

Holiday Highlights
Alladale Wilderness Reserve
7 – 14 October 2023

Guide: Sally Nowell and Alladale Ranger Ryan

Guests: John Enfield, Gill and David Parmee, Shenagh Gilliard, Lynda Niccolls, Dagmar, Martin, Liv and Ida Schumacher

Day 1: It has to be said that the weather today is the worst our guide has experienced. The rain was torrential and unrelenting. But two guests for our trip came up the previous day, one braved the weather driving through floods and landslides, two just got stuck in and braved whatever was thrown their way, but a family of four who came all the way from Switzerland had their train from Edinburgh cancelled and finally decided to drive up with a hire car. Fortunately we are all able to meet for a most enjoyable dinner and our holiday is about to begin!

Day 2: Well the forecast is once again looking grim, but as we finish breakfast the skies clear and as we look from our hotel we can see Inverness appearing through the low clouds. Ryan our guide from Alladale joins us and off we set to Merkinch local Reserve.

As we get out of our vehicles we spot Oystercatchers, Redshank and Ringed Plover out on the weedy shore. As we walk along the seawall we enjoy the sounds of Redshank and Curlew and spot more Ringed Plover, mixed with a smattering of Turnstone. A lone Pink-footed Goose and Red-breasted Merganser out to sea and a few Wigeon start to appear. In the dense scrub beside us Blackbirds, Robin, Greenfinch, Chaffinch flit about and ahead of us a huge mixed flock of Goldfinch and Siskin appear. As we approach a small fresh water pool a relaxed group of roosting Teal can be seen. Further on after crossing the railway track Moorhen, Grey Heron and Red-breasted Merganser can be seen, so we stop to enjoy these along with a large group of roosting Redshank. We have been lucky to avoid the rain, but at this point it starts again and as it gets heavier our pace back to the vehicles quickens.

We are back at our van in no time and our next stop are the loos at North Kessock and then on to Udale Bay to take advantage of the hide there. The tide has quickly gone out, exposing huge mudflats covered in hundreds if not thousands of birds. The sound of Pink-footed Geese echo over the sands and as we look out there must be several hundred, along with a few Greylags and Canada Geese. Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Wigeon and Mallard are the main species here, but Gill and David spot a Bar-tailed Godwit, handsome in its winter plumage and giving us some excellent views and opportunities to focus on key id features.

Further down the road, Scaup are seen distantly but some more good views of lone Bar-tails and an excellent small group of Knot who fly in are definitely a favourite of the day. Ida was keen to know when lunch was half an hour ago, Sally eventually takes the hint and we park up in Cromarty to eat our sandwiches. As everyone is damp and chilled a hot drink seems in order, so we call in to a local café for hot chocolate and tea.

We make our way towards Chanonry Point, crossing the Black Isle via the Eathie road, spotting a large flock of Linnet enroute and a covey of Grey Partridge. Ryan reckons keepers are introducing these as part of a conservation project, which is great to see. This is a lovely drive, exposing some interesting views down to the Moray Firth through the clouds, which by this time we are above and then we finally drop down to Rosemarkie and Fortrose.

We spend a brief half hour at Chanonry, spotting small flights of Long-tailed Duck, huge numbers of Shag, several young Gannets and winter plumage Guillemot and Razorbill. The rain returns and we make tracks north over the Black Isle, over the Cromarty Bridge and then finally over the Struie Road, which offers tantalising glimpses of the view below us through the clouds.

We drive from Ardgay along the river, which is as full as it could be, full to the brim! At points the brown peaty water is a raging torrent and definitely a sight to behold. A brief stop gives us a view of some rather shy female Bullfinches, but we continue on to Alladale. John is in the front seat and wowed by the different habitat we are now surrounded by. Mixed Scots Pine with majestic old grannies and new growth interspersed with Rowan, Birch and Willow. As we drive, the river rages in the ravine below us and Alladale Lodge appears briefly in the mist above us.

