

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### RAPTORS OF THE HIGHLANDS

3 - 10 SEPTEMBER 2022

Guide: Kate Mennie

Guests: Margaret Brennan, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, Fay Tempest and Katy Williams

**Day 1** Kate picks everyone up from the train station and heads towards the hotel. On the way we see two Buzzards crossing our path, first raptors of the week. We arrive at Tigh na Sgiath where Iain gives us a warm welcome and we enjoy our first evening meal and a glass of wine.

**Day 2** The day starts wet and windy as we head out after breakfast wrapped in our waterproofs. We take the small back road towards Carrbridge crossing the Dulnain river. A Red Kite drifts past near the river and we stop on the next bridge where Pied and Grey Wagtails are feeding. There are many Swallows gathered on a telegraph wire. It is quiet along the road today, but we do see Rooks, Meadow Pipit and Greylag Geese. Taking another road out behind Carrbridge, the rain starts to get heavy unfortunately, so we head into Carrbridge for a comfort stop and a warm drink before continuing.

We head up the A9 now and take the road leading to Strathdearn. We stop near the beginning to get a vantage point, seeing some Mistle Thrush, Grey Heron and many Swallows and Martins in the sky. A Buzzard flies round near us and two distant Red Kites make their way round behind the minibus as we leave. As it becomes wet again, we keep driving to the bottom of the glen and the end of the public road where bright skies greet us, and so too do the midges! Here are a couple of Ravens and Buzzard flying around as we start to scan and put on midge repellent. After a few minutes Kate notices a very distant Golden Eagle crossing the glen, but it is hard to get onto. After catching an earlier glimpse, Kate hears young Peregrine, and we soon notice four or five lifting into the air and circling around together as a family. They continue to glide and play as we watch their acrobatics. It is lovely to see they have done well this year. They soon drift over our heads and we get nice silhouette views. Two Buzzards come close and begin to talon grab. Kate shows the group Grass of Parnassus and other wetland flowers that are growing nearby. With the nice display and midges getting worse we make our way back to 'Dipper Bridge,' where Jeremiah and Margaret spot one resting on a stone.

We get nice views of the Dipper through our scopes where there is also Grey Wagtail and lots of Swallows. We enjoy lunch here watching for birds and noticing a large herd of Red Deer stags on the hillside.

Stopping near the Farr Road for a last look worked out very well indeed. Two Buzzards were amongst the hundreds of Swallows and Martins flying around, it was hard to keep track. We notice two large looking hawks, a Goshawk pair making their way left to right showing their natural behaviour. As they get near a woodland, two small raptors join them, realising it was a pair of Merlin that begin to swoop around too. With no time to catch our breaths two Raven make chase on a young Golden Eagle that soon goes out of sight. After a few minutes it comes back again and circles round before slowly moving left where we follow it to a distant hill. Quite a collection of raptors in one spot, finished off with a close fly by from a Red Kite. We continue out of the glen and stop in at Tomatin for a comfort stop before returning south.

We head onto the Dava Moor now, turning onto the road towards the loch to look for Red Grouse. Slowly driving along looking in the purple heather, Jeremiah's sharp eyes spot a close female about five metres from the road who is quite happy to stay and get some photos taken. The sun is shining on the loch as we make our way round and stop on the banks. Too late in the year for divers but on the loch, we see a few Goldeneye and Mallards. Buzzards fly above us and as we drive along, a nice Lesser Black-backed Gull is posing on a rock. A family of Stonechat also perch on the fence beside us. We continue through the purple moorland, making our way down the road through Grantown and return to our hotel.

