

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

RELAX IN THE HIGHLANDS

3-10 OCTOBER 2026

Guide: Sally Nowell

Guests: Anthony & Celia Barnby, Joan Hunter, John Duerden, Alison Pattinson

Day 1 After arriving safely at our very lovely hotel, we settle in and admire our gorgeous surroundings. Our hotel is set in its own grounds where we are surrounded by huge mature oak trees and autumn colours. I think our guests were a little overwhelmed by just how lovely it is! Scottish hospitality at its very best and we are here for a whole week so we get well and truly comfortable.

Day 2 The weather is looking a bit unsettled and perhaps not the best to go in search of eagles and Red Deer so we change our plans and head to the north east coast stopping first at the RSPB hide at Nigg. The tide is quite far out but the hide shelters us from some early drizzle. We have huge flocks of Pink-footed Geese, Golden Plover, Brent Geese and a splendid display by a group of Yellowhammers, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits and Joan spots a Stonechat. A small group of Snipe whip past and Red Kites drift by. It looks like rain is heading our way so we make a dash back to the minibus but miss the shower and spend five minutes enjoying a group of Yellowhammers in the woodland nearby.

We move on and pass a field with a group of 30 or so Whooper Swans. They are magnificent in their persil white and although they look alert when we stop they soon return to preening and grazing in the stubble field.

We continue on to the delightful village of Portmahomack for a comfort break and are intrigued by a building by the harbour that turns out to be an old grain store. Onward we go to the lighthouse at Tarbat Ness admiring the magnificent bulls in the fields as we go. We do a little sea-watching at first spotting several Red-throated Divers in winter plumage though one still has quite a pronounced red throat. There are several Gannets close by but out at sea there are really big numbers of them. We also spot Razorbill and Guillemot.

After lunch we make our way out to the lighthouse and to the point where we again enjoy watching large numbers of Gannets feeding. Amongst the Gannets we spot a skua, an Arctic Skua chasing the Kittiwakes who are also feeding with the Gannets, a larger skua starts chasing the Arctic Skua, this time a Bonxie. The Skuas are recognising there is food on offer if they can just make those who caught it give it up to them, they are very persistent. The birds are quite distant still but they are putting on a pretty good show.

As we leave Tarbat Ness we engage with a local lady who tells us she is a retired shepherdess from the area. She enjoys telling us about the local area, she's quite a lively character for 86. Despite the wind the temperature is pretty mild here but we return to the minibus to make our way to our next stop passing fields full of Pink-footed Geese on the way.

We enter the town of Tain and head down to the Links area where we can see lots of birds. Over the next 45 minutes they gradually get closer. We have a mix of duck including Pintail and Shoveler and both Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit with Redshank, and plenty of Curlew and Oystercatcher. We enjoy the birds here for a while and a local birder stops to chat with us. Eventually we drop by at the local Tesco for some supplies and then head back to the hotel.

Day 3 Despite a damp start the forecast promises the weather is to improve and the patch of blue sky above makes us optimistic for our first day in the mountains. We head first to delightful Loch Achilty and stop for half an hour, where we catch up with Coal Tit and Goldcrest in the oak and birch woodland. Our first migrant thrushes and Blackbirds are busy feeding on a Rowan tree and something is causing some alarm in the trees with all the birds calling but the source of the alarm is illusive. It's such a tranquil place but we make our way along a narrow road passing hydro power stations and eventually crossing a dam wall to join the 'main' road up beautiful Strathconon.

As we drive, the scenery gets more and more spectacular and we savour the drive stopping eventually beside the River Meig to scan the hills and listen for Stags. We finally hear some bellowing and spot a stag high on the hillside. Beside the river John spots a Jelly Stag fungus and Alison finds a tiny but stunningly beautiful Angel's Wings fungus. We continue on up the road trying to track down another bellowing stag and eventually catch up with him on the hillside above us looking and sounding stunning in the morning sunshine.

