

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

WILDLIFE BONANZA

2 - 9 JULY 2022

Guide: Roy Atkins

Guests: Trevor Tipler, Ruth Messenger, Julia Panchen and Alison Reed

Day 1 We all gather at our hotel in Grantown where we enjoy a delicious evening meal and chat about the week ahead. Frustratingly the weather forecast ~is rather poor but Roy says we'll have a great time anyway, even if we don't manage to connect with some of the dragonflies and butterflies, as there are plenty of flowers and birds to enjoy

Day 2 After all the travelling yesterday we are going to stay local today so after breakfast we make a start very locally at a site where Roy has found Twinflower in the past. It is just a short drive then a walk through the trees but there are flowers of interest even beside the car park. We find plenty of Cow-wheat and quite a few Chickweed Wintergreen plants in flower - delightful little flowers like stars. We pick out the differences between Cowberry and Bilberry and as we start down the path find a few other species such as Tormentil, Heath Bedstraw and Heath Speedwell.

After a little way Roy says he is going to just keep walking along and it is up to the guests to spot the Twinflower! Everyone looks a little shocked but we walk on and it is Julia who gets the prize as she spots it beside the track. There is a very large patch of it here and while some of the flowers have already gone over there are still plenty to enjoy and it looks wonderful. It has to be one of the prettiest flowers in the UK and we are delighted to see it looking so good, though some express great surprise at just how small it is. There are a surprising number of Creeping Ladies Tresses here too and we check them carefully hoping to find at least one open flower but no luck yet.

Well pleased, and with lots of photos taken, we walk a little further to a lovely patch of Common Wintergreen. They have obviously been in flower a little while as the lowest flowers are over, but the top half of the flower spikes are still looking great and a lovely pink colour! There are more Creeping Ladies Tresses here too but no flowers... we may simply be too early so far inland.

From here we have another very short drive before we get out for another short walk. Beside the vehicle we are pleased to find our first Northern Marsh

Orchids as well as Alpine Bistort and such species such as Bugle, Selfheal, Lesser Stitchwort and others.

We follow the track and after some time Roy stops everyone and asks them to wait on the main track while he finds a route into an area where One-flowered Wintergreen can be found - he is very keen none should get trodden on or damaged in any way. Once he has found some flowering plants he leads everyone in and we enjoy these strange looking little flowers, also known as St Olaf's Candlestick! The single stigma in the middle of the saucer of petals could be imagined to be a candle on a saucer I suppose, even if it is the wrong way up! This may well be the rarest species we see this week and we take a close look at the unusual looking flowers before moving on to see another patch of Twinflower.

Some people have not brought flasks on the trip and so we have arranged to pick some up from the office and head on our way... delighted to find a great range of flowers along the way. More Northern Marsh Orchids are growing beside the road as well as Meadowsweet, Ragged Robin, Marsh Thistle, Meadow Vetchling, Tufted Vetch and many other common, but nice to see, plants.

We decide to head next towards Abernethy Forest and take the route that crosses Broomhill Bridge. As we cross the bridge we spot a Common Sandpiper on the shingle and it is soon joined by a Dipper which gives great views. There are lots of Sand Martins and then suddenly Roy spots an animal swimming down the river... an Otter!?! But even as he calls it he realises with a little disappointing that it actually looks more Mink-like, being rather small and less 'sleek' looking and not showing any tails as it dives. An interesting sighting non-the-less but let's be honest - we all wanted it to be an Otter! Ruth is very disappointed and says, "Well - you'll just have to find me an Otter now."

We drive on towards our next stop and pass Oystercatchers in the fields and as we drive towards Loch Garten the sun comes out. Oh wow - we were hoping for this for the dragonflies and we decide to head straight for the White-faced Darter pool. Here we arrive to see the sun still out but not for long enough. It is enough to get Large Red Damselflies in the air and they are egg-laying in the sphagnum as we arrive. We look at the Round-leaved Sundews here and a little Bog Asphodel including one in flower. We are amazed to spot a huge female Raft Spider clutching an egg case.

The sun returns and we start to get hopeful again as you can feel the air getting warmer and soon a Large Heath Butterfly flutters past. More damselflies appear and lots of Bordered White moths... one of which is suddenly chased by a Common Hawker! It doesn't seem very competent at catching moths and keep missing - then for a few seconds a Northern Emerald dragonfly flies

through but is gone before most even see it... which is somewhat frustrating. The Common Hawker finally catches a moth and lands on the outer branches of a pine to eat and Roy dashes to get his scope so we can enjoy amazing close up views.

