HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE 24/7

25 APRIL-2 MAY 2026

Guides Jane Atkins and Roy Atkins for second part of the week.

Guests Christine Shawyer, Wendy Good, Derek Capes, Peter Warden, Dave Thompson

Day 1 We all meet just before dinner after travelling by train or car to get to the beautiful Tigh na Sgiath Country House in Dulnain Bridge and are warmly welcomed by Iain. We enjoy the first of many delicious meals cooked by Elaine and get to know each other a little. Jane tells us all about the plan for the week.

Day 2 At breakfast we learn that Derek has had good views of a Red Squirrel from his bedroom window this morning. We enjoy a delicious breakfast and meet at the minibus at 9am. It is a beautiful morning, and the hotel garden is alive with bird song so we spend some time seeing what we can find. Peter spots a Sparrowhawk just before it flies behind a tall tree. It appears and we all see it soaring for a while looking pale and beautiful with the sun on its wings.

There are many birds flitting about including singing Chaffinches, Willow Warblers and Siskins and we also hear Greenfinches, Blackbirds, a drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Blackcap. A few of us see a Goldcrest though it is tricky so high in the trees. Iain calls us back into the breakfast room to watch the Red Squirrel out of the window in the garden at the side of the house, it scampers up a tree. We watch it for a while and head outside to be rewarded with a view of it sitting for a while in the V between two large branches. We meet two birdwatchers, James and Bob who are also staying at the hotel.

We head off for the day. Just along the road we see a pair of Mistle Thrushes and two Oystercatchers in a field.

After driving through Aviemore towards Kingussie, we stop and walk under a small rail bridge to see what we can find on Loch Insh. There are boaters there and a fisherman but Peter points out Goldeneye near the shore and people get some nice views of those, and the lighting is especially good on some others. There are Teal and Mallard and further out a Mute Swan is feeding. Christine finds a Tufted Duck some distance away. There is a pair of Red-throated Divers, their bills slanting upwards, offshore, they are silhouetted by the sparkling water and we can't see the markings. A fishing boat disturbs them and we relocate them at the other end of the loch by the water sports centre. Jane spots a Buzzard soaring quite close.

We head on our way towards Spey Dam, some of us spotting brightly coloured painted wildcats in Newtonmore. There are Oystercatchers and small numbers of Greylag Geese in the fields and we pass some Wild Goats. The springtime is perfect now with the birch and larch just coming into leaf.

Once we leave the main road, we drive slowly looking for what we can see. There are Swallows flying around a barn and a small number of Greylag Geese. We also see Red-legged Partridge in the field just after the farm. We make a brief stop at a corner in the road by the river where a flock of 40-50 Common Gulls are flying about and calling as we arrive; a local colony. Christine makes the point that the calls they make makes you realise why they are called Mew Gulls in some countries. There are farmed Fallow Deer with young in the field. We scan the tops and see a Raven.

We head along stopping to see what we can see. A rusty metal deer, likely used for target practice, briefly fooled some of us into thinking it was a Red Deer. We scan for raptors with little luck but upstream of Spey Dam we hear Common Sandpipers calling loudly and displaying. We enjoy good views of them through the scope and momentarily two land very near us before flying off again.

There is virtually no wind and further along the water is flat calm. We notice two Grey Heron standing by the water's edge. Then two sawbills come into view, swimming at times with their heads down looking for fish and then diving to catch them. These cause puzzlement as it appears to be a male Red-breasted Merganser with a female Goosander fishing together as if they are a pair! They are joined by two more female Goosanders. The Goosanders all have a sharp border between the dark neck and the white chest while the Red-breasted Merganser is a smart male with a shaggy crest.

We continue to the bridge at Garva for lunch and have a relaxed time sitting in the sun either by or on the bridge and enjoying the view. Sand Martins are flying around and Peter finds a Meadow Pipit just sitting quietly on a rock in the middle of the river until, of course, it flies off as soon as we try to show it to anyone else. Wendy and Derek see a Grey Wagtail, enjoying the brightness of the yellow, and there is a Pied Wagtail looking very smart. It is so peaceful here. Jane points out a few Red Deer past the bridge and we enjoy three Buzzards flying by the hillside but no other raptors. A very smart male Stonechat settles briefly on a small tree by the bridge.

