

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE SUMMER MAMMALS & MORE

2011

Leaders: Craig Round & Chrissie Nicholson

Day 1 Everyone starts arriving at Ballintean Steading from mid-afternoon. We are right below the flanks of the Cairngorms and guests arriving early have time to walk our nature trail. Before long we have all arrived and have dinner around our huge dining room table. After a delightful meal, we spend some time over tea and coffee running through the itinerary for the week ahead. With the long days of summer there is still plenty of light left so a few of us go for a walk and see an Osprey flying up the river.

Day 2 After our first hearty breakfast of the week we walk a short distance from the Steading up towards the hanging peanut feeders at the top of the track where we enjoy our first views of Red Squirrel. There are at least four of them feeding amidst the Scots Pines alongside the track giving us fantastic views. We then make our way back past the Steading and down towards the River Feshie to start what is to be a circular walk taking us firstly alongside the river itself. The scenery is magnificent as we gaze across a vista of gnarled Alders and Birch trees giving way to dramatic panoramas where the towering slopes of Carn Ban Mor rise above us as part of the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve.

Carrying on along the path Craig spots an Osprey perched on branches in the middle of the river, then another Osprey flies towards it and there is a commotion in the trees as their youngsters are needing fed. They have nested in the artificial eyrie we have constructed right on our estate here – a twiggy bundle the size of a double bed all atop a 45 foot pine trunk! We enjoy excellent views of the Ospreys then we notice a couple of Scotch Argus butterflies flitting around the meadow and two Swifts fly overhead. It has been a very enjoyable morning with nice weather and lots of interesting and different things to see.

Before we cross the burn “scat man” Craig finds Badger droppings and makes sure the whole group sees them! We then head across the small burn and Craig spots fresh Badger digging activity on the slope facing us, the main sett

is on top of a small hillock. We make our way back along the track and we can hear a Buzzard mewing from the woodland edge, as we come out of the woods it flies overhead to be joined by another bird calling to each other. We then return to the Steading for coffee and Sharon's shortbread, a great start to our first day.

Our afternoon is to be spent up in the Monadhliath Mountains so we set off in the minibus and take the A9 north towards Inverness. We reach Slochd Summit, an area some 1,300 feet above sea level. We turn off the main road and drop down to the River Findhorn and drive alongside it towards Coignafearn where we enjoy more magnificent scenery as it surrounds us, the hills rise higher and higher.

Taking the road to Farr, we make our way through dense areas of pine trees where we hope to see Sika Deer. We all keep our eyes open and silence falls across the vehicle as everyone concentrates, but sadly it's only the tell-tale signs of their browsing that we see – stripped bark and pruned Spruce trees. As we near the high plateau at the top of the hill onto the moorland we make our first stop in a lay-by at the side of the road where we have our first views of Red Grouse and as we scan a few more are spotted.

As time is pressing we decide to head back down from the plateau to the minor road through the 'Strath' but just before we reach the valley floor Craig spots a high soaring raptor overhead. Everybody jumps out of the vehicles to gain a better view as the bird circles above. It turns out to be a Peregrine which soars directly overhead as it's mobbed by a large flock of House Martins – the aerial display they put on thrills us all and we get excellent views.

We set off again heading up the glen and after travelling a short distance Craig finds our first Red Deer of the day, a large group of stags which are feeding in the fields at the roadside. A further stop produces even more Red Deer with big bachelor herds of stags in the low fields alongside the river and there's even more dotted around the hillsides. We stop for lunch and view at least one more Peregrine over the hillside, we are beside a plantation and find the bridge across the river out of action, its being replaced. We would normally walk up the valley, but undeterred Craig and Chrissie start scanning the far hills concentrating on finding one species and it is not too long before Craig has found it, a Mountain Hare, well a very distant one, sitting so still, we have great fun trying to get all the guests to see this camouflaged creature that does not move! Craig decides to demonstrate how the hare is sitting,

so gets down on his knees and tries to imitate a Mountain Hare, much to amazement of the group and Chrissie! (who has photographic evidence if required?) unsure whether this helped, but it does cause a lot of laughter.

