

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### SPRING BIRDS IN SPEYSIDE

13th-20th May 2017

Leader: Craig Round & Simon Eaves

Guests: Gill & John Haveron, Charlotte & Michael Otero, Sally Leach, Carolyn Heathcote, Hazel & Steve Cullum, Sue & Keith Waldron

Day 1 After all meeting up at the Steading and enjoying the first of many delicious evening meals, we run through the plans for the week ahead.

Day 2 Our first day dawns with early rain showers clearing as we take a walk from the steading this morning. A large flock of Common Crossbill are flying around and we get great views of a smart male Redstart singing and Sand Martins overhead. There are lots of Willow Warblers singing as well as a male Blackcap, Siskins and Chaffinch and another three Crossbill fly over along with a few Swallow and House Martin, and we also see a newly arrived Spotted Flycatcher, the first at the Steading this spring. Walking along the river we get great views of our local pair of Ospreys with the female seen sat on the nest and also a male Goosander that flies upriver, as well as a male Cuckoo perched calling and being mobbed by a Pipit. There are also more newly arrived spring migrants with 30+ Sand Martins, four+ Redstarts, Tree Pipits and Willow Warblers.

After a hot drink back at the Steading we head out again up into the fantastic upland habitat of the Findhorn Valley. As we drive alongside the river up into the glen the scenery is fantastic, with a Red Kite and several Common Buzzards seen soaring as well as a smart pair of bullfinch and Red-legged Partridge alongside the road. Stopping to scan a little further on we are amazed to see two Woodcock in daylight chasing through the trees! Here we also pick out

several Common Sandpipers calling from the river below us before we drive on to take our lunch by the Findhorn River, watched by a close herd of Red Deer on the hill above us.

Whilst here two Ravens, Common Buzzard and Kestrel are seen flying over as well as a fine male Ring Ouzel singing from the hillside and there are three Common Sandpipers chasing and displaying along the river.

After some very heavy rain and hail showers have rolled down the glen, we take advantage of a gap in the weather after lunch to take a walk out onto the hill, and get great close views of a juvenile Dipper being fed by one of the adults on a small burn, as well as a Grey Wagtail and female Wheatear.

A little further on we stop and scan out over the hillside and pick out a well camouflaged Mountain Hare and a Red Grouse drops in onto the hill above us. Best of all a superb immature White-tailed Eagle soars over the ridge before drifting off out of sight. What a bird!

We drive further up into the glen passing a herd of Mountain Goats by the road and stop for another scan out over the hills. Here we see a Peregrine in the distance mobbing a Buzzard before we head back to base.

Back at the Steading and after our delicious evening meal we head out again to drive over to our mammal watching hide. It's a fine evening and after Craig and Simon have put the bait out, we settle down in the hide to wait and see what mammals may come into the bait tonight, though the Wood Mice at the front of the hide are already out and about! A smart male Great Spotted Woodpecker soon comes in for the peanut butter and peanuts that are on the bird table and a Woodcock goes over in roding flight. We also get great views of a Tawny Owl that perches obligingly on a close fencepost for some time before flying off.

As the light begins to dim the first Badger arrives followed a little by at least another four Badgers feeding on the scattered peanuts around the hide! Finally just when it seems to have gone quiet for the night some lucky folk glimpse a Pine Marten running through the trees briefly before we head for our beds.

### Day 3

Its a wet and windy start today with the Moray coast our destination today in the hope of finding some better weather. Enroute to the coast we drive up onto some high moorland. As we drive across the moors we soon start to see Red Grouse including several birds very close to the road. On a nearby loch a Common Tern is resting probably a passage migrant dropped in by the poor weather this morning. We also find Common Sandpiper and Redshank along the shore and there are plenty of Sand Martins, Swallows and House Martins hawking for insects out over the loch in the wind and rain. Best of all a little further on we find a stunning Black-throated Diver in summer plumage. A stunning bird indeed!

Moving on our next stop is down on the coast at Burghead, where we are greeted by warm sun and blue skies! Driving alongside the foreshore here, some very smart summer plumaged Turnstone are seen on the rocks as well as well as some Ringed Plover before we park up and take our lunch where we scan out to sea for any passing birds. A close Rock Pipit is displaying right overhead here and a flock of some 40 Knot fly by out to sea. A smart male Eider is just offshore as well as Shag, Herring and Greater Black-backed Gulls and a few Gannets flying past. Two Common Scoter are seen flying past briefly, and a single summer plumaged Dunlin flies in onto the rocks nearby and a Grey Seal surfaces offshore with a large fish in its mouth! From here we drive to our next stop at Hopeman.

From the harbour here three Long-tailed Ducks are just offshore and two Sandwich Terns fly past along with Cormorant, Shag, and a single Fulmar before we move on again around the coast to Lossiemouth. After a crafty ice cream in the sun here, we move around to the estuary.

