

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### SPEYSIDE SUMMER MAMMALS AND MORE

6-13 AUGUST 2016

**Leader:** Craig Round & Duncan Macdonald

**Guests:** Kate Bennett, Diana Smith, Ronan Kane, Fliss Tomlin, Anthony Dodgson, Sheila Rawson, Hassni Malik, Jonathan Swain.

**Day 1** After all meeting up at the Steading and enjoying the first of many delicious evening meals cooked up by chef Sharon, we run through the plans for the week ahead.

**Day 2** Today starts cool and pretty windy with sunny spells, as we head out for a short walk from the steading this morning. Lots of Scotch Argus butterflies are on the wing in any sunshine and small numbers of Meadow Pipits are gathering in the fields as Sand Martins fly over. A very smart male Roe buck is seen crossing the River Feshie giving us some great views and we also see a single Brown Hare on one of the shingle islands out in the river. We also get good views of a juvenile Common Buzzard as it soars overhead before we arrive back at the steading for some welcome tea and coffee.

After our break we drive up into the Findhorn Valley on the look out for upland species. The drive up into the glen takes us through some dramatic mountain scenery as we head over a higher section of road and onto some moorland. Here we find some small groups of Red Grouse right next to the road, not surprisingly hunkered down out of the now gale force winds! Dropping back down from the high moor we take some lunch by the river in the shelter of the forest and out of the worst effects of the wind, though it's still very windy even here, as with a thunderous bang, a Pine tree comes crashing down in the forest opposite!

Driving further on up into the glen, we make our next stop surrounded by the hills next to the River Findhorn. The wind is by now gale force and at times its hard to even stand up, as we take a walk out across the glen and a little way up onto the hill. Even though it's incredibly windy, it's otherwise a beautiful and sunny day and we manage to pick out a large herd of 85+ Red Deer stags on the hill and also a small group of Red Deer hinds and calves.

Further scanning from the shelter of the woods here reveals a Mountain Hare well camouflaged out on the hill opposite, before we begin to walk back, and we also get some great views of a female/juvenile Merlin chasing Meadow Pipits low over the fields and a Peregrine that glides overhead.

Back at base and after our delicious evening meal, it's time to head out again for a visit to our mammal hide on a nearby estate. At the hide after putting the bait out, we settle down quietly inside sheltered from the heavy rain and strong winds outside, to see what appears. Not surprisingly the first mammals to appear are the resident Woodmice making short work of the peanuts! Later on as dusk falls we get fantastic close views of up to five Badgers and a superb Pine Marten feeding around the hide, and on the drive back to the steading two Roe Deer are seen along with a Tawny Owl that flies across the track near the steading. What a great night!

### Day 3

After the gales of yesterday, it's still quite breezy this morning but with sun and showers, as we head out for a visit to the Cairngorm Reindeer herd. On our way up to Cairngorm we drop in at one of our local Osprey pairs. Here we watch one of this years juvenile Ospreys perched, and calling noisily next to the nest as well as the adult male Osprey which is also perched nearby and giving us some great views through the scopes.

After great views of the Ospreys here, we drive higher up onto Cairngorm, before walking the short distance out onto the hill to meet the Reindeer herd. During our visit we hear a little about Reindeer biology and the special adaptations these arctic Mammals have for surviving in very cold climates. We also get to hand feed some of the Reindeer, allowing us some great photo opportunities!

Heading back down we take our lunch alongside Loch Morlich and enjoy the stunning views back up to the Cairngorms, before we drive over for a visit to Alvie Estate.

Here we meet up with David the factor of estate who gives us a short guided tour of the grand estate house and tells us a little of it's history and past, before we climb into 4x4 vehicles to explore the estate further and head up the rough estate tracks through the forest. We hear how the Pine forest is managed by the estate as we go, before we drive higher, out of the forest and onto the open hill. Here we stop to take in the magnificent views looking back down to Loch Insh, Glen Feshie and the Cairngorms beyond and spot a White-tailed Eagle soaring distantly over a ridge, as well as getting some fantastic close views of an adult Golden Eagle hunting low over the mountainside! David explains a little about how the estate manages the Red Deer population along with the hill and moor for the Red Grouse, and

we see lots of Red Grouse alongside the track as we head up to a high point, where we also see some small herds of Red Deer hinds and calves as well as a single Golden Plover up here.

