

Tour Report

Scotland – Winter Wildlife Photography

4 - 11 February 2023

Red deer



Red squirrel & blue tit



Crested tit



Mountain hare



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Day 1: Arrival Day – Inverness & Rowan Tree Hotel**Saturday 4 February 2023**

Weather: Cloudy skies with the odd heavy shower, a light wind and 11°C

The group arrived in Inverness early in the afternoon, some by plane and others by train, and were welcomed by a heavy rain shower. Fortunately this wasn't a sign of things to come for the week ahead. Once everyone had gathered their bags and loaded the van, we made the short 45-minute drive to our accommodation, the Rowan Tree Hotel, set on the banks of Loch Alvie against the stunning backdrop of Cairngorms National Park.

After everyone had settled in for the week, it was time for a quick pre-dinner drink in the lounge, while warming up next to a roaring fire. Following a briefing for the week ahead, it was time for dinner- with the biggest question being "Berries or no berries with your ice cream?" The food was lovely, and after a few hours of eating, chatting and getting to know one another, it was time for bed, as tomorrow we had a busy day ahead searching for the elusive mountain hare.

Day 2: Mountain Hare Photography**Sunday 5 February 2023**

Weather: Frosty start with clear skies, a light wind and 7°C (much colder in the windchill on the mountain)

On the first morning of our trip we were greeted by a heavy frost and a cold start to the day. While the van defrosted we sat down to enjoy a hearty breakfast, then set off to explore the Scottish mountains. Our main focus today was the mountain hare. The day was beautiful, with clear skies and stunning views as we made the 16-kilometre drive along the Findhorn River. Once we had all packed our lunches into our daysacks and prepared our cameras, it was time to begin our walk into the mountains.

The walk began gently as we passed over open heather moorland and crossed the river. As we turned a corner the track began to wind slowly upwards. In our own time we all made our way to the top of the track, which got steeper the further we climbed. We continually scanned the hillside as we walked, looking for any unusual white shapes set against the dark heather (which often turned out to be rocks). As we climbed further up the mountain the wind began to pick up and the temperature began to drop, but that didn't deter us and we continued to scan the hillside searching for hares. After a few hours of searching with no luck, we were about to switch to Plan B and head back down the hillside. However just as we began to walk back down the mountain, an unfamiliar shape was spotted in the distance. Yes, we had our first mountain hare!

We approached the hare slowly from a distance, walking in single file so as to appear as small as possible to it. You can never approach a hare slowly enough. Once we got within range we just sat and waited, allowing the hare to get used to our presence. Once the hare appeared comfortable, we crawled in groups of two, slowly getting closer to it, all the time watching for any reaction. By utilising this slow approach, we gained its trust and got close enough to produce some beautiful images. Being accepted by an animal is always a special experience! After this session we crawled off slowly, leaving the individual to go about its business. With a spring in our step, we headed back to the van for dinner and an early night after a long and tiring day on the hillside.

An added bonus was spotting a herd of sika deer near the roadside on the way back to the hotel. What a way to start the trip!

Day 3: Mountain Hare Photography**Monday 6 February 2023**

Weather: Mild; clear skies, a light wind and 10°C. Beautiful day

After a relaxed breakfast we were ready for another day in the mountains. The plan for today was to explore the opposite flank of the hillside at slightly lower elevations. For a Scottish winter, the weather was certainly in our favour for this trip. Again we were blessed with another beautiful day with only light winds.

Once again we packed our bags and headed out into the hills. The plan for today was to follow a lower, gentler path than the previous day. After a short while we spotted our first hare of the day. The positive side of the milder weather was that the white fur of a mountain hare was much easier to spot against the dark heather. Once again we followed a similar routine as on the first day, giving the hare as much time and respect as possible in our approach. This worked really well, with everyone managing to get shots of the hare as it rested in the heather. After spending a few hours with this individual, we backed off and had a bit of lunch. It wasn't a bad spot - the views were stunning.

After lunch we continued our search for hares, with one member of the group heading back down into the valley to photograph lichen on old walls (I must add that this produced some really unique and fascinating imagery). Following the hares, we hiked further up the hillside. I know this was meant to be a slightly easier day on the legs, but mountain hare photography never turns out that way. We discovered five hares resting in a small area just over the crest of the hill; the majority of these were already alert to our presence and our approach proved to be difficult. But we tried and, as expected, the hares disappeared into the distance - but that's the way it goes with mountain hare photography at times. Thankfully there was one more individual only a short distance away which proved to be very relaxed. We had a great session photographing this hare, which sat in a beautiful spot, framed naturally by the heather. However as the temperature began to dip on the hillside, our bodies began to chill from lying on the cold, damp ground. We decided it was time to head back to the van and warm up with a warm drink and some scones back at the hotel.

