

## Holiday Highlights

### Beginners

5-12 September 2015

**Guide:** John Grierson

**Guests:** Kathleen Murray, John and Joan Oglesby, Caroline Moore, and Fay Tempest

**Day 1:** We all arrive at our well appointed accommodation at the Steading in Glen Feshie. The weather is clear and the views over the valley to the Cairngorms are stunning. We have a wonderful meal, prepared by Sharon, followed by tea and coffee in the upper lounge and John G runs through the itinerary for the week ahead.

**Day 2:** We wake up to a beautiful morning. Apart from some mist on the top mountains, it is sunny. After breakfast we head to Uath Lochans. The lochans are 'kettle hole' lochs formed after the last ice age and there are lovely walks in the surrounding woodland which is mainly Scots Pine. As we get out of the minibus we can hear Goldcrests and Coal Tits calling but our attention is immediately taken to a Red Squirrel in the trees in front of us. It is obviously on a mission and is moving quickly from tree to tree effortlessly. We walk along the track around the lochans. The Goldcrests and Coal Tits continue to call but are high up and difficult to see. We get glimpses but no clear views. John G shows the group a squirrel feeding area, the path is carpeted by seed scales and stripped cones. A check in the trees shows a squirrel in the tree above them. On one of the lochans are Mallard, Swallow and House Martin. Great Tit, Coal Tit, Wren, Robin, Chaffinch and Great Tit also put in an appearance. Walking back to the minibus we see more Red Squirrel, five in total.

We head towards the Findhorn Valley to spend the afternoon. A comfort stop in Carrbridge before heading up the glen is rewarded with good views of Swallows as they go in and out of a nest located in the entrance to the 'Ladies'. The Swallows are still feeding young.

We head down the hill into the Findhorn Valley. John O points out a Kestrel that passes in front of us giving a fleeting glimpse. We head up the valley and a Red Kite puts in an appearance near Garbole. We watch it as it quarters a patch of farmland before disappearing over trees. In the field opposite there is a Brown Hare. We carry on and stop at the bridge over the Mazeran Burn. Its nickname is 'Dipper Bridge', however, on this occasion the Dipper is nowhere to be seen. Over the hill opposite Common Buzzards can be seen soaring and below them are three Ravens. A Sparrowhawk flies down the valley towards us then starts to circle, gaining height, over the woodland opposite. All the time it gets the attention of a couple of Carrion Crows that will not give it any peace. A Grey Wagtail is seen by the river and Mistle Thrush are flying. A peregrine flies over

at height and circles, it is harried by a Kestrel before flying off. The differences between the two birds could be clearly seen.

We carry on to the bridge near Coignafearn where we stop, more Common Buzzards are seen. We cross the bridge and walk over the valley to an area of woodland, passing Wood Pigeon and Meadow Pipit. On the hill opposite the woodland John G spots Mountain Hare among a number of rabbits that have taken up residence on the hillside. On our return to the minibus Joan spots some Red Deer silhouetted on the skyline. John G puts his telescope on them and sees a herd of around 40 Red Deer hinds lying and standing on the slope.

We drive back down the valley and stop at Dipper Bridge. This time it lives up to its name, John G finds a Dipper on a stone just upstream of the bridge, it gives long views before flying off upstream.

After dinner we head out to the wildlife hide. The hide is in woodland on Rothiemurchus Estate near Aviemore. John G puts out bait of peanuts, peanut butter and an egg. It is still light but as it gets darker a Badger comes to the hide and starts to eat the peanuts, it is joined shortly after by three other Badgers. They Hoover up the peanuts and move round to the back of the hide where they are joined by another three. A Pine Marten, a male, takes the opportunity while the Badgers are otherwise occupied to go on to the bird table and take the egg left by John G, it runs off chased by a Badger. Three of the Badgers head off leaving three at the back of the hide. The Pine Marten comes back to the bird table but this time there is a confrontation with the Badgers. The Pine Marten makes it onto the table then there is a standoff. One of the Badgers even climbs a tree to try and get at the Pine Marten. We find that Badgers can climb trees but they are not very elegant at getting back down again!! The Pine Marten eats its fill of nuts then jumps down and runs off closely pursued by one of the Badgers, the other two Badgers then leave. Two Pine Marten appear and go onto the bird table, an adult female and a young female, mother and daughter, they feed happily for a while then leave.

On leaving the hide the group are treated to a fantastic view of the starlit sky. The sky is crystal clear and the Milky Way is clearly visible.

