

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### SCOTTISH MAMMALS IN SUMMER

5-12 August 2017

Guides: Duncan Macdonald & Craig Round

Guests: Louise & Sean Murray, Susan & Andrew Jardine, Marcia Blackman, Diana Smith, Sheila Jones, Janette Foster, Linda Fitch, Emma Pearcey, Michael Pearcey.

**Day 1** The guests arrive from various parts of the UK and we gather at Ballantean, in the pouring rain, and have a superb dinner and discuss the week's activities.

**Day 2** The day dawns dry, thankfully, and some are up and out before breakfast with both Roe and Red Deer being spotted. We have breakfast and decide to have a walk around Ballantean seeing as the weather is nice and clear.

As we walk down towards the river it is evident that there are large numbers of Meadow Pipits around. We get the odd Tree Pipit in amongst them as well. There are Buzzards mewing and beginning to soar in the fine weather. Down by the river we scope the Osprey nest and find a bird flying around while a little further on we find a Buzzard and an Osprey having a disagreement. Whilst walking the two guides have a conversation about Whinchat at Ballantean and why we don't see more migrants at this time of the year. There is a bird on a post a little way off and when we look through the scope we find that it is a Whinchat!

There is lots of Badger evidence along the path showing where they have been searching for food and at the sett we can see that the old bedding has been pulled out in readiness for winter. There are Scotch Argus butterflies on the wing and Pine Marten scat on the track. Chanterelle mushrooms line our way through Birch woodland as we return to the Steading for some well-earned coffee and shortbread.

We drive up the Findhorn Valley, or Strathdearn to give it its proper name, and stop by a bridge where there is a pair of Common Terns hovering over the river. A flotilla of Goosander floats by underneath and as we turn around there is a Red Kite low over the trees.

By a bridge over the River Findhorn we park up, set up and have lunch. There are groups of Red Deer on the skyline and shrews squealing from the grass around us. One or two Mountain Panseys are still in flower. After lunch we walk across the bridge and head towards a plantation. Sheila asks us if the bird she is looking at is a Kestrel. It is but the bird above isn't! The bird above is a White-tailed Eagle! We get great views of this huge bird and the size of it is highlighted as a Buzzard swoops in to mob it, looking like a mosquito. We pick up on another White-tailed Eagle, higher and more distant than the first, but both soon drift away up the valley.

Behind the plantation a heather hillside commands our view and it is here that we scan for Mountain Hare. It is not long before we have two in the scopes and can pick out the id features that separate this species from Brown Hare. There are Red Grouse high on the hill and more Red Deer visible on the ridge-line.

We drive to the end of the public road and have some coffee. Craig spots one of the Sea Eagles further up being mobbed by a Kestrel. We then spot two falcons above the ridgeline and they give us a bit of a headache. They keep appearing and vanishing from sight, but we eventually manage to realise that one is a young Peregrine and the other, another Kestrel. We also find a Raven and a close Buzzard.

We head home for a slightly earlier dinner and then meet up again after and drive round to our hide in the forest to settle down and wait to see what wildlife arrives through the dark hours. We get good views of Brown Hare and Roe Deer on the way there. There are loads of Wood Mice charging around the rocks at the front of the hide and they provide endless entertainment, but we do wonder if there will be any food left for other, larger creatures. Our waiting is rewarded with a bit of a Badger fest. We soon have four Badgers around the hide systematically hoovering up peanuts. There is a highlight of watching a Wood Mouse scoffing peanut butter six feet up a birch tree. What a great end to a great day.

### Day 3

Today we head up into the beautiful area of Glenmore where Loch Morlich adorns the feet of the Cairngorm Mountains. We have a good scan about over the loch where we notice that there are huge numbers of Swallows and Sand Martins along with smaller numbers of House Martins all wheeling around in the mizzle, low over the water, collecting insects. In amongst this hirundine soup, swoop the longer-winged, darker Swifts. We get a great chat going about the remarkable ecology of these supreme masters of the skies and enjoy watching their aerobatics.

After dropping Michael off at the Glenmore Visitor Centre the rest of us drive up to the Sugarbowl and join the throng of visitors (including those with light-sabres) to walk out to the Reindeer enclosure. There has been a Reindeer herd on these mountains since the 1950's and they are wonderful animals to get close to. And getting close is what this is all about. Indeed for those that wish to, we can even hand feed them. The staff of the Reindeer centre give us an enlightening introduction to the ecology of Reindeer, but we can't wait to feed them! It is great fun and it stays dry for the duration only starting to pour as we walk back to the vans.