Once we had showered and warmed back up, it was time for dinner and, as the group noted, this was my third chickpea and chip burger meal in a row - this was a theme throughout the week. Would I finally manage to finish it tonight? Sadly, no, but there's always tomorrow to try again ... It was a great evening spent chatting and eating before we headed to bed ready for a less energy-demanding day in the red squirrel hide the following day.

Day 4: Red Squirrel & Woodland Birds Photography

Tuesday 7 February 2023

Weather: Mixed day with periods of cloud and sun, a light wind and 9°C

Today we were up for a slightly earlier breakfast before heading to Rothiemurchus Estate for our first day photographing red squirrels. This promised to be a much more relaxing day compared to our previous two days hiking up the mountains. After a short walk through the beautiful Caledonian pine forest, we arrived at our home for the next few days: a purpose-built photography hide nestled in a woodland clearing.

Once everyone had found their positions, the group set up their cameras. I settled into my primary role for the day, nut cracking, which is oddly satisfying. It didn't take long for the woodland birds to arrive; it's always a magical experience to see the birds sitting on camera lenses and taking food from the window ledge right next to where we are sitting. Shortly after the birds arrived, we had our first red squirrel of the day, and it really put on a show. It was like a game of cat and mouse at times, as it disappeared into the heather only to pop back up somewhere other than where we expected. There were endless photo opportunities as the squirrel moved from one perch to the next, posing in a variety of positions. This continued throughout the morning, with two or maybe three individuals making an appearance during the session.

When the light levels in the woodland began to fall late in the afternoon and activity had slowed, we decided to call it a day and walked back to the van, taking a minor detour along the shore of the beautiful Loch an Eilean on the way. Back at the hotel we were greeted by a warm fire and scones. After a few hours of relaxing, it was time for dinner and another round of "Berries or no berries with your ice cream?"

Day 5: Red Squirrel & Woodland Birds Photography

Wednesday 8 February 2023

Weather: Weather warning for gale force winds, cloudy and very windy 10°C

Following another hearty breakfast we packed our bags, grabbed our lunch, and set off on another adventure, hoping to find our target species, the red squirrel, again.

In the build-up to the trip the forecast had been showing a weather warning for Wednesday, bringing with it high winds and the possibility of snow and ice. Unfortunately we did not get much snow except on higher ground, but we definitely caught the wind. Sadly, this played havoc with the red squirrels at the hide, and they failed to show. However the woodland birds kept us entertained, continuing to feed in large numbers throughout the day, with everything from blue tits, coal tits, chaffinches, and the iconic crested tit visiting the hide. This offered endless opportunities as we photographed them feeding in the beautiful Caledonian pine forest habitat. Late in the afternoon, however, the birds went quiet for a short period. At first it was a mystery, but then one of the guests spotted a sparrowhawk watching in the distance, and this explained why. The weather truly was wild on this day, and we were thankful for shelter from the four walls of the hide.

Late in the afternoon, as we made our way back to the accommodation, the wind finally began to subside a little. Back at the hotel we were once again greeted by a hot drink and tray of scones; the extra fruit scones went down a treat. We got back a little earlier today, so while some of the group relaxed by the roaring fire, a few of us went for a walk along the shore of beautiful Loch Alvie just as the sun was setting over the mountains. It was a lovely walk, soaking up the peace and quiet, interrupted only by the odd call of a distant goose.

The highlight of dinner for many of us was the change in menu, with new and exciting meals. Again, I turned out to be the butt of the jokes, not having a clue what a pithivier was; it turned out that trying to pronounce it was even harder. It was another lovely meal and chat before we headed off to bed for a packed day full of crested tits and red deer tomorrow.

Day 6: Crested Tit & Red Deer Photography

Thursday 9 February 2023

Weather: Clear skies, a light wind and 8°C

We had a busy day ahead, with crested tits in the morning, followed by red deer in the afternoon.

Following breakfast we made the short drive towards Cairngorm Mountain and our morning photography location for the day: a clearing on the edge of a beautiful pine forest. The walk in was a bit boggy in places, but it was OK; we just needed a bit of manoeuvring to avoid the worst places. When we arrived we were greeted by a magical site, as it was alive with woodland birds hurrying back and forth. After a short while the crested tit also began to visit the feeders. We enticed these birds to land on the most photogenic perches with good backgrounds - a more difficult task than it sounds, as they frequently chose to land in places where we didn't want them to. However, with a bit of trial and error we got there in the end and captured some beautiful images of this true icon of the Scottish Highlands, the crested tit.