Finally we arrive and as Stuart and Mel appear at the door, we are more than delighted to feel the warmth of the welcome and the fire in the grate. After settling in to our rooms we enjoy cake, a cup of tea and a guided tour of the Lodge. Dinner is ready an hour later and the chat flows from one subject to the next. Despite the rain our spirits are far from dampened, we've had a great day of birding interspersed with some stimulating conversations and ever changing scenery.

Day 3: We wake up to a beautiful day, what a transformation from yesterday. Before breakfast everyone is outside with a cup of tea, admiring the views as the clouds lift and the beautiful autumnal landscape is revealed. After a leisurely breakfast we gather outside to wait for Ryan and Innes, who are taking us out today. The area is alive with birds flying back and forth over the tops of the birches and then landing and feeding. The flocks are very mobile, but eventually we all manage to get some excellent views of feeding Redpoll and Siskin, along with Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Bullfinch. Flocks of Redwing are passing over but not in great numbers and they soon disappear. It's a busy time for feeding finches and the time

soon passes and Ryan and Innes soon appear ready to load up our lunch and take us out on the Reserve.

We drive through the Birch woodland and are soon out in the open glen admiring the views in the morning sunshine. Innes starts to tell us about the Reserve and he is soon inundated with questions. John is exceptionally keen to get as much information from Innes and Ryan today, but Lynda and David are just as keen to know more about the fascinating Alladale story. As we stand and listen we see Meadow Pipit, mixed tit flocks and Stonechat. We soon move on and Innes spots an eagle. We are out of the vehicles and there are three Golden Eagles above the sky line, one soon disappears but we are able to watch the others, two adults, for quite some time before they disappear into the low cloud.

We continue on to look for more Red Deer, talking and listening to some of the challenges of returning the estate to nature, introducing wolves, planting trees, managing deer and so on. It's a lively day of discussion and debate. We see a young Golden Eagle showing the white of its tail clearly and watch a group of cheerful Hooded Crows cavorting on the hillside above us. Innes spots a flight of swans but they disappear behind the mountains before we can identify them, but Sally and Ryan both say together they were possibly Whoopers.

We make a return journey towards the Lodge, but stop at the Scottish Wildcat enclosures. Ryan tells us all about the breeding programme Alladale is part of and introduces us to the four remaining cats here. He tells us about the release programme in the Cairngorms National Park and his hopes for the future of the breeding programme at Alladale. We stop briefly at the Lodge, spotting another Golden Eagle and a Red Kite from here, before heading up the River Carron where we will be having lunch. The views are once again stunning, the light illuminating the Birches and Aspens. Ryan talks about the management of tree planting and the challenges of fencing large areas to encourage regeneration and we can see the comparisons between the areas fenced and unfenced, the discussion about the details and careful thought that has gone in to this project is fascinating and inspiring.

We eventually stop for lunch, which we are able to enjoy in the sunshine. Gill asks what time the eagle is due to fly by and within the next half hour we have two adults and a young eagle soaring overhead, what a treat and privilege to be here on such a wonderful day with eagles over our heads!

After lunch we continue our exploration of the valley, stopping at various points as we venture further from civilisation. Surprisingly, after the torrents of water from yesterday the river is quite calm and looks beautiful as it wends its way down the valley. Innes spots yet another Golden Eagle, but coming in the opposite direction another raptor, this time a male Hen Harrier. The two birds just fly past each other without even acknowledging one another, both perhaps determinedly looking for food after two days of rain when they could not hunt.

We continue to the edge of the Reserve, where we encounter a stalker from another estate with a red deer stag he has just shot, the gentleman's outfit causes quite a stir, seemingly a tatty old red and brown checked tweed suit that makes him look a bit like Rupert Bear! On our return journey we catch a glimpse of a Dipper feeding in a mountain burn and surprisingly some spot very late Wheatear, perhaps birds on passage? The chatter slows, we have all taken in a lot of information and need time to process the ideas we have heard, some that challenge thoughts we hold and some that support them. A beautiful day spent in a beautiful landscape filled with interesting conversation and discussion. A privileged experience

Day 4: This morning we are heading east along the Dornoch Firth. As we leave the Lodge the air is unseasonably warm and we set off from the Reserve through the ever changing autumn colours. We pass old derelict farmhouses and cottages along the narrow road that leads us too and from the Lodge.

