

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE SUMMER MAMMALS & MORE

3rd-10th AUGUST 2019

Leader: Craig Round

Guests: Jane Lockett, Teresa Stretton, Barbara Yorke

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 It's a fine, bright and warm start today as we head out for a short walk this morning from The Steading. During our walk we see lots of Willow Warblers as well as Bullfinch, Chaffinch, and several Spotted Flycatchers and as we walk alongside the river Swallows, Sand Martins and House martins are overhead and we get fantastic views of our local Ospreys with the adult female perched on a branch tucking into a fish and also one of this year's juveniles. There are also lots of butterflies on the wing in the warm sunshine which are mainly Scotch Argus but we also see a Painted Lady. Near the river we get good views of a Roe Deer and her fawn amongst the trees and find feeding signs of Badgers in the meadow and come across a fresh Pine Marten scat on the track on the way back. We get back just in time as the rain starts, and after some tea and coffee back at The Steading we drive up into the Findhorn Valley on the look- out for upland species as the heavy rain showers continue.

The drive up into the glen takes us through some dramatic mountain scenery and we make a stop on a high section of road where we get nice views of a herd of some 12 Sika Deer feeding at the edge of the forest in the valley below. Driving further up into the glen we stop to look at a herd of 60 Red Deer up on the hill, which are made up of mostly hinds and calves but also one stag, before we make a stop for lunch surrounded by hills next to the River Findhorn. A Kestrel soars over the ridge behind us here and there are clouds of Scotch Argus butterflies on the wing in the warm sunshine. We also pick out a juvenile Peregrine soaring over the hill in the distance, and further scanning reveals a herd of Mountain Goats in the distance with several more in the riverside fields. After lunch, we take a walk out across the glen and a little way up onto the hill and find some Otter spraint under one of the bridges here. We also get great views of a Mountain Hare through the scope sitting sheltered out of the wind, and on the walk back see an immature Golden Eagle soaring high over the valley as well as two juvenile Peregrines chasing high over the ridge opposite. On the drive back out of the valley we see a Roe Deer fawn in the woods

by the road and a Brown Hare is seen briefly before we arrive back to the Steading. 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, Craig puts the bait out, and we settle down quietly inside 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 a male Pine Marten feeding at the bait before running off with a Hen's egg in its mouth and a little later three Badgers come into the bait and feed on the scattered peanuts on the ground around the hide before trundling off into the darkness again! What a great night!

Day 3

It's another warm day with sunny spells and showers, and this morning we have a visit to the Cairngorm Reindeer herd planned so after a quick stop at Glenmore we drive higher up onto Cairngorm, before walking the short distance out onto the hill to meet the Reindeer. Out on the hill, we hear a little about Reindeer biology and the special adaptations these arctic Mammals have for surviving in very cold climates, and we also get up close and personal with these enigmatic animals, and also get to hand feed some of the Reindeer, allowing us some great photo opportunities!

After some lunch down at Rothiemurchus, our next stop of the day is for a visit to Alvie Estate. Here we meet up with Graham, the head Keeper on the estate and climb into two 4x4 vehicles to explore the estate further. 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 back down to Loch Insh, Glen Feshie and the Cairngorms beyond, as claps of thunder rumble overhead and rain showers move through the strath below us. We then drive even further out into the wilds of the estate seeing a small flock of four Red Grouse, as well as a flock of Ravens, and a large herd of some 130+ Red Deer hinds, and drive through a couple of fords through the river before arriving at a remote bothy! A Wheatear is seen near the river and at the bothy Graham explains some more about how the estate manages the Red Deer population along with the hill and moor for the Red Grouse.

