

Holiday Highlights

Sutherland & Speyside

23 June - 3 July 2010

Guides: Chrissie Nicholson and Julian Sykes

Guests: Mary & Robert Mcallester Jones, Sandra Clements, Valerie Sargent, Sue Aldam, Alan Kinroy, Tessa & Roger Oliver, Marion Kelham

Day 1 As everyone arrives at Glen Feshie, home of our luxuriously converted Steading and our base for the next week, those who arrive by early train have time to walk our nature trail and watch the forest birds come into the feeders at our little bird hide, seeing such varied delights as Tree Pipit, Common Sandpiper and Buzzard to name but a few, even the Ospreys are busy around the artificial eyrie that we have created.

Day 2 As we gather around the table for our first breakfast, Tessa and Roger have great news that they had gone for a walk last night and saw a Pine Marten down along the river bank, wow what a start for them! The weather is cloudy and rain is threatening so after breakfast cooked by Sharon, we head to the Uath Lochans for a wee walk. The woods are very quiet and it starts to rain. We walk around the board walk and spot Round-leaved Sundew a carnivorous plant, along with Bogbean and Bog Myrtle. There are no dragonflies or Damselflies as the weather is not sunny enough, maybe later in the holiday.

We are nearly back at the vehicles when a family of Coal Tits come to greet us, and in amongst these Alan spots a very bedraggled looking Crested Tit, well done, our first view of this elusive bird. Val and Sandra spotted a Buzzard nest early this morning so we stop to take a look at Chrissie's first Buzzard chicks, two quite big birds which are quite active stretching their wings and shuffling around the nest, fantastic. Sandra also finds a Four-spotted Chaser emerging from its casing, and plenty photographs are taken of this special sighting.

We return to the Steading for coffee and shortbread then drive out to the Findhorn Valley. The weather has improved and the sun is peeking out from behind the clouds every now and again. As we drive slowly along the valley, Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers are in the fields.

We stop at Dipper Bridge and lo and behold there is a Dipper sitting underneath, fabulous views are had by all of the group. Common Sandpipers are calling and flying up and down the river quite restless, but making it easy for us to see. Lunch time is filled with bird call and sights. Julian spots a Buzzard flying over and a Kestrel flying up the valley. An Osprey appears flying high and then accompanying the Buzzard, three raptors already and we are just at the first bridge.

After lunch we travel a wee bit further up the valley and stop at the second bridge so we can go for a walk. No sooner have we got out of the vans and Julian shouts Osprey! Another bird flies overhead. We walk into the valley to search for Mountain Hare, it takes some finding but eventually Chrissie finds one sitting very still. We spend some time scanning and as everyone is looking through the telescopes, Chrissie shouts Golden Eagle, it is the juvenile bird which has been seen before on other holidays, it soars along the hillside and telescopes are trained onto it as it hangs in the wind above the hillside. It disappears then appears, so everyone gets really good views and are very happy, what a raptor day! A nice end to the day, as we head back to the Steading for dinner cooked by Sharon.

This is not the end of our day, as we are out again visiting our Mammal hide after dinner. Cameras and binoculars at the ready, we settle into the hide, the first mammal to appear is a Wood Mouse, busy collecting peanuts within minutes of being put out! Then a few Red Deer appear, one has a very young fawn, looking very like 'Bambi' wee and spotty. It brings a natural reaction with everyone saying 'Ahh' at the same time! But tonight we are not lucky enough to see Pine Marten or Badger, although for Tessa and Roger they have already ticked the box, we are all jealous.

Day 3

As the weather is very changeable; we also have to change the day. So after breakfast it is a walk up the mountain. The clouds are high and thick, but the forecast is to improve, we believe!!! Strolling up the path on the way Meadow Pipit call, and Dwarf Cornel and Creeping Azealea grow on the hillside, giving us opportunities to stop and take in the views, which as the higher we get the clearer it becomes.

As we reach the top where it flattens out Chrissie announces we still have a wee bit further to go before lunch, Julian all of sudden shouts Osprey!!! An Osprey flies high over our heads and off down the valley, a first for all, as we usually see them in the valley? Eventually lunch is tucked into and Chrissie scans for Dotterel, and yes, she spots one running around, but when the telescope is set up amazingly there are chicks, wow! She is totally excited now, having seen the female, then a male settling on a nest and now

chicks, fantastic, the whole cycle of a Dotterel.... It is a first for most of the guests too.... It is so worth the walk. We spend a good time watching two little chicks and the male keeping a close eye on them....

