

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE 24/7

2-9 APRIL 2011

Leaders: Chrissie Nicholson & Malcolm O'Reilly

Guests: Christine & Robert Davidson, Tony Swann, Rob Smithson, Alison & Stewart McCormick, John Fisher, Morag & Norman Rea, Sue & Don Zmarzty

Day 1 We all arrive at the Steading our home for the next week, John arrives on a morning flight and takes no time at all to get out and about, he walks along to the Uath Lochans in the sunshine, and his list is started with Goldeneye pairs on the Lochans and Coal, Great and Blue Tits calling in the forest. The others enjoy a cuppa and relax after their journeys. We all congregate for our first of many sumptuous evening meals cooked by Sharon. Chrissie and Malcolm run through the activities for the week ahead of which there are many, with it being a 24/7 week.

Day 2 As we settle at the dining table for breakfast the sun is shining outside and there is a slight breeze. Our first stop is for a walk around the Uath Lochans and as we step out of the minibuses a shower starts, but this does not deter the group, we spot a pair of Goldeneye feeding on the first lochan and Chrissie and Malcolm both shout Crossbill. We are off in search of this calling bird and finally Malcolm spots a male Scottish Crossbill on top of a Pine, with the female just below, wow what a start. As the scopes are set up everyone gets a great view of these speciality pine forest birds. Another very brightly coloured male flies into the same tree but is quickly seen off by the first male.

We walk further and watched Siskin and Goldcrests flitting in the tree canopy when Tony calls Crested Tit, giving directions we watch two birds flitting about in a Birch tree in between ourselves and the lochan shore, fantastic as everyone gets great views of these sometimes elusive little birds. Another pair of Goldeneye are displaying on the lochan, it is amazing watching the male throw his head back and swimming after the female.

As the third lochan comes into view we find Mallard and a pair of Greylag Geese swim by, no divers here today. A shower starts as we head along the boardwalk, Morag and Norman spot a pair of Greylag Geese also on the boardwalk in front of them, Morag starts taking photos of this pair, before

they fly off onto a nearby lochan. Meadow Pipits seem to still be arriving as 12 fly over our heads. A Buzzard flies towards the group but heads off over to the other side of the forest out of sight. Coffee time is calling and we return to the Steading to drink and eat the famous Steading shortbread, yummy!

On our way to a local valley, we call in at Slochd pass and check for Ring Ouzel, unfortunately none are heard or seen, but we do get a fantastic flyby of a Peregrine as it attacks a pair of gulls. Then a Buzzard flies over at the top end of the pass. We hear a call from Alison and Stewart and rush down to the forest edge, what a sight! Another pair of Scottish Crossbill no further than two metres away, happily feeding, undisturbed by all the cameras clicking and excitement of the group, of which most have just got down on the road side, tummy down to get that perfect shot, Chrissie runs back for her digi-scoping equipment, but also takes a picture of the group lying down in action, another great sight, seeing all these bodies lying on the road side, brilliant.

Eventually we arrive in the valley for lunch, the wind is really strong today and showers are passing through so we shelter behind the back of the vans before venturing out for a walk across the valley. The Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers have arrived back in the valley, not flying too much in the wind. No Common Sandpipers in yet!

As the showers are being blown through by the strong wind, we are all kitted up and walk across the valley, we shelter by the woodland and spot Red Deer on the hillside, not as many as usual, and again they are all sitting down in the wind. Braving the elements we walk a wee bit further and stop to look for Mountain Hare. Chrissie is the first to spot one, sitting in a hollow on the hillside, this Hare has still got its winter coat on, although it is not all white, it moves very little and everyone gets a good view. We scan for more but did not find any, a Peregrine flies by and a few of us catch a glimpse. Time is running out so we head back down the valley to find Feral Goats right by the roadside, so cameras are quickly out and shots taken from the vans so we did not disturb them.

Having a quick stop down the valley, Rob gives a call of Golden Eagle, we get a great sighting as everyone watches this young bird for over 5 minutes, flying along the ridge sometimes behind for a few seconds but appearing up again, well spotted Rob. We return back to the Steading for tea with three specialities on our list!