The sky closes in now with thick clouds and you can feel the temperature dropping again so we decide to head for lunch on Tulloch Moor. Here we enjoy our sandwiches sat on the grass and in the brief moment the sun does reappear Common Blue and Small Heath butterflies both appear. It really doesn't take much. We find lots of Heath Fragrant Orchids here and learn how to distinguish Bearberry from Cowberry. We identify Petty Whin and also find Common Blue Damselfly in the heather.

Our next stop is for a walk down to Loch Mallachie hoping for Crested Tit... but first we do some botany beside the car park. Here we find a lovely little patch of Serrated Wintergreen - a rather unusual little flower and quite rare. A few flower spikes encourage us to take a few photos and while here we get chatting to Andrew, a guy Roy knows who does voluntary work here. He tells us we might be better looking for Crested Tit at the feeders at the Osprey Centre as one has been coming back and forth all day. Before we leave we check the Intermediate Wintergreen plants nearby but there seem to be no flowers and none open on the Creeping Ladies Tresses here either.

At the hide we enjoy fabulous views of loads of Siskins at the feeders, plus Coal, Great and Blue Tits, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Chaffinch but sadly the Crested Tit never appears. There is an adult Osprey on the nest however, and that is well worth seeing, and the biggest surprise is a superb male Redstart which shows very well indeed.

A little more sunshine sees us dashing to the van perhaps to head back to the darter pool again, but sadly it is gone far too quickly and we head instead to the famous 'Flowerfield'. Wow!!! It is just stunning! There must be hundreds of Lesser Butterfly Orchids in flower this year, and many of them are in perfect condition. Quite a few are right beside the fence and looking totally beautiful. There are hundreds of Fragrant Orchids here too but even more amazing is the number of Small White Orchids! Many years there aren't any here - or perhaps just half a dozen, but this year there are lots. While many are going over a little, a few are perfect with all the flowers open and looking great. This is another very good find and we are delighted with the whole scene. Before we head for home we spot a little Mountain Everlasting here too and plenty of Rockrose.

Back at the hotel we enjoy another delicious evening meal - but the day is not over yet and after we have eaten we gather back at the minibus for a drive out to our wildlife hide. Here we are greeted by Harris who leads us to the hide and explains what will happen before putting out the food. We chat with him

about all things badger - and wait and watch - the first mammal actually being a Wood Mouse, and wow has he got energy! We are astonished to see it run up a tree and out along the branches. running vertically up and down tree trunks and along even thin branches working his way down to the ground way below.

We don't have to wait all that long before the first Badgers appear and while they look a little nervous initially, soon they come in and start to feed. The following couple of hours is just wonderful with astonishing views of Badgers feeding on the peanuts and the peanut butter that Harris smeared on tree trunks and inside logs. He introduces us to the different males and females telling us a little about them and things he has noticed over his time working here. He knows so much about them and about Badgers generally and also about Pine Martens - though perhaps the less said about them the better given that they didn't show up. We had up to five badgers at a time and six perhaps in total and it was fabulous to see the variation within the group and watch their behaviour. They looked great standing up against the tree trunks to get to the peanut butter! Also, there are three Wood Mice and a Bank Vole... what a fabulous evening - but we are well ready for bed by the time we get home

Day 3 After much deliberation we decide to head to the Findhorn Valley today despite the weather forecast not being too good - basically the forecast isn't good for anywhere! On the way we make a detour to visit a little woodland where we hope to see Coralroot Orchid, a species that is not just rare but which can be hard to find even if you know a site!

We arrive and walk down through the trees, soon coming to the spot and find several Coralroot Orchids all over flower and in fruit. In this state, the seed capsules hang down slightly and make the plant more obvious. We soon find lots more and at least some of them have flowers still. Roy provides a kneeling pad to get down to see them in close up and plenty of photos are taken as we try to see the finer details. This is a parasitic species with no leaves and would be so easy to walk right by without noticing it - something also true of Lesser Twayblade, another tiny orchid with flowers just a few millimetres tall... and this is here too - literally a few yards away.

Lesser Twayblade is like a very tiny version of the more familiar Twayblade but when you look through a hand lens at the flowers they are just the same structure with a forked lower lip and spreading petals above that. These are remarkably tall for this species, perhaps four inches tall - but incredibly spindly and the stems are almost invisible against the background. The cameras come out again and interestingly it the mobile phones that capture it the best.

