

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

AUTUMN WILDLIFE

8 -15 October 2016

Guides: Duncan Macdonald & Craig Round

Guests: Joyce Redfeam & Pete Hewitson, John Robinson, Alison Payne, Helen Lomax, Trevor Parnell, Sylvia Tempest, Christine Laughery, Viv Emery, Valerie Wheeler

Day 1 We all safely arrive, from our various parts of the UK, at the magnificent setting of The Steading, in Glenfeshie. Craig finds a Yellow-browed Warbler in some trees near the main building on his way up to meet guests arriving, so the challenge is on, can someone relocate the bird?

After a sumptuous meal we convene in the lounge for some tea/coffee and run through the week ahead and what we would like to achieve. It is a glorious evening and, content we head for bed.

Day 2 We set off this morning, around the corner so to speak to a group of small Lochans. The air is remarkably still as the weather is maintaining its' easterly origins. The colours and reflections are simply stunning. The water is like a mirror. As we meander through the heather towards the edge of the first lochan there is a squeal from behind and we turn to see Christie hip-deep in a sphagnum hole! We manage to extract her from the mire but in doing so her boot is left behind. Arm deep in the bog we manage to fish the boot out and return Christie to the Steading to dry and change.

The rest of the group enjoy a flock of Redwings and a high flock of Pink-footed Geese. They also hear Crossbills. On Christies' return we go for a walk. There are flocks of small birds moving through - Blue and Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests mainly. We hear a Crossbill "jupping" and it obligingly sits right on the top of a spruce. We get it in the scopes and see that it is quite large billed, this and the deepness of the call makes us tend towards Scottish Crossbill. They are however, notoriously difficult to identify.

There are two Greylag Geese and a Mallard at the next lochan looking like they are floating on glass. The mirror image in the water as the Greylags take off is spectacular. A large flock of Pink-footed Geese heads south, high above our heads "*winking*" as they go. We have coffee and shortbread back at the Steading before heading off for the rest of the day.

We drive into the heart of the Monadhliath, to the north of Strathspey and follow the river Findhorn upstream. Even up here the air is still and the azure sky has little in the way of cloud. We stop at a vantage point above the river and scan around. The still air allows us to hear the bellowing of stags. A sound that will always make the hairs on the back of ones' neck stand up. Buzzards are up and soaring when Craig gets onto a distant Golden Eagle. We get it in the scopes but it is a long way off. Craig isn't finished though as we turn to follow his exclamation to find two Golden Eagles unbelievably close! They fly between us and the near ridge, one behind the other. One then carries on up the valley while the other starts to soar and comes back over our heads. Wow!

A little further on we watch a Dipper swimming in the river. This behaviour is new to some and we watch it for some time. There is a handy parking area by the river and we set up camp here, alongside other vehicles, and have some lunch. There are plenty of Buzzards up as well as good views of Raven. Craig gets onto a Red Kite further up the valley and then follows this with another raptor above the same distant ridge. It too is long tailed but as it banks we see a white rump. A ring-tailed Hen Harrier, fantastic spotting. Our fourth eagle of the day appears above the ridge to our backs and then Helen directs us to a song she has never heard, coming from the river. It is a Dipper. A wonderful song they have and a privilege to hear it.

We take a walk across the river and up behind some ruins and a plantation. The sound of the stags roaring is, well, staggering(!) There are plenty of harems around the hillsides all with their dominant males and troublesome interlopers. Trevor finds us a Wild Goat. Once we find it we realise there are about half a dozen. A Buzzard spooks a group of Red Grouse and we watch them land and get good views alongside the Mountain Hare that is having some late lunch.

Our way back out of the valley is beset by difficult drivers and Brown Hares with mixy. We get back to the Steading where Trevor and Val enjoy Redpoll, Robin and Treecreeper before another of Sharon's extraordinary meals. Afterwards we head on out again to our own wildlife hide on the Rothiemurchus Estate. Badgers are plentiful, Wood Mice are endearing but the star award goes to the stunning Pine Marten that makes two appearances and enthralls us utterly.

Day 3

The temperature plummets to -5°C overnight and so we are scraping frost of the vans this morning. There is a low river mist that we hope will lift. We are heading north today, to the Moray Coast and some sea-watching. However, we decide to make a quick detour up to Cairngorm to take in the

view out over the mist-filled valley and we aren't disappointed. We even manage to get a couple of Red Grouse and some views of the Reindeer herd.

There seems to be a fuel crisis in the Highlands but with luck we will make it to Forres. Phew! There are Starlings, House Sparrows, Jackdaws and large skeins of geese in and over the town. Out at Findhorn Beach we scan out over inky-calm waters. There are huge numbers of young Gannets out at sea and a close group of Goosander. We start to pick up little rafts of duck, mainly Common Scoter and Long-tailed Duck. There is a plethora of Shags and Cormorants.

