

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

NORTH EAST 250

23 – 30 MARCH 2019

Guides: Kate Mennie and Julian Sykes

Guests: Brian Haslem, Margaret Mowbray, John Duerden, Gillian and David Smith and Dave Thompson

Day 1 Julian and Kate meet in the morning then drive to Aberdeen via the Lecht. Blue skies show the surroundings well. After lunch, guests are met at Aberdeen train station and after doing many circles of the multi-storey car park, we drive out to Deeside on our way to our first accommodation. We stretch our legs at Glen Tanar and walk from the Visitor Centre for 90 minutes or so. We are greeted by Mistle Thrush, Oystercatcher and Buzzard, hearing lots of Goldfinch and Siskin. A walk up to the bridge is rewarded with sightings of Robin and Small Copper Butterfly. Over a distant hillside, three raptors are seen soaring, with initial thoughts being a Red Kite. Two Goshawk and a Buzzard attempting to ward them off as they soar above the hill. We discuss the size difference between the female and male, with the female taking the lead as the larger of the two. What a start to our holiday sightings!

We walk back along the river, where we see our first Dipper bathing, along with close sightings of Treecreeper and a pair of Long-tailed Tits. Continuing to Braemar we arrive at Braemar Lodge Hotel for our first of three nights. Over a lovely dinner we talk about the plan for the week ahead, looking at the NE250 route we will follow and places on route. Julian and Kate have a quick trip out later to look for the forecasted Aurora, with no green skies but plenty of stars filling the sky.

Day 2 The day starts with rain showers as we head east to the national nature reserve, Muir of Dinnet. A short walk and a hint of a surprise at the end of the path as we walk; a few early morning bird songs including Wren, Robin, Great Tit and Goldcrest. As we arrive at a dead-end, Kate leads most of the group through a gap between the rock formation and burn, using stepping stones as we go. One at a time we 'canyon' our way into the 'Burn o Vat', a hollowed-out formation eroded over time to create a cave with a waterfall running through the middle. Taking the careful route back through, we continue the path to the viewpoint. John spots some wild

Primrose on the path up. We reach the viewpoint that overlooks the reserve, Loch Kinord, and beyond, spotting two Sparrowhawks flying past. After getting the scopes set up, we see Whooper Swan, Black-headed Gulls and Greylag on the choppy waters of the loch. We take the path back down to the car park for our morning coffee.

With the temperature warming up, we take the next path to Loch Kinord, looking for basking Adders in the Birch trees on the way. Unfortunately, after a thorough search, the sun isn't quite warm enough for these amphibians. Passing fields, we have brilliant views of Lapwing, Meadow Pipit and two Red Kite circling us for much of the walk. We see Tufted Duck, Goldeneye and Grey Heron on Loch Kinord before we return to the car park. We have lunch in the warming sunshine, before the rain returns.

We drive out to Glen Muick as the sun pushes its way through. Margaret and Brian spot a few Roe Deer in the heather on the drive up to the car park, with Common Crossbill flitting between larch trees above the cars. Walking out towards Loch Muick, John and Julian stop as a large herd of Red Deer stags watch from the hillside close beside us. With the weather turning to hailstones and snow, we stride back towards the car park. Above some bird feeders at the visitor centre, a Red Squirrel waits patiently to get onto the nuts.

On our slow drive back up Glen Muick, Dave and Kate spot two Grouse up ahead beside the road, Black Grouse! Continuing our slow drive forward, more and more Blackcock appear on both sides of the road giving us close views. A final count from both sides of the road, comes to 30!

Taking the back roads, we pass the Royal gates of Balmoral Castle with a Red Squirrel on guard above! On our return to the hotel, we stop at Braemar Castle, to admire the architecture of this 'upside down' looking castle. Warming up back at the hotel, we go through our checklists and Black Grouse count. We discuss our early morning plans for a Black Grouse lek before an early bedtime.