**Day 3:** We awake to another beautiful morning, we are off to the Moray Coast today. At Spey Bay there is hardly a cloud in the sky. We park up at Tugnet right at the mouth of the River Spey. Tugnet gets its name from the salmon netting station that used to be there. The buildings we are standing beside are the ice houses used for storing the salmon before it was sent off. The tide is well out and shingle and mud banks are showing. There are hundreds of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls are resting on the banks along with Black Headed Gulls, Common Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, comparing the gulls is easy. Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander are sitting in a large flock on the opposite bank of the river and there are Dunlin, Redshank and Ringed Plover at the water's edge. A flock of Linnets land on the stones in front of us. There

are Gannets out at sea. Fay says, "What's up with the gulls", all the gulls on the shingle get up into the air, in amongst them is an Osprey. The Osprey goes to the mouth of the river and starts to fish. It dives three times, unsuccessfully, before flying off over the gulls; strangely the gulls don't bother with it this time.

John G then says, "Let's go and have lunch at a pig farm", so we drive over to the pig farm near Elgin. Happily there's a small loch, Loch Spynie, by the farm with a bird hide, we have lunch in the hide. Loch Spynie is almost enclosed by tall reeds, there are two small groups of Mute Swans, around 10 Little Grebes mingle with Tufted Duck with Mallard. A heron flies over and then a Common Buzzard. John G says the ducks seem unsettled and are moving away from the centre of the loch and there could be an Otter about. The loch is surrounded by reeds, Otters feel safe and often hunt in daylight. Sure enough seconds later John G points out an Otter in front of the hide about 100 yards away. The Otter hangs around in the middle for about 10 minutes then starts to head off to the right, he is continuously diving and the ducks all keep well out of his way. Kathleen says that there is a Red Squirrel on the bird feeders, or more accurately, in the bird feeder. At the side of the hide there is a feeder for birds and squirrels, it is the type with the perspex front and the roof the squirrels are supposed to lift. The squirrel has other ideas; it squeezes in through the gap and is sitting in the feeder.

After lunch we head to Burghead, a fishing town on a promontory jutting out into the Moray Firth. The tide is coming in and there is a strong current round the headland. There is a male Eider Duck in front of us and Curlews, Redshank, Herring Gulls and Black-backed Gulls on the rocks. Both Shags and Cormorant can be seen fishing. A lobster boat is hauling creels in front of us and it is being shadowed by a Grey Seal.

The sun by now is getting lower and making viewing difficult so we head back to the Steading via Dava Moor and Lochindorb, a large shallow loch on the top of the moor. The heather moor is managed for Red Grouse and is one of the best grouse moors in the area. Unfortunately for us, for whatever reason, the moor seems to be completely devoid of life. As we leave the moor two Police cars pass us heading on to the moor. Caroline says, "They must be going to a case of grouse rustling!"

**Day 4:** We wake up for an early start to go to the West Coast. It is warm but very misty with poor visibility; the forecast is good for the West Coast. We stop at Silverbridge for a comfort break and a look at the waterfall. The water in the river is high and the falls are spectacular. Midges start to put in an appearance and it is time to beat a hasty retreat. We carry on and we pass Loch Glascarnoch, the mist suddenly parts and we get a fantastic view of An Teallach bathed in sunshine. An Teallach means 'The Forge' and with the cloud touching its top it looks every bit a forge. We stop at Dundonnell at the head of Little Loch Broom. The tide is out and the shingle is showing. Some Red-breasted Mergansers can be seen off the shore. Redshank, Curlew and Ringed Plover are on the bank. A hooded Crow, crisp grey and black markings compared with East Coast birds, could

be seen among a mix of Black-headed and Common Gulls. Cormorants are fishing in the bay.

We then carry on to Gruinard where we stop near Gruinard House overlooking Gruinard Island and the southern islands of the Summer Isles. Gruinard Island, also known as Anthrax Island, is famous as the location of biological warfare testing during WWII. The sea is calm and the mist is rising. John O points to a bird in a bay beside us, it is a Great Northern Diver. Close by is a Black Guillemot. A scan of the water between the group and the island finds more Great Northern Divers and Cormorants. Four Black Throated Divers are fishing in the middle of the sound. It is a good opportunity to compare both divers. John G finds a small pod of Porpoise cruising westwards about a mile away. On the island there are around twenty Common Seals pulled out on to the rocks. Gannets are diving in front of them.