We eventually leave them and head back down the mountain, taking our time and scanning for Ptarmigan, but with no results. The sun has come out from behind the clouds and is keeping us very warm walking, but still the group are very pleased with the achievement of doing the climb and returning, well done everyone! A cup of tea/coffee is very welcome when we arrive at the vehicles.

As Chrissie's bus pulls into the drive at the Steading a Tawny Owl is disturbed and flies alongside the van and then right in front of the van and up into the forest, excellent day.

Day 4

The day starts a wee bit cloudy but warm, so after breakfast we drive along the A9 towards the Black Isle. At our first stop at North Kessock Julian spots a Red Kite flying over the car park, a great start to the day. Driving slowly along the coast to Chanonry point a Yellowhammer and Whitethroat are seen.

The Dolphins are seen straight away so off we walk to the point to watch the spectacle. At least three dolphins are breaking the surface and one has a calf, brilliant. As we scan around Chrissie calls a Peregrine hunting amongst a group of Starlings and as it flies off we see it has been successful, the chicks will feed today.

Not long into our watch we notice a tanker coming into the Moray Firth from open sea. We all watch with excitement! As the tanker comes nearer the call comes from Chrissie they are bow riding! Fantastic, at least three Dolphins are riding the bow breaching right out of the water showing off, what a performance without trainers or hoops, all natural behaviour for these magnificent creatures!! We keep watching as the tanker sails past the point with Dolphins synchronising their jumps and coming out together, wow! We could not believe our luck it is surely a magic moment!

The Firth is a very busy place today, with Guillemot, Puffin and Razorbills to be seen floating on the surface. Can we match all this action at the lunch stop at Udale Bay?

Udale is quiet in comparison, lunch is eaten at a leisurely pace, and as we scan Julian gets the group onto a Buzzard and Osprey over the forest behind us. The bay produces good views of Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, one lone male Teal and an Eider family, a nice treat for everyone.

In amongst the grass we find Ragged Robin, Meadowsweet, Valerian and Wild Iris all looking stunning in the sunshine, which has come out from behind the clouds, it is a grand day.

Leaving the bay we head back towards the Steading and stop off at Insh churchyard to check in with our other Osprey pair. We are informed by other birdwatcher's the male has just delivered a fish. As our telescopes are homed in on the nest, yes, she is certainly feeding chicks, but how many? We could not quite see, at least one! But maybe more, they are still small and not tall enough to count! Part of the group is busy watching Goldcrest, Blackcap and Willow Warbler. Chrissie calls as the male comes in with another fish in full view, fantastic for the few who see this magical moment. We eventually head back for dinner.

Day 5

It's an early start today as we head up the Glen Feshie valley, the wind is cold so early, and the clouds are low over the mountains. We search the lek area for the sight of Black Grouse to no avail; they are not feeding in the Larch either. We wait just in case they appear, watching Common Sandpiper on the river shore and a male Stonechat sits on the wire calling, then we view a Buzzard soaring above the hill behind, shortly followed by a Kestrel. Then a Peregrine flies by at a pace, disappearing fast down the valley. It is a good early morning watch, the Black Grouse does not appear this time. We go back to the Steading to warm up and tuck into our breakfast.

We visit a local forest, searching for Capercaillie, Crossbill and Crested Tit. We stroll around the forest, noticing the Chickweed Wintergreen with its solitary flower, just along the edge of the path. Chrissie hears Crossbills flying over, they do not stop though. Carrying on through the forest listening along the way, it's really quiet. A Coal Tit family appear flitting in the canopy, then Julian glimpses a Red Squirrel on the forest floor, and then scurrying up into the tops of the trees, it takes a while to get everyone onto this lovely creature, sitting just behind a branch! Eventually it moves and the group are able to see as it jumps from tree to tree, fabulous.

Carrying on we hear more Crossbills flying over but never stopping, they can be very elusive birds to spot at times. We head back for coffee and then to another part of the Abernethy Forest to try to catch up with these birds.