We are eventually heading towards Dornoch and as we drive the skies clear and we round a corner to see the most amazingly vivid rainbow, the sun is out and the contrast between the blackened skies and the brilliant sunshine is stunning. We are looking for a small turn off which we know is close, but Ryan calls Sally on the radio to say turn right soon. Shortly we are on a narrow road, passing the huge gates to Skibo Castle. A little further on the road deteriorates but we press on, catching sight of a lively flock of Yellowhammers enroute.

As we reach the shore of the firth the sky is black and the wind warm but strong, leaving the sea pretty choppy, not a great day to look for Otters! We scan out across the water, there are a few Shags and a Merganser but Ryan spots a diver, it's really difficult to see amongst the surf, but it looks like a Red-throated Diver. We scan around and eventually Dagmar sees it. This time instead of feeding it's preening, so we are able to get a better look at it and confirm it's a Red-throated Diver, possibly a juvenile. We get some great views as it drifts along almost unaware of our presence. Shenagh finds a dead Razorbill in the weed washed up on the shore, which David reports to the BTO.

We head off from here to the beach at Dornoch, where we have half an hour sea watching or time to stroll along the beach. Gill spots a Wheatear on the beach and we see several Stonechat, Skylark and a group of Common Scoter. John spots a stunning male Yellowhammer and Shenagh impresses us with her amazing telescope before we all head into town to visit the Cathedral, museum and 'jumper' shop.

Soon we are off again to Loch Fleet for lunch, but just as we are about to stop the rain starts. We do however enjoy our lunch whilst scanning out across the loch watching Grey and Common seals, Turnstones, Curlew, Red-breasted Merganser, fly pasts of numerous other waders including Bar-tailed Godwit, Ringed Plover and Redshank. The rain begins to clear and our spirits are soon lifted as we enjoy all the activity out on the water.

We drive a little further on and stop to see hundreds of waders out on the estuary. Bar-tailed Godwits galore, Curlew, Knot, but best of all some beautiful and elegant Greenshank. We enjoy the bird spectacle here for quite a time, before continuing to Golspie where we hope to find Dipper. Sadly no Dippers but we do see our first Eider ducks here.

As we are now beginning to run out of time we head on to the beach at Brora, where we enjoy views of Ringed Plover and Dunlin. Liv enjoys photographing a grumpy Grey Heron and Gill goes off and finds Pied Wagtails with a rather yellow looking face. We go and investigate after David points out some Rock Pipits below us on the shore. The wagtails look to be White Wagtails, but their faces are distinctly pale yellow. David looks this up in Collins and discovers that this is something that happens in winter.

It's time to head back, so we retrace our steps passing Greylag, Pink-footed and a surprise small flock of Barnacle Geese in the fields enroute. We return via Lairg and start dreaming of the pot of tea that we know will await us when we get back, we are not disappointed!

Day 5: We start our day visiting the aquaponics system at Alladale. Today is based around the Lodge and an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the landscape and what else is happening in the area. Ryan tells us about how the system uses Rainbow Trout to feed the salad and vegetables that we enjoy at meal times. We also hear about the project to try and expand the Twinflower in the forest areas.

We then continue a walk through the estate on a very blustery October morning. Sadly most of the birdlife is taking shelter. We disturb a Grey Heron, whilst admiring the torrents of water down the River Carron after another night of heavy rain. We continue to the Glen Calvie waterfall and some of us choose to return on foot whilst others take advantage of a lift with Ryan.

