

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SOLWAY FIRTH

2-9 NOVEMBER 2024

Guide: Sally Nowell

Guests: Liz & Chris & Piper, Judith Dunworth, Joan Hunter, Vivien Emery, Lynn Osborne

Day 1 We all make our way to Dumfries and Galloway and meet in our hotel just before 7pm in time for dinner. We chat about the week ahead and are all relieved that the weather looks pretty settled, cloudy but dry, mild and not windy!

Day 2 We have a leisurely start and make our way towards Ken Dee RSPB reserve. Sally takes a detour via some wooded ridges where she hopes to see raptors but it's too dull and all we see is a couple of Red Kites hunched in a bush waiting for the air to warm and dry. We continue on through some beautiful beech woods, the road is orange with their fallen leaves. We decide to stop for a short walk and to see if we can catch up with a target species of the day, Willow Tit. We walk down a track beside a burn and think it looks good for Dipper but all is quiet on the bird front. We wander off the track and soon Lynn spots a Great Spotted Woodpecker on a tall dead tree. It's shortly joined by another bird and their activity seems to attract a bit of attention and we are soon spotting an array of woodland birds but not Willow Tit. We retrace our steps, return to the van and continue on to Ken Dee marshes.

We stop briefly to scan over the loch and see a lone male Goldeneye fly low over the water and disappear and then return to rest on the still water surface giving us distant but good scope views. We continue on to a small car park and set off for a short walk. Frankly we don't get very far at all! We walk through a track that on either side has some mature hedgerows that are filled with bird activity. For 100 metres we keep stopping, Redwings, Starlings, Jackdaws, all the tits, except Willow! Long-tailed Tits dance from one side of the track to the other, Chaffinches call and Blackbirds and Robins continually flit across the track.

We take a diversion to view the loch from a high point, here we have Goldfinch, Meadow Pipit, Common Buzzard and Song Thrush but not the hoped for Greenland White-fronted Geese. We enjoy scanning to see what we can find but are soon back on the track again making our way to some dense woodland. Here we feel our chances of Willow Tit are greater.

First we spot a Treecreeper, then Goldcrest and check out every moving small bird and there are quite a lot. Lynn thinks she has a Willow Tit but can't quite get on it and Chris similarly. Finally, we see a bird high up in the Larch trees and yes it's a Willow Tit!! Hurrah!

By now its time to retrace our steps back to the van and then to the Red Kite feeding station. As we reach the van a farmer asks if we've seen much and then tells us a flock of sheep are heading our way. We quickly get in the van and are off in the direction away from the sheep towards the kite feeding station. We park up and the owners are happy for us to eat our lunch here, so we listen to the kites and watch them waiting for food to be brought.

At 2pm the kites start to get more active and as the food is spread out they all take to the air and come in waves to feed. They do not seem interested in some of the food and eventually return to their roosting tress and we finish our lunch and leave the avid photographers to it. We next make our way to Kirkcudbright Bay where we scan the shores for waders. There are a few Curlew and Oystercatcher and large numbers of Wigeon. Further along we see a big group of Redshank, a few Little Egret and large mixed gull flocks. We drive round this beautiful area spotting huge clouds of mixed thrushes and Fieldfare giving us our first good views.

Judy has spent a lot of time in this area, her parents used to live here so she guides us to delightful Balcary Point. On route Chris spots a field full of Pink-footed Geese but we are slightly surprised at the lack of geese we are seeing so far. We drive down a single track road to Balcary point where we can see huge numbers of Curlew and Oystercatcher out on the sands but the tide is well out and so they are very distant. Flocks of Wigeon are out there too and a surprise Hooded Crow. As the light is fading we are really hoping we might catch a Barn Owl hunting as we return to the hotel but to no avail.