Eventually we drive further up the Strath and arrive at the top of Coignafearn where we park and have an afternoon tea break and a wee walk along the road. Whilst here, we pick out a Golden Eagle over the distant ridge and to our delight it drifts closer, before spiralling higher into the sky and away – what a day! It has really been a marvellous experience and when we eventually start to wind our way back down the glen heading homewards, we are all reluctant to leave.

Our adventure is not over yet, as Craig's bus gets a fantastic view of an Osprey appearing from nowhere, it dives down to the river and plucks a fish from the water and then flies off, but not everyone sees it, Chrissie's bus has missed out this time! What a day.

After one of our chef Sharon's delicious dinners we head out for the 20 minute drive to our specially built mammal viewing hide. We walk across the grass and settle in the hide hoping for a feast of entertainment. It's still quite light and while we wait we watch the antics of a Wood Mouse as it dashes out to grab peanuts before scurrying back into its hole. How fast are these mice, what great entertainment?

After sitting patiently, three Pine Marten appear from the gully, they are very wary, sniffing the air and looking about, when the coast is clear they head straight up onto the high feeder. They look like kits as they are really small. The mixture of peanuts, sultanas and peanut butter appear to be to their liking!

Not content just to feed, they appear totally at home putting on a full display including playing, screaming and fighting and just having a ball. One leaves and whilst everyone is engrossed with these fantastic animals, two Badgers sneak in below and start hoovering up the peanuts! Oh no, the Pine Marten have noticed and jump into action, literally, they jump off the table and into the tree nearby. They sit up there watching the Badgers every move not really knowing what to do next, one scampers down the far side of the tree and runs into the gully looking back for its friend who is still sitting in the tree, we watch with great interest as the first one comes back and climbs up the tree again! Eventually they both scurry down and away safely into the gully

whilst the Badgers do not even lift their heads. What a feast of entertainment. We leave the hide chatting about the activities of the evening; at least the Wood Mouse is left to feed in peace.

Day 3 We drive along the track out of the Steading and catch a glimpse of a Red Squirrel dashing across the road. We screech to a halt and watch this delightful animal as it runs along the ground between the trees then straight up the trunk of a large pine, peering round to see what we are doing, it soon decides that we are not a threat and sits out on a branch looking incredibly cute at it cleans itself then dashes off up the trunk of the tree and disappears amongst the branches.

As we drive along the road two Roe Deer are spotted in the trees, they stop and then start running away, they keep stopping and looking back, but we stay in the vans and watch them in great comfort.

Soon we are crossing the moorland enroute for the Moray Coast. It's a nice sunny morning so we make a stop at Lochindorb looking out at the castle on the island in the loch and enjoy coffee and homemade shortbread whilst watching a beautiful pair of Black-throated Divers. They are stunning birds and drift into the bay near to the road allowing us exceptional views through the scope. Chrissie spots a Buzzard on the ground on the far side of the loch, its feeding on what looks like a rabbit, we definitely need the telescope for this sighting! There are Red Grouse in the heather and they seem undisturbed by the van so we creep slowly up beside them for very close views through the windows, cameras at the ready for our budding photographers.

As we approach Spey Bay we spot a Yellowhammer on the gorse and a Wheatear on the short turf near the shingle then spend some time enjoying the birds around the river mouth. There are lots of Common and Arctic Terns, some Goosanders and a pair of Ringed Plovers. There are a couple of Wigeon and Shelduck on the far side and a flock of Curlew but no Dolphins out to sea. On the bushes are a couple of very smart Linnets and as we eat lunch an Osprey comes gliding down the river and starts hovering over the surf. We are all urging it to dive in and after several false starts suddenly it goes for it and we give a cheer as it hits the water, but sadly no fish for dinner this time.

