

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPRING BIRDS & MORE

6-13 MAY 2017

Guides: Sally Nowell & John Grierson

Guests: Paula & Karl Singer, Sue & Charles Mize, Brenda Fitzgerald & Andrew Roberts, Connell, Tessa Oliver, Charles Ritchie

Day 1 Everyone arrives on a stunning sunny afternoon, and the Cairngorms National Park is looking its absolute best. We have dinner at eight, orientate and then all head off to bed.

Day 2 Next morning we wake to a very different day of weather. Heavy mist hangs in the air as we head off for a walk along the river. We see Siskin and Redpoll but only hear Redstart. Stunning views of a singing Blackbird is enjoyed by our American guests and photographed by Paula. Swallows and Sand Martins offer eye level fly pasts whilst we enjoy views of an Osprey perched on the river bank. We hear and see our first Tree Pipit singing, and again our American guests are thrilled by a Robin at the barn. We catch glimpses of a Tree Creeper on the birches not yet in leaf.

We then head up Strathdearn. We see our first Red Squirrel of the trip and then Brenda spots a Whinchat on the deer fence beside the van and further along the road we stop to look across at fields where we see Golden Plover, Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Lapwing. We are surprised to see a single male Black Grouse in the field too. We keep bumping into Mistle Thrushes and enjoy a brief view of a Reed Bunting, spotted by Connell in an Alder tree before moving on up the valley. As we drive we are lucky to see a Stoat rushing across the road with a kit in its mouth, it then doubles back across the road behind the van presumably to collect another kit. It is great to get a good look at this beautiful mammal who all too often gives us just a fleeting glimpse.

We stop further up for lunch, disturbing a Grey Heron who in turn disturbs a group of Red Deer as it noisily takes flight, and then we spot a family of Dippers under a bridge. The adult is rushing between two almost full grown chicks who are noisily begging for food in their scaly grey plumage.

Onwards and upwards we go up this beautiful glen pausing briefly to enjoy good views of Red Deer with their antlers in velvet, Feral Goats, Widgeon and Goosander on the river.

We stop at the bridge along the glen and walk to see if we can spot a Mountain Hare. After trying to get everyone on a distant hare through the telescope Connell spots one much closer so we all enjoy exceptional views of a hare in its transition pelage.

We stand for a while looking at Red Deer on the hills and John spots a Peregrine over one of the hillsides. We then head back down the hill to take a slow drive back, once again taking in the dramatic scenery. Enroute we have great views of Red Kite flying at eye level alongside the van and then rising on the breeze before heading out of sight.

In the evening we all head out to the wildlife hide. When we arrive we are all entranced by the Wood Mice and Short-tailed Voles. John tells us he has never seen so many and we can see that some of the mice we are seeing are young ones being significantly smaller than the others. The speed they move is amazing! Dashing back and forth as if they are wind up toys, disappearing just as soon as they appear.

As the light fades we all wait in anticipation for our first arrivals. Sharp-eyed Connell spots the first Badgers of the evening who quickly Hoover up the peanuts. Eye level views of the Badgers thrill everyone as does the Badger climbing the tree for its peanut butter treat. Very soon after the Badgers have cleared up the ground peanuts we are treated to the arrival of a Pine Marten who cautiously approaches us from the woodland before elegantly and effortlessly climbing up onto the table to see what was on offer for dinner this evening. After picking up an egg it disappears back into the trees but then returns and after taking its fill it disappears into the night.

Day 3

After breakfast, we pack up for the day and head north following the course of the River Spey right up to Spey Bay, the mouth of this fabulous body of water. We enjoy good views as we drive stopping briefly to enjoy a happy colony of Tree Sparrows on route. At Tugnet the wind is somewhat unwelcoming and so we strike up positions behind the old ice houses and scan across the bay and marshy area behind us to see what we can see.

We spend some time looking at identification of Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander both of which are giving us great views in the mouth of the river with rafts of both birds together giving us time to see the comparisons and key differences in their features. We hear Sedge Warblers but despite best efforts only get very brief glimpses. We also see our first Eider Ducks

battling with the surf as they head out to sea. On a small island we spot a small group of restless Dunlin, Turnstone and Ringed Plover.

