

Holiday Highlights
Speyside 24/7
27 April – 4 May 2024

Guide: Ailie Brown

Guests: Val Miller, John Duerden, Celia and Tony Barnby, Lynda Niccolls, Dave Thompson

Day 1: After we all arrive at our wonderful hotel, the Tigh na Sgiath, we sit down for dinner and have a brief chat about plans and our hopes for the week. Dave clarifies that he would love to see Common Shrew, which is an interesting choice! Lynda expresses her excitement of looking for the newly released Beavers in the Park, Tony says he would love to see Crested Tit and Val mentions she hasn't managed to see Golden Eagle before.

We have a lovely dinner and all go to bed excited for the week ahead.

Day 2: We start the day with Red Squirrels outside the dining room window whilst having breakfast, the weather is lovely and sunny but chilly. We set off for Strathdearn just 20 mins from the hotel. As we are driving along, we spot a Buzzard with prey and Red Kite, excellent. Already raptors in the sky.

As we reach the single-track road, we drive slowly noticing the first Swallows in the area, we stop at a wet boggy field and view Curlew and a hear a Snipe, after a few minutes of scanning the Snipe flies off. Further along, the River Findhorn comes into view and not one, but two Dippers are seen zipping over the stones, then a single Pied Wagtail flies in.

Our first stop, overlooking the glen, hills and next to a forestry commission wood, provide great views. Lapwings, Curlew, Golden Plover in their beautiful breeding plumage and Oystercatcher fill the fields across from us. We all take time scanning through the sky when right on cue, Ailie spots a distant Golden Eagle. Brilliant! We all take turns taking it in before it disappears over the hill. Hopefully we may get a closer view over the days ahead. We can hear Reed Bunting calling. Tony wanders away for a walk towards the bridge, to look at the river, but signals he hasn't spotted anything.

Further along the valley we stop at a high point, looking down there is a raptor that flies into a group of trees and we all think it is a possible Osprey. While scanning we find a very pale Buzzard, unusually so! But too far away to see if it is anything different. We are hearing the wonderful song of newly arrived Willow Warblers. We continue along and the road is lined with yellow Gorse in bloom. We stop at the end of the valley where we take a walk along the track. John points at a flitting bird going over the edge of the stream, not quite sure what it was. We scan the other direction and spot a small group of Feral goats with kids. We talk about the goats coming lower down with young, so they don't become Golden Eagle food.

Lynda points out the small bird that's appeared again next to the stream, Wheatear! We pause and scan the adjacent hillside looking for Mountain Hare.

After a while, Ailie manages to get one into view, although it is quite tricky to see, blending in so well. It has lovely white feet and sits up, giving us all a nice view. We continue up and perch for a while on the heather. We wait in anticipation of a big raptor soaring over. No such luck. However, Dave points out a small raptor coming into view. Kestrel, it is hovering.

On our walk back down, Ravens are cronking above and there is at least three twirling about and falling through the sky. Wandering back, we pause at the bridge and the noisy Common Sandpipers alert us to their presence, a few Teal are sat on the pebbles up stream too. Moving along a little further to the end of the valley, we park up and have lunch. It is raining so we all sit in the minibus and look at the scree slopes. A couple of Wrens zip past and Meadow Pipits bounce about in the grass. We have one last stop, fondly known as Dipper bridge. A couple of Common Sandpipers are chasing each other up and down the river. A Mistle Thrush perches up on a wire behind us.

We stop at Carrbridge for a comfort stop, a few of us wander up to admire the 300-year-old bridge. A couple of us stay at the carpark, which is surrounded by tall Larch trees. We spot Greenfinch singing from the tops of the trees and House Sparrows flit in the nearby bushes. We all gather back in the minibus and take a drive down to Dalnahatnich.

We pul over at the last field and after a few mins of scanning we pick up some wonderful views of Golden Plover, Ringed Plover and Greylag Geese. We wander up a small track for a few meters, giving us a slightly elevated view over the fields. A few Mistle Thrush fly in and perch on top of the Scots Pine in front of us, great views! We proceed on back towards the hotel, deciding on taking a back road.