Well pleased with our findings we head back to the vehicle and get on our way. It is then a bit of a drive through the rain to the Findhorn Valley where we drive slowly along looking for birds and soon find a pair of Spotted Flycatchers on the fence line by the road. Further on we pause to watch a mix of Sand Martins, Swallows and House Martins over the stream and a lovely Grey Wagtail. A Common Tern flies down the river but there seems to be no sign of any Dippers. We find a Lapwing that seems to have eight legs!! It then walks off and three cute little balls of fluff wander off in all directions from underneath it, looking seriously cute.

The rain comes and goes and it is very windy at times but we enjoy the drive and when we make a stop by the river we shelter behind the van and enjoy a coffee as we scan the mountains when the rain stops. There are Oystercatchers, Common Gulls, more Sand Martins, but no sign of any raptors even when it is not raining. We enjoy looking at some beautiful Mountain Pansies before moving on a bit further up the valley.

At the far end Roy scans the cliffs for Peregrines but with no luck, so we look at the flowers on the slopes here. These include plenty of Heath Fragrant Orchids and lots of lovely Heath Spotted Orchids - many of them pure white. We find Lousewort, Butterwort and a single Pale Butterwort though sadly not in flower, and a little Stagshorn Clubmoss.

Soon the rain starts again and we dash back to the van and drive back down the valley some of the way before making a stop with a nice view for our lunch. For a while the sun returns and we are amazed how quickly raptors appear with up to four different Buzzards and a Kestrel. A Raven flies through and we enjoy watching a group of Red Deer through the scope. When the rain returns we continue down the valley with Ruth spotting a Brown Hare as we go.

We decide it looks a little dryer out of the valley and head back towards home but then take the road up towards Dava Moor. We pause at a small pool of water in a field and are astonished to find a female Wigeon with eight ducklings, two Teal plus Mallards and Lapwings... breeding Wigeon is an excellent find.

The rain stops as we continue on our way and as we get closer to Lochindorb we spot some Red Grouse and are watching these when suddenly Roy spots not one – not two - but three White-tailed Eagles! Well - maybe White-tailed dots would be a better description. We watch two of them skirt along the skyline, disappear behind the hill then reappear nearer the road we just drove along to get here! A snap decision... back in the van... drive very fast back the way we came and when we get there... yay... they are still here!

What happens next is fantastic. One White-tailed Eagle glides slowly away and vanishes from view but the other one we can see is clearly playing with another eagle that on closer inspection is an immature Golden Eagle! Wow... a fabulous opportunity to compare them and enjoy the most astounding views as they talon grapple and generally play together. It is an awesome sight and we are absolutely thrilled - taking turns at the scope and getting very excited! The third White-tailed Eagle appears and after gliding around with the other two eagles a little, it flaps off lazily leaving the immature Goldie and White-taileds to play. We watch them for ages and enjoy wonderful views - incredible through the scope - and eventually they too drift off. Wow - what a treat!

We decide to head to Lochindorb to try and see the Black-throated Divers here but can tell it is going to be hard work as the wind has created white horses all over the loch! We find a pair of Mute Swans and countless Greylag Geese on the far side but no divers. The orchids along the shore - Heath Spotted and Northern Marsh - are fantastic though. There are loads of them! On our return drive we spot a Raven with two Lapwings mobbing it and they look tiny making us realise just how big Ravens are. We can only hope that perhaps we'll see Black-throated Divers on our west coast day tomorrow

Day 4 Checking on the forecast we decide this is the best day by far for heading west and we head first north and then west over towards Loch Maree. There is a very well-known site here for dragonflies including some of the northern specialities and we make a stop to look down the valley from a viewpoint to see Loch Maree down below. It is a superb view but there is also a plant of interest here, though on the wrong side of a fence - so Roy sets up the scope on it! This is Yellow Mountain Saxifrage, and a lovely little plant it is too!

Down at the dragonfly site we are disappointed to find the temperature so cool at just 13 degrees. Although the sun does appear for a while even this only brings out a single Common Hawker and from the spot where we can look down onto the shallow breeding pools there is not even a Four-spotted Chaser on the move. Two Large Heath butterflies wander by and disappear as soon as the sun goes behind a cloud.

