

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SPEYSIDE 24/7

22-29 APRIL 2017

Guides: Julian Sykes & John Grierson

Guests: Pamela & Malcolm Mundy, Liz & Roger Ackroyd, Viki & Paul Ahearn, Clare Watson, Sue Ripley, Pat Fear, John Bescoby, John Robinson

Day 1 We all arrive safely and surprisingly after the forecast, the sun is shining through the broken cloud occasionally - it's great to be here. The Steading has a new porch, a light and airy space which is great for getting boots on or just sitting and watching the birds outside. A few of guests go out for a walk before dinner and are rewarded with great views of Siskin, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Coal, Great and Blue Tit at the feeding station. On one train station run Julian and his three guests are very lucky and see a Red Squirrel at the side of the road – what a great start to the holiday. Dinner, cooked by Sharon is very welcome despite the late hour, with John finally arriving with our last two guests – Sue and Pat. Following dinner, we relax with a cup of tea/coffee, as the lead guide, John, runs through what our potential schedule will be for the week ahead. A welcome night's sleep beckons...

Day 2 The morning starts with John and Julian emptying the moth trap with just a few species – Iron Prominent, Hebrew Character, Clouded Drab and Common Quaker. The local Birch trees are alive with Siskin and a few Lesser Redpoll, plus a Great Spotted Woodpecker appears in a dead oak nearby. There is a fair bit of activity but at 8am we settle down for our first full breakfast of the week before getting ready to leave an hour later. Our first stop is the nearby Uath Lochans and stopping at the car park on this cold grey morning we get ready for a slow walk around the pine-fringed pools. It is initially pretty quiet with the sights, songs and calls of Chaffinch, Robin, Blackbird, Great Tit, Coal Tit and Goldcrest. We hear the song of a Tree Pipit and after a bit of searching we find it at the top of a tall conifer and we have good looks through the telescope. Soon enough we are at the side of the lochan seeing Goldeneye, Mallard, Little Grebe and a couple of Grey Heron. John says he's saw a migrant White Wagtail with the resident Pied Wagtails but it cannot be relocated so we move on around the edge of the water. It now opens up and a Willow Warbler is singing as we head out on the boardwalk through the phragmites bed. This is fairly productive as we manage to find a few Reed Buntings, along with Common Buzzard, Greylag Geese and several Siskins

flying over. It's time for our morning hot drink so we start back towards the car park stopping as John shows us a Treecreeper in with a lovely mixed flock of Goldcrest, Coal and Great Tits. Back at the minibuses Julian and John break out the flasks of hot water, tea, coffee and the obligatory shortbread made by Sharon our fabulous cook.

Once ready (after a wee while) we drive into Carrbridge to use the public facilities before heading on to the A9 and north to the Findhorn Valley. This takes around 30 minutes but once off the main road we slow down and keep an eye out for any roadside wildlife. This starts well as we see a couple of Brown Hares in a field followed by Lapwing and Curlew, but a flock of 25+ summer plumage Golden Plover is a real highlight of the day. We follow this meandering river to an old bridge with sightings of Dipper, Common Sandpiper and Sand Martin as we move slowly along always with half an eye on the ridges for soaring raptors. It is quickly getting towards lunchtime and we park at 'Dipper Bridge' to enjoy our picnic lunches, which produces fantastic views of Dipper under the bridge. John B. finds a male Goosander down the river and Clare sees a Grey Wagtail as we stand around eating our filled rolls. Then all of a sudden Julian shouts "Peregrine" and we see the large falcon above the ridge line being mobbed by a Kestrel, which is fantastic before they both move off. Then a few minutes later a Sparrowhawk flies up into view being harassed by a Mistle Thrush, which is a bit more of an even contest. Common Buzzards are now floating around as it starts to get a bit warmer along with a Raven, making for a fantastic lunchtime period. Mid-afternoon we drive on to Coignafearn (5 Alders) where we see another Speyside Wildlife guide Simon, who is also there searching for raptors. Here we park and get ourselves ready for a walk with the skies becoming grey and the wind strengthening, making things a little uncomfortable. We set off for the Pine woodland a few hundred metres away, continually searching the hillsides for Mountain Hare. Initially we find a few Rabbits lower down then John locates a couple feeding in the heather and we get good views through the scope. Shelter is taken behind the pines but still the wind is a problem with John B's telescope being blown over – thankfully no damage is done. Pam finds a large herd of Red Deer on the far hillside as they move effortlessly across the slope and a Red Grouse is found feeding out in the moor – a very good start to the week, finishing with Common Gull on the walk back to the minibuses.