Once we feel we have seen everything here we head off to Loch Spynie where we walk down through the trees to a hide spotting a couple of Speckled Wood butterflies as we walk. This can be a very good place for Otters and reading the hide book we are feeling quite optimistic as they seem to have been seen a lot recently and at all times of day. However, everything seems calm this afternoon and the ducks are mostly asleep ... not a good sign! There are a few Mallards and a group of Tufted Ducks. The Common Terns are interesting to watch as they fly round and a single Dabchick is found. Then Craig calls 'Otter!' Everyone is very excited but it is quite a while before we get everyone watching this magnificent creature as it swims and dives searching for its catch for today. It disappears but only for a short while and then is spotted again, we watch it for about five minutes and then with its last dive it comes up with a large eel, struggling to keep it in its mouth, it heads for the nearest shore which unfortunately is out of our view, what fabulous day time views of such an elusive creature.

After dinner we round off the evening with a great slideshow about our local mammals and birds from acclaimed photographer, Neil McKintyre.

Day 4 We have a slightly later breakfast this morning because we are going to have a late night tonight. Leaving the Steading and turning off near Aviemore we take a wander down to a small lochside and very soon we pick out two Slavonian Grebes. They are both still in stunning summer plumage but have finished breeding and will soon be leaving the valley for the coast. There is also a group of four Tufted Duck feeding out in the middle of the loch. A Little Grebe appears, also in summer plumage, and swims in past the Slavonian Grebe giving us a good comparison of the two.

We leave the lochan and head into Abernethy Forest for coffee and some delicious shortbread, we then have a short walk. It's not long before we are watching a Crested Tit really close to the path fluttering on the edge of the branches feeding, great views for all. The forest is quite quiet today, really peaceful and atmospheric, with its canopy of ancient Granny Pines, natural regeneration of Scots Pines not nearly as old, and mid storey of Juniper bushes. The under storey is covered with Blaeberry, Cowberry, Mosses and lichen, quite an amazing managed habitat.

We return to the minibuses and decide to make a stop at the Rothiemurchus Visitor's Centre for postcards, gifts and souvenirs before heading up the Cairngorm ski road towards Glenmore. We also make a stop at Loch Morlich to scan for Otters but because it has started to drizzle slightly and the

cloud has come down, thousands of insects are swarming around the edge of the loch. Luckily for us this change in the weather has drawn a huge flock of Swifts who are fly catching. The air is so still we can hear their wings as they whizz over our heads feasting on the clouds of midges and flies. We scan the far shore of the loch for Otter but as there are quite a few boats and canoeists out on the water there is probably too much disturbance. It's time for our 'Reindeer Experience', so we continue our drive up towards the Cairngorms, gradually getting higher and higher before parking the vehicles in a car park known as the Sugarbowl, a small flat area of mountainside over 1,000 feet high. We meet up with one of the Reindeer Rangers who gives us an introductory talk before heaving several sacks of Reindeer food over her shoulder just like Father Christmas and leads us across the road and onto a narrow track. We follow her along the path, down and across a small wooden bridge and then up again over the hills until we reach an area of hillside where the Reindeer roam on the flanks of the Cairngorms. At this point the Ranger walks away leaving us in a group together and as we watch her move away she is descended upon by 30 or more Reindeer, all of which come galloping towards her. As the Reindeer take their food we see they are not only different sizes but also different colours ranging from dark brown to shades of white. Most of their antlers are still in velvet which means they are quite sensitive and we have to be careful not to touch them.

Chrissie decides she will join in with feeding the Reindeer and is given a handful of feed and soon finds herself rapidly surrounded by Reindeer from every direction, nudging and trying to take the food out of her hand. As they pass by, they twist and bend their heads, cleverly avoiding touching us with their antlers. Their constant movement fills the air with a peculiar clicking noise that the Ranger explains is caused by the tendons in their legs catching the bone of their ankles. It's actually a way of keeping in contact when they are in a blizzard and means that they don't have to make any noise and therefore don't waste energy. We stand for some time feeding these wonderful creatures which look quite at home in today's showers, everyone gets plenty time to take photographs. In this terrain it's easy to imagine we are in Lapland with these herds of Reindeer trotting over the lichen clad rocks. We retrace our steps but this time it's with empty food bags!

