

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

MULL AND SPEYSIDE EASTER

12th - 22nd April 2017

Leaders: Craig Round & Duncan Macdonald

Guests: Sarah Sharland, Diana Smith, Jan Walshaw, Franky & David Perry, Don Mills, Alison Cawley & John Scotford, Maureen & Ted Cawley.

Day 1 After all meeting up at the steading, we enjoy our first delicious evening meal from chef Sharon and afterwards Duncan and Craig outline the plans for the week ahead.

Day 2 Our first full day dawns cool and cloudy with a cold breeze blowing, but the birding starts right outside the front door! A flock of eight Common Crossbill along with masses of Redpoll and Siskin are feeding in the Birch trees right behind the Steading and a single Redwing is seen, as we head out to take a short walk in the Pine forest around some local lochans. Not a bad start!

At the lochans a pair of Goldeneye are seen along with more Siskins, Coal Tit, Redpoll and Goldcrest all calling in the trees around the car park and another flock of five Crossbill fly over along with a couple of Oystercatcher. We also come across a very large and noisy flock of Redpoll feeding in the Scots Pine trees right overhead, which is some sight!

After a welcome warm drink back at the steading we head out again and drive up into the mountainous Findhorn Valley. On our drive up into the glen we see a Brown Hare along with Oystercatcher, Curlew and Lapwing in the roadside fields and both Grey and Pied Wagtail and a pair of Goosander along the river. A little further on we stop to watch a Red Kite soaring, when suddenly an immature White-tailed Eagle appears over the ridge opposite mobbed by Common Gulls! We get great views of this huge 'barn door' of a raptor as it is mobbed in the air by three or four Common Buzzards and even a crazy pair of kamikaze Greylag Geese! The upland scenery gets even more dramatic as we drive higher into the glen in between the showers, and have lunch beside the river. During lunch the raptor sightings keep coming and we get good views of two Golden Eagles soaring over the hills, before they both drift off.

After lunch we take advantage of a window of brighter weather in between the showers, and take a walk out onto the hill. There are more Oystercatchers in the fields as we walk and we find at least five well camouflaged Mountain Hares hunkering down out of the wind, as well as a few Mountain Goats.

Driving back out of the glen another immature White-tailed Eagle glides over, and we watch it circling for some time before it finally disappears into the clouds, and a Dipper is seen briefly flying down the river, along with a Red Squirrel that runs under the wheels of Duncan's van but somehow escapes unscathed!

Day 3

This morning we drive over to the Moray Firth and Cromarty Firth coast on the Black Isle near Inverness, but enroute have to make a stop at a layby on the A9 as incredibly an immature White-tailed Eagle is soaring low right over the main road, being mobbed by no less than four Red Kites and a Common Buzzard! What a sight! Just amazing! It is probably one of the young eagles we saw yesterday and a sight that will live in the memory for a long time!

Next stop is on the Black Isle where we see another two Red Kites soaring at North Kessock as well as hearing both Blackcap and Chiffchaff singing, before we take in some farmland, seeing several smart Yellowhammers along with Reed Bunting and another Red Kite. Dropping down to the coast at Avoch we find six Long-tailed Duck offshore along with a few Wigeon and Red-breasted Merganser and a single Swallow that flies past.

We continue on around to Chanonry Point overlooking the narrowest part of the inner Moray Firth, and take a walk out along the beach to the point. At least four Bottlenose Dolphins are just off the point and we get some great views as they surface just out from the beach, along with a Grey Seal that pokes its head up. Also here a flock of Knot fly past heading out of the firth along with a few Kittiwake and three Long-tailed Duck.

Our next stop of the day is for lunch at the RSPB Reserve at Udale bay. It's high tide, and there are flocks of Pink-footed Geese out in the bay, and a good selection of waders including Redshank, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Curlew along with a single Dunlin and Greenshank. Several Shelduck are seen and there are good numbers of Wigeon just out from the hide and a rarity in the shape of a smart drake American Wigeon, which gives us some lovely close views in the sunshine. Smart! Another two or three Red Kites are soaring over the fields behind the bay and there are also Linnets, Meadow Pipits and Skylarks here.

