

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

SUTHERLAND AND SPEYSIDE

17-27 JUNE 2017

Guide: Simon Pawsey

Guests: Paula & Terry Couzens, Margaret Dixey, Jam Binnie, Sue & Bill Gill

Day 1

We all meet up at The Steading and sit down together for our first meal of the trip and a chance to get to know each other. Simon poses the question "What's everyone hoping to see on this trip?" The answers are varied, but Sue says she would like to see some owls if possible. With that in mind and as it is a fine evening, Simon suggests that we head out straight after dinner for a crack at some Short-eared Owls. Everyone is enthusiastic about this so we gather kit and binoculars, pile into the van and head off across Strathspey towards Dorback.

It is fine and dry and not long before we find a Short-eared Owl quartering over the moor. We watch as the bird flies up the side of the hill carrying a vole in its talons before landing in some heather. A chick briefly appears from the heather, the vole is passed over and the adult bird takes off again and resumes its search for prey across the moors, with a background soundtrack of Curlews and Red Grouse. What a great way to start the holiday!

There are Roe Deer on the moor as well and a doe with two young fawns which can't be more than a couple of days old is a great find and wonderful to watch. As the light begins to fade Simon suggests that we drive a short distance to Bynackbeg behind Nethybridge where a pair of Long-eared Owls have been nesting. We wait by a small copse for the owls to show but they are proving elusive so it is time for bed and back to The Steading.

Day 2

Today dawns dry, clear and sunny. After breakfast we head down to Loch Insh and park at the back of the church by the graveyard where the River Spey flows into the loch. This gives us an eye level view of our local Osprey nest and we are treated to wonderful views of both adult birds and two young chicks in the nest. Through the scopes the Ospreys are stunning and we spend a great half hour watching them interact, with the male bird leaving the nest and taking a post on sentry duty in a nearby tree ready to chase off any encroaching Crows or Buzzards.

From Loch Insh we head out to Grantown on Spey and down to the Old Spey Bridge, an eighteenth century military bridge constructed to allow soldiers to move between Grantown, Cromdale and Tomintoul. The bridge allows lovely views of the Spey and it isn't long before we start seeing Common Sandpipers and Grey Wagtails flitting from rock to rock. Dippers nest on the bridge itself and it was only a matter of time before one shows itself. The scopes come into their own again and we have great views of this enigmatic little bird sat dipping on rocks in the river. Some female Gooseanders are also upstream of the bridge and we discuss the identification differences between Gooseanders and Mergansers which can sometimes be confusing. Hirundines are hawking for insects overhead and we have Swallows, Sand Martins and Swifts. It is an idyllic spot and difficult to tear ourselves away, but the upper reaches of Strathdearn (Findhorn Valley) are calling, so it is back into the van and off we go, but first we pop into Simon's house so he could pick up his camera and we have a Red Squirrel on the feeder in his back garden, before heading north on the A9, turning off towards Coignafearn and following the Findhorn River into the glen.

After a couple of miles we pull over to scan some of the lower ridges. Simon puts up an "Eagle" shout and then promptly loses the bird, much to his frustration. However, perseverance pays off and it isn't long before Bill picks up the bird as it appears briefly over a ridge on the opposite side of the strath. It turns out to be a White-tailed Eagle which keeps rising and falling over the ridge, however, we all manage to see the bird before it rises higher on some thermals and drifts away heading south.

We continue further down the glen stopping at some key locations. There are Buzzards circling on the thermals and Kestrels keep appearing, hovering over the slopes. Simon picks up a very distant and very quick Merlin over a high ridge but unfortunately it is a very brief sighting and isn't relocated.

There are small herds of Wild Goats scattered through the glen feeding on the grass. These goats were introduced with Neolithic man and have survived in the Highlands ever since. They are not farmed or fed making them truly wild and some of the males can be spectacular with their long coats and horns curving over their backs. There are some large herds of Red Deer on the upper slopes. The stags are in their bachelor herds with their antlers 'in velvet' having shed them earlier in the year to grow a fresh set in time for the rut in the Autumn.

