

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE SPRING BIRDS & MORE

21-28 MAY 2022

Guide: Kate Mennie

Guests: Dave Thompson, Jackie & Steve Bird, Maggie Scott and Sarah Roberts

Day 1 Kate collects Sarah and Maggie from Aviemore, before meeting everyone at dinner and go through the weeks plan.

Day 2 The day starts dry as we head off at 9.20am. We drive towards Carrbridge taking a small road to the south end where fields give us a perfect chance to see Brown Hares, and we weren't disappointed. Nearly every field had at least two Hares bounding through the grass. Sarah spots a Meadow Pipit and Linnet, Dave spots a Reed Bunting on the wire. There is Roe Deer as we drive on and a big puddle shows close Curlew and Redshank. We go through Carrbridge out another small back road. The drizzle starts as we arrive to watch the Black-headed and Common Gull colony and Curlew call overhead. Jackie and Kate hear a distant Cuckoo and Sarah spots a pale Willow Warbler showing very well on top of a juniper. It's a lovely treat for everyone to hear so many Willow Warblers all around. A common Snipe drums overhead and it isn't long until we see it fly around before landing on a close fence post that we get brilliant views of it with its stripy head. They continue to fly around calling. The rain is not stopping so we head in Carrbridge for coffee and comfort stop where Swifts scream overhead.

After a comfort stop, we head north into Strathdearn. Our first stop is popular, with two other vans there. The sky is now clearing so it is lovely standing out. We get Red Kite on our drive and when we stop here a few Buzzards make an appearance. There are waders in the field, Martins flying above, Lesser Black-backed Gull on the river, Sarah spotting Pied Wagtail, Curlew, Grey Wagtail, a close Red Kite and Red Legged Partridge. The other group think they saw an eagle, but it disappears over a distant hill and we don't see anything further.

We move on to Dipper Bridge to have lunch here and look out for nesting Dippers. The bridge lives up to its name and it isn't long until we see the adult fishing and going into the nest. One young has already fledged as it sits underneath the nest site unphased by our presence. There are Red Deer up the hillside and Buzzard's overhead, before Kate spots a Common Tern

flying quickly past us. We enjoy further views of the Dippers, making sure the young was alright before heading further down the glen after lunch. We scan from the bridge for a while, Sarah and Dave spotting Mountain Pansies, before taking a stroll up the path a little to stretch our legs. We scan for Mountain Hare and raptors but unfortunately it is all quiet, but the sun is showing the mountains well. We head back up the glen, going a couple of miles up the Farr Road for a last chance for eagles, but Kites were the only raptor in the sky. We get back to the hotel early.

An earlier dinner tonight as we head to the evening watching hide tonight. We get to the hide just after 8pm, met by Harris who introduces us to the hide and bates whilst we wait. The first Bank Vole and Wood Mice pop out and we hear a distant Cuckoo. It only takes ten minutes for the first two Badgers to arrive, a male and female. Two more arrive and we get entertained by their antics throughout the evening. They groom each other, have a bit of a fight and start rolling around on the ground. The peanut butter is a favourite as they climb inside logs to get to it and climb up tree trunks. We get eight Badgers in total, of course there is a little disappointment, as there is no Pine Marten for us tonight. On the drive back along the road we see several bats and even a frog hopping across the road.

Day 3

It starts dry as we leave after breakfast, only travelling a couple of miles out of Grantown to a local wood for a wander. We are hoping for Crossbill here. We hear a chorus of Siskin, Willow Warbler and Song Thrush to start. We walk slowly up the path listening to bird calls, when suddenly Maggie and Kate notice bark falling from the tree and hear something above. A Red Squirrel scrambles up the trunk above us, carrying something in its mouth, maybe a bit of bedding. Looking closely, Kate realises it's a kit! It carries its young up the tree, making a rather dangerous jump onto the next big branch. What a treat to see, first Squirrel for many and first kit being carried for Kate! We don't get much further before Sarah's quick eyes spot a bird feeding high in a tree, a Crossbill! The beautiful male quietly feeds for about 15 minutes above us, giving fantastic views. A male Siskin also shows well. Kate hears a Spotted Flycatcher but its flitting nature is hard to get views this time. We carry on the hill listening to Song Thrush and Wren before going back to the minibus.