We make our way to Loch Spynie and enroute find a pair of roadside Goldfinches perching on the fence. Paula manages to get some good shots and we all hope Charles and Sue see the birds well as this is one they really hoped to see. We find the hide empty so spend time there scanning the Loch whilst enjoying our splendid sandwiches. We pick up our first swifts of the trip and enjoy views of Pochard and Little Grebe. John talks about identifying differences between Common and Arctic Tern. Common Tern are nesting on the platform in front of us. In the scrub area enroute to the hide we hear Blackcap and have great views of Willow Warblers and a Wren. We then spot a Yellowhammer high in one of the Pine trees who gives us an opportunity to enjoy good views before we head to our next stop at Lossiemouth, West Harbour. Over lunch we scan the hundreds of gulls but do not pick up anything unusual so head off to try our luck for the White-billed Diver that has been sighted from Lossie just a few days earlier. The sea is rough and so chances of spotting the bird are slim but we do enjoy several huge flocks of gulls, terns and gannets feeding far out to sea.

Next stop is Burghead and though we scan from the cliffs, northside and harbour wall do not pick up Purple Sandpiper that can often be found here. The evening light is beautiful though so Connell, Paula and Sally enjoy taking a few photos of the fishing nets and boats in the harbour before heading south again, this time stopping of at Lochindorb. We drive slowly along the road where we spot Common Sandpiper by the water, Lapwing and Oystercatcher on the fields and then soon pick up the stunning Black-throated Diver and enjoy the views across the loch.

We take a gentle drive back to the Steading enjoying Red Grouse enroute. A great day, with loads of beautiful birds and amazing views.

Day 4

An early start is required today!! It is a stunning morning that fills us with optimism and expectation as we head north and then west towards Handa Island. Words cannot really describe just how beautiful the Highlands look on our way across and through the mountains of Sutherland. The air is clear and still, the light crisp and bright. The reflections of the hills in the lochs is breathtaking and it is hard to keep going without stopping to capture the stunning scenery we are passing through, but we continue our journey stopping briefly at Silverbridge and then for coffee beside beautiful Loch Awe, where John finds us a pair of Black-throated Divers and Connell spots a graceful Greenshank on a small island close to shore.

We arrive in Tarbet in good time to catch our boat across to Handa and so spend a few minutes watching Rock Pipits, Black Guillemots and a male

Wheatear perching obligingly on the chimney pot of the café. All this and we haven't even arrived on Handa yet!

We take a steady walk across the island stopping to admire the Great Skuas sitting on rocks as they survey all around them. We have amazing displays of aerial agility from the Arctic Skuas competing for mates and nesting sites. We enjoy watching the Great Skuas bathing in the lochan at the top of the slope and spot the Red-throated Diver quietly and tolerantly sitting in the background whilst the 'Bonxies' make the most of their fresh water dip.

Finally, we arrive at the majestic stacks and cliffs filled with Razorbills, Guillemots, Fulmars and Kittiwakes. We all stand admiring the sight of these busy cliffs and then head on to our final stop to watch Puffins, one of Carl and Paula's target species.

Below the cliffs we suddenly spot a pod of dolphins, we can see them under the water and John identifies them as the beakless Risso's Dolphin, a first for both guides and most of the guests, all very exciting!

We head reluctantly back to the boat after a magnificent day on Handa. From the beach we have more views of Red-throated Diver and Shags plus some really good views of Eider Duck looking stunning in their fresh spring plumage. We head back stopping for a delicious meal at Aultguish Inn on our way back to the Steading.

Day 5

We start today at a leisurely pace visiting the rather stunning National Nature reserve of Craigellachie in Aviemore. We know that Pied Flycatcher have arrived there and hope to see both them and Wood Warbler. This morning is dull and cold and we are disappointed to pick up neither bird, though hear a Wood Warbler singing. Despite this we all enjoy the fresh green of the Birch trees and Blaeberry finding ourselves in yet another habitat. We manage to get some views of Peregrine on the cliffs above Aviemore but best of all are the flights out they take, seeing off Ospreys and Buzzards who stray too close to their nest. We head off to Abernethy Forest stopping for lunch beside the River Spey. We see our first Grey Wagtail here and Tessa discovers a new plant for the trip, Pink Purslane.

We walk in the forest for an hour or so and here pick up our first Crossbill perched obligingly for all to get good views. We can hear but cannot see more birds but when they fly we get better, though fleeting, views of a male. We head home for a delicious dinner.