After some lunch and coffee we set off for a walk down into the upper reaches of the glen along the gravelled track which gives access to Coignafearn Lodge. Terry picks out a Tree Pipit which is calling and Simon gets a quick and very distant view of a Golden Eagle which disappears over

a far ridge and unfortunately doesn't reappear. We are not to know it, but it couldn't have topped the views of a Golden Eagle we are to get later in the holiday!

It has been a wonderful and varied day so we drift back to The Steading and sit down for a lovely evening meal cooked by Sharon. The day isn't over quite yet - after dinner we set off to our Dusk Watch Hide in the hope of seeing Pine Martens and Badgers and anything else that cared to show itself. It is a fine evening and Simon baits out the hide and we settle in to see what might turn up. The diary for the hide doesn't make for good reading as the local Pine Martens have been visiting infrequently and haven't been seen for a number of consecutive evenings. The mice are performing well though and scurrying around the rocks after raisins and peanuts. It is this mouse activity which draws in a fantastic Tawny Owl and Margaret is treated to a wonderful view of the owl diving down from the trees onto the ground in front of her in an effort to catch a mouse. We all then manage to watch the owl as it obligingly sits on the fence by the nearby cottage and then perches on a lower branch right in front of the hide. It's not often you get to see Tawny Owls as well as that, considering they are largely nocturnal, so it is a rare treat. Woodcocks are riding over the wood and we have three separate sightings of what could have been the same bird. Our patience is rewarded when some Badgers turned up and we have four altogether feeding very well in front of the hide. We stick it out a while longer for Pine Martens but it isn't to be, so we head back to the Steading and off to bed.

Day 3

Today is cloudy and overcast and after a discussion over breakfast we decide to head towards Cairngorm Mountain to see what conditions are like with a view to going up the hill. On the way we stop at Loch Morlich. The loch is calm and there are hundreds of Hirundines, mainly Sand Martins and Swifts with the odd House Martin flying low over the water taking insects as they hatch out of the surface film. There are Goldeneyes on the loch with young chicks bobbing up and down as they copy their parents diving for fish. We have a good view of the mountains, or at least a good view of the mist that is covering the mountains and Simon rather optimistically thinks that it is clearing, so perhaps we should venture higher up.

We follow what is known locally as the 'ski road' up the side of Cairngorm and pull into the lower car park or Coire Na Ciste car park, specifically to look for Ring Ouzels, which really pays off because without further ado Terry announces that he has a Ring Ouzel which duly performs for us on the side of a small hillock. This is a male bird, which is then joined by a female and some Ring Ouzel courtship action is enjoyed by all of us. Terry is christened 'Ring Ouzel Terry' and reference is made to the latin genus name for the thrush family - "Turdus." We decide over coffee that "Ring Ouzel Terry" suits him more than.....well, the other option!

Anyway, it is a Ring Ouzel nest which continues with a young bird begging for food and being fed by its parents, the same pair of adults which we have been watching. The mating display which we witness could be their efforts to have a second brood.

The cloud which Simon thought might lift, isn't lifting and it is quite cold on the hill so we drop back down into the strath and pop into Glenmore visitor centre to use the facilities. This is timely as we are treated to a Red Squirrel and some Siskins on the feeders.

The weather is drizzly and overcast and we head towards Abernethy forest and the RSPB reserve there. We stop briefly at Loch Pityoulish and have a tantalising glimpse of an Osprey as it flies low over the water and disappears behind some trees. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flies into some conifers nearby and there are fledgling Blue Tits sitting in some Birch trees waiting to be fed by their parents.

Further along the road we stop by a field, which is actually someones garden, and has been allowed to remain 'wild' and uncut, providing a great habitat for wild flowers and orchids in particular. There are some Northern Marsh Orchids as well as Lesser Butterfly Orchid and Heath Spotted Orchid and thankfully Sue is on hand with her newly purchased field guide to flowers to assist with timely identification of all things flowery - good work Sue!