We head off and, after a short distance, see our first Wheatear of the year, posing on a fence post, we think there are two. Just after that we see a pair of Stonechats and a little later a Canada Goose – an unusual bird in this area but becoming more common in recent years. We stop when we see a close Brown Hare and by manoeuvring the minibus we all get good views through the fence. As we head back along the road we see more hares in the fields.

After a loo stop in Kingussie, we head to the RSPB lookout at Insh Marshes and enjoy the scene with scattered pools of water amongst the grassland. Almost immediately we hear a Curlew calling and Christine finds our first one; initially asleep with its bill tucked in but eventually it lifts its head, and we can see the long, curved bill. There are scattered Greylag Geese and a flock of about a dozen Pink-footed Geese take off and fly away. There is a pair of Wigeon and Christine finds Redshank and we hear them calling. We enjoy our time seeing what we can and then head off to a sight where we can check out an Osprey nest. There is a bird sitting on the nest, clearly feeling warm in the sun as she has her beak open. Through the telescopes, we can clearly see the markings on her face and her pale eye. After enjoying our view of the Osprey, we head back to the hotel for an early meal and fill in the checklist for the day so far, before heading out to the mammal hide.

Harris greets us in the carpark at Inshriach. This used to be an alpine nursery, and we enjoy a brief look at some fabulous and unusual plants in the garden on our way to the hide. Once in the hide Harris explains about the different animals and while his is talking a male Badger shows up, clearly looking for food! He will have to wait. After baiting the logs with peanut butter and putting out peanuts and raisins we are treated once again to the same male. We enjoy great views of him as he feeds for a while in front of us and we note how pale he looks. He heads back down the path, and we can see him having a scratch and wallow in some dusty soil on the track and we wonder if he is trying to get rid of pests.

Jane's been looking out the opposite side of the potting shed and she sees a couple of bats flying around and Harris gets out the bat detector, we head out of the hide briefly to hear the amazing beat-box like sounds of their echo sounding. Harris identifies these as Soprano Pipistrelles.

We head back into the hide and are treated to a second Badger. Harris points out that she has a narrower face than the male - she finds plenty to eat. We briefly hear a Snipe call and a Tawny Owl and a few of us get very brief glimpses of small mammals but none show for long at all and the Pine Martens are unfortunately shy tonight.

We head back to the hotel having had a lovely evening.

Day 3 We are heading for the Moray Coast today, but we will stop at a local loch called Lochindorb on the way. As we travel, we see burned moorland and Jane tells the group about the Dava Moor fire which burned last summer (2025) over an extensive area and we swap stories about wildfires.

Jane sees a Red Grouse on the roadside, but it was not possible to stop on the main road, we drive slowly along the Lochindorb road looking for more, passing Meadow Pipits and a singing Skylark. We find a male Red Grouse looking quite

regal perched up a little back from the road and pause where we can enjoy good views. He is joined by a female and we see another female walking on the road behind us. We drive on and come across David Hull, another Speyside guide who is day guiding a couple. They are watching the local pair of Black-throated Divers on the far side of the loch. The water is a little choppy and they keep diving but everyone gets to see them before we then lose sight of them for a while. Christine calls out that she's found them again and one comes quite close and we get some fabulous views through our telescopes. They are such a stunning bird. Further along the shore we see Redshank, the sun makes the legs look bright red and we also see good views of Common Sandpipers on the shore.