The drive back along the valley produces many of the same species including a pair of Goosander, more Feral Goats and Red-legged Partridge. We come across a large flock of Chaffinches with a single Lesser Redpoll and Reed Bunting amongst them. Through the Pine trees John's minibus see a male Bullfinch and a couple of Long-tailed Tits followed by fabulous views of Brown Hare, with a couple even boxing in true March Hare fashion – superb. Eventually we reach the A9 and head back south back to the

accommodation where we have an early dinner in readiness for our mammal hide visit. Around 8pm we set off to Cairn Valley and a date with the privately owned and exclusive mammal hide where Julian and John bait the immediate area with hard-boiled eggs, peanuts and peanut butter. It is a slow start but soon enough Liz sees the Wood Mouse followed by a Bank Vole feasting in the nuts scattered around. Although, it's as it gets dark that the highlight of the night occurs with no less than four Badgers coming in to 'hoover up' the remaining peanuts, eggs and peanut butter, which is very short work for these very cute carnivores. Once their appetite has been satisfied the Badgers start to move off but once the last one has gone there is very little food left. Around 11pm we decide it's time to leave and make the short journey back to the Steading seeing a few Red and Roe Deer in the roadside fields at the edge of the forest. Getting to our rooms and into bed is most welcome after this long first day.

Day 3

A cold grey start to the day but a Common Redstart sings behind the Steading along with the usual small flock of Siskin, and Pam points out a pair of Bullfinch before we head for breakfast. Around 9am we set off north towards Inverness passing fields with Greylag Geese, Oystercatcher and Roe Deer, lochs with Goldeneye and a Common Buzzard over the A9. Just beyond the city we turn off to the Black Isle and as its high tide straight on towards Chanonry Point. Along the minor roads Sue spots a Red Kite and the snow starts to fall.

It is very cold on the exposed Chanonry Point with continued snow flurries as we wrap up warm against these inclement conditions. The golf course is quiet with people and as we pass by there are a few Song Thrush, Dunnock and lots of Meadow Pipits on the short grass fairways. We walk out to the beach where we stand and scan the icy grey water for the Bottlenose Dolphins that make this peninsular so famous – sadly there are none. However we are undeterred and we do see a couple of off-shore Grey Seals and there are a few Razorbills and Guillemots flying past along with several Sandwich Terns and a distant Fulmar. Julian spots a Red-throated Diver flying past and there are plenty of gulls, which are predominantly Black-headed and Herring but also Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls. However, we are now cold and wet so back to the minibuses we go for a very welcome hot drink and piece of yummy shortbread.

A comfort stop is organised at Avoch and while waiting Julian spots a Black-throated Diver off the jetty but it quickly disappears before we all get to see it. The snow is starting to fall again so we move on heading up and over the hill to Udale Bay RSPB Reserve and a much more comfortable birdwatching hide. This proves to be very productive as the tide is falling and lots of waders and wildfowl are becoming more active. Julian and John make

an initial scan of the salt marsh and muddy receding tideline and quickly identify a lovely flock of 200+ Pink-footed Geese, Redshank, Shelduck, Mallard and a few Eurasian Wigeon. John mentions to Julian that recently there have been reports of an American Wigeon and Julian suggests it could still be here. A minute later the distinctive drake American Wigeon walks out from around its European cousins on the marsh and it's smiles all round. Our guide Mr Grierson is over the moon as it's the first he's seen this nearctic species. The searching continues as we break out the lunch in the relative comfort of the hide with John spotting some Teal, Clare pointing out a Dunlin amongst the Ringed Plover and Liz finding a small group of Eider. Pam has been watching the fields inland and sees a few Skylark song-fighting over the ploughed fields – superb.

After a while and a break in the weather we set off towards Cromarty along the coast road seeing more Eider and a close Great Northern Diver for Julian's minibus is a nice find along with a couple of Northern Wheatears on the exposed rocky beach. At Cromarty we make another comfort stop and as the weather seems a bit better a suggestion of returning to Chanonry is made. James, our guest cameraman is very pleased about this as he would love some footage of the dolphins today. We arrive back at the sight soon after and almost immediately a Bottlenose Dolphin appears off-shore followed by a couple more heading into the bay - it's smiles all round. Roger and John B have hung back a little with Julian and find our first Red-breasted Merganser along the tide-line. We all get back to the point and there are still further Bottlenose Dolphins around including a young animal and it's mother, which is fabulous. There are not so many seabirds around now but Julian spots four Long-tailed Ducks in the bay and through the telescope we get some decent views especially of a 'long-tailed' summer plumage drake. However a fresh bout of hail has us heading back to the vehicles for some shelter especially now in the strengthening northerly wind.

