

Holiday Highlights
Alladale Wilderness Reserve
5 – 12 October 2024

Guides: Sally Nowell and Ranger Ryan

Guests: Belinda and Steve Batt, Margaret and Dick Lewis, Barbara Yorke, Sheila Rawson, Susan Ripley, Gaye Henson, Heather James,

Day 1: We all arrive by train, plane and automobile at our lovely North Kessock Hotel. After a short evening stroll where we witness a magnificent Pink Footed Goose fly over, we settle into our hotel and prepare for our evening meal. The restaurant is busy and noisy so conversation is not always easy, but the food is delicious and we enjoy our first night together.

Day 2: We have an 8am start and are pleased to have a quiet breakfast attended by our friendly waitress, Marion. We are joined by Ryan, a ranger from Alladale who will be with us for the rest of the trip. We load up the vans with all our luggage, everyone has been thoughtful to bring small cases which easily fit into the vehicles.

Our first stop is back in Inverness at Merkinch Reserve. We have rather a drizzly start to the day, so we have the place to ourselves at first, dog walkers it seems are waiting for the rain to stop or are having a long lie on a Sunday morning.

As we get out of the cars Steve spots a warbler, it could be either a Chiffchaff or a Willow Warbler, we decide probably Chiffchaff, but it doesn't hang about. There are several more in the dense undergrowth along the path. Then Ryan spots some activity that at first looks like angry crows but in fact is crows mobbing a Peregrine, it flies straight towards us giving us a great view. Blackbirds are abundant in the hedge, as are Robins and Chaffinches. Dick spots a small group of Roe Deer, he tells us its an unusual sight at home on the Gower Peninsula. On the seaward side we have Oystercatchers and some stunning views of Greenshank. There's a good selection of waders, with Redshank, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Curlew and Oystercatcher. A cluster of Redshank is a great sight, all huddled together with a Curlew in the centre. There's a small group of Teal on the fresh water pool and some roosting Grey Herons. Around in the scrub, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Greenfinch, Dunnock and Wren feed.

We are pleased the rain has held off and return to the van to make our way to Chanonry Point to look for dolphins. None of us seem optimistic we'll see any and we don't! However, we do see Gannets, plenty of Grey Seals, Eider, Long-tailed Duck and Black Guillemot and we have a pleasant place to sit for our lunch. A Sparrowhawk also flies over, going out to sea, it soon seems to realise it's not going to catch much out there and heads back inland. Steve also spots a pipit amongst the weed, it's a handsome Rock Pipit.

We take a circuitous route over to Cromarty and along the Cromarty Firth enjoy some excellent views of Scaup and winter plumage Slavonian Grebe showing really well in the late afternoon light. We continue on, to Udale Bay where we are met by the sight of hundreds of birds. Mainly Pink-footed Geese but huge numbers of Oystercatchers, Widgeon and Redshank. Suddenly the geese start to take to the air, first just a few but then the whole flock starts to move and very soon the air is filled with the sight and sound of hundreds of geese whirling about over our heads. They soon settle in a nearby field and the cacophony calms. We continue to look out and Gaye spots another Slavonian Grebe. The light is superb, even the oilrigs look magnificent. In the nearby field, a Stonechat perches high on some scrubby Alder and is mobbed by a Reed Bunting, some Starlings busy themselves feeding on the numerous Rowan berries.

It's time to head to Alladale and as we drive we note that the autumn colours are strengthening the further north we drive. The colours are stunning this year, particularly the Wild Cherry which are an almost fluorescent red. We drive over the Struie road and stop at a high point to enjoy the view and look for deer, we also enjoy the spectacular shades of the fading Rosebay Willow-herb. Eventually we head down to Ardgay and onward towards Alladale Lodge.

We are welcomed by Lorraine, shown our rooms and are introduced to the lodge. We listen out for stags roaring but to no avail, but we enjoy a delicious supper and retire to the lounge to discuss the following day.

