

Holiday Highlights
Autumn Wildlife
13 – 20 October 2018

Leaders: Craig Round and Sally Nowell

Guests: Penny Hatfield, Irene and Terry Robson, Gill and David Parmee, Colin Sedgwick, Sue and Paul Daunter, Carolyn Heathcote, Viv Emery, Sally Leach

Day 1: After all meeting up at the Steading and enjoying the first of many delicious evening meals cooked up by chef Sharon, we run through the plans for the week ahead.

Day 2: Today starts still and cool as we head out for a short walk around some local lochans this morning. Lots of Redwings are around the steading this morning and a late Chiffchaff is seen as well as Redpoll and Bullfinch.

There are some great reflections in the lochans, with some lovely autumn colours on the trees and during our walk we see flocks of Siskin, Coal Tit, Chaffinch and Goldcrest, we also see and hear a couple of Crested Tits. Some Crossbills are also heard flying over but sadly the birds fail to land.

After some welcome tea and coffee back at the Steading we drive up into the Findhorn valley. On the way up the glen we see masses of Redwings and Fieldfares erupting out of the trees along the valley and Sally spots a Golden Eagle briefly, which is being mobbed in the distance by a Red Kite! A flock of Ravens are also seen over one of the hills in the distance and we also spot another Golden Eagle briefly which flushes a small flock of Red Grouse off the hill.

Half way up the valley we stop to scan; its a lovely sunny autumn day now and Red Deer are roaring on the hill all around us. Whilst here we get amazing views of no less than five Golden Eagles in the air together! The views of the eagles are simple awesome with birds talon grappling and displaying in the air and soaring right overhead at times. As if five Golden Eagle is not enough we also see an immature White-tailed Eagle hovering over and attacking a herd of Mountain Goats on the hill opposite! Simply incredible stuff! Oooof!

Moving on again we take lunch further up the glen beside the river and whilst having lunch a male Peregrine soars overhead and we spot another four Golden Eagles soaring distantly over the hills. After lunch we take a walk across the river up onto the hill and after some patient scanning through the scopes, Sally picks out a Mountain Hare hunkered down on the hillside above us and very well camouflaged! Driving back out of the valley a Red Squirrel scampers across the road in front of us and up into the nearby trees.

After tea we head up to the mammal hide, it's a cold clear night and as we arrive at the hide we can hear Red Deer roaring from the forest nearby. After putting out the bait at the hide, we only have a short wait before Wood Mice and several Bank Voles appear to feed on the scattered peanuts. Even better, a little later we see two Pine Martens that feed on the peanuts and raisins on the bird table and at least three Badgers! What a night!

Day 3: Dawn's cold and still with early mist and a Brambling is seen outside the Steading. Today we drive over to the Black Isle and enroute have a quick stop just down the road to take in the view at the bridge in Kinncraig. Whilst here a Brambling flies over calling, along with a few flocks of Redwing and three Greylag Geese and a female Goldeneye is on the river.

Just outside Inverness we make a stop at North Kessock where we get good views of two Red Kites soaring and see quite a few Red Admirals on the wing around the car park and under the Kessock Bridge see a few Wigeon, Redshank and Oystercatcher along the foreshore.

Our next stop is Chanonry Point, where we walk out to sea watch across the firth, seeing a few Common Seals just offshore here as well as a scattering of juvenile Gannets and a small flock of Wigeon that fly past.

Above Cromarty we find a large flock of Linnets in the fields near the road, as well as flocks of roosting Curlew in the fields before we have lunch up on the headland at South Sutor. There are some great views out from here across to the cliffs of the North Sutor and we also manage to pick out a few Razorbill from here.

After lunch we drive alongside the Cromarty Firth as the tide comes in and see a few Eiders offshore as well as four Red-breasted Mergansers and large flocks of Greylag Geese along the shore.