Day 3 We start the day by heading towards Dumfries. Chris isn't feeling 100% so decides to follow us in the car rather than risk spreading any germs, in fact he feels much better as the day goes on. In Dumfries we negotiate our way through the town and make our way to WWT Caerlaverock. We are welcomed by the staff here and get ourselves organized for a mornings birding. We start by climbing a tower hide which gives us a good all round view of the reserve. We then start off walking around the Peter Scott trail, from one hide we see a distant Great Egret flying over the marsh. The feeders here are alive with birds but most of all we enjoy the numbers of handsome Tree Sparrows. We watch our first Whooper Swan family whilst we are all crammed into a tiny hide, thankfully there are only six of us.

We continue on to another tower hide which looks out onto the marsh. On our way a Roe Deer buck is grazing on the path, he waits until the last minute before

dashing off, he has obviously found something tasty to eat. The tide is coming in but it still seems an awfully long way out. In the distance we are pleased to see some very large groups of Barnacle Geese and a huge number of Shelduck. We watch some wader flocks wheeling about, we assume they may be Knot but at this distance can't be sure. We hope to see Merlin but instead have a very distant view of a Peregrine disturbing the waders. A few Roe Deer roam around and Little Egrets keep popping up as they feed in hidden channels. We enjoy the Hebridean sheep that are lined up just outside the hide, all part of grazing management of the area.

We return along the track edged with dense hedging. The hedge teams with Blackbirds, Robins and Redwings as we walk, with an occasional Wren or group of mixed tits working their way through the Hawthorns and Brambles. We arrive at the Peter Scott hide where we decide to have lunch. We look out onto the Whooper Swan pond where we get extremely close views of these stunning birds we usually see from a distance. They are joined by Wigeon, handsome Teal and Tufted Duck. One of the wardens gives us a brief talk about the reserve and the reasons behind the regular feeding regime here. We watch as she goes out and another family of Whoopers fly in to get some extra feed after their long journey from Iceland.

We leave the hide and have a warm drink in the reserve café before heading off to New Abbey. Chris soon learns what it's like to be a guide following the lead van through a town but he keeps up and follows us as we take an unexpected turn off. Judy knows this area well and as we drive she has told us of various locations she and her brother have visited. We pass one just as we are about to be held up at traffic lights and quickly turn off.

We discover a gem of a location at Kirkconnell Flow, this tiny reserve is a patch of mixed woodland and a peatland restoration project. The ancient mixed birch wood is extraordinary and we find some interesting fungi here including Ochre Brittlegill, Brick Cap and Turkey Tail. There are some stunning tall and old Scots Pine too. We see Long-tailed Tit and are sure if we stayed here longer could see so much more. It would be a great place to come in spring or summer, perhaps we need to return then?? We feel rather thrilled to have happened upon such a fabulous spot, quite different to anywhere else we have visited and will visit on our trip.

We continue on though some stunning narrows lanes and avenues of huge beech, oak and ash with copper leaves carpeting our route. We eventually reach New Abbey and visit the Sweetheart Abbey which is being restored. We continue on to delightful Carsethorn where the light is fading, we are hoping to catch a Starling murmuration, but there's no sign of any Starlings but a little treat for us at the end of the day is a lone Whimbrel.

We continue on to Southernness where we discover there is no parking rather too late. Sally takes a turn with Chris behind her and then has to reverse, rather inelegantly out of a rather narrow and awkward gap. Lynn comes to the rescue with directions and we are on our way again. Just outside the village we see a huge flock of Barnacle Geese spotted by Lynn and a Brown Hare makes a mad dash across the road just before we reach a junction on to the main road. We make our way back to the hotel in near darkness now hoping once again for owls and once again, no luck!

Day 4

Today we leave the coast and head inland. We drive to Gatehouse of Fleet and take the road leading north west. It's a beautiful road, lined with majestic mature oaks and beech but it's narrow, so when we encounter a huge timber wagon on a sharp bend it comes as a bit of a surprise. We are fortunate to find a drive we can turn down to let the huge lorry continue on its way. Joan spots a Grey Squirrel and as we drive we spot clouds of mixed winter thrushes.