We continue on and find a stopping place for lunch overlooking Loch Beannacharain. The wind has got a up a little and its rather chilly so most of us have lunch in the minibus, as we do Tony suddenly and rather casually says "is that a White-tailed Eagle"? We half think he's joking but then right across the Loch from us a White-tailed Eagle is perched rather precariously in a spruce tree. It looks a little unsettled and flies on to another perch and then again to another before taking flight and giving us a spectacular fly past and over before joining its mate higher up on the hillside. Its difficult to leave these birds and before we do a Golden Eagle appears and flies high over the loch and then disappears.

We drive on up the glen which we now have all to ourselves other than the estate workers passing occasionally. At our next stop we see another Golden Eagle, possibly the same one challenging a White-tailed Eagle, they lock talons a couple of times and fly in perfect synchrony but not for fun, this Golden Eagle definitely did not want the larger White-tailed Eagle around. It was amazing to see the difference in size, perhaps a male Golden Eagle and female White-tailed Eagle, it was a really good opportunity to compare the shape and behaviour of these massive birds of prey.

We scan the slopes across the loch for stags who we can hear roaring and decide to take a walk after our filling lunch. We don't get far, at first stopping to look at plants and across at the stags and groups of hinds but we continue on admiring the ever changing light on the hills and dramatic views. Another spectacular sight is that of two Typhoon Jets speeding down the glen almost below us, incredibly close and INCREDIBLY loud, what a sight!

We come upon a large group of Long-tailed Tits but as we gain height we see little else. Tony is keen to see just what's round each corner and so we all continue up until we agree a final stopping point from where we have another spectacular wildlife sight, two Golden Eagles talon grappling, spinning each other in the air, amazing!!! We can hardly believe our eyes what we've just seen and start to make our way back downhill chatting as we go. Joan spots a Woodland Dor Beetle, she's always on the look out for different insects.

At the bottom of the hill we spend more time watching and listening to the stags as they get louder and louder and more and more vocal. In the grassy areas we search for wax caps, finding four species, Snowy, Slimy, Golden and Scarlet. We make our return journey slowly back along the glen, Alison spots another White-tailed Eagle, possibly one of the earlier adults and the wind seems

to be carrying it at great speed as it effortlessly glides away from us up the glen. The autumn colours back through the trees are beautiful as we drive slowly back to the hotel after a spectacular day of wildlife watching.

Day 4 We wake to a damp but sunny morning and enjoy a spot of birding beside the hotel under a rainbow. The grounds of the hotel are filled with huge trees that provide great perching and feeding opportunities, Alison spots Mistle Thrush.

We are heading west today and sit back to enjoy the magnificent views of the mountains, rivers and lochs as we go. We stop briefly at Dundonnell to scan for waders, we see here Curlew and Oystercatcher before heading to our next stop overlooking Gruinard Bay. The Gruinard River is in spate as it rushes down, there seems to have been a lot of rain, the rivers and waterfalls are full. At the roadside we pull in and get our scopes ready to look out towards the island. We start spotting various birds and after 30 minutes have got an excellent list including summer plumage Red-throated Divers, Black-throated Divers Great Northern Diver. We also have winter plumage Black Guillemot, Gannets and some rather charming Common Seals.

We move on from here to savour a few moments at Mellon Udrigle beach between rain showers. The weather is proving rather uncooperative today with some very heavy downpours interrupting our plans a little. As we head to the beach we are caught in another deluge but as we reach the beach it stops and we enjoy half an hour of beautiful views, Ringed Plovers and tranquillity. We are back in the minibus before another rain shower which interrupts our lunch stop at Mellon Charles.

Next we head to Gairloch Museum for a welcome cup of tea and a look round the interesting museum. We are now at the far point of a circular drive and set off back east towards our hotel. The mountains are breathtakingly beautiful as the light is constantly changing, one minute sun, the next some brooding black clouds, all very atmospheric and photogenic. We stop, partly out of curiosity at "Victoria Falls", apparently visited at some point by Queen Victoria. A short walk takes us to some lovely falls where we were hoping to see Dipper but no sensible Dipper would be dipping anywhere near this torrent today! We have three Crossbill fly over and a flurry of a tit flock and feeding migrant Blackbirds here but we move on.

