

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

WILDLIFE BONANZA

2nd - 9th July 2016

Guides: Roy and Jane Atkins

Guests: Janet Fletcher and Brian Oulds, Margaret Willis, Stephen Evans, Christine and Robert Davidson, Bob Harris, Chris and John Wyatt and Barbara and Mike Shaw

Day 1 Everyone arrives at the Steading over the course of the afternoon and evening and we enjoy a delicious evening meal together. There is lively chatter already and we gather at the top lounge to talk about the coming week. The weather forecast is not very good for the next few days with showers and rain and cloud forecast with perhaps a few sunny intervals ~so Roy explains that finding dragonflies and butterflies may be difficult, especially with cool temperatures in the low to mid teens, but the flowers will be there so we plan a day focussing on flowers with fingers crossed the weather might improve.

Day 2 We wake to cloud so decide to stick with the plan and as we head out we make a brief stop at a spot where there are lots of Common Wintergreens in perfect flower! They are just delightful with their little pink flowers and everyone takes photos before we notice that the cloud appears to be breaking up! We make a snap decision to bomb down to our Northern Brown Argus site in the hope of catching a bit of sunshine as without it we are unlikely to find this lovely butterfly. As we travel the sunny patches on the hillsides gradually vanish and we arrive in cloud!! Disappointed we enter the reserve for a look round anyway - there are a few nice flowers here to look at like Rock Rose (the food-plant of the butterfly's caterpillars), Melancholy Thistle, Slender St-John's-wort and some typical species of heath-land like Tormentil, Heath Speedwell and Heath Bedstraw. We are pleased to see a few Chimney Sweeper moths fluttering over the grassland. While everyone is looking at these bits and pieces with Jane, Roy is trying to cover as much of the slope as he can in search of resting butterflies as sometimes it is possible to spot this species just perched on the grass stems. He is absolutely thrilled when suddenly his eyes fix on one which he quickly pops into a pot and takes down to show everyone. The underside is distinctive with white spots all over the underwing with no black centres but the warmth of our hands cause it to open its wings allowing us to see the clear white spot on its forewings too! We are absolutely thrilled - but no-one more than Chris for whom this is one of the species she was most keen to see.

Well pleased we decide to head back to the van but meanwhile John has walked a little way down the road looking at Tufted Vetch and other roadside plants and he finds a second!! More photos are taken and we also spot Goldeneye on the lochan down below plus lots of White Water Lily

With the weather now wall-to-wall cloud we head next to a lovely woodland in which we are hoping to see Twinflower. We take our time walking up through the trees stopping to identify flowers and ferns as we go. We pass a beautiful patch of Common Wintergreen with a few perfect flower spikes and Chickweed Wintergreen - a strangely named plant that is neither a chickweed nor a wintergreen! We enjoy some of the commoner species too like Cow-wheat, Bugle, and spot a few Creeping Ladies Tresses plants but all are in tight bud - perhaps we'll see flowers at the coast. Roy points out the distinctive structure of Hard Fern with its flat photosynthesizing leaves and upright spore bearing leaves, and also a couple of common species here - Broad Buckler and Lemon Scented Ferns.

The woodland seems to be alive with birds and we spot Willow Warbler, Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Spotted Flycatcher, Treecreeper and fly-over Crossbills - though it is hard to be sure which species.

Then suddenly beside the path there is the Twinflower and what a show! It is looking fabulous with a complete carpet of flowers in places like a starry sky! It is just delightful with the paired, tiny, pinkish-white bells above a carpet of trailing stems. It is such a pleasure to see and soon everyone with a camera is taking photos. We find at least two very large patches and take our time enjoying them before heading back down - identifying a little Narrow Buckler Fern and Scaly Male Fern.

