

Holiday Highlights
Speyside Autumn Wildlife
2011

Leaders: Mark Denman & Chrissie Nicholson

Day 1 We all meet up, at the Steading at Ballintean in beautiful Glen Feshie which is surrounded by the mountains and forest of the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve which will be our backdrop for the week. Those who arrive early find the mountains hidden in cloud as they take a walk along the river in the rain, but fortunately the forecast sounds better for tomorrow.

After the first of our delicious dinners eaten around our magnificent dining room table, we run through our exciting plans for the coming week and head to bed full of anticipation of the birds to come.

Day 2 We awake to some autumnal weather but although there's quite a chill in the air, there are patches of blue sky, it's dry and the rain from yesterday evening seems to have disappeared – hooray!

After a hearty breakfast we head to Uath Lochans for a wee walk, we are looking for Crested Tits and Crossbills but both elude us this morning! We do, however, spot Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Coal Tit and we hear a Wren rattling away in the undergrowth, another one not seen but at least it is heard. We wander around along the board walk, it is very quiet, but then Chrissie hears the squealing pig call of a Water Rail, and asks if anyone else had heard it, yes a few had heard, so makes up for the ones that have eluded us. Coffee calling we head back to the steading for a wee break before heading out for the afternoon.

We head north up the A9 turning off after the Slochd Summit, we travel slowly along the minor road scanning the moorland in search of our first Red Grouse which is spotted by someone in the front van, directions come through the radio on the birds position and good views are had by all.

We continue our journey and drive slowly up along the River Findhorn towards the Coignafearn Estate. There are a lot of Buzzards around and in one spot alone we can see five or six on the wing – all drying out in the

sun after yesterday's rain. Their appearance in such numbers is probably due to a change in the weather conditions where recently it has gone from being damp to being dry and so the birds are now coming out to feed.

We drive slowly all eyes watching for the next bird or mammal to be spotted. En route we spot a couple of Kestrels and a pair of Goosanders on the river. There are a couple of Mountain Goats on the slope above the road almost hidden in the Juniper Bushes and we are all impressed by the size of their incredible horns.

Mark suggests we stop a while at a well known place for viewing Golden Eagles, with that prospect we all pile out the vans and set to watch the valley across the river. After about 10 minutes Mark calls Eagle, over the ridge, we get telescopes trained onto the subject and everyone is given directions to locate the bird, we get fabulous views of a young Golden Eagle.

We go deeper into the glen tracing the river's course with the beautiful backdrop of high hills on either side, a photographers' heaven, we stop to eat our lunch and scan the hills around us. After lunch we cross the bridge and walk up the track to the forest edge, here there is evidence of the deer using the trees, with bark stripped off by the rubbing of their antlers. We stop and scan, Mark finally gets a telescope on a well camouflaged Mountain Hare, so camouflaged that it takes a while for everyone to see it sitting facing us not moving, a challenge, but everyone laughs as eventually we all see this mammal just showing some white of its winter plumage.

There are two large herds of Red Deer on the slopes above us, each a group of females with a single male who is doing his best to keep them all together. This is the rutting season and suddenly one of the males' roar – a fantastic sound that echoes across the valley. The stag from the other herd replies and we watch as they gaze across at each other. Both are impressive stags with superb antlers and one of them has bits of vegetation hanging from his antlers and is plastered with dried mud. We can't imagine anyone is going to steal any females from him!

We drive back slowly down the glen making sure not to miss anything and stop to admire a Dipper at a small burn. We listen to more Red Deer stags as they continue to roar and spot a group of males who haven't managed to get a harem of females. We take a quick detour up the road to Farr that twists and turns through a pine plantation and climbs up onto the moorland. Here we have very good views of three Red Grouse scurrying around in the

heather very close to the minibus. We spend some time searching for other possible species such as Merlin, but Chrissie spots a quartering ring tail Hen Harrier, again as the bird dips behind a hillock and appears again, directions get all guests onto the bird, we watch it for about 10 minutes, a great bird to watch until it heads over the hillside out of view. After a great day we return to the main road and head south coming back through Carrbridge.

We return to the Steading elated and full of our afternoon spectacular. After a delicious evening meal we are back out again for our evening visit to our purpose built wildlife watching hide on the Rothiemurchus Estate. We settle into the hide while Mark puts out peanuts, raisins and peanut butter.

