

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### MULL AND SPEYSIDE EASTER

1-11 APRIL 2015

Leaders: Craig Round and James Shooter

Guests: Richard Stacey, Janice Stacey, Steve Clifford, Lesley Jane Clifford, Rhona Watson, Katrina Watson, Kim Roberts

**Day 1** After all meeting up at the steading, we enjoy our first delicious evening meal and afterwards Craig and James outline the plans for the exciting days ahead.

**Day 2** Our first full day dawns calm with snow on the ground as we head out from the Steading! We take a short walk in the pine forest around some local lochans and see a pair of Goldeneye as well as some noisy Greylag Geese, and a Crossbill is heard calling as it flies over. We also see numerous Coal Tits and Chaffinch along with both Song and Mistle Thrush before we head back to the Steading for a welcome hot drink. Afterwards we drive up into the Findhorn Valley but make a quick stop on route at a local loch where we see female Goldeneye, two Teal, a Goosander and a skein of 40 Pink-footed Geese flying over with a single Greylag Goose. As we drive up into the glen, we get great views of two Sika Deer stags from the road and also several mountain goats before we stop for lunch in the sunshine along the river, surrounded by a magnificent snowy landscape. There are Curlew calling in the fields as well as Oystercatchers, Lapwing and Meadow Pipits. We also flush two Common Snipe out of a ditch beside the road on the drive in. During lunch two Peregrine fly over, and 11 Common Crossbill are perched in the trees nearby giving us great views through the scope. A Red Grouse flies over the ridge behind us followed seconds later by a stunning sub-adult Golden Eagle which soars right overhead! What an incredible bird!

A Dipper is singing on the river as we walk across the footbridge and out onto the hill where we get great views of four Mountain Hare, including one that gives us a great close view. On the walk back a Merlin flies right over us and circles several times before heading off! What a day for raptors in the glen! We also see Buzzards, Kestrels and Ravens, as well as large herds of Red Deer watching us from the ridges above. Incredibly on the drive back out of the glen six Black Grouse are spotted next to the road, which include four males.

### Day 3

Today dawns cloudy as we drive over to the Black Isle and our route takes us over some farmland where we see at least three Yellowhammers including some smart males, and best of all two Tree Sparrows are seen on the bird feeders outside one of the farms along with a Great Spotted Woodpecker and numerous House Sparrows. We also see other farmland birds here including Reed Bunting and Sky Larks.

Near Avoch, we pick out a fantastic flock of 42 Long-tailed Ducks which are chasing and calling frequently just offshore. There is also a single Slavonian Grebe and two Razorbills here. Driving on we head around to Chanonry Point where the sea is flat calm and it is sunny and warm. Just offshore a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers are very close to the beach and give us some great views before we walk around to the point. A single Long-tailed Duck flies past and a couple of Razorbill are seen here, but sadly no dolphins, and as it's quiet, championship stone skimming ensues which Craig wins unofficially! Common and Grey Seals surface briefly, and a Sky Lark is singing and displaying next to the lighthouse along with a few Meadow Pipits. As we walk back along the beach two Ringed Plovers chase a Turnstone onto the beach and are seen displaying.

From here we then drive over to Udale Bay, seeing three Red Kites on route soaring near Rosemarkie before we arrive at Udale Bay for high tide overlooking the estuary. There are lots of Oystercatchers, Curlew, Redshank, Lapwing, and Bar-Tailed Godwits roosting. Also here we see Wigeon, Shelduck, Teal and two Red-breasted Mergansers that drift down the river channel in front of us. We also witness a stunning flight of 4000 Pink-footed Geese that come in off the fields where they have been feeding and fly right over us before dropping down onto the estuary. The sounds of the geese as they go over is incredible and a real sight to behold. As the tide drops we follow the tide out towards Cromarty and stop near Jemimaville where 134 Scaup are seen distantly offshore. There are also at least four Slavonian Grebes here along with more Long-tailed Ducks and Eiders. Driving alongside the firth we pass more Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers and also Curlew along the shore, and just outside Cromarty Craig spots a very close in Slavonian Grebe in full summer plumage which gives us fantastic views! As we drive back over the Black Isle we pass a flock 700 Pink-footed Geese including an incredible looking pale white leucistic bird and another flock of several thousand geese are seen over the fields a little further on.