After a few hours working with the birds we headed over to Alvie Estate to work with another of the Highlands' iconic species, the red deer. On arrival we were greeted by our hosts for the session, two of the estate's gamekeepers. Many of us were instantly captivated by one of our hosts, who had worked on the estate for over 40 years and was a larger-than-life character. We loaded our gear into two Land Rovers and made the drive up into the hills in search of the red deer. After a while we began to spot a few red deer hinds in the woodland, but as the scenery opened up there was a huge herd of red deer waiting for us, including stags, hinds, and a few youngsters. Beautiful shafts of light filtered through the trees as we photographed the deer, producing some lovely imagery. The gamekeepers then stepped in with food for the red deer, which they scattered nearby, continuing a tradition that they have followed on the estate for around 80 years. This

allowed us to capture a few more intimate shots while the deer cautiously made their way closer to our position. This was one of the highlights of the trip for me, and hopefully for many of you too.

Once the deer had moved slowly back into the trees, we made our way back down the hillside to the van and headed back to the hotel for a celebratory drink after a successful day. Another day in the Scottish mountains was sadly over, but we still had one more adventure to come.

Day 7: Mountain Hare Photography

Friday 10 February 2023

Weather: Heavy showers, sun, cloud and strong winds and 12°C

Our final day was again spent searching for mountain hares, after a few relatively calm days earlier in the week. This was a reminder of how difficult it can be to photograph mountain hares. With a few members of the group sadly feeling a little under the weather and staying at the hotel to enjoy a relaxing day by the fire, the rest of us set off. We left the hotel in good spirits, laughing and joking. But once we arrived at the location, looking at people's faces, I think many slightly regretted not staying by the warm fire! It was wet, wild and extremely windy; even trying to open the van door was difficult in these conditions. Eventually we plucked up our courage and headed across the valley in search of hares. The crosswind in the valley was incredibly strong, buffeting us and pushing us back with every step. The bank on the sheltered side of the hill offered some cover, and we pushed on. When we found shelter and regrouped, we discovered that some mountain goats had the same idea and were also hunkering down to avoid the wind.

As we chatted we noticed a hare sitting above us on an exposed hillside. It was going to be difficult, but we decided to give it a go. This hare decided early on in the stalk that it wasn't going to stick around and bolted as we approached the crest, so we pushed onwards as a few other hares ran in the distance. Resorting to a different strategy, we dropped back down the mountain in an attempt to find the individual we had worked with on Day 2. We were able to retrace our steps from that day and work with this hare again, but after an hour or so of lying on the wet ground the cold quickly set in, so we backed off for a warm cup of tea and lunch. With the strong winds, weather systems were blowing through quickly; one minute it was heavy rain, the next it was sunshine. So we decided to work our way slowly back down the mountain. By this point we were all looking a little wet and bedraggled, but as we made our way down we spotted another hare in the distance. We decided to go ahead with it in the hope that the heavy rain would pass quickly. It was so worth the extra effort as the hare groomed itself, displayed, and even put on a little show for us - and thankfully the rain did subside.

It was a tough day on the mountain with difficult conditions at times. Well done to everyone who pushed themselves out of their comfort zones and trusted me.

Sadly, this evening was our final dinner together (the staff even gave us our own special private dining room). Venison was a popular choice for our last meal, and by all accounts, it was very tasty. After another great meal and a few hours of chatting and relaxing, it was time for bed and to get ready for our departure the following morning.

Day 8: Departure

Saturday 11 February 2023

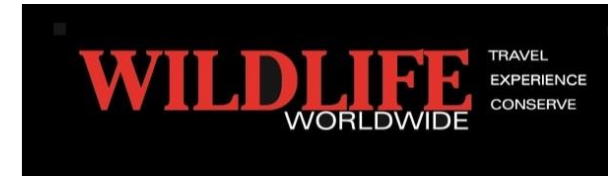
Weather: Clear skies, a light wind and 11°C

Sadly this was our final breakfast of the trip, and we were heading back to reality. After breakfast, it was time to pack our things and make the short drive to the train station and onward to the airport, where we said our goodbyes.

Finally, I just want to add my thanks to you all; you were an amazing group and really made this week a pleasure to lead. I hope to see you all soon.



Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	MAMMALS	<i>MAMMALIA</i>						
1	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	✓	✓				✓
2	Red grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	✓					
3	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓				✓
4	Mountain goat	<i>Capra hircus</i>	✓	✓				✓
5	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓			
6	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>					✓	
7	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓					
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>						
1	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
2	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	✓	✓	
3	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
4	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓	✓	✓	



5	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	✓	
6	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓		