Heading into Abernethy we drive off the road and along a track taking us through the forest to Forest Lodge, the local HQ for the RSPB. We have lunch by the van and then decide to walk through the woods despite the fact that it is still raining. The habitat in Abernethy is wonderful and we talk about the forest and the plants and birds like Capercaillie and how important it is to protect what is left of this type of habitat.

We have some great views of Coal Tits feeding young and a cracking view of a Tree Pipit sat just above us on a telegraph wire, giving us an opportunity to look at the key identification differences between Tree and Meadow Pipits, specifically the length of the rear claw, which is significantly longer on Meadow Pipits. Unfortunately, the Crested Tits and the Crossbills that we have been hoping for don't show, but it is still a lovely walk in a very special place.

On the way back we call into Dell Woods and visit a feeding station which can be good for Cresties, but again they are elusive. A cracking male Bullfinch on the feeders make up for it though, ably supported by some more Siskins. Finally we get back to the Steading, just in time for our evening meal - another good day!

After dinner the temptation to head back out is too great, especially as it is a fine and dry evening and so it is back into the van and towards Insh Marshes RSPB reserve. As we approach Tromie Bridge a very large and healthy looking male Pine Marten is crouched on a side track right in front of us before darting into the trees and down towards the river Tromie. The view can't have been for more than three or four seconds and unfortunately, not everyone sees it.

We stand on the viewing platform overlooking the marsh which gives a great vista of the marsh and the Monadhliath hills behind. There, Roe Deer on the marsh feed on the lush vegetation and every now and then a Snipe pops up and then disappears again. The number of Starlings over the marsh begin to increase as the light fades and they begin to flock together giving us a mini murmuration, which is very impressive and the first time that Simon has seen this at Insh Marshes.

As we leave and drive away Jan asks if it is likely we might see a Woodcock roding on the way home. The words are just out of her mouth when a Woodcock puts in an appearance flying over some Birch woods alongside the van, giving everyone good views. A fitting end to a good day.

Day 4

It is an early start this morning and away from the Steading for 06.30hrs to get over to Dorback for Black Grouse. It is another fine day with good visibility and as we pull up to overlook the lek site, it doesn't appear that any birds are present, however, closer inspection through the scopes reveal five males wandering around a field behind the traditional site. The birds are obviously in company with each other and are feeding and generally passing the time of day but not lekking. That said, it is great to see them and we have some good views of the birds.

A Cuckoo puts in a very brief appearance as we arrive and a Short-eared Owl, presumably the one we had been watching on Saturday night, is quartering the ground over the moor. We also manage to find Brown and Mountain Hare in the same field together and are able, to a degree, to compare the differences between the two separate species.

We head back to The Steading for breakfast and then head 'up the hill' again for the big push to the summit of Cairngorm. The weather holds for us and it is a glorious day. We catch the funicular up to the top station and then walk out onto the mountain and take a path which swings around the north side of Cairngorm and rises to the summit. This is generally a quieter path and can therefore be better for birds.

We walk for about 20 minutes, with plenty of scanning when Simon picks up a single Dotterel on some short grass 50 metres from the path. We all get good views of the bird and then a second bird is found. After about five minutes both birds then take off and fly uphill towards the summit. They are joined in flight by a third bird and disappear from our view.

We continue uphill hoping that we would relocate the Dotterel and sure enough we find them right next to the path and within 10 metres of where we are standing. There is at least one male and a female and a bit of a love triangle going on. It is wonderful to watch these enigmatic special little waders high up in the Cairngorms, especially as they are so confiding and giving such good views.

We are joined by three Spaniards, one of whom is a guide and has previously guided Jan in Spain, so a brief and warm reunion takes place on the side of the mountain and they are able to enjoy the Dotterel as well.