Again, we are off on another walk, this time Siskin are calling and perching to enable all to see them, very obliging! Walking up to a good view point out over the forest, we scan for raptors over the hillsides. It is not to be today, although we did get a lot early this morning. Strolling back Alan

spots a Crested Tit, then another one and then another, wow, three Crested Tits in the same tree, great stuff, we watch them for a good while before returning to the vans.

We now head to a local lochan, seeing Slavonian Grebes sleeping in the weeds as we get out of the vehicles. Although it does not take long for them to wake up and start feeding around the loch. As we watch, one starts calling, it's a beautiful sound, nothing else is singing so the call echoes around the lochan. Goldeneye are also feeding further down the loch, Common Sandpiper are flitting around the lochan, landing on rocks and feeding along the edge, giving fantastic views for everyone. After such a full day, dinner is calling.....

Day 6

Today is the start of the second part of our holiday, as we head to the Rhichonich Hotel in Sutherland. We need diesel but have a trial trying to find a petrol station open, eventually in Inverness, but lose a lot of time searching. Eventually we head to Gruniard Bay.

As we tuck into lunch Julian sees a White-tailed Eagle soaring over the island and settling down on the hillside. We get the telescopes onto this magnificent bird. It flies off and disappears, after a while it reappears on the same spot without anyone noticing it fly in! Amazing! We also see Black-throated Diver, Red-throated Diver and Buzzard. Chrissie then gets her scope onto two adult White-tailed Eagles sitting on a hillock on the edge of the island. Again, how did they get there without being seen? Then it is incredible they both leave the hillock and are joined by another bird, a juvenile, fantastic they have been successful this year too!

After all of the excitement, we then find a lot of Fragrant Orchids just below the car park, along with Northern Marsh and Heath Spotted Orchids, fabulous, as everyone gets down on their knees taking photographs it is quite an amusing sight!!

Off in the vans again, we head to another loch and Chrissie spots a Black-throated Diver in summer plumage, but at the same time the mist comes down and it rains quite hard, so visibility is very poor with the wind driving the rain along the glen. We quickly retreat to the vans and travel on to the Rhichonich Hotel to settle in and have our first dinner there.

Day 7

Today is a big day; we are off to Handa Island, with the weather producing a slight breeze, dry but not sunny yet, which is good as we do not want it too hot!! The boatman takes us all across at once in his very fast new boat. Great, we have a wee talk by the volunteer about the island and then start

off to the Stack for lunch. On the way we see great views of a Snipe sitting on the ruins of the village on the isle. Then Arctic and Bonxies, either flying close by or sitting close by the path enable the photographers to put their skills to work.

As we arrive at the first of the cliff edges, we look back over a wee lochan and find Bonxies bathing, sprucing themselves up, getting rid of the salt water from their feathers. In the corner of the lochan, a lone summer plumage Red-throated Diver sits on the surface, superb views.

When we arrive at the Stack, it is heaving with birds, we get a really good close spot for lunch, although the smell is not very appetising, but the views of the Puffin, Guillemot and Razorbills are amazing. Fish filled beaks are heading to chicks either in burrows or on the cliff edge. It is a grand walk around the island, followed by Bonxies and stopping to view all the cliff sides full of breeding Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwakes, the latter are calling echoing up to the top of the cliffs.

Walking along the well-marked paths, we hear an eerie call, then Chrissie realises it is the seals calling, again it echoes up the cliffs as they lay hauled out on the rocks below, wow! Although we search, no otters are found in the bay, we near the bothy and beach for our return boat trip. The sun is shining and the heat has increased as we walk the last bit of boardwalk back to the bay. There are a lot of people already waiting for the boat, so Chrissie cannot resist a plodge! Together with Tessa, who is already plodging, Sandra and Chrissie are there, ah bliss! Although it is cold it is reviving to weary feet being stuck in boots all day..... What an end to a superb day!

Day 8

After our filling breakfast, we set off to explore the local area. It is a dry calm morning, and as we travel along the edge of the sea loch, Julian pulls in and shouts 'Otters' over the radio, everyone gets out of the vehicles as quietly as possible in the excitement of seeing Otters for the first time.

We watch as two Otters fish in the bay, then one heads straight for us, again trying to keep an excited group as quiet as possible, this dog Otter comes out of the water and runs up the beach scent marking on the way over the grass, fantastic, this is a truly amazing sight, the size is truly visible as this Otter runs up and under through the tunnel and out of sight.... It has followed a fresh water stream away up the hill....