As we start back out of the Black Isle we again stop at Avoch as another nearctic visitor - Bonaparte's Gull has been reported recently and you never know your luck. Sadly this individual isn't seen but we do see plenty of other gulls, a few Common Redshank and a couple more Red-breasted Mergansers in the sea. The highlight here though are the masses of hirundines (Barn Swallow, Sand and House Martins) now hawking insects over the sea as the weather has greatly improved along with a Blackcap singing in a nearby tree. However, it is now late afternoon and need to set off for our accommodation getting there a little over an hour later. There is a bit more snow around Glenfeshie and that evening through dinner the 'white stuff' fall starts in earnest – what will tomorrow bring?

Day 4

We wake to a Winter Wonderland, which Sue finds fantastic, and it is spectacular more akin to January than late April – this is the Highlands of Scotland after all. The evening before, our plan was to visit the Moray coastline but this development has changed things as we know the roads will be difficult to negotiate. We are now staying local. After breakfast around 9am we are driving away from The Steading, a short distance to Insh Churchyard. This is Osprey time and as we get out of the minibus we see the male flying around over the nest. He puts on a fabulous display over the next 30 minutes as the female shuffles around in their nest which is covered in snow, which looks bizarre and cold. A great start to this potentially interesting day.

Next we head up towards the funicular at Cairngorm as we are sure the road here should have been kept snow free but are wrong. We manage to get beyond Loch Morlich but not by far before having to stop and turn round but we do see Tree Pipit along the side of the road. We return to the car park at Loch Morlich, which proves to be quite productive with great views of a pair of Red-throated Divers, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and Mallard on the water. A hot drink is taken here along with the obligatory shortbread and before we leave, Pat spots another Osprey and James gets a brief view of a Stonechat but sadly it disappears. We move on now to Avielochan but the weather is horrendous so we decide to abort this and head to the Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre for a comfort stop and a little retail therapy.

Our options are limited as we head towards lunchtime and James kindly offers his home at Cairn Valley to be out of the weather. This is both kind and a revelation as we stand in his kitchen with the bird feeders outside covered in birds. There are easily 50+ Siskins visiting with much lesser numbers of Coal, Great and Blue Tits plus singles of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Tree Pipit, Dunnock and our first Jay of the week. Around 2pm and with the weather somewhat improved we leave James's house after thanking him very much and drive off to Insh Marsh. This is useful as again we can make use of the hide overlooking the whole area and the feeders in front of the glass. We easily find several Greylag Geese and Grey Herons, with a few Redshank in the shallow pools. Vicki spots a Brown Hare on the opposite hillside, a few Roe Deer are dotted around and there are Common Gulls on a poolside nest. Julian spots an interesting wader below that is finally confirmed as a Greenshank followed by Liz and Roger seeing a Common Snipe lurking in one of the ponds. Then Julian shouts "male Hen Harrier!" – he describes it moving right low over the reeds and across our view shed. We all manage to get a decent look at this beautiful and scarce pale grey raptor as it works its way across the marsh until it's out of sight.

A great bonus to our day. Clare goes out just before we leave and enjoys looking at a Wren at its nest and a Bank Vole near the minibus. Late afternoon we head back to the accommodation.

After an early dinner we set off again for our planned night drive around the Rothiemurchus estate with Alf. We split into two groups with Alf taking half of us for two, one hour sessions that are very good fun seeing a few good mammals, including Rabbit, Brown Hare, Roe and Red Deer. One of the trips sees a Wigeon flying away from a pond and a young Leveret at the side of the road being watched by its mother. John and Julian do a less off-road drive while we are with Alf and see much the same things, thankfully a lot of the snow has melted off the good tracks so access is not a problem – around midnight we head back.