We drop down to a spot beside the river where we enjoy lunch scanning for Dipper with no luck - but there are plenty of Sand Martins. Our next stop is at a Northern Damselfly site and as we walk down to the board walk the cold weather and lack of sunshine mean we won't be looking for them flying. They are usually not too hard to find though perched in the tall vegetation so we walk out on the board walk and start our search but after some time have only found Emerald Damselfly.

There are few flowers of interest including Marsh Cinquefoil, Marsh Lousewort and Lesser Spearwort but Roy decides to have a look the other side of the lochan and soon finds our target species hiding out of the wind! They are so inactive it is easy to simply tap one into a pot and take it for everyone to see and even tap it out onto a plant for photos! It is distinctive looking being rather greenish under the thorax and head and having the distinctive arrowhead shape of the marking on the abdomen with the black side bars on either side. It flies before everyone gets a picture and while Stephen spots a couple more in the vegetation they are a little distant so we go back round to the side of the water where we find another and get more chances to take photos. There are a couple of Common Blue Damselfly here as well.

We make a brief stop next at a car park where sometimes we have found flowering Intermediate Wintergreen in the past but sadly this year there are no flowers. There are, however, a few flowers on the Serrated Wintergreen which is also here and we get good views of Spotted Flycatcher.

Our next stop is to have a look at a lovely orchid meadow - though one that you are not allowed in. It is still well worth a visit though with Lesser Butterfly Orchids and Heath Fragrant Orchids growing just the other side of the fence and easily close enough to photograph. There must be hundreds if not thousands of them here and they make a wonderful show.

Our final destination is a lovely bit of moorland/heath where we are hoping to find Small White Orchid in particular and perhaps Lesser Twayblade. We get out of the vans to discover Heath Fragrant Orchids everywhere! Kneeling down, the scent of their flowers is just lovely. We are very pleased to find several Small White Orchids almost immediately and they are in excellent condition. While we are taking photos Stephen finds a flower spike of Intermediate Wintergreen looking perfect and nice to compare with the Common Wintergreen we saw earlier. There is Petty Whin and Bitter Vetch in the heather here and a few small patches of Mountain Everlasting. Roy then works his way round the slope searching for Lesser Twayblade. It is a hard plant to find being incredibly insignificant and often hidden beneath the heather, but after finding a few tiny pairs of leaves at last he spots one in flower. Everyone is astonished by how tiny the flowers are - just three mm tall or so, yet perfect little orchid flowers and the same structure in miniature as its larger relative. The whole plant is a couple of inches tall at most.

With time flying we decide to call it a day and head back to the Steading to have enough time to freshen up before our evening meal. But the day is not over yet!! After our evening meal we are going out again to our wildlife watching hide in the hope of seeing Pine Martens and Badgers.

Once in the hide - with bait in place - a Wood Mouse runs out to grab a peanut and vanish again back under the rocks. It is entertaining to watch as it repeats this again and again but is immediately forgotten when suddenly a Pine Marten appears in the tree!! We have smeared a little peanut butter in the fork of a branch and it spends a while licking every last bit out of it before something appears to spook it and makes a dash back into the forest.

After a little pause suddenly two more Pine Martens come looping and bounding into the area and we enjoy absolutely wonderful views as they initially feed on the bird table then come round to the rocks and feed right at eye level just a few feet away! They seem to be two kits from the previous year and look so pretty - though one is behaving a little strangely and seems to want to suckle from the other! They stay for a while before finally heading away into the trees. They reappear a while later and feed some more before again vanishing into the trees!

There is then a bit of a pause before our first Badger appears. Soon a second joins it and then a third comes to the other side of the hide. Two are rather small darker animals, perhaps last year's young, and the other a much bigger greyer one. This latter one feeds just a couple of feet from the windows and if there had been no glass you could have patted it on the head!! Eventually, well fed, they wander away and we decide this would be a good moment to leave. It has been a long day and we are very ready for bed!

Day 3

We start the day with a run through the moth trap. Despite the cool weather there are a few nice species of moth including Garden Tiger, Silver-ground Carpet, Coxcomb Prominent, Light Emerald and White Ermine.

