

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

MULL & SPEYSIDE EASTER

20-30 APRIL 2011

Guides: Craig Round; Steve Willis

Guests: Audrey Adams, David King, Jane & Mark Fisher, Shirley & Paul Graber, Helen & Bernie Bedford

Day 1 Our trip begins at the Steading in stunning Glen Feshie. The group arrive through the afternoon and by early evening everyone is here and we settle down to a fine dinner. There is much talk about the forthcoming trip exploring local sites in Speyside then venturing west to the Isle of Mull.

Day 2 We start the first full day with a walk around the immediate surroundings of the Steading. A Brown Hare bolts from its form across the fields away from us. As we walk down to the River Feshie we pass through Alder woodland alive with the chatter of Siskin and the melodious song of Tree Pipit. David notices some activity in the grass and finds a Common Lizard. He manages to pick it up and its bright underside shows it is a male. Craig hears a Redstart and after a short search we have found the bird sitting proud on the top of a tree. A Treecreeper's high pitched call also gives its position away. The highlight of our walk is the Osprey nest that sits just a few hundred metres from the Steading. We watch the female bird sat tight on the nest and Steve and Craig agree it looks like she is incubating eggs.

After a cuppa in the sun back at the Steading we drive up into the Findhorn. On the way we watch a pair of Red Grouse in moorland alongside the road. They show well and the photographers in the group snap away at them until we move on. In the lower valley we watch numerous Lapwing displaying over the fields. As we scan the fields we notice some Deer grazing in an area of cleared forest, they are Sika! With the scopes set upon the small herd we watch them for a wee while, interrupted only by a Sparrowhawk passing over the group.

Onwards up the glen we pass Common Sandpiper in display flight over the river and get to the end of the road. Over lunch we settle down and scan the skies overhead. After a while Craig shouts 'Eagle!' as a Golden Eagle shows some distance away. Sadly it does not show any closer so we take a walk to seek out some other upland specialities. On a heather clad slope across the glen we stop to have a scan for Mountain Hare. Craig and Steve

look and look and eventually each find a Hare. They show pretty well in the scope but are not close enough for the photographers. Mark and David start a stalk, creeping up the hill towards the animal. Directed by the group below they eventually get right up to where the Hare is sitting. Sadly they don't realize how close they are and startle the Hare which races up the hill away from them.

We depart the Glen and head back to the Steading. On the way we stop at what the guides nickname Dipper Bridge and sure enough we find a couple of Dipper showing well. An excellent first day!

At dusk Steve is outside and watches a Woodcock zip past 'beeping' it's way around it's territory. The Woodcock's alleged appearance will become a sore point over the week.....

Day 3

Today we explore the Black Isle north of Inverness. At our first stop Craig sees a small group of Sandwich Tern loafing on moorings. We visit Chanonry Point in the hope of some Bottlenose Dolphins and it does not disappoint! There is a buzz of excitement when we get there and we walk a short way out to the end of the point. Here we are treated to a fantastic display from the local Dolphins some just metres away from us. There is a great deal of activity from a scattered pod and sometimes some boisterous leaping and splashing. This is keeping the crowds and photographers very happy indeed! Tearing ourselves away we check out what else is around. White Wagtail are flitting around the shore and Bernie and Helen find some waders. These turn out to be Dunlin and Turnstone and we all get great views of these passage migrants. Shirley points out some small birds nearby and they turn out to be a small flock of Linnet.

On the north side of the Black Isle we spend some time watching seaduck on the Cromarty Firth. We find massive flocks of Scaup and amongst them there are scattered Long-tailed Duck. Udale Bay has hundreds of Pink-footed Geese feeding in the saltmarsh. We also find Wigeon, Oystercatcher, Curlew, and Redshank. Alongside us on dry land we are joined by both Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer.

One thing all the group have commented on is that the Bluebells this far north are well behind those at home further south.

Day 4

It's an early start today to seek out the elusive Capercaillie! We leave the Steading at 5am and make our way to the RSPB's Loch Garten reserve. From their purpose built hide we don't have long to wait before a big male 'Caper' appears! With our own scopes and those of the RSPB set up on the bird we all watch the male doing a fine display. The sun rises behind the

famous Osprey nest so we take it as our cue to leave. We have another Grouse species to seek out before breakfast! Just a short way up the Glen from the Steading we have unique access to a Black Grouse lek. To Steve and Craig's horror there is not a bird to be seen on the lek site when we arrive! A closer inspection reveals black heads popping up through the heather all around the lek. Within a minute there are more than 20 males strutting their stuff on the short turf. Amazingly, two females come in and all hell breaks loose amongst the males! Helen can't help finding the whole performance quite comical and rightly so!

