

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SUMMER WILDLIFE BONANZA

2-9 JULY 2011

Leaders: Roy Atkins and John Grierson

Guests: Margaret & Les Bardwell, Kathleen Murray, Sue Coxon, Nora Boyle, Ann Feltham & Alastair Rae

Arrival Day Everyone arrives during the afternoon and after a very enjoyable evening meal we all gather in the top lounge for coffee and a chat about the week to come.

Day 1 We wake to a beautiful day of sunshine and it is already beginning to warm up, before breakfast a few folk take a walk finding a few birds and both Meadow Brown and Ringlet Butterflies.

After an excellent breakfast we head round to the moth trap to see what the night has brought in and there is a superb selection including Mottled Beauty, Ghost Moth, Coxcomb Prominent, Snout, Common Lutestring, Map-winged Swift, Green Carpet, Beautiful Golden Y, Lesser Swallow Prominent and the superb Garden Tiger.

We decide to head round to Uath Lochans for a walk here but we have not even got out of the grounds before we get superb close up views of a Crested Tit! We also glimpse a Red Squirrel as we drive the short distance to the car park. Here we find a Goldeneye on the first lochan and pick out Goldcrest, Willow Warbler a delightful family of Treecreepers - six in all and incredibly close. The day is really warming up and dragonflies are on the wing with several Four-spotted Chasers, Common Blue, Large Red and Blue-tailed Damselflies around the edge of the lochans amongst the taller vegetation and we get a brief view of a Northern Emerald amongst the trees. There are also a few interesting plants to be found such as the very pretty Chickweed Wintergreen, Round-leaved Sundews and some rather low down Alpine Ladies Mantle! There are lots of tiny baby Common Toads as well as a few one year old ones and as we cross the boardwalk we spot Sedge Warbler and lots of a family of Meadow Pipits.

We head next to our favourite Osprey nest! It is a very easily viewed spot and the Ospreys are in residence with the two well grown chicks and adult female in the nest, the chicks standing out by their pale fringed feathers on their backs. The male is nearby enjoying a fish, some of which may well make it into the nest when he has finished - after all - he has to eat too!

We travel next up the A9 and into the Findhorn Valley. This beautiful valley is always all the more so when the weather is like this and we enjoy the views as we work further up and make our first stop at a small bridge to see if the nesting Dipper is here. We are not disappointed and can't help wondering whether it is 'dipping' this morning in time with the music emanating from a vehicle parked nearby! We continue on and find Common Sandpiper and a Curlew with chicks looking nervous.

At our next stop we spend a while scanning the skies in the hope of a Golden Eagle. There are plenty of Red Deer on the hillside and many have lovely little calves with them. Snipe are calling and we wonder if that is the species in the talons of a Peregrine that flies over, as whatever it is has rather long legs! We take a walk over to scan a hillside that can be a good place to find Mountain Hare but have no luck spotting any.

We drive a bit further up the valley scanning the whole time for raptors but it is not until we are on the way back that suddenly, there, straight ahead are two Golden Eagles circling above the skyline! We drive to a suitable spot and jump out to enjoy fantastic views as these birds circle just a couple of hundred yards above our heads gaining height all the time. They spiral higher and higher until they are just dots to the naked eye and drift away leaving us with big smiles on our faces.

We head back to base for an early evening meal as the day is not over yet! After we have eaten it is back in the van for a short drive round to our wildlife hide. Here we are soon settled in and sit quietly waiting for anything to appear. At first things seem a little slow but we are shortly entertained by a couple of mice that come out to feed on the peanuts. At first we don't realise that they are in fact two species! One is a cute little Wood Mouse with brown fur and large ears - the other looks greyer and has smaller ears - a House Mouse and a species much rarer here!! Next a small group of Red Deer come by. They have some small calves with them and they are full of energy racing around after each other and play like little lambs! They engage in some pronking and even start to annoy the adults with one female giving them a bit of a kick! We also see a Roe Deer with a small calf in the long grass a little further away.