After our meal we head out to our Wildlife Watching hide on Rothiemurchus estate. Just as we turn out of the Glen Feshie estate road, a Brown Hare is spotted in a nearby field; our list is getting fuller by the minute. As we arrive at the hide, Alan has already put out the food and Red Deer are munching away happily and we are not even in the hide yet! As we disturb the deer Malcolm hears a Woodcock flying by, calling, we stop to listen. Once we are in the hide it does not take long before the Red Deer are back.... The next mammals to appear is the very fast Wood Mice, scurrying out quickly grabbing a peanut and disappearing back into his home under the rocks in front of the hide.

Rob sees a Tawny Owl fly by the window and watches it as it lands in a nearby tree, so camouflaged it takes a while to see it right up against the tree trunk, amazing, it must have perched on the shortest twig on the side of the tree. It takes a while for everyone to get this bird, as it is so flush with the tree, but we succeed!

As Chrissie watches the cctv, a Badger appears on one of the cameras, we wait patiently while it decides where to feed, front first and then the back, hoovering up the peanuts. Later on another Badger arrives, definitely a different one, as it has a much cleaner head than the first. We have done well, but alas no Pine Marten comes whilst we sit there. Still a fantastic first day finished we head home to bed.

Day 3

After breakfast today, we head to the Black Isle, stopping for a comfort stop and scanning for Dolphins and Otters which are not seen? We are pleasantly surprised when a Red Kite comes really close over the car park, in total we watch four Red Kites flying above our heads; one has lost a lot of wing feathers but is still flying successfully, much to our delight. Malcolm also spots a Sparrowhawk flying from the woods across the road and over heads out over the estuary.

Heading to Chanonry point, the first bird heard is the fantastic Skylark above on the edge of the Golf course. Starlings feed in among the seaweed, with Sanderling also flying along, whilst we enjoy coffee and shortbread. It is a sunny day, but the wind is quite chilly when standing still on the point. Some get some shelter from a big sign on the top of the beach. As we scan the bay, we pick up Razorbills, flying in towards the bridge, we have a good number of Long-tailed Ducks, Eider, Red-breasted Merganser and Ringed Plover, so with our list increasing all the time, just as we are about to head off, Malcolm shouts Dolphin, so as he describes to everyone where it is, we all watch as it twists and turns, looks like it is fishing, it's not long before another one appears, although distant, it is still a tick for our lists.

We drive along and suddenly Malcolm and Chrissie slow down, we have a field full of Pink-footed Geese and one Greylag amongst them, a great comparison for everyone. Continuing along we stop at the sea front at Cromarty for lunch, it's really nice here and a wee bit sheltered. We are looking out when Sarah goes by on her boat, waving, she is off to look for Dolphins! It is a good sign, as everyone watches her boat and it is not long before Dolphins are spotted in front of the boat, then behind, great views. Also a huge tanker comes into the Firth, so again everyone watches the bow and sure enough there is a few Dolphins riding the bow, how good is this?

Long-tailed Ducks are quite close in and diving making it harder for us to get a good view, but eventually we all get them through the telescopes. Swimming by we watch 12 Red-breasted Mergansers, Malcolm picks up a Red-throated Diver, but not all get the opportunity to see this bird, maybe another day?

It starts to rain so we head towards Udale bay RSPB Reserve, as we drive along the road, there is a huge number of Scaup really close to the shore, but with a service bus behind us we cannot stop on the road side and drive along to the nearest car park to view from there! A couple of Slavonian Grebes are picked up in the distance and Red-breasted Merganser swim by. With the rain getting heavier we keep going to shelter in the hide at the reserve and pick up some more waders. Pink-footed Geese feed on the bank side, with Teal and Mallard. The Curlew are still roosting as the tide starts to ebb away, Redshank are feeding and a group of Knot fly in to feed also. Scanning the wader parties, Chrissie spies two Bar-tailed Godwits feeding on the far shore.