While driving along, John spots several Brown Hares, six in total in one field! We pause and all have a good look at them, although they are a bit distant. In passing fields, we see Curlew Rooks and Jackdaws. This little back road is surprisingly busy with lots of cars, so we don't spend as much time stopping and scanning as Ailie hoped. So, with a bit of time to spare, we squeeze in one more stop, heading to Old Spey bridge. Well, it is a good stop, we get out the minibus and wander down to the river. Tony picks up a Goldeneye, while Ailie and Dave find a bobbing Grey Wagtail, Pied Wagtail and a Common Sandpiper. It is a bit rainy but feels spring fresh, there is Wood Anemone lining the path. We head back to the hotel to get dinner and not long until we are headed out again.

After dinner, we all wrap ourselves up and head out for an evening at the hide. Harris greets us at the car park and takes us into the hide. We sit for around 30 mins, chatting about the hide and what we may see. A Wood Mouse and a Bank Vole make an appearance, nipping along the back of the logs, a lone Wood Pigeon and Robin fly in to take some of the scattered peanuts. The speaker is on and we

can hear Snipe drumming and then a distant Tawny Owl. After about an hour the first Badger comes in. We hear it chew away on the peanuts and watch it turn over the logs to get to the tasty peanut butter. A few more Badgers appear, then a Pine Marten follows. We all enjoy hearing them munch away at the scattered peanuts. We decide that it is time to go and on the way back a Barn Owl flies off from a post which Dave and Ailie are lucky enough to spot.

Day 3: It is a lovely sunny morning, and we all bundle into the minibus to head to the Black Isle. Before leaving we admire a Treecreeper and then a Great-spotted Woodpecker in the large Pines next to the hotel. We enjoy our drive and get wonderful views of Ben Wyvis as we come down into Inverness.

We stop at North Kessock for a comfort break and from the car park we see a Red-throated Diver, Ailie scans for potential Otters but no such luck, with a distant Common Seal popping up. It's lovely sunshine and we drive a bit further along the coast to our first stop.

We are looking out over the Beauly Firth and spend a bit of time scanning. Tony calls out a raptor in the air, Red Kite. Excellent. There is chatter behind us from a group of House Sparrows, but we check to make sure they aren't Tree Sparrows. Ailie points out a Red breasted Merganser that floats by. We continue along the coast and stop once more. The wonderful noise of Curlew can be heard and we spot a couple feeding further along the shore. A few Crows fly behind us and we notice a busy hedge. Yellowhammer, Greenfinch and Chaffinch are all flitting in and out of the hedge where we spot a feeder.

We continue again along the coastal road and enjoy the views; Linda points out some colourful Shelduck. We drive on towards Rosemarkie where we stop for the loos and chat about how lovely the village is, even the loos have a nice garden. As we are about to get back into the minibus, Dave points out a bird flying over, Sparrowhawk, we are doing quite well for birds of prey so far.

Our next stop in Chanonry Point, Ailie warns everyone that the gulls are used to people having lunch here and to be on guard, we plan to walk to the headland and return for lunch. We take a wander round the corner and John and Ailie discuss a beautiful Coastal Lupin. We scan over the lovely calm water. There is a group of birds feeding over the other side of the water, Gulls, Gannets, a couple Swans and Auks. We discuss that it would be a great place to see Harbour Porpoise and then John timely spots some surfacing next to the feeding birds. After we all get on them, we decide that there is at least three. We enjoy watching them for some time and even attract a few bystanders. The Porpoise start to move further away from sight, they must have known, because then Tony and Celia point out in the opposite direction a couple of fins. Dolphins! We spend the next while watching Bottlenose Dolphins feed just a few meters from the shore. While we enjoy the action, Razorbills and Cormorants fly past.

We decide to head back to the minibus for lunch and cautiously eat our sandwiches and keep watch on a couple Herring Gulls eyeing us up. A flock of Turnstones pass quickly in front of us. We scan through them in case of any other species mixed in. We spot the Harbour Porpoises once more a bit further out and decide that's a nice moment to finish on.

We drive on to our next stop at Udale Bay, we arrive and get out the minibus to a huge flock of waders feeding on the mud flats, looking out to the Cromarty Firth. We enjoy looking through the mixed flocks. Pink-footed Geese, Greylags, Lapwings, Oystercatchers and lots of Gulls. We sift through them and find a Bar-tailed Godwit. We head in the hide to have a look inside and admire the artwork on the walls. Tony and Ailie go back and forth trying to decide if it's Bar or Black tailed, it's just too far away to tell but enjoy a good discussion on the differences. Nice groups of Redshank are calling as we leave the hide and head back to the minibus.