Craig *cho geur ri suil gobhair* (eyes like an eagle) manages to pick up on a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins. We can see them clearly through the scopes. We enjoy all of this over a cuppa and enjoying great views out to Easter Ross and Sutherland. We find a little group of Kittiwakes out on the water.

Both guides are, independently, going through id features of a lone gull quite close in. They both realise at the same time that it is not a winter Black-headed Gull. It is in fact an adult, winter Mediterranean Gull! We go down onto the beach for a closer look at this very smart gull and a good record for this coast. An army helicopter flies over spooking it and it flies off towards Lossiemouth.

At Burghead we take a back road towards the harbour and chance upon five young Swallows on a wire! These will be the last of the year. In the harbour itself there are a couple of young Grey Seals that are so sleepy they appear to be dead! They are not, of course.

We have lunch on the shore beneath the maltings. There are Knot, Turnstone, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Redshank on the rocks. Groups of smart Eiders fly by, Rock and Meadow Pipits pick around the seaweed on the strand line while, all the while, young Gannets practice their diving out at sea.

At Hopeman, down on the beach, we find a very black Lesser Black-backed Gull as well as a lovely little troop of Sanderling on the sand. While we are watching Long-tailed Duck flying by we pick up on a couple of Arctic Skua coming closer. We watch them terrorise every bird that happens to be on the water. At Lossiemouth we check the estuary. There are hundreds and hundreds of birds. Huge numbers of gulls as well as Teal, Wigeon and Mallard. Waders are represented by Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Curlew. Grey Heron and Goosander complete the picture. Typhoons and Tornados are flying overhead from the RAF base.

Our journey home takes us up and over the Dava Moor where we see a number of Roe Deer to add to our list for today.

Day 4

The day dawns misty again but, after yesterday we are not disheartened and are sure that it will lift. We head into the pine forests to the north of us and head for the shores of Loch Garten. A car is parked there already and obviously a photographer. We get out and have a look at what he is doing. He has a packet of bird seed and has scattered it around some low bushes. Coal Tits are pouring out of the forest to get to the bonanza. It doesn't take long for one of our target species to appear - Crested Tit. For the next hour or so we enjoy the toing and fro-ing of these splendid little birds. We even get supplied with bird feed from the photographer and enjoy having Coal Tit in the hand!

We are all freezing from our Loch Garten experience so we head into Boat of Garten to get a warming cup of coffee and cake, at the 1869 cafe. This is most timely. We continue out past Nethy Bridge, taking a small road that gives us great views back onto the Cairngorms. We decide to have lunch here, but just as we start passing them out it starts to rain. That was not in the script! We use the vans for shelter and scan around. We find a Buzzard perched. There are Mistle Thrushes on a wire and we get a movement of Fieldfares past us as the rain stops.

Abernethy Forest is one of the largest tracts of forest left in Scotland and is owned and managed by the RSPB. We head into this pine wood after lunch for a walk. The track we choose will give us a great view out over the forest but can be popular with mountain bikes. The forest is quiet as we start to walk, looking at the id features of Scots Pine and being able to tell the difference between Cowberry and Blaeberry (bilberry). A flock of Redpoll livens things up and then we find a Song Thrush in a Rowan softly calling. This is likely to be a continental bird as our breeding population heads south for the winter. Suddenly there is a loud clattering of wings from the side of the track. The guides shout, "Caper!" but only a lucky few see the male as it wings off through the trees. Superb!

There is a fantastic view point out over the forest to the hill of Carn na Cnuic and almost instantly Craig gets us onto a distant raptor. It is an adult White-tailed Sea Eagle and it is disappearing quickly so we need to be quick. Wow!

We head home past Loch Garten where there is now a pair of Goldeneye on show and past Roe Deer at the side of the road. What a marvelous day with some very special moments.

Day 5

We have an early breakfast as we are heading west today and it is a considerable drive. Our journey takes us up past Inverness and out on the Ullapool road. Just past the town of Contin there are some well-placed lochs at Rogie Falls and we stop there. The colour of the birches and Larch are beautiful. We carry on but stop at Loch Droma where we have a quick scan. Craig shouts, "Merlin!" and we all follow his directions to get jaw-dropping views of a female Merlin dashing over the moor on the other side of the loch. She is being pursued by a Hooded Crow so we really see her size well.

As we turn onto the road to Gairloch we stop at one of the great geological features of this part of the world - Corrieshalloch Gorge. This is Scotland's deepest river gorge, over 200ft deep but what seems only a few yards across. We have tea and coffee before walking down to the gorge. There are constant flocks of Redwings and Fieldfares moving across the sky and a pair of Sparrowhawks make an appearance. We walk down to the gorge and out onto the suspension bridge across it. The falls of Measach below are little more than a trickle as we have had so little rain.