**Day 3** It starts off wet again, so we head to Anagach Woods where it starts to dry. We walk slowly listening to Wren in the woods and Treecreeper. Towards the feeders, Kate spots a Red Squirrel coming in through the branches of the tree. It stops briefly at the feeders, enough time for Fay and Katy to get pictures of its gorgeous dark tail before hopping off through the trees. Round at the bird feeders we wait to see what comes in. Blue Tit, Great Tit and Chaffinch make use of the peanuts available. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flies into the top of a tree then slowly down to the nut feeder. Kate explains it's a young female by its head markings. It poses and we enjoy watching it feed for a while. On the walk back, we see a Treecreeper and investigate the cones that have been chewed by the Squirrels, fascinated how they get the seeds out.

We head out towards another moorland estate, seeing Buzzard on the way, before turning off at the snow gates. Kate discusses how this is a recent Red Kite territory when one suddenly flies across the road. A little further

down, a bin lorry is stopped in the road and two Red Kite are diving down to the road trying to catch a carcass. We stay here to watch them, Jeremiah spotting one sitting on a nearby tree and one behind in the forest. We watch for a while, when a crow comes out the woods chasing a smaller bird, a Sparrowhawk, as they fly in front of us and up the road. We carry on and stop at the end of the estate road where it is very quiet apart from Buzzard and Meadow Pipits. Just as we get back in the van Margaret points out a raptor which reappears briefly in front of us, a Goshawk.

We travel down to Nethybridge for a comfort stop and a look at information boards in the visitor centre. We take a small track up into the Abernethy Forest to take a walk and listen out for any woodland species. On the track we taste the wild blaeberrries, find some Angel Wing fungi and admire the different lichens growing on the tall Scots Pines. As we are admiring some Cow Wheat, Kate hears a flock of Crossbill flying over and managing to find them in nearby trees. We all get a good look at the mixed flock in the scope and a male sits nicely at the top. We carry on our walk listening for birds, including Goldcrest and the trill of Crested Tit, they are hiding though as we make our way back to the minibus.

We sit down at Loch Garten for lunch with the water shimmering in the sunlight. We discuss how the Ospreys don't like to fish in this loch as the water is too peaty and dark. Margaret and Jeremiah find out more from RSPB staff on site. We head south now to the village of Kincaig and take a walk through some oak trees to view a local Osprey nest in hope that a juvenile is still around. We scan for a while but unfortunately no Ospreys today as they must be making their way south on migration. There are some Mute Swan and Mallard on Loch Insh though, and Buzzard flying over. We take the back road to the village on Insh, spotting some Red Deer in the fields, soon arriving at Insh Marshes reserve. Sadly, no lookout tower as it recovers from a fire, but we take a small lane towards another hide overlooking the marsh. Here there is a good chance of Hen Harrier, so we stay a while and scan around in hope of one. There are plenty of small birds like Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Goldcrest and even a surprise Willow Warbler that are very active above our heads, but no other raptors for today. We head back to the hotel early before our evening excursion.

An earlier dinner tonight as we go over our plans for the next stage of our holiday, and enjoy another meal before most of us go out just after 8pm to look for Owls. As the light fades the last pink glow in the sky greets us, and a Red Kite glides past as we leave Dulnain. Further up the road we stop and

stand out to enjoy the fading light. We now take a small road out from Carrbridge and drive slowly looking for wildlife. Using a torch we scan a few fields, seeing the eyes of Roe Deer grazing and Rabbits jumping across the road.

Further up we park up and Margaret and Katy hear the first Tawny Owl calling from the forest. A few minutes later a second joins and we enjoy listening to evening sounds and see if any owls fly by. A few bats are flying overhead also. We continue the road, Brown Hare running in front of us. There are reports of high Aurora tonight so we stop one last time to see if there is any green glow to the northern skies, before returning to the hotel.

**Day 4** After breakfast we pack up the minibuses in good time and head off for the second half our holiday to the Isle of Mull. In between rain showers we enjoy the first half of our journey, taking in the scenery and light over the mountain as we say farewell to the Cairngorms for now. Heading southwest we start to see Ben Nevis towering beside us as we stop at Spean Bridge for a coffee stop. We head through Fort William and stop on the banks of Loch Linnhe for a leg stretch and some wildlife spotting. The water is very flat and shining in the sun as we scan out and see a few gulls on the water. A Blackbird is feeding on the Rowan berries behind us and a few other small birds. With the seaweed here we scan for Otters along the coast, but none today.