After lunch at the Lodge we continue our locally based day by visiting Croick Church, but enroute we are stopped in our tracks by a flurry of activity at a nearby stand of Rowan. The telegraph wires and trees here are dripping with mixed thrushes busily feeding on the Rowan berries. Mistle Thrushes, Fieldfares and Redwings are constantly on the move, its great to see our newly arrived winter visitors. Ryan spots an injured Buzzard, it appears to have a broken wing, we are all concerned what its fate will be and wonder what happened. Above us are a number of Ravens cavorting about and a Buzzard is part of the activity, it's very windy so we wonder if the injured Buzzard has been injured in the activity in the windy conditions. Ryan will report the bird to the SSPCA.

We continue on to the church, where Ryan tells us about the history of The Clearances in the area and about the writing on the windows. It's a moving story of many years ago but in the last two days we have visited several areas that have been affected by what happened in the mid 1800's. The graveyard is fascinating

to Shenagh, who finds the different stories about what has happened in families written on the grave stones, we see there have been a lot of young deaths. David is interested in some of the military connections and both John and Shenagh find several interesting fungi as we walk around. Liv is particularly taken with the Orange Peel fungus. From here we retrace our steps and stop briefly at Amat in the hope of catching up with Crossbill, but sadly the wind continues to be quite strong. John finds us the cone of a Douglas Fir and shows us a distinctive feature of the three pronged Swedish crown shape of its bracts and Shenagh finds some Stagshorn fungi.

We discuss our options for the final hour of the day and all decide that our favoured choice is to return to see Ryan feed the Scottish Wildcats. Ronnie steps in to help with lifts and we are soon back at the cats as Ryan feeds them their supper of day old chicks. Ida and Martin decide to go for a walk.

We have a quick shower before Kate comes to talk to us about the European Nature Trust and then we have an opportunity to watch the film Riverwoods, quite a full but interesting and varied day!

Day 6: Well today is our big scenic drive day. We have waited for the best weather of the week, so that we can enjoy the beautiful mountains and landscape of Sutherland to the full.

We start by stopping in Bonar Bridge in the hope of seeing Otter. The car park is full of flocks of small birds, Goldcrest, 30 or more Long-tailed Tits, Robin, Wren, Blackbird and a few Redwing. We scan over the river to look for Otter, but nothing to be seen. Out on the water we can see Teal and Wigeon and a few Mallard, so we head to the loos and are ready for off but Sally has one last look and there's an Otter, so we all rush to the river side to see it swim, dive, swim dive and then leave the water and up under some Aspen trees before disappearing, an excellent start to the day.

Not far out of the village we see swans on the loch, we stop and check and two of them are Whoopers, the rest are Mute. We also see Goldeneye, but aren't parked in the best spot so need to move before we cause a traffic jam!! We stop briefly for fuel and then head north west along the side of Loch Shin. The weather is coming and going but as the light rain clears we stop beside Loch More for a comfort break. Lynda is first up a track and spots that there is a great view of the surrounding hills from here. The rest of us wait for her return and soon we are all up the track to admire the view and opportunity to scan the skylines for eagles. We start to hear stags roaring, Martin spots some Sika Deer and then we realise the hill is covered with Red Deer and some are very lively and vocal stags. It's hard to keep up with them, there are stags roaring and chasing hinds all over the hillside, Liv and Ida are loving the show. Overhead though Sally spots our first White tailed Eagle, it soars high above us and across the glen before disappearing into the distance. Over the hills we see more activity with Ravens, Buzzards, a Kestrel being chased by a Sparrowhawk and then two Golden Eagles

and then another and another White-tailed Eagle, maybe the same bird is back over the hillside behind us, its all happening and the stags continue to roar and its still dry and we are surrounded by autumnal hills, quite magical.