Day 5

An 08:30 breakfast is planned as we are in bed so late and we are all looking forward to another full day in Speyside. Once ready we drive out towards Grantown on Spey then on to the Tom Vaich Forest filled with fine mature Scots Pine and Sika Spruce. We ready ourselves for a walk along a very good track but the intermittent showers don't make things easy, especially since it's quite warm and the snow is disappearing fast. The walk starts slowly with Chaffinches, Robin, Wren, Great and Coal Tits being seen but no sign of the 'hoped-for' Crossbills. We reach the turning point of the walk and feel a little disappointed with our sightings but then Julian hears the 'chup, chup, chup' of Common Crossbills – and in they fly. A flock of 30+ birds pitch into the conifers next to the track and we get fabulous views of gaudy red males and lovely green females as they feed on the conifers hanging from the trees. Through the telescope they look fantastic and a very welcome addition to our bird list.

We get back to the minibuses and break out the hot drinks and shortbread before returning to Grantown on Spey where a visit to the public facilities is required before driving out on towards Lochindorb. This shallow lake is in the middle of some classic upland grouse moor and we see lots of Common Gulls at their nests. We drive slowly along the single track road with Clare exclaiming "STOP – Red Grouse" and there right next to the road is a pair of these beautiful game birds – superb. On we drive to the loch edge and stop to scan the water finding lots of Greylag Geese, Sand Martins and Swallows. Meadow Pipits are everywhere as we continue along the edge of the loch but it's the close views of Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Redshank and Curlew that is really noteworthy. We stop at the main lay-by and again scan the cold grey waters for our main target – Black-throated Diver but there is no sign so we break out the picnic. There is a biting wind and occasional rain showers but we make the best of it and views of two Ospreys (one with a fish) keeps the interest, as does Vicki's (almost) pet Red Grouse standing just a couple of metres away right out in the open! Julian

is continuing to search the open water and announces he has found the divers but sadly they are distant. It isn't easy to see this pair of summer plumage Black-throated Divers on the choppy water but you can tell what they are – hopefully better views would be had later in the week.

It is time to leave the car park but first Julian then points out a Red Kite that's flying through. Again we drive slowly around the loch and back out heading to the very famous RSPB reserve of Loch Garten. En-route Clare spots a Dipper from the old Nethy Bridge as we drive over and Julian stops to check a few raptors soaring over the coniferous forest, which all turn out to be Common Buzzards. Eventually we reach the car park and around the feeders there are the usual woodland species before John has negotiated a free visit to the Osprey hide. We walk the short distance along the track and stand watching arguably the world's most famous pair of Ospreys through the viewing ports and on the monitors around this luxurious building with associated café and RSPB shop. The feeders here hold much the same with lots of Chaffinches and Siskin, but it's still a nice relaxed way to spend an hour. Eventually we set off back and in the car park Malcolm and John B. have gone to look at the feeders again whilst Pat points out a lovely Bank Vole to Julian and John R. right next to the minibus. Word gets back that there are Crossbills at the feeders so we all walk to that area and there they are in the surrounding conifers feeding happily on the cones. Julian fixes his binoculars on one and is immediately struck by the size of bill in comparison to the head and raises the question that he thinks this is a scarcer Scottish Crossbill, and it's a cracking male. There are also Common Crossbill there but out of the flock at least 3 individuals are identified as Scottish with photographs taken to confirm it later (which has been done!). A fantastic find and a new bird for John B. and only the third time Julian has seen some.

Later this afternoon we make the very short drive to the Loch Mallachie car park where we engage in a good long circular route through this ancient Caledonian Forest and along the loch edge. It is a lovely still afternoon and the reflected view across the water to the snow-clad mountains beyond is fantastic and incredibly memorable. There are most common woodland species around but Roger and Liz find a Reed Bunting and a singing Chiffchaff, plus Pam spots a drake Tufted Duck on the loch. We get back to the minibuses late afternoon and set off back towards Glenfeshie stopping at the side of the road for a Northern Wheatear that's strangely feeding deep in the forest. On we travel back to the accommodation seeing again Roe Deer and Brown Hare in the open fields before arriving back in plenty of time to freshen up before sitting down to another fabulous evening meal.

Day 6

After an earlier than usual breakfast we ready ourselves for a long journey across Scotland to the West Coast. We get beyond Inverness and out into the open countryside seeing Red Kite and Common Buzzard before making

a comfort stop at the Black Water River rest area. We can hear a Chiffchaff singing from the car park and a short walk down to look at the old 'Silver Bridge' is impressive with the torrent of water passing through the narrow gap. It is now out into open moorland with a mixture of heavy and light rain showers passing the Aultguish Hotel where we would be eating later that night. Just before we turn off the main road to Ullapool John spots a couple of Mute Swans on one of the many lochans along this route. Eventually we reach the west coast stopping at a very wet Dundonnell where we see our first Red-breasted Mergansers, Curlew, Oystercatchers, Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed Gulls but generally it's quiet and we don't stay long.