There are lots of roosting Gulls, mainly Herring Gulls but also Greater Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Common and Black Headed Gulls on the estuary here but they soon all take to the air as a cracking Osprey flies over!

On the drive back to base a Red Squirrel is seen close to the road as well as a Mountain Hare, and back at the Steading some folk go out again for a short walk and see a female Capercaillie on one of the forest tracks!

## Day 4

The aim today is to cover some local forest and freshwater habitats and we start this morning with a short walk in some local Pine forest, where we get good views through the scopes of a Common Crossbill perched on top of a Larch Tree. Next on the agenda is a walk alongside the River Spey through a lovely bit of deciduous woodland. Here we get fantastic views of a pair of Pied Flycatchers, what total stunners! We also see Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Warbler in the woods here, before we move on to our next stop at a small freshwater lochan.

There are many Sand Martins hawking over the lochan and we also see Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher, Little Grebe, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Goldeneye and Greylag Goose here, though the real stars are the pair of Slavonian Grebes we see floating amongst the lily pads in the warm spring sunshine! Lovely stuff!

After some lunch in the shelter of the forest at Abernethy we take a walk through the forest near Loch Garten. On our walk in the woods we see a Common Crossbill flitting around in the tops of the Pines and calling loudly but it's very windy by now making conditions for finding birds very tricky and besides a few Goldcrest it's very quiet, so we decide to move on around to Insh Marshes RSPB Reserve.

From the lookout here we get great views of three Foxes on the mound opposite the viewpoint including two boisterous cubs! Lapwings and Redshank are calling and displaying, and we pick out a Curlew with three well hidden chicks, and several Roe Deer feeding out on the marshes. Pairs of Canada and Greylag Geese are with their goslings, and two Swifts fly over the watchpoint. In the scrub around the hide there are many Willow Warblers singing and also a Garden Warbler and Blackcap, before we head back.

## Day 5

Today we head out West via Inverness and Ullapool making for Handa Island. Our first stop is overlooking a freshwater loch where we get fantastic views through the scopes of a Black-throated Diver on its nest out on a small island on the loch. Two Greenshanks are also calling and displaying here and we also see two Ringed Plover and a Dunlin is also heard displaying.

The mountainous west coast scenery gets more and more dramatic as we push on NW onwards to Tarbet seeing a Cuckoo being mobbed by a Meadow Pipit as we drive, before we arrive at the tiny harbour to catch our boat over to Handa.

As we make the short crossing to the island a Red-throated Diver flies over before we land on the beautiful golden shell sand beach on Handa. After a brief welcome talk from one of the SWT volunteers in the bothy we have a look out over the bay and beach, seeing Arctic Terns flying over calling and displaying, as well as a Ringed Plover on the beach and Eiders just offshore. From here we walk out on the boardwalk across the island towards the cliffs and Great Stack, passing numerous Great Skuas both in the air and on the ground and get breathtaking views of five+ pale and dark morph Arctic Skuas calling, chasing and displaying in the air only a few feet away from us! Epic!

A Cuckoo flies past mobbed by Meadow Pipits and many Skylarks are singing and a Snipe is also seen briefly. As we approach the cliffs we pass a small lochan which has at least 30+ Great Skuas bathing on it! The cliffs here are packed with birds on the ledges along with masses of Guillemot, Fulmars and Razorbill, it really is a stunning sight! Moving on we take our lunch overlooking the Great Stack a huge towering sea stack, it's ledges packed with seabirds and with a cacophony of Kittiwake and Guillemot calls echoing all around us and we pick out at least three Puffins on top of the Great Stack. We also see a single Gannet passing by offshore from the cliff top and a Raven that flies over carrying an unfortunate Razorbill's egg in its bill! We take some time enjoying the incredible seabird spectacle before us and taking in the beautiful scenery before with time getting on we start to walk back to meet our boat off the island.

On the walk back we get fantastic views of some very close Great Skuas on the ground and also more Arctic Skuas and take in the beautiful views back to the mainland, with the azure sea and backdrop of mountains as far as the eye can see. What a place Handa is!

## Day 6

A young Tawny Owlet is seen perched in trees near the Steading this morning and after breakfast we drive up onto Cairngorm to look for some of the special birds of these high hills.

From the top ski car park we take the funicular railway up the mountain to the top station seeing a stunning male Ring Ouzel singing from one of the Ski Tows as well as a Ptarmigan and Red Grouse all from the train before we have even reached the top station! It is perfect weather for the hill today with sun, scattered cloud and a light breeze blowing as we walk out from the top station onto the mountain and head up a short way on the main track towards the summit. We soon manage to spot a male Ptarmigan perched sky lined on the ridge above us and get some good views through the scopes, and whilst watching the Ptarmigan we pick out a 'trip' of four stunning Dotterel! We get some lovely views through the scopes of these beautiful mountain waders and later get views of another male Ring Ouzel singing as well as another pair of Dotterel calling and displaying beside the path and only a few feet away!