After breakfast back at HQ we make our way out again to explore some local wetlands and woodlands. At Avielochan we are thrilled with stunningly close views of a pair of Slavonian Grebe. These smart little birds show beautifully and again our photographers are thrilled! Paul finds a female Goldeneye on the far side of the loch.

On a seasonal wetland at Boat of Garten we find another Grebe, this time a Little Grebe. Joining it are Greylag Geese, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Curlew, and Redshank all breeding on this small patch of water and mud! Wigeon and Coot are also present, the latter on a massive nest.

We stop for lunch by the River Spey. Sand Martin hawk for insects over the river and we inspect some Otter spraints by the water. Apart from some calamitous kayakers there is not much else to see here so after we finish lunch we move on.

We return to Abernethy Forest for a walk in the ancient pinewoods. From the Loch Mallachie trail we walk along looking and listening for Crested Tit and Crossbill. We manage to hear 'Cresties' high in the canopy but they elude us! We do, however, find some Crossbills high in a pine. It's hard to tell visually but it looks promising that they are the Scottish type!

David is keen to see the Woodcock so gives it a little bit of time at dusk but sadly to no avail.

Day 5

The fair weather is continuing, so today we decide to climb up into the Cairngorms. We are seeking out some elusive upland specialities, Dotterel and Ptarmigan. On our way up the road to the Cairngorm Ski Centre we stop to search for Ring Ouzel. It's a little early in the year but worth a look. Alas no Ouzel but David does see a Black Grouse in flight.

Our walk climbs steadily and on the way we see some Wheatear and get excellent views of Red Grouse. To the whole groups surprise we also find some Mallard wandering about Heather moorland at over 2,000 feet!

As we climb higher the vegetation thins and there are more and more boulders, perfect Ptarmigan habitat. Steve stops and sees a male Ptarmigan walking slowly amongst the granite boulders. This is a 'first' for many of the group and this magical mountain specialist enthralls us. Shortly afterwards Mark finds another male and alongside it Bernie picks up a female! All these birds are in slightly different stages of moult so some show more white feathers than others.

Higher up we walk across the mossy plateau in the hope of Dotterel. No luck sadly, but it is still early in the year. Just days before Steve has seen some on a neighbouring range and these were the first of the year. Whilst we don't find any Dotterel we do see two more distant Ptarmigan. We turn around and make our way back to the van. The day is turning into a celebration of Ptarmigan as we find yet another pair of birds! These are right alongside the path and happily feeding away oblivious to us and the many hillwalkers. Cameras are out and the birds are snapped by most of the group. What a day!

Shirley preferred taking it easy back at the Steading and has been a wee walk at Uath Lochans. She is delighted to have found Crested Tit all by herself so has definitely not missed out on some great wildlife.

Our day is far from over though, after dinner we make our way to our exclusive mammals watching hide on Rothiemurchus Estate. We get in around 8.30 and settle down. We don't have long to wait, Mark raises the alarm when a Pine Marten comes in within just 15 minutes! It's a big male. Given how early it is, it is still nearly full daylight, so we can all watch it easily. It picks up an egg and then dashes off through the woodland and out across a clearing. Given the grass is still very short we enjoy stunning views of the Marten moving stealthily through the woods. Some time later a Badger appears and feeds quietly just metres from us. It's been an amazing day so once the Badger has fed and left we make a move back to the Steading for a well earned rest!

Day 6

We explore some moorland above Strathspey this morning. We start at Lochindorb where we find Red Grouse galore! Mark and David get some great photos of Grouse right by the road. We hope to find Black-throated Divers on the loch but as hard as Craig and Steve try they just can't see any. Driving alongside the loch we find Lapwing, Common Sandpiper, and Redshank all at close quarters.

Our route takes us north over the moorland to the Moray Coast. Our first port of call (no pun intended!) is Burghead. Offshore we can see Common Eider and find a small number of Long-tailed Duck. There are seabirds too,

Bernie can see Fulmar and Kittiwake and Gannets stand out even at a considerable distance. Guillemots and Razorbills can just be seen as well. There are birds feeding on the shore's edge very close to us, Maureen picks up White Wagtail amongst the resident Pied Wagtail. There are also Rock Pipit hopping about around the shore.