We drive across the Cromdale bridge by the River Spey before turning off towards an estate near Nethybridge. We drive slowly up the road, not spotting anything before parking up as a cloud rolls in. We get brief views of a Cuckoo and hear a Snipe whilst getting a coffee to drink before a downpour of rain begins. We try to wait it out, spotting a lovely female Cuckoo flying across the road chased by Meadow Pipits. The rain becomes too torrential even for waterproofs, so we head towards Nethybridge, seeing a surprise Red Kite fly off. As we take our comfort stop the rain starts to move, so we go back and along a nearby road to Lurg. Steve spots a pale

bird on top of some rubble, Dave also spots it before it flies, a Wheatear. In a nearby field two very wet Brown Hare are hunched down. We get to the end of the road as the rain clears, Goldfinch and Greenfinch on the wires. We start scanning here and have our lunch whilst we watch Curlew, Waders, Gulls and Buzzards. After much scanning no large raptors make an appearance.

We drive the back road to Loch Garten, parking by the Loch Mallachie trail for a walk-in hope of Crested Tit. There are plenty of Chaffinch as we stand beside the calm loch and a Goldcrest is singing above us. Kate keeps her ear out for the Crested Tit and hears one up ahead. It takes a while to find and is very high up, but most of us see it flitting through the branches calling. At Loch Mallachie, we talk about the Goldeneye boxes that are put up here for the breeding ducks, but don't see any today. There are Mallard and Teal out at the back of the loch and Hirundines. Steve spots a Common Sandpiper on the island, getting nice views in the scope.

We all hope to be able to visit the nature centre that the guests have heard so much about, so we make our way back up the track. Kate suddenly hears a close Common Redstart but after a couple of minutes of searching every branch we cannot locate it and it flies further into the woods. We park down at the centre, and all get up to the nature centre which has had very exciting views of Osprey already this year, which everyone is keen to see. The three-camera screen shows the nests of the Ospreys out the window, White-tailed Eagle and Goshawk elsewhere in the park. We enjoy wandering around and talking to centre staff, watching the large Eagle chicks and parent coming in to feed and learning about the surrounding area. Sarah spots a Redstart out of the centre windows, within a metre or two in front of us, which gets everyone else in the centre excited also. We head back to the hotel.

Day 3

Up early today as we head off before 8am to the west coast. Another Speyside guide, Olly comes with us today. After only 10 minutes, a Stoat runs across the road in front. We drive past Inverness stopping at Rogie falls for a comfort stop, where Kate hears a Wood Warbler on the other side of the road, which we can't access unfortunately. We carry on, following Black Water river through the moorland towards Ullapool, checking the sky as we go for any birds. The sun is shining as we reach Ullapool and start heading north, stopping a couple times to check Buzzards. We drive the twisted roads through Sutherlands dramatic landscape, reaching the village of Tarbet just after 11am where we luckily find a space in order to cross over to Handa Island. We get ourselves ready and have a morning coffee in the sunshine and watch birds in the bay whilst we wait. Eider Duck, Ringed Plover, Buzzard, Rock Pipit, Red-throated Diver and Guillemots are all seen.

The short boat trip takes us across to the island of Handa onto the picturesque sandy beach. We walk to the ranger base where we get introduced to the island, Wheatears hopping all around. We walk slowly towards our lunch spot, Marsh Thistle starting to grow, Kate shouts as Red-throated Diver flies low in front of us, then another two. There are a few Great Skua on nest sites as we walk. We stop at the abandoned village where some rocks provide good perches for lunch. The impressive Arctic Skuas keep us entertained as they chase each other in the sky and call. Snipe call from the marsh below and Sarah spots Redpoll on a nearby tree singing. The sun is warm, and woolly hats are replaced by sunhats and cream today which is a lovely change.