Around the stunning west coast we stop at Gruinard Bay where we have great views of Gruinard Island, Priest Island and the edge of the Summer Isles. There are three Great Northern Divers out in the water, two adults and a youngster. We find Black-throated Diver and Black Guillemot whilst Ravens are ubiquitous. Craig alerts us to an adult White-tailed Sea Eagle perched on the highest point of Gruinard Island. We get great views of the bird's head, but wait, there is another soaring off to the right. Wow, we can really see this bird. The pale neck and head, the pure white tail and the immensity of the wings. Stunning. We move on to Aultbea for comfort but find Rock Dove, House Sparrows and Goldfinch.

We take a small road and stop at an old pier near the community of Laide. We break out the flasks and lunch and enjoy the spectacular scenery. Viv finds us some Teal in with the Mallards, Curlew and Oystercatchers are flying around while Cormorants, Shags and five Common Seals are out in the water. Suddenly Alison tells us all that Helen is onto an animal. Quickly we reposition and have a look over Helen's shoulder. A head appears. It has whiskers and smaller than a seal. Then it dives and we see the tail. Otter! It reappears with a Butterfish in its mouth and starts to chomp. It swims closer and past us, fishing all the way. It climbs out onto a rock, spraints and slides back in. This is a large dog Otter and we are entertained by him for over an hour! Up onto rocks, eating copious Butterfish and some of the best views of Otter we could have hoped for.

Further up this road we come to the wonderful beach of Mellon Udrigle where we find another Great Northern Diver in the bay along with a drake Long-tailed Duck. Then a fin is spied. It is a Harbour Porpoise and it is ridiculously close. It almost looks like it is going to beach. Back and forward it works its way through the bay. But time is pressing and we have to leave if we want to eat, so, off to the Inchbae Lodge for our dinner, passing a few Red Deer on the way. We get back to the steading late but content.

Day 6

Today is ascent day. We make our way after breakfast to Cairngorm. We park at the lower car park as it is a bit more sheltered in order to get suited and booted. The wind is fresh and we can imagine what it will be like on top. There are a couple of Red Grouse and as Craig spins around for a look the other way he finds that there is a large female Peregrine right above us! We watch in awe as this supreme falcon puts on a flying display for us, soars and heads off.

We take the funicular train up to the Ptarmigan station at 3,500 feet. There is a handy viewing platform from which the view out over Glenmore and Strathspey is superb but it also allows us to quickly scan for Ptarmigan. We find a group easily enough and then head out onto the hill to get closer to them. The weather at this point decides to show us how hardy these grouse are. Within minutes of setting out we are being cut by the wind and the sleet starts to whip into us. The birds are just behind a snow fence that gives us great cover in order to hide us. The weather sends us scuttling for cover, tea and cake, but we are smiling from the experience.

We have lunch at Rothiemurchus visitor centre where Redwings are pouring out of the sky onto the Rowan trees and where the group dispose of some of their cash and support the local economy!

We drive up to Lochindorb in Dava Moor where we get stonking views of Red Grouse but really not much else so we decide to head closer to home and have a look at Insh Marshes. This is the largest system of river fens in the UK and internationally important for breeding and wintering wildfowl. There is a wonderful viewing roof on the main reception hide that gives wonderful views onto the Monadhliath and the town of Kingussie. There are large numbers of Teal and Mallard below us and regular flocks of Mallard flying high heading north. Roe Deer are skulking in the marsh when we pick up on a young Golden Eagle above the hill opposite us. We watch as it is repeatedly mobbed by Buzzards and drifts out of view. What a way to end the day.

Day 7

Sharon really looks after us at the Steading. The food is simply too good to pass up. I would never dream of having a cooked breakfast every day of the week at home but here, oh yes please!

We head for the Black Isle, a peninsula that sticks out to the North of Inverness. The countryside is agricultural and soft on the eye, but the mountains in the distance are a constant reminder that we are in the Highlands. The Black Isle is almost surrounded by very productive sea and the sheltered bays and firths are internationally important for wintering wildfowl and waders. Through the farmland we go through fields of harvested barley. Just before Avoch we come across a field that is absolutely stuffed with geese. They are Pink-feet and impossible to count. As we edge out of the vans for a look they take to the air and the sight and sound makes us all stand in amazement. There must 5 - 10 thousand birds in the air. We find Yellowhammers and a couple of Tree Sparrows further up the road before Craig lurches to a halt at a field entrance where there is another large flock of Pink-footed Geese. On the edge of the flock, however, is a little group of Barnacle Geese.

We drop down into the town of Avoch where Pied Wagtails and Rock Pipits are working the strand line and we can see Gannets offshore. There are Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser and Wigeon out at sea by the river mouth while Turnstone, Oystercatcher, Curlew and Redshank pick their way along the shore.