Along the road we stop quickly to get a view of some Scaup we spotted distantly from Udale Bay. We get a good view of them, a group of about 20 bob up and down in the waves. Along the road we take a comfort break at Cromarty. This pretty little village is worth a stop, so we decide to park up and all meet back at the minibus in 30 mins. John, Dave and Ailie decide to take a walk along the waterfront while everyone else takes a wander through the village. As we wander along, we have a very close Red-throated Diver appear, fishing close to the shore. A little further along in the bay, there is a small group of Eiders and beautiful Long-tailed Ducks. We have a nice stretch and made our way back where Celia and Tony inform us of the local museum and its highlights.

We gather into the minibus and make our way back to the hotel, we admire the landscape and have a nice view of Buzzard and Red Kite on our journey. Before passing over the Kessock Bridge we decide to have a quick drive by in North Kessock to check for any Otters, no such luck but we all chat about how lovely the weather has been, the calm sea and how much we are looking forward to dinner.

Back at the hotel, we are welcomed back with a cosy fire on, where we do our checklist before dinner and chat about our plans for the next day.

Day 4: Another lovely morning and everyone is ready to go at the minibus, but there are so many little birds at the feeders, we all take 10 mins to enjoy watching some of the more common species. Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Coal tit all flit around. A Red Squirrel scampers across the lawn.

Onwards we go, we are all ready for a long day, we are staying locally but have a lot planned. We head south and stop at a layby next to Loch Insh. Under the tunnel, where Ailie warns that the trains come by quick and can be loud, we emerge at the most stunning view of the loch and hills behind it. We all scan the loch, picking up Goldeneye, a pair of Goosander and then after double checking, a Great Crested Grebe! Which is a very unusual sighting for here. Wonderful. Dave and John identify some wildflowers and include Val into helping them. Tony points out a diver,

excellent, everyone else gets on it, those who missed the one in Cromarty get good views first. The loch itself is quite still and there are dozens of Sand Martins feeding over the middle and we all enjoy the peace for a few more minutes.

We drive along for quite a bit, heading for Spey Dam, stopping in Laggan for a quick loo stop. The weather looks to be darker and a bit rainy in the valley in front of us. Oh dear. No matter, we proceed with hope. As we drive along the single track slowly, Celia points out a bird of prey on a fence post, Buzzard we think. We stop in a layby for a better look. The bird of prey is gone from the post, we have a good scan and another bird of prey zips over the marshy field in front of us, Hen Harrier! A female or juvenile, with that obvious white rump. Yes! What a great start to Spey Dam. We keep our eyes on it until it is out of sight and slowly move on. Then we see a Buzzard for sure and some thrushes. We all admire the cute Highland Cow calves and while doing so, we notice a couple Brown Hares.

We stop next to a small bridge and get out to have a scan and stretch our legs. The weather turns a bit drizzly, but that doesn't put off the numerous hares in the field in front of us, John count eight in total in one field. Then a Cuckoo flies past at some speed, but Ailie shouts and everyone manages to see as it flies away. We have a look along the river from the bridge and a Common Sandpiper alarm calls. We decide to move on and head back to the minibus, but as we were about to get in the Hen Harrier flashes over a small hill in the field and we all get a decent view before it disappears again.

Further along the road we take our time scanning from the minibus as the rain gets slightly heavier. With the windows open we can hear the Willow Warblers singing. A few Stone Chats fly alongside us then perch up on the fence posts, we keep stopping to check for Whinchat. As we pause, Linda spots a couple of Red Deer standing a bit further away and on closer inspection, there is a small herd and there are quite a few, with a beautiful stag lying down within a stone's throw. Many meadow pipits catch our eye as we drive along.

We stop for lunch at Garve Bridge, it's still rainy so we seek shelter in the minibus. As we enjoy our lovely pack lunches, we see a Wheatear that lands on a boulder, then we see a few Red Deer grazing behind, with the hills and surroundings it feels very remote. After lunch, we investigate the bridge and scan along the rocks jutting out, in search for a possible Dipper or Wagtail. We go for a short walk and meet some walkers who proudly tell us they saw Golden Eagles on the hills. We stop to scan one last time and another Hen Harrier! It's clearly hunting, zipping over the boggy fields. A lovely finish to the end of Spey Dam. We head back, seeing some Fallow Deer and Kestrel on the journey back.