On the plus side we are pleased to be able to compare Round-leaved and Great Sundews, the leaf shape being very different. There is plenty of Bog Asphodel in flower and Roy points out White-beaked Sedge - a foodplant for Large Heath. We sniff the Bog Myrtle and find a few Heath Spotted Orchids and enjoy the beautiful scenery but with the sun now firmly behind some very large clouds we decide to go and get a coffee. We find a Spotted Flycatcher by the van as we drink coffee but despite another brief appearance of sunshine we see nothing else and head towards the coast.

It is quite a drive still to Gairloch where we decide to have a slightly early lunch sat on rocks looking at the sea. There is a Common Sandpiper sounding a bit nervous as we eat and we find a distant flock of Eiders. There are a few Hooded Crows and Ravens around and we discover a beautiful patch of English Stonecrop where we are eating. It all feels very relaxed.

Moving on we arrive at Poolewe and pause here to scan the bay. There is a small group of Red-breasted Mergansers but little else other than a couple of Grey Herons and Hooded Crows.

Our next stop is a meadow that Roy discovered a few years ago and as we get out we spot a Small Tortoiseshell, several Ringlets and our first Meadow Browns of the trip. The sun is back out and suddenly there are butterflies in numbers! We are looking for Greater Butterfly Orchid we walk slowly through the grass and flowers soon spotting some white orchids – that turn out to be Lesser Butterfly Orchids! This is a surprise as Roy has never seen this species here before and it is great to be able to compare them with the Greater Butterfly Orchids we find moments later. It is all about the pollinia! There are Northern Marsh Orchids here too.

We drive down to another spot where we enjoy spectacular views towards the mountains further north. The bay here often has a few birds and we are soon finding several Shags, a Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and several Curlews, Oystercatchers and fly-by Rock Doves... proper Rock Doves too - not your common or garden Feral Pigeons!

Roy spots a head poking up in the water and it vanishes instantly! Was that an Otter? He daren't say anything until he is sure after the Mink episode the other day, but he checks Ruth is close by and when it appears again he calls her to the scope... this time it really is an Otter! What is more it comes out onto the rocks to eat a large fish it has caught and we get fantastic views through the scope as it stays out long enough for everyone to get a turn and enjoy this special sighting. It heads back into the water and works its way along a line of rocks going in and out of the water. It is all very exciting!

The Otter vanishes, as they do, and we scan the bay again finding two Red-throated Divers which show well before taking flight and doing a long fly around the bay giving us good flight views too. A Gannet appears and we watch it diving and a flock of Ringed Plover and Dunlin fly through and land on the distant rocks. We sip more coffee as we enjoy all this in the warmth of the sun and it is just a wonderful place to be!

The road continues to a beach and we decide to drive to the end to enjoy the view from there. We have not gone far, however, before Roy spots a flying Redpoll that lands on the wires at the edge of a small field. We pause to have

a look and there seem to be loads of birds here! The Redpoll moves on but juvenile birds come in and we find Linnets, a lovely family of Stonechats, four Pied Wagtails, Meadow Pipits and Goldfinches.

At the end of the road we drop down onto a beautiful beach with turquoise seas and a view north towards the mountains of Sullivan, Stac Pollaidh, Cul Mor and others and just pause to take it in. There is a Black Guillemot out at sea though distant, more Shags and Red-throated Divers, Ringed Plovers on the beach and Arctic Terns fishing in the bay. On the grass behind us is a nice male Wheatear and in the stream plants of Blood-drop Emlets - a species of Monkey-flower with red blotches on the yellow petals.

We drive round to another view point looking out into the bay but with nothing new here we decide to try for Black-throated Divers on our way to our evening meal spot. As we drive Alison spots a flying Red-throated Diver that astonishes us by landing on a tiny loch right by the road and allows us fantastic views! It is so close we daren't even get out of the minibus but watch through binoculars - a bird in full breeding plumage. Several very close Ravens fly by as we continue on our way and then we arrive at the loch where Roy has seen Black-throated Divers in the past. We drive slowly along looking carefully and there they are – on the far side. This is perfect as we can get out and set up the scope and enjoy wonderful scope-filling views without disturbing them. What stunning birds they are! At our feet we are surprised to find Kidney Vetch along with Fairy Flax and sheets of Wild Thyme.

Delighted with our sighting here we decide to move on when both divers go to sleep and stop a little further down the road for a very enjoyable evening meal before the last leg of the journey back to our hotel.

Day 5 The forecast is for a dull overcast day causing much deliberation, but we plump for a local day again to see if we can catch up with any of the species we are missing. There is plenty to do and a few nice birds to try for so we start at a Slavonian Grebe site that is not far away.