We continue up towards the summit and stop by the weather station for some lunch. A pristine Red Admiral butterfly is found on the summit, not a species known for higher altitudes and a very good find.

Simon and Terry wander further down a rocky slope as they could hear a Snow Bunting singing away. Simon briefly sees one perched on a rock further down the hill before it takes off and then Terry relocates the bird sat on a small rocky pinnacle. It is a cracking male in summer plumage and shows really well. Simon calls over the rest of the group and as Sue and Paula are walking over they flush a pair of Ptarmigan which are very calm and obligingly walk across the rocks between us giving great views. Terry manages to stay upright as he balances precariously on some rocks and with a bit of support from Simon swings round and gets a cracking view of the birds which are a lifer for him. A punch of the air and a loud "YES!" suggests he is quite pleased! Well done Sue and Paula!

We are all feeling very satisfied with ourselves having cleared up with the species we were hoping to find, but the mountain hadn't quite finished and as we walk back down the hill towards the top station another male Snow Bunting perches on a post and sings his heart out right in front of us, hops around on the ground, catches some insects and then flies uphill to a nest site. As if that isn't enough, he does it all again for a second time. What a fantastic little bird and a rare breeder in the UK.

So that was it, the Cairngorms had delivered - but the fat lady is still singing and we have a cracking Ring Ouzel just above the top station, found by none other than.....Ring Ouzel Terry (who else.)

We meet up with Margaret on the viewing platform, who has also had a lovely few hours enjoying the view and the wildlife. Simon recounts what we had seen and comments that a Mountain Hare would round things off very nicely at which point Margaret points out "like that one there" as a hare runs across the hill in front of us. It just doesn't get much better than that on the mountain - a red letter day! We stop at Loch Morlich on the way back and have a relaxing cup of tea served at a picnic bench rather than out of the back of the van, feeling very pleased with ourselves.

After another lovely evening meal we go for a stroll in Inshriach hoping to find a Capercaillie, but they remain elusive and the midges are starting to take a liking to us, so we retreat back to The Steading.

Day 5

Today is overcast, but otherwise fine and warm. After breakfast we drive to Aviemore for some supplies and then head to Avielochan. Parking by the busy main road we walk through the access gate and down towards the lochan, hoping to find the pair of Slavonian Grebes which breed on the loch. We are not to be disappointed and the grebes are showing very well from our elevated position. The light on the birds is wonderful and shows off their exquisite plumage. There are also some young Goldeneye on the loch as well as a creche of young Greylags with their parents in close attendance. Buzzards are circling overhead and as we walk away an Oystercatcher is performing a distraction flight over our heads, trying to draw us away from a chick hidden somewhere in the grass.

We continue towards Carrbridge and turn towards the wonderfully named Dalnahaitnach, following the river Dulnain upstream. The end of the road looks over the Monadliaths and the southern side of Strathdearn, where we were on Sunday and can be good for Eagles. We have a cup of coffee and some shortbread and spend a relaxing half hour or so scanning the ridges and chatting. There is a feeding party of Willow Warblers in some Juniper bushes nearby which Terry finds and there are numerous Buzzards circling over the Strath doing their best 'tourist eagle' impressions. A Kestrel keeps putting in an appearance and there are Lapwings in the field directly in front of us as well as a pair of female Goosanders which are just visible on the shingle banks of the Dulnain.

From Dalnahaitnach we drive across Dava Moor to Lochindorb, stopping not far from the loch itself to watch a pair of Red Grouse and their chicks scuttling through the heather. The Black-throated Divers that breed on the loch can be elusive, but Simon picks them up through the scope relatively quickly in the southern arm of the loch. Whilst he is focussing in on the birds a falcon flies low over the water through his field of vision prompting a "Peregrine" shout. However, the falcon then banks to the side revealing red trousers! This is a Hobby and a rare bird for the Highlands with perhaps only one or two

irregular breeding pairs. The bird moves very fast, low over the water and then drifts over the moor and is tricky to get onto, but hopefully most of the group managed to see it. What a great bird, Simon was well chuffed!

