

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### AUTUMN WILDLIFE

2-9 OCTOBER 2021

Guide: Kate Mennie

Guests: Sue Skinner, Gillian and David Smith

**Day 1** Kate picks up Sue from the airport and we meet Gillian and David at dinner time, before we discuss our weeks plan.

**Day 2** The autumn sun is shining but there a chill in the air as we head out on our first day. Firstly we pass a Black Grouse site to check, but nothing this morning. We pass Greylag Geese in a field and Long-tailed Tits on a telegraph wire. We head up the A9 and turn off towards Strathdearn, crossing the Findhorn River. At our first stop, it isn't long until Gillian spots three Buzzard nearby and Kate sees the first Red Kite. David spots a Raven before a Red Kite glides slowly over our heads, so close we are looking into its eye. We watch the way it manoeuvres its tail to help in the wind. We carry on the road, spotting Red Deer stags against the horizon, before parking at Coignafearn Bridge. There are high winds, so we wrap up and begin scanning. There is a Kestrel hovering and two Buzzard also. Kate catches a glimpse of a distant Golden Eagle, but it disappears behind the hill. After a few minutes we decide to take a wander to keep warm so set off up the hill a little. We stop to scan for any Mountain Hare that may be around, which unfortunately they aren't. Suddenly Sue spots a bird above a near horizon, a Golden Eagle. In the wind, they hold their wings in so it looks smaller than you would imagine, and it gives us tantalising views for the next few minutes, as it stays low and goes behind the hill. A second bird appears and Kate catches a glimpse realising it is a White-tailed Eagle, but it is a very brief view. A third bird comes over a distant hill, a second Golden Eagle, but again does not stay high against the wind. The rain sets in, so we retreat to the minibus and drive out of the glen. We take a bit more shelter at dipper bridge where we have lunch, spotting Feral Goat on the hillside and scan the river for Dipper.

Stopping briefly in Carrbridge we carry on up into the Dava Moor where a line of gorgeous Mistle Thrush cause great excitement for Sue with such a close view. We turn off to Lochindorb, slowly making our way along the road in search of Red Grouse. Kate finds one hiding out of the wind and we enjoy these views. The wind is strengthening so we drive along the lochside and

through the Dava. We turn off next towards Auchnagallin, where Kate spots a brief Sparrowhawk, and we stop on the road where a few thrush fly over. It is tricky to identify them, but likely Mistle Thrush. The mass of rowan berries catches our eyes and we hope they will attract some Scandinavian visitors this week. To finish our afternoon, we pull into Tomvaich woods, where we don't even get two feet out of the minibus before hearing a mass of birds above us. There are several Common Crossbill and an eruption of Siskin feeding on the spruce cones. The Crossbill are almost too close for the telescopes, but we get fantastic views and even spot Goldfinch, Coal Tit and Goldcrest amongst the mass of birds in the trees. With an early dinner looming, we head back to the hotel.

After dinner we set off to our evening wildlife hide. Not long after we enter, the first Badger arrives, joined by a younger male. They both feed for 50 minutes and keep us entertained. A Pipistrelle Bat flies past and the Wood Mice busily gather peanuts. Another two Badgers come in for a look but don't stay long. We stay as long as possible but unfortunately no Pine Marten tonight, so we drive back to the hotel.

**Day 3** A bright autumnal morning, we head to the old Spey Bridge. David spots our first Dipper and a Goosander is swimming downstream. On the trees above, brief crossbill fly over, David sees Great Spotted Woodpecker and Mistle Thrush. Gillian shouts as she sees a Grey Wagtail, shortly joined by a second and three Dipper all fly upstream and we can hear the echo of their song below us, fabulous. We drive on through Dorback, with a surprise Rat running across the road in front of us. We scan the moor where David sees Roe Deer and Redpoll fly over. Driving along fields two Jays briefly fly across. Down Lurg road, Roe Deer hiding in a field alerts us to a big flock of thrushes, we scan vigorously but no migrants, a few Swallows and at the end of the road, Mistle Thrush and Skylark. We stop at Nethy for comfort before continuing on to Abernethy.