Our next stop is much more productive as we overlook the famous Gruinard Island with fabulous views of stunning summer plumage Great Northern Divers and Red-throated Divers in the bay. Clare spots a Guillemot followed by Roger finding our only Black Guillemots of the day. Malcolm is loving this part of the week as he relays information on his other passion – geology and this coastline has some great examples. We stay here for a while chatting to other Speyside Wildlife guests who are visiting independently before moving off along the coast road. This is the 'First Coast' (of Five) and short hops along the network of laybys is again productive as John knows where to look. Common Seals are 'hauled out' on the rocks below looking like huge grey spotty bananas and in the sea there are more divers, plus Shag, Cormorant and seaduck. Julian spots another shape with a long tail in the water and says "Otter" but sadly this individual disappears before most people get to see it – however a lucky few do as it swims in the choppy waters. Out to sea we are now seeing a few Gannets passing and watch as they drop like an arrow into the grey waters hoping to catch a fish, which is a fabulous sight.

It is now lunchtime and John drives us through to the jetty at Laide and despite the continued inclement weather we enjoy our time here. As we arrive Clare spots a Rock Pipit that sadly does not stay around as we alight the vehicles and off-shore there are more Great Northern and Red-throated Divers. Along the rocky shoreline we find Greenshank, Redshank and Common Sandpiper plus views of Pied Wagtail and Meadow Pipit as we eat our very tasty sandwiches. However, the rain gets worse and forces us to move on. Next stop along is near Udrigle village and here we see some 'genuine' Rock Doves followed by Paul finding our only pair of Stonechat of the week, which is superb. Eventually we reach the gorgeous Mellon Udrigle beach with its pure white sands and seaweed-clad rocky edges. There are waders on the beach with several Ringed Plovers and a single summer plumage Dunlin plus the usual Oystercatchers, Curlew and Redshank. Out to sea we are getting more great views of Gannet fishing in the bay before Julian shouts "Bonxie" (aka Great Skua) as we get brief

views of this avian pirate before flying out of view. This is later followed by two more with one being quite close to the beach and showing well to Roger and Julian. Our attention is diverted to landbirds as Pam finds a Northern Wheatear followed by a couple more on the nearby rocks. This deviation causes Julian to spot a few unexpected birds around the coastal houses, which are Redwing. Surely they should be much further north by now on their breeding grounds? Most of us start back to the minibuses having had a terrific time on this fabulous beach and this gets even better as we find Linnet, Siskin, Greenfinch and Goldfinch around a garden feeder and a few Skylarks song-fighting above.

It is now time to start and make our way back east for our dinner at the Aultguish out on the upland moor east of Ullapool. This again produces much the same species with a couple of Common Buzzards mobbing a much larger bird briefly that very quickly drops out of sight. Is this our chance of Golden Eagle passing by? We drive now away from the coast and back to the main road that connects Ullapool with Inverness with lots of Red Deer seen at the side of the road. John's bus almost hit a female Merlin before this same bird then makes an abortive attempt for a Meadow Pipit before disappearing low over the ground. John is again on the ball as he passes Droma Loch spying a diver in the middle of the steely grey water. Suspecting its identification we stop and sure enough, there showing very well through the telescope is a gorgeous summer plumage Black-throated Diver. Vicki even gets a super photo of this bird even at a range of a few hundred metres in low light – just amazing.

Not much later we are pulling into the hotel/restaurant car park and settling down to a good meal in this rural establishment but we all agree it's not as good as Sharon's dishes. This takes us to around 8:30pm when we set off again across country on our way back home. As we head south of Inverness the sun has set and it's the dull light of dusk with John seeing a Woodcock fly over his minibus before leaving the A9 at Kingussie. We get back to our accommodation just before 10pm and with the prospect of being back in the vans 7 hours later we head to our rooms without 'passing GO, without collecting £200' or any other Monopoly quote. It has been another long but very productive day!