Anyway, back to the Divers, which are very obliging and showing well as they fish along the far shore, diving and resurfacing as they go, giving great views through the scopes. Further along the loch a pair of Reed Buntings is another surprising find for Lochindorb.

We are still on a mission to try and find a Crestie, so with that in mind we head to Loch Garten in Abernethy forest and walk through the woods to Loch Mallachie. The weather by now isn't great and it has started to drizzle, but we persevere. Coal Tits and Great Tits are very much in evidence, but no Cresties. They are known to be very elusive at this time of the year, preferring to remain in the high tops of the Scots Pines and they are certainly living up to their reputation.

At Loch Mallachie there are Common Sandpipiers and an Osprey fly low through the forest towards the loch, but must have perched in some trees out of the rain as it doesn't reappear. It is a very pleasant walk and a good way to end another day, so we head back to The Steading in time for dinner.

Day 6

All roads lead north and west today and after breakfast we load the vans with our luggage, say farewell to Sharon and The Steading and head out - destination north west Sutherland, with a few strategic stops on the way of course.

We briefly stop under the Kessock Bridge to have a crack for an Otter, but there is not much showing so we continue north on the A9. This is Red Kite country and a soaring bird shows well over the van as we approach Contin. We make good progress towards Ullapool and stop at a viewpoint overlooking Carn Braec Beag. There are some Red Deer on a distant hill and Buzzards are circling over the wonderful view that is in front of us looking down towards Loch Broom and Ullapool.

Bill asked if what he is looking at is a Buzzard, but this bird turns out to be a cracking first summer Golden Eagle, showing quite a bit of white to its underwings and tail. What a magnificent bird and it soars across in front of us almost at eye level, giving stunning views. A Buzzard then flies in and repeatedly mobs the Eagle allowing a side by side comparison, the Eagle being almost double the size of the Buzzard. It is breathtaking and we watch mesmerised as the eagle gains height and then drifts across the glen soaring over distant peaks. A second eagle briefly puts in an appearance quite a long way off behind it, but the views we have of this young bird are not to be forgotten.

We continue towards Gruinard Bay and stop for lunch and coffee overlooking Gruinard Island. A magnificent seascape looking north toward the summer Isles and the mountains of Wester Ross surrounding us. Simon picks up a pod of Common Dolphins a long way out which are moving through the water very quickly and they are difficult to get onto. There are Red-throated Divers scattered across the sea with the odd Black-throated but no sign of any Great Northern.

Simon picks up a White-tailed Eagle as it drifts effortlessly across the bay in front of us, giving fantastic views. This is an adult bird and we are able to see all its identification features in detail and compare them to the Golden Eagle which is still fresh in our minds. We watch the White-tailed for a good five minutes as it soars over some low hills before flying towards us and disappears over a ridge not once flapping its wings. Amazing bird.

There are Gannets fishing in Gruinard Bay and plenty of Cormorants and Shags which prompts a bit of a lesson in Cormorant and Shag i.d. features. Something which Simon randomly tests throughout the rest of the trip - just to make sure everyone was paying attention!

We head back the way we had come and stop briefly at Ullapool to use the facilities and have a spot of retail therapy. Bill makes good use of this opportunity and buys a particularly fetching checked shirt.

We press on heading north and stop at Loch Glencoul where some Common and Grey Seals are hauled out on the rocks. We pull into Kylesku to use the facilities and stretch our legs. There are some Collared Doves hanging around the hotel and a distant pair of Red-throated Divers out on the loch.

Our next stop is Scourie where we drive down towards the lovely sheltered bay. Corncrakes have been heard here this year and the habitat on some of the crofts is ideal, with plenty of overgrown nettle beds and high vegetation for them to skulk in. However, all is quiet while we are here, but we vow to come back all being well.