We arrive up into Abernethy Forest and begin our walk. A Tit flock is along the track which includes a few Crested Tits. Above the trees, Swallows and a couple of House Martins are gathering flies. We hear Jay and Buzzard before arriving at Rynettin Bothy for lunch in the sun. We watch the rain showers over the mountains as they sweep by. Kate hears a Chiffchaff calling, catching a glimpse before it flies off. As we continue, stopping to look at Mistle Thrush, Kate spots three Buzzard then suddenly a Golden Eagle comes up from the trees. We get great views as it rises in the sky and get a comparison of size beside the Buzzards. We watch until it gets too high. We walk through the peaceful forest noticing the wild blaeberrries and a rainbow over the trees.

We get Swallows on the way back, with another tit flock and Treecreeper. We drive to the mountain car park to end the day. We scan for Ptarmigan before four brief Snow Bunting land on the roof of the building. We take a wander to try and relocate. David sees Stonechat and Meadow Pipits. We stop on the way down to see the Reindeer. On the way back, we stop at Milton Loch where there is a good number of ducks, including Tufted, Mallard, a surprise Shoveler, Moorhen and Grey Heron, also a big Lapwing flock and Brown Hare on the journey home.

#### Day 4

It's our West Coast day today, heading past Inverness, we first stop at Rogie Falls. We take a walk through the woods down to the black water waterfall in hope of catching a glimpse of any salmon jumping up the ladders. The autumn colours are gleaming in the sunshine and we hear Long-tailed Tits, Raven and Robin. We continue west, stopping briefly at Loch Dorma, where Gillian sees Pink-footed Geese overhead. We stop next at the viewpoint overlooking Sgurr Mor where Kate catches a glimpse of an eagle but goes before anyone manages out of the minibus. Red Deer are rutting and there are plenty of Ravens over the ridges. On now to Little Loch Broom where the tide is out, giving us a good chance to see waders on the sand. Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Redshank, and Sue sees Red-breasted Mergansers, whilst David spots seals and porpoise. We continue driving, stopping at Gruinard Bay parking spot for lunch. It is a bit windy, but we scan here whilst eating. As everyone warms up in minibus, Kate spots two Red-throated Divers followed by a dozen Black-throated Divers all in different plumage and a Black Guillemot in winter plumage. Scanning some more, Kate catches glimpse of five Whooper Swan as they fly straight overhead, calling as they pass.

We drive to Aultbea for the toilets seeing Red-breasted Mergansers, Razorbill, Shags and Black-throated Diver in the bay. The cool northerly wind has got into our bones, so we find a nearby café and have a hot chocolate to warm us up. We travel back along the road to Laide Pier now. Not long after parking up, Kate spots a Great Northern Diver not too far out. All three divers now! We also have distant Gannet, Mergansers and Shags. On to Mellon Udrigle, where we take a wander down to the beach. Sue cannot resist and braves the sea for a paddle. The sea is very rough but we see diving Gannets and David sees a flying Red-throated Diver. Walking up to the houses we see Stonechat, and some small birds which turn out to be Twite, a favourite of Davids. A Kestrel hovers nearby and lands on a wire for Sue to admire. We stop to scan all the way back, stopping at Little Loch Broom, where Kate notices a flock of thrushes. On closer inspection, she excitedly finds two Redwing

amongst them, and we hear the Red Deer rutting. Despite stopping to scan all the ridges, no other Eagles appear today. We stop in at Inchbae Lodge for dinner before arriving back in Grantown after nine.