Driving back we take the scenic route, with a fabulous view down over Chanonry point, Chrissie stops so everyone can take photographs, the sun is shining and the view is amazing. Homeward bound we are all looking forward to our tea and checklist update.

Day 4

Just before the sun has risen, we head to the RSPB Loch Garten Capercaillie Watch. It is amazing watching the light creep over the forest, with the early dew glistening in the early light. The Osprey are just waking up and starting to fly. But we have to keep scanning for the Caper, the Warden picks one up on the camera, and we all search for the tree it is standing beside! Obviously there are so many trees out there it is not an easy task, but perseverance pays off, as Tony finds the bird, so as the Wardens get a telescope on the bird for all to see, a queue forms in anticipation of seeing

the bird! As each person steps forward it gets up and flies off!! Not everyone gets to see this bird, the Osprey are collecting twigs and making some home improvements for the new season, after a while we leave the Osprey hide, we still have Black Grouse to find.

We drive to a nearby lek site where Malcolm calls over the radio, Woodcock, as two birds fly off the ground right on the road side, just a wee bit further along he calls again Woodcock, another two fly up from the road side, one flying right passed everyone in Chrissie's van, fantastic. Then two more, they must have just arrived overnight. Stopping at the lek site, it is not long before a displaying Black Grouse is just visible behind a low birch hedge, then another, we watch as they fluff up their tails and face off, then in the silence of the morning the bubbling calls carry across the moorland towards us, this is a brilliant sight and sound for the few disappointed folk who missed the Caper. Returning for breakfast, we just make it with only a few minutes to spare as we stop just on the top of the drive to watch two Red Squirrels chasing each other up and down the tree.

We all enjoy breakfast after our early start, once we have our fill, packing the vans off we drive to a nearby lochan. Counting four Dabchicks, the lochan also has displaying Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and our first Sand Martins of this year, it is fabulous watching them flitting over the water catching insects on the wing. Calling at another local spot we check for Slavonian Grebe, but they have not arrived inland yet, we are not deterred as the elusive Coot is feeding on the bank edge, Redshank feed also, while the Teal sleep. The Lapwing are in the fields with the sheep and new lambs, so tiny, it is an 'Aaaaah' moment!

Away from the lochans, the forest calls and now the weather is actually turning out great as the sun shines and in the shelter of the forest we can feel the heat off the sun, how nice for early in the season. Our walk is quite productive with Malcolm and Chrissie hearing Crossbills and eventually finding them. We are able to have fantastic views of Parrot Crossbills very close the pair feeding, not taking any notice of us; in fact Chrissie says the male is quite a poser!! Of course the cameras are clicking and after everyone has great views and takes photos, folk edge a wee bit closer for more photos. Much to Chrissie's disappointment she has left her camera and digi-scoping attachment in the van, as the birds are there for quite a while, she wishes she had gone back but is promised by Malcolm he would send her his best picture, so all is not lost and she enjoys the close view of these fabulous birds with their larger head and bills, brilliant, two species of Crossbill ticked....

Further up the track Malcolm starts pointing out some Capercaillie droppings on the path, further up again there is the biggest pile of droppings anyone has ever seen, this causes some comments, but unprintable! Malcolm also picks up pine cones which have been eaten by Crossbills and Red Squirrels, giving the group a good comparison. Because we have been out longer than we expect lunch is very late today.

We head back to the Steading for a wee break before evening meal, giving folk the chance to go to the hide to photograph the Red Squirrels. After a delicious tea we complete our check list for the day.

Day 5

The weather starts out a wee bit damp and drizzly, but after breakfast, we drive to Burghead, carefully parking the vans and providing shelter from the strong wind. On the shore a group of Knot, Turnstone and Oystercatchers feed, we watch as the Oystercatchers prise open the mussel shells so brilliantly with their bright orange bills, fascinating to watch. Common Scoter, Long-tailed Ducks and Eider all fly by, together with a few Kittiwakes. Gannets are feeding just off shore and are magical to watch as they fold in their wings and plunge head first into the water, they seem to home in on a shoal and then we watch a good group plunging one after the other, an amazing sight.

