

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS

19-26 JUNE 2026

Guide: Sally Nowell

Guests: Susan Bradshaw, Christine Parkin, Heather James, Gaye Henson, Alison Reed, Yvonne Hamblin

Day 1 We all arrive at the North Kessock Hotel and as the weather is good we take a stroll along the Beauly Firth in search of Otter. We pick up a few species but no Otter. We return to the hotel for our first dinner together where we are joined by Heather who sadly arrived late after a rather stressful days train travel.

Day 2 We are all rested by a good nights sleep in our peaceful hotel. Before breakfast Sally catches sight of an Otter and as we are gathering to leave the hotel Heather spots it again. We all manage to get some pretty good views of it as it fishes in the shallows and eventually comes on to the weedy shore to finish consuming its catch. What a start! Great views of a fishing Otter and the holiday has barely begun. We all get into the minibus and make our way along the shore spotting Curlew and handsome Shelduck along the way. The hedgerows are magnificent, they are filled with Dog Roses and the damp verges have Meadowsweet and Common Valerian. We are lucky to see a Yellowhammer, perched high singing on a dead Ash tree.

We begin to head north and the minibus is filled with chat as our group members get to know one another. Our first stop is at the delightful town of Dornoch where we make use of the loo's before heading to Loch Fleet. Theres a rather chilly wind and few birds, but we enjoy watching an Eider with two chicks, loafing Common and Grey Seals and a group of Red-breasted Merganser.

We move on to 'The Mound' where Sally knows the car park is closed, but as we pass the closed sign we spot that there is another car there and a gap in the bollards we can squeeze through. We arrive and the other birders point out a Greenshank. There are a number of Red-breasted Mergansers, Teal, and a distant Greenshank. A Common Sandpiper is calling and so is an Osprey, overhead we have two birds, one has a fish which is taken to the nest and then

another is seen lower down eating a fish, we think we have three birds in total. After enjoying the Ospreys we head off again, another loo stop and then we go looking for Dipper, we stop and admire a gentleman's beautiful garden and enjoy juvenile Grey Wagtails and Sand Martins but no Dipper today.

We continue to Helmsdale enjoying the ever changing and beautiful scenery and turn off the main road towards Forsinard. Immediately it feels like the pace has slowed as we follow the route of the river Helmsdale. The river gently meanders along the glen and we eventually settle on a lunch spot near a small burn. Here we have great views of Red Deer stags with their antlers in velvet, Siskin, our first Wheatear and Common Sandpiper.

We continue on and spot a high flying Osprey. We watch as it flies over the Loch, dives and returns with a fish, it comes quite close as it jiggles the fish into position before gaining height again to fly off presumably to a nearby nest. We arrive at RSPB Forsinard to meet Louise the site manager, she gives us an introduction to the reserve and then we walk out to the observation tower, enjoying the sights and sounds of the 'Flow Country' as we go.

The bird life today is limited and as it's rather windy and the likelihood of odonatan is poor. But plants don't care so we enjoy some new species, such as Round and Oblong-leaved Sundew and Chickweed Wintergreen. We also find basking Common Lizard and even catch sight of an Adder. The tower gives us spectacular views of the peaty pools and we are pleased to see it in sunlight rather than the squall we saw coming in when we arrived. We wander back to the minibus and say goodbye to Louise and make our way to our hotel. We stop on route in the hope of Hen Harrier and Golden Plover but no luck and no time today to linger. We continue on again through beautiful scenery until we reach the north coast and our hotel, home for the next five nights.

Day 3 We are pleased to have a dry morning with less wind today. We leave the hotel promptly and head east towards our first stop which is a delightful small RSPB reserve. We do of course have to take a diversion to a loo stop overlooking the bay at Reay. We couldn't help ourselves but look out finding a Great Northern Diver loafing out in the bay.

As we drive on we pass banks of roadside wildflowers through dense forestry but finally into a wide valley of Flag Iris and open marshland. We stop in a small car park after Sue spots a Snipe. We soon hear the Snipe drumming overhead

and are mesmerised by it over the next 20 minutes or so. There's a stunning soundscape here, we have the place to ourselves and no car passes for the 30 minutes, we listen to the Snipe, Curlews, Skylarks, and Stonechat. We spot four Osprey flying over the distant woodland, a nesting Mute Swan, a family of Stonechat and Redshank. As we drive away the road in front of us is a resting place for Stonechats, Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails, birds flit up all along the road, it really is a very delightful place.

The satnav takes us a rather interesting route to our next destination, Castle of Mey. We are greeted like special visitors and soon have the van parked and we are into the shop and making use of the loos. We decide that as the weather was good we should visit the garden first, have lunch and then take in the castle. The gardens are delightful, but we are all sorry the roses aren't out yet, they must be a picture when they are out and the scent must be amazing. Sue and Christine particularly enjoyed the bees making use of the glorious Geraniums.