### Day 4

This morning it's an early start pre-breakfast for Caper Watch at Loch Garten. We drive over to the reserve in the dark before dawn and walk up to the hide to join other birdwatchers hoping to see Capercaillie this morning. Loch Garten's famous female Osprey EJ is on the nest, but the Capercaillie sadly prove elusive, although Craig does glimpse a male bird

briefly flying across the clearing in front of the hide. However, Craig is the only one to see it! We walk back to the car park where we spot a Red Squirrel scampering through the Pine trees before we drive over to some moorland nearby. Whilst here we can hear Black Grouse calling from their lek nearby but the birds stubbornly remain out of sight amongst the trees, and with the weather closing in and light rain falling, we head back to the Steading for breakfast.

After breakfast our first stop is overlooking Loch Insh where we pick out four Red-throated Divers out on the loch before we drive onto our next stop which is another local freshwater lochan. Here we see Tufted Ducks, more Goldeneye, two Little Grebe as well as Oystercatchers, Greylags and another skein of 70 Pink-footed Geese that fly over. We move on again and have a look at the small pools near Boat of Garten where there are more Lapwing and Oystercatchers displaying along with Tufted Duck and a few Teal. A flock of some 30 Meadow Pipits are in the fields nearby and we get nice view of a Red Squirrel on the bird feeder in amongst the trees here. Near Nethybridge Craig spots two Whooper Swans in a field near the road and the Swans get more than they bargained for when they are chased by a mad sheep! There is also a flock of 700 Pink-footed Geese in the same field, whilst near Broomhill Bridge along the river Spey 30+ Teal are on the flooded fields along with several Oystercatchers, Lapwing and a single Redshank. We take our lunch here by the river where we see a Dipper, and more Curlew and Oystercatchers fly overhead before we drive back into the forest after lunch. Near Loch Garten we take a walk through the beautiful Caledonian Pine Forest around to Loch Mallachie and on our walk we get lovely views of a pair of Treecreepers displaying, numerous Coal Tits, Goldcrest and Chaffinch. At least two Crested Tits are heard, though they are some distance away in the forest and remain elusive.

## Day 5

Today is lovely and sunny, even spring like! We get fantastic views of two Crested Tits singing and displaying from the trees at the Steading before we drive up onto Cairngorm. We make a quick stop for photographs overlooking the superb snowy mountain scape of the Cairngorms spread out before us and the Pine forest stretching off into the distance towards Glenmore. Whilst here three Lesser Redpoll land in the top of the Birch trees nearby. We drive up onto the mountain and make a stop half way up at the lower ski car park. There are lots of Meadow Pipits newly arrived on the hillside around us and we hear some Red Grouse calling before we drive higher up the mountain road to the upper ski car park. Here we catch the funicular up the mountain which is very busy with skiers today as there is still a lot of snow. From the top station we take a walk out onto the mountain and up towards the summit. We soon find a pair of very close Ptarmigan right next to the footpath allowing us some brilliant views through the scopes. A skein of migrating Pink-footed Geese fly very high over the

mountains and the views back across to Ben Nevis are simply breathtaking. In the warm sunshine and clear skies we take some time enjoying the views before heading back down where we have a hot drink beside Loch Morlich. Three Whooper Swans are seen distantly on the loch here and a Crested Tit is seen calling from the pines in the car park.

Our last stop of the day is at the Insh Marshes RSPB reserve where we scan out from the viewing hide. Many Curlew, Lapwing and Redshanks are calling and displaying, as well as Teal, Mallards and Greylags. There are also a scattering of Roe Deer feeding out on the marshes below us.

After tea in the evening we drive over to our mammal hide on the Rothiemurchus Estate where we scatter some bait around the hide and settle down inside to wait and see what mammals may be tempted in. It's not long before the first Wood Mouse appears feeding on some peanuts scattered on the ground at the front of the hide, and only a little later a superb Pine Marten scampers in and takes a hen's egg from the bird table and carries the egg off into the forest in its mouth. A few minutes later the Pine Marten returns and spends some 10 minutes feeding on the bird table on the peanuts, raisins and peanut butter that was put out by James as bait, before running off back into the darkness. What a cracking animal!

## Day 6

Today we drive over to the Moray coast via the moors above Grantown-on-Spey. A few Stonechat are seen as the road starts to cross the moorland and we also get some fantastic views of male and female Red Grouse calling and displaying near the road. On a nearby loch a stunning pair of Black-throated Divers are seen very close to the road, and several more skeins of Pink-footed Geese pass overhead on their way north. A fishing Osprey also gives us some great looks as it flies right over before gaining height and drifting off very high to continue it's migration flight.