As it starts to rain we drive alongside the Cromarty Firth and stop to scan out for birds every so often as we go. We find a large raft of 700+ Greater Scaup offshore along with four+ Long-tailed Duck as well as both male and female Eider. Near Cromarty Bay we get great close views of a pair of summer plumaged Long-tailed Duck just offshore and as we drive back over the Black isle another Red Kite is seen along with a cracking Glaucous Gull that is in a ploughed field beside the road.

Day 4

Today starts with a large flock of 50+ Crossbill including some lovely brick red plumaged males, calling and singing from the trees right outside the steading! Several crossbills from the flock drop in to drink from the burn at the back of the Steading, giving us some great views. Lovely stuff!

From here we drive over the moors seeing quite a few Red Grouse right beside the road along with a Stonechat, and stop for a hot drink beside Lochindorb. It's very windy here with some heavy squally showers coming through but we still see several Redshank along the shore and an Osprey hovering, fishing over the loch as well as a few Sand Martins and House Martins.

Continuing on down to the Moray coast, our next stop is for lunch along the foreshore at Burghead, where we scan out to sea for any passing birds. There are Gannets flying past close in and we also see a few Razorbill, Guillemot, Long-tailed Duck, Kittiwakes, five Sandwich Terns, Red-breasted Merganser and a raft of Eiders just offshore, as rain squalls roll in off the sea. There are also small flocks of Turnstone and Redshank feeding on the rocks nearby.

From here we drive around to check the harbour, and get good views of a flock of 20 Turnstone roosting on the harbour wall along with a Rock Pipit here, before making our next stop at Hopeman.

It's fairly quiet here though we do see two Razorbill close inshore and a single Fulmar flies past, before we move on again around the coast to Lossiemouth. Here we see another Rock Pipit along with more Eiders offshore, passing Gannets and a flyby Red-throated Diver before we move around to take a look at Lossiemouth Estuary.

There are lots of roosting Gulls, mainly Herring Gulls on the estuary here, and scanning through the waders we find Oystercatcher, Redshank, and single Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot, and Greenshank, along with small numbers of Wigeon and Teal.

Our final stop of the day is at Findhorn Bay, which proves quiet due to disturbance from the kite surfers that are out in the bay, but we manage to see both Shelduck and a distant skein of Pink-footed Geese before we head back.

Day 5

It's a fairly cool and damp start this morning, as we take a walk in some local Pine forest, where we get fantastic views through the scopes of a pair of Crested Tits excavating their nest at the base of a dead Scots Pine tree. Around 10 Crossbills are also seen and heard flying over the trees. Light rain soon starts to fall, however, so with the weather now a bit 'iffy' we head to the Inshriach Alpine nursery to warm up over coffee and cake! The other advantage to coming here of course is the great views we get of Red Squirrel along with lots of birds including Siskin, Chaffinch and Great Spotted Woodpecker on the feeders here!

After tea and cake we drive up onto Cairngorm to look for some of the special birds of these high hills.

Our first stop is slightly lower on the mountain, and we are soon getting some cracking views of two male Ring Ouzels calling and singing, also from here there are Red Grouse calling and we see two Golden Eagles soaring and 'roller coaster' displaying high over Strath Nethy, fantastic!

We park higher up on the mountain and have lunch, seeing three Red Grouse fly over the car park before taking the Funicular railway up the hill to the Ptarmigan Visitor Centre and ski area. There is still quite a lot of snow up here but finally we manage to pick out a female Ptarmigan feeding amongst the boulders, giving good views through the scopes and also a female Ring Ouzel, before we make our way back down the mountain to the shelter of the trees beside Loch Morlich, in the shadow of Cairngorm. A small flock of eight+ Sand Martins are hawking over the loch and there are also a pair of Goldeneye here. And best of all we spot two superb summer plumaged Black-throated Divers out on the loch. What a couple of stunners!