We have lunch back down at the Glenmore Visitor Centre where there is pretty good Red Squirrel action behind the building on the feeders.

We drive down to a private estate on the edge of the Monadhliath Mountains and meet with the factor there, David. We get a warm welcome and a short introduction to the history of the estate. We then clamber back into the vans and follow his 4x4 up the track that leads out onto the open hill. We pass through nice looking forest and as we near the top of the forest, two large, dark birds emerge from the trees. Golden Eagles!!! We all leap out and get brief views of these birds as they lift and begin to drift away from us. We get back in and follow them uphill. We come out of the trees and park up then walk a few hundred metres uphill to a vantage point giving us spectacular views back down over Badenoch and to the Glen Feshie hills.

David talks to us about the management of the hill ground of the estate and is thankfully candid in his approach. With the 12 August looming it is refreshing to hear the "other side" of the debate about grouse. We may not agree with everything that is said but we all agree it is a highlight of the trip. The highlight only gets better when both eagles cruise back into view above us. They are definitely interested in what we are doing as they come closer and closer. The views we get of this, Britain's supreme terrestrial predator (sorry Sea Eagle, you just don't cut it) are quite simply breathtaking. The views are also prolonged, giving us the chance to look at plumage, shape and size difference between the two. Wow.

#### Day 4

After an early breakfast we set off for the West Coast. Our journey takes us up past Inverness, onto and across the Black Isle and out onto the Ullapool road. At Garve we turn off and head past Loch a' Chroisg to Kinlochewe, stopping at the viewpoint that looks down the valley.

At Gairloch we meet up with the boat staff who are going to take us out into the Minch. We all get suited and booted and head down to the boat where we meet Fraser the skipper and Lucy a Marine Biologist, specialising in cetaceans. The sun is warm, the sky is blue and we are soon full throttle

out into Gairloch Bay and beyond. Fraser takes us in a Northwest trajectory, heading towards the Shiant Isles. There are lots of Gannets around and we get good views of a couple of Great Skuas (Bonxie). We slow down for a group of Puffins that are close as well as Common Guillemots with chicks. The adults with the chicks will all be male as the females have already headed further out to sea. A Fulmar cruises by close and then a group of Kittiwakes lift from the surface and give us a great fly-by.

There are a good number of Storm Petrels seen, like House Martins at sea. The views back to the mainland and out to Skye and Harris are spectacular. The sea has hardly a swell on it as we head towards a couple of Scallop dredgers. Around these two vessels there is a swarm of birds. Mainly Gannets of all ages, Great Black-backed Gulls and Fulmars, but there are also good numbers of Bonxies. A beautiful Arctic Tern comes right over our heads. There are no fins of any description though.

Fraser decides to take us back towards Gairloch as the wind picks up a little sending more of a spray into the boat, but all is ok as Diana has placed herself in a position that blocks the spray from everyone else. What a star Diana, thank you! Suddenly the boat lurches to a halt as Lucy announces that there was a Minke Whale right in front of us. We stop and scan all around but if it was it doesn't resurface and we head back into Gairloch Bay. We pass some rocks where there are lots of Cormorants and Shags before heading back to the harbour. We meet up with Louise who didn't join us on the boat and plough into our lunches. All that sea air has given us an appetite. Some of us go back down to the pontoon where a big bull Grey Seal has been enticed in by scraps from a prawn boat. He is a cracker.

We drive around the coast to Laide where we park up and have a look while we are having coffee. Craig is quickly onto a couple of close Red-throated Divers. There are also Shags around and Linda finds one with a Red-breasted Merganser in attendance. There is some splashing further out and heading into the bay. We are delighted to see that it is a sizeable pod of Common Dolphins. They must be chasing a school of fish but are soon heading back out and gone. We realise why we didn't see anything from the boat; it was because Louise wasn't with us. Now that we are all together again we see dolphins!

Craig spots an adult Sea Eagle out over the island of Gruinard. It is distant but even from this range we can see just how huge it is and through the scopes we clearly see the white tail. We move around to a layby that overlooks Gruinard Island from the other side and quickly find an adult Sea Eagle on the summit of the island. Through the scopes we can see its massive yellow beak. There are still no Otters but we do find a raft of Black-throated Divers out in the bay. There is more splashing further out with

loads of gannets plunging into the sea. It is our pod of Common Dolphin again. How the Gannets miss the dolphins as they plunge into the sea is a mystery. It is a fitting way to finish our West Coast adventure as we head off to the Aultguish for dinner.