We stop again at Rogie Falls and take a walk down through mixed woodland with again mixed tit flocks with Goldcrest and Siskin too. The falls are amazing and we watch anxiously as you men swing below the bridge over the water, definitely not for the faint hearted. We are just 10 minutes for the hotel and are back in good time for another delicious and very special meal.

Day 5 We head out east and north today. Initially we make our way over the scenic Struie Road. We stop in the hope of spotting a Hen Harrier but all is quiet except for a pair of Ravens on one of the pylons but the views are superb. When we set off this morning we were in cloud along the rivers but rose out of it higher up, now the cloud has disappeared and we can see for miles down to the Dornoch Firth and along to the Kyle of Sutherland.

We make our way to a comfort stop at Ardgay and continue to Loch Fleet. Here the tide is still well in so we continue to Golspie in search of Dipper, but no luck, then to Brora for lunch but just as we arrive the heavens open and so lunch is enjoyed in the minibus. The sun is soon back out though, and we enjoy Ringed Plover, Redshank, Red-throated Diver and Razorbills and Guillemots.

After lunch we head back south to Loch Fleet where the tide is starting to drop quite rapidly. On the sand banks Common Seals loaf and Joan spots a single Grey Seal. A loan Curlew feeds nearby, its great to have the time to just watch and enjoy as it quietly goes about its business only pausing and lifting its head when it hears another Curlews calling way off. We spot a group of eight Greenshank and Joan finds a Goosander.

We move on to Embo, the sea is pretty quiet, just a couple of Eider but as we persist in scouring the rocks we pick up Ringed Plover, Turnstone and a group of Rock Pipit. We find a great place to stand with the warm sun on our backs. We can hear a lot of geese calling, it's hard to work out where from, they sound as if they are in the air but we can't see anything, we then spot birds low down over a field and when we leave Embo we spot that there are around 1000 birds in a field all chattering away, what a sight and sound when they take off!

We make our way to Dornoch now and park up for half an hour to explore this delightful town, we really need an afternoon to do it justice. Tony and Celia visit the Cathedral and everyone else does a little shopping but everyone enjoys the town. We return to the hotel and have a 'leg stretch' on the way back along

a forest track. A mixed flock flit in the willow scrub, but nothing new for the list here other than, Saffron Milkcap and Pine Marten Poo!

Day 6

We head back into the hills today taking a leisurely drive toward Glen Affric. On route we spot a lot of vehicles parked in a field and when we stop in Cannich we see even more, what's going on? Apparently it's a massive film set for a new series called The Laird, starring Kenneth Brannagh it means little to us but we are amazed by the number of vehicles and people, one of the security guards tells us there are 500 folk who all need feeding and somewhere to stay, no wonder films need such a big budget.

We first head to Plodda Falls. We enjoy a beautiful walk to the falls through stunning but sadly birdless forest. Its non native but very impressive with stands of huge Douglas Fir. The waterfall itself is pretty impressive too with a massive drop and full of the night before's rain. We discover an interesting Salmon-eggs Slime mould and enjoy the lush vegetation. We return to the car park but before doing so come across a group of Coal Tits and Goldcrest flitting above our heads from one side of the track to the other. We move on from this spectacular location driving along the main route through Glen Affric, it's pretty busy with film crew, etc. but when we get to the end of the road the picnic table we'd hoped for is waiting for us and we easily find a parking spot.

We enjoy lunch in the sunshine under an old Scot's pine tree in a beautiful location. The whole glen is stunning as the trees are taking on their autumn colours and the old granny pines stand proud on the hillsides. We take a walk into the forest with the aim of finding Crested Tit. It's one of the things Joan particularly wanted to see and we are lucky, a busy mixed flock moves through the trees and amongst them are at least two Crested Tits, mission accomplished, Joan and everyone else sees them well.

On our return we find another interesting Fungus, Elfin Saddle, a peculiar grey fungus that would be very easily overlooked. We return to the minibus and head back up the glen to Cannich where we take a sharp left to go up Glen Cannich. A very different glen but aglow with autumn colour. Sadly the rain begins and it doesn't tempt us to stop and listen for stags roaring. We check the river for Dipper and continue to the end of this beautiful road up to Loch Mullardoch before heading back to the hotel.