We enjoy a lovely lunch before going into the castle for what feels like a very personal tour around a small part of the castle where we hear a lot about the Queen Mother and her character and habits whilst she was in and around the castle. We all love this little insight into her and the royal families world seeing that it not all perfect and that she clearly loved the area and local countryside as much as we are doing.

We leave the castle and head to Dunnet Head. We take a detour to St Johns Pools where we are surprised by a melee of birds we view from an excellent hide, Black-headed Gulls dominate but we love seeing nesting Sandwich Terns, Arctic Terns and a small number of Common Terns. The noise is deafening and after 15 minutes we are ready to move on. We head to Dunnet Head now, a busier route and when we get to the car park there isn't much space but we park up and look out over the cliffs to see nesting Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots and Fulmar. The Fulmars glide nonchalantly by at eye level and below on the water we see flotillas of auks and a distant passing Arctic Skua. It's quite busy here so we depart and are rather disappointed to see a coach driver with a drone despite the 'no drones' sign!

We leave and head to Coronation Meadow, a delightful and understated area filled with delightful plants. As we arrive, there is a small group of folk leaving and we ask if they have seen Scottish Primrose, they have!! They show us where and there are four plants, tiny, perfectly formed and charming. Gaye finds four more

tiny plants and we all explore the area looking for more jewels. Sue finds Moonwort, Alison finds Common Butterwort and we all just enjoy the peace of wandering the meadow for 45 minutes before its time to head back to the hotel. We divert again, a short cut to some loos via an ancient harbour constructed with beautiful Caithness slate. We stop at the harbour for a look but after a quick look out to sea, we spot some Divers and have to get the scopes out, a pair of Red-throated Divers. The more we look the closer they get, the sun comes out and its' very hard to leave. Eventually we spot six Red-throated Divers and two distant Great Northern Divers, with Shag, Kittiwake and rafts of auks and a small group of Eider. it's a lovely place, it would be nice to spend more time here but we make our way to the toilets and then a direct route along the coast back to Bettyhill.

Day 4 We spend today a bit closer to home. We head over to Invernaver National Nature reserve just a 5 minute drive from our hotel, which we are all enjoying by the way. We decide to take lunch with us and head out in pretty good weather immediately wishing we were in our shorts. We are greeted by views of young Stonechat and flitting Wheatear and soon we start scouring the ground for plants. Sue and Christine have the 'seek app' and are quick to identify plants we do not recognise, these include, Fairy Flax, Scurvy Grass and Arrow Grass. We don't get far but are enjoying the good weather and beautiful plants We pause briefly and Alison spots a Diver out in the bay, we can't quite see it well enough with our bins. Sally didn't bring her scope, this was going to be a plants day, but we need the scope, so a quick dash back to the minibus and we are ready for anything fully armed with our scope. We continue on enjoying the plants and warm sunshine which bring out butterflies including Common and Small Blue, feeding on the Kidney Vetch, Small Heath and Five-spot Burnet Moth. Best of all was a Golden-ringed Dragonfly, something Christine had particularly hoped to see.

After patrolling up and down a small stream it rewarded us by landing and giving us prolonged views even through the telescope. All the while we have singing Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Wheatears and Stonechat flitting about in the nearby rocks We stop to review how far everyone wants to walk and we all agreed we wanted to try and get to the beach but with the option to turn back if needed. We continue and in no time at all we are at the edge of the dunes and taking the short walk to the huge beautiful stretch of empty sand at Torrisdale. It was the perfect place for lunch and Sally and Heather even brave a paddle. Out to sea we have brief views of Harbour Porpoise and two Red-throated

Divers and an extremely distant 'Bonxie' perched on a cliff, fortunately they have a very recognisable profile.

We enjoy the sun and the beach for a while before heading back towards the minibus. Once again we search for flowering gems amongst the scree and grasslands, slender St Johns Wort, Fairy Foxglove to name but a few. We arrive back at the minibus with ice cream on our minds but sadly no ice cream to be found in Bettyhill so we make our way to our next beach stop at Armadale. A steep slope leads us down to an easy path along a stream and some different plants and a beautiful singing Sedge Warbler, Sand Martins and Swallow wheel overhead as we make our way to some benches overlooking yet another deserted and beautiful beach.

On route Sally spots a plant in a field which we view through the scope only to find that there are carpets of the plant lining our path ahead, Purple Oxtropis. We enjoy a seat for a while before heading back along the path and making a return journey stopping briefly at a view point with a board identifying the stunning misty blue mountains ahead of us. This led to quite some discussion which eventually had to be brought to a close by turning on the engine and making to leave if everyone didn't get aboard soon.