On the drive to Forres, those of us who have been before note that the Common Gull colony is not there this year, maybe they have moved elsewhere. Peter sees a colony of Sand Martins by the road, it is not possible to stop though, so it is a Peter only pleasure! In Forres we stop at the toilets and admire Grant Park and the lovely children's "vegetable" garden with many flowers - what a lovely venture! We also make a brief stop at Sueno's stone, a Pictish carved stone standing more than 6m high. It is understood to be over 1000 years old. We enjoy a snack and a cuppa before heading to the coast at Burghead

As we get out of the minibus, we see a Rock Pipit on the path which flies up and perches in silhouette on a cliff-like rock outcrop. It is quite smelly here, but we persevere for a while. Christine finds a Turnstone and a Dunlin with the black belly of its breeding plumage. There is a Common Gull on the beach. We enjoy our lunch while looking for birds - a Rock Pipit display-flighting and singing from a house gable, more Turnstones, a small group of Redshank and Jane finds a Purple Sandpiper. We admire a very handsome Greater Black-backed Gull which lands on a rock in front of us and poses regally. We see a few Guillemots offshore but there is little else on the sea, then Dave spots some largish birds flying by. Jane sees them too and to our surprise they appear to be Brent Geese - but they are so quick non-one else gets onto them.

We head off to Lossiemouth making a stop at Hopeman on the way for ice cream or coffee. Such a choice; Whisky and Scottish tablet and Sea Buckthorn are the unusual ones chosen.

After an unintended tour of Lossiemouth and a beautiful view of the wonderful beach, we end up where we want to be by the estuary. The tide is out and the sun is behind us and lights up the Turnstones, Ringed Plover and Dunlin on the muddy shore just in front of us and a flock of Herring Gulls are bathing. Among the Herring Gulls are a small number of Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls allowing us to compare their size and colour.

Christine finds two Black-tailed Godwit and there is a pair of Wigeon, a small number of Teal, Mallard, and a Mute Swan. There is one Dunlin in winter plumage and others are in the breeding plumage looking smart with ginger on the back and black bellies. We can hear Goldfinch singing. It is such a beautiful and busy scene, then suddenly everything takes off and looking for what has upset everything, we see an Osprey glide over. We get fabulous views of it lit up underneath by the sun as it flies remarkably close and then away. Everything settles down again.

We head off to Loch Spynie RSPB reserve, passing pigs and piglets on the way. We enjoy the birds at the feeders in the car park seeing good views of Tree Sparrows, Chaffinches, Blue Tits, Greenfinches, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, Yellowhammer and Wren. We walk down to the hide by the loch and hear Little Grebes calling as we approach and singing Chiffchaff and Willow Warblers. On the lake there is a platform with very noisy Black-headed Gulls and we soon find the Little Grebes, displaying Goldeneye, feeding Mute Swans and a few Tufted Duck. A flock of about 150 Pink-Footed Geese fly over. We enjoy seeing some Reed Buntings in the reeds on the far side of the Loch and try unsuccessfully to turn them into Bearded Tits! Peter spots a pair of Shovelers flying past.

Back at the car park there is a Red Squirrel on and in the feeders and Goldfinches in the treetops. We take a scenic route home, enjoy another delicious meal, complete our checklists and go over the plan for tomorrow.

Day 4 Yet another a beautiful morning, sunny and calm and we head off to a lochan nearby to see Slavonian Grebes. We approach the loch quietly and find a pair of Goldeneye are courting, the male throwing back his head a few times and the female lying very low in the water with her head and neck outstretched towards him. They couple for a few moments; the female almost totally submerges under the water except her eyes and the top of her head. They repeat this courtship a few times, before the female shakes herself and swims off. The beautiful morning light makes it extra special.

The water is almost totally calm with the reflections of the trees making lovely colours on the water. We walk around to the large part of the loch and almost immediately see our first pair of Slavonian Grebes near the opposite bank. They come a bit closer and through the scope they are beautiful. A second pair are seen at the far side of the loch and don't seem too disturbed by a man sitting on the shoreside. Common Sandpipers call as they fly about: they are so mobile, they prove challenging to see through the scope except distantly. The peace is challenged by the sound of a flock of 20-30 Herring Gulls bathing and some quite noisy Greylag Geese. Christine has been looking carefully and adds Coot and Moorhen to our trip list, both scarce birds in this area.