It is quite a while before suddenly a nice male Badger appears, eating the peanuts but also digging for roots in front of the hide. He is there for a while then after he leaves a female comes in to the back of the hide. Once she has left we wait a little while then a lovely young male Pine Marten comes in – looking rather nervous. He can't settle and keeps looking around - then we realise why when a bigger male comes in to feed. The younger animal seems to know this male and relaxes to feed so we enjoy fabulous views of the two animals as they munch on peanuts and raisins - they really are such wonderful animals to watch, it is a treat. While they are there another Badger comes in to the front of the hide - it is hard to know where to look! When they finally disappear back into the trees we make our get away adding Brown Hare to the list for the evening as we head back to The Steading

Day 2

Another sunny start and a couple of people take a walk before breakfast finding various birds including Crested Tit and Long-tailed Tit, Greenfinch and Spotted Flycatcher.

After breakfast we are soon on our way and after making a brief stop at the shop in Kincaig where Swifts are racing around we are onto the A9 and heading north towards Inverness. We are heading to Glen Affric and hoping the sunshine will stay, as it is a day for dragonflies. The scenery gets better and better as we head west and we are pleased to find the sunshine still strong when we arrive.

We start our walk by checking the river where we are surprised to find no dippers then follow a trail out to a lochan that has a fabulous reputation for dragonflies. We glimpse a Common Hawker as we cross the river and pause to look at a few interesting ferns on the far side including Hard Fern, Lemon-scented Fern and the rather lovely Oak Fern forming a large patch. There are a few Rannoch Looper Moths flitting around, a very localised species. At the top of a rise we get a fabulous view down to the loch and even from here we can see that there are lots of dragonflies buzzing around the edge. The loch looks absolutely beautiful, almost circular with white lilies in flower and large areas of sphagnum. We are soon down there and immediately find two immature Little Grebes then after tentatively working our way to the edge of the water we start looking at the dragonflies.

The most obvious species is the Four-spotted Chaser of which there are lots! They are very active and living up to their name chasing each other around and defending small patches of the shoreline - but amongst them are the much scarcer Downy Emeralds. We soon realise that they are also

here in good numbers and in some areas they are astonishingly common. They are flying back and forth just yards off the shore and often pause, hovering in one spot allowing us to enjoy incredible views. Amongst the heather and Bog Myrtle we find several damselflies including Large Red and Common Blue and a single Emerald Damselfly. A Golden-ringed Dragonfly is seen occasionally but never for long as it skims around the far side. Poor Kathleen takes a step in the wrong direction and sinks up to her thigh - but we are very impressed that with dragonflies all around her she takes the chance to continue taking photos of them before asking for help to get back out!!

We enjoy lunch while we watch the dragonflies and Kathleen dries out surprisingly quickly in the warm sunshine - except for her boots. We walk on stopping to check the other shore of the loch finding more of the same species. Alistair finds an Emerald Damselfly and back on the path we are delighted when a Golden-ringed Dragonfly perches on the heather right beside us! Well pleased with this view we are treated next to similar views of a perched Downy Emerald, close enough to get some good photos.

We walk on stopping to admire a few plants as we go. There are two species of Wintergreen, Serrated-leaved Wintergreen and Common Wintergreen and while the Serrated-leaved is usually a late flowerer, it is already in fruit, while the Common Wintergreen that usually flowers earlier is still in good flower! Explain that one!! Other flowers we identify include Tormentil, Heath Bedstraw, Heath Speedwell, Common Butterwort and Round-leaved Sundew. We spot our first butterfly of the trip with a lovely Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary soon followed by Common Blue and further up the track we find several more and get fabulous views of both species. We get brief views of a Common Hawker but are very surprised by the real lack of some species - normally there are plenty of Common Hawkers here and it is a great place to look for Azure Hawker - yet despite the lovely sunny weather there are none!

We pass several more patches of beautiful Common Wintergreens in flower and find a lovely patch of flowering New Zealand Willowherb and have the chance to compare Beech Fern with the Oak Fern we saw earlier. There are a few Heath Spotted Orchids too. We follow the track upwards then take the steepish trail back down to the bridge over the river. We glimpse a Speckled Wood as we walk then as we head back along the road we find a very nice Moonwort plant on top of the wall. It is a superb specimen - a big one for this species and in perfect condition.