Alison makes us all turn around from sea watching to the bank behind us where she has found our first Swallow flying below the top of the bank, fabulous! Migration is in full swing marvellous, bring it on.... Having turned back to sea watch Alison spots Red-throated Diver flying off shore, not many could pick it up though as it is well off shore, great spotting from Alison today.

The wind has cleared all the showers away and as we head to Lossiemouth the sun is shining while we tuck into our lunch. As Chrissie is scanning the wader parties, she finds one Black-tailed Godwit amongst some Oystercatchers and makes sure all of the party see this tall, long billed bird. Malcolm then sees six Black-tailed Godwits flying over and out of sight. We have lunch just in time, as when we are ready to go it starts to rain a wee bit.

We drive to another hide to give us shelter from the shower. A local loch is full with Mute Swans, 56 in total, we have never seen so many on this loch. As we scan through the ducks, we find Tufted Duck, Dabchicks, Teal and a good close view of a male Scaup, swimming with the Tufted, again a great

comparison is shared with the group. Some spot a Sparrowhawk as it shoots by, Buzzards fly over the woods. Tony and a few others watch the Herons in the Heronry, but we do not see any Otters here today!

With the night drive later today, we drive back to the Steading for tea, before getting spot lights at the ready, a few folk decide not to come on the night drive so we only take one van. When we meet Alf the group is split into two, the first guests head with Alf and the others with Chrissie and Malcolm, driving on different parts of the estate, we head off to see what is out tonight? The first things Chrissie and Malcolm see are Roe Deer, with the spot light shining into the fields; the eye shine is picked up. There is Badger evidence on the drive and they have been very busy over the winter. We pick up Brown Hare running and stopping, then off again. In between the buildings there is an enormous Norway spruce, no one had seen such a huge tree, it is at least three feet wide and 30 metres long, huge.... A couple of Pipistrelle Bats are picked up in the lights, but it is still cool so there are not many out. We try to find Owls but they are not out tonight. A visit to Loch an Eilean produces a wee Bank Vole scurrying between dead branches on the shore.

Driving back we swap over and drive out again, similar to the earlier drive, Roe Deer, Brown Hares and Pipistrelle Bats are picked up but again, no Owls! Both of Alf's drives produce the same, so we collect everyone and head home to bed, everyone having had a long day.

Day 6

It is another early start as we have our breakfast and pack the vans for a drive over to the West Coast. The cloud is quite high so the scenery is impeccable, stopping briefly to look for Black-throated Divers and photos, we do not stay out long, as the wind is absolutely howling down the valley and after yesterday being so mild, it has changed completely and the wind is bitter. The reservoir further along has two Whooper Swans on the near edge which we pass by but then turn around to get a better look.

Our coffee stop is at Dundonnell, the tide is high and the waders are sheltering behind any hummock available. We scan and pick up Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Redshank, various Gull species. Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Black-headed, Common Gulls, are also huddled in groups along the shore line. Red-breasted Merganser's are battling with the waves, making it hard to pick them out. Two Greenshank are seen, but not from where we are so everyone walks along to see them feeding in the estuary stream.

We drive on towards Gruinard Bay and a scan over the channel between ourselves and the island. In the fields there are a group of Barnacle Geese and Golden Plover. Out on the channel a Golden Eagle is spotted flying towards us, and over the top, and then a Great Skua flies by, with Gannets following. Malcolm finds a Great Northern Diver not quite in summer plumage but it is hard to pick out as the water is choppy and the same colour as the bird! But eventually everyone gets a good view.

Moving to a more sheltered spot for lunch, as we pull up there are three Great Northern Divers in the bay, fantastic. It is a great area to stop, as it is sheltered and in the sunshine it is glorious, while we have our fill of sandwiches, scones, fruit and drinks, we watch over the bay and spot Red-throated Divers, Black-throated Diver and the Great Northern, amazing all three divers in the one bay, incredible!!

