the loop at Loch Malachie. Returning along the other side of the loop *en route* to the car park saw another couple of cresties picked up, as well as two treecreeper before the group finally reached the minibus.

After a fine Grant Arms packed lunch the group then headed further southwest for RSPB Inch Marshes to see what goodies were waiting on the reserve's huge floodplain which has been created by the River Spey's passage through the valley. The marsh's topography is dominated at the southern end of the reserve by a large glacial esker that is best viewed from the roof of the circular hide. Here, the hide itself is also surrounded by trees and being served with a couple of feeders can also be good for spotting a variety of woodland birds. In this visit was no exception, with blue tit, great tit, coal tit, long-tailed tits, chaffinch and a female great spotted woodpecker all noted in quick succession upon our arrival.

Large numbers of wigeon, teal and mallard were by far the most abundant species on the marshland behind, but by far the best find were 18 Eurasian white-fronted geese spotted by Mike on the cut fields away to the north. This represented an important record for a species very rarely encountered in the Spey Valley and was duly forwarded to the county recorder where the importance of the find would be fully appreciated. The only other geese observed was a small flock of six greylags, with the sole raptor spotted being that of a single buzzard.

Guessing that the likelihood of harriers coming in to roost at Insh to be minimal, Mike then suggested that a trip to Garva Bridge, situated further up the River Spey's water catchment, might be a good place to end the day. With all agreeable to this change of plan, the group then headed for Laggan. On the way a brown hare was noted by the roadside, along with a couple of buzzards and upon arrival at the small, remote car park at the bridge, a large number of red deer hinds were immediately picked on the hill to the immediate southeast. Travelling over the bridge and further up the track, the group then came face to face with a herd of at least a dozen stags, obviously post-rut, with the animals seemingly disinterested in the minibus and so thrilling the guests with views from less than 20m away.

In amongst the stags was a much smaller, darker animal with a different antler structure, which upon inspection became clear that it was a sika stag. Sika deer were introduced in around 1860 to parks in the UK and subsequently escaped, with the largest populations believed to be in the Scottish Highlands. Despite worry among conservationists that they may well hybridise with red deer, which will in turn dilute the genetic purity of our native species, it was nevertheless thrilling to see this shy alien at such close quarters. The sika stag then promptly left the red deer stag herd and trotted over to the forest edge, where the group watched as it joined a couple of hitherto unseen sika hinds, prominently displaying their diagnostic all-white tails. This

represented a new species of deer for all the guests, in an area where they are only very sporadically recorded - making it quite the day for firsts. Driving back a happy minibus load of guests past Spey Dam on the return back to Grantown, the group were additionally able to spot a further six brown hares emerging as dusk descended, making for a fine end to the afternoon's mammal-spotting session.

Day 4: Tuesday 3 November 2020

Strathdearn - Road to Farr, bridge car park, end car park , Carrbridge, Lochindorb via Ferness Road

Despite yet more rain overnight, the group woke to discover a forecast finally showing the sun's belated appearance later that morning, making the valley of the raptors the obvious destination of choice. After a full Scottish breakfast, Mike drove the group across to the A9, before then heading south into the heart of the Monadhliaths, which are bisected by the mighty Findhorn River. Recently the more northerly and lower regions of the valley had been most productive for raptors and so with this in mind the group jumped out by the humpback bridge, close to the road to Farr, for the first scanning session of the morning. With the sun seemingly appearing on cue, a buzzard and a red kite were picked up almost immediately by the group. Also across the valley the fields close to the river were awash with feeding thrushes, and in no time redwing, fieldfare and mistle thrush were all observed.

Ravens were also proving plentiful across the valley until Mike spotted two mobbing an interesting raptor, which upon closer scrutiny declared itself to be a goshawk! Patently a female, as its wingspan was close to that of the ravens, the two species took it in turn to mob each other, providing in the process a thrilling spectacle to the onlooking guests. The raptor theme then continued with distant views of a juvenile golden eagle away to the northwest, which was admittedly no more than a speck in the guests' binoculars, but a very good sign of things to come. A large herd of red deer were also noted on the hillside too. Before departing to travel further up the valley, the group also were able to get good views of perching red kites on the fence posts around the aforementioned 'thrush field'.

Upon moving onto the Bridge car park, the resident family of kestrels were quickly picked up with a total of six counted as they played with each other and on the crags' up draughts. Then the call of "eagle!" quickly went up as another Goldie, this time an adult, was picked up on the wing. Initially distant, this bird kept flying towards us until it flew right over the group at a height of 50m, and then was quickly followed by another some five minutes later!