We pass a few Chimney Sweeper moths as we walk in and as we approach the loch we are thrilled to find the Slavonian Grebes are on the near shore with a chick. The scope is set up in seconds and everyone enjoys wonderful views as the birds drift into the lilies and start fishing. The young one looks really pretty having lost its head stripes and having a lovely buffy coloured face.

With our main target here secured we scan around to see what else is here and soon find Little Grebes, a few Goldeneye, Moorhen, Common, Black-headed and Herring Gulls and Oystercatchers. Roy also points out that there are three bands of water plants at the edge of the loch... the nearest is Amphibious Bistort with both types of leaves and spikes of pink flowers.

Beyond that is White Water-lily also with lots of flowers and further out still is Least Water-lily - a fairly rare and local species - but perhaps not the most beautiful water-lily you will see!

We move on to the well-known Osprey site near Kincaig and arrive to find the male circling overhead. It looks superb and we watch it for a while before walking to a spot from which we can see the nest. The female is on the nest and seems to be covering the chicks with her wings which, though well grown now, are hiding from view beneath her. She looks superb and this is a great spot as you can enjoy good views without them being disturbed. We enjoy a coffee as we watch and find Treecreeper, Song Thrush and other common birds too. There is plenty of Red-berried Elder coming into fruit, an escape that is spreading in the wild in the area, and some superb Melancholy Thistle.

Just a short drive away we park up to visit the shore of Loch Insh. It has an interesting collection of plants but there is one in particular we are hoping will be in flower. As we follow the shore we soon find an interesting species in full flower - Northern Bedstraw. It is odd as it seems to be far bigger and more luxuriant here and also flower better than it ever does in its usual sites on mountains! We find several large plants of Marsh Lousewort, Butterwort, Marsh Arrowgrass, Lesser Spearwort, Valerian, Marsh Bedstraw and huge beds of Michaelmas Daisy though nowhere near in flower yet. We need to get to a very shallow pool that is behind the end of the loch and try to find a way through the bushes, and when we do we almost tread on a Greater Butterfly Orchid! And now what a wonderful sight – the pool is full of Water Lobelia and it is all in flower!! This is what we really came to see and it looks fantastic - so much so that at the end of the week in our roundup of the holiday it is the 'plant of the week!' With the dark water behind the flowers they look like thousands of little stars in a night sky... or maybe like thousands of Water Lobelia flowers in a muddy pool if you are not feeling so poetic! We work our way closer to see them in close up and can see they really are a typical lobelia shaped white flower but the leaves grow down on the bottom of the loch - the stem with the flowers rising up out of the water a good foot or more in some cases. It is hard to capture this scene in a photo and we just take it in for a little while before heading back to the minibus and moving on for lunch.

Our lunch spot is on rocks overlooking a rocky river and is a beautiful place. We watch the Aspen leaves trembling in the breeze as we munch then drop our baskets at the minibus before taking a short walk round the flower meadow here. There is a glorious display of Heath Fragrant Orchids and lots of Heath Spotted Orchids in a wide range of colours from almost pure white to a dark pink. To our great surprise we also find three Common Spotted Orchids here - a rarity in Speyside - and it is great to be able to compare the shape of the lower lip of the lowers with them side by side. We find Ladies Bedstraw in good flower, Wild Thyme and a variety of other common flowers

as well as a small number of Northern Marsh Orchids and about a dozen Greater Butterfly Orchids in perfect flower. There are plenty of Chimney Sweeper moths on the wing and when the sun comes out for a little while a couple of Dark Green Fritillaries appear.

It does look like we might get more sun so we make a dash for our Northern Brown Argus site. As we arrive the sun vanishes and indeed the temperature feels rather colder here than where we have come from. There are several Ringlets as we search but despite our best efforts we fail to find the butterfly we are looking for – though there is plenty of Rockrose - the foodplant on which it lays its eggs.

We have a little spare time and decide to make a final stop on our way back at a pond known to hold Northern Damselfly. We arrive to find the weather has got worse and is both cold and quite windy but Roy searches the shore for any of these little blue damselflies. We spot a couple of Large Red Damselflies and identify Marsh Cinquefoil with its lovely maroon flowers, but are right on the verge of giving up when Roy picks one out through his binoculars. It is hard to point out so in the end he gets it in the telescope and everyone gets to see the green underside, especially of the eyes, but the markings on the first segment of the abdomen are hard to see due to its angle. Buoyed up by finding one he searches for another and this one is within reach of a butterfly net! Soon we are all enjoying close up views in the hand as Roy lifts it up in the net for everyone to see. We are just about to take photos when it takes off much to our surprise! We realise that while Roy was lifting it up inside the net with his hand, he was also providing lots of warmth (he does have very warm hands!) and this had given it the energy to take flight. Maybe we'll return another day for photos if there is time.