We continue and make our way to Oban in good time to have our lunch and watch from the harbour. Kate points out a couple of Black Guillemots out on the water as the ferry comes in. We board and wildlife watch on the short journey over to Mull. Gannets fly above the water, Guillemots with young, Arctic Terns and Gulls.

We arrive on sunny Mull and make a short journey to Craignure Golf Course. The tide is in, so not many waders today but the sea is very calm so perfect for birdwatching. There is a flock of Canada Geese in the field opposite us and Jeremiah soon spots a Great Northern Diver out in the bay. After scanning for waders, Kate looks over the hills behind us where she soon spots two distant Golden Eagles that slowly go behind the hill. We have a little discussion about how to scan ridges for Eagles and Katy soon puts it to practise, spotting the two Golden Eagles again. This time they are much closer and we get views through the telescope. Before heading to the hotel, we have one final stop at Garmony. With the tide in there are only a few waders like Oystercatcher and Curlew. After a bit of scanning, Margaret finds a pair of Red-throated Divers out on the water and there are a few Common Tern fishing. We head north now, past Salen Bay continuing to Tobermory, parking up along the row of coloured buildings and get settled into our hotel before dinner.

## Day 5

The sun is shining in Tobermory Bay as we leave after breakfast. We make our way to Salen Bay and stop at the ruined boats that are very popular this morning. Jeremiah spots a pair of Mute Swan and Kate notices a Redshank nearby. After admiring the scenic view out over the sound of Mull, Margaret spots a different wader, a Greenshank close to where the Redshank was. Also, in the bay there are Common Tern, Eider, Cormorant, Great Black-backed Gull and a surprise Little Grebe. A nice start to the morning before we head back to the Glen Aros Road.

There are plenty of Buzzards out this morning, watching us from fence posts as we drive past. We stop overlooking heathland that can be good for Harriers where there is a family of Stonechat moving through the shrubs. No Harriers today so we slowly continue down the road admiring the view where Kate pulls into a suitable space surrounded by hills. Using the horizon trick, Kate spots two Eagles that disappear over the hill, but soon sees two figures that look like rocks on the horizon. A look through the telescope confirms that they are a pair of Eagles. Due to their size and way they are sitting we conclude they are White-tailed Eagles, possibly juveniles waiting to be fed. A few Ravens fly over and glancing behind, Kate spots a large raptor take off from the near hillside, a Golden Eagle which we hope will drift our way, but unfortunately not.

After waiting a few minutes, we continue through Dervaig and take a small road which takes us up to high ground. Views behind us looking towards Eigg and Muick and Iona in front of us. We stop to look for small raptors, spotting a Kestrel hovering over a hill, soon joined by two more. There are also a few Red Deer around us. We head down and along the twisty road towards Ulva, stopping at Eos Fors waterfall for our lunch.

We head down to Ulva ferry, meeting Alex and Steve from Mull Charters for our charter boat trip to hopefully see some White-tailed Eagles up close. We head aboard the Lady Jayne, greeted by Monty the labrador who is our mascot for the trip. After a briefing we head out on Loch Tuath where it is more sheltered, passing a group of Harbour Seals on the rocks. We sit back and relax, keeping an eye out over hills and cliffs for any raptors. Kate points out distant White-tailed Eagles and Ravens over Gometra. We get close to a shore when Kate notifies Steve of an eagle approaching the boat as we come to a stop. We all fall silent and watch the giant bird getting ready to dive to the water, no more than 10 metres away. Almost instantly the female has its turn and they both make their way to shore to eat their fish. It is amazing to see the size of these birds especially compared to the sheep they sit beside. Alex gives some fascinating commentary about the pair before they come over for a second supper.

