

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

WALKING & WILDLIFE

30 JULY – 6 AUGUST 2011

Guide: Steve Willis

Guests: Gordon Lemmon, Sue Brodie, Sue Bradshaw, John Duerden

Day 1 The group arrive through the first afternoon and find the Steading basking in sunshine. It's a promising start to the first ever Speyside Wildlife Walking and Wildlife week! Over dinner we discuss what we hope to do this week and have a relaxed chat about what we all want to see and where we want to visit.

Day 2 We start our first full day on the doorstep of the Steading. There is a small hide just up the track and we take a walk up there to look for Red Squirrels. We get in the hide and Steve puts some food out. We don't have long to wait - a Red Squirrel is quick to dash in and grab a hazelnut. There follows half an hour of amazing antics from the squirrels. Sitting silently and comfortably in the hide it's wonderful to be able to actually hear their chattering calls and the sound of their sharp claws on the bark of the pines. One young squirrel causes great amusement by not being able to open the hazelnuts and simply resorts to wearing the shell away! Some typical woodland birds appear, Chaffinch, Great Tit and Coal Tit. Suddenly Steve hears the distinctive call of the Crested Tit! The chattering gets closer and closer and then we watch in amazement as a 'crestie' lands on the peanut feeder! Sue Brodie (Scottish Sue) is absolutely delighted, this is one bird she has been desperate to see, and we see it so well! It sits and feeds, flits around the trees, and even allows a few photos to be taken.

We then get in the vans for the drive up to the Findhorn. Once we get into the glen we slowly drive along keeping an eye out for any wildlife. From one stop we look down onto the fields and see a female Roe Deer. As we watch it walk around she comes to a stop in thick grass. We then watch as two fawns stand up underneath her and suckle for a moment. It's a privilege to watch when the animal is totally unaware of us!

As we drive up the glen Gordon calls out when he sees an Osprey flying over the river alongside us. Steve pulls in and as we watch the Osprey we also have a good scan of the skies for any passing eagles. We drive all

the way up to the end of the road and then have a cuppa before our walk. The first days walk is a nice stroll along the bottom of the glen. It's a nice wide track and allows us to easily look around as we walk. Sue Bradshaw (Yorkshire Sue) sees a raptor high above us. We take a closer look and it's a Peregrine Falcon! It seems to be passing back and forth along the sky line and as we walk up the glen it seems there is almost always a Peregrine in view. Steve has noticed some Red Deer high on the opposite hillside. When we look with our bins we see that there are far more deer than just those silhouetted against the sky. There are hundreds of stags!

A large raptor cuts across the ridge to our right and Steve shouts out 'Eagle!'. It's a Golden Eagle! We look around the hill where it disappeared and it returns to view passing low over the Birch woods. Soon it is circling over the glen right in front of us. It is an adult bird, but an incredibly scruffy individual! As we have lunch sheltering from the wind a Stoat dashes out across the track. Where we are sitting we are surrounded by Grass of Parnassus. We turn around and make our way back down the glen. Peregrine and Kestrel show well and Yorkshire Sue sees a Raven fly out from the tops. We take a slight detour over the glen to look for Mountain Hares. We scan and scan but sadly we fail to see any!

We get back to the Steading with a bit of free time before dinner. The Sues go for a walk around the surrounding woods and fields and find both a Jay and what sounds very much like a Tree Pipit.

After dinner we pay a visit to the mammal hide on Rothiemurchus. We get in as the light is fading and wait to see what will come and see us. A male Badger comes in quite early and methodically makes his way through the bait. Another couple of younger Badgers come in and see if they can find any scraps left behind by the male. At one point we are enjoying views of four Badgers all right in front of the hide! Steve announces that we will wait another ten minutes before we need to make a move back. No sooner has he said that than a Pine Marten dashes in and climbs onto the feeder at the back of the hide. We spend ten minutes enthralled by this amazing animal until, as suddenly as it appeared, it leaps down and vanishes into the night. What a first day!

Walking: c. 7km on wide dry tracks. Negligible altitude gain.

Day 3

Today we are staying local and walking in the stunning pinewoods of Abernethy Forest. We start at Forest Lodge right in the heart of the forest. We see Pine Marten droppings on the track as we walk along looking

and listening for any birds or mammals. John stops to look at Sundew and Butterwort growing in the ditch alongside the track. Steve points out various places by the track where Capercaillie have been dust bathing. In some of them we find fresh droppings and some stunning feathers from a hen bird. Sadly we don't see any of the birds themselves!

We make a short diversion at the edge of the forest to see if we can see eagles. Unfortunately the famous Scottish midge finds us and brings our watch to an abrupt stop! We carry on and head down to the River Nethy. The plan had been to do a linear walk but Steve has forgotten how big the river is here! We can't cross so we make our way back to Forest Lodge by another track. As we do we stumble into a big mixed flock of tits. Crested Tits are calling within the flock and with a bit of searching we all find them.

