

Speyside Autumn Wildlife Trip Report 06 -13 October 2018

Leader: Craig Round

Guests: Louise Bacon, Andy Clarke, Vicki Harley, Steven Keey, Doug Radford

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 dawns breezy, cool but dry. A flock of some 40+ Redpoll and Siskin are flying around The Steading as we head out for a short walk around some local lochans this morning. Three Whooper Swans are seen and heard flying over as we arrive at the Lochans and during our walk, we get a good view of our first Crested Tit of the week and some Common Crossbills are heard flying over. We also see Coal Tit, Blue & Great Tit, Goldcrest, Chaffinch and Treecreeper as well as a flyover Buzzard and Grey Heron.

After a welcome hot drink back at The Steading, we drive up into the Findhorn Valley. The views and scenery are stunning up here as we drive along the glen and some Raptors are making the most of the dry weather window and are already on the wing, with a Red Kite seen soaring over the road with a Common Buzzard as well as an immature White-tailed Eagle and another two Red Kites soaring!

A single Common Crossbill is seen well, perched on the top of a pine, before we stop for lunch amongst the shelter of the trees, and whilst here get some great views of some 40+ Common Crossbills perched in the tops of the pines and flying around calling, as well as quite a few Siskin.

After lunch we drive up to the top end of the glen seeing a herd of mountain Goats and a couple of Red Deer out on the hill as well as a Raven that flies over, as the weather starts to turn a little grim, to say the least with rain coming in and the wind gusting to gale force.

We make another stop alongside the River Findhorn surrounded by the imposing hills, and from here we see more large herds of Red Deer out on the hill, including an impressive stag bellowing and chasing his 'harem' - some 50+ of hinds, and a Kestrel is hunting along the ridge above us.

After tea, we head back out into the wind and rain again up to the mammal hide, and after putting out the bait of peanuts, raisins and peanut butter around the hide we settle in to see what mammals might turn up. We only have a matter of minutes to wait however before the first Wood Mice appear to feed on the scattered peanuts along with a Bank Vole. Things really get busy a little later though as no less than four Badgers amble in to feed on the scattered peanuts around the hide, followed shortly after by a superb Pine Marten! We get some great views as the Marten feeds on the peanuts and raisins on the bird table before scampering back off into the darkness. What a night!

Day 3 It is overcast this morning with a light South West wind blowing as we set out to drive over to the Black Isle. Our first stop is just across the Firth from Inverness at North Kessock, where we get views of a Sparrowhawk and another two Red Kites soaring, and a large female/immature Peregrine that goes over.

From here, we head to Chanonry Point and walk out to the point to sea watch across the Firth. Three or more Common Seals are just off the shingle beach here, and we see a small flock of seven Turnstone flying past, as well as a few Kittiwakes, Razorbill, Guillemot, Eiders and Shag offshore. A flock of around 20 Scaup and Long-tailed Duck are seen distantly out in the Firth, and a few Meadow Pipits and Rock Pipit fly over calling. A Great Skua also flies through heading inland on migration.

Our next stop is for lunch at Udale Bay RSPB reserve for high tide and our timing is spot on as we arrive to the sight of masses of birds gathered in the high tide roost at the head of the Firth. Big flocks of Pink Footed Geese fly noisily overhead and out on the estuary there are of 100s of duck including Wigeon and Teal as well as a few Shelduck and Red-breasted Mergansers.

There are also many waders including around 300 Lapwing, 12+ Black-tailed Godwit, 1 Bar-tailed Godwit, Oystercatchers, Curlew, Redshank, 10 Golden Plover that fly over and a single female Ruff, which is a good find.

As the tide drops, we drive around the coast following the shore alongside the Cromarty Firth, and make another stop to look at a stunning close flock of around 400 Greater Scaup. The views of these smart sea duck are fantastic in the calm conditions, and there are also a scattering of at least 20+ Slavonian Grebes offshore as well as a drake Long-tailed Duck and a scattering of Eider. Moving further along the firth, large flocks of Greylag Geese are roosting along the shore by the road and more Curlew, Redshank and Eiders are seen before we head back to base as the rain finally closes in.