The hedgerows and trees are busy with birdlife this morning. The morning is rather grey but the low cloud over the woodland Viv comments on is rather atmospheric. We come to our first stop of the day at Dromore. Almost as soon as we arrive there are birds all over, Fieldfares, mixed tit flocks, a Redpoll, Reed Bunting and Meadow Pipit. We use the facilities but continue a little further up the track under the viaduct and park up and then walk through the forest area and finally down to a river. From here we stop and enjoy the view. We are surrounded by Wild Cherry trees that we saw from above were filled with feeding Fieldfares and Blackbirds, now they are silenced by our arrival.

We meet a man walking who tells us there is a circular route but by the state of his wet boots, we decide not to take his recommendation and to retrace our steps back to the van. We are looking for Crossbill in the towering spruce trees covered in cones, we have a couple of fly overs but not convincing views. We walk back to the van where there was a little more activity and drive back to the visitor centre. We start scanning about and hear Crossbills, a pair come and land in the ash tree in front of us. We are puzzled at them being in the tree but they appear to be nibbling the ash shoots. As we watch the crossbills two Ravens come in, they perch nearby and start preening each other. The Crossbills fly off before Joan has a chance to see them, we all get engrossed in the Ravens and then Joan notices the Crossbills are still there in another tree, they fly back into the tree in front of us and give us some fabulous views. The Ravens are exceptional too and we hear them making an unusual 'knocking' noise, a courtship call perhaps. The Ravens leave and so do we.

We start towards Creetown and stop briefly to enjoy the autumn colours along the River Cree, and watch from a bridge over the river for Dipper. On to Newton Stewart and we then turn north again towards the Galloway forest. As we drive, Joan spots what look initially like wild goats but in fact turn

out to be a white Fallow Deer. We continue to an outlook over the woodland surrounded by huge spruce trees. As we arrive a female Bullfinch is calling. Over lunch we scan the trees and bushes with Redwing, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Common Buzzard and Long-tailed Tits passing through. Our lunch today has some extra treats, some fresh cream donuts and eclairs, we finish them all off and thank Pauline at the hotel for them later, it's with mixed feelings that we learn they were leftovers from yesterday's wake!

After lunch we stop briefly to admire the feral goats at the wild goat park and then continue to Clatteringshaws Loch. On several fronts this is rather a damp squib, no toilets, no café and no birds today so we continue to New Galloway where we warm ourselves in a welcoming café with a hot drink.

We are soon on the road again in search of Joan's favourite place from her last trip, Knock Tinkle road. We stop in the hope of catching sight of Hen Harrier coming in to roost but sadly we aren't lucky. Joan spots some Golden Plover in a nearby field, really unusual to see them in this habitat in winter, but there they are feeding amongst a group of sheep. We scan for a while but then continue on stopping and scanning as we go, always hopeful of a harrier or an owl. We continue on towards home with a slight detour in the hope of Barn Owl as the light fades.

Day 5 Goodness me, the weather is not looking great today but we can't do anything about the weather so we head off west towards Stranraer. As we drive we enter thick mist as we reach slightly higher ground and can barely see the fields beside the road. Spirits are dipping as we were looking forward to today and it looks like we aren't going to see much at all, but when we arrive in Stranraer we dip down below the mist and although visibility isn't great it's much better than we were expecting. We call and make a quick comfort stop in Morrisons and are immediately struck by how warm it feels and as we return to the minibus, we can see some of the only blue sky of the week!

