

# HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

## REWILDING

28 JULY – 4 AUGUST 2018

**Guide:** Sally Nowell

**Guests:** Alan Daniells, Judy Millson, Richard Thomas, Betty Lee, Bob Lee

**Day 1** We all arrive full of anticipation at The Steading, not quite sure what to expect from this first ever 'Rewilding' week. We start with a passionate and slick presentation from Pete Cairns of 'Scotland: The Big Picture'. We see some stunning and moving images of Scotland's wilderness and hear the introduction of some challenging ideas about how we see Scotland now, how it might look in the future and indeed what it should or could look like. Pete introduces us to Cairngorms Connect, a new and inspiring project to "enhance habitats, species and ecological processes" across 600sq km within the Cairngorms National Park. This is a project over 200 years and is described as the biggest habitat restoration project in Britain. We go for dinner and then chat at dinner regarding the talk and our interest in rewilding and the future of the Scottish landscape starts to emerge.

**Day 2** We have our first breakfast together and then head off to RSPB Abernethy to meet Ian Perks (who kindly came to speak with us on his way to Edinburgh Airport). We have a privileged gathering in Forest Lodge, the largest wooden building in Scotland, where Ian talks to us about the history of the reserve, the work that is being done here and the plans for the future. Ian is a delightful speaker and speaks with genuine passion about his work and the future challenges conservationists face in the Rewilding of the Highland Landscape. He tells us about RSPB Abernethy's involvement in the Cairngorms Connect project where 50% of lekking Capercaillie are now being found.

After meeting with Ian we take a walk into the forest past the tree nursery, where the seedlings of the future forest are being nurtured. We see a distant Spotted Flycatcher on one of the huge Lime trees by the river which still holds the scent of some remaining blossoms and catch sight of Crested Tit amongst a mixed flock of fast moving birds high in the Scots Pine canopy. We are able to walk out into an open area of the forest due to the low water levels in the stream and take hopeful looks out over the distant hills for Golden and White-tailed Eagles but neither are present. We head back to the van and head out to Dorback Estate en route spotting flocks of 30 or more Mistle Thrushes perched high in a Larch tree above the road and in a roadside field. On the feeders along the road Red Squirrels

hesitantly feed but the visiting Woodpecker is just too wary to visit whilst we are there. On to Grantown-on-Spey and the Old Spey Bridge, where we have lunch overlooking the river and Richard spots a Dipper which we watch for a while before heading off to Avielochan. Sally is worried the almost fully grown Slavonian Grebe chick will leave with its parents this week and when we arrive there is no sign of the birds though there are plenty of Little Grebes that often get ignored because of the Slavonian grebes but this time they got a little more attention! A few female and immature Goldeneye are present too but having searched every corner of the loch we have to leave before heading out to the Dusk-watch hide where we waiting patiently but not in vain. We had views of Tawny Owl, Badgers and fab views of Pine Marten too. Everybody is happy and ready for bed!!

### Day 3

We have an early breakfast and leave The Steading at 8.30 today heading for Aigas Field Centre and the West Coast. After a beautiful drive along the Moray Firth, we arrive at the stunning Aigas Field Centre and have a welcome coffee and shortbread in the lecture theatre which is full of stuffed animals and other natural history paraphernalia. Ben gives us presentations about Beavers, their ecology and reintroduction and the Scottish Wildcat project that Aigas are involved with. We take a walk beside the small Loch into which the Beavers have been introduced and see evidence of their presence in both lodges, tree felling and tree regrowth.

We then go to see the two captive Scottish Wildcats in their enclosure via a herd of cattle and an extremely friendly Clydesdale horse, Queenie. A magnificent and rather ferocious looking male Wildcat keeps his distance from a perch high above the ground maintaining some of his wild mystery despite being part of a captive breeding program. I think we all enjoy this. Having a really good look at these fabulous but threatened animals feels a real privilege and it is difficult to pull ourselves away but we have things to see and places to go so we bid farewell to Ben and Aigas. We head out west via Loch Glascarnoch where we have lunch overlooking a rather dry loch. A couple of Redpolls stop by on the vegetation beside us but little else so we press on to Little Loch Broom for a tea stop to be thrilled with the birds we have here. Alan spots a Greenshank amongst the many waders we can see on the mudflats. We have distant but good views, because of the light, of Black-Throated Divers and families of Goosander and Red-Breasted Mergansers. We are surprised by the presence of a lone Gannet who seemed surprisingly inland for a Gannet but it gives us some great views as it patrols the sea in front of us.

On to Gruinard Bay. Sally can't believe her luck when she sees a White-tailed Eagle perched on the cairn on top of the Island. After we all have a look through the scope we cannot resist the beautiful shallow sea so Sally, Alan, Betty and Judy roll up their trousers and head out to the water's edge. With binoculars still in hand, we are able to watch the

White-tailed Eagle perched on the top of Gruinard Island as we enjoy the feel of sand between our toes and the cool water of this stunning bay.