Our next stop is First Coast and a lay-by above the sea. Thirty Common Seals are hauled out on to rocks below us and others are swimming around. There are a few Gannets diving and there are Cormorants and Shags fishing. A small flight of Twite fly by but don't stop. Joan calls out, "there's an Osprey" and sure enough an Osprey flies by quite close and on our level and we get good views. The Osprey continues on around the coast. Two rock doves fly by.

We leave First Coast and head to Aultbea, we stop at a 'convenient' location. There are Great Black-backed Gulls and Common Gulls at the mouth of the burn and Gannets fishing in the bay. Two Black-throated Divers are also in the bay.

Lunch is at Laide Jetty, by now the sun is out and all the mist and clouds have gone. The temperature is in the twenties and there is little wind. The view from the jetty of the rest of Scotland is spectacular. Red-throated Divers are fishing amongst the boats moored off the jetty. More Black-throated and Great Northern Divers are fishing further out, another Black Guillemot is seen. Curlew and Redshanks are moving amongst the rocks. Lunch is suddenly interrupted when Joan says she has seen something moving just off the rocks, it is an Otter, just as quickly as it is seen it disappears.

After lunch it's off to Mellon Udrigle Bay, a small bay filled with clean white sand, it is dazzling in the sun. Four Great Northern Divers are fishing in the bay. Oystercatchers are on the rocks with Redshank, Pied Wagtails are searching the strand for food and squabbling with Rock Pipits. Two Northern Wheatears are seen on the grass bank behind the beach.

We leave Mellon Udrigle and head for Gairloch on our way to Aultguish for our meal. Gairloch is bathed in sunshine and the Isle of Skye can be seen in the near distance, the Uists can be seen behind it. There are Herring Gulls in the harbour and a solitary Lesser Black-backed Gull, two Grey Seals can be seen swimming off the pier. The drive along Loch Maree side from Gairloch is stunning. The skies are clear and John G stops at Loch a' Chroisg. A quick scan of the hillside shows

two Sika hinds in the trees at the top, they are nervous of us, even at that distance and make their way off through the trees. We head to Aultguish where we have a lovely meal then head back to the Steading.

**Day 5:** It's a clear morning with bright sunshine, today is a local day. We head over to Abernethy Forest near Nethybridge. Abernethy Forest has remnants of the ancient Caledonian Pine Forest which would at one time have covered a great deal of Scotland. On the way John G takes a short detour into Rothiemurchus Estate, Katherine has been asking all week to see black highland cattle. John G knows where there is one on the estate, he explains that most people will be familiar with the reddish coloured cattle but may not know that they also come in black, Katherine gets her photo opportunity. As this is happening a Red Kite comes over trees and flies slowly past the group. We head for Abernethy and a Jay crosses the road in front of us.

We arrive at Forest Lodge, the RSPB Offices in Abernethy Estate and head off on the Rynettin Farm path. The path borders a young Scots Pine plantation on our right with more open space and large old Scots Pine on our left. The older trees are at least two to three hundred years old and are part of the ancient Caledonian pine forest. These older trees, 'Granny Pines', are well branched and uneven and would have been left when the forest had been clear felled. Although they would have been no use for timber they would provide shelter and seeds for natural regeneration of a new forest. The walk continues with John G pointing out the Blaeberry, Cowberry, Ling Heather and Juniper that makes up the lush undergrowth. John G admits his lack of knowledge where moss species are concerned and just refers to them by their colour.

Coal Tits, Siskin and Goldcrests are calling; however they are high in the trees and are difficult to pick out against the sun. A short distance on, John G goes off the path and indicates a large heap of pine needles. It is a wood ant nest absolutely covered in ants. There may be up to quarter of a million ants in the nest, most of the nest is underground. The ants pick up the pine needles and other pests. Without them the forest would clog up and die.

A wren is calling and can be seen flitting about in the undergrowth and as we walk up to Rynettin Farm a Common Buzzard is soaring over the forest. Meadow Pipits and Mistle Thrushes are in the field at Rynettin. A Swallow is flying over the field. In the clear conditions, Cairngorm and the Northern Corries look fantastic. We carry on to the lower path and head back to the minibus, John G stops, there is a Crested Tit calling in trees beside us, it continues to call but remains elusive. A small flock with Coal Tit, Great Tit and Siskin pass by, a Robin is flitting on in front of us.