We visit Lossiemouth and watch the estuary of the Lossie. There is a sizeable gull roost here and after a careful scan we confirm they are all just the expected gulls of Greater and Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Common, and Black-headed and no white-winged rarities. There are however, some nice close waders. The highlights of these are Dunlin in full breeding plumage.

Still no sign of that Woodcock.....

Day 7

We depart Speyside bound for the west coast. It's a scenic drive and the landscape noticeably changes character as we travel west and to the lush areas at the coast. Nearing Oban, Craig pulls in off the road as he has heard a Grasshopper Warbler! We make our way along the road and get brief views of this diminutive warbler.

At Oban we board the Cal Mac ferry for the short crossing to the Isle of Mull, our home for the next three days.

Ferry's can be excellent platforms for wildlife watching and this crossing proves productive for some good sightings! Even before we leave the harbour we find Black Guillemot (aka Tystie) feeding alongside the quay. Lesser Black-backed Gulls follow the ferry allowing a very close look! The sea is incredibly calm and just as Steve points out how Harbour Porpoise will show well in these conditions one swims past us! These animals are notoriously hard to predict and spend little time at the surface but despite that most folk see the Porpoise.

We arrive on Mull at Craignure. There is the usual hustle and bustle of a ferry arriving on an island but we soon leave that behind and drive a short way to Grasspoint. On the way around the coast road we pass some big bays and standing right in the middle of one of them is a big Red Deer stag! At our next stop Steve finds a scattered herd of Red Deer on the opposite hill. We are distracted from this by hearing a Cuckoo a short distance away, the first of the year for some of the group. A Buzzard soars over the hill near the Deer and then suddenly a larger raptor catches our eye, Golden Eagle! There are two of them far away but we can follow them in the scopes.

Down at Grasspoint we get out the vans and look around to see what we can find. Craig scans the wooded horizon and soon finds an adult White-tailed Eagle sat in the top of a Birch tree! We set the scopes on this massive bird but it soon flies off. We follow it in flight and then watch as it joins another adult bird nearby! They sit for a while then take to the air allowing the whole group stunning views of this massive raptor.

What a start - welcome to Mull!

Day 8

Mark has been out early for his first day on Mull and has found some nice woodland walks near the hotel. Here he has found Bullfinch, Crossbill, and also a Cuckoo. After breakfast we make our way back to Grasspoint, stopping at a little estuary on the way. There is a Greenshank feeding very close to us, occasionally giving its distinctive call. Shirley turns up a Yellowhammer on the Gorse and we see Twite and a pair of Greenfinch.

We park up at Grasspoint and then walk a short way down to the rocky shore. On the way we pass scrubby Birch woods and boggy areas. We flush Snipe which dart away from us and the whole time we can hear Redpoll chattering. Down on the shore we set up the scopes and begin to search for Otter. It's mid-tide and there is a huge area of rocky shore to scan. After a few minutes Steve finds a couple of Otters playing in the water. We watch them some way off and then realise that there is a third Otter near the first two! It looks like two well grown pups with their mother. We all watch these beautiful animals but typically after a minute or two they vanish. Movement further away on the shore catches our eyes and it turns out to be Mountain Hares! There are at least two running around actually below the high tide mark! Odd behaviour!

We make our way back to the vans and have a cup of tea then set off again. Down the road we stop to look into the Birch woods above us where we find a huge White-tailed Eagle nest with an adult bird sat beside it. We don't hang about here, just have a quick look then move on. Just along the road both vans simultaneously screech to a halt. Steve in one van and Jane in the other have seen a stunning bird, a male Hen Harrier. It shows beautifully for a minute or two then flies out of sight.

Glen More is our next destination, an impressive glen surrounded by towering craggy slopes. At our lunch stop we have a quick look about. Craig looks directly overhead as there is some faint calling. It's more White-tailed Eagles! To our amazement it is a total of six! They are interacting and there is some playing and talon locking. Lunch is forgotten! Through the middle of this group pass two Golden Eagles which continue onwards out

of sight. We're just coming to terms with the six White-tails when another two fly in and join them! This is just incredible, and all under clear blue skies! We leave all these Eagles to it and drive down to the coast. Craig's van is in the lead and they stop alongside the road when they see an Otter slip off the rocks into the water. It does not go far and in fact seems to be hiding in the seaweed! It's hard to pin down but most of the group manage to see it amongst the eggwrack just metres away from us! Over Loch Spelve a White-tail travels overhead. We stop briefly then have a tea break down by Loch Uisge. As the group have a cuppa Steve and Craig go down to the Loch to scan the high ground. They have not been looking long when they both see an Eagle, this time a Golden Eagle! The group drop their cups and dash down to the shore to try and see the bird but it has passed out of sight. Their efforts are rewarded though, another White-tail appears and flies over the loch! We keep an eye on the ridge and after no more than 10 minutes or so the Golden Eagle reappears with a Hooded Crow in tow. The Crow is following as the Eagle is carrying a dead lamb! Steve is amazed by this, in all his years watching Golden Eagles he has never seen one carrying prey!