Arriving at Udale Bay RSPB Reserve for high tide there are masses of birds out on the estuary, including thousands of Pink-footed Geese, as well as many Wigeon and Teal. Large numbers of waders are gathered on the estuary as well, including Oystercatchers, Curlew, Redshank and Lapwing, along with smaller numbers of Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Bar Tailed Godwits, Knot and Black tailed Godwit. A single Golden Plover flies over calling and there are large flocks of roosting Common, Herring and Black-headed Gulls.

As the tide starts to drop we drive around the coast, following the shore alongside the Cromarty Firth. Here we stop to look at a stunning close flock of 380 Scaup and get lovely views in the calm conditions. Here we also manage to pick out a few Slavonian Grebes offshore, as well as more Eiders, before we head for home.

Day 4: Today starts very windy but dry. Our first stop this morning is at the Insh Marshes RSPB Reserve. It's a great view from the lookout here, with the marshes spread

out below us in some cracking autumn light. Flocks of hundreds of duck, mainly Teal, are wheeling around this morning over the marshes making a fantastic sight, and there are also Wigeon and a single female Pintail on the pools below us. Several Roe Deer are dotted about on the marshes and a single Whooper Swan is seen feeding in the distance, along with a single Pink-footed Goose amongst the many Greylag and Canada Geese. A few Snipe fly over along with a small flock of 12 Lapwing and flocks of migrating Redwing and Fieldfare. We also get good views of a Lesser Redpoll that perches in front of the hide, as well as more flocks of Redpoll and Siskin flying over.

From here we drive over towards Carrbridge and head up into a valley nearby for some lunch and whilst here see huge flocks of newly arrived Redwing and Fieldfares passing through in a constant stream and flying on up the valley on migration, a fantastic sight!

Near Grantown on Spey there are flocks of Redwings and Fieldfares seemingly feeding in every Rowan tree as we drive over to the old Spey Bridge, where we take a short walk along the river. There are some great autumn colours on the Beech trees along the river here and we see a large flock of Siskins and Coal Tits 'dribbling' down through the tops of the pine trees opposite!

Our last stop of the day is overlooking the moorland and hills near Nethybridge, with some great views across to the high Cairngorms beyond. Here there are more signs of the huge movement of winter thrushes that has occurred today as many hundreds of Fieldfare continue to pour through in large flocks migrating into the strong wind.

Day 5: There has been a large arrival of winter thrushes this morning with flocks of mainly Redwings flying over constantly as we head out and dropping in to feed in the Rowans. We pass one flock alone of 400+ Redwing together on the shinty pitch in Kincaig! What a sight!

From Speyside we head for the Moray coast and as we drive over the moors we come across a superb flock of ten male Black Grouse lekking in a field not far from the road, giving us some great views! Near Lochindorb this mornings 'grouse-fest' continues and we see many Red Grouse displaying and calling near the road and also see a Peregrine that soars over before we drop down to the coast.

Our next stop is on the coast at Findhorn bay, where we get some lovely close views of a flock of 22 Golden Plover that are roosting in the dune slacks. What total stunners! Looking out to sea from here there are many juvenile Gannets plunging for fish offshore and we also see three pale-bellied Brent Geese that fly past as well as a few Guillemots, Common Gulls and Oystercatchers.

At Burghead we have some lunch near the Maltings and see a Mink scampering along the foreshore, which causes some Otter/Mink i.d panic for a while! There

are more juvenile Gannets offshore here and we also see several Long-tailed Duck, as well as Guillemot and Razorbill. A Rock pipit flies over calling and there are lots of Turnstone, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Curlew and a single Dunlin feeding amongst the rocks here.

Our last stop of the day is around at Lossiemouth estuary, where there are masses of birds to be seen. The late afternoon autumn light is fantastic and we get great views of the many birds here including close Wigeon, Teal, Dunlin and Redshank, along with Curlew and a single Grey Plover and large numbers of roosting Herring, Common and Greater-Black backed gulls.