Day 3: We have a leisurely start today. Meeting at 9am after breakfast outside the lodge where we hear both Sika Deer and Red Deer rutting. Two very different sounds and two very different looking deer when we see them well. We can only hear the Red Deer but the Sika appear in the distance and we can see a stag and four hinds in their dark grey winter coats and Persil white bums. A few Goldfinch fly in to the birches and Coal Tits feed at the box, several Ravens fly over calling in the misty morning. It's a rather dreich morning with low cloud over the hill tops and light drizzle. Innes joins us and soon Baxter his 'Red Fox' Labrador is swirling around us and getting all the attention, in fact Baxter is introduced before Innes introduces himself to everyone! Ryan arrives to fill the bird feeders and before long we are off in the vehicles down Glen Alladale.

We pause to admire the plot identified for Paul Lister's house, the views are glorious but plans to erect a phone mast in the middle of the view are not popular. We continue down the glen and stop once again to enjoy the view but also to hear from Innes about the history of the Reserve and to ply him with questions about it. We stand for 40 minutes or more fascinated by the tale of Alladale and all the challenges the owner Paul Lister and his team have had over the years.

We are on our way again in search of Red Deer. We pass through the magnificent glen flanked on either side by ancient and majestic Scots Pines, the cloud has come down but Innes and Ryan spot some deer further up the valley. A large group of hinds are accompanied by a very vocal stag who is seeing another group of stags

off. Innes joins in by roaring at the stags, he sounds quite impressive, they respond by roaring back and then make short work of a steep hillside and before too long they are out of sight in the cloud, eventually reappearing above the cloud on the skyline. We enjoy watching the deer and scanning for birds.

We retrace our steps and head down to see the Highland Cattle that are used to break up the ground and graze the bracken, heather and rough grassland. They are spectacular and noisy beasts; they are clearly expecting to be fed but we have nothing for them and they are not happy! We all take an opportunity to take some photos, they are too spectacular to ignore!

We continue back down the glen to visit the Scottish Wildcat enclosures. Ryan tells us all about the history of the decline of the Scottish Wildcat and the projects to protect and reintroduce them. We listen intently and then have the pleasure of meeting the breeding cats of Alladale. They are spectacular and fascinating; they do not tempt us to go anywhere near them as they look decidedly angry.

A few of us walk back from the wildcats the short distance to the lodge where we have a quick comfort stop before heading out for lunch. We pass large flocks of Ravens enroute who are gathering around the reserves midden, a good place for White-tailed Eagles to hang out too surely? We pass through woodland planted 15 years ago and begin to get the sense of how long it takes to establish a mature woodland. We come to a halt at an area known as the 'Badger hide' and Innes disappears into a small door, within no time smoke is coming out of the chimney and lunch is underway. Innes makes us coffee and tea and we enjoy the warmth of the fire as it creates a very cozy lunch spot. We see Salmon leaping from the large still pool beside us and a small group of Teal.

After a lovely lunch we are off again up the glen but the cloud rolls in just as we are looking once more for the Red Deer, we can hear them but they are right under the cloud. Further on we know there is a Golden Eagle nest but once again, it's in the cloud. It's clear Ryan and Innes are disappointed; they really want us to see an Alladale eagle today and the recent chick ringed and satellite tagged by Ryan is sure to be a great thing to see. We continue but the weather is deteriorating, however the scenery and company is superb. Ryan and Innes keep us all entertained with stories and information for the rest of the afternoon so much so that the weather being bad and not seeing an eagle does not disappoint us at all. We have more opportunities to watch Red Deer rutting on a far hillside. Once again, a large group of hinds with a spectacular stag closely guarding them keeps us watching for quite a time.

We continue and the terrain changes as our altitude increases. Along the way we enjoy spotting the rich colours of Aspen, glowing a rich butter yellow for autumn. As we cross a river two glorious Aspen stop us in our tracks, they shimmer with golden coins of leaves with the occasional red leaf amongst them, beautiful.