After dinner the action continues as we head off at 10.00pm for a night drive on a nearby private estate. We meet Alph our guide, half the group clamber into his Land Rover and head off with spotlights into the dark and gloomy depths of the forest. The other half of us take one of the vans on a more "on road" trip around the estate and surrounding area.

The spotlights are very powerful, we pick out eyes glistening in the darkness between the trees and we're never quite sure what to expect! The first thing Craig finds is a large herd of Red Deer and their twinkling eyes rush across the fields like little stars in the dark. Craig tells us that other animals often lie up with the herds of deer and it's worth checking for smaller eyes lurking in the grass and we soon spot a few Roe Deer. We have a good view of a Tawny Owl as it flies along the fence line, then off into the field hunting. We are amazed how many animals are out in the woods and fields at night.

We see surprising numbers of Roe Deer and Brown Hare then suddenly there are eyes galore looking back at us! We are very excited then laughter breaks out as we realise they are just cattle! One of the best sightings of the night, however, is a beautiful Long-eared Owl which is sitting on a fence post, but not for long as it takes off into the night, flying along the road at first then off into the fields out of sight. On the way round we stop by a loch where we all jump out to try the bat detector and we pick up a Pipistrelle Bat hawking for insects low above us in the canopy.

After an hour we all meet up again and swap vehicles and head out again into the night. On Chrissie's drive we spot a Fox, a scarce animal here and watch it stealthily stalking its way across the top of a ridge. Again, several Brown Hares and Roe Deer appear in the lights, it's only at night you can appreciate just how many there are as during the day they just disappear.

Try as we might we cannot relocate the Long-eared Owl but get another cracking view of a Tawny Owl sat on a fence post. We have no luck finding the Daubenton's Bats though, the Pipistrelle bats are still feeding. We then drive back to meet up with Alph and the rest of our guests, they had discovered Red and Roe Deer, Brown Hare, Tawny Owl and a Heron roost. We are thrilled with what has been an exceptionally good night of spot-lamping. We arrive back at the Steading much later than usual but having seen so much no-one is complaining ... what a day it has been!

Day 5 We have a relaxed breakfast and meet at the Moth trap, it has been a good catch and there are several spectacular species. Driving away its time to check in with our local Osprey nest.

It isn't long before we have absolutely cracking views of three well-grown Osprey chicks on their nest. We spend quite some time watching the three of them when the adult male flies into the nest carrying what looks like

a trout and we have all four sitting on the nest together giving absolutely fantastic views through the scopes.

We drive on to the RSPB reserve of Abernethy and go for a walk through the old pine forest there along the shores of Loch Garten. We soon hear a Crested Tit calling and after a short search get excellent views of two of them as they search for food in the outer branches of a small pine, sometimes dropping down into the heather. There are few other birds here, though we do get good views of Siskin and on Loch Garten there are several Goldeneye.

There is a lot of evidence that Red Squirrels have been feeding in the area and we keep our eyes peeled but they must all be asleep this morning. We continue our walk in anticipation of seeing an Otter; we have heard one had been seen earlier today. But luck is not on our side, maybe next time.

As we walk back to the vans a party of Crossbills fly over calling. They don't land but we see them in flight as they cross an open bit of sky and from the call we are pretty confident they are Scottish Crossbills but it is never easy without a view of them perched. Below the peanut and seed feeders along the road at the RSPB car park we watch the nervous antics of a Bank Vole as it dashes above ground to grab the food dropped by the birds. As we drive on from here through some of the older woodland we keep our eyes open because there is Capercaillie in this area. It is very tricky to find them at this time of year as the females have young and the males are moulting but you never know your luck.