Day 7

We decide to visit an area of forestry just beside the hotel to look for Crossbill this morning. We take a short walk meeting several dog walkers on the way who chat about their dogs and the area. We are eventually rewarded with some beautiful views of Mistle Thrush and Crossbill perching high in the tall spruce trees.

We head from here to The Black Isle, first stopping at Chanonry Point in the hope of seeing Bottle-nosed Dolphin. There's plenty of activity out on the water with hundreds of Gannets, mostly immature, feeding quite close into shore. But there are no dolphins, we hear that they headed north-east earlier in the morning. But we are lucky to catch up with Bonxie, Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck, spotted by Joan, and Common Tern spotted by Tony, also a Great Northern Diver and large numbers of auks.

We eventually leave and head over to Cromarty. We have a perfect parking place for lunch and sit in the sun looking out to sea. After lunch we move on to Udale Bay where there is a mass of feeding and preening birds as far as the eye can see. On our way we see a group of ducks just off-shore and stop briefly to admire a large flock of very handsome Scaup. From the road we get a great view but cannot delay, a car is coming!

We arrive at Udale and start scanning the scene with the sound of Pink-footed Geese ever present. We have both Black and Bar-tailed Godwit, Oystercatchers, Curlew, Redshank and Dunlin, Wigeon, Teal, Pink-footed and Greylag Geese. We enjoy sifting through the birds but find nothing different, no sign of the Ross' Goose that's been around. We head on now to the road from North Kessock to Red Castle on the off chance we see Otter. The light isn't great, we are heading into the sun and the tide is well out so other than a few waders we push on back to Contin and return to the forest for a second chance of Crossbill. No Crossbill but good views of our first Sparrowhawk of the trip.

We return to pack in readiness of going home and do the final bird list in front of a log fire. We enjoy a final meal together, most of us decide on a treat of Fillet Steak and a dessert which we've resisted for most of the trip.

Day 8

We have a slightly earlier breakfast on our last morning as folk have trains to catch or long journeys. We say our farewells after a splendid week where we've been lucky to dodge the bad weather and to see the Scottish Highlands in all its wildlife glory. Highlights have definitely been the glorious glens, eagles and stags.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Barnacle Goose
Brent Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Pintail
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone

Dunlin
Redshank
Greenshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Snipe
Great Skua
Arctic Skua
Pomarine Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Greater Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Guillemot
Black Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (H)
Skylark
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit

Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Treecreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Crossbill
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Common Seal
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Sika Deer (H)
Rabbit

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral
Speckled Wood

FUNGI

Fly Agaric
Snowy Wax Cap
Golden Wax Cap
Slimy Wax Cap
Scarlet Wax Cap
Angels Wings
Lilac Pinkgill
Jelly Antler
Fleecy Milkcap
Orange Peel Fungus
Saffron Milkcap
Elfin Saddle
Salmon-Eggs Slime Mould

OTHER THINGS

Woodland Dor Beetle
European Goldenrod
Devils Bit Scabious
Fox Moth Caterpillar
Ruby Tiger Moth Caterpillar
Pine Marten Poo
Deer Fern
Rainbows +++
2 Very Close Typhoons

Favourite Species

John White-tailed Eagle
Alison White-tailed Eagle and Pink-footed Geese
Joan Crested Tit and Scaup
Tony Black-tailed Godwit
Celia Curlews
Sally Black-throated Diver

Favourite Place

Alison Glen Affric and the Caledonian Pines and Strathconon
John Loch Mullardoch and its remoteness
Joan Strathconon
Tony Glen Affric and Plodda Falls
Celia Plodda Falls, Glen Affric and Mellon Udrigle
Sally Strathconon

Magic Moment

Celia White-tailed Eagle and Golden Eagle in combat
Tony White-tailed Eagle and Golden Eagle in combat
Joan White-tailed Eagle and Golden Eagle in combat - size difference
John Seeing Crested Tit
Alison Seeing the first bellowing stag and watching the stags and hind activity
Sally Golden Eagles talon grappling