Steve read in the last trip report of a character we met at this end of the Reserve in 2023, amazingly we arrive in the same spot a year later and he's there having just shot a stag. His 'Rupert bear style attire' make him unmistakable and Steve asks for a photo which he kindly agrees to! What a coincidence that he's here again in the same place as us.

It's time to return and the weather is getting more set in. We start to make our way back checking the river as we go for Dipper, there are so many good spots for them but sadly no Dippers today. We head back to the lodge through driving rain, we've been lucky that we've all stayed relatively warm and dry today. A welcome cup of tea beside a roaring fire awaits and is just what we need.

Day 4: A slightly earlier start today as we have a 170 mile drive ahead of us and we want to enjoy the scenery and the wildlife! Everyone is down promptly for breakfast and after a brief visit from Innes and Baxter we are off on our way.

First stop is Bonar Bridge where we have a look for Otter, no luck, just a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers. As we leave the car park we have a fly over of Greylag Geese and make a quick return to Ardgay for the loos and there we have a high flying Red Kite and a surprise late Swallow feeding over the village. We continue our journey passing a busy sheep market on the way. The road is busy with sheep farmers moving stock and a number of camper vans.

We make a stop beside Loch Shin to look for Dipper but though we don't see one we are delighted with a very accommodating Merlin who is chasing a pair of Hooded Crows. The Merlin won't leave the crows alone and we watch it for some 10 minutes as it keeps wheeling about trying to drive the crows away. We make our way up the loch side amazed by the stunning colours and berry laden Rowans. As we drive we cross a river and Sally and Steve almost in unison spot a Dipper. We stop the vehicles and get some decent views but it's always tricky stopping to view from a passing place. We move on to try and get a better view but the Dipper seems a little camera shy, so we continue our drive through some magnificent scenery.

We stop again beside Loch More, this time for a comfort stop, but also to look out for eagles and deer. We are immediately delighted by the sound of rutting stags on the hillside above us and watch as Red Deer stags defend their hinds from chancers without a harem. We scan the hillside for eagles, but the weather is not the best, rain is coming in and out and although there is some blue sky it doesn't seem quite enough to tempt the eagles into the air. Plus there are midges!! What in October, yes and they become a little irritating to some and it looks like rain might be on its way again so we head to the comfort of the vehicles and continue towards Durness.

The weather closes in which is pretty disappointing as we are missing the views, but we press on to Balnakeil where we have a brief break in the weather to scan the sea. The water is pretty rough, visible are Red-breasted Merganser, Black Guillemot

and a number of feeding Common Gulls. The wind is cold and strong, so we eat our lunch in the vehicles and then a few of us brave the weather and take a walk up the beach, which despite the conditions, is the favourite place of the trip for four of us. We have a brief window of sunshine and enjoy being out in such a glorious place. But it's time to leave and so we make our way along the north coast pausing briefly to admire the raging sea to our left as the winds pick up from the north.

We turn south along Loch Eriboll and then round the head of the loch heading back towards the coast we then head down Loch Hope but Ben Hope is in cloud. We enjoy what we can of the views but it's clear we are missing a real treat when the clouds lift and show us what we are missing. As we near Lairg we are treated to a male Hen Harrier being blown in the wind, sadly it quickly disappears and so not everyone sees it.

We continue our journey back to Alladale but have a Ring-tailed Hen Harrier further down the road, excellent to see two Hen Harriers in this part of the world, perhaps heading to a roost somewhere at the end of the days hunting? It's getting late now so we take advantage of the open road and head home.

Belinda has taken a day to rest at the lodge and tells us she's had a great day reading and watching Red Squirrels and Sika Deer on the lawn outside.

Day 5: We wake to a slightly clearer morning and the sound of Red and Sika Deer stags calling in the valley below the lodge.

