

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### WALKING AND WILDLIFE

27 JULY–3 AUGUST 2013

**Guests:** Mary and Chris Bancroft, Andrea and Dave King, John Duerden, Sue Coxon, Dave Darby

**Guide:** Chrissie Nicholson

**Day 1** We all arrive at Ballentean, Glen Feshie, home of our luxuriously converted Steading and our base for the week. The setting is perfect, we are right below the flanks of the Cairngorms and stunning scenery is all around us. It is a lovely warm sunny day, with a nice breeze. Our first evening meal is cooked by Sharon and Chrissie runs through the walks and places we will be during this holiday.

**Day 2** We wake to a damp misty morning; we eat our hearty breakfast and head out for our first walk of the day. The first bird we hear is a Robin chipping outside the Steading. As we set off it starts raining, we walk through the forest it is not long before Chrissie gets a view of a feeder across the clearing and actually inside the feeder sits a Great Spotted Woodpecker, it is feeding on the remainder of the peanuts. No-one has ever seen a bird inside a feeder, so we decide to come back later to make sure it is not stuck!! Chaffinch and Great Tit are snatching food from the sides of the feeder, which does not seem to bother the Woodpecker.

On the path there are lots of tiny frogs, they are everywhere once we notice one, we have to watch our feet carefully and try to avoid stepping on them, but they are so wee it is very hard. We walk on in the rain, the forest is quiet, not surprising with the weather. But still at the top of the crags the view is spectacular, as the mist hangs on the hillsides and all the lochs and lochans are visible. Sue spots a Roe Deer in the trees, but it does not hang around too long, we all manage to see it though. We return via the boardwalk, with Bog Myrtle and Bog Asphodel in abundance, the Bog Bean and March Cinquefoil just have the leaves left the flower has gone over now. In a square container filled with water we watch Tadpoles, Pond Skaters and Diving Beetle. John and Chris stay behind and find a Common Newt, what a great little habitat.

We arrive at the Steading for lunch, we are a wee bit wet and it is not long before everyone is changed and tucking into lunch in the upstairs lounge. This is very cozy and welcome, as the rain does try and stop. After lunch we walk along to Feshie Bridge for our next outing. It has stopped raining a bit, so we head down the path, a Buzzard is calling and down by the river a Meadow Pipit, Robin, Pied Wagtail and Tree Pipit are making us aware they are around. Along the track Meadow Brown and Small Heath Butterflies rise off the grass nearby and a Damselfly is spotted, along with Chimney Sweep Moths. We reach the bridge and take photographs of the side rapids which run fast downstream on the other side into calm deep pools such a contrast, it is beautiful listening to the river, with juvenile Coal Tits feed in a nearby tree.

We return along the top path, a Swallow sits high on a dead twig calling. Chrissie then sees on the fence ahead Spotted Flycatcher, Willow Warbler and Meadow Pipits feeding, lovely to see so many flying to and from the fence line. As we turn the corner Andrea catches sight of a Brown Hare darting away across the field, through the fence and away. We can hear the Osprey calling from the river, but only Chris gets a glimpse of the bird flying beyond the trees. We finish the walk by going to check out the feeders for the Great Spotted Woodpecker, as we get closer the bird is not stuck in the feeder as there is a big hole in the top, so access available, we are all relieved as trying to release it from a feeder could have been challenging!! We turn away from the feeder but Sue turns back and there is a juvenile Crested Tit, wow, what an end to the day, we watch it for quite a while feeding on what was left in the feeder, brilliant.

As always on a Sunday night, after our dinner we head out again to our Wildlife Watching Hide. On arrival Chrissie puts the bait out, and it is not long before the Wood Mouse is racing back and forwards with peanuts into the crevices in the rocks. We get comfy and settle in, it does not seem long before a Pine Marten appears, fantastic views as it feeds for a few minutes. After this excitement, we watch three Badgers hoovering up the peanuts and finishing them before we can leave. A long but fabulous first day, we head back to the comfort of the Steading.

### **6 miles total**

#### **Day 3**

After enjoying our breakfast we drive off in the sunshine to Spey Bay, on the way we see Tufted Duck on a roadside pool. The tide is out when we arrive, and it is really busy, we have a coffee get our backpacks filled with lunch etc., and set off. As we pass the houses and gorse bushes, Yellowhammer, Linnet and Swallow families are all seen. We walk along the

coast past the golf course, the shingle beach is a great wind break whilst walking. We keep climbing to the top and have a scan along the coast, Small Tortoiseshell and White butterflies fly over and Dunnocks chip away in the edge bushes.

Before we cross the stream, Chrissie sees Dunlin, Common Sandpiper and Pied Wagtail all feeding up on the stream edge. We walk a short way on the wet sand to Port Gordon, Ringed Plover run along the shore in front of us; an outflow pipe at the end of the beach is our lunch stop. Chris spots Eider Ducks while we all tuck into lunch, with the sun shining it is lovely.