We leave the bay and stop further round where we get slightly closer views of the perched White-tailed Eagle and then spot another White-tailed Eagle, on the ground on the Island. The birds stay put but we are thrilled to see them and to enjoy the success story of the White-tailed Eagle reintroduction reflecting on some of Ian's talk about the ever increasing numbers in Scotland but also some of the challenges they face as they venture into some of the less welcoming parts of the country.

We head back home after a fabulous day out and enjoy the scenery and chat on our return journey whilst also spotting Red Kites over the road on the Black Isle.

#### DAY 4

We have a relaxed start to the day with a walk down to the River Feshie. The water levels were extremely low so very little activity on the river. In Spring some of the areas we walk through are busy but in July they are much quieter but as we walk we see the Osprey pair ahead and then are startled by a small group of Jays that are attacked by a Peregrine Falcon. It looks like the Jays escape but they certainly make their feelings heard and we get some great views of the Peregrine as it rockets past us!

A Pied Flycatcher surprises us here and we have a lovely view of a Small Copper Butterfly.

After our walk, we head to Inshriach Forest and walk up to Sally's 'special tree'. A stunning Granny pine sits at the base of a magnificent piece of Caledonian Pine forest on the hillside. This takes us back to times when the forest covered the area and the hillsides but sadly provides us with a bit of a challenge to get to across the fallen timbers of other trees but it's well worth the effort! It is a very atmospheric place and one where we see some evidence of Capercaillie activity finding two female feathers in one of the dust baths.

This evening we are due at Loch of the Lowes to look for Beaver. We head off south down the back roads stopping for tea en route and then up and over the Trinafour road. A scan from the high point provides a real highlight for the trip with a distant but none the less thrilling view of a male Hen harrier wafting over the moor. It disappeared briefly but everyone gets a view of this wonderful bird before it finally flies out of view. From here we travel through the soft Perthshire countryside to Dunkeld for a very pleasant supper with more lively discussion about Rewilding!

After dinner, we head to Loch of the Lowes where we meet Lindsay our guide for the evening. Lindsay gives us an introduction to the story

of Beaver behaviour and presence at Loch of the Lowes. A female beaver is spotted heading straight towards us and we watch as she heads around the Loch. We also see Great-Crested Grebes here, a bird absent further north and have splendid views of Fallow Deer and the resident Osprey family.

On our journey home Sally glimpses a Barn Owl on the road edge but despite turning round for a second glimpse and to check it wasn't injured, sadly nobody else saw the bird which must have been hunting by the road edge.

## DAY 5

This morning we are on our way to Dundreggan to meet Doug Gilbert from Trees for Life. We drive round Inverness and down Loch Ness-side behind some frustratingly slow drivers! We share coffee and cake with Doug in the car park of Trees for Life and then take a walk through the glorious Caledonian forest, this time dominated by Birch and other deciduous trees along with some spectacular Juniper. As we walk Doug demonstrates his knowledge of the wider fauna and flora associated with this woodland type and we see Miner Bees feeding on the Devils-bit Scabious, Tiger Beetle larva and Bloody Slayer Ants, a name none of us will forget in a hurry! Doug shows us the enclosure which held Wild Boar in the past and the impact of their activity churning up the ground and enabling new growth of young trees and other plants to prosper. Doug talked to us about the work of Trees for Life as we walked through spectacular woodland reaching a high point for lunch where we hear about how work is afoot to encourage owners of the last fragments of Caledonian forest to try and link up to expand the forest area. We take a different route back via Loch Ruthven where we are successful looking for Slavonian Grebe and en route see a family of Red Kite. We head south into the Findhorn Valley via the Farr road getting glimpses of Sika and Roe deer as we travel.

## DAY 6

We are going to Coignafearn today...Hurrah! Who doesn't love this valley and that feeling of anticipation as we approach it?

Along the approach road, we see Brown Hare hunched in the grass, our first of the trip. As we drive Alan spots Feral Goat on the hillside, so well camouflaged, it took sharp eyes to see these from a moving van! We arrive at the bridge for coffee and shortbread and whilst standing see Peregrine and Kestrel above the hillside beside us and then spot a Peregrine decisively flying off only to return 15 minutes later with prey which, whilst it calls, it passes to another bird above the rocky slopes above. Oystercatchers on the shore of the River Findhorn still have a young family. A distant Eagle appears above the valley and as it gets nearer we can see that it is an immature White-tailed Eagle. Its dramatic wings bring it effortlessly towards us and as it flies past, it looks down at us as we gaze in awe at this magnificent bird, who bats off an annoying kestrel like a fly. On our route

into and out of the valley we get great views of Stoa, one with an old rabbit skin runs into the roadside and we all have a good look at this often, hard to see, mammal.