On the way back to the minibus Peter draws our attention to Polypore fungus on a fallen Birch and its stump, pointing out that the fungi have grown after the tree fell, because the fruiting bodies are facing down on the log which is the way they grow.

We drive through Carrbridge and head to Strathdearn (also known as the Findhorn Valley). Willow Warblers and Chaffinches are singing as we enjoy coffee by a bridge hoping for Dippers – but with no luck. There is a Pied Wagtail but little else. We drive to the end of the road and sit in the sun munching our lunch, scanning the sky and skyline and enjoying the lovely view. We see several Buzzards over the hills including one displaying, dropping like a stone before coming out of the dive.

Most of us walk a bit further up the valley to look for Mountain Hare on the slopes. We have nice views of perching Wheatears. Dave stays by the minibus enjoying the peace and the view. It is a very warm afternoon and we wonder if that has made the wildlife inactive as we find no eagles or Mountain Hares sadly, just a Kestrel on the way back.

Heading back out of the valley we stop at a new café and sports centre for toilets and ice-cream / tea and enjoy the great view. We discuss options and decide to go for a walk in the forest and hope of maybe seeing Tree Pipits, other birds and a nice view of the Cairngorms. We walk amongst varied tree species and appreciate the shade they provide while Dave sits and enjoys the view. We have one or two good views of Willow Warbler and Chaffinch which are singing all the time and find some Siskin in the treetops. It is quiet wildlife-wise but we enjoy the walk and the lovely view towards the Cairngorms.

We eat at the Old Bridge Inn in Aviemore for dinner, and enjoy some very interesting and tasty food - the most popular dish being the rhubarb and custard trifle which must have made us all tipsy as, when we get out of the minibus later and gather our stuff for watching Beavers, we have quite a giggle with people losing things; someone found they had put someone else's coat in their bag - no wonder we couldn't find it. Roy has now joined us for the rest of the holiday.

We enjoy the mile walk to a small loch in the beautiful evening sunshine and sit or stand by the dam. The Beaver lodge is on the right of the loch, and we sit quietly and watch. We are watching a pair of Goldeneye displaying in the small bay in front of us when Roy spots six Goldeneye chicks followed by their mother coming round the corner into the bay. The ducklings are very cute, but their mother and the male have quite a violent scrap. We suspect this is about defending her young and are relieved when it calms down and she can take them away and he returns to his first female.

After some time Roy spots our first Beaver swimming behind the reeds - it disappears and all seems quiet then we realise that the dark blob on the far bank, is the Beaver! In fact there are two blobs: two Beavers feeding together. The light level is dropping but we can see them moving through our telescopes and we agree that side-on they look a bit like Capybara! We watch for a while, before they disappear, then before the light fails, we go on to the tiny promontory and can see that many trees have been gnawed through and have been fallen on the bank, with many more on the opposite side of the loch. The Beavers were only released here a couple of years ago in 2024, but they have been busy and have raised four kits. Christine spots the Beaver again in the same place, as we watch it goes into the water and some of us see it swimming briefly, but the light levels are fading.

We have a few moments of quiet and enjoy the moment with Pipistrelle Bats flying around us reflected in the water. The moon is bright and we enjoy our walk back to the minibus with some hearing a roding Woodcock and, near the entrance gate, we hear a female Tawny Owl and Dave sees it flying against the sky between the trees. A great finish to the day. At Tigh na Sgiath we are warmly welcomed back by Iain and Elaine and choose our breakfasts for the following morning.

Day 5 After an early breakfast at 7am, we get on our way around 8ish for a long day to the west coast. Heading up past Inverness we glimpse a Red Kite along the way before making our first stop for loos near a waterfall. We look at the river and after a few moments of searching Wendy spots the Dipper we are hoping for. We get the impression it is nesting in a small cliffy area on the far side and enjoy several fabulous views as it comes in and poses and dives into the rapid water to catch food. We see Red Admiral and Peacock butterflies in the car park.