Later on we head out from the steading again for a visit to our mammal hide, and on the drive out Duncan sees a Stoat that dashes across the steading track in front of his minibus! At the mammal hide after putting out the bait we settle in to await the first mammal visitors. A roding Woodcock flies over the hide as the light begins to fade before the first Wood Mice and Bank Voles show up snatching a peanut or two at the front of the hide, and a Brown Hare runs through.

Soon the first Badger arrives and ambles in to feed on the scattered peanuts outside the hide followed by another three Badgers! One adventurous Badger even climbs the tree outside the hide 'bear like' after the lure of the peanut butter bait! Sadly though, this time the Pine Marten remains elusive and fails to show, so finally bleary eyed we head off to our beds.

Day 6

It's an early start this morning as we head out for a visit to a local Black Grouse lek. It's definitely worth the early start though as we get some great views of no less than nine male Black Grouse out on the lek, as well as two female Black Grouse or 'Greyhens' that also drop in onto the lek and another two females that are feeding in the tops of the larch trees nearby. The views are stunning through the telescopes as the birds strut and posture in display below the dramatic backdrop of mountains in the glen, it really is a fantastic sight! Whilst we watch the Grouse, skein after skein of Pink-footed Geese are coming in over the Cairngorms pushing north, and we also see two Goshawk displaying over the hillside opposite, before flying across the glen. What a stunning morning! Then it's back to the Steading to warm up and enjoy some well earned breakfast and take on some much needed caffeine!

After breakfast the first Tree Pipit of the Spring is heard singing below the Steading, as we head out again for our next stop to check on the progress of one of our local pairs of Ospreys. Here we get great views of the male and female Osprey sitting on the nest through the telescopes, and we are also lucky to see the male Osprey flying back in onto the nest carrying a stick! Also whilst here Swallows and Sand Martins are hawking over the loch, a pair of Goldeneye are displaying, two Redshank fly over and we also see Tufted Duck, Grey Wagtail, and a Willow Warbler is heard singing.

Moving on to a spot overlooking Loch Insh a superb flock of 17 migrating Whooper Swans fly right over calling, heading North and also another small flock of Pink-footed Geese also heading North. Out on the loch an inland Strathspey scarcity, in the shape of a male Long-tailed Duck in winter plumage is found amongst the Tufted Duck along with two distant Red-throated Divers, Goosander, Mute Swan and 50+ Sand Martins over the loch. There are also two Barnacle Geese in with four Canada Geese out on the loch and a single Ringed Plover with a small flock of Oystercatcher.

Moving on to another local freshwater loch. Here we see numerous Sand Martins hawking over the surface of the loch in the cool and breezy weather, as well seeing more displaying Goldeneye, Tufted Ducks, Oystercatcher, displaying Lapwing and no less than four Little Grebes.

For lunch we drive down to spot alongside the River Spey, where we see a Dipper perched on the wooden struts of the bridge across the river, before we move back into the forest near Loch Garten and take a walk amongst the Caledonian Pine Forest. There are more Goldeneye and also a few Teal out on Loch Garten, and on our walk in the woods we hear several Common Crossbill calling as they fly over, and also hear a brief call from a Crested Tit, but with the weather rapidly closing in with sleet, snow and rain showers starting to fall and the temperature dropping we decide to head to the shelter of the hide overlooking Insh Marshes. From the lookout here we see several Roe Deer out on the marshes, but its otherwise quiet so we head back to base to warm up!