## Day 5

Sharon does us proud again at breakfast and replete we head north once more, this time to the Moray Coast. We drive north to the town of Forres where we use the loos and pay homage to the Forres Beaver before heading out through Elgin and to Tugnet, at Spey Bay, where the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Trust have a facility and we set up and scan about. Using the ground in front of the ice houses as a vantage point we find lots of gulls in the river mouth along with Sandwich Terns and a large group of Goosander. There are a few Gannets out at sea with more Sandwich Terns. Small trips of Linnet are coming up from the shingle when Emma spots an Osprey fishing over one of the river channels. Over lunch we watch it try and try again before heading away. It is replaced later with another bird, equally as unsuccessful.

We are here a while in the hope that some dolphins will make an appearance but they don't. It is quite cold and some use the warmth of the shop and café. There is only so long we are prepared to push it here so we pack up and head back towards Elgin where there is a small freshwater loch where we can shelter in a hide as it has started to rain.

We all squeeze in and enjoy the view out over the loch to extensive reed beds. There is platform in the water that has Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls on. Both species have bred on it and chicks of both species are begging for food. Out on the water there are plenty of Tufted Duck, Mallard, Wigeon and a good smattering of Little Grebes. The Greylags are beginning to huddle together and so are some of the Tufted Ducks. This can be a sign that an Otter is about but no matter how hard we look in all directions no sleek water mammal appear. There are feeders off the side of the hide and these are attracting Siskins, Coal Tits, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Red Squirrel. These keep us entertained.

Before we know it, it is time to go as we have quite a distance to go back over the Dava Moor, to the Steading and more of Sharon's sumptuous cuisine.

## Day 6

We have had two long driving days back to back, so we decide to keep local today. There is another reason for this as we are heading out later for another evening adventure later.

We start off with a visit to the local Osprey nest site on Loch Insh. There are no birds in sight when we get there although a Buzzard tries it's best to look like one. Goldeneye are on the loch looking a little scruffy as they enter their eclipse.

At the RSPB reserve of Insh Marshes there is a fabulous lookout hide with one of the finest views in Badenoch. Some of us use the roof to view from while those less hardy(!) elect to stay, underneath, indoors. We soon spot Roe Deer in various locations around the marshes including directly beneath us. The feeders get a constant flow of Great Tit, Blue Tit and Coal Tit as well as Chaffinch and Pheasant. We have a good laugh about an entry in the log book that we can't quite believe and that brightens us up.

We drive north to Boat of Garten and Loch Garten where we have lunch around the shore of the loch. This loch has provided us, in the past, with some memorable Otter sightings so with time running out we spend a little time here with our fingers crossed. We enjoy our rolls and cake but we get no Otter so we decide to take a walk through the forest here with the hope of maybe a Crested Tit or crossbill. We hear a churring and get onto a Crestie as a Heatherlea group emerge from further down the track. We all join forces and we get views of more than one bird in the end.

We head back to the Steading for a little down time as we are heading out again later in the afternoon. Once we re-muster we head south on the A9, deep into Perthshire. This is a new venture for us and we are all excited! We have to have dinner before our evening adventure, so we park up in the bonnie wee town of Dunkeld and head for the Bistro where we are expected. Dinner is lovely and the staff friendly, fortified we head around the corner to Loch of the Lowes. This Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) reserve is famous for its Ospreys but recently they have discovered that they have another, rarer resident; European Beaver.

It is for the opportunity of seeing this recent re-addition to our fauna that we have come here. We are met by Jane and her colleagues and given coffee and shortbread before heading into their crannog hide and given a presentation about Beaver ecology and their successes at Loch of the Lowes. Whilst this is going on we are scanning the water. There are Great Crested Grebe and Gadwall on the water when a young Osprey starts to call and flies in, perches and allows us great views. Jane graciously pauses the presentation so that we can all get a look. Suddenly her radio crackles into life and she is informed by colleagues elsewhere that there are two Beavers in the channel, now! We all train our binoculars in the direction of the channel and, well, we are staring into the eyes of two Beavers. What an experience. As we watch the two animals separate with one heading into an area of Water Lilly whilst the other appears to be heading

straight for us. We quieten down and open a few more windows as this animal swims closer and closer until it passes in front of the hide just yards away! It is ridiculously close and cameras are snapping away and there are plenty of smiles around the group. This guide has tears in his eyes, a real, wild Beaver in Scotland, superb. It swims across the loch and eventually disappears. But what of the other? Well we relocate it in the lilies, munching tubers. At one point it has its tail out of the water so we can see it clearly. It too then decides to cross the loch. It doesn't come anywhere as close as the first, but the views are still spectacular. What an experience! We thank the staff for their time and retrace our steps, back up the A9 and happily head to bed. Beavertastic!!