Well pleased, we get back on our way heading next to a loch where Black-throated Divers have nested in the past. We arrive to find a group of birders already looking and they tell us there is no sign of any divers this year. We are indebted to them, however, for pointing out a circling Golden Eagle which provides rather distant, but good views through the scope. We are even able to see its golden nape. After the other group have left, we are pleased to find a Greenshank on the far side of the loch and a gorgeous Redpoll in the bushes in front of us. We continue slowly along the road and at the far end stop to watch a 'snorkelling' Red-breasted Merganser (which we thought was a diver at first) and a Teal as we all enjoy a cuppa.

It is a long but enjoyable drive, and the scenery just gets better and better as we go. With clear blue skies and snowy patches on the higher mountains it is beautiful and so clear. We pause to enjoy the view from a viewpoint and hear Skylarks singing. There is a real bonus: someone selling coffees! We drop down to the coast but the usual layby we stop at is full of minibuses and birders

and we decide to swap the order for the day and head straight to another spot further on where we intend to have lunch. On the way we stop to look at two Cuckoos on the wire just off the side of the road.

We have the jetty to ourselves and its lovely in the warm sunshine as we start scanning the bay almost immediately picking up Arctic Terns which are calling and our first Great Northern Divers. They are close at first and what a sight they are - just glorious with some birds in full breeding plumage. Over to our right are a group of Common Seals 'banana-ing' on the rocks and nearby there are Red-breasted Mergansers and several Shag. We see several more Great Northern Divers and a couple of distant Black-throated. A small number of Guillemots with a Razorbill in amongst them are out in the bay and two Common Sandpipers fly in calling loudly and look so tiny beside a Herring Gull. A group of four Whimbrel fly past, then after a fly round drop in on the shore but annoyingly out of sight. When they leave a few minutes later their calls make the identification totally certain. We get great views of Ravens. The bank behind us is covered in Primroses and a few Dog Violets plus a scatter of Bluebells just opening.

After we have found as much as we are able to here and enjoyed our lunch, we decide to head to a beach at the end of the road. We drive slowly looking out for small birds as we go. We see Wheatears here and there and a field full of Meadow Pipits and perched Mistle Thrush. The gorse everywhere here is stunning and completely smothered with yellow flowers making quite a show. Right at the end of the road, we are pleased to find a small group of Rock Doves perching on the rocks and Roy points out that they are all the same as one another, with white rumps and two strong wing bars. There is something rather nice about seeing proper wild Rock Doves; the ancestors of our highly variable domestic and Feral Pigeons.

We walk down to the beach and pass more Wheatears, Meadow Pipits, a female Linnet and on the beach, we see super-smart male White Wagtail - a very nice surprise. In the bay in front of us there are several Arctic Terns, a Black Guillemot and a gorgeous Red-throated Diver its red throat catching the sunlight. We enjoy watching a smart pair of Ringed Plovers running around at the edge of the beach.

Time is flying by and we don't want to leave, so Jane gives us a moment to just take it in quietly and we just enjoy the wonderful views with the mountains in the background and the sunshine before final heading to the vehicle. From here we decide it might be wise to head to some loos before the long drive home, so we drive the short distance to Altbea and are soon joined by the other birders who have also come for a toilet stop. Lots of pairs of eyes available to scan the bay make a difference and someone spots a bird over the Isle of Ewe across the bay. They are not sure what it is and soon everyone is trying to see it - and wow - it is a Short-eared Owl! We watch as it flies low initially then starts

perhaps displaying a little with deep wingbeats as it gains height. With the sun behind it, it looks beautiful through the scope despite being so distant. Then, astonishingly, a male Hen Harrier appears over the same island, and we watch it for some time as it quarters the ground pausing here and there to drop to the ground. What a treat!