We stop in Kingussie where it's a bit warmer and with a bit of sunshine, for a comfort break and look at the maps of the local area. We head off to Insh Marshes for our next stop. We head to the lookout and all enjoy the sun on our backs for the first time today. Another birder kindly points out Whooper Swans to us. We also see a few Roe Deer and then Linda spots a bird of prey, it's a Marsh Harrier,

we follow it with our scopes and it has reeds dangling from its feet. We continue to enjoy the look out while we wait. Dan Tomes, from the RSPB comes to meet us and chat about the recently introduced Beavers. We have a nice chat, learn about the individuals released, where they came from and bit more about the issues they will face with flooding. We then decide to take advantage of such a lovely afternoon and go for a walk round the Reserve. We follow the trail and Tony spots a Wheatear. There is a lot of birdsongs and we hear a Tree Pipit, first one of the year for Ailie! A group of birds feed in some Birch and we identify them as Redpolls. Another new one for the list of the week.

We head back towards Aviemore on a back road, enjoying the views of Insh Marshes and some more Highland Cows. Ailie points out the Konick Ponies that can be seen, that are used as grazers on the Reserve. We have one last stop before dinner, Ailie parks up and we walk towards a loch. It's a very scenic spot, looking down towards the water, we have a great view of an Osprey nest, although a good distance away. Both the male and female are there, we all discuss which is which, Linda and Ailie chat about the breast band being more prominent. We also see some Teal, a Goosander snoozes on the shore and a Common Sandpiper fly along the shore. We head back to the minibus, just about ready for dinner and stop to admire the lovely stitch on top of the post box.

We have a very delicious dinner at the Old Bridge Inn which sits next to the River Spey. We chat about the day and the evening to come.

After dinner, we drive a short distance and park up next to a Pine woodland. We head out for our evening walk with one species in mind. We all wander through this majestic forest and it's still light. We get to a little lochan and find a good spot to look out over the loch. Ailie spots it! A Beaver, just its head popping up and it goes down, everyone has a look through the scope, but we don't see it, we decide to move back round the loch a bit to get a bit of height. We stop and set up our scopes, when Tony alerts us all quietly that the Beaver is out of the water on the other side. We are all so excited and Ailie makes sure everyone get's a good view when we spot a second Beaver also out of the water. Wonderful. We all enjoy the view and watch them munching on some reeds. Jonathan, who was part of the reintroduction comes over to say hello. He chats to us a little a bit about their behaviour and how they have settled in. Elated, we continue until the light fades then head back along the path. We see some bats fly low over the loch and hear Snipe drumming and Tawny Owl on the walk back.

It's been a great evening, and the air is just cool enough to keep the midges at bay. We get back to the minibus and then back to the hotel It's a quiet but relaxing drive back.

Day 5: It's an early start today and Ailie gave everyone the option to sleep in if they wish, as we would be coming back to the hotel for breakfast, but everyone opts to get up early and we are all ready to go just after 6am. It's a beautiful bright morning. We head up to a heathland and pull into a layby. We are rewarded with a group

of six male Black Grouse lekking. It's so still and we can hear them bubbling and cooing. We watch them run back and forth, fanning their tails. Curlews are calling and Willow Warblers are singing and we watch the Grouse while the sun comes up and hits the hill, they are lekking on. We have fantastic views and peel ourselves away as it's getting close to breakfast time. We have a nice breakfast, already having achieved great wildlife sightings.

All geared up for the day ahead we make our way up through moorland to Lochindorb. Before we get to the loch, we are stopped by a Red Grouse in the middle of the road. It passes in front of us slowly and then stops at the side where we all get a great close up. We stop and get out, scanning the loch when Dave notices something on the water. We all get our bino's on the bird which is a Black-throated Diver. It's shows off it's beautiful breeding plumage. John hears then picks out a Redshank on the side of the loch.