Our next stop is down on the coast overlooking Burghead Bay where we see a few Long-tailed Duck offshore along with a scattering of Velvet Scoter, before we continue on around the coast to Burghead driving past a flock of eight Whooper Swans feeding in a roadside field as we go. In Burghead Harbour we find a great flock of some 50 Turnstone and a few Redshank roosting on the harbour wall, giving us some nice close views before we have lunch nearby on the foreshore near the maltings. During lunch here we see a few more Eider and also get nice close views of 11 Long-tailed Ducks just out from the beach; the flock includes several fine looking drakes in almost full summer plumage. The first male Wheatear of the spring also pitches in on the rocks below us briefly before flitting off.

At Hopeman Harbour we find another flock of 56 Turnstone roosting on the rocks and also a couple of Rock Pipit, before we drive around

to Lossiemouth estuary. There are more waders to be found here including Redshank, Ringed Plovers and a couple of Bar-tailed Godwit, and also some Wigeon and Teal. In amongst the large numbers of roosting gulls Craig spots an immaculate adult Iceland Gull glowing white amongst the other gulls, and we get some great close views as this scarce winter visitor drifts down the river channel, even bathing as it floats past us! We also get lovely views of a pair of Long-tailed Ducks, and can even hear the drake bird calling and displaying it's so close!

## Day 7

Today we leave the Steading behind to head west over to the magical island of Mull. The scenery is spectacular as we drive via Loch Laggan to Fort William and alongside Loch Linnhe before arriving into Oban in time for some lunch. Two cracking Iceland Gulls are in the harbour here as well as several Black Guillemots before we board the ferry and make the crossing over to Mull. The ferry crossing is pretty quiet bird wise but is sunny with a flat calm sea and stunning views over to the mountains of Mull.

Landing on Mull we drive down to the coast and have only been on the island for a matter of a few minutes when we spot our first two adult White-tailed Eagles circling over the estuary! We drive around to the far side of the estuary and are in position as both eagles soar low right overhead calling, giving us simply epic views! A Sparrowhawk even flies over and starts soaring with the eagles, though it is dwarfed by the huge birds, they really are flying barn doors! What a start to our time on Mull!

Moving on we drive down towards Grasspoint and pick up one of the eagles again, this time soaring in the distance. A few Stonechat are seen beside the road, along with lots of displaying Meadow Pipits and the fields have scattered herds of Red Deer feeding in them. Near the point a Raven flies over at speed calling, and the reason it is in such a hurry soon becomes obvious as it flies off into the distance only to mob one of the White-tailed Eagles circling a mile or so away! With time getting on we drive over to the hotel to settle in, and arrive in some lovely evening sunshine with a Chiffchaff singing from the hotel garden to greet us.

## Day 8

Our first full day on Mull dawns with early fog clearing to blue skies and sun, as we head out from the hotel. We drive north but have only gone a short distance when we spot three Ringtail Hen Harriers hunting over the hillside near the road, and get some prolonged views through the scopes as the harriers quarter back and forth low over the ground. Driving on around the coast we make another quick stop to take a look at five+ Common Seals that are hauled out on the rocks just offshore before driving up into a nearby glen. An adult Golden Eagle is seen here over a distant ridge opposite being pursued by a male Hen Harrier, and the raptor sightings just keep coming thick and fast as a White-tailed Eagle appears briefly over the forestry

plantation behind us along with two displaying Sparrowhawks, and a female Hen Harrier soars over mobbing a Common Buzzard! A little later two juvenile White-tailed Eagles fly right over, 'talon grappling' in midair before one of the young eagles lands opposite in amongst some sheep! The eagle gets constantly mobbed by Common Gulls whilst on the ground however, so soon takes off again chased by 10 Common Gulls!

We finally drag ourselves away from this 'raptorfest' to head over to Loch na Keal for lunch where we see a Great Northern Diver out on the loch and a superb pair of Golden Eagles circling over the mountainside. We also watch the female eagle through the scopes sat high up on her cliff top eyrie as another Golden Eagle soars over high up, mobbed by three Buzzards! From here we drive alongside Loch Na Keal where we see at least 20 Wheatears along the edge of the loch and also plenty of Meadow Pipits and Skylarks on the shore. Another four Great Northern Divers are also seen along with Curlew and two Red Breasted Mergansers. We drive under the imposing Gribun cliffs and drop over to Loch Beg where we pass a large raft of Eiders off shore before heading through Glen More. Near Lochdon Craig spots a stunning male Hen Harrier hunting right by the road, what a great end to the day!