Day 7

Today we leave the Steading behind to head west over to the magical island of Mull. The scenery is spectacular with snow on the mountain tops as we drive via Loch Laggan passing Ben Nevis to Fort William and alongside Loch Linnhe before arriving into Oban. We get good views of two Black Guillemots in the harbour here as we take lunch, before we board the ferry and make the crossing over to Mull. During the ferry crossing we pick out several more Black Guillemots as well as Shag, Guillemots and Gannet, before we land on Mull where we drive down to the coast and make a stop overlooking the estuary and hills beyond. Here we see a female Red-breasted Merganser on the estuary as well as Curlew and Shelduck and a little further on see both Wheatear and Stonechats as well as Swallow and Meadow Pipits. A skein of Pink-footed Geese are seen passing north up the Sound of Mull and an Osprey is watched hovering over Loch Don and being mobbed in the air by Oystercatchers! As we head back towards the hotel a female Hen Harrier is seen hunting over a ridge opposite briefly, followed by a sighting of another female Hen Harrier before we get to the hotel to check in.

Day 8

Our first full day on Mull starts damp and misty, as we drive out from the hotel this morning and head up the road, making our first stop a short distance away up the coast. At our first stop to have a scan about, a male Hen Harrier is seen briefly flying over a ridge in the distance and there are two Great Northern Divers out in the bay here along with a small raft of Eiders.

The sun finally comes out and the cloud lifts as we make our next stop a little further down the coast. Here we get fantastic views through the scopes as a dog Otter swims in and clambers out onto a small skerry offshore, sprainting on top of the rocks before slipping back into the sea! Fantastic! We also see at least nine Common Seals hauled out on the rocks, and there are a couple more Red-breasted Merganser offshore. Three Curlew also fly over together with a few Oystercatcher.

Moving on again the road hugs the shore and we get nice views of male and female Eiders from the road as well as more waders, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew, another Great Northern Diver and Red-breasted Mergansers.

From here we drive up along a nearby glen, and get lovely close views of pair of Goosander on the river, we also pass a smart pair of newly arrived Wheatear and two female Hen Harriers are seen hunting over the ridge above the road. Stopping a little further up the glen for a hot drink we see another female Hen Harrier hunting over the low ground nearby and getting mobbed before drifting off, and a Golden Eagle circles high over the ridge opposite, as another Golden Eagle is seen perched on the same ridge! Phew! What a morning for raptors already!

From here we drop back down to the coast, and see two White-tailed Eagles an adult and an immature soaring majestically over the Sound of Mull, before we make our next stop.

Here we get fantastic views through the scopes of an adult White-tailed Eagle sat on its nest and at the same time another two adult White-tailed Eagles soar over in the distance! We drive up into Glenmore, and take our lunch in the sun surrounded by dramatic peaks and some stunning scenery. The eagle sightings just keep coming here and incredibly we see another nine White-tailed Eagles, two Golden Eagles, three Hen Harriers (2 males 1 Female) and a Sparrowhawk just whilst having lunch! The views are just amazing as we watch one adult White-tailed Eagle soar right overhead and four immature White-tailed eagles in the air together! The two adult Golden Eagles we see also fly right over us and one does it's full 'roller coaster' display directly overhead! Just breathtaking raptor action! Also whilst here we get good views of two Tree Pipits displaying from the tops of the trees and a Willow Warbler is singing.

At the other end of the glen we stop for a hot drink again and get some simply amazing views of a pair of Golden Eagles soaring right overhead and perched on the crags above us, with some breathtaking views through the telescopes of these stunning birds. We also see the adult male Golden Eagle take off to chase an intruding adult White-tailed Eagle out of the glen and it's territory!

Whilst watching the eagles other raptors show up and we get great views of a pair of Hen Harriers gliding along above us and another Sparrowhawk, before as the weather and low cloud starts to close in again we head back to base, after what has been a mind bending day on Mull for birds of prey!

Day 9

Today is a cooler and breezier day with sunny spells as we head out, making our first stop overlooking the estuary at Loch Don. scanning out over the estuary we pick out a stunning flock of 63 Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits all in summer plumage, as well as seven Bar-tailed Godwit. A cracking male Merlin is perched on a fencepost whilst watching the waders and we also see more Curlew and Oystercatcher. An adult White-tailed Eagle flies over followed by another two adult White-tailed Eagles that fly right across the estuary, looking epic against the mountains beyond before dropping down out of sight a short distance away. We follow the direction the Eagles flew in and drive around to the other side of the estuary, and there they are! Bingo! A pair of adult White-tailed Eagles perched only a short distance away on top of a dry stone wall! We get some incredible views through the scopes and can see and hear the birds calling before they both fly off and are mobbed by a flock of Greylag Geese! What is it with kamikaze Greylag Geese and Eagles this trip!