Today our first stop is Ammat just a few miles down the road, we are hoping to see Red Squirrel. The trees are pretty quiet regarding birdlife, but some of us do catch a glimpse of a Red Squirrel. The mature trees are spectacular and make a great perching post for a raucous Raven whose call echoes through the woodland. We continue from here to Bonar Bridge, after a short comfort stop in Ardgay where we see for the second day a swallow flying over the roof tops. At Bonar Bridge we sadly do not see an Otter and on our next stop for Otter we are unlucky again, but we are determined if nothing else!

We continue to Dornoch where folk have a time to shop and visit the Cathedral. A delightful town full of history and nice shops, a good job our visit here is limited to 40 minutes agree the gentlemen in the group!

We continue to Loch Fleet for our lunch. The light here is glorious and despite the wind, in the sun its really quite pleasant. A small group of Mallard huddle on the rocks with Curlew, Redshank, Oystercatcher and a loan Lapwing. Out on the water are several Red-breasted Merganser and a mix of Grey and Common Seals rest on the sandbank. Over on the fields Red Kite and Sparrowhawk fly over Skelbo Castle. In the distance we can see some burning going on, its gorse management on the hill below the Sutherland monument.

We enjoy a tasty roll for lunch and then make our way to Golspie where we hope to see Dipper. We take a short walk and in no time at all Sheila's spot a Dipper. Not one but two Dippers! We enjoy watching them and Steve and Dick take a few photos. Just as we are relaxing in the sunshine another flurry of rain comes by and we shelter under some trees, no sooner than it arrives it passes again and we continue back towards the vehicles looking for the Dipper enroute, it's just under the bridge and once again gives us some excellent views.

We move on to Brora where the tide is in and just a few waders are visible. We decide to take a walk from the golf course but are all a bit reluctant to leave the vehicles as the wind is whipping up and the temperature has dropped quite a bit. But brave souls that we are we continue across the golf course which is maintained it looks like by a herd of Highland Cattle and on to a lookout point across the dunes. The sea is raging and Eider Ducks bounce about in the surf. Gannets are diving out to sea and Black-backed Gulls wheel about in the wind. A stunning rainbow appears but its top is missing, but gradually the rainbow completes and we are right below it, the light is beautiful, it's a spectacular spot but the cold wind drives us back to the van.

We make the return journey, stopping of briefly at Dunrobin Castle to admire the views from the terrace out to sea across the formal gardens. We take a different route back but do stop one final time at Bonar Bridge once more to look for Otter. It's now 4°C and Sally asks everyone to vote for either staying to look for Otters or returning to the lodge for a hot bath and aperitif before dinner, we laugh because the vote is almost unanimous, everyone but Heather opts to go back to the lodge, but just as we are about to leave Ryan spots a Kingfisher whizzing along the opposite bank, its joined by another! They fly out of sight, but we finally get one perched, distant but still quite a surprise sighting on a Highland river. It's not easy to see or indeed hear what we are looking at and we get some interesting and hilarious crossed lines as Sally tries to describe where the bird is when some think we are looking for an otter not a kingfisher on a branch 4ft above the water. What a thrill at the end of the day, some compensation at least for not seeing an Otter and probably more difficult to see a Kingfisher in this part of the country.

We make our way back to base for a warming cup of tea and are pleased to see a roaring fire in both the lounge and dining room tonight. We enjoy a delicious meal followed by a recap of where we have been over the last days and a brief outing to look at the stars which we are seeing for the first time today as the clouds have finally cleared, they are spectacular, will we wake to snow on the hills tomorrow?

Day 6: Yes we do wake up to snow on the hills this morning and the temperature is just above freezing. But the skies are clear and we can see the sun rising over the hills at breakfast time. Barbara tells us she woke in the night and looked out at a star filled sky, she was clearly thrilled with the sight and we are indeed in total darkness here at Alladale.

We start the day with a visit to the Aquaponics, this is where a lot of our food comes from and has been a major investment. It's an amazing set up with Rainbow Trout providing all the nutrients for the plants to grow. From here we take a walk along the track and rivers edge watching Ravens overhead and the odd flight of Redwing going over.