We wait a while as the night falls and it isn't long before the first Pine Marten appears! It pauses briefly at the edge of the spotlights, standing tall on its hind legs to check everything is safe before starting to feed. After eating the peanuts and raisins for a while it climbs up onto the branches we have placed in front of the hide to get the peanut butter. Everyone is thrilled with these stunning close up views of this normally so elusive animal but all too soon it dashes away into the trees. Ten minutes later a Badger appears shortly followed by another, and another, before we know it there are four Badgers feeding in the same place, hoovering every peanut in sight. They give tremendous views and feed quite unconcerned at eye level just the other side of the glass. It's been a great evening and we head for home elated.

Day 3

The weather forecast for the day is not too good and it's already looking pretty grim with gales and rain forecast for later – oh dear! We leave the Steading after breakfast and head north towards Inverness where we are sure to find some birds and shelter.

We make our first stop at Longman point, where we dodge the rain showers whilst looking out over the Beaully Firth. There is plenty to see, however, and we soon pick out various ducks, Teal and Wigeon, we scan the ridges and a flock of Ringed Plover zoom around behind us and land on the shingle. The sky is beginning to look very grey and whilst we all stand and discuss the weather, a sheet of rain comes in and swamps us! We are quick to jump back in the minibuses and head off onto the rolling farmland of the Black Isle where our next stop is in search of Red Kites. Despite the awful weather, we do manage to get a couple of Red Kites soaring around the vehicles whilst we enjoy the warmth and comfort of a hot cup of coffee and some homemade shortbread.

Moving on, we drive along the shoreline of the Black Isle, where it's raining even harder and there is not a lot on the shore! We drive along the spine of the Black Isle heading for the Cromarty Firth but en route stop at Munloch Bay where we see quite a few Wigeon – birds coming in fresh from Scandinavia and Iceland. We see a nice migrating flock of at least 60 Skylarks going over and we are also interested to find a small group of Shelduck and a flock of Greylag Geese as well.

We finally take sanctuary on the northern side of the Black Isle in the hide at RSPB Udale Bay where there are masses of Wigeon to be seen, probably about 2,000 birds and they put on a real display as they sweep around the estuary there. With an incoming tide, there are lots of Dunlin and we pick out a small group of Bar-tailed Godwits, which are distinguishable by their upturned bills, very pale plumage and long legs. All of the waders are keeping to their own little groups and we see Knot, a few Golden Plover, Lapwings and a single Black-tailed Godwit. There are also quite a few gulls giving us nice comparisons between Herring and Common Gull. For those that are still not too sure about the identification differences, we get clear views of their facial features showing the nice soft expression of the Common Gull compared to the mean, more brutish Herring Gull.

We stay in the hide for a very welcome and warming lunch before driving slowly up to Cromarty itself where we discover a few small flocks of Red-breasted Merganser bobbing between the white horses which are now whipping up on the Cromarty Firth. As the wind increases and the oil rigs loom ever larger in the grey mist (the firth is used as a rig repair area), Ringed Plovers scurry around the shoreline and a few Scaup can be glimpsed out on the water, we also spot one winter plumage Slavonian Grebe but only a few guests see this quick diving bird. As we drive away on to the shingle spit of Chanonry Point we find that, despite the weather, it isn't as windy and cold as we had thought. The shingle point guards the entrance to the Inner Moray Firth and sea watching here turns out to be pretty good as it's obvious that the birds are being pushed in by the bad weather. Lots of big chocolate brown juvenile Gannets weave past and some of them are very close to the point, accompanied by Guillemots and Razorbills. It's not long before Chrissie picks out a Red-throated Diver and Mark gets on to three Great Skuas wheeling past and heading east being dive-bombed by a few gulls. About 10 minutes later two Arctic Skuas pass by – it's quite interesting to get Skuas this late in the year. Our attention is caught by the black and white

plumage of a male Long-tailed Duck as it quickly whizzes over the waves of the Moray Firth, a new bird for a few of the group, as we keep watching a few more fly by quite close, showing off their long tails.

Unfortunately the rain closes in and it's not very pleasant to be out and about so we decide it would be sensible to return to Glen Feshie where it will be warm and dry and we can relax for a while before enjoying another of Sharon's superb meals.

Day 4

The weather this morning is cold, frosty and clear but unfortunately some rain is forecast for this afternoon so we may have to plan our day carefully. Before we head away we check the moth trap and identify 12 species, see list at back, some photographs are taken before releasing them.