Day 6: Today we head for the west coast, driving through some fantastic scenery before we make a stop for a hot drink surrounded by an epic backdrop of high hills and looking out across to the jagged peak of An Teallach. Red Deer stags can be heard roaring from the hillsides nearby and several Ravens fly over whilst here before we push on down to the coast.

Our next stop is overlooking Gruinard Bay and Island. The sea is calm and we see a stunning raft of six Black Throated Divers here out in the bay, as well as several Great Northern Divers and a Snipe that flies past. Whilst watching the divers, a pair of White-tailed Eagles appear, circling together over the hillside behind us and soar overhead before crossing over to the island and perching, and being mobbed by a Raven!

Moving on a cracking flock of 30 Whooper Swans are seen flying over near Aultbea, before we make our next stop for lunch along the coast. More Great Northern Divers are offshore from here, including one in partial summer plumage diving for crabs just offshore and we also find a Red-breasted Merganser here as well as a single pale-bellied Brent Goose, 20 Ringed Plover and a few Curlew and Oystercatcher.

Our final stop is at Mellon Udrigle, where we take a walk down onto the beautiful remote shell sand beach, with fantastic views northwards to the distant mountains of Sutherland. Here we have some time to take in the fine views and also get some great close views of three Red-breasted Mergansers just off the beach here, as well as another Great Northern Diver and an inquisitive Common Seal.

Day 7: We awake to a complete 'Thrush Tsunami' outside the Steading this morning! Huge flocks of Redwings and Fieldfares are flying over calling in the murk with many hundreds of birds plummeting vertically out of the sky and dropping into the trees all around us as we watch, to feed in the Rowans around the Steading, giving us some fantastic views. It really is an incredible sight to behold! The numbers of birds involved in the 'Thrush fall' is dizzying this morning with birds seemingly everywhere!

Dragging ourselves away from the 'eye of the Thrush storm' we drive over to Cairngorm, its pretty windy with rain showers up on the mountain and from

here we see more large flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare wheeling around on the high ridges above us, grounded by the weather. Red Grouse are calling, a Peregrine soars high overhead briefly and a migrating flock of 20 Greylag Geese fly over the summit and into the cloud and rain, before we retreat to the warmth of the coffee shop for a hot drink!

Heading down off the hill we make our next stop at Loch Garten RSPB Reserve, where we walk up to the Osprey hide to check out the bird feeders. There are masses of birds around the feeders, mainly Coal Tits and Chaffinch along with Blue and Great Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. After a patient wait we also get some fantastic close views of a Crested Tit here, along with hearing a Brambling calling and a Redwing in full song!

In Nethybridge we see a few Crossbills flying over calling and get good views of a Red Squirrel, before we head into Abernethy forest for a walk. On our walk through the forest we see a few Goldcrest, Coal Tits and more Redwings flying over and as we come out to the edge of the forest, there are some fantastic views out across the reserve looking up to Cairngorm along with a huge flock of some 400+ Redpoll feeding in the birch trees and wheeling around, what a sight!

Species of the Trip: White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Fieldfare and Redwing, Icelandic Redwing, Black-throated Divers, Crested Tit, Pine Marten, Golden Plover, Great Northern Diver

Place of The Trip: Mellon Udrigle, Udale Bay, Findhorn Valley, Abernethy, The Steading

Magic Moment: Complete Holiday! Autumn Colours, Thrush Fall, Black Grouse lekking, White-tailed Eagle attacking Mountain Goats, Craig thigh rubbing! Pre-dawn Feshie

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Pale-bellied Brent Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Pintail
Wigeon
Teal
Greater Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Black Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Slavonian Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Peregrine
Oystercatcher
Goldcrest
Chiffchaff
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Trecreeper
Magpie

Ringed Plover
Golden plover
Grey Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Turnstone
Dunlin
Redshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Swallow
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird

Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Badger
Pine Marten
Mink
Wood Mouse
Short-tailed Vole
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Mountain Hare
Feral/Mountain Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottlenose Dolphin
Common Seal
Feral Reindeer

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral
Small Tortoiseshell