Day 7

It's another grey and drizzly morning as we meet at the un-earthly hour of 5am with Sue, Pat and Clare abstaining from this pre-breakfast excursion. It's a quiet journey as we drive through towards Dorback seeing a few Roe Deer, Brown Hare and Rabbits in roadside fields. Once we arrive Julian leads us out on to the moorland with an adjacent pine woodland stopping in a convenient gateway along the deer fence. He says immediately "got them!" as he points out in the distance a few black shapes that materialize into Black Grouse through the telescope. We climb to a better position and

get decent views of at least eight birds at their lek but they are still a long way off and the weather isn't helping. Julian suggests a move to a potentially closer position and this is much better and we now enjoy some good looks at these scarce game birds with Viki getting a couple of very passable images as they dance around. John R. is over the moon as this is the best view he's had of Black Grouse in various visits to Speyside, which is great. This success justifies the early start and as we leave, checking the rest of the area produces a Red Grouse, Curlew and more Roe Deer but it's time to leave.

We have plenty of time before our scheduled breakfast and John now takes over and drives us through towards Nethy Bridge and to Milton Loch – a small roadside pool. This is fairly quiet but does produce Eurasian Teal, Mallard and Tufted Duck found by Pam. On we now drive for our next target species of the day – Slavonian Grebe, one of the scarcest breeding species in Britain. At Avielochan we cross the busy road and walk in towards the loch in the light rain. We stop at the main body of water and quickly find Little Grebe, Goldeneye, Greylag Geese and a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers. There's a single Sand Martin over the water, which looks very lonely in these poor weather conditions. We stay for a while checking the edges of the loch but cannot find our target although our first Moorhen of the week found by Liz was some consolation. John decides we should head back to the vehicles and as we start back he notices a couple of small waterbirds on a side pool – a pair of gorgeous summer plumage Slavonian Grebes. They are not too far away and through the telescope we get tremendous views of these delightful birds, a great start to the day but it's now time for breakfast.

We soon get back to The Steading and with a little time we have a wee freshen up before sitting down to eat, Clare has been out for a local walk and heard our only Common Cuckoo of the week. Sharon's breakfast is (as always) superb and very relaxed being in good spirits after our success this morning and an hour later at 10am we are all setting off again. This time we are driving to Dalnavert in hope of finding our third target species of the day, the diminutive and rare Crested Tit. This proves to be easier than expected as we eventually find the nest of a pair and thoroughly enjoy the activity of these birds. We are over the moon and Malcolm gets a chance to do some proper photography as now the weather has significantly improved. This forest is very productive with good views of more Common Crossbill, plus Tree Pipits, Siskin, Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Coal, Great and Blue Tits. John B. comments that we are on a roll being '3 out of 3' for the 'hoped for' species – hopefully this will continue?

John and Julian now want to head up to Cairngorm after their abortive try earlier in the week and this time there is no problem, in fact it is glorious. A coffee break is taken near the top with spectacular views across the valley

and at the funicular car park we ready ourselves for the top of the mountain at a height of 1017m. Rest rooms are used, tickets are bought and soon enough we are making our way on the mountain railway with John B. seeing a male Ring Ouzel on the way up. At the mountain station we make our way to the viewing platform and from there scan the snow-clad mountains – it is spectacular. In fact, Paul wants to stay here for the rest of the day, as it ticks all his boxes – mountain, snow and sunshine! There are Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails around but Sue spots a Snow Bunting flying away, with John B. seeing another couple later on but prove elusive. Our third grouse species is hoped for and when Julian announces ‘Ptarmigan’ we have to agree the ‘dot on the rock’ is certainly grouse shaped and moving! Thankfully this bird continues the search and soon after two much closer and more Ptarmigan-like individuals walk along the nearby ridge – superb.

It is now lunchtime and back down the funicular we go keeping an eye out for ‘Rouzes’ but nothing shows so back at the minibuses in the warm sunshine we enjoy our picnics. Julian then sees the male Ring Ouzel at the back of the ski station so we march off to look but the flipping thing has again disappeared. We have a good look round before heading back and this is when we find the pair of Mountain Thrushes feeding on an open patch of vegetation. We now get fabulous views of both birds before having to leave, today is proving to be a great finale to the week. Sadly the cloud is building up and it's starting to shower as we return to the minibus and with limited time John decides we should finish the day at Insh Marsh, where we have a chance of Golden Eagle – a bird Julian is keen to see.