After our walk we explore some well known Speyside haunts. We walk through birchwood and fields to Avielochan and here we find the stunning Slavonian Grebe. Two are feeding away in the shallow loch alongside Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. The weather is picking up and as the day warms it brings out Common Blue Damselfly, Common Darter, and Common Hawker Dragonfly.

Having missed out on Crossbills so far we decide to go searching for them at Carrbridge. There are very promising woods around the cemetery. When we get there the heavens open so we wait it out for a little. When the rain stops we take a look around but unfortunately cannot find any Crossbills.

Walking: Total of c. 9km. Vast majority on wide dry tracks, some wet areas on narrow paths. Negligible height gain.

Day 4

With a promising looking forecast we take to the mountain today! There is a little cloud hanging around the Cairngorms but undeterred we make for the ski centre. Having got to over 600m by the road we have fairly reduced the climb for the day. We set out and make our way along underneath the Northern Corries. We climb up the edge of Coire an Lochain and find ourselves over 1000m up in the mountains. We keep our eyes peeled for Dotterel and Ptarmigan but nothing so far. The weather is deteriorating fast and a bank of cloud is moving our way. The rain starts and we stop to get all our wet weather gear on.

We climb up a bit further and then follow the path along the top of the Northern Corries. No doubt there are Ptarmigan and Dotterel about but it's now so cold and wet we are not really looking too hard! Any hopes of a Snow Bunting are not looking promising either! What a way for Yorkshire Sue to spend her birthday!

We take advantage of one of the tracks down and as we drop back towards the ski centre the visibility and weather improve. After more scanning we fail to pick up any Ptarmigan or even Red Grouse for that matter! There is nothing else for it, what these brave adventurers need is a hot chocolate!

Back at the van it's agreed the best plan is to get back to the Steading to get warm and dry. With boots drying and our kit hung out in the nice weather we all take some time to relax in the Steading's amazing surroundings. At dinner Gordon and Scottish Sue are buzzing with excitement. They went up to the hide to watch the squirrels and were amazed to find a Pine Marten passing by the hide quite casually! How amazing!

After dinner we enjoy wonderful photos from local wildlife photographer Neil McIntyre.

Walking: c. 10km with c. 800m height gain. On man-made single track hill path the whole way.

Day 5

We wake to a fine days weather and by way of contrast with yesterdays mountain mission, today we're down at sea level by the River Spey.

We drive down Speyside and stop just short of the sea in the town of Fochabers. Steve drives on to Spey Bay then cycles back up the road to meet the group. We gather at our meeting point and as we set off Yorkshire Sue finds a Dipper just below us! It sits and shows perfectly well for us then flies upstream. We head downstream, bound for the River Spey. The first part of our walk passes through beautiful broadleaved woodland. At this time of year it's pretty quiet but still very nice walking. Out into open farmland we see and hear Yellowhammer and get amazingly close to young Whitethroat in the gorse. The path periodically goes right along the bank of the river. We sit and have a relaxed lunch watching the river and the occasional salmon leaping. Near Spey Bay we walk out onto the old railway viaduct over the river. From here Steve sees an Osprey which we watch for 15 minutes or so. It makes numerous dives but never catches anything, what

a wonderful sight! A short way further on sees us arrive at the WDCCS centre at Spey Bay. We get our scopes (and a cuppa!) from the van and have a look about to see what's around.

Spey Bay is always a great place to visit. We see diving Gannets, Razorbill, Eider, three species of Tern, Cormorant and Shag out at sea. There is a huge raft of Goosander at the river mouth and many hundreds of gulls. A Pale-phase Arctic Skua passes by and gives chase to a Sandwich Tern. Steve is watching a group of waders on the gravel by the river and sees Redshank and a small flock of Dunlin. Many of the Dunlin still have their black bellies from the breeding season. Yorkshire Sue gets her scope on the Dunlin and finds Ringed Plover amongst them. She also manages to find a Grey Seal out at sea bobbing up and down in the waves.

Leaving Spey Bay behind we make our way back to Speyside. We pass over high moorland and look out for Grouse. As we make our way over the moor at Lochindorb Estate, Gordon finds Red Grouse sitting in the heather. We get close to both male and female birds and enjoy great views of them. On a little way we take a closer look at Lochindorb itself. There sat in the middle of the loch is a beautiful Black-throated Diver! Steve sets up his scope and we all take in the stunning plumage of this enigmatic bird.

Time is marching on so we tear ourselves away and make our way back to the Steading for another fine dinner!