We travel back through Bettyhill to make a brief visit to an ancient cairn and relicts of an ancient clearance village. On the way back our interest was taken by the goings on at the bridge building so much so that we almost missed the green light! We returned to the hotel in plenty of time for a cup of tea and shower before catching up with our bird and plant list and dinner.

Day 5

We start our day heading east. Its considerably warmer than it has been and we are delighted that there is no need for layers and waterproofs. We are heading to a Puffin colony and miss our parking place at the roadside, it is quite small but at least its empty. So we drive down the road to turn and spot a couple of Roe Deer in a nearby field. We make a return journey where our parking place is clear but tucked right in to the roadside so we are all on high alert on this busy road.

We quickly make our way along a grassy verge and are soon walking along a peat track across the moorland towards the sea. We spot a couple of new plants, Cow-wheat and Hard Fern and encounter a bit of muddy furrowing as we go which thankfully, is easy to avoid. As we near the sea we leave the main

track and approach the cliff edge. Out in front of us is a pyramid full of Puffins busy with their daily routines of fishing, feeding and feather preening. It's an amazing sight, there must be hundreds of Puffins, which we enjoy for the next 30 minutes perched on the cliff top watching their comings and goings whilst also scanning out to sea in the hope of a passing cetacean.

We leave the Puffins, who we have enjoyed all to ourselves and head back to the minibus. Just as we get to the minibus Sue and Christine spot a large bird, it's a White-tailed Eagle soaring some distance away but still clearly showing its white tail as it gets mobbed by a smaller bird, possibly a Kestrel or Peregrine.

Our next stop is Strathy Point, a stunning location overlooking the bay with Bonxie and Fulmar flying over. On the rock cliff tops Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover nest and we have several great views of Rock Pipit. Best of all is finding quite a few tiny Scottish Primroses amongst the remains of hundreds of squill, just a few remain. We eat our lunch here in beautiful sunshine, such a glorious spot we were lucky to be able to enjoy, once again all to ourselves. We leave Strathy point but not before Alison soaks up the beautiful view along the north coast and we all drink in the beautiful scenery around us,

We make our way back to Bettyhill and then on towards Tongue where we stop for an ice cream and then take a drive around the Kyle of Tongue with its magnificent views of Ben Loyal. We stop briefly to watch an Eider with chicks and to scan the mountains tops for eagles. From here we head to Moine black pools.

Since the morning, the wind has really picked up and its pretty blustery out on the moorland. We are back to beautiful 'Flow Country' with magnificent panoramic views to Ben Loyal and Ben Hope and the Black peat pools glimmer in the afternoon sunshine, Its a gorgeous scene but we hoped for some Dragonflies which were definitely not going to show in this wind. We also visit Moine House, a place of refuge in years gone by for folk crossing the moor, a desolate place, but with 360 degree views so beautiful on a day like this. We return to Gaye who decided not to brave the strong winds and make our way back to our hotel enjoying the views on route.

Day 6

Oh dear, our lovely holiday is coming to the end, but we have two more exciting days ahead and today is definitely a bit of an adventure, we are heading to Cape Wrath. Sadly this requires a bit of an early start but our delightful hotel have

a pack up breakfast all prepared, we have filled our flasks with a hot drink and off we go, heading west from our hotel. At this time in the morning the roads are quiet apart from a few builders vans so we take a steady drive across the stunning north coast admiring views of mountains we are now familiar with, Ben Loyal and Ben Hope.

This journey is not for dilly dallying; we have a boat to catch so we steadily progress making our way through our breakfast snack bag and a comfort stop at Durness before heading to our ferry terminal. Well I say ferry terminal, more of a bus shelter and a concrete slope down to the sea but we wait patiently for our ferry and coach driver to arrive. It's a bit chilly this morning with a cold wind but we are well wrapped up and looking forward to our adventure. Our boat arrives and in 10 minutes we are whisked across the Kyle of Durness and into a sheltered sunny cove, what a delight.

We then board the Cape Wrath bus and make our way across to the lighthouse with a humorous but informative commentary from our driver Stuart. On route we spot Greenshank and Golden Plover. At the lighthouse its very windy but we are at Cape Wrath the most northly point in the mainland UK so we can expect it to be windy. We admire the cliffs as close as we can go and the plentiful seabirds below but head back to the Ozone Café for a hot drink and then to the return bus for another fact filled journey. We are back to our minibus by one, find a place to park up for lunch and then make our way to Balnakeil Beach where we stretch our legs along the beautiful golden sand despite the strong wind.