Returning back to the Farr car park, a fourth golden eagle was then picked over the hills to the east. This bird was another juvenile and was constantly being mobbed by a kite and a buzzard, beautifully illustrating to the group the size difference between a 'tourist' eagle (or common buzzard) and a 'real' eagle! Retracing our steps back north, a superb morning was topped as one of the clients spotted another eagle out of the window across the valley, which after some very quick parking by Mike revealed itself to be a juvenile white-tailed eagle - our second eagle species of the morning! The group were so excited by this that upon boarding the minibus Mike almost ran over a suicidal red squirrel, which had made an unwise choice as when to dash across the road.

Driving back to Speyside, Mike took the group for a quick pitstop at Carrbridge to admire the old packhorse bridge, one of the iconic landmarks in the region, as well as giving the guests the opportunity to add collared dove to their list for the week. As high tea was arranged for 4.30pm, with the hide booked later that evening, Mike suggested the group still had enough time to drive across the moorland of Lochindorb before returning to the hotel. Turning off the Ferness road, towards the loch, the first species encountered were a splendid pair of stonechat, which all saw well as they perched up in characteristic fashion for everyone to admire. As the sun was still out, but low on the horizon, the light was fabulous, making six tufted ducks and five goldeneye stand out easily on the loch, further into the estate.

Despite being unable to spot any red grouse on the main body of moorland, the 'Jesus Loves NHS' lay-by once again turned up this species as a male was 'scoped up' on the ground, followed by another four spotted flying across the road back to Grantown.

Following on from the frankly enormous high tea, the group boarded the minibus for the final time that day as Mike drove the group round to the Speyside Wildlife hide. Meeting ranger Kate at the parking location, the group then decamped to the hide to see what would arrive as dusk fell. With the arena duly baited, and guests settled down, it was not long before the first badger made an appearance, which was then quickly joined by another animal from the same clan. Mike guessed the wait for pine marten wait would possibly be very lengthy, so he was thrilled to be proved wrong when the regular female suddenly appeared in the tree at the back of the arena just before 7pm. This individual stayed for over an hour before then departing into the dead of the night as quickly as she had arrived. The ecstatic group of guests were just about to do likewise - with cheese and wine beckoning at the hotel, when a third badger suddenly turned up. With no one allowed to leave until the arena was totally devoid of animals, it took another long 40 minutes for this final badger to disappear, which in turn precipitated the release of the hungry and thirsty guests back to the minibus! And as we finally tucked into the food left out at the hotel, the talk was of little else other than eagles and martens!

Day 5: Wednesday 4 November 2020

Findhorn Bay, Findhorn Beach, Burghead, Roseisle, Spey Bay, Loch Spynie

With a largely overcast, but mild day predicted, with a fresh southwesterly breeze, Mike suggested the group head back up to the coast to explore stretches of the Moray coast further to the east. Findhorn Bay is best enjoyed at low tide, when the group can safely walk out onto the mud for a wildfowl and wader experience out in the middle of the estuary. So, after a slightly earlier breakfast than normal, the group pulled into the car park opposite the old RAF Kinloss airstrip in preparation for a yomp across the mud.

The first bird spotted upon arrival last the reserve was a magpie, which is a very unusual bird in the Highlands. Crossing the saltmarsh, it didn't take long for the group to be 'in amongst' the birds as curlew and oystercatcher were picked up feeding away on the great expanse of mud. Further toward the central channel, where the River Findhorn empties into the firth, redshank could then be seen and heard everywhere. Named the 'warden of the marsh' due to their noisy call and nervous disposition, it was not long before the group became very familiar with both the sight and sound of this distinctive estuarine bird.

With the group now closer to the channel, the first flock to come under scrutiny belonged to around 300 pintail. This handsome duck had patently just finished its post-breeding moult, meaning the males, freshly in from breeding sites across northern Europe and Russia, looked in superb condition. Alongside the pintail were large numbers of wigeon, which in turn were interspersed with smaller groups of the diminutive teal.

In addition to the curlew, oystercatcher and redshank, other waders looked well represented out on the estuary too. In no time the group were able to pick out at least six bar-tailed godwits, which towered over dinky dunlin, and slightly detached from all the other waders was a flock of around 20 golden plover, which seemed to shimmer in the weak sunlight. The star of the show, however, was a tight, aerial flock of around 400 knot, which put on quite the show as they flew back and forth along the channel. And finally as a backdrop to all this again activity, skeins of pink-footed geese were still roosting on the mud, with a section of the main flock occasionally hiving off, as they took to the air and passed overhead, *en route* to breakfast in the barley fields further inland.