We have a cup of tea as we drift in the loch surrounded by eagles. As we move slowly round the shore, a pair of Golden Eagle fly from a rock and we watch them slowly flying over the ridge. A look at a sea cave and the White-tailed Eagles again we slowly make our way back. Katy and Kate suddenly spot a fin in the water, another brief sighting of a Common Dolphin. We turn the boat to go looking for the pod, but they seem to have made their way out of the loch already. Heading into Ulva port, Kate notices a White-tailed Eagle over the island, chased by Buzzards.

We find our land legs again and have a little look at a craft stall in the car park before slowly making our way home. We drive along the banks of Loch na Keal, with views over to Ben More on the opposite side. We stop halfway along where Kate knows of a White-tailed Eagle territory. The rain begins and there is no sign of Eagles but we scan out on the loch where we see a large flock of Red-breasted Mergansers and Black Guillemot. We make our way through Salen then back to our hotel after a busy day.

**Day 6** Heading to the south end of Mull today, so we start our journey past Salen stopping first at Craignure Golf Course. The tide is mid-way out this morning so there are a lot more wader species for us to look at. There are good numbers of Turnstone and Ringed Plover feeding on the shingle which are lovely to watch. A few Eider are out on the water and Arctic Tern over the water. With nearly all the gull species out on the shingle, it is a good time to focus looking at their differences and see the juveniles. We stop at Craignure for a comfort stop and look in the shops here. Lots of buses and a piper arrive at the ferry port and soon we are stuck as lots of people arrive onto the island, so we sit and listen to the piper to let the traffic go past.

On now to Grass Point road, where we hope to spend some time looking for Hen Harrier. We stand on the hillside scanning out over the heath, but the looming rain cloud arrives and so do the midges. We travel slowly south, turning off towards Lochbuie. Driving through the ancient Oak and Alder trees, we reach the banks of Loch Spelve and stop for a look. Not a lot on the water, but we scan the surrounding hills, where a distant Eagle drifts over the horizon. Kate suddenly notices a female Hen Harrier dash across the road, hard to find against the hillside, not everyone sees it, as it glides over the hill and out of sight. We keep looking but unfortunately it doesn't reappear.

We keep an eye out for Otters as we drive slowly along the banks of the loch, making our way through the Lochbuie Estate, reaching the end of the road down at Lochbuie itself. Here there is a very popular tearoom and shop with benches, so we set ourselves up and enjoy lunch with a view. Red-breasted

Mergansers are close into shore and Margaret spots Rock Pipit close-by. Just as we are finishing our lunch, Kate spots a Golden Eagle over a nearby mountain, staying in the air for a few minutes so we all manage to get a good view. Just as the Eagle disappears, two Sparrowhawk climb higher into the sky nearby. Margaret points out a Red-throated Diver out in the bay as the others go and look at the little shop and get a hot drink. As we come out of the café there is a commotion out in the bay with all the gulls lifting into the air. Suddenly Kate notices a White-tailed Eagle flying through the flock and flying across the bay, a great way to end lunch.

We head back along the small road, soon noticing a small bird on the telegraph wires, we all get out to get a view of a Whinchat as it poses along with the Swallows and Stonechat. We turn off towards Croggan, driving slowly to keep an eye out for any Otters on one side and Harriers on the other. There are a few Buzzards long the posts and Fay says she saw a grey bird flying low down. Hoping it was a Harrier, Kate stops to have a look, but unfortunately it has disappeared. We go for a short walk along the shore here, through more ancient trees. On our way back a flock of Redpolls call as they fly over to land in the trees. As we reach the car park, Kate spots a Golden Eagle suddenly right in front of us, it starts at nearly eyelevel and slowly catches a thermal and rises above us. Soon two Buzzards join and we get a good size comparison of the two species. Amazing views to end the day. We slowly make our way round Loch Spelve, stopping along the road for another scan for Harriers, but none today.