We head down to the Findhorn Valley, taking it slow and looking for birds and anything else of note as we drive. We pass Lapwings with well grown young and a nice Brown Hare. We are astonished when we spot a juvenile Redwing on the road!! This is a very good sighting as it proves breeding of this rare nesting bird. We make a stop at a bridge where Dippers have nested this year and enjoy a coffee while we scan the river, soon finding Common Sandpiper and then a Dipper perched quietly on the bank.

The scenery gets better as we get further up the valley and we pass another Common Sandpiper in the river and a fishing Common Tern. We make a pause when we spot a Small Heath butterfly on the road verge and then realise there are lots of Mountain Pansies here and Alpine Bistort in lovely flower. We drive on and stop at a spot where we scan for Golden Eagles and other raptors. We enjoy lunch while we scan before taking a walk in search of Mountain Hare. There are Curlews and at least three Ravens as we walk then suddenly Robert notices something on the track up ahead of us - a Stoat!! No, two - now three!! We soon realise they are young animals and there are in fact a whole family of them all playing and gambolling around and at one point there are six of them playing on the track just twenty yards ahead of us! They are absolutely wonderful to watch and are clearly having a great game together, rolling around on the grass and chasing each other in a game of tag amongst the stones. They pause occasionally to have a look at us but seem pretty unbothered by our presence and play on. We watch them for ages completely thrilled by what we are seeing and well aware this is possibly a once in a lifetime sighting!

After a long time we decide to see if we can walk past them and they see us moving and watch us from the rocks vanishing for periods before popping heads up amongst the stones. We continue on up the slope until we reach a good vantage point to scan for Mountain Hares. Before we start Bob spots a Red Squirrel scampering through the conifers and a couple of us get a brief view.

We scan the hillside and almost straight away spot a couple of hares. They are not very far away and through the scope we can check out the differences between these and Brown Hare. The smaller ears and subtly different colour are distinctive and one has quite a lot of white on the belly too. We find a third and then a fourth and enjoy nice views. We also scope a herd of Red Deer on the hillside - some with large antlers already! There are several Ravens and suddenly a large bird of prey catches our eye - an immature Golden Eagle with lots of white in its wings and tail! We are thrilled to see it circle a few times before gliding and flapping across the hillside in front of us. A Peregrine comes in to mob it looking tiny in comparison but strong enough to upset the eagle that almost turns on its back trying to avoid it! After two or three passes the eagle seems to have had enough and lands on a large rock on the slope. It looks magnificent through the scope and we are hugely impressed - until it start waddling up the hillside with a rocking motion like a parrot!! It flaps away across the slope a little way then lands again and we can't work out what it is looking for as it waddles up the grassy slope before finally flying up and away over the horizon - wow!

We have another look for the squirrel and find ourselves in a small boggy area with Starry Saxifrage, Butterwort, Round-leaved Sundew and other nice plants before heading back to the vans. We drive to the further car park for a quick look at the slopes where we find Heath Fragrant Orchids and some lovely Heath Spotted Orchids - some of which are pure white! We are about to leave when a Peregrine appears and flies right over the van before sweeping round and, after circling a little, lands on a rock where it is joined moments later by a second!! They look like a painting, perched side by side on the rocks, and are a really superb finish to the day

Day 4

Today we are heading over to the west coast so we take a slightly earlier breakfast and are soon on our way. We make a comfort stop at Black Water Falls where we take a look at the ferns comparing some of the common species including Male, Lady, Scaly-male and Broad Buckler. The forecast is for cloud in the morning opening up to sunny intervals in the afternoon so we decide to head out towards the coast first before heading to our dragonfly site.