After our walk Ryan picks Sally up to collect the Land Rover, as we are heading out up the glen more in search of eagles. We drive out to mixed weather, but the clear skies of the morning convince us that there is every chance eagles will take to the air today. We drive out and see that there are huge numbers of Ravens perhaps 100 or so over the skylines. Ryan thinks perhaps they are feeding off '*grallochs*' left behind after the deer cull and that maybe an eagle might be attracted to the food to. We enjoy watching the rutting stags again, more visible today, last time we passed they were in cloud. They are much closer today and the roars are enough to make the hair on the back of our necks stand up.

We drive on but there is no sign of an eagle, we turn back towards the lodge which Sally finds a bit tricky, it's the first time she's had to find reverse in the Land Rover and then she has to reverse for 50 metres or so which causes further chaos and hilarity. We and the Land Rover all make it safely back unscathed and a delicious lunch awaits us at the lodge. Fresh sandwiches, carrot and fennel soup and a lot of cake! We take a break and then head out again this time to Croick church, where we hear about the impact of the clearances on the local area. We also hear from Ryan about the church which has been closed to the public since lockdown and does not look like it will be reopened anytime soon.

We return to Ammat, where we drop off Steve who wants to try his hand at getting some good shots of Red Squirrel. We continue on to the Glen Calvie falls, we park up and notice two smart gentlemen in plus fours heading towards us. The area is being carefully strimmed so Ryan checks its ok for us to proceed and we take a steady and careful walk along the riverside. Once again the weather is mixed but we have been lucky that the sun is shining for us, so we enjoy the magnificent waterfall and once again the glorious autumnal butter yellow Aspen.

We walk back to the car park where we all head off in different directions. Sally heads back to pick up Steve, Barbara had thought she might walk back to the lodge but reassess the situation and decides to get a lift and Ryan takes, Gaye, Heather, Sheila and Susan to photograph the old granny pines in Glen Alladale. We seem to have managed to fit in most things everyone wanted to do today, including Steve getting some great shots of Red Squirrel.

Back at the lodge we have a relaxing end to the week, sitting by the fire drinking tea and looking at photographs. We are also lucky that a Red Deer stag has returned to the lawn and several of us manage to get some decent photos of this handsome animal. We have dinner slightly earlier than usual tonight and are pleased that Brian and Gordie our chefs decide to come in to see us so we can thank them for their excellent food. We sort out our bills and prepare for leaving the lodge tomorrow.

We have an aurora alert on our phones, but the sky is cloudy and the rain is pretty heavy so although the alert is strong we all head to bed. However an hour later Sally checks outside and the aurora is glowing pink and green, she rushes upstairs in her dressing gown to tell everyone, shouting at the top of the stairs and Gaye, Heather, Susan and Sheila come down, Ryan joins us and we watch an amazing display of the lights over 30 minutes or so by which time we are all pretty frozen, most of us are out in our PJ's and dressing gowns!

Day 7: We wake to a fine day and sadness that we are leaving Alladale. Over breakfast Innes pops in to see us and joins us for 10 minutes. After breakfast we load the vehicles and say our goodbyes to the team, especially Lorraine who has looked after us so well. After a final photo on the steps of the lodge we are off. We take a slow drive out of the Reserve and along to Ammat, with a Red Squirrel just as we leave and Sika Deer along the track.

We make our way to Tain and the Glenmorangie Distillery. We have chance of an early visit to the shore and are a bit disappointed not to see more waders and wildfowl, Ryan thinks it's because they have been shooting geese and sure enough we soon hear shots so we are a bit unlucky today. We catch up briefly with a rather nervous Grey Wagtail, before heading to the distillery meeting point where we are greeted by Lewis who is our guide for the morning. He remembers our group from last year, he's quite a comedian in a dry kind of a way.

We tour the distillery, enjoy our whisky tasting and then pop in to hear about the oyster preservation project that the distillery is supporting in the Dornoch Firth. We are also thrilled to have two flights of Whooper Swans overhead, our first and only ones of the trip.