We make our next stop at Broomhill Bridge where a pair of Dippers are searching for food and disappearing under the bridge where they clearly have a nest. There are a few Sand Martins skimming the fields beside the river and a couple of Buzzards circle over the wood nearby. A Grey Wagtail potters along the shore as we eat our lunch. There is an Otter spraint on one of the rocks on the shore.

After lunch we make a short stop by a tiny pond to look for dragonflies and find a single White-faced Darter which is quite a scarce dragonfly and rather a pretty one too. From here we make our way to Insh Marshes and eventually arrive at the hide overlooking the marsh, the largest fen in Britain with sedge beds stretching for miles north and south. Below

us there are several pools and lochans that we scan diligently for Otter but there is no sign though we do get good views of several female Roe Deer with kids including one with twins and also a nice Brown Hare.

Everyone seems very relaxed and happy to scan the area for a while, watching the Buzzards over the wood on the far side and the occasional Curlew or Lapwing flying around. There is a big mound of earth in the middle of the marsh with a Rabbit warren and someone says they have got another Roe Deer sleeping under a Juniper Bush.

After another great day we eventually head back to the Steading for our evening meal, tea and coffee in the lounge and a run through the checklist for the day.

Day 6 We set off early for our day on the West Coast with our main aim of searching for Minke Whales and Otters. It's cloudy today as we leave but gradually the skies clear and soon it's a beautiful day. Once we have passed Garve the views start to get better and better and we pass through some really spectacular mountain scenery.

After a couple of hours travelling we are driving alongside a sea loch on the rugged west coast. We stop overlooking a huge bay with glass calm waters. An island just off-shore is a favourite roosting and hunting ground for White-tailed Eagles so with a cuppa in one hand and binoculars in the other we scan for any roosting birds. There is nothing sat on any of their favourite perches so we turn our attention to the sea as this has been a reliable spot for Otters this year. As we have eyes looking in all directions, we hear a call, Porpoise, and sure enough swimming along the channel there are about six or seven. A Red-throated Diver still in summer plumage is a nice find, diving just offshore. Someone is still watching the sky and calls as a huge bird appears over the skyline of the island. It's a White-tailed Sea Eagle! We are delighted and watch as this massive bird soars along the length of the ridge then banks round with its white tail gleaming in the sun before it glides over the back of the island and out of sight. Time for a celebratory sandwich!

We press on and finally arrive at the harbour where our boat awaits. We meet our captain and are soon manoeuvring our way out of the harbour then head out into the bay. There are several seaweed strewn islands and we check these for Otters as we pass, we travel out to deeper water, as this is where the whales have been feeding.

There is a huge raft of seabirds out on the sea beyond the entrance to the bay and as we sail out into more open water the weather is perfect. As we are slowing down, a bird on the water receives a great debate between Craig and Nick, it's not a Black-headed Gull, or a young Kittiwake, but it could be a Sabine's Gull? Yes, that's what it is! Fantastic a first for our experienced bird guide Craig, and a few others.

To locate whales one of the best pointers is a large gathering of feeding seabirds (hurries), which can be seen to suddenly take flight moments before a whale surfaces. Young Guillemots squeal, the odd Manx Shearwater passes by and a couple of Porpoise join us for a while. Craig is with our excellent skipper when Nick suddenly yells Minke Whale!

The skipper slowly turns the boat, we ease ahead to try to get a little closer. Slowing as we near the spot, we sight the animal as it surfaces. First the head, then a blow of spray followed by the long gentle arch of its back and finally its sickle fin slipping gently back beneath the waves – what a sight! We track this little leviathan for about 20 minutes – it must be about eight or nine metres long – and the skipper tells us that we've been moving around in large circles over an underwater reef where he's regularly found whales.

We move on and a distant Golden Eagle is spied, soaring high in the warm blue sky. Then we find a flock of Guillemots and Kittiwakes tightly packed over a patch of water, even some Gannets are diving into the middle of it all. The skipper seems just as keen to see everything as we are! It's not just Minkie Whales that occur here, several species of cetaceans have been spotted in these waters including Common and Risso's Dolphin. Before we reach the bay we spot a Great and an Arctic Skuas, some Manx Shearwaters and get great views of a Storm Petrel.