We quickly make our way down to the shore and start to see a mass of birds. We drive a short distance and park up. We don't know where to look, there are birds everywhere. Firstly we notice a huge number of Mute Swans, then Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Wigeon galore and our first Scaup. A few waders along the shore, Dunlin and Chris spots a Sanderling amongst them. A lone Bar-tailed Godwit preens amongst a mix of waders and wildfowl, it's a spectacular sight. We walk a short distance and flocks of Greenfinch fly along the shore, feeding on the seaweed. Further out we see Red-breasted Merganser and Red-throated Diver. We drive down to the harbour where at first we see very little but the more we look the more we see. Goldeneye, a large number of Red-throated Diver, Shag and Guillemot. We need now to find some loos before we leave the town and Lynn cleverly navigates us to some in the centre of town.

Next we head to 'The Wig', the road we planned to take is in a bad state and Sally decides not to put the guests or the van through the ordeal of negotiating the lumps and bumps in the road. We go a little further on and take a short walk down to the shore through some pleasant woodland scrub. Here we have Stonechat, Reed Bunting and a large group of roosting Grey Herons. We meet a lady with her dog who we are introduced to, she's quite a character and makes us laugh quite a lot at her unexpected comments! We also spot a sign here warning of high waves 30 minutes after the ferry passes, presumably the wake from the boat.

We return to the van and then back to 'The Wig' car park for lunch. We have another good session birding here with Slavonian Grebe, Long-tailed Duck and Common Scoter. We leave here and head to Port Patrick but as we go the mist hits us again and we disappear into low cloud. Sadly we continue in the murky weather until Port Patrick and never really get to see what a lovely little village this is or what's out on the sea.

It's a different vantage point altogether here and we can imagine we might see Gannets from here but not today so we call in at The Crown for a cuppa and are served two enormous pots of tea. As we leave the lady behind the bar reminds us all to go to the toilet before we leave after so much tea! She tells us she is a teacher and is used to reminding the children, when she asks if we've washed our hands too we feel very at home!!

We are heading now to look for Greenland White-fronted Goose and are hoping to catch a Hen Harrier coming in to roost. Joan navigates us around a maze of small roads passing fields full of Lapwing through the mist to a location Sally has visited before. We pull up and overlook an area of reeds surrounded by open farmland. Joan spots a flock of geese in a field, a mix of Greylag, Canada and Pinkfeet. Chris spots another group, this time it's the Greenland White-fronts, hurrah, handsome birds, a group of around 50. We start scanning for Hen Harrier and eventually one comes in but its distant and so not everyone sees it. We can see a perched bird and watch it in the telescope, it flies and it's a Hen Harrier, it crosses the vegetation and eventually it drops into the reeds. A while later Joan spots a bird not far from us, at first it looks like buzzard but no it's a Hen Harrier, we all get superb view of it as it glides over the road and down into the reed area eventually disappearing into a similar spot to the earlier bird. We continue looking in the hope of seeing a grey bird. Geese fly over in small groups but the light is fading fast and at five we call it a day and head for home.

Day 6 We are heading inland again today to the RSPB reserve Wood of Cree. We make a start west towards Newton Stewart once again and are soon heading north from here on a narrow road. Sally suddenly realizes we are so busy chatting

that she has forgotten to stop at the loos. Joan has noticed they are near a day centre and is concerned Sally is going to drop everyone off there for the day!

Comfort stop completed and we are off again, another missed turning unfortunately but this leads us past a field of handsome bulls and feeding finches and our first and possibly only magpie of the trip. Once on the right route we enter some beautiful old mixed woodland just holding on to their autumn colours by the skin of their teeth.

We stop at a small car park where we get out of the minibus to have a listen for birds around in the woodland. There isn't much activity so we continue on a little further. We stop in another small car park where we go looking for Dipper. In the trees we hear Jay and then we walk down to an Otter pool. We stand and gaze out at the water for a time, a couple of Mallard fly in, a charm of Goldfinches pass by and a single bird we aren't quite sure, of but Lynn is pretty sure it was Snipe. A Jay skulks around in the bushes and then flies up giving us the best view of Jay we've managed so far.