Day 4 Today starts with more wind and rain as we head over to the Moray Firth via some high moorland. As we drive across the moors, we see several Red Grouse calling by the road and get a brief view of a Golden Eagle soaring over a nearby ridge before quickly drifting off out of sight.

Our next stop is overlooking Lochindorb where we find a cracking female/immature Merlin perched on a boulder in the distance. A few Goosander and Goldeneye are out on the loch and we get another brief view of the Merlin hunting as well as more great close views of Red Grouse beside the road, before we drop down to the coast.

At Findhorn Bay, it's a very high tide today being driven on by a strong wind, challenging conditions for finding birds though we do see a flock of some 50+ Redshank as well as a few Curlew out in the bay.

Moving on again around to Findhorn Dunes, we get great views of a stunning flock of Golden Plover wheeling around overhead in formation, as well as finding 2 Stonechats and a few Yellowhammers in the coastal scrub here. Just offshore, many Gannets are plunge-diving for fish and a little further out to sea 2 Great Skuas and (3-4) Arctic Skuas are harassing the Kittiwakes. Moving on from here we drive around the coast to Burghead and make a stop in the harbour where we find 4 Grey Seals in the harbour swimming around the moored fishing boats. For lunch, we drive over to the foreshore near the maltings where we get more great views of plunging Gannets just offshore, as well as a few Guillemots.

As more rain starts to come in off the sea, we move on again around to Lossiemouth estuary, where we find masses of roosting Herring, Common, Black-headed and Great Black-backed Gulls as well as getting some nice views of close flocks of Teal and Wigeon. There are also a few waders here including Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher, and a single Ringed Plover whilst a late female/ 1st winter Wheatear is along the seawall with a Rock Pipit for company and a flock of Eider are offshore here.

Day 5 The weather is much better today as we head for the west coast, and it is beautiful and sunny as we drive west through some dramatic scenery. At Loch Glascarnoch we find 31 newly arrived Whooper Swans resting at the head of the loch giving us some great views in the autumn sunshine, before making our next stop near Dundonnell for a hot drink looking to the dramatic peak of An Teallach. A few Red Deer are roaring out on the hill here and a Buzzard soars over before we move on again and make our next stop overlooking Gruinard Bay and Island.

From here we get fantastic views through the scopes of a flock of 4 stunning Great Northern Divers feeding on flatfish just offshore with some still in partial summer plumage, and we also pick out a few Black-throated Divers in winter plumage out in the bay.

Our next stop is down by the coast for lunch, where we get fantastic views of an immature Golden Eagle which flies right over us heading inland! There are also more Great Northern Divers with at least 10+ offshore, as well as a few Black Guillemots and Shags and a Great Skua chasing kittiwakes distantly offshore. In the

very calm sea conditions, at least 8 Harbour Porpoise are seen surfacing and Craig briefly sees a Minke Whale breaching! A Twite is heard flying over and a single Red-throated Diver flies past, whilst six or more Common Seals are hauled on the rocks in a nearby bay with a flock of 20+ Ringed Plover along the shore.

The views are stunning looking out across Gruinard bay to the distant mountains as we follow the coast around to our final stop of the day at the tiny isolated settlement of Mellon Udrigle, where we take a walk down onto the beautiful golden shell sand beach, A Kestrel flies overhead and a flock of around 20 Ringed Plover fly past, with yet another 2 Great Northern Divers close just offshore, giving us more great views. On the drive back, we see two late Swallows and a single House Martin hawking insects over the road and a herd of Mountain Goats.

Day 6 It's a dry but windy start this morning, with several newly arrived Redwing seen flying over The Steading this morning, as well as Brambling and a Common Crossbill. At the bridge in Kincaig, there are some lovely autumn colours on the trees and reflections in the river, and a few more Redwing are seen flying over before we move on around to a small loch just outside Boat of Garten.

Here, there are several Grey Heron, some 20-30 Teal out on the loch as well as few Mallards and a mixed flock of Goldcrest, Coal & Blue Tit and Treecreeper move through. At Loch Garten, we find at least ten Goldeneye out on the loch and Craig finds a stunning male Parrot Crossbill singing from the top of a nearby Scots Pine tree! The views of this monster Crossbill are something to behold! Also, here we get some great views of a Red Squirrel and a Crested Tit that flies quickly through.