Lunch over and all diver'ed out, it starts to rain so we make a hasty retreat to the vans, and drive the coastline scanning for Otters, but none are found, it's fantastic Otter habitat but they are not out today. There are lots of Common Seals hauled out on the rocks, all different shades, some high and dry others right in the swell of the ebbing tide. We return the same way, just in case an Otter can be spotted on the coastline on our return, but the rain seems to have set in, and the scenery is showing well in different light. The sun comes out again as we arrive back at the Steading for tea.

Day 7

Well, our last day has arrived, it seems to have been an awfully quick week. We have decided to stay local and not drive much today. We try once more for Slavonian Grebe and closer Red-throated Divers on nearby lochans, but no joy, too early yet.

The weather is good and dry, although there is low cloud on the mountains; we keep our walk till later. Broomhill Bridge brings a welcome coffee break, but the water is really high so no Dippers are seen. We call into Loch Garten RSPB Reserve in case a Capercaillie is showing, no joy there either. As some go to buy gifts and check out the Ospreys, Chrissie and Malcolm scan the loch for Otters! Just before we get back in the vans a call comes 'Butterfly!' It is identified as a Small Tortoiseshell, the only one of the week.....

The mountain is calling, the clouds have lifted high and there is a slight breeze but nothing significant to stop us going for a walk. So lunch first which includes Brian's much raved about by Chrissie, fruity, nutty flapjacks, yummy! Then all togged up we set off for 'Coire an Sneachda' Malcolm explains this name is translated to 'Corrie of the Snows'. Morag and

Norman decide not to do the climb and take the funicular train to the top and thoroughly enjoy a 'Hot Toddie Chocolate', it is their wedding anniversary after all! When we hear we are quite envious, it sounds great. The path is clear of snow and there are still pockets of ice high on the side of the Coire. We keep stopping to scan for Ptarmigan, looking along the ridges and around the patches of snow but we find no Ptarmigan, we know they are there, but they are so camouflaged, they remain unseen. Time is running out and Aviemore Tesco is calling to some of the guests, so we trek back down to the car park for a well-earned cup of tea, and head to Aviemore.

Our last tea together is as tasty as the first, with Brain cooking for the end of the week. We retire to the lounge for our coffee, completing our last check list, we recall the week with our Magic Moments, lots to choose from. Thank you, to everyone making this week another special adventure with Speyside Wildlife.

SPECIES OF THE TRIP: Red Squirrel, Parrot Crossbill and Crested Tits came out tops, along with individual, Scottish Crossbill, Young Golden Eagle, Capercaillie and not mentioning one species was the 'Pigs'.

PLACE OF THE TRIP: Tom Veche forest and Laide jetty were top of this list. With Uath lochan, view down over Chanonry, Findhorn Valley, Blackwater stop, Squirrel hide and last but not least, The 'Pig Sty'.

MAGIC MOMENT: No two were the same, so I will start at the top of the list: Dawn over Loch Garten reserve; Arriving and seeing Chrissie was working this week; Finding the Capercaillie; Watching Heronry with Tony's lens cap on; Opportunity to photograph Red Squirrels in natural habitat; Malcolm spotting the Scottish Crossbill; Breakfast at 9am; Parrot Crossbill; Saying to Tony they had got Ptarmigan (joke) when he had gone on ahead! AND 'PIGLETS'.

Day 8

After an early breakfast we all say our goodbyes and wish everyone a safe journey home and hope they will return in the future.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Common Scoter
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
Red Kite
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Sparrowhawk
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Osprey Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Black Grouse
Capercaillie
Pheasant
Moorhen
Robin
Redstart
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Sanderling
Woodcock
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank
Turnstone
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Mistle Thrush
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit

Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treecreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Redpoll
Scottish Crossbill
Parrot Crossbill
Bullfinch
Barnacle Geese
Black-tailed Godwit

Total Birds: 108

MAMMALS

Bank Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Badger
Feral Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Common Seal
Grey Seal
Bottlenose Dolphin

Total Species: 121