We explore the machair here with a new special species, Grass of Parnassus, a treasure of a plant but though there is evidence of quite a few plants, few are in bloom, but what a stunningly elegant bloom it is, quite exquisite in its subtle beauty compared to some of the almost gaudy colours of some other machair flowers. We take a look over at the next beach, a huge swath of sand which is enjoyed by a young couple and their dog, they have the place to themselves which we are discovering is quite easy to do once off the beaten track in this stunningly beautiful part of the world.

We head back to the minibus as it looks like a shower is approaching. Its not a shower that heeds our progress, but a very strong incoming wind which pushes at us as we return across the beach with views of Ringed Plover, Red-breasted Merganser and Sandwich Tern. We head back east enjoying views and having a crafty snooze after all the fresh air of the day.

Day 7

We reluctantly leave our lovely hotel which we have been extremely comfortable in, so much so that one 'magic' moment was the moment two guests arrived in their room and saw the view. We head west once again but then take a narrow road south towards some spectacular scenery and below magnificent Ben Hope. We travel along the road looking out over the loch in the hope of seeing a diver. We eventually stop at a pull in and Sally goes to see if there is anything on the loch, there is a lone swan, could it be one of the few breeding Whooper Swans on mainland UK. It puts its head up and yes it's a Whooper!! We look out over the loch and see Common Sandpiper, a couple of Grey Herons and our first midges of the trip.

We scurry back to the van and make our way along the road to a broch, again the midges get the better of us and we get back in the van to wait for an oncoming tractor who is cutting the verges to pass. We continue, sadly in rain for the first time in the holiday which is pretty persistent. We arrive in Alnaharra and park up for lunch before heading on down to Lairg and Bonar Bridge where we stop briefly to look for Otter. We continue on to a small community woodland where we take a short walk, no sooner have we started the walk do we see movement, it's a family of Great Tits and then we see Bullfinch, a male feeding a chick, the Bullfinch is behaving more like a Flycatcher presumably catching food for the youngster.

Whilst we are watching Christine spots a Treecreeper and we continue on finding another Bullfinch family feeding on the blossoms or unripe berries of Blaeberry.

We enjoy watching this unusual behaviour and seeing the Bullfinch family. A little further on this gorgeous ancient woodland we come to a small pond. Here we spot Pond Skaters and Whirligig Beetles. Large Red Damselflies and a pair of Four Spot Chasers. Sue spots a newt which Yvonne sees but none of us can find it amongst the weeds.

We continue on and Christine finds the path covered in tiny froglets which we all try to avoid treading on. The vegetation of mixed ferns and ancient trees is beautiful. We complete a circuit of the wood, take a last loo stop and then head back to Inverness. After passing more beautiful scenery and a possible Hen Harrier we arrive back at our hotel in North Kessock. We meet in the beer garden to complete our final bird list and reflect on what has been a really wonderful holiday.

Favourite Place

Heather	Strathy Point
Alison	The drive around the Kyle of Tongue and the gorgeous views of Ben Loyal
Gaye	Same as Alison
Yvonne	Forsinard and the Invernaveir NNR, leading to Torrisdale Beach
Christine	Forsinard and the view west from Strathy Point
Sue	Forsinard and its special plants, "it set the scene for the rest of the trip"
Sally	RSPB Broubster

Favourite Species

Heather	Cuckoos on the wire
Alison	Divers and Puffins
Yvonne	Puffins
Christine	Ravens, "First time I've ever seen 5 together"
Gaye	Snipe drumming at Broubster
Sue	Golden-ringed Dragonfly
Sally	Scottish Primrose

Magic Moment

Christine	Seeing the Golden-ringed Dragonfly and walking into our bedroom and seeing the view.
Gaye	Getting to Torrisdale Beach, "it was magic".
Heather	Osprey fishing and catching a fish on the drive north, and the snipe drumming and the paddle at Torrisdale.
Sue	View from the tower at Forsinard and the plants there, it was "WOW"!
Alison	Hearing the snipe at Broubster and seeing Primula Scotica
Yvonne	The Snipe at Broubster and seeing the Otter on the first morning.
Sally	Being at Strathy Point

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Teal
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Greenshank
Curlew
Snipe
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake

Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Puffin
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap (H)
Whitethroat
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff (H)
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Treecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow

Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Otter
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Common Seal
Grey Seal

REPTILES

Common Lizard

AMPHIBIANS

Smooth Newt
Common Frog
Common Toad

OTHER THINGS

7 Spotted Ladybird
Golden-ringed Dragonfly
Common Blue
Small Blue
Small Heath
Small White
Painted Lady
Six-spot Burnet Moth
Cinnabar Moth
Speckled Wood
Smooth Ground Beetle
Four-spot Chaser
Large Red Damselfly
Pond Skater
Whirligig Beetle