Our first proper stop is to check out a loch for Black-throated Divers. We sip coffee as we scan the water and initially can't see anything, but then way down the loch we spot one feeding a chick! It is great news to know they have bred successfully and we drive down the loch for a better view soon enjoying scope views as the adults feed two chicks. They seem to be feeding them on tiny things - perhaps even dragonfly larvae they look so small.

We continue on our way through showers of rain which then gets heavier as we near the coast. Another loo stop provides views of Curlew, Redshank, Oystercatchers, etc. then arriving at Gruinard Bay we scan the sea. The rain

is steady but not heavy as we spot distant Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemot and Shag but it is not eagle weather and the hoped for White-tailed Eagles are not going to be flying in this. There are Common Seals hauled out on the islands and a flock of nesting Arctic Terns while in the bay is a surprise male Common Scoter! There are a few Heath Fragrant and Northern Marsh Orchids.

We move on to Laide where we scan the shore hoping for Otters while we have lunch. We have no luck but do find more, and closer, Red-throated Divers, Black and Common Guillemot, Hooded Crow, Gannets and while the rest of us are distracted watching a Harbour Porpoise, Robert spots a White-tailed Eagle! The scenery is simply stunning despite the low cloud giving it a very moody look.

We drive on towards Mellon Udrigle spotting some good birds on the way. Stonechat, Redpoll and Linnet plus several proper Rock Doves. We pause to check out some birds beside a flowery meadow and suddenly realise there are lots of orchids! Jumping out we identify them as Northern Marsh, Heath Fragrant, Common Spotted and Greater Butterfly Orchids while also enjoying a few more common flower species such as Butterwort and Yellow Rattle.

The cloud at last starts to break up and start on our way towards our dragonfly site. We make a stop at Aultbea and are delighted to find a pair of beautiful adult Black-throated Divers very close indeed. Through the scopes you can see every marking on these stunning birds. There are Common Sandpiper and Common Terns here too and a few nice coastal plants like Sea Plantain, Thrift, Scurvy Grass, Sea Heath and Sea Sandwort.

Arriving at the dragonfly site there are a few breaks in the cloud but no sun right here. After looking at the Great and Round-leaved Sundews, smelling the Bog Myrtle and identifying a few other bog-land plants like White Beaked Sedge and Lousewort the sun finally makes an appearance and you can feel the temperature rise! Within a couple of minutes Common Hawker appears flying round the edges of the clearing and we start to feel optimistic that perhaps one of the northern species might appear any moment. We wait with anticipation but all too soon the sun vanishes behind the clouds again and even the Common Hawker disappears from view. It is all rather frustrating but there is nothing you can do about the weather so eventually we have to give up and drive to the hotel where we are eating tonight.

We enjoy a very nice evening meal here then as we get into the vans to head home a Wheatear appears on the fence along with Willow Warbler.

Day 5

We start the day with a run through the moth trap to see what we have caught. Along with many of the same species we add Lesser Swallow Prominent, Green Carpet, Brimstone and Map-winged Swift. All the moths released we gather at the vans and are soon on our way towards the Cairngorm Mountains.

The weather is looking ideal as we gain height and there is even a little sunshine as we approach the lower car park. A pair of Ring Ouzels have nested here this year so we make a stop to see if we can find them. After a bit of a search John and Chris find a young bird in the bushes and we walk up to try and see them - soon getting a good, if brief, view of this rather scaly looking bird. To our surprise we are delighted when a Large Heath butterfly flies past!! It flutters around a rather boggy patch of ground nearby then lands allowing the chance for some photography of this distinctive Scottish race of the species.

We continue up to the top car park and once kitted up we start our walk. The nice thing about the route we have chosen is that there are interesting flowers right from the start of the walk and almost as we leave the car park we are finding Cloudberry and Bog Bilberry. There are already a few berries on the Cloudberry and the Bog Bilberry is growing with Common Bilberry making for a nice comparison. We are astonished to find a couple of Lesser Twayblade plants looking in absolutely perfect condition beside the path and a careful search reveals many more amongst the heather, some in perfect flower. We find patches of Alpine Ladies Mantle and some large spreading patches of Bearberry then a large and very beautiful patch of Dwarf Cornel. Where a small stream crosses the path we discover Starry Saxifrage, Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage and several plants of Chickweed Willowherb, though none in flower. Tiny plants of Blinks are growing in the wetter areas.