Yorkshire Sue is keen on her bats so after dark we take a very short drive up to Uath Lochans with a couple of bat detectors. With torches shining out over the water we find both Pipistrelle Bats and also get great views of Daubenton's feeding low over the still water.

Walking: 10km with no height gain. Level waymarked route.

Day 6

In the last few days there has been a mass emergence of Scotch Argus Butterflies. All around the Steading they can be seen flitting around in the grassy areas. The forecast for most of Scotland is looking pretty grim today so we chance a visit to the Black Isle. From the picturesque village of Cromarty we walk up to the South Sutor where the Cromarty Firth opens to the Moray Firth. It's still nice and dry and it allows us lots of time to take in the amazing seascapes.

The path is a little vague across the farmland but passes areas of gorse with the Sues finding Spotted Flycatcher, Dunnock, Robin, and Willow Warbler in the thickets. All the time we have views out to the Moray Firth and we keep our eyes peeled for any Dolphins. When the path climbs back up over towards the Cromarty Firth we see one of the dolphin watching boats from Cromarty sitting idle in the water. We watch more closely and see that it is surrounded by Bottlenose Dolphins! As we watch we see breaching and can just make out smaller young dolphins amongst the group!

The rain hits us literally as we get back to the van. No matter, we're off to a hide! At Udale Bay we sit in the hide with a cup of tea (and shortbread) and watch the roosting birds at the top of the tide. There is a sizeable flock of Canada Geese close by and numerous Mallard amongst them. Grey Herons stalk the shallows and there are various flocks of waders on the far side of the bay. Scottish Sue is keen to take a closer look at the waders so with the scope and the trusted Collins Bird Guide we work our way through flocks of Knot, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Redshank and Lapwing.

Our last port of call on the Black Isle is Chanonry Point. We make our way to the end of the gravel spit in the hope of more Dolphins. Sadly no luck with Dolphins but we do see Common and Grey Seal and good views of Harbour Porpoise.

Walking: 8km on good paths and through grassy fields. Some wet ground. Height gain total of 200m.

Day 7

The collective decision of the day is to stay local and explore more of Speyside. We start off right on the doorstep with a walk to Uath Lochans. We can't pass the hide by so pop in to watch the Squirrels. It's another good performance with some fast chases, chattering, and one Squirrel running around on the hide roof!

At the top of the track into Uath Lochans a large flock of Tits, Finches, and Warblers are flitting through the canopy. We stand by the track and watch them and sure enough there are more Crested Tit! At one stage two of these charismatic wee birds are just metres away from us in the Pines!

We walk along the boardwalks around the wetlands and there are thousands of newly emerged toads so we have to walk carefully! A Sedge Warbler is singing from deep in the reeds and after a short search we manage to get a close look at the stripey little warbler. Our route takes us up onto the high ground overlooking the lochans. From here we enjoy incredible views of the

pinewoods, the lochans, and the Cairngorms beyond. Red Squirrels occasionally pass by and in the course of the walk we enjoy great views of them going about their business. On the path down from the top of the hill we see a Sparrowhawk. It flies straight away from us then settles on a branch allowing us all brief but very good views.

We pick up our lunches back at the Steading then drive down to Insh Marshes RSPB reserve. As we eat our lunch we look out over the wetlands. There is not a great deal about so we move on.

John is a keen botanist and so we take a walk in a wood near Grantown where some botanical delights await. In Tomvaich we find some great examples of Twinflower growing right by the track. There is also Creeping Lady's Tresses in flower. Another exciting thing living in these woods is the elusive Capercaillie. Walking along slowly and quietly we keep our eyes open for any movement in the forest. Sure enough near the end of the track we all watch as one male and two female Capercaillie fly up and away from us! Wonderful!

Our time is running out so we make our way back to the Steading for a well earned dinner and to decide on our magic moments. Steve has expanded the categories a little and the winners overall are as follows:

Mammal of the week:	Red Squirrel
Bird of the week:	Crested Tit (unanimous winner!)
Walk of the week:	The Speyside Way to Spey Bay
Place of the Trip:	No clear winner- we all voted for different places!
Magic Moment:	The Marten sightings

BIRDS

Black-throated Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Goosander
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Capercaillie
Pheasant
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Dunlin
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Common Sandpiper
Arctic Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern

Arctic Tern
Razorbill
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Sedge Warbler
Whitethroat
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treetreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Jay
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch

Siskin
Linnet
Crossbill spp.
Yellowhammer

Total Birds: 86

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Stoat
Pine Marten
Badger
Daubenton's Bat
Pipistrelle Bat
Feral Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer

Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

INSECTS

Dark Green Fritillary
Scotch Argus
Meadow Brown
Small Tortoiseshell
Speckled Wood
Green-veined White
Fritillary spp.
Common Blue Damselfly
Common Darter
Common Hawker

Total Species: 112