The drive back towards Glen Feshie is another easy one and we reach Insh with an hour to check the area heading straight to the viewing platform. The usual suspects of Grey Heron, Curlew, Redshank, Snipe, Common and Black-headed Gull are seen from here but a harsh call alerts us to a pair of Peregrine Falcons flying over. The rain starts and as we leave Clare spots a Lesser Redpoll with the Siskins below us around the bird feeders. We decide to move into the hide below and there we get further good views of the feeder with lots of birds visiting plus Vicki spots another fabulous wee Bank Vole running around. A little after 5pm we decide to leave and make the short transfer back to The Steading, where we have some time to freshen up and pack for the following mornings departure. Dinner is again excellent with Julian and John going through the daily checklist and the highlights of the week over a very welcome single malt, hot drink and chocolate mint, bringing to a close a terrific week in the Highlands of Scotland.

Day 8

Nothing on today as after our last delicious breakfast, we are leaving so we say ‘goodbye and thank you’ again to John, Julian and Sharon, for what has been a terrific and eventful week.

Species of the Trip

Paul – Wagtails
Vicki – Divers/Ring Ouzel
Roger – male Hen Harrier
Liz – Divers/male Hen Harrier
John R. – Crossbills
John B. – Scottish Crossbill
Malcolm – close Red Grouse
Pam – Crested Tit
Sue – Ring Ouzel
Pat – Long-tailed Ducks
Clare – Crested Tit/Eurasian Teal
John G. – Bank Vole
Julian – Crossbills

Place of the Trip

Paul – Cairngorm
Vicki – Cairngorm
Roger – Cairngorm
Liz – Cairngorm
John R. – Findhorn Valley
John B. – Chanonry Point
Malcolm – Chanonry Point
Pam – Mellon Udrigle beach
Sue – Mellon Udrigle beach
Pat – Mellon Udrigle beach
Clare – West Coast
John G. – Loch Garten Car Park
Julian – Cairn Valley lunch (James house)

Magic Moment

Paul – having a warm shower each evening
Vicki – arriving at The Steading/Loch Mallachie walk
Roger – seeing the Crested Tits at their nest
Liz – night drive with the Leveret and mother Brown Hare
John R. – seeing the Crested Tits at their nest
John B. – seeing the Crested Tits at their nest
Malcolm – Bottlenose Dolphins at Chanonry Point
Pam – watching the Badgers
Sue – waking up to a Winter Wonderland
Pat – first sighting of the Crossbills
Clare – seeing the Crested Tits at their nest
John G. – seeing the American Wigeon
Julian – Mellon Udrigle beach

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	Woodcock
Black-throated Diver	Curlew
Great Northern Diver	Common Redshank
Little Grebe	Greenshank
Slavonian Grebe	Common Sandpiper
Fulmar	Great Skua
Gannet	Black-headed Gull
Cormorant	Common Gull
Shag	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Grey Heron	Herring Gull
Mute Swan	Great Black-backed Gull
Pink-footed Goose	Sandwich Tern
Greylag Goose	Guillemot
Shelduck	Razorbill
Eurasian Wigeon	Black Guillemot
American Wigeon	Feral Pigeon
Teal	Rock Dove
Mallard	Woodpigeon
Tufted Duck	Collared Dove
Eider	Cuckoo (heard only)
Long-tailed Duck	Great Spotted Woodpecker
Goldeneye	Skylark
Red-breasted Merganser	Sand Martin
Goosander	Swallow
Red Kite	House Martin
Hen Harrier	Tree Pipit
Sparrowhawk	Meadow Pipit
Common Buzzard	Rock Pipit
Osprey	Grey Wagtail
Kestrel	Pied Wagtail
Merlin	Dipper
Peregrine	Wren
Red Grouse	Dunnock
Ptarmigan	Robin
Black Grouse	Redstart
Red-legged Partridge	Stonechat
Pheasant	Northern Wheatear
Moorhen	Ring Ouzel
Oystercatcher	Blackbird
Ringed Plover	Song Thrush
Golden Plover	Mistle Thrush
Lapwing	Redwing
Dunlin	Blackcap
Snipe	Willow Warbler

Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treetreeper
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Bullfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Common Crossbill
Scottish Crossbill
Snow Bunting
Reed Bunting

Total Birds: 115

MAMMALS

Short-tailed (Bank) Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
European Otter
Badger
Feral Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

MOTHS

Iron Prominent
Hebrew Character
Quaker
Clouded Drab
Early Toothed Striped
Red Chestnut

Total Species: 135