Despite shortage of time, we decide to make a final stop looking towards Gruinard Island. We are hoping for a White-tailed Eagle but have no luck, however, the bay is scattered with birds including two Red-throated, two Black-throated and at least half a dozen Great Northern Divers. Christine finds a Black Guillemot and there are Common Guillemots too plus a couple of Red-breast Mergansers. We don't want to leave, but it is a long drive back and we head for home enjoying the fabulous scenery as we go. Not far down the road we come across a couple of female Wild Goats and their little fluffy kids - so cute!

Day 6 Wendy and Derek decide to have a relaxing father and daughter day today. The rest of us set off for the day. Other birdwatchers have been seeing Black Grouse mid-morning so we decide to try. At the site we see a Red Kite being mobbed by Curlew and Lapwings and a couple of Red-legged Partridges, a couple of Oystercatchers and some Greylag Geese - but sadly there are no Black Grouse.

After having a good scan, we decide to check on the other side of the moor, so we pass through Grantown and beyond. Disappointed we see someone cycling up the track and realise that had there been any Black Grouse, they would have been flushed. We do see a Red Grouse however, and enjoy very close views of Willow Warbler and lovely views out across the moorland, but time is flying by already and we want to go to Abernethy Forest and then up to the Cairngorms.

A few days ago, while he was with his identification class group, Roy discovered a Crested Tit nest hole, so we walk straight there and watch. After some time, all we have seen are Chaffinches, but we have heard a Redstart singing. It is hard to know whether to search for this or watch the hole. Then, suddenly the Crested Tit flies out and away before returning a few minutes later and vanishing straight into the hole! Goodness, this is harder than we thought.

After some time while Christine and Jane stay to watch the hole the rest of us head on down to where Roy had seen Redstart and Tree Pipits a few days ago. Despite the lovely weather, or perhaps because it is too warm, none of them are singing this morning. It is very quiet and we are very disappointed to find neither but Jane and Christine have seen the Crested Tit again, leaving and returning to the hole and we are delighted when the partner of the one

in the hole comes close, the one in the hole comes out and is fed while trembling its wings. We enjoy brief but good views before one flies off and the other goes back into the tree-hole.

Our next stop is Loch Morlich where we enjoy wonderful views across to the Cairngorms as we eat lunch. We are joined by Harris who is going to come with us up the Funicular railway so we can head out from the top if there is not too much snow. We take the railway to the top looking out for birds as we go – then enjoy a coffee outside on the terrace while scanning in every direction and checking every rock and stone in the entire view, but despite our best efforts we fail to find any Ptarmigan. The only bird we spot the whole time is a very close Raven - it looks huge. It is so clear that looking one way we can see Ben Nevis and a long range of distant mountains in the far west and to the north we can see the Moray coast.

We take a short walk finding Fir Clubmoss and Mountain Crowberry but nothing else of note. It is still very snowy and the track we would have taken is under snow with skiers still enjoying it so it is impossible to go far and eventually we call it a day and head back down.

On the way down in the funicular, it is frustrating for all that Roy and Harris spot Ring Ouzel, but it is out of view so fast that no-one else manages to see it. Back at the car park we decide to walk round to the alpine garden and look for Ring Ouzel. We get close views of Willow Warbler below us in the willows then further along, as we cross a bridge over a steep, small stream, Harris spots a Water Vole! This is a great surprise, and being one of the native Scottish Water Voles it is jet black! This really is a treat and we are thrilled as it stays out munching away on grass and buttercup leaves before a second appears and to our amazement dives straight into the stream despite the speed of the flow. Surely it will be washed away, but a moment later it is out on the other bank which seems remarkable.

We drive down to the lower car park to see if we can find a Ring Ouzel here instead but again we have no luck despite real persistence, just finding Meadow Pipits, Willow Warbler and a Pied Wagtail, plus a very smart male Red Grouse - but as we head back to the vehicle we are astonished to discover a Whinchat! This really is a big surprise, and we enjoy some fabulous views through the scope before it flies off.