Trekking back across the mud, the next destination was little more than a couple of miles further north, as the group climbed up on top of the Findhorn dunes, with a commanding view of the Moray Coast. On the water another flock of around 400 long-tailed ducks could clearly be seen, indicating that large numbers had probably just arrived from their northerly breeding grounds. Also present was a large, tight flock of around 150 eider, which were also by now in full breeding plumage and fascinating to watch as they practice

synchronised their diving while dipping below for mussels on the seabed. Close to the beach, a small group of five red-breasted mergansers were also noted, by now having fully moulted into their winter finery. Additionally spotted on the water was a single guillemot and Mike was particularly pleased with the discovery of a single red-throated diver in winter plumage fishing right behind the breakers. Feeding shags were also a common fixture right across the bar and a group of five common scoter, including three males and two females, proved to be an additional bonus as the group watched them whizz past.

Findhorn Bay is also a well-known haul-out location for common seals, and did not disappoint on this occasion either, as at least 40 could be seen on the large sand bank where the mouth of the river empties into the firth. Alongside on the same sand bank, cormorants could also be seen drying their wings among a group of four species of gull, comprising common, greater black-backed, herring and black-headed.

Driving then a touch further east to the small fishing port of Burghead, the tide had mostly covered the rocks immediately east of the promontory, but we were still able to pick out at least 12 turnstone and two redshank feeding in what little seaweed could still be seen above the rising water. Out to sea, all the usual suspects were present, including more long-tailed ducks, with a second red-throated diver of the day another good find. And just before leaving, the group were able to log one further species, in the form of a rock pipit, as a singleton flew into view, before then settling on the breakwater rocks.

After a coffee break Mike then took the group to Roseisle Forest, a site managed by Forestry Scotland, which is located between Findhorn Bay and Burghead. Comprising a large conifer plantation with an extensive coastline, the dunes which overlook the sea are perhaps one of the best place to search for velvet scoter along the entire UK coast. On this occasion, however a couple of windsurfers out on the water had pushed all the seaduck further west, enabling Mike to show the group through his scope a flock of black dots on the water, which could only be recognised as velvets when they flapped their wings - in the process revealing the gleaming, white patches on their secondaries.

Abandoning the location, Mike suggested the last stop on the coast should be Spey Bay, where the River Spey discharges into the Moray Firth. Travelling back east again, the group were just about to enter the car park when an incredibly late swallow was spotted feeding along the line of beach homes. At Spey Bay itself, the water was by now fully in on one of the highest tides of the year, meaning most birds were currently tucked away in high tide roosts. Curlew, wigeon and teal were all spayed however, and were no doubt taking forty winks while waiting for the waters to recede. Taking a stroll along the banks of the river, four male goosander were then picked up, with two in full summer plumage, while the other couple looked in various stages of their post breeding moult. Before departing a grey seal was also spotted in the centre of the river channel.

Driving slowly out of the car park, the fields immediately to the south can often be good for farmland birds and two yellowhammer were duly picked up on the telegraph wires, along with a single mistle thrush. With the light slowly fading, Mike had planned the last stop of the day to be Loch Spynie, a freshwater loch managed by the RSPB to the west of Spey Bay. Despite most RSPB hides still being closed due to the Covid pandemic, the wildlife on the loch can still be easily viewed from a couple of viewpoints. Walking down through the wet woodland that surrounds the loch a male great spotted woodpecker was both seen and heard on both the bird feeders and in among the trees. Arriving at the loch, the guests were confronted with a fine selection of birds, with at least 30 whooper swans and around 150 greylag geese contributing loudest to the cacophony. Pink-footed skins were also picked up, against the backdrop of a beautifully pink sky and back down on the water both tufted duck and golden added to the diversity of species present.

Suddenly a murmuration of around 300 starlings came into view, before then putting on a mesmerising display both above the reeds and in front of the pink background. And with a reed bunting further bolstering the group's weekly total, it all added to provide a sensational end to a most enjoyable day.