**Day 5** Today starts a sunny and calm autumn morning as we head to Loch Insh. Overlooking the loch, we see a dozen Whooper and Mute Swan, as well as Canada Goose, Tufted Duck, Wigeon and Cormorant. We admire the gorgeous views as the sun gets higher in the sky and large skeins of Pink-footed Geese fly overhead. We head next for Uath Lochans where each tree is reflected against the dark water of the lochans as we begin our walk. Kate hears rustling from a tree and we watch a Red Squirrel clamber about before coming down and running across the path. A large flock of Redpoll fly overhead as we walk through the trees and we hear Jay calling. There is a small mixed flock of tits but lots of movement, so hard to pick out. David and Gillian see Goldcrest in a high spruce and there is plenty of fungi for us to admire, including Angels wings and Stagshorn. After walking round the lochans, we start heading uphill, seeing two more Red Squirrels. We reach the viewpoint overlooking the lochans, admiring the mountains and forest below.

We head to Insh Marshes for lunch on the lookout tower. Roe Deer and a close Buzzard are there as we arrive. There are Red Deer on a distant hill, Grey Heron and Teal on the lochans below. It is very quiet here except the sound of Bullfinch and Long-tailed Tits. We now drive south to Spey Dam, which is very quiet for birds, but hear a few roaring Stags from the mountains. There is a Buzzard on a post for Sue to study and we stop at Garva Bridge looking into the mountains. No birds, but we enjoy the views and the echo of rutting Red Deer. We drive back down seeing a Stoat dashing on the road before going up Glen Banchor to scan the ridges and trees for any thrushes, seeing more Red Deer. David asks for one last attempt to see Hen Harrier, so we head to Insh Marshes again for a 10 minute scan. We are giving up hope when David shouts and a female Hen Harrier quarters a field of sheep, getting a great view before it flies behind the trees. One happy David!

**Day 6** Today starts nicer than expected with warm temperatures too as we head to the Black Isle. We stop at North Kessock looking into the Beauly Firth. There are Razorbill and Guillemot in the bay with Heron, Redshank, Curlew and Oystercatcher on the seaweed. A few nosey seals watch us and a Red-throated Diver comes close into shore. We head to the north Black Isle road where Sue manages to look over to the Fyrish monument above Evanton, a symbol of her heritage name Munro. David sees a nice flock of Linnet along the road. We get down to Udale Bay just as the tide is coming in. Here there are hundreds of Pink-footed Geese gathering and the noise is spectacular.

A couple of Barnacle Geese and a Greenland White-fronted Goose has been reported, and it isn't long until we find both species amongst the others. We spend some time here scanning the endless birds as they shift with the incoming tide. There is Ringed Plover, Redshank, Wigeon and a Canada Goose. David spots Meadow Pipits and looking further afield we spot some Bar-tailed Godwits. We watch the movement of the geese before heading to Jemimaville for lunch. There is a large raft of Greater Scaup here, a few distant Eider Duck and winter plumage Slavonian Grebe. We head down to Cromarty for a comfort stop and look over the water for Long-tailed Duck, but none to be seen.

We drive west to Chanonry Point where the wind picks up, so we shelter round the east side. There are plenty of Gannet feeding out in the water, Guillemot and seals. Kate spots some waders flying into the point so we get a closer look and see a single Sanderling, Ringed Plovers and Turnstone. Kate and Sue spot a Red-throated Diver round the corner and young Gannets sitting close to shore. A Rock Pipit is a nice extra as the rain sets in, so we call it a day and decide to end the day in Speyside.

After lengthy delays in Fortrose, we get down the road and we drive up the Dulnahaitnach Road in Carrbridge to find some winter thrushes. We drive slowly up, looking at the rowan trees for any movement. Getting to the end of the road we start scanning out and it isn't long until Kate spots two large raptors over a hillside. Gathering round the telescope, we find two Golden Eagles in the air and watch them interacting in the sky. Just as we are thinking about leaving, Kate takes a quick scan down near to us and gets a surprise as a female Hen Harrier dashes through the trees and we all see this beautiful raptor dashing over the tops before disappearing, a nice end to the day.

**Day 7** Our last day, we head north towards the Moray Coast with rain starting the morning. David tells us about a Black Grouse site he knows on the way, so we stop for a look. Kate catches a Black Grouse flying low and fast but unfortunately it disappears. We get out for a scan and Red Grouse begin calling and flying past.