Day 6

Today we head north to the Black Isle. Crossing the Moray Firth on the Kessock Bridge at Inverness we are concerned that the tides are not right for

the Dolphins, they are best seen on an incoming tide. On arrival at Chanonry Point however our fears turn out to be unfounded. As we pull into a parking space John immediately spots dolphins just off shore. We watch from the car park and then from the point as several Bottle-nosed Dolphins fish just metres from the shore. As the Dolphins have appeared so promptly we have time to spare and so take the opportunity to take a walk up the RSPB owned Fairy Glen. In yet another habitat, we enjoy various new plants including carpets of Yellow/Green Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage, Meadow Saxifrage and Water Avens. The trees are full of Warbler song but getting good views of Blackcap proves challenging.

After leaving the Fairy Glen we head to the hide at Udale Bay where we have lunch and spend time scanning the flocks of waders and ducks. Tessa picks up a distant Red Kite and we all enjoy beautiful views of Lapwings in the sun. Across the road in the field we have Skylark singing and perching, camouflaged in the field they are very hard to spot!

We drive along to the village of Cromarty, enroute we have great views of Red-breasted Merganser and Eider Duck.

We take a slow drive across the Black Isle, Connell spots an Oystercatcher nesting in the top of a fence strainer as we go.

Day 7

Our early start rewards us well! Firstly we are treated to a beautiful sunrise and stunning views of the Cairngorm Mountains.

Secondly, when we arrive at the Grouse Lek, 10 Lekking males are visible. We, and Charles in particular, enjoy a grand performance. As we are about to leave John spots a Woodcock flying over purposely and then one appears again just as we are driving away giving everyone a great chance to see Woodcock in daylight. We then head over for a brief stop at RSPB's Capercaillie watch. We know that this year has been a particularly difficult one for Caper but we have great views of Red Squirrel and Siskins on the feeders and a rather difficult yet stunning view of a red male Crossbill perched on top of a Pine right next to the Osprey hide. Hugo spots another Crossbill as we walk back to the car park to get great views of a male Great Spotted Woodpecker on the feeders in the car park.

Back for breakfast and then off again up Cairngorm Mountain. We make the decision, because of fierce high winds, not to go up to the summit of Cairngorm but instead opt to go up the funicular railway and try our luck from there for our target species. We have barely set foot on the viewing platform when Andrew spots a male Ptarmigan around 15 metres in front of us. When we look more closely we realize he is not alone and has a beautiful companion. We watch male and female Ptarmigan through the

scope for a while enjoying the females subtle markings and the male who is in the process of moulting out his white feathers for his summer plumage and then they move over to the path and take a long and leisurely dust bath.

We are joined today by a new colleague, Tim Drew. He is quick to pick up Dotterel on the hillside towards the summit. We see four birds, male and female and watch them for quite some time, later picking Dotterel up again on the left of the path to the summit whilst waiting for the train down.

We have a brief and much disputed view of a Ring Ouzel from the train up but then after hearing them singing finally have views of a young bird with rather muddy plumage and then finally a great view of a stunning male. This is Hugo's target bird so great to get him a good view of this charming bird.

We then head down to a lunch spot by a burn in the sun where we see Grey Wagtail again and enjoy yummy carrot cake before a final stop for Crested Tit. We hear but do not see one so after a while we head to Insh Marshes for our final stop of the trip.

The views from the top of the hide are fabulous and we all stand and scan the Canada Goose and Goslings, Grey Herons, Reed Bunting and a great view of Goldfinch for Sue and Charles before the end of their time in the UK.

Tessa spots an Orange-tip behind the van! We also see Green-veined White, before a final photo call and head reluctantly back to the Steading to begin our preparations for our different journeys home the next day.

Bird of the Trip

A bit of poetic license is used here and very appropriately, as though we saw some wonderful birds it is clear they did not always hold the limelight.

A beautiful view of a Ringed Plover at Chanonry Point, Ptarmigan up Cairngorm Mountain, Slavonian Grebe, Black Grouse and Black-throated Diver clinched it for most of the group. A long awaiting opportunity to see Puffins and Goldfinches from our American guests as well as a chance to see species such as Robins and Chaffinches, something we may take for granted but our American visitors loved. The non bird species of the trip was our chance encounter with the Stoat running across the road with a young kit in its mouth, fabulous views looking down into crystal clear waters from the cliffs of Handa to see Risso's Dolphin and perhaps something we all were wowed by over our week together, the gorse! We must have hit this at its most beautiful. Wherever we went we were commenting on the rich

egg yolk yellow of its dense flower bedecked branches. The rich coconut fragrance hard to detect on this rather chilly week but the beauty of this plant had us all captivated.