We stop for lunch at Broomhill Bridge. Swallows and House Martins are over the fields and above woodland on the hill behind, two Common Buzzards are soaring. After lunch we head for Cairngorm Mountain, the car park at Coire Cas is about 2,300 feet above sea level and is almost half full with tourist. We take a short

walk from the car park, Meadow Pipits flit along in front of us and a Black Bird flies into the mountain garden.

We return to the minibus and head down to Loch Morlich, a remnant of the last ice age. A kettle hole loch, it was formed when a huge lump of ice detached from the bottom of a glacier. It was sedimented over and when the glacier melted it also melted to form the loch. The loch has the distinction of hosting the highest yacht club in the UK and also the highest beach. Today the beach is packed, Swallows are flying over the water and on the far side of the loch Goldeneye, Goosander and a single Greylag Goose can be seen. The usual attendant Mallards are around our feet in no time.

**Day 6:** Yet another lovely morning, today we head for the Black Isle which is not black or an island. We go straight to Chanonry Point at Rosemarkie and stop in the car park, on the shingle shoreline in front two Turnstones are feeding. They move off as we get out of the minibus leaving a small group of Ringed Plover. House Sparrows are on the grass, amazingly our first sighting of them this week. We walk down to the point, a wren is flitting about in the undergrowth and a Hedge Sparrow is having a dust bath. Meadow Pipits are on the golf course beside the point and Swallows are flying around and a small flock of Starlings land on the lighthouse. Cormorants can be seen roosting on a channel buoy. The tide has just turned and is going out; Bottlenose Dolphins come into the inner Moray Firth at this point and follow the salmon shoals up to the Beaulie Firth. The salmon will come in and out with the tides until they are able to go up the rivers. There are four Grey Seals swimming off the point, not always a good sign as dolphins and seals don't get on together and the seals will usually vacate the area when dolphins are about.

Cormorants are in the middle of the channel with Black-headed Gulls and Common Gulls. Herring Gulls are resting on a buoy on the edge of the channel. A Great Skua is patrolling the bay on our left. Gannets are fishing in the distance. John G points out two birds flying low and fast, they are Arctic Skuas, light and dark phase. The skuas home in on and chase after a Black-headed Gull. All three put in a superb flying display before the gull empties its crop and the skuas are rewarded. The skuas then turn their attention to a group of Common Gulls and the flying display resumes.

A cargo vessel is heading down the Firth towards Chanonry. John G says that often the dolphins will move down with the boats and sure enough a few hundred yards off the vessels stern are three Bottlenose Dolphins, two adults and a juvenile. The juvenile, apart from being much smaller, is lighter in colour. The dolphins are chasing fish, they continue on down the Firth and pass us then head out into the outer firth.

We head to Udale Bay for lunch, the bay is an area of tidal mudflats in the Cromarty Firth. Cromarty Firth is one of the largest deepwater harbours in the UK and is used by oilrig companies as a safe haven for rigs during the winter and

for repairs. Today there are twelve oilrigs in the Firth. Udale Bay is a nature reserve and is managed by the RSPB. There is an excellent hide, however, in view of the excellent weather, we don't use this hide today. The tide is just starting to go out, there are a hundred plus Teal roosting on the grassy shore along with Mallards, Widgeon, Greylag Geese and Canada Geese. A large flock of Oyster Catchers are resting behind the Teal along with some Sandwich Terns. Lapwings are dotted about over the bank. In the distance around ten herons can be seen standing like sentinels keeping a look out for danger. Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Common and Black-headed Gulls can all be seen on the bank. Out on the mudflats there is a mixed flock of Knot, Curlew and Bar-tailed Godwit following the tide going out, two Hooded Crows are finding something to argue over. The tide is going out quickly and more and more mud is exposed. A flock of Redshank flies in and land, they are joined by Dunlin and a single Greenshank, flocks of Widgeon can be seen landing at the water's edge, there are hundreds of them.

We have lunch then drive slowly along the coast towards Cromarty. We stop in a car park outside Jemimaville, the tide is now well out. Bar-tailed Godwits are on the tide line with Curlew, Redshank and Dunlin. Two Shelduck are sifting the mud. Two Mute Swans are walking out through the mud towards the shore. Out in the Firth a group of Eider can be seen and a small flock of Scaup are around an oilrig, Red-breasted Mergansers are diving.

We head back through the middle of the Black Isle. Near Kippen a Red Kite appears over woodland, we watch it for a few minutes until it goes behind trees. We carry on and a couple of minutes later see a second Red Kite, this time it is much closer and we get good views, it's then back to the Steading.