#### Day 4

Today we head for the west coast via Achnasheen and Loch Maree, driving through some stunning and very dramatic west coast scenery before arriving into the harbour at Gairloch. Here we get suited up for our trip out on the R.I.B boat 'Orca 1' some 20 miles offshore towards the Shaint Isles and the Burma Bank looking for cetaceans and seabirds.

It's lovely and sunny offshore today but there is a big northerly swell running as we speed out to sea. During our boat trip we get to see a good selection of seabirds including Great Skuas, Fulmars, Gannets, Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes. The undoubted highlight of this 'seabird fest' though are the incredible views we get of some true ocean wanderers with at least four stunning Sooty Shearwaters gliding right past the boat and only a few feet away! We also manage to pick out a few Manx Shearwaters and at least five Storm Petrels that we see flicking low, rapidly over the sea.

As well as all the pelagic avian riches out here we also manage to get fantastic views of two different Minke Whales an adult and a juvenile. The juvenile Minke Whale is very inquisitive and surfaces right next to the RIB to have a look at us at one point, and we also see the adult whale surface lunge feed through a shoal of fish! Some awesome whale action out here today!

On the way back in, we glimpse at least two Harbour Porpoise and get some lovely views as a school of Common Dolphins come in towards us breaching and bow riding right alongside the boat, before we arrive back into the calm of the harbour at Gairloch with one of the resident Grey Seals swimming in around the boat to greet us!

Back on dry land and after some lunch in the sunshine in the harbour we drive north up the coast. Here we spot a lone Common seal pup hauled out on the rocks near Laide as well as two Golden Eagles, with one perched on a ridge in the distance. A little further around the coast we stop again and get good views of more Common Seals hauled out on the rocks below us before making our last stop of the day overlooking Gruinard Bay and Island. A single Great Northern Diver is close in to shore in the bay here, and the raptors just keep coming as two huge adult White-tailed Eagles fly off Gruinard island opposite, heading inland! What a great end to the day!

#### Day 5

This morning we drive over to the Moray coast, and on the way get stunning views of a Short-eared Owl hunting low over the moorland right beside the road! We watch the Owl for some time quartering low over the heather

looking for prey before it finally drifts off and we head on again to drop down to the coast at Spey Bay.

We take our lunch here whilst scanning out over the river, and get some great views of an Osprey hovering right overhead and fishing over the river mouth, we also find a small flock of Turnstone on the shore amongst the roosting gulls as well as female Goosander. Offshore, numbers of Gannets are passing and we also see them plunge diving for fish.

From here we make a quick stop around the coast at Lossiemouth estuary where there are hundreds of roosting Herring Gulls, Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls, as well as Common and Black Headed Gulls. A good selection of commoner waders are also feeding on the estuary including Redshank, Oystercatcher, Curlew and a flock of Ringed Plover and Dunlin that fly in.

Our last stop of the day is just inland at a large freshwater loch. From the hide here we see large numbers of noisy Common Terns that are nesting on the tern raft just out from the hide, as well as two close Little Grebes, Tufted Duck, Wigeon and Coot. There are also some quality mammals to be seen here and we get nice views of a Red Squirrel on the feeders right next to the hide, and best of all an Otter which we see swimming out across the loch, close in to the edge of the reed bed opposite and panicking a couple of Mallards as it goes!

## Day 6

There is very heavy rain overnight, and this morning it is still raining, grey and misty. Our first stop is just down the road at Feshiebridge where the river has risen very dramatically overnight and is now a raging torrent of rapids passing under the bridge, a very noisy and impressive sight with the river in full spate. From Feshiebridge we move on down to the Insh Marshes RSPB reserve, where from the viewing area on top of one of the hides we get a great view of the marshes spread out beneath us. Here we enjoy fantastic views of four Foxes a vixen and three cubs that are playing and chasing on the glacial mound opposite. There are also several Roe Deer visible out on the marshes and amazingly at one point we see a very bold Roe doe chase off two of the fox cubs that have wandered out onto the marshes!

The weather by now is turning pretty wet and grim so we head for some hot drinks and cake at the local alpine nursery to warm up! Yum! The bonus of eating cake here is also the wildlife that can be seen from here and we get great views of at least two Red Squirrels on the feeders along with masses of birds including Coal Tit, Blue and Great Tit, Chaffinch, Siskin, and Great Spotted Woodpecker. The cake isn't half bad either!