Great start, we drive further along the loch, getting out to have a wander along the side of a Pine woodland. Red Squirrel scurry up a large Pine and as we are watching it, we hear a distinctive call, Ailie calls everyone over that has wandered off, we all get our eyes on one specific tree and then a Crested Tit comes into view, feeding on insects in and amongst the bark, Val gets a good look through the scope and we are all very excited. A little behind schedule but worth it, Ailie ushers everyone back to the minibus and we head for the coast, passing slowly through a Common Gull colony.

We enjoy a scenic 30-minute drive over the Dava Moor and down into the quaint town of Forres, where we stop for a comfort break. We admire all the spring flowers planted in the public park then we drive on to Findhorn where we park next to the sand dunes. As soon as we get out of the van the smell of the Gorse hits us, a sweet smell of coconut. Tony and Celia decide to head down to the shore and write their names in the sand. It's a beautiful day and the sun is shining. There is not a lot of birds around, just some very distant gulls. We just enjoy being there and we do spot a Kittiwake flying past before we leave.

Onwards just a few miles along the coast to Burghead. We wind down to a viewpoint that gives a great lookout right on the water. We decide to have lunch here and all find a comfy spot out of the wind on the side of the slope. All comfortable, we enjoy another great pack lunch from the hotel. John points out a Rock Pipit and Val points out the large Gannets flying past. Dave has a bird diving into the water, it's a Common Tern. What a great lunch. A few Long-tailed Ducks and Eiders also fly past as we sit and watch the sea. Then a gull shaped bird flies past and it has two long tail feathers, Arctic Skua! All while we have our lunch. With the weather holding out, we all conclude we should get an ice cream. Ailie suggests a nice little spot at Hopeman where we are going to next. We have a good scan first, with a potential Red-throated Diver in the distance bobbing in the waves, Ailie and Dave have a hard time identifying it. Ringed Plover chase the surf and a flock of Turnstone come in, bringing with them Purple Sandpiper. After everyone watches them for a while and all very happy, we go for that ice cream.

After we finish our ice cream, we bundle into the van and we drive further along the coast again to finish off our Moray Coast tour. We arrive at Lossiemouth and the sun is still shining. There are groups of Teal and Wigeon on the other side of the estuary, all grazing away. There is a nice group of Bar-tailed Godwits mixed in with the gulls. There are a lot of photographers and it looks like we timed the tides right, as an Osprey arrives and dives straight in front of us, catching a fish. One of the photographers tells us how many he knows of that use the estuary and what time they will be back.

It's been a full day but it's not yet over, we have one last stop before heading back to the hotel. Inland we go and we turn onto a dusty farm track, Ailie tries to avoid the bumps on the road. We park up at the RSPB Loch Spynie car park. As we pull in a flutter of birds flies off from bird feeders, so we decide to stay in the car park for a while. In the surrounding shrubbery we watch these little songbirds sing, come to the feeders for some seed and flit between the tops of the small bushes, in total, we have seen Great Spotted Woodpecker, Chaffinches, Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Blue Tits and Yellowhammers.

After really enjoying the activity of the car park, we walk down towards the hide, a short stroll and we hear Blackcap and spend a bit of time looking for it. In the hide looking over Loch Spynie, Black-headed Gulls are flying past and making a lot of noise. There are groups of Geese and a couple mute swans and a Shoveler at the back corner. We hang about for ten minutes then head off. There is another wildlife group in the car park that share their sightings for the day. A good time to go back to the hotel as we have an hour drive and this little Reserve just got quite busy. We all chat in the van of what a great day it has been and look forward to dinner.

Day 6: Meeting at the van at 8am sharp, we are all re-energised and excited about the day ahead. We are headed to the west coast and the weather is glorious, very sunny and warm.

We cross the Kessock Bridge scanning the water as we go over. We stop further into the journey at Black Water for the toilets, which are closed! It's a scenic spot next to a bridge and wonderful rushing waterfalls. We all ponder for a moment and a nice gentleman approaches us and asks if we would like him to open up the toilets for us, but only one. As we wait, Dave gets up close with some moths that are resting at the toilet lights. We head down to the viewpoint and watch the waterfall for a few minutes. Only a brief stop as we have a big day.