We reach land accompanied by Sammy the Grey Seal, who is a bit of a local celebrity. He is fed fish by the local fishermen so he's pretty tame and comes right up to the side of the boat looking up at us.

We have our evening meal half way back to Speyside in a little restaurant before heading back to the steading tired, sunburnt and sleepy but exhilarated by the days sightings. It really has been a special day.

Day 7 After the late night we have a later leisurely breakfast and a bit more moth trap excitement. We leave the Steading at around 10.00am, to drive over to the farmland of the Black Isle via Inverness. No sooner than we have

crossed the Kessock Bridge we see a single Red Kite soaring very low over the vehicles, it's a great view and as it banks round we get a great sight of its red tail glowing in the sunlight.

Our first stop is Chanonry Point with its lighthouse which looks across to Fort George. The tide is low and sadly there are no Dolphins around but we do see a Sanderling which flies in to land on the beach and there are a few Turnstones scurrying around in amongst the seaweed. We have lunch and spend time here, just in case the Dolphins decide to appear.

After lunch, we drive through to Cromarty where we meet Sarah who is to take us out for a boat trip to look for Dolphins. The boat is amazing! It is long and narrow with huge motors at the back and we sit astride the seats as she explains where we will be going then fires up the engines and we take off almost literally! The engines are incredibly powerful and the trip is very exhilarating as we whip out over the water covering the distance to the cliffs on the far shore in a very short time.

Back on the boat everyone is loving it as we do the occasional big sweep around just for fun and I'm sure even if we didn't see any Dolphins everyone would have enjoyed the trip enormously but as it is we haven't been out for very long when suddenly she shouts that she has just seen a fin some way off. We head in the direction she has seen the fin then, as we get closer, we slow down as we scan for any movement. Suddenly a fin appears quite close then a second and then two more a little way away and there we are in a group of Bottlenose Dolphins. They start chasing around and come very close to the boat allowing fantastic views as they cruise past, one leaping partway out of the water.

We think there are actually at least five animals and we stay with them for quite a while as they cruise round, sometimes just swimming quietly then suddenly getting excited and chasing each other, leaping and splashing, one slapping its tail on the water several times. Eventually they swim away at speed and we decide not to chase after them. There are a few birds out here too such as Gannets and Kittiwakes and the occasional Guillemot, and then we get good views of a couple of Shags as we head back for Cromarty well pleased with our encounter.

Time seems to vanish remarkably quickly and it is soon time to head back to the Steading. We enjoy our last evening meal and a relaxed coffee as we go through the checklist one last time and discuss our 'Mammal of the

Trip,' 'Place of the Trip' and 'Magic Moments' of our holiday. We've had a great week and the highlight of course has to be the Minke Whales ... or the Bottlenose Dolphins ... or the cracking views we had of Badgers at our very own hide? ... or those unforgettable Pine Martens! There's so much to remember!

Day 8 We enjoy our last breakfast together and look back on what has been a memorable week before we say our fond farewells and head off for our journeys home.

MAMMALS

Hedgehog
Mole
Common Shrew
Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Pine Martin
Fox
Badger
Common Pipistrelle Bat
Daubenton's Bat
Otter
Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Roe Deer
Minke Whale
Harbour Porpoise
Bottle-nose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

Total Mammals: 24

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Manx Shearwater
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant

Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Barnacle Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red Kite
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Hen Harrier
Golden Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Black Grouse
Red Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Snipe
Curlew
Redshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Knot
Sanderling

Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Pomarine Skua
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Sabine's Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl
Long-eared Owl
Short-eared Owl
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Willow Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Goldcrest

Spotted Flycatcher
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treetreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Redpoll
Common Crossbill
Yellowhammer
Corn Bunting

Total Species: 114