Back at Tigh na Sgiath, we meet up again with Wendy and Derek who have had a lovely relaxing day to themselves enjoying the hotel, Castle Roy and some local birding with Redstart and Golden Eagle the highlights.

Day 7 This is Black Grouse morning, and we head off just after 6am passing several Brown Hares along the way and a couple of Roe Deer plus a Curlew. We are delighted to find several birds strutting their stuff and quietly open the minibus door. Immediately we can hear their bubbling call. They are far enough away not to be disturbed by us getting out and setting up scopes and they look fabulous in the glorious sunshine, all shiny with a blue sheen on their backs. Their white tails are fanned so the impression is not so much a black bird as half black and white. We count seven birds and enjoy watching them running up and threatening each other.

We spend plenty of time just enjoying the spectacle while also picking out other species nearby… Greylags, Red-legged Patridge, a Wheatear and Willow Warblers everywhere. We also see both Greenfinch and Siskin in the nearby conifers and hear a distant Cuckoo.

It has been a wonderful start to the day but, being greedy for more and having a little spare time before breakfast, we drive a little way towards Lochindorb. We disturb a Buzzard from a post as we turn off the main road then find a Red Grouse is not far from the roadside, so we pause for a look, and spot another bird silhouetted against the skyline. It looks slim and we feel a little puzzled, then it turns its head to reveal a typical plover type bill - it is a Golden Plover! A few breed on this moor but this is a fabulous find, and we enjoy fantastic views before realising there is a second bird, an even smarter one with black belly and dark face, very close by. We drive to the loch to see if we can see any divers but there is no sign and we must head back for breakfast.

After breakfast we gather again and have a panic over lost minibus keys. It turns out that they had already been on the passenger seat when Derek climbed in and sat on them! What a relief. We head north towards Inverness, making a loo stop just beyond Kessock bridge. From this vantage point we are delighted to find a Porpoise! We drop down and drive along the coast scanning carefully for Otters as we go. Sadly, there is no sign of any, but we are amazed to discover up around ten or so Whimbrel scattered along the coast. We pass Mute Swans and Shelduck and a few Mallards but little else.

Our next port of call is Chanonry Point famous for its dolphins and we deliberately aim to be there on a rising tide. The Bottlenose Dolphins are there when we arrive, a little distant to start with. We walk out to the point to enjoy some lovely close-up views. They calmly surface again and again and we think there are three at least just off the point: one is a young one. Shortly, another two come in to join them, one of which is carrying a fish, which looks to be an enormous Salmon! At times it seems to look like it is spitting it out and then taking it back in again. We are thrilled with the views as one of the Dolphins almost comes right out of the water. As well as Dolphins there are occasional

birds and we see several Guillemots, a Red-throated Diver, a Kittiwake, a couple of Common Terns and a small number of Gannets. Back at the van we also find a single Turnstone on the shingle while we enjoy a cuppa.

We drive across the Black Isle to the RSPB hide at Udale Bay. We are astonished to discover a lorry tipped well over to one side with the wheels totally down into the mud at the side of the road. If it had gone in any deeper, it looked like it would have tipped right over!! Two forlorn looking men are sat in the layby waiting to be rescued.

When we park up, a Red Kite is perched on a stump out on the salt marsh and flaps away, quite lazily. At the hide we see a flock of several hundred Pink-footed Geese (they seem quite late in the month and will be on their way north to breed) and there are also 40-50 feeding in the field by the road and these look fabulous through the scope. Derek watches these for a while and then spots a Reed Bunting flitting about in the grasses nearby and with some perseverance we get some good views. There is also a big flock of Oystercatchers but no other obvious waders. We enjoy great views of the Reed Bunting, a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers, a group of very distant Eiders, more Shelduck and a distant flock of Curlew. It is a good spot to enjoy our lunch with seats in the hide and such a nice spectacle. Well-fed we head off to Cromarty - but before we leave, we can't resist watching the lorry being slowly winched out of its predicament and it is soon back on the road.