Back at the vans we enjoy a cup of coffee before we decide that with the weather forecast not so good for the rest of the week perhaps we should try and get round to Loch Bran before we head back to the Steading. It adds rather to the journey home but may be our only chance to see Brilliant Emerald. It is a very scenic drive along the shore of Loch Ness and back up the other side enjoying lovely views of the loch and the mountains all around. We arrive at the loch after around an hour and a quarter then walk down to the edge of the water. Here we find lots of Four-spot Chasers and almost immediately a Brilliant Emerald appears then is gone in seconds and there is great frustration as the sun goes behind a large cloud and all activity stops! Sadly the people keenest to see this species, Alistair and Margaret, missed it, so we wait and watch the clouds to see if there might be a gap. There are Common Blue Damselflies flying around and a few Blue-tailed Damselflies as well but little else happens until after what seems like an age suddenly the sun reappears. Time is flying by - we really need to be going but with the sun still out and the warmth surely getting things on the wing again we hang on. Most people realise we should be going and start back to the vans but suddenly there it is! Right in front of us and just a few feet away a Brilliant Emerald comes in and hovers, flies around a little pausing again and again to allow us to enjoy its brilliant shiny green colour, then dashes away as if it was just teasing us all along - fantastic! We find a Highland Darter as we walk back but it is really time to go and we drive back through more lovely scenery to the main road and back to base in time for a short break before our evening meal.

Day 3

Heading over to the west coast the weather looks a bit mixed but seems dry though rather cloudy as we head north towards Inverness. The other side of Inverness we look out for Red Kites and eventually spot two and pause to watch them for a while as they circle around low over a newly cut field then right over the vans - superb views! We continue westwards and make a brief stop at Black Falls where, as well as enjoying the falls, we also get to grips with the three species of heather growing side by side here.

Next stop is a rather beautiful loch where we pull in to scan for Black-throated Divers. We soon find a superb breeding plumage adult and after watching for a while it is joined by two little fluffy chicks - lovely and very pleasing to see these birds being successful. Also get good views of Raven here but little else, though oddly there is a small patch of Quaking Grass beside the road.

We continue on our way stopping next at a layby looking out over the head of Little Loch Broom. Here there are few roosting Common Gulls and a Grey Heron plus several Curlews and a couple of Red-breasted Merganser. At least two or three Ringed Plovers appear and a single Dunlin but nothing else of note so we continue on our way.

We arrive at Gruinard Bay where there are birds scattered on the water below us and we soon pick out a couple of Red-throated Divers then two more in the bay to our right much closer. These birds are all in full breeding plumage and look very smart. A Black-throated Diver flies past and there are even more Red-throats further out. Roy finds a couple of Razorbills and Common Guillemot plus a single rather distant Black Guillemot and a little flock of Arctic Terns. There are several Eiders on the end of Gruinard Islands and also both Shag and Cormorant side by side which makes for a nice comparison. Alistair points out an orchid right by our feet and we realise there are actually two species here, Heath Spotted and Fragrant Orchid then while seeing what else we can find we discover a beautiful deep purple Northern Marsh Orchid. There is Fairy Flax here and some large clumps of Sea Plantain. A Great Northern Diver appears out past the point of land to our right and while looking for that bird Ann says she has three birds. Assuming she must be on the wrong bird Roy has a quick look through her scope to see a fourth bird join the first three - and they are all Great Northern Divers!! There is a fifth further to the left making a total of six - an excellent count!

Out over the island we pick out two Great Skuas that are cruising around in circles but seem perhaps to be mobbing something on the far side. They disappear and John soon spots two Arctic Skuas circling high up and they too head over towards the island when suddenly a White-tailed Eagle appears from behind the island - perhaps what the Bonxies were mobbing. We watch the eagle as it flies in sweeping circles and gains height, the white tail catching the light as it banks round. Then it slowly starts flapping and gliding in our direction and we watch in awe as it get closer and closer and eventually passes almost directly overhead - fantastic. Scanning the water again we add little more to our sightings, a distant Grey Seal, a single Kittiwake and a Gannet so we decide that perhaps we should move on.

We pull in at layby with a terrific view right up the coast and scan the bay below where John soon picks up a flock of eleven breeding plumage Black-throated Divers!! What a wonderful sight they make, the flock filling the view through the scopes. There are a few Red-breasted Mergansers on the shore and a single Guillemot.

At First Coast we scan again and find both Grey and Common Seal, some distant Gannets and more Red-throated Divers. There is a Six-spot Burnet Moth in the heather beside the road and a lovely Magpie Moth. We find Fox-and-Cubs, Crowberry, Fairy Flax and more Heath Spotted Orchids then en route to Laide Jetty we spot a couple of Rock Doves - the genuine article here! At Laide Jetty we find a couple of much closer Red-throated Divers, and these even put on a bit of display calling loudly. There are a couple of Common Sandpipers on the shore and more Gannets diving into the sea further out. We drive round to Ardesea to use the facilities and find two very close Red-throated Divers, a single Black-throated (how many have we seen now!?) and a flock of Common Terns.