Just outside Scourie we find a lovely Black-throated Diver which is showing very well on a freshwater loch, flapping its wings whilst sat on the water and rolling and preening, showing it's wonderful plumage.

We continue north for another 10 minutes and arrive at Rhiconich and check into the hotel in good time for a drink in the bar and evening meal at 7.00pm.

Day 7

Today is very windy with some showers but otherwise fine. After breakfast we drive along the shores of Loch Incharid stopping at a small roadside lochan to enjoy a pair of Red-throated Divers which are fishing on the loch. We continue along the coast to Oldshoremore where we park up and walk a short distance to look over the bay. There are lots of Eider on the sea and some Common Gulls which are sheltering in a small bay away from the strong onshore winds.

Further along the coast we stop at Droman Pier and have great views on the cliffs in front of us of Fulmars, true Rock Doves and a brief Great Skua.

We then retrace our tracks and head north to Balnakeil, where we pop into the craft village, before heading down to Balnakeil Bay and park up for lunch and coffee overlooking the sea.

On the sea there are Guillemots and Black Guillemots with Gannets fishing offshore as well as lots of Cormorants and Shags. A lone female Common Scoter is a good find, but proves tricky to get on to as it is repeatedly diving in the heavy seas.

After lunch we walk through the dunes and come across a fenced off area allowing large nettle beds to grow, specifically for breeding Corncrakes. Balnakeil is the only place in mainland UK where Corncrakes regularly breed and it is good to see their habitat being preserved. A little further on we come across an excellent flooded marsh and a pair of Whooper Swans is a surprising find. Fewer than 10 pairs breed in the UK, mainly in the northern and western isles, and it is possible that this pair may have had young which we are unable to see because of the dense nature of the reed bed. A Sedge Warbler also puts in an appearance which isn't surprising as the habitat is perfect for them.

From Balnakeil we drive through the village of Durness and around the shores of Loch Eriboll. We pick up a party of four Red-throated Divers further out in the loch and a group of Eiders with the males starting to moult into eclipse plumage.

We then turn south and follow a minor road along the shores of Loch Hope with the peaks of Ben Hope towering in front of us. We have good views of Stonechat down here, a bird which has eluded us until now as well as some Lesser Redpolls flitting around some farm buildings. From here we retrace our steps and head back to the hotel in time for dinner.

Day 8

We are all keeping a close eye on the weather forecast as Handa Island bird reserve is very high on our 'must visit' list, however things are not going in our

favour as the harsh weather is preventing the small ferry from sailing across to the island. But a plan is hatched and Monday is looking like our best opportunity. We are keeping everything crossed.

Today is again overcast with heavy showers and strong winds. We head off south down towards Assynt intending to take a route around the coast towards Lochinver. First of all though we pull into Scourie Bay for a quick scan. There are a pair of Red-throated Divers on the sea, showing well. A bedraggled birder then approaches the van stating that he had recently seen a Great Grey Shrike in some fields further around the bay. Hearing this we drive straight there and spend 20 minutes or so looking for said shrike to no avail. There are some quite heavy showers and the wind is increasing so we make our way south down the coast towards Assynt. A charm of Goldfinch feeding their young brighten up our day and we stop at Drumbeg for a cup of coffee, which is quite a feat considering the high winds.

Pressing on we detour off towards Stoer point and the lighthouse. By now it is very windy, with the winds gusting over 50 miles per hour and a brief stop on the headland by the lighthouse has the van shaking in the wind, so we retreat a little lower down and park up overlooking the sea. Despite the rough seas there are plenty of birds moving north and south with Gannets, Auks and Great Black-backed Gulls flying low over the water. We briefly see a dark phase Arctic Skua and a Bonxie puts in an appearance.

The Lochinver lifeboat goes past us heading north at a rate of knots, looking extremely impressive in the rough seas. It transpires that the lifeboat had been called out for a stranded kayaker, who we had seen earlier in the morning in Clashnessie Bay. The kayaker was rescued safely.