The other, a female Otter still fishes, bringing her catch out onto the shore for great views by all, she then also comes our way.... The anticipation of this Otter also coming out in front of us is incredible... but she seems to sense we are there and heads away fishing as she swims. We leave them reluctantly, maybe she wants to go to her Holt somewhere nearby.

We drive through Durness and stop for postcards and papers, not many shops in this area at all. At another sea loch we watch Bonxies following a fisher boat, and Shelduck in the bay below us with young. Also a very hazy view of Greenshank proves a hard call for everyone to see. The Curlew are further away but it is not such a hazy view of them.

Heading to a local glen we settle into lunch, there is a wee breeze which keeps the biting insects at bay. As people wander along the road spotting Orchids, we end up with Fragrant and Greater Butterfly Orchids, again everyone is down on their knees taking photographs. Then Julian shouts 'Eagle' and we all get onto this great view of a Golden Eagle flying above the ridge in the glen, then another one joins it, fantastic two Golden Eagles flying along the hillside giving great views. One starts climbing and soaring high, as our necks crick, some follow this bird as it is high above our heads, then in a second it folds its wings and starts plummeting downwards, what a sight, such speed as it flies down out of view. It obviously has spotted prey and is on a mission to catch something, shame it is behind the mountain, but still what a sight seen by all...

What an exciting day, with Otters and Eagles, we are very happy, and return to the hotel, to enjoy another great dinner.

Day 9

Our luck has changed as it is a rainy and windy start to the day, although Chrissie assures everyone it will clear by 1pm according to her forecast, most disagree and say it will be 4pm! Watch this space...

We drive out to Balnakeil Bay and get toggged up with waterproofs, etc. We shelter behind the wall whilst we all get ready and straight away, we spot Red-throated Divers in summer plumage just off the cliffs. Walking along the road a wee way then onto the golf course, strange no one is playing on this windy, wet day!!! But still, settling down on the edge of the cliffs, we are really close to the divers and out in the bay there are, Black Guillemot and Razorbill. The Black Guillemots give us really good views as they fly from the sea onto the rocks with their little bright feet very visible, fabulous. From our view point we are able to see Razorbill swimming under the water, what a sight, following this incredible bird speeding through the clear water.

Chrissie hears Roger say 'Scottish Primrose', well that is it! We leave the birds for more photographs, there are not many sites for this amazing plant growing low on the edge of the clean mown lawn of the golf course. Some of these flowers have two heads, but others have five, amazing. When we have finished with the photo shoot we head back across to the shelter of the wall and vans for coffee. Common Twayblade also hugs the edge of the cut grass, and in the longer grass Julian finds a Common Frog.

After coffee, we drive back towards the hotel and turn off to visit Oldshoremore, by the time we get there it is lunch time, roads are not fast up here. It is still spitting with rain, and very windy, so we use the vehicles until just after 1pm, when the sky clears and the sun comes out!! Shame Chrissie had not bet some money on her weather forecast as she is right!!!! Walking up the wee track we walk onto the headland with absolutely fantastic views of this fabulous long white sandy beach, what a sight, especially special in the sunshine.

Again on the headland looking down into the clear blue sea, the Razorbills fly through the water enabling us to watch this spectacle. Then a Red-throated Diver does the same, swimming underwater we can see where it will emerge. Finding a sheltered spot just over the top of the headland it is scorching and so we sit a while just enjoying the peace and quiet out of the wind.

In amongst the rocky outcrops, Mountain Everlasting clings and in the open Globe Flowers are vibrant yellow in the sunshine. After our fabulous sunny time at Oldshoremore we start back in the vehicles up the hill... Until Julian stops abruptly and shouts 'Black-headed Bunting' Chrissie stops and looks to the left and sure enough there on the wall is a male summer plumage Black-headed Bunting WOW!! Getting as many as possible onto this bird, it is hard as a car then decides to leave the beach also and is sitting behind Chrissie not knowing what is happening! The bird flies off up the hill so we are able to squeeze into a passing place and get out of the way to let the car pass.