Further on we reach a point where a bigger stream crosses the path and here we find another collection of interesting plants. There are lovely Globeflowers in good flower and nearby lots of Alpine Saw-wort some of which is close to flowering with large buds. There are few Alpine Bistort growing here too and also great spreading plants of Interrupted Clubmoss.

We walk on higher and soon find some large clumps of ferns amongst an area of large boulders. Careful checking reveals them to mainly be Alpine Lady Fern with a couple of plants of Northern Buckler Fern too. Higher still and we find our first Trailing Azalea and some of the rather interestingly structured Alpine Clubmoss with its trailing stem with spreading 'hands' coming off alternate sides. We find Three-leaved rush and Least Willow. There is much more Alpine Clubmoss here and large patches of Trailing Azalea but the flowers are very few and far between.

Finally we reach the big boulder fields at the far end of the corrie and here we wander along the near edge until we reach a damp area where we start searching for Frog Orchids. It is not long before we find some and then realise they are everywhere!! There must be dozens of them in total but they are easily overlooked being rather green or slightly reddish-green in colour. The whole area is awash with alpine flowers with large clumps of Roseroot amongst the boulders, plenty of Alpine Ladies Mantle, Alpine Meadow Rue, Alpine Saw-wort, Northern Bedstraw, Globeflower and more.

We walk into the boulder field a little way and searching for Alpine Speedwell discover a few plants of Dwarf Cudweed. We find a Mouse-ear nearby that looks rather large flowered - the hybrid between Common Mouse-ear and Arctic Mouse-ear, which we know grows on the slabby rocks further on. We decide to start back down, but make a slight detour to enjoy the lovely flowers of the mountain form of Marsh Marigold growing here by the stream.

It has been a very successful and beautiful walk and we wander back down the path feeling pleased with our finds - but there is a surprise in store for those at the back! Some years ago the ranger had mentioned to Roy he had found Scottish Asphodel beside the stream. This seems completely the wrong habitat but he had sounded convincing so Roy had looked again and again for it - and given a couple of people were a little way behind he decides to give it another go. Not feeling at all optimistic of finding it he is astonished when suddenly there are several plants right there in front of him!! Delighted he calls Barbara and Mike over as they pass and the three of them get to see this surprising species looking quite out of place amongst the heather.

Back at the vans we enjoy a coffee and cake and hear that John has been seeing Snow Buntings flying back and forth - but sadly there is no sign of them now.

Day 6

With the forecast suggesting the chance of some sunshine locally today we decide to start with some birds and see what happens! Our first port of call is therefore the Osprey nest at Loch Insh and we arrive to find the female perched out on the bare branches with the young one hunkered down in the nest. After a while the young bird appears and shows very well, the lovely scaly pattern on its back and orange eye giving it a very different look. The male even flies in and circles overhead before leaving again but doesn't bring in anything.

It is still cloudy so we head next to our local Slavonian Grebe site - a lovely little lochan where two pairs are nesting this year. As we walk in, we spot a pair of Little Grebes with a well grown chick and a few Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and Greylag Geese. We spot a Slavonian Grebe out on the water then to our astonishment a Red-throated Diver!!! This is a real surprise here and provides the opportunity for exceptional close views, the red throat being very obvious at such close range. It is hard to follow as it is slightly nervous of us and swims rapidly underwater popping up right over the far side and moving around a lot. We soon discover the Slavonian Grebes have a chick and we watch as the adults feed it tiny fish. They are at the edge of a huge patch of water lilies with two species - White Water-lily, a common species all over the UK and Least Water-lily which is much rarer and very northern in distribution. There are also lovely big patches of flowering Amphibious Bistort. A bit further round we find the second pair of Slavonian Grebes and they also have a chick which is excellent news.