We continue our walk to the main cliffs taking in so much of the scenery and surroundings. There are a huge number of flowers and plants beginning to grow, including Lousewort, Milkwort, Butterwort and Common Spotted Orchids. A Lizard slides through the undergrowth. Walking along the board walk we continue to search for plants and the skies are filled with Skuas, observing some lovely examples of pale and dark phased Arctic Skuas on the bathing pool.

Reaching the first cliff area, the sound and smell of the seabirds hit us, with Fulmar flying around, sea littered with Guillemots, Razorbill, Kittiwake and Puffin on the ledges. We continue up the last hill, reaching the stack. The puffins are nesting on top of the stack, Razorbills underneath and then Guillemots on the bottom. The sea is perfect for sea watching for cetaceans, so Kate begins to scan, pointing out Gannet flying above the water. We rest, sunbathing with these amazing views with no one else round us, but with it being time to get back for the last boat we begin to walk back. Sarah takes the longer route round the island to have a jog. On the way back Maggie enjoys views of posing Lizard and we enjoy views inland to the east. Whilst we wait for the ferry, we watch breeding Arctic Terns on the rocks, Cormorant, Shags, Red-throated Diver and Wheatears. At the beach we see closer Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemots and Olly finds a distant Great Northern Diver.

Once back on the mainland, we have a snack and tea before hitting the road. Stopping a couple of times to check pools for Divers and sky for Eagles, stopping at Kylesku Pier for 10 minutes to scan from here. Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemots, but no luck with raptors. We stop at Knockan Crag to check the lochan here, but all quiet. A male Cuckoo is very vocal and flies around before stopping on a close tree that we can admire it on. We make haste to our dinner reservation enjoy a meal here before getting back on the road as the sun sets.

Day 5

After a late return from the west coast, we have a slower breakfast, leaving at 9.30am for a local day. We go first to Boat of Garten to a pool here full of waders and duck species. It is amazing the number we see, with Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe, Redshank and gulls. Moorhen and Coot that were once scarce to find in this area are here breeding, with young wading.

We take the back road and head up to the Cairngorm Mountain car park to take a walk round the immediate area as it is too windy to go further up today. Sarah spots Stonechat and Wheatear to begin with. We look here for Ring Ouzel walking into the mountain garden where Kate hears a call. Dave and Sarah look at the different plants growing here, whilst Kate continues to look for Ring Ouzel. A quick look outside and a female flies out to get food. Kate tries to get everyone onto it, but it quickly flies away, so not a satisfying view. We walk further up the track but don't relocate. We drive down to Loch Morlich for lunch out of the worst of the wind. Dave spots Goosander flying in, with Goldeneye and Common Sandpiper also here.

With the sun shining, we head to Craigellachie Nature reserve in Aviemore, an area of gorgeous Birch plantation full of nesting birds. On the path we get a brief Bullfinch in a Rowan tree. Walking into reserve, there is flowering Chickweed Wintergreen, and a Treecreeper makes its way up a nearby tree. Alerted to the sound of Siskin we watch a single chick being fed by its parents. The Fresh Bog Myrtle sends a lovely scent on our walk up to the lochan, the vibrant green trees making for a nice backdrop. At the opposite side of the loch we listen carefully for the Wood Warbler that usually nests here, trying our best to hear past the strong gusts. Hearing a couple of calls is all we hear so we continue walking back down the path, spotting a family of Long-tailed Tits huddled together on a branch. Kate suddenly hears the song of the Pied Flycatcher and it isn't long until Steve and Kate find a nest box with the male singing beside it. It poses well for us so we enjoy close scope views. A passing birder says that we are stood beside a Spotted Flycatcher nest, so we take a few steps back when Steve notices the female Pied Flycatcher on the edge of the box hole. We walk slowly back to the minibus after those brilliant views.