Day 6: Thursday 5 November 2020

Lek on the road to Ferness, Anagach Wood, Boat of Garten Lochan, Cairngorm Mountain

Taking advantage of the fine weather window, the group arose early to meet Mike in the foyer of the hotel at 6.30am for a pre-breakfast visit to the local black grouse lek. Despite the light levels being pretty low upon arrival, the guests were still able to make out the white rears of the males some 300m away. And as the light steadily improved a total of 10 males was made. Sticking close to the minibus, as per protocol, most of the guests were able to get fine views of the grouse, before the birds suddenly became spooked, possibly by a bird of prey, and promptly flew off to the forest, leaving the guests both exhilarated and disappointed in equal measure!

Despite the early disappearance of the main attraction, the group were still able to spend a while listening to the far more abundant red grouse calling from in amongst the heather, and also caught sight of two meadow pipits passing by overhead. Dropping then down onto the Lochindorb Estate, a quick scan of the loch revealed five goldeneye, including a couple of males, and at least four tufted ducks, with a small flotilla of eight greylag geese also out on the water. Back aboard the minibus, the group were then royally entertained by a small flock of seven red-legged partridge with zero road sense as Mike headed back to the main road, which officially did make it to the other side of the road unharmed!

Taking in a leisurely breakfast and with the weather forecast due to get better throughout the day, the next destination was the close by woodland of Anagach in order to try and catch up with red squirrels at the feeding station set up by the hotel. Reaching the feeding station, the wait must have been no longer than a couple of minutes before the first squirrel was seen traversing the trees tops, prior to scrambling down to the peanut feeder. Both the photographers and wildlife watchers within the group then spent the next hour filling their boots with shots and views as at least four different squirrels were enticed in. The best moment occurred when two pugnacious individuals chased each other around the tree as they tussled for the prime feeding spot! Also the birdwatchers in the group were well catered for, as a steady stream of coal tits, chaffinch and great tits were attracted to the adjacent bird feeder.

After a quick cuppa the group then headed to the unnamed freshwater lochan just north of the small village of Boat of Garten, which is one of the few places in all of the Highlands to boast a small population of moorhens. Parking right at the water's edge, Mike was mightily relieved to see that the birds were indeed still present, as a couple were quickly located, alongside a group of at least 20 teal. By now the weather was sensational, so Mike suggested they head up Cairngorm Mountain to enjoy the views and see what else could be tracked down.

While driving up, a glance revealed that the local herd of reindeer had descended from the mountain's more elevated crags to feed on the lush grasses surrounding the lower car park, so Mike took a quick detour to enable the group to enjoy the herd. Parking up, the guests were then able to observe Britain's only feral herd of this species from the distance of just a few metres, against a backdrop of Loch Morlich and the forests of Glemore in the valley way down below. Moving then onto the main car park, the astonishingly clear weather enabled Mike to take the group on a gentle walk up the mountain, via the vehicular access road, and up past middle station, just short of Coire Cas. Despite reaching a height of 1,000m, the group were still unable to track down any snow buntings or ptarmigan, which Mike surmised may well have been down to them being nearer the summit - given the weather, however the walk nevertheless afforded the group superb views right across the great forests of Glenomre and Rothiemurchus.

In fact, it was not until the group had descended right back down to the mountain's botanical garden, just above the bottom funicular station, that they saw their first birds of the walk. First a blackbird flashed past and then four migratory common crossbills posed for the group on top of one of the garden's pine trees, giving all cracking views of this shy and elusive species. On the way back to the hotel, after a rare day of wall-to-wall sunshine in Speyside, the group stopped for the opportunity to photograph the mountains from the other direction, this time at the lapping shores of Loch Morlich.

Day 7: Friday 6 November 2020

West coast: Glascarnoch Loch, Dundonnell, Gruinard Bay, Laide, Melon Udrigle, Aultbea, Second Coast

The last full day of the tour had finally arrived, and with the continuation of the fine weather experienced during the previous two days Mike decided to take the group on their delayed trip across to the west coast. Before leaving Grantown however, the group managed a quick visit to the River Spey, by the new bridge, to see if they could achieve better views of dipper than the brief glimpses afforded earlier in the week. The early morning appearance of the sun and a lack of wind combined to give the surreal appearance of smoke rising from the river, as mist evaporated from the water's surface, but the view was still clear enough to pick up a pair of goosander feeding towards the centre of the river. Mike then explained to the group that the rocks emerging above the water were always the best places to check for dipper, when one suddenly appeared on one of the aforementioned rocks, with impeccable timing and to the delight of all.