Our first stop is at Loch Glascarnoch, the minibus is running a bit hot and Ailie is a bit worried so we stop and have a scan. We spot a couple of Red Deer, but it is a bit quiet. Onwards we go and as we travel through the stunning scenery, the minibus decides it is a bit too hot to continue so we pull over. Luckily it is a beautiful spot. After 20 mins and a call to the garage, Ailie is happy to continue knowing the minibus is safe just running a bit hot. We take it easy and look out for big birds in the skies.

Our next stop is at the bay of Little Loch Broom, the mudflats and a small stream are in front of us. We hear Greenshank but can't quite get our eyes on it. A few Oystercatchers and Curlew but again a little quiet. So, we decide to move on but only a short distance. Less than five minutes in the van and we get out again. The water is just beneath us and quite deep here. As we have a scan, Val spot's a few seals on the other side, a nice group of Grey Seals out sunbathing. There are Razorbills and Guillemots in the bay, in loose groups. John says he has a large diver and Tony gets it in his scope, it's a Great Northern Diver. We pick out a couple more divers, a few in breeding plumage. Absolutely stunning. Ailie has a large bird in the scope, it's gliding over the hills in the distance. It's a Golden Eagle and it's coming closer, as everyone gets on it, we watch as it drifts over the bay and flies straight over us and the over and behind the hill next to us. Wow! That is incredible. What a wonderful sighting. Time to move on and it's been a very productive stop.

Another scenic drive, we take in the coast and the mountains and pull into Gruinard Bay, the layby is just off the road, but we wander down to a dip in the hill away from the road and out of the wind. Here we have lunch with the Gruinard Island in view. Linda spot's a Stonechat, we have Meadow Pipits singing, a seal comes in close to the shore and pops his head up a few times to look at us. Dave comes across a huge caterpillar and we all try to identify it. Some type of moth. We head back to the minibus and start to get organised to leave. Ailie mentions that when she was last here, she was luck enough to see White-tailed Eagle come up from the ridge behind them, as we look over like clockwork, a White-tailed Eagle floats up over the ridge and circles a couple times before flying over us and then over the bay, towards Gruinard Island. It was so close over us, we all get amazing view. Today just keeps getting better.

We move on and have a quick stop at Altbea for the toilets, where Ailie and Dave spot a Song Thrush, a species that has escaped us all week. We have a quick scan of the bay here for Otter, but no luck and then head for Laide Jetty. As we pull up to park Ailie spots another White-tailed Eagle heading down towards the shore. We wander down the track and perch up on the jetty. After a few moments, Ailie finds the Eagle, it's sat on the rocks blending in very well, about 100 feet from us. It eventually takes off and we all celebrate with having great views again. Gannets can be seen in the distance and then a wonderful Great Northern Diver in its breeding plumage comes close in. Loads of Common Seals bask on the rocks in the bay further along. We notice a few Whimbrels sat on the rocks too, a nice surprise. The primroses and spring flowers are starting to bloom and we all take time looking at them on the way back to the minibus.

Our most westerly stop is Melon Udrigle, a beautiful beach with distant mountains. Here in the car park, we are greeted by a lovely flock of Twite and very close Skylark feeding on insects in a meadow. We head down to the beach, where we scatter. Some go for a nice walk along the beach and some of us sit in the sand. We see a Red-throated Diver feeding a bit further out. There are Shags on the rocks and a couple of Wagtails pottering about in the dune. We identify a White Wagtail, a bit neater and sharper in colouring than the Pied Wagtail. Nice to see both species

together. After a few group photos and a snack, we bundle back into the minibus for the return journey.

We take it easy on the way back, deciding to stop a couple more times, once at Corrieshalloch Gorge, taking a nice walk and enjoying a stretch of the legs. Lastly, we stop for a comfort break at Rogie Falls, where Ailie says to take 10 mins and Linda, Tony and Celia head off for the falls. The rest of us enjoy the evening light through the Pine trees and spot a couple of butterflies.

Back at the hotel we do our checklist and have dinner and get a good night's rest as tomorrow is our last day.

Day 7: Our final day, we enjoy a nice breakfast and all chat about the day ahead. We are staying local, which is nice and we have seen so much already we are just looking forward to having a nice day out. Once we are organised, we head out to the minibus and head towards Cairngorm Mountain, we take a back road and take our time. We first pause at Milton Loch scanning from the minibus, we see Teal, Goldeneye and some Mallards. There is a Mute Swan on a nest in the middle of the loch. A Little Grebe fishes. We continue on this quiet backroad with the wonderful views of the mountains. It's such a nice day we make an unplanned stop at Loch Morlich just to admire the view. There are some Goosanders here and a group of hungry Mallards looking for crumbs.