After a quick stop in Nethybridge for lunch, we drive around to Loch Garten RSPB reserve. Here we find two Bank Voles feeding under the bird feeders in the reserve car park, a new mammal species for the week, and also take in the views out over the loch. We then take a walk down to Loch Mallachie through the Scots Pine forest nearby. On our walk it proves fairly quiet for birds but we do come across lots of interesting fungi including Cep, The Sickener and Cauliflower fungus amongst the trees, before the rain starts again and we head back to base.

## Day 7

Sadly it is our last day today, we drive over to the Black Isle near Inverness to Cromarty for our boat trip out into the Cromarty/Moray Firth.

After a short talk from Sarah the skipper of the boat, we get suited up with waterproofs and life vests and are soon speeding out into the firth. It's still pretty windy out at sea today with lots of spray, not ideal conditions for finding the Bottlenosed Dolphins, but at least it's sunny as we head out to begin our search for dolphins in the slightly more sheltered waters of the inner firth. Here around the enormous legs of one of the gas/oil rigs we see many Shags using the legs of the rig as a handy spot to perch on, and also a late migrant Common Sandpiper!

From here we head further out into the Inner Moray Firth, seeing more Shags and Cormorants as we go as well as some Kittiwakes, but sadly despite much searching in the choppy conditions there are no dolphins to be seen today. On the way back in we cruise in under and past the impressive seabird cliffs of the North Sutors seeing more Shags, Cormorants and Herring Gulls before we turn around and speed back into the Cromarty Firth and head back into the harbour.

After lunch we drive alongside the Cromarty Firth to Udale Bay RSPB reserve. Here we find an Osprey perched out on the estuary and also see some distant Bar-tailed Godwit, Oystercatcher and Curlew along with large numbers of Lapwing and Canada geese that are roosting in front of the hide here.

Our final stop of the day is at Chanonry Point, at the narrowest point of the Inner Moray Firth. It's still very windy as we walk out along the shingle beach to the point, where we find lots of folk are also out here looking for the dolphins. Sadly though the weather conditions seem to be against us today, and again after much searching the Dolphins again fail to show. Next time! We do however see both Common and Grey Seals just offshore from here as well as both Common and Arctic Terns flying past, before with time getting on we make tracks back to base at the end of a fantastic week of wildlife!

**Species of the Trip:** Pine Marten, Red Fox, Red Squirrel, Short-eared Owl, Sooty Shearwater, Gannet, Oystercatcher

**Place Of The Trip:** High up on Alvie Estate, c20mls offshore in the The Minch, Ballintean/River Feshie, Mammal Hide, Laide Jetty.

**Magic Moment:** Minke Whale surfacing in front of the boat, Short-eared Owl flying towards us, Common Dolphins bow riding, Feeding Reindeer, Findhorn Valley rainbow, Roe doe chasing fox cubs!

## **BIRDS**

Red-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Little Grebe  
Fulmar  
Manx Shearwater  
**Sooty Shearwater**  
Storm Petrel  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Goldeneye  
Tufted Duck  
Goosander  
Red Kite  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
**Goshawk**  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Golden Eagle  
Osprey  
Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
Red Grouse  
Pheasant  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Dunlin  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Great Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Puffin  
Guillemot  
Black Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Rock Dove  
Collared Dove  
Wood Pigeon  
Tawny Owl  
Short-eared Owl  
Swift  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Sand Martin  
House Martin  
Swallow  
Meadow Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Wren  
Robin  
Northern Wheatear  
Blackbird  
Mistle Thrush  
Willow Warbler  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Treecreeper  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Redpoll sp  
Linnet

Bullfinch  
Yellowhammer  
Reed Bunting

**Total Birds: 91**

**MAMMALS**

Hedgehog (Deceased)  
Short-tailed Vole  
Bank Vole  
Wood Mouse  
Red Squirrel  
Rabbit  
Brown Hare  
Mountain Hare  
Weasel  
Pine Marten  
Otter  
Red Fox  
Badger  
Pipistrelle Bat  
Red Deer  
Sika Deer  
Roe Deer  
Minke Whale

Harbour Porpoise  
Common Dolphin  
Common Seal  
Grey Seal  
Feral Reindeer

**Butterflies**

Small White  
Small Tortoiseshell  
Green-veined White  
Scotch Argus

**Moths**

Northern Eggar

**Dragonflies**

Common Hawker

**Amphibians**

Common Toad

**Total Species: 121**