From the loch, we head the short distance up along the road to check out the bird feeders outside the Osprey Centre. A Red Deer runs off through the trees as we walk up to the hide, and there are masses of birds around the feeders, mainly very tame Coal Tits but also Great and Blue Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. A Crested Tit is heard calling several times but fails to show itself sadly, and several Brambling are also heard calling from the trees, amongst the flocks of Chaffinch.

From Loch Garten we drive to Nethybridge for lunch, passing a cracking Red Deer stag in the forest by the road, before heading into Abernethy forest to take a walk in the woods. During our walk, we see a huge flock of some 300+ Redpoll wheeling around over the forest, in addition to a flock of 12 Crossbill that fly over calling and a brief Golden Eagle soaring in the distance. As we get to the edge of the forest the views are superb out to the hills and up onto Cairngorm, and as we start to walk back through the forest a hunting female/immature Merlin slices through the hundreds of Redpoll, followed shortly after by a hunting Peregrine that flies over! A tit flock also moves through the trees here along with a couple of calling Crested Tits.

Day 7 Today dawns to southerly gales and rain - nice! This morning we head up onto Cairngorm briefly, to see just how wild Britain's weather can be! On the mountain from the top car park, incredibly a few Redwing and Fieldfare are seen still migrating in the atrocious weather but struggling to make much headway through the sheeting rain and gale force wind! After a warming drink up here, we drive down to the relative calm of Insh Marshes RSPB reserve, and from the viewing platform on top of the hide here we get a great view over the marshes spread out below us. A stunning male Hen Harrier flies through quartering low over the ground hunting, and there are some large flocks of Teal and Wigeon feeding out on the marshes, as well as six or more Pink-footed Geese amongst the flocks of feeding Greylags and a few Roe Deer. There are also signs of some Thrush migration underway with flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare all flying past heading South West along with at least six Brambling. A few Siskin and Redpoll fly over and a Great Spotted Woodpecker along with Blue, Great and Coal Tits are busy on the feeder in front of the hide.

As the weather starts to worsen, we move on again but gradually conditions become pretty un-birdable with teeming rain falling from the sky, so we finally admit defeat and head back to base to dry out!

Species of the Trip:- Parrot Crossbill, Great Northern Diver, Pine Marten, Merlin

Place Of The Trip:- Mellon Udrigle, Gruinard Bay, Udale Bay, Insh Marshes, Abernethy

Magic Moment:- Pine Marten, Gannets plunging, Merlin hunting Redpoll

MAMMALS

Wood Mouse

Bank Vole

Red Squirrel

Rabbit

Mountain Hare (deceased)

Pine Marten

Badger

Pipistrelle Bat

Bat sp

Feral/Mountain Goat

Red Deer

Roe Deer

Common Seal

Grey Seal

Harbour Porpoise

Feral Reindeer

Butterflies/Moths:-

Red Admiral

Speckled Wood

Mottled Umber

Winter Moth

Silver Y

Fox Moth (larva)

Dragonflies:-

Common Hawker

Golden Ringed Dragonfly

BIRDS

Mute Swan

Whooper Swan

Pink-footed Goose

Greylag Goose

Canada Goose

Shelduck

Mallard

Wigeon

Teal

Pochard

Greater Scaup

Tufted Duck

Eider

Long-tailed Duck

Goldeneye

Goosander

Red-breasted Merganser

Red Grouse

Red-legged Partridge

Pheasant

Red-throated Diver

Black-throated Diver

Great Northern Diver

Slavonian Grebe

Gannet

Cormorant

Shag

Grey Heron

White-tailed Sea Eagle

Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Peregrine
Merlin
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden plover
Lapwing
Turnstone
Dunlin
Ruff
Redshank
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl

Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Rock Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Swallow
House Martin
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Northern Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Fieldfare
Blackbird
Goldcrest
Wren
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Treecreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow

Chaffinch
Brambling
Linnet
Twite
Redpoll sp
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Parrot Crossbill
Yellowhammer