Day 4

Today, we head for the west coast, driving via Inverness and Loch Maree and through a lot of heavy rain and spray to Gairloch. As we arrive, thankfully the rain starts to ease off and the sun even comes out, and we are soon suited up for our trip out on a RIB boat offshore looking for Cetaceans and Seabirds. We head out to sea and into Loch Gairloch and then further out across The Minch towards the island of Rona, seeing a good selection of seabirds including Storm Petrels, Great Skuas, Gannets, Kittiwakes, Fulmars, Common Terns and a few Puffins as well as rafts of Guillemots and Razorbill. Near the entrance of Loch Gairloch we get great views of a school of Common Dolphins feeding and breaching and bow riding alongside the boat - fantastic! The sea conditions are perfect and flat calm and with the sun

out it really is idyllic out here with stunning views back to the mountains on the mainland. The calm conditions also help us in picking out a least 10 Harbour Porpoise and the odd Common Seal that pops up. From Rona we head across towards the Isle of Skye and the Sound of Raasay where we get some incredible views of at least four Basking Sharks including two huge sharks that swim right up to the RIB! We also get good views of three or more Minke Whales out here which are seen feeding and surfacing amongst the flocks of birds, and on the way back in, a tantalising view of a very large whale species which surfaces only briefly sadly!

After some lunch in Gairloch, we drive back up the coast, seeing a Red-throated Diver close into shore near Aultbea before we stop, overlooking Gruinard bay. The scenery is stunning with sea, sky and mountains all around us, and whilst here we also see a late Common Sandpiper along with Oystercatchers, Curlew and a migrant Whimbrel that flies over calling and heading south. A single Common Seal is hauled out on the rocks below us and further around the coast we find another six Common Seals as well as seeing five Black-throated Divers out in the bay. Scanning across to Gruinard Island Craig picks out a magnificent adult White-tailed Eagle which is perched on the island and we all manage some great views of this magnificent bird through the scope.

Day 5

After torrential rainfall overnight, our first stop this morning is at Feshiebridge to take a look at the river, which is a roaring torrent of white water coming down under the bridge, we also have a look at the River Dulnain at Carrbridge where we find crowds of people have also had the same idea and have turned up to watch the amazing display of white water roaring under the bridge here. It really is an awesome sight! From here we drive over to Moray in the hope of finding some slightly better weather and head up over the moors seeing a Roe deer and its fawn in a field near the road. As we cross the moorland, we get good views of several flocks of Red Grouse near the road and also see Meadow Pipits and Stonechats. Alongside Lochindorb, Sand Martins and Swallows are hawking low over the loch in the unseasonably cool and wet weather today, and due to flooding we have to make a detour as the road has disappeared under water! As we drop down towards the coast, we see a Red Kite soaring over the fields before we arrive at Spey Bay where sadly, even here, the weather is pretty grim with frequent monsoon like rain showers coming in off the sea! In between the showers we scan out over the river mouth and also look offshore seeing large numbers of Goosander just out from the river mouth as well as few Shelduck, and a few gannets are passing by offshore. During a drier interlude we take a walk out onto the shingle beach towards the mouth of the river. Out here, a Common Sandpiper flies out from underneath a wigwam of sticks on the beach, where it has been sheltering from the bad weather! We also see a flock of Turnstone and Dunlin and a large flock of over 100 Oystercatcher fly over as well as a flock

of 6 Whimbrel and also get some lovely views of an Osprey flying over, hovering over the river hunting fish, and flushing the large numbers of roosting Herring, Lesser Black-backed, Greater Black-backed and Common Gulls into the air.