Day 6 Today looks to be our only chance for heading up the hill to see alpine flowers but as we drive round towards the road up to the Cairngorm car park the sun is shining and we decide to try the White-faced Darter pool again. Wow... are we pleased we did!!! It is lovely and sunny as we arrive and there are Large Red Damselflies in numbers - but much better, and even better than White-faced Darter, a Northern Emerald dragonfly flies in and lands on the heather! This is remarkable and hardly ever happens and we soon get the scope on it so everyone can enjoy the moment. Astonishingly two more fly in - both males - and they chase each other round the ponds - Roy has never seen three together anywhere ever! Next a White-faced Darter appears and lands in full view and at the same time at least four Large Heath butterflies are flitting around in the background! A Common Hawker appears and a Rannoch Looper moth flies through too - it is all happening this morning!

Stuart Taylor was the warden at Loch Garten RSPB reserve for many, many years and retired several years ago but he still lives here and is very active

in recording the wildlife. Roy has not seen him since the 1980s but still recognised him when he arrived at the boardwalk and shows him the Northern Emerald. The two males are also still around and even he says he has never seen three before at the same time! He looks genuinely very excited and as we watch the dragonflies he explains he is here to help some guys filming Raft Spiders. Back at the minibus he fetches a couple of boxes as he has both a male and a female just in case he can't find any for them to film – the female might even be the one we saw the other day with her large egg case.

We are aware time is racing away and we have a long walk to do so we get on our way and are soon at the Cairngorms car park ready for our walk. The walk is a couple of miles or so each way but we stop regularly on the way up to check out the flowers as we go and almost straight away we are finding plants of interest.

There is plenty to see right from the start and we find a very nice mix of berry bearing bushes including plenty of familiar species but with three new ones... Cloudberry, Crowberry and Bog Bilberry. We are amazed by the number of Lesser Twayblade plants we find - even out in the open, and there are also loads of Heath Spotted Orchids looking perfect. There is an introduced species here too called White Woodrush and we find plenty of Stagshorn Clubmoss sprawling through the heather.

We walk on passing more Cloudberry with berries on it and then in wetter areas find some beautiful patches of Starry Saxifrage. The amount of Alpine Ladies-mantle is increasing as we gain height and we find some lovely patches of Dwarf Cornel in perfect condition. There are some huge sheets of Bearberry too in places pouring over the rocks and down the slope by the path.

We continue upwards and at a spot Roy knows he heads off the path to check a spot where he has found Scottish Asphodel in the past. This is a very rare plant here indeed - a species far more likely in the more base-rich rocky slopes in Tayside. It is a tiny flower and not easy to spot so we are very pleased when we find a small group of flowering spikes - they are small but delightful!

Further on we come to a spot where a stream crosses the path and here we find our first Globeflowers. Alpine Sawwort is here too though only a single plant has any open flowers – then as we are looking at this Roy notices Frog Orchids nearby. There are patches of Alpine Bistort too and shortly we gather round our first Interrupted Clubmoss - a strange looking clubmoss pinched in at regular intervals - hence the name.

Further on the vegetation becomes very short with areas of bare grit and we find more arctic species here such as Trailing Azalea (now over flower), Three-leaved Rush, Stiff Sedge, Alpine Clubmoss and Least Willow creeping

tight to the ground and with tiny tree trunks following the contours. We are surprised to meet Mike Dilger – a naturalist from the TV – with a small group and discuss our finds. We tell him some spots to try and he tells us where to find a Trailing Azalea in flower... and after wishing them farewell we head to the spot and soon find it. They are such tiny pink flowers it is hard to believe it really is an Azalea at all.

We finally get to the big boulder field where we search for more species to add to our growing list. First we enjoy searching out more Frog Orchids which seem to be having a good year as there are quite a few. We find the tiny leaves of Alpine Meadow-rue, lots more Globeflower and large bunches of Roseroot amongst the rocks. We find Northern Bedstraw, Alpine Bistort, lots more Alpine Sawwort, and a few other plants of interest including a Common Dog Violet still in flower! Despite searching we can't find any Alpine Speedwell and wonder if it has disappeared from this spot now.