We decide that we still have time to go back to view Loch Maree and head down the coast through absolutely tremendous scenery. It really is a stunning part of the world.

We follow down the side of Loch Maree until we reach Bridge of Grudie where we decide that since the weather has been much better than forecast perhaps there is just the faintest chance of a dragonfly! There seems to be nothing on the move as we walk into the clearing but on the far side we enjoy the astonishing sight of dozens of Creeping Ladies Tresses, all in beautiful flower and looking superb! It must be a really good year for them as we have never seen so many here. In the boggy areas are both Round-leaved and Great Sundews, patches of White-beaked Sedge and Bog Asphodel. After walking through the Bog Myrtle for a while hoping to flush a dragonfly into the air we eventually give up and we are just walking back when suddenly silhouetted against the sky there is a Northern Emerald!! We are delighted and watch as it circles around in the clearing just off the outer branches of the trees making occasional sallies after flies. It is almost impossible to follow when in front of the trees but we pick it up again as soon as comes against the sky and the silhouette and size is distinctive. After a couple of minutes it vanishes and despite waiting a while it does not reappear but well pleased to have seen one at all we walk back to the van and start our journey back.

We make one last stop to scan the hillside in an area where we have seen Sika Deer in the past, and after just a few seconds Margaret spots one quite close. It runs off up the hillside and we jump out to watch it, soon finding another, then three more of these distinctive animals with their white rear ends surrounded by black. On the skyline are several Red Deer. We drive

round to the hotel where we are eating this evening and have a very enjoyable meal before heading back - a Roe Deer with a calf crossing the road as we are almost back making three species on our journey home!

Day 4

With the local weather forecast absolutely dreadful we decide to make a run for the Moray Coast which almost always has the best weather, and with rain falling as we leave we hope it is a wise decision! We head out over Dava Moor and make a stop to have a look at a small group of Red Grouse poking their heads up above the heather, and spot a couple of displaying Snipe while we are out of the van. It is still spitting with rain as we continue, pausing for a fabulous close up view of a Black-throated Diver near the edge of the loch and then a huge flock of Greylag Geese - a mix of adults and very well grown young birds - there must be hundreds!

As we get nearer the coast we are pleased that we finally get away from the rain and when we arrive in Burghead it has stopped completely. On the beach here we find a fine breeding plumage Bar-tailed Godwit and there are also a few Curlew and some Eiders just off shore. We drive round to the maltings and scan the water hoping to find the Black Scoter that has been here recently but there don't seem to be any Scoters at all. There are a few more Eiders, several Sandwich Terns fishing out off the waves, lots of Kittiwakes and Gannets passing further out and a Red-throated Diver. There are a few distant Guillemots, a Fulmar or two and several Cormorants and Shags including a mixed flock on the rocks.

We walk round to the shingle passing some interesting plants on the way - both Sea and Buckhorn Plantains, Kidney Vetch, Hop Trefoil, White Campion and Northern Dock with its robust heads. Further round we find a superb patch of Biting Stonecrop and then on the shingle some Sea Sandwort and masses of Scots Lovage. We follow the top of the shingle along until we spot up ahead the tell-tale patch of bluish leaves of a large patch of Oysterplant. It is in excellent condition and we soon find several more patches including a couple of very large plants and lots of very small ones, it would appear that it has seeded well recently. The larger plants trail over the rocks as if poured over them and look superb with their brilliant blue flowers and blue-grey leaves.

Well pleased we take photos and then walk back towards the vans stopping to scan the sea again here and there and we spot two Arctic Skuas which drop down onto the water allowing good scope views. We find a Rock Pipit but there is still no sign of any Scoters, so we decide

to drive round to Findhorn Bay and see if there are any there – but it is incredibly quiet here with just a few Gannets, Sandwich Terns and Fulmars passing.