Day 6

Today starts dry and overcast with only a few light rain showers, and our first stop after breakfast is at another of our local Osprey pairs, where we watch the adult male Osprey chase off three Crows that land briefly on the nest to try and eat the remains of a fish! We also get good views of one of the remaining juvenile Ospreys through the scope which is still hanging around the nest site. There are also lots of small birds here including Siskins and Bullfinch as well as Swallows and Sand Martins overhead, and a lone Buzzard perched in a tree beside the loch, which is very high after the huge amounts of rain yesterday. At the bird feeders at Loch Garten RSPB reserve we find plenty of Coal Tits, Chaffinch and Siskin's busy around the feeders and also get good views of a Treecreeper here. We also get great views of a Bank Vole feeding on peanut scraps underneath the feeders before we move on around to the shore of Loch Garten for lunch, where we also see a Goldeneye out on the loch. After lunch, we drive down to the Insh Marshes RSPB reserve, where from the hide watchpoint we get a great view of the marshes spread out beneath us. Here we enjoy views of a Roe Deer with only three legs! and her two fawns feeding out on the marsh and also views of a female/ringtail Hen Harrier which is quartering slowly over the marsh hunting. From here it's back to base for a little down time before we head out again to drive down to the Loch of the Lowes SWT reserve, in the hope of seeing European Beaver.

It's a fairly calm evening and from the hide at the reserve we get a great view looking out across the loch. Two juvenile Ospreys are around the nest opposite, calling noisily and flying around and we see one of the juvenile Ospreys drop down into the shallow water at the edge of the loch to bathe. Sadly, though we quietly stake out the loch until it gets too dark to see anymore, no Beavers show up on the loch, so we finally admit defeat and head for home.

Day 7

Sadly, our last day, today dawns wet, very wet, though every cloud has a silver lining, as we head out from The Steading, a Red Squirrel is seen as it dashes across the road! We drive over to the Black Isle near Inverness, but sadly due to the adverse weather and strong Easterly winds today our planned boat trip out to look for Dolphins has had to be cancelled, so we make our first stop just under the road bridge in Inverness looking out across the firth. Here we see four Common Seals hauled out on a small island opposite and also see several Oystercatcher and Curlew here. At Chanonry Point, overlooking the narrowest point of the Inner Moray Firth, we brave the elements and the steady rain and wind to walk out to the point. A few Sandwich Terns and Common Terns are passing just offshore

as well as Kittiwake, Gannet and Fulmar but there no Dolphins to be seen currently and it's otherwise very quiet here so we move on around to Udale Bay RSPB reserve and the shelter of the comfortable hide for lunch, out of the wind and rain. Out on the estuary there are lots birds to be seen including roosting flocks of Herring Gull, Common Gull, Black-headed Gull, Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls as well as lots of Canada Geese, a few Greylag Geese, and also Teal, Curlew and Oystercatcher.

After lunch we head alongside the Cromarty Firth, seeing more Oystercatcher, Curlew and geese before we head back to base via the Lower Findhorn valley where we see a late Common Sandpiper along the river as well as Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Sand Martins, Meadow Pipits and lots and lots of rabbits, but sadly no hares!

Day 8 After breakfast, we say our farewells and head home.

Species of the Trip

Pine Marten, Basking Shark, Osprey

Place Of The Trip

Alvie Estate, West Coast

Magic Moment

R.I.B boat out on the West Coast, Basking Shark, Mountain Hare stretching.

MAMMALS

Pipistrelle Bat
Badger Pine Marten
Common Seal Common
Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Minke Whale
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Sika deer
Reindeer
Feral Mountain Goat
Red Squirrel
Wood Mouse
Bank Vole
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Rabbit
Basking Shark
Total: 18

BUTTERFLIES

Dark Green Fritillary
Green-veined White
Speckled Wood
Painted Lady
Small Tortoiseshell
Scotch Argus
Meadow Brown
Total: 7

DRAGONFLIES

Common Hawker
Black Darter
Total: 2

AMPHIBIANS

Common Toad
Common Frog
Total: 2

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose

Shelduck
Mallard Teal
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Peregrine
Merlin
Oystercatcher
Turnstone
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew
Whimbrel
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Sandwich Tern
Puffin

Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Common Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Tree Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Robin
Wheatear
Stonechat
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Willow Warbler
Blackcap
Goldcrest
Wren
Spotted Flycatcher
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Trecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Raven Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Twite
Goldfinch
Siskin
Lesser Redpoll
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer
Total: 90