We start back down by looping round to check out a lovely wet area with lots of Starry Saxifrage and plenty of the alpine form of Marsh Marigold. Here they are small plants with just a few leaves and perhaps three or four flowers per plant. We add nothing new on our way back down apart from a Grey Mountain Carpet moth and are soon back at the car park and after a coffee we drive back for another delicious evening meal.

Day 7 We start the day today by emptying the moth trap which has been set in the grounds overnight. Although we are in town there is a fabulous catch with over a hundred moths in the trap of over 30 species! Most impressive are the seven Poplar Hawkmoths – an astonishing number of these large and impressive looking beasties! We place them on tree trunks for a better photo - much nicer than in an egg carton! There are Light Emeralds, a Brimstone moth that is bright yellow, Antler, True-lover's Knot, Bright-line Brown-eye, The Snout, both Golden Y and Plain Golden Y, Angle Shades and a few stunning Burnished Brass that look like they coasted in places with metal that catches the light from only certain angles. There are many more as well as a few caddis flies and we keep a list that will be at the end of the report.

We have not yet been to Glen Affric but the forecast is not good there with rain and low cloud while further east the cloud is set to break up allowing a bit of sunshine - so we decide to stay local. Our attempt to find a Crested Tit failed the other day so we decide to try again and we are soon at Loch Garten where we enjoy lovely views of Siskin, Great Spotted Woodpecker and other common species as well as the Osprey on the nest – but still no Crestie. We enjoy a talk about the forest from one of the volunteers who also explains a little about the Cairngorms Connect project which is a great initiative. Back at the minibus we enjoy a coffee while watching a Grey Wagtail in a tiny pond in the middle of the car park.

We move on for another visit to the Northern Damselfly lochan and find it busy with Four-spotted Chasers - there are loads of them! There are plenty of Large Red Damselflies and Northern Damselflies and a single Common Hawker flies through. A beautiful Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary appears and lands right in front of us on the Marsh Cinquefoil - superb!

With lunchtime already past we dash up to a spot with a wonderful view of the Cairngorm mountains to enjoy the view while we eat. It is a superb spot for lunch and we enjoy the warmth of the sun before taking a look round. There are plenty of Heath Fragrant Orchids, but the species we have really come to try and find it Intermediate Wintergreen and we find some superb flowering spikes with ease – the stigma poking out of the bottom of the larger white flowers. We find two well over Small White Orchids and several non-flowering Lesser Twayblades under the heather. We are surprised to find Creeping Ladies Tresses here but still no open flowers. Julia tells us she used to see Small White Orchids a bit further along the road so we try her spot and soon find a single Small White Orchid with flowers providing our first chance to really see the flowers in close up. There are also plants of Bitter Vetch, Slender St John's-wort, Petty Whin and a few nice Heath Spotted Orchids.

With the sun still shining we decide to make another dash to our Northern Brown Argus site... and arrive to find it warm and sunny and our hopes rise that this time perhaps we will be successful. We have not gone far when Roy flushes one and manages to catch with his butterfly net. Once in a tub we can see all the details including the white spots in the underside but it seems like it doesn't want to open its wings to show us the white spots on the forewing - or at least only for half a second. Roy decides to try something a little risky to see if we can see the spots. We move into the shade and let the butterfly cool down then tip it into the cool grass. Here it flits from stem to stem before finding a patch of sunlight and hey presto... it opens its wings! Yay!!!

Before we leave we scan the loch the other side of the road finding a couple of Little Grebes and also identifying Least Waterlily again but more exciting are two Dark Green Fritillaries flitting around the thistles which is great as not everyone saw one the other day.

With a funny amount of time left before we need to be back we decide to visit Loch Mallachie for a final attempt at Crested Tit - but with no luck in a forest that seems to be totally silent but for the calls of a Common Sandpiper on the branch by the shore. However, it is not a total waste of time as after seeing so many Creeping Ladies Tresses with no open flowers – at last here are a few plants in which the lowest flower or two have opened – providing the chance to see these furry little flowers in close up at last.

Back at the hotel we take a short break before our evening meal and then a final run through the checklist and then we do our traditional round-up in which each person gets to choose a species of the trip, a favourite place and a 'magic moment'. With so many groups of species - birds, flowers, various insects and so on - we decide to allow a flower, a bird, an insect and a 'wild card' - something else of your choosing from any list. Amazingly this results in an impressive 15 species being mentioned ranging from eagles to Badger, Raft Spider, Burnished Brass moth, Northern Emerald dragonfly and Twinflower amongst many others. There are however three species that all received three votes however and these are Water Lobelia, Black-throated Diver and Otter.