Julian climbs the hill after the bird but can't see it, there is also a family of Wood Warblers flitting between a bush and a fence, another unexpected bird here, with a great air of excitement we drive around to Droman, but the rain has returned and the mist appears so visibility is not good. Julian needed phone reception so we do not hang around and head back to the hotel. After dinner and check list, the sun appears again and produces the most amazing sunset, after pictures taken and the midges biting we all retire. What an incredible end to an incredible day and an incredible holiday!

Day 10

With a bit of reluctance, we enjoy breakfast, no one really wants to leave this amazing place, we all feel we have been away from the Steading for a good while, never mind 4 days.

We say our farewells to the staff at the hotel and drive off. We stop at a loch to view Black-throated Diver which proves very difficult to track as it is feeding and diving, every time the telescope is on the bird it dives.... but with endurance everybody gets a good view as it swims closer towards us.

Stopping at Knockan Crag Visitor Centre for coffee and the views, we get a group photo taken by another tourist, great stuff. Travelling on we stop again at Gruinard Bay for lunch, watching out for the White-tailed Eagle, but it is very quiet, it is breezy and the water choppy, so visibility is not good and we spot nothing on the water. We enjoy our lunch and then drive through the mountains passing sea lochs, the scenery is brilliant. We stop at Loch Maree for photographs and our last coffee, eventually arriving back at the Steading to pack and get ready for our dinner, and check lists, including our Magic Moments of the trip which will be very hard for all of us?

Day 11

We have our breakfast and say our farewells. What a holiday; a big thank you to you all, hope to see you again on another Speyside adventure.....

Favourite Species: Joint first - Dotterel plus chicks and the Otter. Others are; Pale-phase Arctic Skua, Slavonian Grebe, Diver sp, Dunlin (summer plumage), and the Orchids.

Favorite Places: Oldshoremore Beach comes out top, followed closely by Handa Island. Others are: Cairngorm (making the effort to get birds); Walking along the Feshie down from the Steading (Ospreys and Spotted Flycatchers).

Magic Moments: There are so many, here they are: Finding the Black-headed Bunting and Wood Warbler family; Julian's reaction to finding the Black-headed Bunting; Osprey feeding chicks; Pine Marten on the Feshie; The stack on Handa (seeing the birds so close); Sunset on the last night; Bottle-nose Dolphins riding the bow of the tanker; Dotterel and chicks; Golden Eagle overhead in Sutherland; finally Watching Razorbills swimming in the clear blue sea.....

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Peregrine
Black-throated Diver
Pheasant
Slavonian Grebe
Oystercatcher
Fulmar
Ringed Plover
Gannet
Dotterel
Cormorant
Lapwing
Shag
Dunlin
Grey Heron
Snipe
Greylag Goose
Curlew
Shelduck
Greenshank
Wigeon
Common Sandpiper
Teal
Arctic Skua
Mallard
Great Skua
Tufted Duck
Black-headed Gull
Eider
Common Gull
Goldeneye
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Red-breasted Merganser
Herring Gull
Goosander
Great Black-backed Gull
Red Kite
Kittiwake
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Sandwich Tern
Sparrowhawk
Common Tern
Common Buzzard
Arctic Tern
Golden Eagle
Guillemot
Osprey
Razorbill
Kestrel
Black Guillemot
Puffin
Sedge Warbler
Rock Dove
Whitethroat
Wood Pigeon
Blackcap
Collared Dove
Wood Warbler
Cuckoo
Willow Warbler
Tawny Owl
Goldcrest
Swift
Spotted Flycatcher
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Crested Tit
Skylark
Coal Tit
Sand Martin
Blue Tit
Swallow
Great Tit
House Martin
Treecreeper
Tree Pipit
Magpie
Meadow Pipit
Jackdaw
Rock Pipit
Rook
Pied Wagtail
Carrion Crow

Dipper
Hooded Crow
Wren
Raven
Dunnock
Starling
Robin
House Sparrow
Redstart (H)
Chaffinch
Stonechat
Greenfinch
Wheatear
Siskin
Blackbird
Linnet
Song Thrush
Twite
Mistle Thrush
Redpoll
Common Crossbill (H)
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting
Black-headed Bunting
Jay
Chiffchaff (H)
Manx Shearwater

Total 110

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Stoat
Pine Marten
Otter
Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottlenose Dolphin
Grey Seal
House Mouse

Species Total: 125