Our next stop is Culbin Forest, though we do pause on the way to admire the spectacular stands of Giant Hogweed along the way. They really are very impressive and taller than the van! We arrive just around lunch time and enjoy our sandwiches at the picnic table in the car park before taking a walk through the trees. There are plenty of plants of interest with a few Northern Marsh Orchids and plenty of Common Wintergreen. There are remarkable numbers of Creeping Ladies Tresses, many in excellent condition in full flower, including some very robust plants. But the real *crème-de-la-crème* here is the delightful One-flowered Wintergreen and as we approach the area where Roy has found them before he spots a single white flower and realises he has found a new patch! There are several in flower here but some have had their petals eaten by slugs so we walk on to the patch he already knows and sure enough there are several more in flower here and they are absolutely perfect! They seem to be enjoying the wet summer we are having and are in truly excellent condition with more in flower than Roy has ever seen here before – a lovely sight.

We walk back towards the van but take a detour down another track and stop to enjoy the sight of dozens of flowering spikes of both Common and Serrated-leaved Wintergreens. The Serrated-leaved is mainly over flower but there are a couple that are still in flower and look lovely. We then have a look at a rather damp area of ground where we find lots of Round-leaved Sundews, Marsh Lousewort and masses of Creeping Willow – but the scarcest plant here is the rather insignificant Marsh Clubmoss. It is clearly also enjoying a very good year and looks in superb condition – bright green and very healthy looking.

We pass a small pond where there are thousands of tiny baby toads, no bigger than the Wood Ants that are nearby! It is too overcast for any dragonfly activity unfortunately and there are no birds on the water at all either!

Our final stop is at a rather nice little nature reserve further along the coast and after a quick coffee we walk through the reserve enjoying lots of flowers as we go. We identify Tansy, Meadow Cranesbill, lots of Northern Marsh Orchids and on the shingle, masses of Sea Campion, Wood Sage and other species. Our main target here is Coralroot Orchid

and we head for a rather damp dune slack amongst the willow and scrubby birch bushes. Around the edge and under the bushes there are dozens of them! It has clearly been a very good year for them too but it is also clear they have flowered early this year and have swollen seed capsules and no flowers left at all. This is a shame though it is still interesting to see them like this. There are huge numbers of Common Wintergreen here too and more Northern Marsh Orchids, Creeping Willow in abundance and Marsh Cinquefoil flowering very well.

We continue on our way round the reserve and the rain is starting to spit again as we head back adding Yellowhammer to the bird list but few more plants. Time is really running out so we start for home - and have hardly gone any distance inland before we hit the rain! It clearly was a very good decision to come here today as the roads are awash with water as we get back into Speyside - huge puddles in the road and the rain is hammering down for the last part of the journey! Hopefully it will all pass through overnight!

Day 5

We gather round the moth trap before breakfast to see what we have caught overnight and are soon identifying a superb selection of moths including many caught on the first night such as Common Marbled Carpet, Mottled Beauty, Beautiful Golden-Y, Ribband Wave, and a perfect Lesser Swallow Prominent perhaps the most impressive species here. We add Small Square-spot, Map-winged Swift, Purple Clay, Purple Bar and the rather nicely named Spectacle amongst others to the list before heading to breakfast.

After breakfast we set off for our local day - but already it is spitting with rain. The forecast is for it to gradually improve so we decide that it is best to start with flowers and try for some insects later when the sun arrives! Our first stop is perhaps the best bit of woodland in Scotland for Twinflower and as we walk up through the wood we enjoy a few other species as well. There are several Chickweed Wintergreens in flower and yet more Creeping Ladies Tresses and we identify a few ferns too such as Male, Scaly Male, Broad Buckler, Hard Fern and Lemon-scented Fern. We can hear the occasional Crossbill calling but they seem to be invisible in the tree tops and we only glimpse one fly over. Soon enough we arrive at a huge patch of Twinflower but sadly with hardly any flowers at all. It has clearly flowered very early this year but a little further on is another patch - almost as large - and with many more flowers. They really are exquisite and incredibly delicate little flowers hanging in pairs above the trailing stems. The cameras are busy for a while as we try to get the best

angle and background. After a while we are distracted by a calling Spotted Flycatcher and enjoy excellent views as it flits amongst the lower branches of the pines.

After a coffee we head to Abernethy Forest and Loch Garten where, with the sun now beginning to come out between the clouds we try for Northern Damselfly. It does not take long for us to find one and then a pair mating and as soon as the sun is out again they are flying tentatively through the Water Horsetail stems and laying eggs. We find at least four pairs and a couple of individuals including one very close one. We even have a look at them through the scope which is a great way to see the detail of the markings. There are several Four-spotted Chasers here and a couple of Emerald and Large Red Damselflies. We hear Crested Tit and more Crossbills but they are remarkably elusive.