We decide on a local foray into the pine forests in search of Capercaillie, Crossbills and Crested Tits, so after breakfast we head out in the minibuses.

The sky is beautifully clear and blue and since it's such a lovely still morning we all find it difficult to believe what the forecasters are predicting – perhaps they will be wrong again! We park the vehicles and walk up a broad track but all seems quiet with just a few Chaffinches and Coal Tits to be seen, then suddenly at the far end of the track there is a clatter of wings as a big male Capercaillie takes to the air. It must have been feeding on the ground a little way ahead of us but it's a good job Mark instructed everyone to stay close together as it means everyone sees the bird despite the brief views – fantastic! With the excitement and chatter, there is another clattering in the trees and another male Capercaillie is flying our way and right across the path behind us, everyone is still in shock from the first one, so a second one was definitely not expected! We continue on along the track, and hear Crossbills and then see them flying around, watching them closely eventually they settle, with all binoculars and telescopes on them, they are identified as Parrot Crossbills, photographs are taken with zoom lenses and digi-scoping, we have done fantastic and we have not even had coffee yet!

Moving on from there we have our morning coffee break by a bridge over the River Spey. Here, watching from the historic timber bridge, we get superb views of Dipper swimming in the water right in front of us and there is a second bird under the bridge – the birds are even singing, giving their scratchy warble, which carries over the sound of the water.

Next we head for RSPB Abernethy Forest, first taking a short walk into a clearing amongst the gnarled ancient pines where we have regularly seen Crossbills. Unfortunately, we only manage to see three birds, none of which are Scottish Crossbill – a Wren, a Goldcrest and a Coal Tit! Further into the ancient Caledonian pines and carpets of Blaeberry, the wood is very quiet but there is a magical atmosphere and we can almost imagine a Bear ambling about amongst the dark forest. Then almost at the end of our walk we hear the distinctive call of a Crested Tit and get fantastic views as it perches right on top of a small pine beside the track. We have lunch here adding Siskin to the days list and although we hear a couple of Crossbills fly over they do not appear.

After another of Sharon's excellent evening meals we go through the checklist for the last two days and then have the pleasure of a slideshow from acclaimed photographer Neil McKintyre who shows us some of his stunning photos of our local wildlife.

Day 5

We wake up to a bright day with generally light winds. Just before breakfast we head on to a local private estate in search of Black Grouse. We pull off and have a scan over an area of moorland and grass with various pine plantations. In the spring this is their lekking area and we have come here on the off chance that some might be visible, and how lucky are we, there are about 12 male birds sitting in the lekking area. We spot an odd male fluffing up its tail and bouncing around a little, which is a good view for this time of year. After 15 minutes they all suddenly fly off down the valley, our timing was perfect.

Around the Steading this morning are a few winter thrushes perched in the trees including a couple of Fieldfare, the first of the week. We leave after breakfast and drive over Dava Moor where we stop at Lochindorb. The ruins of the castle, once home to the Wolf of Badenoch, rise majestically from the centre of the loch and between the vehicles and the loch edge we get exceptionally close views of several Red Grouse. A raptor flies past us quickly and is quickly recognised as a female Kestrel – not a Merlin!

We drive on from the bleak heather moors and drop down onto the low-lying barley fields of the Moray Firth coast. We continue out to west Findhorn where we make our first stop for coffee and shortbread amongst the sand dunes looking out to sea. There are quite a lot of young Gannets feeding offshore, with the odd Long-tailed duck whizzes by. Whilst searching the sea for sea ducks, a Peregrine scatters the very close Turnstones off the

shore right in front of us, swooping in a couple of times unsuccessfully, but it is magical to see such a bird so close, we keep watching it for up to 10 minutes moving along the shore line then high in the sky, and off in the distance.

Before heading on towards the rocky foreshore of the former herring fishing village of Burghead we make a brief stop in the harbour where we see lots of roosting Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls plus a winter plumaged Guillemot which shows well amongst the moored trawlers. Soon we are heading around to the other side of Burghead where we park up alongside the rocky, weedy shore to unpack our picnic hamper. We sit for a while and enjoy our packed lunch, here there is a good selection of waders (no not in the picnic hamper!) – Redshank, Turnstone, Oystercatcher, Curlew and a couple of Knot. Offshore a few Red-breasted Mergansers fly past and also several Common Scoter. Whilst Mark is engrossed in conversation, the bird he has been waiting to see, whizzes past, with all of the group calling Velvet Scoter, oh dear, Mark missed it! After lunch we head towards Lossiemouth. At Lossie Estuary the tide is high and it is sparse of birdlife.