**Day 7:** Another beautiful morning, the sun is shining and there are few clouds, today is another local day, we head back up on to Lochindorb Moor. When we visited it on Monday coming back from the Moray Coast it was very quiet with not much about, as we drive on to the moor a Common Buzzard soars past over a hill on our left. A short distance on we see a Kestrel hovering near to the road, we continue on. John G spots a Red Grouse about 20 feet from the road so we stop, it is a female and is accompanied by three other birds, all this year's young. We watch for a while then carry on, we don't go far before seeing more grouse, this time a male with its red wattle showing well in the sunshine, what a difference to Monday. In the space of 30 minutes we see over 50 Red Grouse, suddenly John G shouts, "there are two eagles flying straight towards us". Unfortunately the excitement doesn't last long (except for John G!!) as he points out that they are American F15 Strike Eagle fighter bombers on a low level exercise, they pass by very low and close.

We head on off the moor and stop at Upper Tom Vaich Wood near Grantown on Spey, the wood has mature Scots Pine and some Sitka Spruce, we walk up the hill. Coal Tits and Goldcrests are in the trees beside us and Mistle Thrushes can be seen flying over. John G points to a small flock of Crossbills flying over,

unfortunately they don't stop. A bird is flitting around in vegetation at the side of the path, it is a Bullfinch. Further on Coal and Great Tits are seen in the treetops. A Crested Tit can be heard calling, we wait and the Crested Tit comes into the treetops above us, it is too high and agile to get a good view but its crest could be clearly seen. John G points out some Twinflower that is still in bloom.

Our next stop is lunch by the River Spey at Inverallan by Grantown on Spey, two salmon are seen jumping in the fast water leading out of the pool. After lunch we head for Insh Marshes, a National Nature Reserve on the River Spey Valley just south of Kingussie. The reserve is owned by the RSPB and there are good hides at the south end of the marshes, we use the main hide and stand on the open platform. There is a Roe Deer buck feeding in the rushes below us, Chaffinches, Coal Tits, Great Tits and Siskin are on the bird feeders in front of the hide. A small flock of Redpoll fly over and all around us are Highland Darter dragonflies, they sit on the handrails so getting a good look at them is easy.

Two Common Buzzards are soaring over the marshes and a few Grey Herons can be seen here and there. Two Sparrowhawks, one smaller than the other, put on an aerial display chasing each other then a crow joins in. It looks as if it is trying to chase the Sparrowhawks off but they just ignore it. Two Mute Swans are seen and Mallard and Teal are seen in the pools, Swallows are patrolling over the marshes.

It is soon time to head back to the Steading, after the evening meal, we have a cup of tea/coffee accompanied by a 'nippy sweetie' for those who wanted one. We go through the checklist for the last time and discuss our 'Species of the Trip', 'Place of the Trip' and 'Magic Moment'. Everybody has difficulty deciding. The Osprey came out on top as the favourite species with the West Coast the favourite place. There were so many magic moment with no outright 'winner'.

**Day 8** After breakfast we say our farewells and wish everyone a safe journey home, hoping to see them again on another Speyside Holiday.

**Species of the Trip:** Osprey, Peregrine, Otter, Red Squirrel, Arctic Skuas, Pine Marten.

**Place of the Trip:** Mellon Udrigle, West Coast, Loch Spynie, Laide Jetty.

**Magic Moments:** Confrontation between Badgers and Pine Marten, Loch Spynie, Otter and Red Squirrel in feeder, Osprey arriving at Spey Bay, Getting an identification right, Arriving at the Steading.

## **BIRDS**

Red-Throated Diver  
Black-Throated Diver  
Little Grebe  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Shelduck  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Tufted Duck  
Eider  
Goldeneye  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
Red Kite  
Osprey  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Red Grouse  
Pheasant  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Lapwing  
Knot  
Dunlin  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Turnstone  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Sandwich Tern  
Guillemot

Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
Rock Dove  
Wood Pigeon  
Collared Dove  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Northern Wheatear  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Dipper  
Wren  
Robin  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Goldcrest  
Crested Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Raven  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet

**TOTAL BIRDS: 79**

## **MAMMALS**

Short-tailed Vole

Woodmouse

Red Squirrel

Rabbit

Brown Hare

Mountain Hare

Pine Marten

Otter

Badger

Red Deer

Sika Deer

Roe Deer

Bottlenose Dolphin

Common Seal

Grey Seal

Reindeer

**TOTAL SPECIES: 95**