Day 3

We wake around sunrise and travel to Glen Tanar, for an early morning Black Grouse lek. We meet Colin McClean and he leads us in his Landrover through the ancient trees on the estate out onto open moorland where Margaret spots Roe Deer jumping through the heather beside us and we pass a few Red Deer stags. As Colin leads us to the lek site, the sunshine appears and we are greeted by the sight of 19 Blackcock displaying. A few grey hens then appear making the males go into a frenzy. We also see

Snipe, Lapwing, Oystercatcher and Curlew among the waders, as well as Meadow Pipit. Just after talking to Colin about how we had yet to see any Red Grouse, the sound of their “go back, go back” echoes behind us allowing us to spot them.

We make our way back down through the forest after a successful morning and back to the hotel for breakfast. Out again whilst the sunshine is out, we head south towards Glenshee. Stopping on a couple of occasions to admire some Red Grouse. Reaching Glenshee car park, we look for Snow Bunting, sadly with no avail, but more Red Grouse showing well. With the chair lifts closed due to high winds we head uphill slightly by foot to get a better vantage point. After searching in the snow patches, we get scope views of camouflaged Ptarmigan high up. Feeling the urge to get closer views, Julian and David stride off uphill to the low snow patches. After watching them climb and return, a small group are seen flying downhill. A 20 minute scan from the car park proves that they really are the masters of camouflage. Lunch with a view is enjoyed before heading back down towards Braemar. We stop at a couple of parking areas where we have fantastic views of two Peregrine flying in and out of their nest site. Brian spots a herd of Stags lying down close to the road, posing for a photo or two.

As we take a side road back to Braemar, we stop across from Glen Callater where we see two Golden Eagles along a ridge. One is perched on a rock, very obliging as we look through the scopes, as the other continues to soar and attempts a hover above the other. We continue through Braemar and out west towards Linn O' Dee. David calls out, “what's that black thing in the tree?” A Black Grouse - taking our total for the holiday to 56 is perched in a Larch tree feeding next to the road. Going over the Linn Bridge we spot something dashing through the forest. A Brown Hare! - not somewhere you expect to see one. Parking up, two fleeting Crossbill fly off, giving most of us a very quick view. A short walk through the trees and a Great Spotted Woodpecker is drumming a standing tree directly in front of us. Driving back, a Jay flies across the road close to where the Black Grouse is still feeding. Stopping at Mar Lodge viewpoint, we watch the sunset over the River Dee, and see two Buzzards, Brown Hare, Robin and Song Thrush. Over a lovely last dinner at the Braemar Hotel, we discuss our journey towards the coast in the morning, as well as reliving some old music favourites.

Day 4

After a longer lie, we pack up and begin our journey north, stopping first on old military road with views back to Lochnagar. After a few minutes Margaret shouts “raptor” and as we swing round, a Peregrine skims close over our heads. A female Sparrowhawk flies by and a Buzzard follows.

We travel on towards the Lecht, stopping at 'The Watchers' viewpoint, part of the Snowroads installations - four seats built to shelter against the wind, positioned overlooking Corgarff Castle. Over the Lecht and down into Tomintoul for a comfort break before having coffee at the wader's bird hide. We watch the displaying Lapwing whilst having our shortbread. Continuing no more than a mile, a large flock of Thrushes fly overhead. Redwing is heard, with a mix of Mistle Thrush and Fieldfare landing in the nearby trees and field. Continuing past Glenlivet, Dave shouts "Grey Wagtail" which is our first spotted on the trip. As we pass Marypark, John spots a Hooded Crow in the field beside us.

Onwards and straight up to Lossiemouth to start our seaside journey where we have lunch overlooking the estuary. After all the sitting on the journey, Gillian gets some much needed step-counts in, which starts a step challenge between us. In the estuary, we are amongst many gulls, Lesser Black-backed and Greater Black-backed, Goosander, Wigeon, Teal and Bar-tailed Godwit. After lunch we start the 'step challenge' and head to the bird feeders located in Lossie woods. Three brightly coloured Yellowhammer greet us along with Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Wren and Robin.