We return down the muddy path to the van and then continue down an increasingly beautiful road. We pass a large waterfall, stunning through the trees and then come to a river. The river is pretty full too but it looks like an ideal place for a Dipper, we all scan carefully but there are no Dippers to be seen but the river is beautiful.

We continue on up towards Glentool stopping once again at a river in search of Dipper and beside an information centre which is sadly closed. After this it's just another three miles to the end of the glen. We drive through mixed woodland, some mature plantation with huge spruce trees and some fine stands of tall Scots Pine, we then come to some fabulous ancient oaks and mixed birch which are all above Loch Trool which we can now see below us.

The road comes to a stop and we all get out to go and admire the view, we can see its beautiful but sadly the hills are shrouded in mist though we can see that the sun is just trying to push through but the mist wins and we lose out on an opportunity to enjoy what we are sure is a glorious view of the hills of Galloway. A kind couple take a few group photos which sadly don't include Judy who has stayed back at the hotel today. We return via a different route and head straight for Wigtown for a comfort stop and then on the Crook of Baldoon where we hope to catch the high tide.

Our timing is good but the water and the birds are still a long way out to enjoy. Large flocks of Shelduck and Oystercatcher, Pink-footed Geese and Curlew are on the shore. We have a few Snipe fly over head and then a group of around 30 are flushed from the reeds and circle over head before dropping back in. They come up several times and circle round calling, quite an unexpected

sight. In the small wetland are a number of Mallard, Teal and Wigeon and our only Gadwall so far. The weather has turned uncomfortable and nobody looks keen for a walk in the cold damp wind. We decide to go back to Wigtown to find the harbour hide for a bit of shelter. Here we see Wigeon and a few Redshank, Lynn spots some smaller waders, Dunlin, but there isn't a great deal else here though it's a super hide. After 20 minutes we head into town and everyone visits the book shops which close at 4pm. We then make our way down a quiet road which runs behind the marsh land hoping for a harrier or Barn Owl but its quiet along here except for the Blackbirds that cross our path as we drive almost everywhere, and the Redwings and Fieldfares that we flush from trees as we drive throughout the week. It's getting dark now so we head for home.

Day 7 We have a carefully choreographed day ahead of us, trying to fit in everything we can to our final day. We start at 9am and head down to Carlingwark Loch. The water is flat calm and we can see Mute Swans, Goldeneye, Little and Great Crested Grebe, and we have a fly over from a group of Whooper Swans. In the woodland we finally catch up with Siskin, get good views of Nuthatch and Treecreeper and enjoy a lot of small bird activity around the Alders and Sycamore.

At 10 we head back to the hotel and have half an hour of shopping in Castle Douglas. We know this is not a traditional pursuit on a Speyside Wildlife holiday but we just couldn't resist visiting this traditional high street full of independent shops, it's a bit like going back in time. Homemade chocolates, a special pad of drawing paper, a beautiful biscuit tin and some local cheese are purchased from an amazing array of local shops. Fortunately we are all back at the van by 10.30 ready for some serious birding.

Off we go to Kippford and enjoy birding from the boat yard out over the mud flats, next we go to Rockcliffe where we are surprised to see an ice cream van, and guess what, we all have an ice cream! Out on the mudflats there are huge numbers of Oystercatchers, a few Curlew, Wigeon and Teal. We decide to continue on to Mersehead and Judy tells us a little more about her families relationship with this beautiful area.

At Mersehead we park up and go down to the first hide. In the hawthorn hedge is a huge flock of Linnets with a few Tree Sparrows mixed in, later we discuss how big the flock is and eventually agree to differ on the subject! We are also thrilled to see a large group of Barnacle Geese in the field next to us and all stop to take some photos.

On to the hide where we relax to watch the wildfowl, Shoveler and Pintail amuse us by showing us their bums not their beaks, but eventually we all manage to enjoy these beautiful ducks out on the pool with Wigeon and Teal and

a handful of Gadwall. A lone Snipe makes an appearance too. After a while we decide to return to the van to collect our lunch, some eat inside watching the feeders whilst others sit in the fresh air and enjoy a Barnacle Goose flyover.