We decide to move on and make our next stop at a very small pond which is well known as a White-faced Darter site. To our frustration the sun is out just before we arrive but goes in within moments and though we get odd glimpses of sunshine it is never enough to really get things moving. A Four-spotted Chaser does a bit of a buzz around and we see a couple of Large Red Damselflies but there is no sign of the darters. We decide that if the weather is due to continue improving perhaps we should enjoy lunch before searching for our next target - the Large Heath Butterfly.

After a very relaxed lunch and hiding from a particularly heavy shower a large patch of blue sky appears to be heading our way so we set off across the moor to a spot overlooking a large area of wet marshy ground. We have not gone far when we notice several Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries flitting around us and amongst them a larger species - a Dark-green Fritillary. We arrive at the spot and with the sun out still we get a look at a rather distant Large Heath but soon it comes much closer and flits around the nearest bushes. It is distinctive enough and we are well pleased but Roy wonders if he might net one if he wades out into the marsh, so borrowing John's net he carefully heads out into the very wet ground and waits. To everyone's astonishment after about three or four minutes a Large Heath comes flying towards him and he catches it with a single swipe of the net - even he is astonished!! It is a great opportunity to see the markings while the butterfly is in a tub and compare it with the book. It is no surprise that it is the highland subspecies with no spots on the hind-wing and very different to those found further south. We let it go and then start heading back across the moor but in moments a small dragonfly flits ahead of us. It looks black with dots of yellow on the top of the

abdomen and Roy presumes it is a Black Darter - perhaps a teneral male darkening up. It lands facing us and we immediately spot the white face!! It is a female White-faced Darter!!! This really is a big surprise here. We get a couple of good views of it but it is very restless and keeps moving on before finally heading out over the moss.

As we walk back we enjoy looking at a few plants including Petty Whin, Bitter Vetch and a selection of berry bushes. Indeed growing in amongst each other and side by side are four species - Bilberry, Cowberry, Bearberry and Crowberry! Near the vans there are plenty of Fragrant Orchids and a couple of patches of Mountain Everlasting as well as a couple of Field Gentians.

Our next stop is a short distance down the road where we stop to look over the fence into a lovely meadow of flowers including lots of Lesser Butterfly Orchids. There are a few close enough to see well through binoculars but then we are even more pleased to find one just our side of the fence allowing us to get some great close-up photos. There are Fragrant Orchids here too as well as Rockrose, Mountain Everlasting and more Field Gentians. From here we drive round to another very pleasant spot where again we are looking for orchids. There are once again plenty of Fragrant Orchids but we are also looking for Small White Orchid and after a short search we soon find a cluster of perhaps eight flower spikes. John spots a couple of flowering plants of Intermediate Wintergreen amongst the bushes and it is great to be able to see the features of this species so soon after seeing Common Wintergreen, the whole plant looking bigger with bigger flowers and the style of each one poking out just below the petals. As we are looking at these Roy then spots a fine Lesser Twayblade! This really is the tiniest of the orchids with minute buff coloured flowers and just two small leaves. It is certainly deserving of a good close up with a lens to see the detail of this flower - still a perfect orchid flower in every respect!

We decide to have a go next for Northern Brown Argus and drive to a site we know, arriving in sunshine and with great optimism. There are Rockrose flowers all over the slope and we are very hopeful we will find one but as we arrive the sun goes back behind the clouds and then you can almost feel the air temperature drop. There are still Ringlets on the move flitting around but soon even they drop into the vegetation and frustratingly we don't manage to find any of the Northern Brown Argus. We are however compensated by seeing three immature Peregrines chasing each

other around high overhead above the cliff face. There is a small group of Mountain Goats amongst the boulder scree and we find a very impressive Bee Beetle, a superb insect.

We decide to head back but have one last little stop to make very near to home. At the edge of a field we walk into a superb meadow area of wild flowers, a mass of Oxeye Daisy, Ladies Bedstraw, Self-heal, Lesser Stitchwort, Meadow Buttercup, etc but amongst these are about twenty or so superb Greater Butterfly Orchids. Some are in perfect condition and it is very nice to see them so soon after seeing Lesser Butterfly Orchids and compare the features. These certainly look more robust and have diverging polinia and shorter curved spurs to the flowers. After taking lots of photos and enjoying the general scene of the meadow we head back to The Steading for our evening meal and run through the checklist before heading to bed.