Sand Martins are everywhere and we check the gulls finding a Herring Gull amongst Common and Black-headed. In the reeds at the margin are Common Blue and Emerald Damselflies and as we walk back we find Small Heath butterflies.

With the sun emerging at last we make a dash to a spot in Abernethy forest where White-faced Darters are found. It is a tiny little pool with a small patch of floating sphagnum moss and we arrive to find the sun has gone again!! Roy walks down to check it out and finds a White-faced Darter perched on the boardwalk and calls everyone down. It flies but soon the sun comes out again and suddenly the air is full of dragonflies! There are several Large Red Damselflies, three or four White-faced Darters and then a single Four-spotted Chaser and a Common Hawker. We are thrilled and soon we're getting some nice photos of these species - with now seven White-faced Darters here! Then the sun goes back in and everything gradually vanishes again as if nothing ever happened.

As we are walking back to the van we suddenly hear a Crested Tit calling and we are delighted when a group of at least three birds appear at the edge of the road in pines and also right in the top of a birch tree where one shows particularly well. Some have been on bird weeks and failed to get such good views as this! We get several more views before they finally disappear into the trees.

It is a shame - but it is lunchtime so we drive round to a nice grassy spot where we can sit and eat lunch and hope it returns. There are a few nice plants here and we look at Heath Fragrant Orchids, Mountain Everlasting, Petty Whin, Bearberry and Slender St John's-wort. We are very surprised when we disturb a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary which flies a short distance then lands allowing us to take photos and even coax it into a pot to show those back at the vans. Even more surprising we happen upon a second - spotting it in the heather while looking at a nearby flower! They are superb and we get excellent photos.

With the sun now definitely hidden behind a blanket of cloud we decide to go in search of Crossbills instead of insects and drive round to Forest Lodge from where we'll take a walk. As we start the walk we find a nice patch of Serrated Wintergreen and then shortly a couple of Common Wintergreens too. The forest looks beautiful but is very quiet with no bird song other than the occasional Coal Tit. We hear a Crested Tit calling and after a few moments find it amongst the branches. It is a lovely sighting and everyone gets good views. We find a vantage point from which to scan the distant forest and hills but there is no sign of any eagles - though we do see Buzzard and Kestrel. As we walk back we see another Crested Tit and two Jays but nothing else and we arrive back at the vans where we have a coffee. John finds a rather nice moth - an Iron Prominent - and we are just about finished when suddenly we hear crossbills calling and two birds fly over landing in the trees. Moments later they drop to the ground where they

drink from a small puddle and raising the bins we are astonished - the bills are enormous!! They just have to be Parrot Crossbills, the scarcest of the three species found here and very impressive birds. They don't stay long but it is a great finish to the day - however there is still one more surprise.

As we drive back through the forest Roy notices something on the road and slows down - amazed to see it is a Crested Tit. As he gets closer it flies up onto the fence right beside the van and then spends five minutes, joined by a second bird, flitting around at eye level amongst the junipers just yards away - the best views you could wish for! Grinning from ear to ear - we head home

Day 7

The forecast is looking best on the Moray coast today so we decide to head out that way driving out across Dava Moor on the way. We make one or two stops to scan for Red Grouse which we find quickly and easily and some are very close to the road, females with well grown chicks just yards away. The loch is surprisingly quiet for birds with nothing on the water at all, though this may be because of the strong wind making the birds hide in more sheltered corners - but we can't find any divers and there are no ducks while all the Greylags are out on the fields on the far side.

We drive on towards the coast and soon arrive at Forres where we make a stop at the Sueno's Stone. This is a very interesting pictish carved stone which at 21 feet high is the largest found in Scotland. Boards explain what the carving on the stone represent - the main pictures being of a battle scene. It is well worth seeing and also well protected in a large glass case.