**Day 7** Our final day today, we pack up the minibus after breakfast and promptly leave at 9am in hope of spending another hour or so on the island before the ferry. We stop down at Salen Bay where the tide is perfect. There are plenty of waders this morning, with Curlew, Redshank and Greenshank being a highlight. Kate notices another new species, Bar-tailed Godwit along the shore and Ringed Plover. Arctic Tern and juveniles are being very vocal as they beg for food and many gulls are resting on the seaweed. The sun is warming so we spend a few minutes enjoying the scenery and bird life around us. We finish our time on Mull back at Garmony to try again for Otter, which we don't manage to see on this occasion. There are some of the usual waders, Seals and Red-throated Diver out on the sea. Just as we are dragging ourselves away, Kate spots a White-tailed Eagle flying across the Sound of Mull, which we all manage to watch and see reaching the mainland before resting on the shoreline.

We head to Fishnish now to catch the ferry to the mainland. The little coffee shop here gives us a nice morning drink as we watch the ferry approaching. On the ferry, Katy and Kate watch out on the sea, spotting Gannet and Razorbill on the crossing over to Lochaline.

Onwards with our journey now, taking in the scenery of the Morvern peninsula, stopping to scan as we go before taking a small road. We stop at Loch Uisge to have our lunch watching Stonechat and Reed Bunting on the wires. Kate spots a distant White-tailed Eagle skimming the horizon being followed by Raven and Buzzard. We slowly drive on now getting to the banks of Loch Linnhe. The loch is very quiet today and we don't even see an Eider on the calm waters that we are following. We reach a viewpoint that is overlooking Inversanda Bay where we have a final leg stretch. Margaret and Jeremiah enjoy investigating the plants growing in the peaty ditch here, including the different heathers. Kate spots three distant Golden Eagles, that once we get onto, come closer over the hill summit and we watch them enjoying the air together and soaring.

We head down now to catch the Corran ferry and carry on past Fort William, reaching our hotel by 6pm to get settled, enjoy an evening drink and remember all our favourite moments from the week and our total number of raptors, which is always interesting to learn. After dinner we say our goodnights after a long travel day.

**Day 8** We enjoy our final breakfast together and Kate takes everyone to Aviemore station where we say our farewells after a fantastic week together.



### Species of the Trip

Fay	Eagles
Margaret	White-tailed Eagle
Jeremiah	Common Toads
Katy	Goshawk
Kate	Golden Eagle

### Place of the Trip

Fay	Morvern Peninsula
Margaret	Carr Road at night listening to the Owls
Jeremiah	Boat – seeing the Hebridean islands out at sea
Katy	Salen Bay
Kate	Boat

### Magic Moment

Fay	Seeing the Eagles Diving
Margaret	The Highland hospitality
Jeremiah	The Red Grouse right beside the minibus
Katy	White-tailed Eagles diving
Kate	All the raptors together on day 1

## **RAPTOR COUNT**

Buzzard – 42  
Red Kite – 8  
Sparrowhawk – 3  
Peregrine – 5  
Golden Eagle – 12  
White-tailed Eagle – 8  
Merlin – 2  
Goshawk – 3  
Hen Harrier – 1  
Kestrel – 3

## **BIRDS**

Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Mallard  
Eider  
Goldeneye  
Goosander  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Red Grouse  
Pheasant  
Red-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Little Grebe  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Red Kite  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Sparrowhawk  
Goshawk  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Merlin  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover

Turnstone  
Greenshank  
Redshank  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Black Guillemot  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Rock Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl (H)  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Rock Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Dipper  
Robin  
Whinchat  
Stonechat  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Blackbird  
Willow Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Wren  
Great Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Crested Tit (H)  
Jackdaw

Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Carrion Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Twite  
Redpoll  
Goldfinch  
Crossbill Sp.  
Reed Bunting

## **MAMMALS**

Common Seal  
Grey Seal  
Roe Deer  
Red Deer  
Red Squirrel  
Bank Vole  
Brown Hare  
Rabbit  
Common Dolphin  
Common Toad  
Lion's Mane Jellyfish