We travel east to Spey Bay, stopping to look for Tree Sparrow in local gardens. We arrive at a windy, cold Spey Bay and search out to the choppy sea and in the estuary. Good views of Eider, Goldeneye, Shelduck, Gulls and Goosander. We travel on to Cullen Bay Hotel - overlooking the sea - for the next two-night stay.

Day 5

Our first coastal day begins with a search out to sea at breakfast, with a passing Magpie as our first bird. Leaving around 9am in the rain, we stop down at Cullen beach, where we have a lovely selection of seabirds. Close views of Long-tailed Duck, Eider, Red-throated Divers in winter plumage and a dozen flying Whooper Swan. On the rocks in front, some well camouflaged Turnstone. Dave also spots couple of Purple Sandpipers.

We continue east, where we reach the RSPB Reserve of Troup Head. A walk along the edge of the field, with displaying Skylark, we reach the cliffs. We are greeted by a chorus of Gannet and Kittiwake before we are even near the edge. On the cliffs, Razorbill, Guillemot and Fulmar are perched on their nest sites. A shout from Julian, "Puffin," gets us all excited as we watch them fly from the rocks and across the water down below. The weather now clears so we enjoy being in the company of so many seabirds and the only mainland colony of Gannets. Another shout, from Margaret, "raptors!" Two Peregrines fly over squabbling with each other.

We continue onto the other side of the hill to have our lunch out of the wind, with more views of Red-throated Diver.

Getting back to the vans, we head back west, stopping at Banff Harbour where we see our first Rock Pipit. On to Portsoy, made famous most recently for the filming location of the adaptation of 'Whisky Galore!' From a high vantage point we look out to sea, where we spot a distant Black Guillemot and Great Northern Diver. Portsoy is also famous for its ice cream, and what would a visit to the seaside be without an ice cream!? A sweet treat later, we head to Sandend, followed by a search for an abandoned castle. Driving past a farm we park up next to a sea of oil seed rape fields all in bloom. Beautiful, but not so good for hay fever sufferers like Kate! A walk down towards the blue sea, and we get our first glimpse of Findlater Castle - a 15th century castle built on the edge of the cliffs. We decide that the structure and paths don't look safe enough to walk to, so instead we admire the view out to sea, in the hope of some passing cetaceans. We travel back to the hotel and relax with the sun setting out of the bay windows.

Day 6

As we leave Cullen and the Moray Firth behind and head to the east coast, we stop at Banff Bridge for a final scan. We travel past Fraserburgh and stop south at Waters of Philorth. The reeds in the car park give us the chance to admire Reed Buntings and Skylark at eye level. Walking towards the dunes, David and Kate catch a glimpse of a mammal! They decide it is either a Stoat or Weasel, but with such a brief glimpse they can't confirm either way. Overlooking the dunes and North Sea, we have great views of Long-tailed Duck and a Great Northern Diver. A Kestrel also hovers silently overhead.

Onwards to where we spend the remainder of the day on the north east peninsula of Scotland. The RSPB Reserve of Loch of Strathbeg, home to thousands of Pink-footed Geese and migrants. First scan from the visitor centre, David alerts us of a Little Gull that is sitting with the Black-headed Gulls! A further scan reveals two Little Egret, Gadwall, Dunlin and a perched Peregrine on the empty Osprey nest. With the sun shining and temperature warm, we enjoy a short stroll to two wetland hides.

A walk back past hedgerows with Skylark and Linnet to the hides, brings us closer to ducks, such as Shoveler and Gadwall, then back to the car park for lunch. Our final stop for the day is to Fen hide, further up the reserve, reached by driving through an old airfield. A walk through trees and reeds to the hide, we spend a couple of hours, before the sun sets. David has kept

a record of the species we have seen - 26 in total. Hundreds of Pink-footed Geese land in a nearby field to roost for the evening, along with Whooper Swan, Goosander, Redshank and Goldeneye. A shy Water Rail is also hiding near us, calling from the reeds. We are all happy with species seen, so a final scan before making our departure. A call of, "is that a Buzzard?" as a brown raptor flies in front of the hide. A female Hen Harrier glides over the loch and lands out of sight. A fantastic way to end the day.