We head now out to the coast where we take a walk along the shore pausing to identify a variety of coastal plants as we go. Thrift, Scurvy Grass, Sea and Buckshorn Plantain are all identified while the most unusual plant we find is Scot's Lovage - a nice looking umbellifer found only in the north. We find Kidney Vetch and Sea Sandwort and even patches of Sea Heath but we are shocked to find no Oysterplant at all at the site where we have seen it in the past! It has appeared to be declining on previous visits but it is rather a shock to find none at all and despite a good search we walk back feeling saddened by the failure to find this plant.

Out at sea we spot Gannets, Sandwich Terns, a Fulmar, passing Curlew and a few Eiders. There are Oystercatchers on the shore and Kittiwakes flying by out at sea while in the gorse we spot a singing Yellowhammer then we have lunch back at the vans. As we eat we continue to scan the sea and Roy is thrilled when suddenly he spots lots of splashing - dolphins!! A groups of around ten Bottlenose Dolphins are passing and very active, leaping clear of the water sometimes and we enjoy great views through the scopes.

We drive next to Culbin Forest passing astonishing stands of enormous Giant Hogweed en-route. Along some of the small streams it is growing all along the banks, towering above the vans even! We start our walk and after a short distance find some flowering spikes of Common Wintergreen then

our first Creeping Ladies Tresses and stop to check each one to see if the flowers are open yet! Some are very close to it and we find one with just the bottom flower open but most are still in tight bud. We walk on and find a nice mixed flock of birds with Siskins, Goldfinch, Coal Tits and calling Crested Tits and Treecreeper which we fail to pin down. Crossbills are calling and flying over, sounding rather like Common Crossbills but they refuse to land where we can see them. Glancing down we suddenly realise there is masses of Creeping Ladies Tresses here and many are in full flower! Stephen discovers a lovely patch of several all in flower and looked gorgeous. The cameras are out and clicking but we also take a very close look at the flowers which are unusual in being very hairy!

We walk on to the spot where we hope to see One-flowered Wintergreen and Roy looks horrified when arriving at the spot where he has seen the most in the past - the whole area has been burned!! Meanwhile, Stephen has spotted a single flower further back and we take a look at this one before exploring the area close by the burned area and realise there are actually still lots of plants that are ok and many are in flower. We spend a while taking photos and enjoying these strange looking flowers - also known as St Olaff's Candlestick!

We take another track down to a damp area, passing some lovely mixed patches of Serrated and Common Wintergreen. There are hundreds of tiny baby toads and we have to be careful not to tread on them! The damp area has a few interesting flowers to entertain us but we are a bit shocked to discover that the Marsh Clubmoss appears to have vanished! We find Marsh Lousewort and several flowering Round-leaved Sundews. We also spot the incredibly tiny white flowers of Allseed - the plants are so small you really do have to get on your hands and knees to see them and a hand lens is needed to appreciate the flowers which are perhaps one millimetre across if that! At the edge of the gravel pit opposite are a couple of Blue-tailed Damselflies.

Time has got the better of us so we head back to the van and then head for home where after another excellent evening meal we gather in the top lounge for coffee, a run through the checklist and our traditional round-up of the holiday. This involves going round the group to see what species people have enjoyed seeing, what was their favourite place and hearing of any 'Magic Moments' they may have had.

Each person is allowed to choose three species they were particularly thrilled to see and as we go round the group we are amazed at just how many species are chosen - the final tally being 24 species!! Someone points out that this says a lot about what a fantastic week it has been and about what the week is about - all kinds of wildlife - and indeed in the list are birds, mammals, flowers, butterflies, dragonflies and even moths!