But we have a destination to head for so we continue our drive to Durness, where we stop for a comfort break and then on to Balnakeil beach, where the sun comes out and we are greeted by a rainbow over the beach. We enjoy another delicious lunch with beetroot chocolate brownies, which are divine! Meanwhile we are spotting Long-tailed Duck, Eiders and Red-throated Divers in the bay and Gill spots a group of dainty Sanderling bathing in the fresh water stream that enters the bay. Dagmar and Martin have seen a group of Ringing Plover on the sand and they look stunning reflected in the pools of standing water. A large charm of Goldfinches flit onto the beach and then back onto the fence and a couple of White Wagtails forage amongst the seaweed, Gannets fly over the rough water and before to long its time to leave.

It's such a beautiful spot and it's very hard to tear ourselves away, so we extend our stay by another 15 minutes before heading east along the north coast. John tells us about Loch Eriboll, being a place that sailors referred to as 'Loch Horrible' during the Second World War and this is exactly where we are heading.

We navigate our way around the loch, stopping briefly to scan for eagles and other birds on the loch. On one stop a lady comes rushing up to us pointing out an eagle, we've been looking at the water; meantime behind us floats a White-tailed Eagle. We watch it through the scope as it drifts effortlessly over the loch showing its white tail in the amazing light, until eventually it's out of sight and we need to move on.

We continue down beside Ben Hope, everyone in Sally's van thinks she's taken the wrong turn the road is so rough and narrow. The grass in the middle of the road almost touches the underneath of the van, but it's a totally stunning drive along the narrowest road ever but past beautiful ancient mixed deciduous woodland and spectacular mountain scenery and we don't pass another car for 20 miles of magnificent scenery. But we do stop for a leg stretch and see three Golden Eagles and by this time everyone has seen so many eagles they don't even come and look at them through the scope!! I think everyone has been spoilt with eagles by this point and so we continue on, seeing another two Golden Eagles as we drive, what a day!

We continue on our drive and as the light is beginning to fade we press on, stopping briefly to admire a couple of Red Deer stags that are getting more active as the evening arrives. We are back at the Lodge just after 7pm, for our final night. We eat dinner together and then sit in the lounge and share a dram, whilst reminiscing about the last few days. Liv and Ida come and join their mum and dad on the sofa for a bedtime story and the rest of us retire for the night.

Day 7: We are all rather down hearted this morning because we have to leave the comfort and care of the Alladale team. Innes comes in to say his goodbyes and Natasha, Stuart and Kate are at the door to say goodbye, before they ready the Lodge for the return of owner Paul Lister. After a bit of 'pandemonium' we leave our gorgeous accommodation and drive steadily down the road back to Bonar Bridge on the off chance of getting another opportunity to see the Otter. Sadly we aren't lucky this time and continue on to Balblair woods to overlook the Kyle of Sutherland. We hoped to see the Whooper Swans from yesterday but today there are only Mute, but there is a great flotilla of Goldeneye out on the water.

We continue on to the Glenmorangie Distillery, although there seems to have been a mix up about the time we were expected Lewis is quick to reorganise things. Whilst we are waiting we watch flights of Pintail and Wigeon passing by, but before long we are off on our tour of the distillery.

Our guide Lewis is rather deadpan, but has a dry sense of humour as he walks us round, he is freezing in a thin puffer jacket but we are all dressed to be outside so we are warm as toast. After our tour we have a whisky tasting, but not everyone is keen on whisky but valiantly they taste the golden liquid, leaving lips numb but it certainly warms us up. We continue with our birding and venture down to the shore only to find the tide is right in and birds are perched quite a distance along the rocky coastline. We spot a Grey Wagtail here though which is Ida's favourite bird of the trip.

As it approaches lunchtime we head to Tain Links. Its very breezy here, but we enjoy our final Alladale lunch whilst watching wave after wave of wildfowl flying past and landing in the turbulent sea. Most of the ducks are Wigeon, but there are Teal and Pintail too. After lunch we head to Tarbat Ness, enroute we see an amazing sight of hundreds of Whooper Swans and gulls in flooded stubble field pools. This is John's magic moment and a pretty spectacular sight.