We arrive at Findhorn Bay where the tide is far out, but we see Kestrel and Linnet on our way to the beach. From here we see Magpie and the flat calm sea gives us a great chance to scan out as far as the eye could see. Mergansers, Eider and Gannet's diving are a great sight. Even a few sightings of Harbour Porpoise. Very distant Scoters, and a quick Long-tailed Duck fly past. Sue spots the Porpoise again as we head away. The rain clears as we get to Findhorn Bay hide and walk out to the edge of the heathland. Curlew, Black-tailed Godwits,

Redshank and Geese are all easy to see. The tide is still far out and heat haze makes it tricky, but Kate spots distant Pintail which she describes through the telescope. It is now warm as we head to Burghead. Heading to the harbour wall first, there are a few Turnstone and Redshank on the wall. Moving to the north point we set up here for lunch. It is unseasonably warm and the sun shines on the calm sea making it look very blue. Many Auks are out on the water and David spots a Red-throated Diver. We sit here for a couple of hours watching the movement of the birds and even a Porpoise. A small flock of Common Scoter fly past and lines of Eider fly low past us. Sue spots a much closer Red-throated Diver and Ringed Plovers fly past.

Dragging ourselves away, we head to Lossiemouth Harbour to look for Purple Sandpipers. Instead, a man alerts us to jumping Dolphins in the far distance. Sue spots the first ones as they leap and splash in the water, before we all watch them. More Common Scoters also fly past. With the day feeling like summer, we can't resist an ice cream which we enjoy overlooking the beach. We park at the estuary where we scan for Glaucous Gull, but with the tide being in, the gulls are on the wing. To end the day, we take a walk to Lossiemouth woods, where we see Magpie, Crested Tit and Long-tailed Tits at the feeders as well as a very obliging Red Squirrel. We have one final scan for the Glaucous Gull before we call it a day and head home via the whisky road, counting 16 distilleries in the space of an hour.

We meet at dinner before going through our checklists and talking through our highlights from the week.

**Day 8** Up early, Kate says farewell to Sue as she heads to the airport before taking Gillian and David there later.

### Species of the Trip

David	Hen Harrier
Gillian	Red Squirrel
Sue	Crested Tit/ Stonechat
Kate	Geese species

### Place of the Trip

David	Burghead
Gillian	Rynettin Bothy
Sue	Uath Lochans
Kate	Abernethy Forest

### Magic Moment

David	Golden Eagle/Buzzard comparison beside each other
Gillian	Seeing the first Eagles down Strathdearn
Sue	The number and sound of the geese at Udale Bay
Kate	Surprise Hen Harrier

## Birds

Mute Swan  
Whooper Swan  
Pink-footed Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Greenland White-fronted  
Goose  
Canada Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Pintail  
Shoveler  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Scaup  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Common Scoter  
Long-tailed Duck  
Goldeneye  
Goosander  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Red Grouse  
Red-legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Northern Diver  
Slavonian Grebe  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Red Kite  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Moorhen  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover

Lapwing  
Knot  
Sanderling  
Turnstone  
Redshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Guillemot  
Black Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Rock Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Skylark  
Rock Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Pied Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Dipper  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Redwing  
Blackbird  
Goldcrest  
Wren  
Great Tit  
Blue Tit  
Coal Tit  
Crested Tit  
Long-tailed Tit

Treecreeper  
Magpie  
Jay  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Carrion Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Twite  
Redpoll  
Goldfinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Bullfinch (H)  
Common Crossbill  
Scottish Crossbill  
Snow Bunting  
Yellowhammer  
Chiffchaff  
(104)

### **Mammals**

Pipistrelle Bat  
Badger  
Stoat  
Grey Seal  
Common Seal  
Bottlenose Dolphin  
Harbour Porpoise  
Roe Deer  
Red Deer  
Mountain Goat  
Red Squirrel  
Wood Mouse  
Brown Hare  
Rabbit  
Rat  
(15)

### **Other**

Black Darter  
Common Darter  
Red Admiral Butterfly  
Small heath Butterfly  
(4)