The scenery up here on the mountain today is breathtaking and there are some great views out to the distant hills beyond as we make our way back down.

After a late lunch we take a walk in the Pine forest, seeing several Spotted Flycatchers as well as Siskin, and also get some fantastic views through the scopes of a pair of nesting Crested Tits bringing food to their newly hatched chicks in a dead Scots Pine tree. As we walk further into the forest a Green Tiger beetle is seen on the forest track and a small flock of Crossbills fly through, though Simon comes up trumps when he finds a Green Sandpiper on a small lochan in the forest!

## Day 7

Its a lovely sunny start today as we head over to the Black Isle coast via Inverness. Our first stop is to check on the progress of one of our local pairs of Osprey, and through the scopes we get some great views of the female Osprey sitting tight on the nest and see the male Osprey fly in to take a turn at incubating. There are Swifts and Sand Martins overhead and we also see a pair of Goldeneye on the loch as well as Lapwing, Common Sandpiper and a singing Blackcap. From here we drive out onto an extensive open area overlooking some moorland and hill as well as upland fields and Pine forest. It's a great mix of different habitats and we get some lovely views of a flock

of smart summer plumaged Golden Plover gathered in the fields, and also hear them calling and displaying. In the same fields are other waders including Lapwing and Oystercatcher, and we see several Goosander flying over as well as Common Buzzards and a Red Kite circling in the distance over the hills. Oddest sighting here though goes to the Grey Heron circling high over the forest and mobbing two Common Buzzards!

From here we drive over to the Black Isle and after some lunch on the coast at Rosemarkie head around Chanonry Point which overlooks the narrowest point of the Inner Moray Firth.

We take a walk out along the shingle beach to the point by the lighthouse for a seawatch, and as we arrive get great views of three+ Bottlenose Dolphins just off the point, and also a flock of 60 Kittiwakes that fly past into the firth, as well as good numbers of Common Terns passing by. After a while the dolphins move further out of the firth so we walk back from the point and drive around to the foreshore at Avoch, with the offshore tern rafts here busy with nesting Common Terns. Driving back to base via some farmland we see and hear some typical farmland birds such as Yellowhammers and Common Whitethroat and also see several Tree Sparrows before we finally arrive back to the steading, to be greeted by a large flock of Common Crossbills flying around!

**Bird of the Trip:** Pied Flycatcher, Crested Tit, Tawny Owl, Dipper, Slavonian Grebe, Dotterel, Puffin, Ptarmigan

**Place Of The Trip:** Handa, Top of Cairngorm/Cairngorm, Findhorn Valley, Dalnahaitnach

**Magic Moment:** Arctic Skuas chasing, Female Capercaillie in flight, Seeing Pied Flycatcher, Dipper chick, Arriving at the Steading! Red Squirrel and Badgers, Tawny Owlet, Treecreepers, Crested Tit nest

## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Little Grebe  
Slavonian Grebe  
Fulmar  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Long-tailed Duck  
Common Scoter  
Goldeneye  
Goosander  
Red Kite  
White-tailed Eagle  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Osprey  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Red Grouse  
Ptarmigan  
Capercaillie  
Red-legged Partridge  
Pheasant  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Dotterel

Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Dunlin  
Common Snipe  
Woodcock  
Curlew  
Common Redshank  
Greenshank  
Common Sandpiper  
Green Sandpiper  
Turnstone  
Arctic Skua  
Great Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Sandwich Tern  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Puffin  
Rock Dove  
Collared Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Cuckoo  
Tawny Owl  
Common Swift  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Green Woodpecker  
Skylark  
Sand Martin



House Martin  
Swallow  
Tree Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Wren  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Redstart  
Stonechat  
Wheatear  
Ring Ouzel  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Garden Warbler  
Blackcap  
Common Whitethroat  
Chiffchaff  
Willow Warbler  
Wood Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Pied Flycatcher  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Long-tailed Tit  
Crested Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Trecreeper  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow

Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Redpoll sp  
Common Crossbill  
Scottish Crossbill  
Bullfinch  
Yellowhammer  
Reed Bunting

**TOTAL BIRDS: 124**

#### **MAMMALS**

Wood Mouse  
Bank Vole  
Red Squirrel  
Rabbit  
Mountain Hare  
Pine Marten  
Badger  
Fox  
Pipistrelle Bat  
Feral/Mountain Goat  
Feral Reindeer  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Bottlenose Dolphin  
Common Seal

#### **AMPHIBIANS**

Common Toad

## BUTTERFLIES

Green-veined White

Orange Tip

## ADDENDA

Damselfly sp

Dor Beetle

TOTAL SPECIES: 144