We travel a short distance down the road to Tain Links, where there are loads of birds but a long way out so only really good to look at through the scope, so we have lunch and move to our next stop at Portmahomack where we have a cup of tea. We are served in a pleasant craft shop, but the order seems to take forever, however we are at Tarbat Ness for 3pm and have a pleasant hour looking out to sea where we have both Red-throated and Black-throated divers, Razorbill and several Gannets. Huge flocks of Pink feet whirl around over the fields and as we leave we have super views of Yellowhammer and Linnet on the wires. The fields nearby are full of large flocks of Curlew, probably 100 or more.

We continue on to Nigg RSPB Reserve and are pleased to see we have the hide all to ourselves and so we can carry out our plan! That is to do our final bird list in the hide before we say goodbye to Ryan. It's great so many of our favourite memories of the holiday are about Alladale, so that Ryan can go back to tell the team there. We watch the birds from the hide, more Pink feet, Shelduck, a mix of waders including Bar-tailed Godwit and hundreds of widgeon.

We leave Nigg at 5pm and head back to Inverness, driving for a final time to look for Otters along the road beside the firth. No luck but it's a beautiful drive and

we pick up Shoveler as a final new species for the trip. We arrive at the hotel and say our goodbyes to Ryan as he is heading home after a busy week with us.

We enjoy a final delicious meal together at the North Kessock Hotel. Plans for the following morning are complex, so we say our goodbyes to one another in case our paths don't cross in the morning.

Day 8: We do manage to meet up again, but everyone is dashing off in their different directions except Barbara who has a final few hours to enjoy some Highland air before catching her flight. Lucky Barbara, after all our searching I do believe she managed to spot an Otter as she walked along the shore from our hotel!

Favourite species:

Margaret- Red Squirrels and Aspen
Heather- Scottish Wildcat
Sheila - Scottish Wildcat
Barbara - Dipper
Steve - Scottish Wildcat
Gaye - Red Deer
Belinda - Red Deer
Susan - Merlin
Dick -“All pretty good”
Ryan - Kingfisher
Sally - Aspen

Favourite Place:

Gaye - Bridge at Glen Beag where the Aspen Trees were
Steve - Alladale, Ammat
Susan - Alladale
Heather - The lounge at Alladale with tea and cake and Balnakeil Beach
Barbara - Alladale and Balnakeil
Maragaret - Bridge at Glen Beag where the Aspen Trees were
Sheila - Alladale and the 470 year old Scots Pine
Dick - Alladale
Belinda - Alladale and the story behind it
Ryan - Balnakeil
Sally – Balnakeil

Magic Moment:

Sheila - Geese flying over at North Kessock on the first night and the looks on the faces of the Scottish Wildcats.
Steve - Watching the Dippers feeding right on the edge of the sea.
Barbara - Opening the curtains and seeing the starry night night sky at Alladale.
Belinda - Geese on mass on the first night and Baxter (Innes' dog) jumping over the seat to sit on our knees.
Margaret - Visit to the Wildcats and Baxter jumping over the seat to sit on our knees.
Dick - The first time Innes roared up at the Red Deer stags to get them to respond “I didn't know what was happening”.
Ryan - Voting to go home (back to the lodge) at Bonar Bridge but then staying another 15 minutes and seeing the Kingfishers.
Heather - Sally calling us to come and see the Northern Lights.
Gaye - The Northern Lights
Sally - The Northern Lights
Susan - The Northern Lights

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Merlin
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Turnstone
Dunlin

Redshank
Greenshank
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black Guillemot
Razorbill
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (H)
Swallow
Kingfisher
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Duncock
Robin
Stonechat
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Chiffchaff
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Trecreeper
Magpie

Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Grey Seal
Common Seal
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Short-tailed Vole

OTHER THINGS

Froglet
Golden-ringed dragonfly
Black Bumble Bee
Atlantic Salmon
Caterpillar sp
Bat sp