Place of the Trip

Eight of our 11 chose some part of our trip to Handa as their favourite place. This in part due to the fact that we were blessed with beautiful clear (but cold!) weather on our drive to and from Handa and whilst we were on the Island we really were able to enjoy this part of the world at its very best. So aspects that were most enjoyed is our coffee stop at Loch Awe, the stunning reflections in the Lochs, the bird filled stacks and 360 degree views on Handa and time spent exploring the delightful ferry port at Tarbet. Its always an honour to share this beautiful country with guests but Paula's pleasure in seeing the Highlands for the first time was evident and 'The Highlands' were her favourite place.

Our trip up the Findhorn Valley was the next favourite place in particular the views on the drive in and 'Dipper Bridge'.

Magic Moment

There was great pleasure to be had from everyone thrilling at just seeing the Scottish Highlands in spring and in good weather and, at times, breathtakingly beautiful light so this provided more than just one magic moment.

We struggled to get everyone on a rather distant and difficult view of the Peregrine on the crag above Aviemore but thanks to Hugo generously sharing his telescope Tessa was able to have a good look and saw the male bird stand and leave the nest giving her a wonderful view of the bird as it launched itself off the nest before seeing off a passing Osprey.

Witnessing 10 Black Grouse lekking in the early morning was a magic moment for Charles and Brenda too who enjoyed this early start as we were able to witness a stunning sunrise off the mountains.

We were lucky to give Sue an eye level view of a spectacular Red Kite along the Findhorn Valley, her magic moment.

The Dusk watch provided magic moments for Carl and Paula who managed to get some photos of the beautiful Pine Marten that suddenly appeared out of the woods. Connell, though being thrilled by the Pine Marten really loved all the rodent activity. We seemed to have a particularly busy night of Wood Mice and Short-tailed Voles flitting from one corner to the next in search of food as soon as we arrived.

The Ptarmigan spotted by Andrew off the platform on Cairngorm provided Hugo with his magic moment watching a male and female dust bathing. Perhaps the fact that this gave us long views to really admire and appreciate the detail of these birds or it was how relaxed they seemed to be whilst being watched by so many of us.

John was concerned we had the tides wrong when we approached Chanonry Point to see the Bottle-nosed Dolphins so his magic moment was in the car park when we arrived to see several Dolphins within seconds of parking the van!! Phew!!

What an amazing week, the Scottish Highlands looking beautiful for our fabulous guests whose enjoyment and enthusiasm was infectious and a huge part of what made this into a very special Speyside week.

BIRDS

Red-Throated Diver	Curlew
Black-Throated Diver	Redshank
Little Grebe	Greenshank
Slavonian Grebe	Turnstone
Fulmar	Arctic Skua
Gannet	Great Skua
Cormorant	Black-headed Gull
Shag	Common Gull
Grey Heron	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Mute Swan	Herring Gull
Greylag Goose	Great Black-backed Gull
Pink-footed Goose	Kittiwake
Canada Goose	Common Tern
Shelduck	Guillemot
Widgeon	Razorbill
Teal	Black Guillemot
Mallard	Puffin
Pochard	Rock Dove
Tufted Duck	Woodpigeon
Eider	Collared Dove
Goldeneye	Cuckoo
Red-breasted Merganser	Tawny Owl
Goosander	Swift
Red Kite	Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sparrowhawk	Skylark
Common Buzzard	Sand Martin
Osprey	House Martin
Kestrel	Swallow
Peregrine	Tree Pipit
Red Grouse	Meadow Pipit
Ptarmigan	Rock Pipit
Black Grouse	Grey Wagtail
Red-legged Partridge	Pied Wagtail
Pheasant	Dipper
Moorhen	Wren
Coot	Dunnock
Oystercatcher	Robin
Ringed Plover	Redstart
Dotterel	Whinchat
Golden Plover	Stonechat
Lapwing	Wheatear
Dunlin	Ring Ouzel
Snipe	Blackbird
Woodcock	Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush
Blackcap
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Trecreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Redpoll
Common Crossbill

Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting

TOTAL BIRDS: 119

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Bank Vole
Wood Mouse
Mole
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Stoat
Pine Marten
Badger
Feral Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottle-nosed Dolphin
Risso's Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Common Frog

TOTAL SPECIES: 138