Reaching Lochinver we stop for a break and have a relaxing half hour over coffee in a pie shop! A party of Mergansers are in the harbour, but otherwise things are quiet from a birding perspective.

On the way back to Rhiconich we stop again at Scourie and have another crack at the Great Grey Shrike to no avail.

Day 9

The winds have dropped off today and it is overcast and cool. After breakfast we head down a quiet road to Skerricha and park at the end of the road overlooking a sea loch. Sue finds a stunning male Peacock wandering around, which is unusual in so far as there are not any houses nearby where the bird may have come from. There is a distant Red-throated Diver on the loch and a Snipe puts in a very brief appearance as it rose up out of some dense bracken before disappearing again. Jan spots a Red Deer stag very close to us with his velveted antlers sticking up through the bracken.

We then head north again and back towards Balnakeil, stopping by Rhiconich to look at some Goosanders and Eider which are on the water. We briefly stop at Keoldale to look for Twite, as Simon has seen them here previously, but they are not showing.

As we pull into Balnakeil Bay the weather starts to improve, so we have a coffee and a scan of the bay. Simon picks out two Harbour Porpoises which are breaching on the far side of the bay, but as ever with cetaceans, they are difficult to find as they are under for up to a minute and then surface for a few brief seconds.

The usual Auks are on the sea and the female Common Scoter is still present. Common, Arctic and Sandwich Terns are fishing in the bay giving good views and we are able to compare and talk about the differences between Common and Arctic Terns, which are always tricky to split.

With the weather improving we decide to stretch our legs and head out for a walk towards the sea stacks at Clach Mhor Na Faraid. We have a great vantage point overlooking the bay and out towards the stacks. There are Grey Seals in the surf below us and we can see them diving underwater through the waves. The sea is scattered with Auks - there are Puffins in small rafts as well as Common and Black Guillemots with the ever present Gannets fishing offshore. A distant immature Black-throated Diver is also fishing just beyond the surf. Terry finds some Rock Pipits just below us, on some rocks oddly enough and the birds give us great views.

We continue walking through the sand dunes towards the MOD station at the headland. We come across the first of three Sand Martin colonies in the hard packed sand of the dunes and spend a great half hour or so watching the Martins coming and going and feeding their young, some of which are perched right at the entrance to their burrows, just waiting to make their first flight. It is a lovely experience and a privilege to watch these declining birds nesting in natural habitat.

Margaret stays behind to enjoy the Sand Martins whilst the rest of us head up to the headland. The views looking back across Balnakeil Bay and along the coast towards Cape Wrath and Clo Mhor cliffs is fantastic. There are Fulmars riding the thermals right in front of us with the odd Bonxie and Ravens cronking overhead.

We walk back along the beach and pick up what might have been Otter tracks in the sand, it is difficult to tell. Back at the van we have a well earned cup of tea and look back over what has been a lovely afternoon wandering through the dunes and the beach and in good weather!

Heading back to Rhiconich a shout of "Golden Eagle at 11 o'clock over the ridge" from Simon gets some of us onto an adult bird as it drifts over a distant ridge for a few seconds before disappearing again. Very tantalising!

After dinner we make the most of what is a lovely fine and still evening and head out principally to look for Otters. Sue spots a wader moving along the shores of Loch Inchar which turn out to be a Greenshank, a good find. We scan and scan the water and then scan some more, but the furry little devils aren't showing and the midges are definitely nibbling. Still, it is a lovely evening and a great way to end the day.

Day 10

Let 'Operation Handa' commence. With the vans loaded with our luggage we head south and turn down towards the ferry for Handa Island. The weather is as forecast and it is a fine day with light winds. We check in for the ferry and after a short wait we are on our way. Ten minutes later and we set foot on the island.