We continue on to Tarbat Ness lighthouse. We see more Whoopers and a huge flock of Pink-footed Geese, Greylags and a handful of Barnacle Geese in a roadside field. At the lighthouse it is just too windy for many small birds to be sitting up on the gorse, but despite the challenging weather we fight against the strong gusts and walk up to the lighthouse and then down to the end of the peninsula. We do attempt some birding in the protection of the lighthouse wall and see Gannets and David spots Fulmar.

We decide to continue on to Nigg, where there is a hide to protect us from the ever strengthening wind. We reach the welcome and cosy hide but the birds are a long way out, its amazing how quickly the tide drops and the birds move out. We decide to use the opportunity of being here to share our memories of the holiday. Ryan is due to leave us this afternoon and we want to share this time with him. We all find a seat and gather round with the wind and rain whistling around us, but the late afternoon sunlight manages to put in an appearance too, this is an ideal spot for us to do our reminiscing about our week together.

We leave the hide and make the final part of our journey back to North Kessock. We sadly say goodbye to Ryan and check into our hotel, where we enjoy another delicious meal, lots more chat and discuss our respective travel plans for the next day.

Day 8: Sally takes John for an early train and is back to chat to Lynda who is having an early breakfast. Everyone else arrives for breakfast too, but we are soon saying our sad and final goodbyes. Dagmar, Martin, Liv and Ida have the longest journey, Sally drops them at the station in Inverness but they are due to fly back to Switzerland later in the day, so hopefully their onward journey will be straightforward.

What a fabulous holiday with a delightful group of guests.

Favourite Species:

John - Sanderling

Liv - Orange Peel Fungus

Lynda - Mistle thrush

Dagmar - Long-tailed Duck

Ida - Grey Wagtail

Gill – Eagles, especially White-tailed Eagle and Wheatear

Ryan - Red Deer rutting

Martin - Goldeneye

David - White Tailed Eagle

Shenagh - Greenshank

Sally - Sanderling

Favourite place:

Lynda - Alladale

John - Open woodland on the way in to Alladale

Ryan - Loch Eriboll

Liv - The beach at Newton Point

Ida - The beach at Newton Point

David - Alladale

Martin - Walking back up Glenmore at Alladale

Dagmar - Alladale and the views from the Lodge and the Loch Hope road

Shenagh - Alladale and the road in with the river down below in the ravine

Gill - Alladale and the drive up the valley

Sally - Loch Hope road.

Magic Moment:

David - Seeing the White-tailed Eagle at Loch Eriboll disappear into the distance and showing its white tail in the sun and the mass of Bar-tailed Godwits at Loch Fleet.

Liv - Waterfall at Glen Calvie

John - The mass of birds on the way to Tarbat Ness, hundreds of Whooper Swans in the fields with mixed gulls.

Ida - First time I saw my room at Alladale.

Martin - Seeing the Red Deer rut beside Loch More.

Gill - The walk to the waterfall and the roar of the water. Meeting the 'tartan man'.

Shenagh - watching the mixed thrushes on the trees and wires on the way to Croick Church.

Dagmar - On the drive north witnessing the huge landscape and comings and goings of the weather.

Ryan - Seeing the Otter and the Greenfinch on our first day, as haven't seen one for years.

Lynda - Going to see the Wildcats and hearing Ryan talk about them with such pleasure and in such a caring and knowledgeable way. Have always been interested in them, so it was great to see them.

Sally - John making us laugh at the dinner table and witnessing the spectacle of wildlife beside Loch More, Sika and Red Deer rutting and both Golden and White Tailed Eagle overhead

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Barnacle Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Pintail
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Eider
Common Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Grey Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Turnstone
Dunlin
Redshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Guillemot
Razorbill
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Rock Pipit

Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Blackcap
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Wheatear

MAMMALS

Otter
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Red Squirrel
Rabbit

OTHER THINGS

Froglet
Golden-ringed dragonfly
Black Bumble Bee
Atlantic Salmon
Caterpillar sp
Bat sp