To end the day we head to Loch Insh for Kates favourite Osprey pair. Standing almost at eye level with them, we can see the female is on the nest as we watch her head pop up and down, presumably still incubating eggs. After a while Kate get slightly higher and spots the male on a nearby tree. He is very wet and is preening his feathers, possibly just back from diving in the river for fish. We all enjoy seeing them so close before we made our way back to the hotel.

Day 6

It's a coastal day today as we depart at 9am and take the whisky road north after about an hours drive. We stop at Bogmoor where a Tree Sparrow colony of nest boxes gives us a good chance to see these Sparrows that many haven't seen for a long time since numbers have fallen. Further up the road Kate stops to look at a bird on the telegraph wire, a Corn Bunting. As we get out, two are singing. One drops down onto the fence and we manage to see it close up.

On to Speybay now, we park up and set up overlooking the estuary and out to sea. A large group of Goosanders on the opposite side, Gulls, Heron, Shelduck, Arctic and Common Tern. We keep looking out to sea in case there are any cetaceans about. We take a wander watching a Sedge Warbler bringing in nest materials and singing loudly from a nearby tree. A close male Yellowhammer also sings close showing off its stunning colours and a Reed Bunting too. With the biting wind, we warm up with a drink at the Dolphin Centre. We scan for a further few minutes out to sea, seeing a pair of Eider, Ringed Plover and Gannet but sadly no dolphins today.

We now head east to Loch Spynie, with the next shower coming we take our lunch down into the hide. Young Black-headed Gulls are on the breeding island, Common Tern, Mallard, Shoveler, Little Grebe and Mute Swans. Kate thinks she has a possible female Garganey, but it is too far to tell and disappears out of sight before we can decide. We let the shower pass before heading out, hearing Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler and Yellowhammer.

Before heading off from the car park, which we had to ourselves, Kate takes a moment to write up some notes and Sarah goes for a walk. Suddenly Steve mutters, there's a Pine Marten on the feeder. Not believing it Kate jumps round, and there it is, a beautiful Pine Marten in the sunshine on the nut feeder. Kate has to get Sarah back and luckily, we all get to watch it. It sits there with the sun shining on it for a few minutes, knowing we are there, but not bothered, the Woodpecker alarm calls, amazing to see it as it hops off back into the wooded area. We still can't believe our eyes, as the car park starts to fill up we leave, out towards Lossiemouth. Stopping for a comfort break we decide to carry on to Burghead to end our day at the coast. Out at the point it is very windy but using the shelter of the van we start scanning. Nothing out at sea with the large waves, but a few Gannets fly past close and Ringed Plover on the shore as well as gulls. We move along into the bay a little more where the low tide is exposing the rocks where waders like to feed. It isn't long until we find Turnstone and some Knot.

We drive slowly back down the road towards Grantown via the Dava Moor. Kate makes a stop in a passing place, but with the wind, wants to make sure if it worth getting out or not, it is! A large bird rises above the horizon at a nearby hillside so we all get out and shelter to the side of the van. It isn't

long until a second large bird joins, Kate initially thinking it was two White-tailed Eagles going by initial look at plumage. After getting everyone on the birds, one more join in the sky as Kate looks through the telescope and identifies them as Golden Eagles. They battle with the wind as they keep low to the ground, at times chasing Red Deer through the heather. There are four birds in the sky at once, two looking like young birds from the previous year. We enjoy watching them but soon realise how cold we are, we are happy to end the day and make our way back to the hotel.

Day 7

Our final day today, leaving slightly later this morning as we head out to get a few new species today. Arriving about 10am at the top end of Strathearn stopping first at Woodend to look over the fields. A few Red Kite begin to take to the wing after a rain shower, Brown Hare in the field, Martins flying around and Buzzard. After Dave and Kate discuss the lack of small raptors this week, Sarah and Maggie suddenly spot two Kestrel come out of a nearby disused building. The male flies off but the female sits on the telegraph pole eating something. It appears to be a gull chick, so it has a feed before returning to its nest site in the side of the building.