Altogether it's been an overwhelming day with so many Eagle sightings! We make our way back to the hotel to relax and get dinner.

Day 9

We start the day with a scan of the shore around Fishnish hoping for more Otter sightings. We don't find an Otter but a Golden Eagle passes over the hillside and then lands on a rock, a good start to the day! Just up the coast Craig's Eagle spotting eye is in overdrive as he finds a White-tailed Eagle circling over the forest. We have a quick look then make our way inland to Aros. Pulling off the road we look about and then find, sitting in the middle of a field, an adult White-tailed Eagle! It sits there somewhat nonchalantly and then gets up and flies within 100m of us. Cameras snap and it's a breathtaking view. It flies into a field behind us and as we follow it's path we see it is flying directly at another Eagle, a juvenile White-tail! What a place!

We drive over to Loch na Keil. We drive slowly along the lochside and then stop for lunch. We see another White-tail briefly. Shags are feeding offshore and we watch them and brush up on the differences between them and Cormorants. Steve finds a pair of Red-throated Divers and a Great Northern Diver much closer. David calls when he sees a White-tailed Eagle over a distant hill. We all take a closer look and then realise it is not alone, there are four more! All these flocks of eagles! Craig looks up the hill directly behind us and finds a much closer Golden Eagle. As it circles we manage to follow it in the scopes and soon another adult Goldie joins it as they soar high above us.

Our route back over towards Craignure takes us over high ground through some stunning mountain scenery. A Buzzard is mobbing a large bird just off from the road, it's an adult Golden Eagle! Pulling off the road we get classic views of an Eagle alongside the Buzzard and everyone easily sees the size difference. Craig's group are a wee way ahead and are lucky enough to get the eagle pass just overhead.

Down at Loch Scridain we stop at a safe distance from a White-tailed nest site. It's a massive heap of a nest high in the conifers. A scan of the clear sunny skies around us turns up more Eagles soaring far off, it is four Golden Eagles gliding up in a thermal!

This has been a truly staggering day, we tally up the Eagles and just today we have had 11 White-tailed and nine Golden. Neither of the guides have ever had so many before, or more importantly had such good views!

Day 10

Sadly we need to leave Mull today. We drive just up the road to Fishnish for the short ferry crossing to the mainland at Lochaline. We see some Common Seal from the ferry and then have our lunch when we get in. We sit at a picnic site nestled in Hazel woodland with Blackcaps singing nearby. It's a pleasant drive over Moidart back towards the Cairngorms. We get back late afternoon and we have enough time for a last walk around the Steading. Audrey heads for the Osprey nest where some of the rest of the group join her. There is a great deal of activity here with an interloping female passing by raising merry hell!

After dinner it's time to sit and review our amazing trip and try and decide on our species and place of the trip and also our Magic Moment. White-tailed Eagles win out as species of the trip with Pine Marten coming a close second. Glen Feshie scores highly as place of the trip with a few folk specifying the Blackcock lek. Finally choosing the Magic Moment proves tricky. Overwhelmingly, Mull's White-tails take the trophy but the Blackcock lek, the Golden Eagle with the lamb, and the local Ospreys also figure. All in all an amazing trip!

Now the group has just one more chance to see if that Woodcock will show up.....

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Ptarmigan
Black Grouse
Capercaillie
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Dunlin
Snipe
Woodcock
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank
Common Sandpiper
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Tawny Owl
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Tree Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Stonechat
Whinchat
Wheatear
Blackbird

Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Grasshopper Warbler
Blackcap
Whitethroat
Goldcrest
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Trecreeper
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite
Redpoll
Common Crossbill
Scottish Crossbill
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting

TOTAL BIRDS: 116

MAMMALS

Common Shrew
Short-tailed Vole
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Pine Marten
Otter
Badger
Feral Goat
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Roe Deer
Fallo Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

TOTAL SPECIES: 134