We drive to Loch Spynie where we know there is a hide. We walk down through the plantation to the hide, we can see that there is a good assortment of ducks on the water and on closer inspection most of them are Tufted Ducks, but in amongst them there is a single eclipse drake Scaup. There are also one or two Mallards, a Little Grebe, a rare and elusive Coot (!) and several Mute Swans. Whilst at the loch a skein of at least 30 Pink-footed Geese fly overhead calling and giving good views. A Red Squirrel appears at the feeder entertaining the few sitting on that side of the hide, but then the main mammal appears, we have an excited group when Chrissie says 'Otter', yes swimming along the edge of the reed bed. It then dives and it is all eyes scanning to see where it appears next. It comes up once more then disappears out of site. Some get great photos of the Otter when it swims along the top of the water, a grand end to the day.

Day 6

We arrange to leave the Steading early this morning, when one of guests comes running back into the dining room stating there is a male Capercaillie out by the wood pile? So the table clearing is left as we all run to look. All quietly huddled by the front door, we cannot believe our eyes, it is the closest anyone has been to this magnificent bird. We all have fantastic views and photographs are taken for evidence! It just keeps on feeding not seeming to be bothered by us at all. What a sight right outside the door.

We find it hard to leave but our destination is the West Coast so we reluctantly climb into the vans and set off leaving the Capercaillie still eating. We stop briefly at the Blackwater Falls, some taking photos until Chrissie spots a Dipper flying downstream, followed by a Grey Wagtail, a nice little stop.

As we continue west the scenery becomes more and more rugged with vast expanses of moorland and mountains. We make a stop at a gorge where we have coffee and watch for Golden Eagle. Unfortunately there is no Golden Eagle today, it is usually a reliable sight. Not deterred though we move on, we continue through the glen and down into Gruinard Bay. The scenery is tremendous – calm sea against a backdrop of very deep ochre brown bracken and heather interspersed with birches that look like candle flames as they turn to glowing yellow. With dramatic mountain peaks and shores it's all a bit like a mini Alaska! We stop at Gruinard and look out to sea to find a winter plumage Black Guillemot, a few divers including a nice Great Northern in front of us and a Black-throated Diver in half summer plumage floating effortlessly in the bay. Whilst watching the divers Mark sees a group of Porpoise swimming left to right, we ensure the entire group glimpse these lovely mammals, although they do not appear above the surface very often, so it takes a while.

As we overlook Gruinard Island we are hoping for another rare eagle. Scanning the island carefully it doesn't take long to pick up an adult White-tailed Sea Eagle sitting on one of the large boulders out on the island! We train the scopes on it and within a few more moments another one is seen flying across the sea from the island back towards the mainland to the north, an immature bird this time with an all brown tail. It disappears behind the hillside before reappearing within a minute or so and flying past about half way between us and the island! Wow! With the adult still remaining on the island we take the opportunity to both enjoy the views in the x60 Leica and also scan around the nearby water.

We soon pick out a flock of about 20 Black-throated Divers feeding between us and the island, and a handful of Great Northern Divers including the odd one virtually in full summer plumage. We also see several Black Guillemots in their grey-white winter plumage. There is also a Buzzard up above us and there is a number of Shag feeding out in the bay. We enjoy the scene although there is a bit of a cold breeze blowing but it is dropping all the time and we have definitely got the best of the weather. As we are taking it all in, Mark calls out and there is a second adult White-tailed Eagle.

We see it land right beside the Cairn at the top of the island and it hops around before clambering around on top of the Cairn where it remains – a stunning sight.

Time is moving on and so must we, but we stop first at the high viewpoint in the road, taking in the vista across the bay into the mountains towards the jagged peaks of An Teallach. We continue on round to the lay-by at Second Coast where there are a couple of Common Seals hauled out on the rocks and another Great Northern Diver out to sea. Next stop is at Laide where we have lunch. The odd Rock Dove flies over while out on the water are a few more divers, mostly Great Northern and there is also Black Guillemot around.