Re-boarding the minibus, the group then headed up the A9 before then turning off towards Garve and all points west. The first planned stop was at the head of Glascarnoch Loch at the other end to the huge dam, where a small patch of good wetland habitat often holds a few interesting birds. This tends to be one of the few places in the Highlands which regularly houses Canada geese, and on this occasion five could clearly be seen - adding another species to the week's list, as well as five whooper swans, a drake wigeon and mallard.

The small village of Dundonnell, at the head of Little Loch Broome, is always a great place to stop and enjoy the scenery, with the pub car park offering perhaps the best view of both the locks and the surrounding mountains. Taking a break here also gave the group a chance to scan both the estuary, water and surrounding mountains for any wildlife of interest. With the tide right in, much of the saltmarsh was covered, but the group were still able to record oystercatchers, hooded crows and common gulls biding their time until the waters receded. On the water itself, Mike was able to point out a single little grebe and two winter-plumaged black-throated divers fishing in the bay, with the latter being a difficult species to catch up with anywhere - unless you are on the west coast in autumn that is!

Raptors can also be very good at Dundonnell, but on this occasion the complete lack of wind meant that only species recorded here on this occasion was a buzzard. However, as both eagles had already been observed earlier in the week the pressure was certainly off for these species! Driving up and over to Gruinard Bay, the group then encountered their second feral mammal in successive days as we had to wait while a herd of wild goats crossed the road! First appearing in Scotland with Neolithic farmers some 4,500 years ago, and so still technically an introduced species, they have acclimatised incredibly well to their adopted home, and also represented a welcome addition to the group's burgeoning list of mammals seen during the week.

The lay-by overlooking both Gruinard Bay and Gruinard Island has to be one of the finest places to look for divers anywhere along the entire coastline of the UK. And it didn't disappoint on this occasion either, as Mike was able to count at least 20 black-throated divers from just the one spot as the group also took in the majestic view across to 'Anthrax Island'. Also close in, a moulting great northern diver represented the third diver species of the week and this was then complemented by two black guillemots resting out on the water. Fishing shags were also abundant right across the bay and a flock of around 250 barnacle geese feeding in a farmers field to the east was another good find, which also took the number of goose species recorded during the week to an impressive total of five. A single rock pipit was also picked up close by the shore too.

Stopping again for the view at the western end of Gruinard Bay, another great northern diver was picked up, as well 12 more black-throats, but most of the guests only had eyes for the 30 common seals hauled out onto the rocks below. With the tide, by now having turned, oystercatcher, curlew and redshank could also be seen reclaiming the beach before the group then moved around to the jetty at Laide in order to enjoy their lunch.

With the weather becoming steadily cloudier, the temperature had also begun to drop, but a great northern diver very close in to the harbour in full summer plumage was able to warm the spirits of those still keen to birdwatch while eating. Buzzard and kestrel were also picked up during the lunch hour here too. The final

stop on the big west coast day is often the small village of Melon Udrigle, which possesses both a world-class beach and a bay that tends to be a hotspot for otters. While no otter on this occasion could be located, Mike did pick up a dark, distant bird on the water, which he suspected might be a skua, and just while getting the group onto this dark 'dot', it suddenly took off. By then chasing two previously unseen kittiwakes around the bay, while hoping to persuade one of the gulls to regurgitate their hard-won lunch, the whole group were then suddenly able to watch the Arctic skua doing what it does best - in the process also adding another couple of species to the week's bird list. A fitting end to a bumper week of wildlife watching with over a hundred species of bird recorded and a number of new mammal species for all the happy members of the group.

Day 8: Saturday 7 November 2020

Loch Flemington and farewells

Saying goodbye to two members of the party shortly after breakfast, a late departure for the final two guests meant that Mike just had time to take them to Loch Flemington, close to Inverness Airport for a last dose of Scottish wildlife before their return south. This location is one of the very few around the Moray Coast to boast a population of coots, which were duly enjoyed, alongside 12 whooper swans and large numbers of mutes, wigeon and teal. And the final cherry on the top of an outstanding week of wildlife watching was provided by the innumerable skeins of pink-footed geese constantly passing overhead - surely the quintessential sight and sound of the Moray Coast in winter.