Further down near Garbole, we stop again to scan. There are Raven, Grey Wagtail and Lapwings around us. It isn't long until Kate spots two distant Golden Eagles skimming the horizon of the hill. Jackie keeps an eye on them in the telescope as they move down into a gully of the hill and behind the trees, they never re-emerge. Kate spots a large flock of Golden Plover in their stunning summer plumage over the river amongst the sheep. With the next rain show arriving, we take the small road towards Farr, an uneventful journey with a couple of Buzzards spotted as we drive through the upland heath and down the other side.

We arrive now at the RSPB reserve of Loch Ruthven, where our first sighting is a brief Osprey hovering over the loch. A coffee break is much appreciated as we get ourselves ready, surrounded by Meadow Pipits and Reed Bunting. We head out towards the loch where we get our first glimpse at our first Slavonian Grebe through the branches. Reaching a small area of beach, the strong westerly winds make our eyes water, but here we get closer to three grebes and Kate spots three Red-throated Divers on the far side of the loch. We work our way along the path to reach the hide that looks out onto the loch. We see at least six different Slavonian Grebes below, two pairs swimming in and out of the reed bed. Looking though the telescope, the vibrant flame-coloured eyebrows really stand out and the red eye. One of the males begins to call and at such a close distance it is magical to hear. The divers wake up and we also get a nice view as they swim across the water. We walk back along the tracks and have our lunch at the minibus before heading south again, stopping in at Tomatin for toilets.

Heading out of Carrbridge we head onto the Dava moor, seeing two male Cuckoos flying past. Driving slowly along towards the loch, we keep an eye out for Red Grouse in the heather, spotting one or two with chicks feeding. We scan the length of the loch for Black-throated Diver, the wind adding to the challenge. Oystercatchers nesting on the side of the road, we park at the end. After some looking, Kate spots one diver in the distance. We get good views before the rain sets in and we get wet. Before getting back in the minibus, Dave spots something moving in the heather, hoping it was a Shrew as he hasn't seen one for years, we look closer. It turns out to be a baby Wood Mouse. We call it a day with the weather worsening and head back to Grantown.

Some of us go on an evening walk before dinner into Anagach woods. Not far into the wood, Kate pauses and points out a Red Squirrel on a feeder. A second one comes on the second feeder so we enjoy watching them. Taking a small track, Sarah spots a Roe Deer jumping through the trees and a Long-tailed Tit family call from above. We enjoy the walk and just before coming to the end, Kate hears a Crested Tit and we wait until it makes itself more present. Hiding in the shadow, but it does show nicely. One final meal together with a drink to celebrate the week, finished by reminiscing and share our magic moments from the past week.

Day 8

After breakfast, Kate, Sarah and Maggie say their farewells as they head off to the train station, Jackie and Steve staying on to enjoy a few more days themselves.

Species of the Trip

Jackie	Red Squirrel
Steve	Pine Marten
Dave	Pine Marten
Maggie	Pine Marten
Sarah	Redpoll
Kate	Pied Flycatcher

Place of the Trip

Handa was the outstanding highlight for everyone!

Magic Moment

Jackie	The Badgers flipping over to get the food
Steve	The shock of seeing the Pine Marten
Dave	Squirrel carrying the kit through the trees
Maggie	Lizard posing on the Handa boardwalk
Sarah	The seabirds on the stack on Handa
Kate	The surprise of hearing Steve saying Pine Marten at the feeder

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Tufted Duck
Eider
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Turnstone
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew
Snipe
Great Skua
Arctic Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Puffin
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Tree Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap (H)
Sedge Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff (H)
Goldcrest
Wren
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher

Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Treetreeper
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Crossbill (SP)
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer
Corn Bunting
(114)

MAMMALS AND OTHER

Pipistrelle Bat
Badger
Pine Marten
Stoat
Grey Seal
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Red Squirrel
Wood Mouse
Short-tailed Vole
Brown Hare
Rabbit
Common Frog
Common Lizard
(14)