We drop down to Chanonry Point, the tip of a large terminal moraine if you are to believe the glaciologists. We know better though. It is in fact the point that was reached when the faeries were building a bridge across the firth for the great warlock Michael Scott. Their work was disrupted by a tinker who wished them, "God's speed" with their work and the spell was broken.

We find that off shore it is thick with Gannets, extraordinary numbers of them, mainly youngsters. It has obviously been a prolific breeding season for them. There are good numbers of Common Guillemots and a few Razorbills. Shags and Cormorants are both here as are both Common and Grey Seals. We find a Red-throated Diver to finish our diver collection and we get another superb view of Arctic Skua. They have all been dark-phase birds, but it doesn't lessen the quickness of the pulse when this pirate of the sky powers into view, what a bird. We have tea and coffee here, waiting in vain for a dolphin to show.

We head to the north coast of the Black Isle and another RSPB reserve. Udale Bay is a huge tidal bay that is mud-rich and can hold massive numbers of waders and wildfowl in the winter. As we pull up we can see that we are

not going to be disappointed. There are thousands of birds out there. As we break out lunch and set up the scopes the sound of Pink-footed Geese is hair-tingling. There are thousands out on the mud and flock after flock are wheeling and whiffing in to join the party. There are good numbers of Canada Geese, Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Bar-tailed Godwit, Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers. We find a small group of Black-tailed Godwit and out on the mud is a large flock of Golden Plover. In the hide the sightings book mentions a Bean Goose seen the previous day. This guide loves a goose challenge and so while we are all chomping a thorough scan of the geese on the mud is in order. It is located very quickly, showing bright orange legs and a longer, more orangey bill, but it is mobile and difficult to follow as it purposefully follows Pink-feet into the channel. Now it will be trickier. Suddenly the whole lot of geese burst into the air as if a predator has spooked them. They wheel around and settle back onto the mud further out. Well, the Bean Goose is out there amongst that lot!!

At another view point along the firth we stop and have another look along the mud. Lots more Pink-feet and Wigeon. There are Dunlin in with the Redshank and larger numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit here. Out at sea we can make out some sizable flocks of Scaup. We keep our eyes seaward as we head to the little town of Cromarty, where we use their facilities and then have to head off back to the Steading.

After dinner we have a wee dram and go through the final checklist. We all agree it has been a superb holiday. We also go through the traditional voting.

Species of the trip went to the eagles that we saw with Pine Marten a close second; Place of the trip was comprehensively the Findhorn Valley. Magic moments are very personal but votes for the close encounters with Coal Tits at Loch Garten came out a clear winner.

Day 8

We have an early breakfast. Did anyone else hear Tawny Owl last night? We say our farewells and drop at the train station. What a fabulous week.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	Black-tailed Godwit
Black-throated Diver	Bar-tailed Godwit
Great Northern Diver	Curlew
Gannet	Redshank
Cormorant	Turnstone
Shag	Black-headed Gull
Grey Heron	Mediterranean Gull
Mute Swan	Common Gull
Pink-footed Goose	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Bean Goose	Herring Gull
Greylag Goose	Great Black-backed Gull
Barnacle Goose	Kittiwake
Canada Goose	Arctic Skua
Shelduck	Guillemot
Wigeon	Razorbill
Teal	Rock Dove
Mallard	Woodpigeon
Scaup	Collared Dove
Eider	Tawny Owl (h)
Long-tailed Duck	Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Scoter	Skylark
Goldeneye	Meadow Pipit
Red-breasted Merganser	Rock Pipit
Goosander	Grey Wagtail
Red Kite	Pied Wagtail
White-tailed Sea Eagle	Swallow
Hen Harrier	Dipper
Sparrowhawk	Wren
Common Buzzard	Dunnock
Golden Eagle	Robin
Kestrel	Stonechat
Merlin	Blackbird
Peregrine	Fieldfare
Red Grouse	Song Thrush
Capercaillie	Redwing
Pheasant	Mistle Thrush
Oystercatcher	Yellow-browed Warbler!
Ringed Plover	Goldcrest
Golden Plover	Long-tailed Tit
Lapwing	Crested Tit
Knot	Coal Tit
Sanderling	Blue Tit
Dunlin	Great Tit
Snipe	Treecreeper

Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Redpoll
Scottish Crossbill

Total Birds: 106

MAMMALS

Bank Vole
Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse

Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Pine Marten
Otter
Badger
Pipistrelle Bat
Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Harbour Porpoise
Bottlenosed Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

OTHERS

Red Admiral
Fox Moth caterpillar
Northern Eggar Moth Caterpillar
Dor Beetle
Lemon Slug

Total Species: 129