From our lunch stop we continue on towards the curiously named settlement of Mellon Udrigle. From the road we see a couple of Rock Doves – real pure birds out here – we can hear a Snipe calling from the tussock field, but cannot see it. We take a walk down to the beautiful white sandy beach out in the bay, where the sun is shining, Oystercatchers scatter as we appear, calling as they fly away. A small group of Ringed Plover are on the beach at this delightful spot, we leave them scurrying around at the water's edge and we wander over to the point, it's such a calm day we scan for cetacean's. Eventually we reluctantly return to the vans leaving the tranquil idyllic sunlit beach behind and journey back round the bay. It is a shame to leave, but everyone is getting peckish and we have a fair drive to our meal en route home.

We do stop briefly for a quick look for Sika Deer at a spot Mark knows and not long scanning the hillside we spot two climbing away from us up the hill, fabulous views of these mammals which are not often seen. We now have to get going back to the Inchbae Hotel for a super evening meal.

Day 7

Today is our last day, after breakfast we look up at the mountains and dither about whether the cloud is going to clear the tops. The forecast looks promising so the enthusiasts among us could try for Ptarmigan. We drive up the ski road to the shores of Loch Morlich and indeed it is starting to clear, so six intrepid souls decide that they are going to make a bid for Ptarmigan. We drop off the rest of the group in the forest of Glenmore and Mark and Chrissie lead the "hill walkers" off up across the burn from the top car park and onto the mountain path.

We follow the well made path and are not far from the car park when we get good views of a Dipper which flies off down the burn. We continue gaining in height all the time approaching the area where we hope to catch up with Ptarmigan. Generally it's quiet along the whole route but the boulder screes and scenery are wild and dramatic and eventually we reach the edge of Corrie an Lochan.

We continue into the Corrie, with its huge walls closing in around us, picking our way between the boulders trying to see any moving rocks. We find a sheltered spot and have our well deserved packed lunch. After lunch we start seriously scanning the boulder valley and Chrissie spots a group of birds up by the lochan, as they are counted eight birds are seen in total, but as we study the birds closer we discover that they are not Ptarmigan! Which is what we expected at this level, but eight Red Grouse, amazing? We continue scanning and it is not long before we pick out first one Ptarmigan and then five together which are now at least three quarters white. We watch these as they feed some distance up the Corrie side but through the scope have pretty good views. Just as we turn to retrace our steps we pick up another couple on a nearer ridge so we absorb these for a good half an hour and watch them as they pick their way furtively among the rocks.

After staying to watch these magnificent well camouflaged birds, we start our journey back down the mountain, to tea and coffee which is waiting in the vans. We only suffer a few spots of rain but it has turned quite cold now as we retrace our steps, watching a flock of Greylag Geese fly high over us. We are glad to reach the minibus and begin our descent towards the Spey. We pull over to have a look at the Reindeer on the hillside before heading for our rendezvous with the rest of the group.

The 'lowland group', having left the intrepid mountaineers at the car park, have been walking through the forest for a final last ditch attempt at Scottish Crossbill. It's a nice peaceful walk up through the old pine trees to a small lochan where a couple of Crested Tits call from high in the treetops. On their way back they tell us how a flock of Crossbills flew right overhead but never settled on the trees.

After our final gourmet dinner we spend time in the lounge completing our checklists and voting for Bird of the Trip which is a toss-up between Capercaillie, Sea Eagle, Golden Eagle and Velvet Scoter. Place of the Trip

turns out to be the west coast of Gruinard Bay – well it was a stunning day – and the Magic Moment? Well that has to be watching the Capercaillie just outside the front door of the Steading! What an exciting week!

Day 8

In the morning we say our sad farewells and look back on an entertaining week before all journeying home.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Common Scoter
Velvet Scoter
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
Red Kite
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Ptarmigan
Black Grouse
Capercaillie
Pheasant
Water Rail (heard only)

Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Knot
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Turnstone
Great Skua
Arctic Skua
Puffin
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Sabine's Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Stock Dove
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (Heard only)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Wheatear
Swallow
Dipper
Wren

Robin
Blackbird
Fieldfare
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treetreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carnion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite
Redpoll
Bullfinch
Parrot Crossbill

Total Birds: 110

MAMMALS

Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Stoat
Pine Martin
Badger
Pipistrelle Bat

Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Reindeer
Harbour Porpoise
Otter
Common Seal
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare

MOTHS

Large Yellow Underwing
Rosy Rustic
Frosted Orange
Small Wainscot
Ear Moth
Black Rustic
AutumnGreen Carpet
Pine Carpet
Red Swordgrass
Autumnal Moth
Angle Shades
Green-brindled Crescent

Total Species: 138