We pause along the way to enjoy great views of Eiders just off the shore then arrive in Cromarty where we discover a pub selling the most fabulous ice creams! We have half an hour free time, and some explore the town while others explore the museum, before we all meet up and head down to the harbour area to a pair of Long-tailed Duck in breeding plumage. This plumage is not so commonly seen in the UK so it is interesting to see - and we also find Red-breasted Mergansers, Guillemots and distant Eiders.

We decide to drive back towards a layby where, in the past, we have found plenty of Scaup. On the way we make a stop to enjoy more Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks and a Red-throated Diver in breeding plumage. At the layby a Yellowhammer is singing and Wendy finds a Curlew quite close on the edge of the water; it's a nice close view and is good to see how they differ to the Whimbrel we saw earlier. We are pleased to find many Scaup, they are scattered over a large area and are quite distant, but their white sides show well in the sun. There are a few Long-tailed Duck with them and a flock of Eiders are all gathered calling, and we can make out the amusing calls of the males. Someone spots an Osprey hovering and it flies and hovers and is initially quite high, then it drops and hovers a few times before it finally dives in – fabulous to see but it doesn't catch anything.

It is time to head for home, and we get on our way making one final stop just to check whether a particular spot by the main road still has Ring Ouzels like it did years ago. Roy has a feeling they no longer nest here so perhaps it is not so surprising to see nothing, but we do have a nice view of a Kestrel overhead.

From here we head home allowing extra time for packing before for our special evening meal. After the meal we have coffee and chocolates in the lounge, go through the checklist and then have a lovely round-up of the week each sharing two favourite species, a place of the week and a magic moment. We are joined by our fellow birders James and Bob who we've chatted to every day during the week.

A wide variety of species are chosen by people with three choosing Black Grouse and two choosing Whinchat. Other species include Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle, Badger, Beaver, Water Vole, Dolphins, Great Northern Divers, Crested Tit and Goldeneye. The favourite places were also varied with one person wanting to move to Cromarty, another loved the Black Water Falls and two choosing Melon Udrigle. The Old Spey Bridge and the moorland with the Black Grouse were also chosen. One person chose Tigh na Sgiath Country House - a perfect choice, it's been a fabulous place to stay.

It's lovely to hear about people's magic moments. For two of us it was the dolphins and watching them play with the salmon, one had seen dolphins there several times before but never being so active. For another it was the moment he saw the Water Vole at Cairngorm, his first in Scotland and so unexpected. Two of us chose the time we were at Lossiemouth watching all the birds washing and feeding and being so close with the sun on them showing their plumage so well only to be made even better by the Osprey flying over and putting everything up. Another person said it was many moments relating to the kindness, patience and showing and explaining what things were and the smile on her father's face after seeing the dolphins. James and Bob, the two birders at our hotel, shared their moments enjoying the Osprey at Loch Insh and the White-tailed Eagle that they were lucky enough to see at Gruinard (we were not jealous at all). With so much variety and lovely comments we are all agreed that it's been a lovely week and a big thank you to everyone for being such a lovely group and looking out so well for each other.

Day 8 We gather for a final breakfast together and Wendy passes over a lovely card to Jane thanking her for a wonderful trip. Then we say our fond farewells and thank Iain and Elaine for their fabulous hospitality and head off back to our various homes.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Brent Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Scaup
Tufted Duck
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Black Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Little Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Purple Sandpiper
Turnstone
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Greenshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Whimbrel
Snipe (h)
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Stock Dove
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Short-eared Owl
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Sand Martin
House Martin
Swallow
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
White Wagtail (subspecies)
Grey Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Wheatear
Whinchat
Stonechat
Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Carrion Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Badger
Common Seal
Bottlenose Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Fallow Deer (farmed)
Wild Goat
Red Squirrel
Brown Hare
Rabbit
European Beaver
Water Vole
Soprano Pipistrelle

OTHER

Red Admiral
Peacock
Small Tortoiseshell
Speckled Wood
Small White
Orange-tip
Brimstone Moth
Green Tiger Beetle
Brimstone Moth
Rove Beetle