We drive through Mintlaw to our destination, Saplinbrae Hotel - a large comfortable country hotel - where we discuss our final day itinerary before our delicious dinner.

Day 7

Our final day on what has been a fantastic first North East 250 trip. Before Kate can even get her boots on, Julian dashes in to say there is an Osprey behind the hotel! We all watch in awe at the first Osprey sighting of the year, not far from its nest. Sitting in a tree in the bright sunshine, with Brambling, Grey Wagtail, Bullfinch, Magpie and Chiffchaff being seen and heard. And all before breakfast!

Leaving slightly later we head on to Bullar's of Buchan. The cliffs are full of Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill and Shag with rather funky hair styles. We walk back along the top of the cliffs, with a Green-veined White Butterfly showing well. Onwards to Cruden Bay for a comfort break and coffee at the harbour, with views over to the white sandy beach. Goldfinch, Razorbill and a range of Gulls are bathing in the estuary.

Next, we take a small road to Meikle loch with ducks, gulls and our first Coot! On to Waulkmill hide on the Ythan Estuary at low tide. Many Redshanks, Whooper Swan and Oystercatcher. After a spot of lunch, we then head down to Newburgh Beach, a part of Forvie Sands, we stand on the estuary banks looking over to the seals and largest breeding colony of Eiders in Britain. To protect the breeding seals, the public are advised not to approach them, but you can't stop them approaching you with two coming for a closer look. There is a large group of Eiders also close in, making their "Aoooooh" calls. We admire the Common and Grey Seals sleeping on the beach, then a Sandwich Tern flies overhead!

We drive to the other side of the estuary and watch Black-tailed Godwit in the mud plains from the seating area. Some take a walk up to a sand quarry to see if any early Sand Martens have returned. Our final stop for the day, and the holiday, is to Forvie Sands visitor centre. Here we take a walk over the heather covered dunes, a perfect habitat for Short-eared

Owls. Unfortunately the Owls decide not to make an appearance, but we get views over the sea and we finish the day with a walk to stretch our legs and work up an appetite for our final meal together back at the hotel. We sit and relax in the lounge discussing our holiday and the highlights of the trip.

Day 8

The day starts with a quick breakfast before packing up the vans and heading to Aberdeen to say our goodbyes.

Species of the Trip

John - Goshawk
Dave - Shag (punk rock hair)
David - Golden Eagle
Gillian - Osprey
Margaret - Peregrine
Brian - Black Grouse
Julian - Black Grouse
Kate - Black Grouse

Place of the Trip

John - Muir of Dinnet/Glen Muick
Dave - Troup Head
David - Glen Tanar
Gillian - Bullars of Buchan/Crudan Bay
Margaret - Glen Tanar
Brian - Muir of Dinnet
Julian - Troup Head
Kate - Troup Head

Magic Moment

John - View to Lochnagar
Dave - Ice cream at Portsoy
David - Hen Harrier flyby
Gillian - Black Grouse lek
Margaret - Lossiemouth feeders
Brian - Gorge walking at Burn o Vat
Julian - Hen Harrier flyby
Kate - Fen Hide/Hen Harrier flyby at sunset

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Tufted Duck
Eider
Common Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Ptarmigan
Black Grouse
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Kestrel
Peregrine
Water Rail (H)
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Lapwing
Sanderling
Purple Sandpiper
Turnstone
Dunlin
Redshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (H)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Robin
Stonechat
Redwing
Dunnock
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Chiffchaff (H)
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Treetreeper

Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer
Osprey
Puffin
Little Egret
Little Gull
Sandwich Tern
Gadwall

Total Birds: 114

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Common Seal
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Red Squirrel
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Rabbit
Stoat/Weasel

Total: 9

INSECTS

Buff-tailed Bumblebee
Green-veined White Butterfly
Red-tailed Bumblebee
Seven-spot Ladybird
Tortoiseshell Butterfly
Small Copper Butterfly

Total: 6

Total Species: 129