From here we drive through Glenmore and drop down to the shores of the loch, getting nice views of a pair of Curlew here. As we approach the head of the loch an immature White-tailed Eagle glides right over and drops in to join another two immature White-tailed Eagles on the rocks nearby! We get great views of the three perched eagles through the scopes as they are ganged up on by a gang of Hooded Crows who cheekily stroll right up to the eagles several times and tweak their tail feathers! Just when we think it can't get any better the Eagles take off and two of them take it in turns to hover directly over a swimming Otter right in front of us diving down and almost snatching the Otter out of the water! Then suddenly we have two Otters and three White-tailed Eagles all in the same binocular view! The first two Otters swim off up the loch but another two Otters are seen including one that clambers out onto the rocks opposite and giving us some lovely views through the scopes.

We drive around following the loch shore and take lunch, seeing at least five Great Northern Divers including one in summer plumage as well as more Red-breasted Mergansers. The weather by now is turning a little damp and misty as we drop down to Loch na Keal, making a stop to take in the great view out to the Treshnish Isles and down to Iona. Driving alongside Loch na Keal and under the dramatic Gribun Cliffs we see at least another nine Great Northern Divers out on the loch, more Red-breasted Merganser, as well as a numerous Wheatear and a small flock of five Twite. A little further on an adult White-tailed Eagle flies over and lands on the hillside above us mobbed by a Raven at the same time as a dog Otter clambers out onto a small skerry offshore, rolling around on its back in the seaweed to clean its coat!

At our last stop of the day at the head of the loch for a hot drink, another White-tailed Eagle flies across the loch mobbed by gulls and we pick out two Slavonian Grebes offshore as a Cuckoo calls from the oak woodland nearby.

Day 10

Today sadly we have to leave Mull to head back to Speyside, so after loading all the luggage into the vans at the hotel, we drive up for some sightseeing in Tobermory. Enroute we make a brief stop along the coast, seeing Eiders, Red-breasted Mergansers, and two Great Northern Divers as well as a porpoising Common Seal, and Swallows and Sand Martins hawking low over the sea below us in the damp and rainy weather. After some time taking in the delights of Tobermory we drive back down the coast seeing a brief Whimbrel along the shore and also a Peregrine that flies right over the road and out across the Sound of Mull as an immature White-tailed Eagle also flies over, before we catch the first of our ferries at Fishnish back to Lochaline on the mainland

Landing at Lochaline we begin the drive through some stunning scenery of the Morvern peninsular and via the Corran Ferry and Fort William and finally back to the Steading.

Species Of The Trip: White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Ring Ouzel, Goshawk, Eider, Sandwich Tern, Ptarmigan, Crested Tit.

Place Of The Trip: Mull! Gribun Cliffs, Loch Beg, Loch Don, Atlantic Oak woods, Morvern, Glenfeshie lek, Rothiemuchus forest.

Magic Moment: Black Grouse lek, Mountain Hare, Badger appearing at the hide, Crossbill flock at steading, Pink-footed Geese heading north, Peregrine making the set of raptors, Bottlenose Dolphins, Crested Tit excavating nest, Crested Tit with a crest, three juvenile White-tailed Eagles mobbing/attacking Otters!

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Barnacle Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
American Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Greater Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
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
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Dunlin
Common Snipe
Woodcock
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Redshank
Greenshank
Common Sandpiper
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Glaucous Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Tawny Owl
Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Swallow
Sand Martin
House Martin

Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Tree Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
Ring Ouzel
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Blackcap
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treecreeper
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite
Redpoll sp
Common Crossbill

Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting

Total Birds: 127

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Bank Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Stoat
Otter
Badger
Bat sp
Feral/Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

Total Species: 144