## Day 7

For our final day we are heading north to the Black Isle for another boat adventure. We have no time to stop on our way, so we head straight for the sleepy little town of Cromarty. Here we meet up with Sarah who runs EcoVentures, a fast RIB that will take us out into the Moray Firth in search of Bottle-nosed Dolphins. It is a windy day and the clouds are of a threatening grey as we suit ourselves up and head out to the boat. We really feel the wind as we walk down to the jetty and the amount of white horses on the water gives us an indication of how bumpy it might get. Louise, Sean and Janette have all opted to stay ashore, so we wave them farewell and head off.

The sea is bumpy, but not as bad as it looks. Sarah takes us out past the rigs parked in the Cromarty Firth and through the Sutors and out into the Moray Firth. The water is choppy still out here as we search first to the north and then to the south of the Sutors in the hope of a fin. There are Fulmars and gannets, Shags and Cormorants but nothing mammalian in the water that we can see. Sarah brings us back into the more sheltered water of the Cromarty Firth and we have a search around the rigs, but again there are no fins. We do get a couple of Eider. We head back to shore and agree that it was a lot of fun despite the lack of cetaceans. We have lunch in Cromarty.

We haven't given up on finding dolphins and so we head around to Fortrose where a point of land sticks out into the Moray Firth and where there is a well established watch point. Chanonry Point is now world renowned for dolphin watching and it is not long before we too are enjoying superb views of these wonderful animals. It is hard not to smile when looking at a dolphin. There are a good 6-9 animals and although we get no leaping and frolicking they are close and dolphins! Again we realise that we are seeing them because we are all together. We were missing three of the group on the boat, so were never going to see dolphins from there!

The Kessock Bridge carries the A9 over the sea at Inverness and we head underneath the bridge in the hope that we might be lucky with an Otter. There are Goosander out on the water and a lone Goldeneye and we even find another dolphin in the mouth of the River Ness, but alas, no Otters.

Our final dinner is again superb and afterwards we go through the checklist and our traditional votes for the holiday.

**Species of the Trip:** The Beavers came out top with Golden Eagle behind and Reindeer, Red Squirrel, Badger, Puffin and Storm Petrel all with votes.

**Place of the Trip:** The West Coast, including the boat trip, was a clear winner with Loch of the Lowes in second place.

**Magic Moment:** Usually very personal but the Beavers had 4 votes.

## Day 8

Sharon has provided us with another great breakfast to set us on our way as we say our farewells and head off home. What a great group, thanks to all for your fun and enthusiasm and we look forward to seeing you all again.



## MAMMALS

Common Shrew  
Short-tailed Vole  
Wood Mouse  
Red Squirrel  
European Beaver  
Rabbit  
Brown Hare  
Mountain Hare  
Badger  
Pipistrelle Bat  
Mountain Goat  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Reindeer  
Fallow Deer  
Common Dolphin  
Bottlenosed Dolphin  
Common Seal  
Grey Seal

**Total Mammals: 19**

## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Great Crested Grebe  
Little Grebe  
Fulmar  
Manx Shearwater  
Storm Petrel  
Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Tufted Duck  
Mandarin Duck  
Eider

Goldeneye  
Goosander  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Red Kite  
White-tailed Sea Eagle  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Golden Eagle  
Osprey  
Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Red Grouse  
Pheasant  
Oystercatcher  
Lapwing  
Dunlin  
Curlew  
Whimbrel  
Redshank  
Great Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Kittiwake  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Sandwich Tern  
Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
Puffin  
Rock Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl  
Swift  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Sand Martin  
Swallow  
House Martin  
Tree Pipit

Meadow Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Wren  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Whinchat  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Willow Warbler  
Goldcrest  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Crested Tit  
Coal Tit  
Great Tit  
Blue Tit  
Treetreeper  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Hooded Crow  
Raven  
Starling

House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Bullfinch  
Corn Bunting

**Total Birds: 96**

### **OTHERS**

Common Hawker  
Black Darter  
Red Admiral  
Green-veined White  
Scotch Argus  
Dark Green Fritillary  
Common Toad  
Common Frog  
Antler Moth

**Total Species: 124**