## Day 9

Today is another gorgeous sunny day on Mull with a little early mist and low cloud. This morning we drive through Glen More where we get great views of three Golden Eagles (one immature female, one adult male and one adult female) soaring right over head and low over the crags above us. At one point we see the immature eagle chasing, swooping and talon grappling with the adult male in midair before heading off, an incredible sight to behold! As we head down out of the glen, a male Hen Harrier is hunting beside the road before we arrive at Loch Beg where we see Redshank and also another two Great Northern Divers. A little further on at Loch Scridain another Great Northern Diver is on the loch and we get fantastic views of five migrant Greenshank roosting on the rocks by the shore. There are plenty of Red-breasted Mergansers also on the loch, and a huge juvenile White-tailed Eagle flies over as well as another two Golden Eagles soaring high up.

From here we drive back through Glen More and stop to take in the wonderful views overlooking the three lochs. We also see a distant White-tailed Eagle here before we drive over to Loch Spelve. Here there are Oystercatcher, Lapwings and two Turnstone along the shore, as well as Wheatear and Rock Pipits as we take our lunch by the loch in the sun. Just off shore we see a Grey Seal and also a Black Guillemot, and watch three White-tailed Eagles (one adult, two juveniles) soaring over the ridge opposite. There are also several Yellowhammers seen in the gorse bushes around the croft nearby. After lunch we drive around to the far side of Loch

Spelve along the narrow single track road that hugs the shore. A few Curlew and Red-breasted Mergansers are seen but it is otherwise quiet so we drive back down to Loch Beg for a short time where we enjoy the views and the sunshine beside the loch before heading back to the hotel.

## Day 10

It is another sunny day on Mull this morning and after loading all the luggage at the hotel we drive north towards Tobermory and make a detour up into one of the glens. The first four Sand Martins of the spring are hawking insects over the road and a commotion among the Common Gulls alerts us as a stunning first year Golden Eagle takes off, mobbed by 10 Common Gulls, as well as Lapwing and Curlew! We get amazing views as it glides very low over the ground hunting rabbits in the field, and watch it hunting for some time. Simply incredible views! A Common Crossbill flies over calling and a male Siskin display flights overhead in the sun before we drive up to Tobermory for some sightseeing and shopping. From Tobermory we drive down to Fishnish where several Willow Warblers are singing by the ferry terminal, and Katrina spots a Red Admiral Butterfly here. From here we board the ferry across the Sound of Mull to Lochaline where we take lunch, then drive back via the Corran ferry and Fort William and finally up to Speyside at the end of a fantastic trip.

**Species Of The Trip:** Hen Harrier, Merlin, Golden Eagle, Ptarmigan, Iceland Gull, Black-Throated Diver, Mountain Hare.

**Place Of The Trip:** Mull, Glen Aros, Findhorn Valley, Cairngorm, River Feshie walk.

**Magic Moment:** White-tailed Eagle, White-tailed Eagle after 5 mins on Mull! Loch Insh Osprey, Hunting juv Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier mobbing Buzzard!, Close Ptarmigan, Close Mountain Hare, Finding Common Lizard.

## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Little Grebe  
Slavonian Grebe  
Fulmar  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Pink-footed Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Shelduck  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Tufted Duck  
Greater Scaup  
Eider  
Long-tailed Duck  
Velvet Scoter  
Goldeneye  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
Red Kite  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
Hen Harrier  
Goshawk  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Golden Eagle  
Osprey  
Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
Red Grouse  
Ptarmigan  
Black Grouse  
Capercaillie  
Red-legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Moorhen  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Common Snipe  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Turnstone  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Iceland Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Black Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Rock Dove  
Wood Pigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Skylark  
Swallow  
Sand Martin  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Wren  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Wheatear  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Chiffchaff  
Willow Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Long-tailed Tit



Crested Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Trecreeper  
Magpie  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Redpoll sp  
Common Crossbill  
Bullfinch  
Yellowhammer  
Reed Bunting

**TOTAL BIRDS: 112**

## **MAMMALS**

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

## **AMPHIBIANS/REPTILES**

Common Toad  
Common Lizard

## **BUTTERFLIES/MOTHS**

Red Admiral  
Peacock  
Small Tortoiseshell  
Orange Underwing

Green Tiger Beetle

**TOTAL SPECIES: 131**