Day 6

Today we are heading up into the Cairngorm Corries and looking at the weather as we go to breakfast it looks like we will be fine as the sun is shining and the clouds are high, even if there are a few more than we might wish for! After breakfast we have a look at the contents of the moth trap and find a selection of moths similar to yesterday though there are a couple of new ones - True Lovers Knot and Light Emerald.

We drive round to the car park up on Cairngorm and after gathering everything we need, are soon on our way. We have not gone far when we start finding our first plants of interest. Alpine Ladies Mantle is growing beside the path here and there and we pass an introduced species called Snow Woodrush which is thought to have come in from Europe perhaps on walker's boots! We also add more to our list of berry bearing plants with a lovely patch of Cloudberry and some nice Bog Bilberry. A little further on we find our first Fir Clubmoss poking up like fingers out of the heather. We reach a small stream and here we find the delightful Starry Saxifrage with its tiny white flowers, growing with Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage and Alpine Willowherb - though sadly not in flower. There is a patch of Dwarf Cornel with a few in flower - their white bracts looking like petals with just a hint of pink. There are large patches of Interrupted Clubmoss trailing through the heather as we get higher, then several Globeflowers beside the stream. Roy finds a patch of Alpine Saw-wort with large buds and the very first flowers just beginning to open. We find several Alpine Bistort flowers and the higher we get the more Alpine Ladies Mantle we start to find, often in large clumps or even forming sheets on the higher ground. We spot a small cluster of Small White Orchids on the far

side of the stream which is a bit of a surprise then stop to examine some ferns – a large patch of Alpine Lady Fern and a single plant of Northern Buckler Fern. There seems to be remarkably few birds with just Meadow Pipits in evidence.

We continue onwards and upwards finding more good alpine plants as we start leaving the heather behind and find lower growth of plants tight to the ground. Trailing Azalea, Least Willow, Alpine Clubmoss, sheets of Bog Bilberry and Stiff Sedge are now common and we find patches of Three-leaved Rush as we approach the large boulder-field at the end of the corrie. We enjoy our lunch on the first boulders surrounded by alpine flowers with more Globeflower, Alpine Saw-wort and Bog Bilberry in abundance. We are also pleased however to discover lots of Frog Orchids in the short grass, many with a reddish tinge to them. As photos are taken other interesting alpine species are found including Roseroot, Northern Bedstraw and Alpine Meadow Rue. We search for Alpine Speedwell with no luck and examine a patch of Arctic Mouse-ear which appears to be a hybrid that is known from here.

We decide to head over the boulders and just walk a little way up the steep track that would go up onto the plateau and as we do we stop to talk to a couple of Australian girls who say they have just seen a bird like a chicken with six chicks by the track further up!! We thank them and decide to keep our eyes open as we know what it must be - and it isn't a chicken! We add more alpine flowers as we go. Mountain Dock is looking very robust with a sturdy spike of flowers and we find a small patch of Moss Campion that is over flower. There are a few Spiked Woodrush plants by the path and above us on the rocks are several lovely patches of Arctic Mouse-ear - this time the real McCoy not a hybrid. It is accompanied by several plants of Pyrenean Scurvy Grass. We add Dwarf Cudweed and then find a lovely patch of Moss Campion with flowers this time! Further up the slope we scan for the Ptarmigan that the girls mentioned (Chicken?) and suddenly there it is! It is right out in the open on top of the large boulders by the path and we enjoy remarkably good views of the female and her chicks before they wander away over the ridge.

Well pleased we head back down - making it back to the vehicle in astonishingly quick time, then after a coffee we drive back towards The Steading, but make one last stop on the way. Since we have a bit of time and we are passing we decide to stop for a last look at the Ospreys and

again get superb views of two chicks and the female on the nest. They are lovely to watch but we also finish the week as we began by finding another family of Treecreepers