We make our way up the hill towards the Cairngorm Mountain resort. We scan on the way for anything perched or flying through the Pines. We get out of the minibus and luckily there is hardly a breeze, we get geared up and go for a hike.

At the very start we hear Ring Ouzel singing and scan all the posts nearby to see if it's sat in view. Not right now, we go on and hope to see one on our walk. As a group we take our time, crossing over small burns, we manage for about an hour or so, our aim is to get to Coire an t-Sneachda. We take quite a few breaks to stop and look at the scenery and views. There are Meadow Pipits everywhere and we even see a couple Red Grouse flying in between the heather. One nearly makes Ailie fall over as it is flushed quite close to us. Dave finds a frog and it's our first amphibian of the trip. Val, Dave and Celia decide to head back to the café for a coffee.

Ailie stays with Tony, Linda and John and we head up for another 30 minutes to get to our viewpoint. We find patches of snow and Tony decides to make snow angels. We stop and have a scenic lunch, spotting John a little bit further down, he has been admiring all the plants on the way up. We still haven't seen much wildlife, but all agree it's just such a beautiful walk and it's been a great day so far. We make our way back down with a bit more pace than on the way up, Ailie struggles to keep up with Linda and Tony who are very quick walkers. John and Ailie enjoy a slower pace and we all meet the others at the café.

After a break to rest our legs, we all head up the Mountain Garden. It's only a five minute walk, where we read the signs and watch all the Bumblebees at work on the Willow. A few photos are taken at the UK's highest phone box. The day out is coming to an end and we reluctantly head back to the minibus. Ailie has one more stop before we go back to the hotel.

We drive back towards the hotel and pull over in a layby next to a busy road. Ailie explains that it's a wonderful little lochan and it's worth stopping at the busy road, we cross over and get away from the traffic noise. We walk through a pleasant meadow to a little lochan. Here we watch Sandmartins and Swallows. There are lots of Greylag Geese with goslings, we make a point of staying a bit further back as to not disturb them. Then the species Ailie is looking for comes into view. It is Dave that gets eyes on it first. A beautiful Slavonian Grebe goes under and then back up on the other side, making it difficult to get everyone on it through the scope. After a bit of perseverance, we all get a good look at it. A satisfied group, we are now ready to head back to the hotel.

We have an early checklist and share our magic moments. From beavers to the walk today, to hares in fields, we tally up the number of species seen as 17 species of mammals and 120 species of birds, butterflies, spring flowers and some of the best scenery.

We have a special dinner booked at a local restaurant. They use all their own ingredients grown or hunted on the estate. We arrive to find out they don't have our booking but not to worry, the waiter and Ailie set up a table in a private room and Ailie acts as the waitress for the drinks order. Luckily, we get some nice wine for the mix up. It's no problem at all because the meal itself is outstanding and we all have a good laugh. We leave the restaurant and drive back quietly. Iain and Elaine are there to greet us again, as they have been every night when we get back. We say our goodbyes as we aren't sure if we will all see each other in the morning.

Day 8: Ailie, Val and John get up early ready for departure, as they must get to Aviemore train station in good time. We have our breakfast together. Then the rest of the group come down and we say our goodbyes and once again all exclaim what a wonderful week it has been. We say goodbye to Iain and Elaine who have fed us well over the past week and given us such wonderful hospitality.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Cannada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Tufted Duck
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red Breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Black Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Great Crested Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Gannet
Fulmar
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Barn Owl
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Purple Sandpiper
Turnstone
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew
Whimbrel
Snipe
Arctic Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull

Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Feral Pigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin
House Martin
Swallow
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Wheatear
Whinchat
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Willow Warbler
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Twite
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Yellowhammer
White Wagtail

MAMMALS

Badger
Pine Marten
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Bottlenose Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Fallow Deer
Feral Goat
Red Squirrel
Wood Mouse
Short -tailed Vole
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Rabbit
European Beaver

REPTILES

Common Lizard

AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog

BUTTERFLIES

Peacock
Grey Veined White
Ornge Tip
Tortoiseshell