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>						
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>						✓
2	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>						✓
3	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
4	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
5	White-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>				✓		
6	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓			✓		
7	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓		✓		✓
8	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓					
9	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</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	Melanitta nigra				✓		
17	Long-tailed duck	Clangula hyemalis	✓			✓		
18	Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula		✓	✓	✓	✓	
19	Goosander	Mergus merganser				✓		✓
20	Red-breasted merganser	Mergus serrator	✓			✓		
21	Black grouse	Lyrurus tetrix					✓	
22	Red grouse	Lagopus lagopus			✓		✓	
23	Red-legged partridge	Alectoris rufa			✓		✓	
24	Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Red-throated diver	Gavia stellata				✓		
26	Black-throated diver	Gavia arctica						✓
27	Great northern diver	Gavia immer						✓
28	Little grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	✓					✓
29	Slavonian grebe	Podiceps auritus	✓					
30	Grey heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
31	Gannet	Morus bassanus	✓				✓	
32	Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis	✓			✓		✓
33	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	✓			✓		✓
34	Golden eagle	Aquila chrysaetos			✓			
35	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	✓					

36	Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis			✓			
37	Red kite	Milvus milvus	✓		✓			✓
38	White-tailed eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla			✓			
39	Buzzard	Buteo buteo	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
40	Spotted crane	Porzana porzana					✓	
41	Coot	Fulica atra						
42	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓			✓		✓
43	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	✓					
44	Golden plover	Pluvialis apricaria				✓		
45	Ringed plover	Charadrius hiaticula	✓					✓
46	Curlew	Numenius arquata	✓			✓		✓
47	Bar-tailed dodwit	Limosa lapponica				✓		
48	Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	✓			✓		
49	Knot	Calidris canutus				✓		
50	Dunlin	Calidris alpina				✓		
51	Redshank	Tringa totanus	✓			✓		✓
52	Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	✓					✓
53	Black-headed gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓		✓			
54	Common gull	Larus canus	✓			✓		✓
55	Great black-backed gull	Larus marinus	✓			✓		✓

56	Herring gull	Larus argentatus		✓		✓	✓	
57	Arctic skua	Stercorarius parasiticus						✓
58	Common guillemot	Uria aalge	✓			✓		
59	Razorbill	Alca torda						✓
60	Black guillemot	Cephus grylle						✓
61	Rock dove / feral pigeon	Columba livia	✓			✓		✓
62	Stock dove	Columba oenas						✓
63	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Collared dove	Streptopelia decaocto				✓		
65	Tawny owl	Strix aluco				✓		
66	Great spotted woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		✓		✓		
67	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus				✓	✓	✓
68	Jay	Garrulus glandarius	✓					
69	Magpie	Pica pica						✓
70	Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Carrion crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓		
73	Hooded crow	Corvus cornix	✓					✓
74	Raven	Corvus corax				✓		
75	Coal tit	Periparus ater		✓	✓		✓	✓

76	Crested tit	Lophophanes cristatus		✓				
77	Blue tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓			✓	
78	Great tit	Parus major		✓	✓		✓	✓
79	Skylark	Alauda arvensis	✓					
80	Swallow	Hirundo rustica				✓		
81	Long-tailed tit	Aegithalos caudatus		✓				
82	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓				
83	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
84	Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		✓				
85	Starling	Pastor roseus	✓			✓	✓	
86	Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris	✓		✓			
88	Redwing	Turdus iliacus	✓		✓			
89	Song thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓					
90	Mistle thrush	Turdus viscivorus	✓		✓	✓		
91	Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola	✓		✓	✓		✓
93	Dipper	Cinclus cinclus	✓					✓
94	House sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓		✓			✓
95	Dunnock	Prunella modularis				✓		

96	Pied wagtail	Motacilla alba				✓		
97	Meadow pipit	Anthus pratensis					✓	
98	Rock pipit	Anthus petrosus	✓			✓		✓
99	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓		✓	✓
100	Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula	✓					
101	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				✓		
102	Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓					✓
103	Scottish crossbill	Loxia scotica		✓	✓			
104	Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra					✓	
105	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis				✓		✓
106	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella				✓		
	MAMMALS							
1	Common pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pipistrellus						✓
2	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		✓				
3	Brown hare	Lepus europaeus		✓				
4	Red squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris			✓		✓	
5	Field vole	Microtus agrestis	✓					
6	Wood mouse	Apodemus sylvaticus			✓			
7	Common seal	Phoca vitulina				✓		✓
8	Grey seal	Halichoerus grypus				✓		✓

9	Bottlenose dolphin	Tursiops truncatus					✓	
10	Pine marten	Martes martes			✓			
11	Badger	Meles meles			✓			
12	Red deer	Cervus elaphus		✓	✓			✓
13	Sika deer	Cervus nippon		✓				
14	Roe deer	Capreolus capreolus	✓	✓				
15	Reindeer	Rangifer tarandus					✓	
16	Goat	Capra hircus						✓