In the evening we enjoy a delicious meal then with coffee enjoy a wee dram, then do a final run through the checklist followed by our traditional round up of the week to see what places and species people enjoyed the most and if they had a particular magic moment. The species were many and varied with examples of everything from plants, birds, mammals and dragonflies - Oysterplant, Pine Marten, One-flowered Wintergreen, Large Heath Butterfly, Northern Damselfly and Red Deer calves all getting a mention but it is the astonishing views and numbers of Black-throated Divers that make it our winner this week I think! Of the places we went, two in particular get their main share of the votes coming out just about equal, Glen Affric and the Cairngorm Corrie we visited today. Magic moments are always varied and unpredictable but baby Treecreepers, the close views of Downy Emerald, the Large Heath Butterfly, the wonderful views of Pine Martens, the appearance of the Brilliant Emerald at the last second and the two Golden Eagles are just some of the wonderful moments that made up our week. It has certainly been a wonderful mix of wildlife and considering the weather was not ideal we agree that we did incredibly well to see so much.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Greylag
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Eider
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Ptarmigan
Pheasant
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Curlew
Snipe
Common Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake

Great Skua
Arctic Skua
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Sedge Warbler
Willow Warbler
Spotted Flycatcher
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Goldcrest
Treecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook

Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Magpie
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Goldfinch
Linnet
Twite
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Snow Bunting
Reed Bunting

DRAGONFLIES

Emerald Damselfly
Large Red Damselfly
Northern Damselfly
Common Blue Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly
Common Hawker
Golden-ringed Dragonfly
Northern Emerald
Brilliant Emerald
Downy Emerald
Four-spotted Chaser
Highland Darter
White-faced Darter

BUTTERFLIES

Common Blue
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary
Dark Green Fritillary
Meadow Brown
Speckled Wood
Large Heath
Ringlet

MAMMALS

Pine Marten
Badger
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Wood Mouse
House Mouse
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Roe Deer
Mountain Goat
Common Seal
Grey Seal

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog
Common Toad
Common Lizard

MOTHS

Beautiful Golden Y
Bordered White
Brown Rustic
Chimney Sweeper
Clouded Bordered Brindle
Common Marbled Carpet
Coxcomb Prominent
Green Carpet
Ingrailed Clay
July Highflier
Light Emerald
Lesser Swallow Prominent
Magpie Moth
Map-winged Swift
Mottled Beauty
Northern Spinach
Purple Bar
Purple Clay

Rannoch Looper
Riband Wave
Silver Ground Carpet
Small Square Spot
Snout
Ghost Moth
Spruce Carpet
Garden Tiger
Middle-barred Minor
Grass Rivulet
Common Lutestring
True Lover's Knot
Small Dotted Buff
Antler Moth
Spectacle
Flame Shoulder
July Belle

PLANTS

Heather
Bell Heather
Cross-leaved Heath
Bilberry
Cowberry
Crowberry
Common Wintergreen
Intermediate Wintergreen
One-flowered Wintergreen
Serrated-leaved Wintergreen
Chickweed Wintergreen
Twinflower
Common Rockrose
Eyebright
Bitter Vetch
Round-leaved Sundew
Great Sundew
Bog Myrtle
Field Gentian
Bogbean

Marsh Cinquefoil
Marsh Lousewort
Common Lousewort
Common Cow-wheat
Yellow Rattle
Field Gentian
Common Butterwort
Bog Asphodel
Heath Milkwort
Petty Whin
Melancholy Thistle
Water Lobelia
Creeping Ladies Tresses
Lesser Twayblade
Heath Spotted Orchid
Northern Marsh Orchid
Fragrant Orchid
Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Greater Butterfly Orchid
Small White Orchid
Coralroot Orchid
Frog Orchid
Giant Hogweed
Scots Lovage
Oysterplant
Northern Dock
Thrift
Kidney Vetch
Sea Sandwort
Scurvy Grass
Common Valerian
Purgings Flax
Creeping Willow
Biting Stonecrop
English Stonecrop
Mountain Pansy
Globeflower
Alpine Meadow-rue
Arctic Mouse-ear

Cloudberry
Dwarf Cornel
Alpine Lady's-mantle
Roseroot
Northern Bedstraw
Least Willow
Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage
Starry Saxifrage
Alpine Bistort
Trailing Azalea
Bearberry
Bog Bilberry
Mountain Everlasting
Alpine Saw-wort
Alpine Lady Fern
Northern Bucker Fern
Oak Fern
Beech Fern
Fir Clubmoss
Alpine Clubmoss
Interrupted Clubmoss
Marsh Clubmoss
Lesser Clubmoss
And many more!

Others

Bee Beetle