After lunch we walk down to the further hide, on route enjoying fields heaving with 'Barnies' including a rather delightful Leucistic individual amongst them. At the hide we enjoy a family group of Whoopers and hear a distant Water Rail. We have had both hides all to ourselves today, amazing how quiet it is everywhere. We leave the hide and walk down to the beach, in the trees are a group of Goldfinches and on the beach a large flock of Pied Wagtails. Although it is nearly high tide the sea still seems a long way off, but we enjoy the vast open space of the beach and mudflats and take a few photos with Sallys phone perched precariously on a tree washed up on the shore.

We enjoy having the beach all to ourselves and then make our way slowly back knowing this is the end of the holiday, we seem to be dragging our heels a bit. We reach the end of the coastal path and hear a loud noise, it's a returning flock of 'Barnies', we rush to see them arrive and they land in the fields either side of our path back, what a treat, the noise is incredible. We walk down admiring the geese, we are all rather smitten with their stunning plumage and confiding nature. As we walk Joan notice's a small flock of Starlings. We had seen on the board that there had been a murmuration of 3000 birds at dusk, but we didn't know where that would be. As we watched the small flock is joined by another small flock and then another and before we know it there is a huge gathering of Starlings whipping and whirling through the air creating amazing shapes, it is spellbinding and I don't think any of us really expected to see a murmuration, let alone one as incredible as this.

We watch for 10 minutes or so and then as quick as they all gathered they all go down into the reeds to roost and the show is over. What a finale to our week. We continue and enjoy watching Roe Deer in the field that watch us carefully but do not bolt or seem unduly concerned by us, just a little wary. We approach the building and realize we are coming up to a field full to the gunnels with 'Barnies', they all have their heads up, they are closer to us than they would like but we try to avoid disturbing them by walking slowly on, but then one gets too anxious and the field erupts with geese right over our heads, again amazing, a double finale to the week.

Back to the van and a final drive home down a quiet road past Judy's old family home, a beautiful road where we hope for owls or Woodcock but we 've had enough luck for the day and wend our way back to the hotel with a final visit to fabulous local artisan bakery to pick up some lunch for the following day and a few last minute food treats. We meet for our final bird list and to reminisce over our favourite species, places and magic moments of our holiday.

Day 8

We are all heading off in different directions today. We have breakfast and say our goodbyes, having had an excellent week of birding and a lot of fun and laughter too!

Favourite Species

Judy Barnacle Geese
Sally Barnacle Geese
Viv Barnacle Geese
Lynn Crossbill or Willow Tit? Crossbill because of the great view and unexpected location.
Liz Barnacle Geese, seeing them so close and Tree Sparrow
Chris Barnacle Geese
Joan Barnacle Geese

Favourite Place

Vic The autumn colours of the woodland especially the Beech trees and the rivers where we were looking for Dippers
Liz Walking through Potterland Wood, the colours and the smells
Joan Being at Bruces Stone, Glen Trool
Lynn Wood of Cree and the drive to Glen Trool
Sally Discovering Glen Trool
Chris Stranraer and Loch Ryan
Judy Auchencaim Bay and Mersehead

Magic Moment

All of us chose the Starling murmuration. But Viv, Joan and Judy all loved the canoodling Ravens too, Lynn particularly enjoyed the sound of the Barnacle Geese in flight and we all enjoyed watching Lynn tackle the huge piece of Cheesecake!

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Greenland White-fronted Goose
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Barnacle Goose
Pale-bellied Brent Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Pintail
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Tufted duck
Common Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Shag
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Sanderling

Turnstone
Dunlin
Redshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Guillemot
Razorbill
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Willow Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Nuthatch
Treecreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow

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

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Roe Deer
Fallow Deer
Feral Goat
Grey Squirrel
Brown Hare
Rabbit