Of the places we visited Laide Jetty is the outright winner with three votes while the corrie in the Cairngorms and our lunch spot at Gairloch also get a mention. When it comes to a magic moment – one person said that there were so many it is impossible to choose a single one – which can't be a bad thing. Sometimes, however, there is a moment on a holiday that does stand out as very special and watching the Golden Eagle and White-tailed Eagle playing together and dropping and catching whatever it was really was a very special moment – so it is not the least surprising that everyone else chose this as the magic moment of the week - something I doubt any of us will forget. Roy is delighted to receive a lovely card and a very nice thank you from everyone too and we spend a while chatting about what a great week we have had despite the weather – my thanks to everyone for a great week with lots of laughs!

Birds

Mute Swan
Greylag
Mallard
Wigeon
Teal
Eider
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Gannet
Shag
Grey Heron
Osprey
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Swift

Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sand Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap (h)
Willow Warbler
Wren
Spotted Flycatcher
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Treetreeper
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin

Dragonflies

Large Red Damselfly
Northern Damselfly
Four-spotted Chaser
Common Blue Damselfly
Common Hawker

Northern Emerald
White-faced Darter

Butterflies

Common Blue
Northern Brown Argus
Red Admiral
Small Pearl-bordered
Fritillary
Dark Green Fritillary
Speckled Wood
Ringlet
Meadow Brown
Small Heath
Large Heath

Mammals

Pipistrelle sp
Badger
Otter
Mink
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Mountain Goat
Red Squirrel
Wood Mouse
Bank Vole
Brown Hare
Rabbit

Reptiles and Amphibians

Common Frog
Common Toad

Moths

Chimney Sweeper
Common Wave
Six-spot Burnet
Rannoch Looper
Silver-ground Carpet
Snout
Map-winged Swift
Beautiful Golden-y
Plain Golden Y
Mottled Beauty

True-lover's Knot
Brown Rustic
Light Emerald
Brimstone
Poplar Hawkmoth
Pale-shouldered Brocade
Double Square-spot
Silver Ground Carpet
Dotted Clay
Ingrailed Clay
Grey Mountain Moth
Silver Y
Antler Moth
Angle Shades
Burnished Brass
Smokey Wainscot
Dark Arches
Middle-barred Minor
Small Square-spot
Large Yellow Underwing
Yellow Shell
Brimstone
The Spectacle
Flame Carpet
The Flame
Bright-line Brown-eye
Small Fan-footed Wave
Lychnis
Bordered White

Other

Raft Spider
Green Tiger Beetle

Plants

Least Waterlily
Globeflower
Marsh Marigold (alpine form)
Alpine Meadow-rue
Amphibious Bistort
Alpine Bistort
Northern Dock
Slender St-John's-wort
Round-leaved Sundew
Great Sundew

Common Rockrose
Mountain Pansy
Least Willow
Common Scurvygrass
Crowberry
Trailing Azalea
Bearberry
Cowberry
Bog Bilberry
Bilberry
Cloudberry
Common Wintergreen
Intermediate Wintergreen
One-flowered
Wintergreen
Serrated Wintergreen
Chickweed Wintergreen
Roseroot
English Stonecrop
Ragged Robin
Starry Saxifrage
Yellow Mountain Saxifrage
Marsh Cinquefoil
Alpine Ladies Mantle
Bitter Vetch
Petty Whin
Chickweed Willowherb
Dwarf Cornel
Heath Milkwort
Bogbean
Eyebright
Common Cow-wheat
Lousewort
Marsh Lousewort
Common Butterwort
Pale Butterwort
Water Lobelia
Northern Bedstraw
Twinflower
Common Valerian
Alpine Saw-wort
Melancholy Thistle
Mountain Everlasting
Bog Asphodel
Scottish Asphodel

Sneezewort
Purging Flax
Lesser Twayblade
Creeping Ladies Tresses
Greater Butterfly Orchid
Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Frog Orchid
Small White Orchid
Heath Fragrant Orchid
Heath Spotted Orchid
Common Spotted Orchid
Northern Marsh Orchid
Coralroot Orchid
Fir Clubmoss
Stagshorn Clubmoss
Interrupted Clubmoss
Alpine Clubmoss
... and many more!