We are greeted by the reserve volunteers who run us through the ins and outs of the island and then we set off to walk out across the centre of the reserve towards the sea stacks and cliffs on the west coast. Skylarks are singing all around us and we have great views of Snipe as they chase each other low over the vegetation. It isn't long before we come across our first breeding Arctic Skuas complete with a chick. The birds are very confident and relaxed in our presence, but not so relaxed with the 'owners' of the island - the Bonxies. Ariel battles are going on all around as Skuas chase Skuas, with the Arctics trying to chase the Bonxies off their territories. It's not surprising that the Arctic Skuas are nervous as a Bonxie would take a young Skua chick in a second given the opportunity.

The Skuas are spectacular and it is impossible not to look into a patch of sky without seeing at least one Bonxie. Not far from the cliffs we come across a small lochan where a group of Bonxies are bathing, washing the salt water from their feathers. A pair of Red-throated Divers and a chick are on the far side of the lochan, which is surprising considering the amount of skuas that are around.

The sea stacks and cliffs are truly spectacular, and fill with Guillemots, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Razorbills with Puffins nesting on the grassy slopes. The sights, sounds and smells are intoxicating. Heading home without having had the experience of Handa would have been a tragedy!

We amble around the reserve on the wonderfully maintained boardwalks taking it all in before eventually arriving back where we started at the visitor

centre. We have a little while to wait before we are all able to get onto a ferry, but the sun is shining, we are on the beach in a great place so we don't really care!

Eventually we are back on the mainland and back in the van with a bit of a drive ahead to get to Aviemore in time for evening meal. We head across country passing along the shores of Loch More where we stop to watch three stunning Black-throated Divers very close to the road displaying to each other. Probably the best views we had enjoyed all trip of these beautiful birds.

The scenery through the glens as we drive back is superb as we hug the shores of Loch Shin before driving through Lairg and on towards Inverness and then finally Aviemore, where we check into the Cairngorm Hotel for our last night together. A few drinks in the bar, a final checklist and a good meal rounds off what had been an excellent trip, with some amazing wildlife, fantastic scenery, great company and very good humour.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	Common Sandpiper
Black-throated Diver	Arctic Skua
Little Grebe	Great Skua
Slavonian Grebe	Black-headed Gull
Fulmar	Common Gull
Gannet	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Cormorant	Herring Gull
Shag	Great Black-backed Gull
Grey Heron	Kittiwake
Whooper Swan	Sandwich Tern
Greylag Goose	Common Tern
Wigeon	Arctic Tern
Teal	Guillemot
Mallard	Black Guillemot
Tufted Duck	Razorbill
Eider	Puffin
Common Scoter	Rock Dove
Goldeneye	Woodpigeon
Red-breasted Merganser	Collared Dove
Common Scoter	Cuckoo
Gooseander	Tawny Owl
Red Kite	Short-eared Owl
White-tailed Eagle	Swift
Sparrowhawk	Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Buzzard	Skylark
Golden Eagle	Sand martin
Osprey	Swallow
Kestrel	House martin
Hobby	Tree Pipit
Peregrine	Meadow Pipit
Red Grouse	Rock Pipit
Black Grouse	Grey Wagtail
Red-legged Partridge	Pied Wagtail
Pheasant	Dipper
Oystercatcher	Wren
Ringed Plover	Dunnock
Dotterel	Robin
Lapwing	Stonechat
Snipe	Wheatear
Woodcock	Ring Ouzel
Curlew	Blackbird
Greenshank	Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush
Sedge Warbler
Whitethroat
Willow Warbler
Spotted Flycatcher
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Bullfinch
Snow Bunting
Reed Bunting
Hobby
Peacock

TOTAL BIRDS:
A Very Respectable 110

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Bank Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Pine Marten
Badger
Pipistrelle Bat
Wild Goat
Red Deer
Sika Deer
Roe Deer
Reindeer
Harbour Porpoise
Common Dolphin
Common Seal
Grey Seal

BUTTERFLIES

Small Heath
Green Veined White
Red Admiral

TOTAL SPECIES:
A Very Creditable 132