This afternoon we go to visit Alvie Estate. David and Ian give us an introduction to the estate explaining it is diversifying into green energy production but also that it is a sporting estate and still works as one whilst trying to preserve the landscape and its inhabitants. The views from the top of the hill are fabulous and we all acknowledge that some of the priorities for sporting estates and conservationists, like ourselves, sometimes differ. Despite some of the differences we share our shock in hearing about the theft of some Golden Eagle eggs from the estate this year.

We take a drive up to Insh Marshes Reserve at the end of the afternoon for a relaxed final hour's wildlife watching. We bump into a young boy in full Jewish dress on a bike and perform a rescue operation for one of his friends who has become lost and is heading to Kingussie instead of Aviemore!

Our rescue operation makes us slightly late for dinner where we are joined by James Stevens one of our new guides in the Speyside team.

## DAY 7

We decide to have a relaxed day and a visit to the seaside. We start however, by walking up the Glenmore track looking for Capercaillie, Crested Tit and Crossbill. Walking up this track is always an exciting experience and we search for dust baths and evidence of Caper activity. We drove up to Findhorn Bay via Darnaway Forest where we shelter from the rain whilst we eat lunch. The mixed, non native forest around us holds many cones so there are lots of Crossbills calling above our heads but always perching just where we can't see them. Alan is impressed by the huge specimen trees here, mostly Douglas Fir. We head on to Findhorn Bay with great views of Yellowhammer and Linnets in the gorse and dunes as well as flypasts of Sandwich and Common Tern. We drive through the pig farm fields to Lossiemouth looking for waders seeing a few Dunlin, Redshank and Curlew along with huge Gull flocks but nothing unusual.

This is a lovely final day together where the themes of the week continue to predominate our discussions and thoughts. We head back one final time to our comfortable and welcoming Steading for dinner and an opportunity to share together our holiday highlights and reflections on our week.

### **Favourite Species**

Richard First Beaver in the UK  
Judy View of White-tailed Eagle up Coignafearn and Beaver  
Bob White-tailed Eagle and Beaver  
Betty White-tailed Eagle  
Alan Ospreys at Loch of the Lowes and having time to watch them  
Sally Male Hen harrier

### **Favourite Place**

Richard Dundreggan, Loch of the Lowes, Forest Lodge  
Judy Findhorn Valley and Loch of the Lowes  
Bob Loch of the Lowes because of all we saw there and the 'clockwork' Beaver.  
Betty Loch of the Lowes, Findhorn Valley and the Glenmore Track.  
Alan Dundreggan and the inspiring story behind it.  
Sally Regeneration of the forest at the high levels about the current tree line.

### **Magic Moment**

Richard Seeing the speed and activity of the Beavers  
Judy seeing the Beaver there in front of us moving "at the speed of knots!"  
Bob The unexpectedness of seeing the Hen Harrier.  
Betty The unexpectedness of seeing the Hen Harrier.  
Alan The unexpected view of the Stoat and the great views we had.  
Sally Realizing at the beginning of the trip that our group were really interested in the subject of the trip and embraced everything about it with such energy and enthusiasm.

## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Teal  
Goldeneye  
Tufted Duck  
Goosander  
Red-Breasted Merganser  
Red-Legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Crested Grebe  
Little Grebe  
Slavonian Grebe  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Eagle  
Osprey  
Golden Eagle  
Red Kite  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Sparrowhawk  
Kestrel  
Peregrine Falcon  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Lapwing  
Dunlin  
Red Knot  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Curlew  
Snipe  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Common Tern  
Sandwich Tern  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl  
Barn Owl  
Swift  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Sand Martin  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Redstart  
Stonechat  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Blackbird  
Blackcap  
Willow Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Wren  
Pied Flycatcher  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Great Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Crested Tit  
Treetreeper  
Magpie  
Jay  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Redpoll  
Goldfinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Bullfinch

Crossbill Sp  
Yellowhammer

**Total Birds: 92**

### **MAMMALS**

Pipistrelle Bat  
Soprano Pipistrelle Bat  
Badger  
Stoat  
Pine Marten  
Grey Seal  
Roe Deer  
Red Deer  
Sika Deer  
Fallow Deer  
Feral Goat  
Red Squirrel  
Woodmouse  
European Beaver  
Short-tailed Vole  
Brown Hare  
Mountain Hare  
Rabbit

### **INSECTS**

Green Leaf Beetle  
Scotch Argus  
Peacock Butterfly  
Garden Slug  
Blue Damselfly  
Common Darter  
Bee Mimic  
Meadow Brown  
Small Copper  
Speckled Wood  
Sexton Beetle  
Antler Moth  
Green-veined White  
Bloody Slaver Ant  
Yellow Meadow Ant  
Harry Wood Ant

### **REPTILES**

Common Frog  
Common Toad

**Total Species: 128**