Our return route takes away from the sea and starts on an old railway track through fields full of Barley, and covered in Small White Butterflies, fluttering over the top it is fascinating watching them, so many, beautiful. The hedges along this track are full of birds. Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and calling high up a Whimbrel flies over, in the distance and to the west thunder rumbles in the black sky; phew it never comes our way!! Chrissie then hears a Corn Bunting singing so the search is on to find this bird as it is one Chris wants to see. Eventually it is found sitting on the top of a bush, what a treat. Skylarks are singing, and Whitethroat hop low in the hedge. We finish the walk through the woodland, and then the other side of the golf course, rabbits run around the grassy fields and a Black Rabbit is spotted!

We return to the estuary where there is a mass eruption of Terns and Gull sp., although we do not spot a bird of prey. Terns include: Sandwich and Arctic, Dunlin and summer plumage Knot are roosting on the shingle islands. Goosander is swimming upstream and most Gull species are seen. A great end to the day we drive back to the Steading for tea, it is a bit tight time wise, but we make it.

## **6 miles total**

### **Day 4**

The morning greets us with a black threatening sky with sunshine, but breakfast is enjoyed and off we go. Our first stop is a local Osprey nest, a juvenile is seen sitting in a nearby tree but then Mary spots an adult flying over and then comes in and lands on the nest, a fabulous sight, watching Ospreys is never disappointing, they are magnificent birds, and now the young have fledged it may not be long before they start their migration and leave the nest site.

Our walk from forest lodge takes us through the forest at first, plenty of Capercaillie dust bathing sites in the sandy banks as we pass by. We are looking for the '3 Cs' Capercaillie, Cresties and Crossbill! Coal/Crested Tits and Chaffinch are seen feeding in amongst the trees. The weather stays

dry as we come out of the forest and to a clearing; there in front of us is a magnificent view of the Cairngorm Mountains. On the track side Willow Warblers feed in the regenerating Pines, some of the tree stumps are covered with mosses and Blaeberrys. We walk into the mountains and stop for lunch beside a loch and watch out into the valley. As we are getting up to leave, Chrissie spots over the mountain top a Golden Eagle, in the skyline, it is distant but still brilliant views, this is a great sight before we return to the van. We go a different way back and have a river to cross down the track, but it is not running too high so we manage quite well. The forest is quiet on the way back, just before we reach the van a heavy rain shower catches us, but we shelter under trees by the stream, no point in getting soaked now, we are nearly back. A cuppa is welcome when we eventually reach the van and then drive back to the Steading for dinner, coffee and checklists.

### 6 miles total

#### Day 5

Another blue sky start to the day which is welcome as we are off up the mountain today.

We drive to the car park and get ready for our walk, we set off and take the path up the 'windy ridge'. Slowly and steadily, that is Chrissie, wishing she had done more walking uphill whilst she was off!! Red Grouse are the first birds to see a family, chicks are still quite small for the time of the year, but only a few can find them in the heather. Chris spots a Wheatear flitting over the boulders, and then one is spotted closer by so we get brilliant views.

We have a brief stop at the Ptarmigan building for quick cuppa/drink/facilities before we head on up the last track to the top of the Cairngorm. The weather stays fine and dry, we can see for miles the views on the journey up are spectacular. Mary sees a movement away off the path, but we can not see anything, but then Chrissie hears a Dotterel so everyone stops and starts to scan. From the area where Mary has been looking, out comes a Dotterel, running and stopping, then another, wow what a view. Then someone says 'there is one here, really close', but we all find the bird hard to find but then we all get on the bird which is literally on the edge of the path!! We watch as it makes a soft call, and then to our amazement a tiny chick, then another oh what a sight! Adult Dotterel with two tiny chicks trying to keep up with it, we watch in amazement as they both cross the path in front of us and catch up with their parents, memorizing, then the adult calls them in and he settles down with them brooding underneath,

although he can not sit right down as they are a bit bigger now, we are so lucky and privileged to see such a sight. It is also a wee bit distressing as this is late in the season to have new chicks; we leave them and wish them well.

We reach the top for lunch, we find shelter from the wind behind the weather station and are joined by a Norwegian couple, who everyone chats to, telling them what we have seen and where we have been. We take photos on the top by the cairn, we can see for miles. We return down the main track to the Ptarmigan Station, after another brief stop we walk down the track to the car park. We are still scanning for Ptarmigan but none to be seen today. Near the alpine garden Chrissie has a brief view of a Ring Ouzel (DLT), as no one else catches the bird in flight. As we drive down the road we stop to look for the Reindeer in the paddock. Dinner is waiting for us, cooked by Sharon and thoroughly enjoyed by all.

#### 4miles up and down

#### Day 6

Before breakfast we see Red Squirrel, Spotted Flycatcher and Great-spotted Woodpecker. Today will be an easier day, so we head to the Black Isle. We stop at North Kessock and two Bottlenose Dolphins are spotted, one has a tiny calf, fantastic to see. We drive on to Chanonry Point, we walk around to the point and the wind is blowing straight into our faces, it is quite cool compared with previous days. Nothing is to be seen on the windy side, so we head back to the van for coffee, just as everyone gets a cuppa, a Dolphin is spotted in the calm water off the pier right in front of us, brilliant, just what we want to see!