Of these several get more than one vote with Crested Tit, 'Wintergreens,' Twinflower, White-faced Darter and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary all doing well. But it is a neck and neck draw between three species for top spot - Stoat, with the amazing sight of the family playing on the path, Black-throated Diver with a pair feeding chicks, and the delightful Northern Brown Argus that behaved so beautifully once Roy had managed to find it - sitting on the leaves with wings open for photos before flying away!

Favourite place also results in several choices but two places stand out with the most votes, the Findhorn Valley with its eagles, Mountain Hares and Stoats and the walk up into the Cairngorms with the wonderful selection of flowers all the way along the route and superb cliffs surrounding you at the top. Magic moments are always varied and this week included the visit to the hide, the dolphins, Peregrines and other sightings but by far the most votes went to those wonderful Stoats playing on the path right in front of us for so long. This was indeed something you could go a lifetime without ever seeing again and well deserving of being winner.

John finishes the evening with a lovely speech thanking Roy and Jane for all they have done and for a great week. It has been good fun and we have seen lots despite the weather.

Birds

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Greylag
Mallard
Teal
Tufted Duck
Eider
Common Scoter
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red Kite
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Pheasant
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Curlew
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Guillemot
Black Guillemot

Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Ring Ouzel
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Redwing
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Crested Tit
Trecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Jay
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch

Siskin
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Linnet
Twite
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Parrot Crossbill
Yellowhammer
Snow Bunting

Dragonflies

Emerald Damselfly
Large Red Damselfly
Northern Damselfly
Common Blue Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly
Common Hawker
Four-spotted Chaser
White-faced Darter

Butterflies

Large White
Green-veined White
Common Blue
Northern Brown Argus
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary
Meadow Brown
Small Heath
Large Heath
Ringlet
Speckled Wood

Mammals

Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Stoat
Pine Marten
Badger
Common Pipistrelle
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Common Seal

Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenose Dolphin

Reptiles and Amphibians

Common Frog
Common Toad
Common Lizard

Moths

Bordered White
Brimstone
Broken-barred Carpet
Brown Rustic
Clouded Border
Clouded Bordered Brindle
Common Carpet
Common White Wave
Chimney Sweeper
Common Marbled Carpet
Coxcomb Prominent
Dusky Brocade
Flame Shoulder
Garden Tiger
Green Carpet
Iron Prominent
July Belle
Light Emerald
Lesser Swallow Prominent
Magpie Moth
Map-winged Swift
Middle-barred Minor
Mottled Beauty
Purple Bar
Riband Wave
Silver Ground Carpet
Six-spot Burnet
Small Square Spot
Smoky Wainscot
Square-spot Rustic
Swallow Prominent
True Lover's Knot
Welsh Wave
White Ermine
Yellow Shell

Plants

Common 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
Bogbean
Marsh Cinquefoil
Marsh Lousewort
Common
Lousewort
Common Cow-wheat
Yellow Rattle
Wood Vetch
Common Butterwort
Bog Asphodel
Heath Milkwort
Petty Whin
Melancholy Thistle
Least Water-lily
Creeping Ladies Tresses
Lesser Twayblade
Heath Spotted Orchid
Common Spotted Orchid
Northern Marsh Orchid
Fragrant Orchid
Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Greater Butterfly Orchid
Small White Orchid
Frog Orchid
Giant Hogweed
Scots Lovage
Northern Dock
Thrift
Kidney Vetch
Sea Sandwort
Sea Plantain
Buckshorn Plantain
Common Valerian
Purging Flax
Allseed
Creeping Willow
Burnet Rose
Mountain Pansy
Globeflower
Alpine Meadow-rue
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
Dwarf Cudweed
Scottish Asphodel
Alpine Saw-wort
Welsh Poppy
Slender St John's-wort
Amphibious Bistort
Allseed
Alpine Lady Fern
Northern Bucker Fern
Stagshorn Clubmoss
Fir Clubmoss
Alpine Clubmoss
Interrupted Clubmoss
And many more!