Our walk today is from Cromarty to South Souter along the coast, we going past a new archaeological dig just discovered and up through the wood. As soon as we start walking the rain starts! Along the shore path we see a Shrew struggling, we think it had been caught in the strimmer as the guys have just completed clearing the edges of the paths. A very sad sight!! Once we get into the wood the struggle begins, as the way up has lots of steps, and is judged for people with long legs. Chrissie and a few others struggle getting up them, what a laugh!! It was supposed to be an easy walk.....

By the time we reach the top the rain has eased a wee bit so we use the seats for lunch, and again the one Chrissie chooses is so far off the ground she can not climb onto it, she has to go the highest ground edge, what fun!! The return journey is much easier along the road and back to the van, as we have no shelter; Chrissie drives to Udale Bay and the hide, so we can enjoy cake and tea in the dry. There is quite a bit about there, Canada

Geese, Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank, Teal, Heron and all the Gull species nearly all bathing in the fresh water stream flowing into the estuary. The rain keeps getting heavier and heavier so we decide to head back home and finish the day. Dinner and checklists keep us busy this evening.

### **3 miles total**

#### **Day 7**

This is our last day and it is cloudy and windy, but dry, bonus. The Findhorn Valley is our destination, and as we start along the valley, we watch out for Dipper, Grey Wagtail and birds of prey. We drive to the furthest car park, we set off along the straight stretch in the valley bottom. Kestrel are battling against the wind but have to land often as it is too strong. We are also heading straight into the wind so we have to keep a hand on our hats. Chris spots Feral Goats on the mountainside and Chrissie gets everyone a great view of Stags walking away over the ridge, they look fine, getting ready for the rutt, later in season. The hinds are in groups with calves, dotted around the mountainside. The valley is magnificent, we carry on walking along the river until we reach the lodge and what a building, well-furnished and kept, for a house in the middle of no-where.

We cross a bridge and head further into the hills, the wind is still in our faces and gusting, it is hard going. We eventually stop for lunch and shelter by some rocks on the hillside watching another Kestrel trying to keep above the ridge, challenging though! On our return journey the wind is behind us and pushes us along, which makes it a bit easier. Hot drinks are calling from the van, which we finally go to, a brilliant walk of about eight miles altogether. A nice end to the week, with dinner and checklists to be completed we head for home. Chris reads out his poem he has written for the weeks adventures.

### **8 miles total**

#### **Day 8**

An early breakfast for all, and everyone heads home, safe journey to you all and hope to see you again on another Speyside holiday.

**Species of the Trip:** Dotterel with chicks (4), Crested Tit (1), Osprey (1) and Pine Martin (2)

**Place of the Trip:** Top of the Cairngorm (3), Speyside Way railway section (3), Findhorn Valley (2)

**Magic Moment:** Mammal hide, Dotterel + chicks, Butterflies over field on Speyside Way, Curlew bathing and seeming to dance, Unimog in Cairngorm Mountain car park.

## BIRDS

Gannet	Tawny Owl (h)
Cormorant	Swift
Shag	Great-spotted Woodpecker
Grey Heron	Skylark
Mute Swan	Sand Martin
Greylag Goose	Swallow
Shelduck	House Martin
Teal	Tree Pipit
Mallard	Meadow Pipit
Tufted Duck	Grey Wagtail
Eider	Pied Wagtail
Goldeneye	Wren
Goosander	Dunnock
Red Kite	Robin
Sparrowhawk	Redstart
Common Buzzard	Wheatear
Golden Eagle	Ring Ouzel
Osprey	Blackbird
Kestrel	Song Thrush
Red Grouse	Sedge Warbler
Red-legged Partridge	Mistle Thrush
Pheasant	Whitethroat
Oystercatcher	Blackcap
Ringed Plover	Willow Warbler
Dotterel	Goldcrest
Lapwing	Spotted Flycatcher
Knot	Crested Tit
Dunlin	Coal Tit
Whimbrel	Blue Tit
Curlew	Great Tit
Redshank	Treecreeper
Common Sandpiper	Jackdaw
Black-headed Gull	Rook
Common Gull	Carrion Crow
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Hooded Crow
Herring Gull	Raven
Great Black-backed Gull	Starling
Kittiwake	House Sparrow
Sandwich Tern	Chaffinch
Common Tern	Greenfinch
Arctic Tern	Goldfinch
Woodpigeon	Siskin
Collared Dove	Common Crossbill

Yellowhammer  
Reed Bunting  
Whooper Swan  
Corn Bunting  
Canada Goose

**TOTAL BIRDS: 91**

**BUTTERFLIES**

Small Tortoiseshell  
Speckled Wood  
Meadow Brown  
Small White  
Small Heath  
Ringlet  
Red Admiral  
Common Blue  
Painted Lady

**MAMMALS**

Brown Hare  
Pine Marten  
Badger  
Feral Goat  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Bottlenose Dolphin  
Grey Seal  
Mole (dlt) photo evidence  
Rabbit  
Common Shrew  
Wood Mouse  
Red Squirrel

**TOTAL SPECIES: 113**