

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

AUTUMN WILDLIFE IN SPEYSIDE

30 SEPTEMBER - 7 OCTOBER 2017

Guides: Simon Pawsey & Craig Round

Guests: Denise Mead, Patricia & Alan Shaw, Terry Smith, Jeanette Gosney, Janet & Peter Mann, Lydia & Ian Taylor, Libby & Joel Butroyd, John Workman

Day 1 We all meet up at The Steading late in the afternoon which gives us time to relax and take in the surroundings. After a lovely evening meal cooked by Sharon we retire to the lounge for coffee and to run through the itinerary for the week ahead and talk through everyone's hopes and expectations.

Day 2 Our first full day dawns wet with heavy showers and an increasing wind throughout the day. We are not to be deterred though, and decide to head north and try to evade the worst of the weather by heading to the RSPB's reserve at Loch Ruthven, which is known for its breeding Slavonian Grebe population. We manage to miss some of the heavy rain that the Cairngorms was experiencing, the wind, however, is increasing, but we still manage to find some good wildlife.

Just before arriving at Loch Ruthven we spot a Red Kite circling over a hill and repeatedly dropping down low over the ground before rising up again. The reason for this turns out to be a Roe Deer which appeared from out of the vegetation and may have been lying down, drawing in the Kite which may have believed the deer was carrion.

Once at the car park we have a quick coffee and watch flocks of nomadic Mistle Thrushes and Meadow Pipits moving through, searching for food amongst the birch trees and moorland. A Little Grebe is on the loch which is extremely rough as the wind whistles through the glen and along the surface of the water. The vortex caused by the strengthening wind is very impressive and quite a spectacle as it whips the water causing it to spiral into the air.

We seek some sanctuary from the wind at the reserve's hide. There is a flock of Teal in the reeds along with some Mallard. Simon finds two late Slavonian Grebes further out on the loch that are moulting into their winter plumage before they leave the loch and move to the coast for the winter. Other than this the loch is quiet, but the spectacle of the wind on the water keeps us all entertained.

Back at the car park there are still a number of Mistle Thrushes moving through and Simon picks up a Redwing amongst them which proves difficult to get onto as it disappears into some Silver Birches.

We drive onto the road which skirts around the western shores of the loch and have some excellent views of Red Kites, including one which flies straight into a fence in front of Craig's van. Thankfully the bird appears uninjured and flies away.

Retracing our steps we then turn onto the "Farr Road" which takes us over the moors before the road drops down into Strathdearn and the Monadhliath mountains. A Common Toad on the road is a good find and probably the most watched toad in the Highlands at that time, as everyone clusters round it to take photos and get a good look. The moors over the Farr Road are managed grouse moors and true to form we have some excellent views of Red Grouse very close to the road in the heather. Where there is Grouse there are raptors, and Simon picks up a large Peregrine in his wing mirror as it flashes behind the van low over the moor in full hunting mode. The Peregrine then flies alongside both vans giving fast but excellent views before disappearing over a ridge.

As we drop down into Strathdearn the weather begins to improve and we find a quiet spot out of the wind by a burn which flows into the River Findhorn. A Red Admiral is on the wing, it has been a bumper year for these migratory butterflies in the UK and a Common Hawker is hunting up and down the stream.

After some lunch we drive into Strathdearn, also known locally as the Findhorn Valley. A bit of a misnomer as there are no valleys in Scotland, just glens and straths. Driving through Strathdearn and following the Findhorn into the upper reaches of the glen we pick up herds of Red Deer on the hills. The annual Red Deer rut is just starting to gather momentum, but our best views (and sounds!) are to come later in the week. Ravens are sparring and tumbling in the air, their cronking calls echoing around the glen and there are numerous Buzzards soaring on the strong winds. Peter picks up a Dipper in one of the shallow channels of the river and we watch it searching for food in the water and Lydia spots a distant Mountain Hare, just starting to lose its summer coat and looking 'frosted.'

The eagles for which the glen is justly famous for are proving elusive but then on the way back Craig finds a White-tailed Eagle flying between the hills at the back of Glenmazeran. We all pile out of the vans to try and get onto the bird but it is flying with a purpose and we lose it behind the trees on a distant fell.

Back at The Steading we have an early dinner and prepare for an evening in our Pine Marten hide on Rothiemurchus estate. The conditions are not particularly in our favour as the weather is still very windy and wet. However, once the food is out the Wood Mice keep us entertained until the Badgers put in an appearance and what a show they put on for us, with a total of five Badgers coming to the hide, including one of the males who gives a masterclass in how to climb trees, which is not an easy thing to do when you're a Badger. He makes it look easy and is rewarded with a mouthful of peanut butter. Unfortunately the Pine Martens don't show, but it is a fitting end to a great first day despite the bad weather conditions.

Day 3

The weather has improved slightly today. There are still some showers but the strong winds from the previous day has dropped off, at least they had in Strathspey. We head north up the A9 to Inverness and turn into North Kessock and take up a position underneath the Kessock Bridge, mainly to look for Otters which can often be found there. Unfortunately the wind is still very strong up here and we don't manage to find any Otters. Cormorants are perched and fishing in the Moray Firth and there are a number of male Gooseanders over the far side.

We drive onto the Black Isle and make for Chanonry Point. There are Guillemots and Razorbills on the sea and a juvenile Herring Gull is wandering up and down the tide line, coming quite close and calling forlornly. A flock of Eider fly into the bay and we have good scoped views, along with a flock of Wigeon which fly in off the sea probably on migration from Iceland or northern Scandinavia. Otherwise Chanonry is quiet and no sign of the Bottle-nosed Dolphins for which the area is famous.

We carry on to the RSPB's excellent reserve at Udale Bay. The weather at this point is breezy but dry and the area of the bay in front of the hide is absolutely crammed with birds and quite a spectacle. There is a massive roost of gulls in their hundreds, as well as a flock of Wigeon which numbered into the two to three thousand birds. There are Teal in the channels in front of us and as they fly in we get great views of our smallest and one of our most attractive ducks.

Waders are very much in evidence with thousands of Golden Plovers, Oystercatchers, Redshanks, Knot, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwits are forming flocks out on the mud flats. As the waders take to the air Craig picks up a single Ruff which frustratingly flies away from us and settles in amongst some Bar-tailed Godwits and Wigeon. However after some persistent scanning we manage to find the Ruff again, which flies nearer to the hide and gives us some great views of what turns out to be an elegant immature female. Udale proves to be a real spectacle and it is great to see so many birds in such big numbers.

We continue along the Cromarty Firth towards Cromarty, stopping at the wonderfully named Jemimaville to scan across the open water towards the towering oil rigs which have been towed into the firth to be de-commissioned. There are at least 100 plus Scaup on the sea, another migrant duck which comes to us in the Autumn to winter in the UK from Iceland and northern Europe. Simon manages to pick out a pair of Slavonian Grebes in amongst the Scaup, again likely to be birds which are wintering in the UK from Iceland and Scandinavia.

From the Cromarty Firth we drift back towards Strathspey, picking up three Red Kites on the way as we leave the Black Isle. We call into the Beaully Firth on the way back and have some great views of a Black-tailed Godwit quite close in, with some further out on the mudflats. Pink-footed Geese are now starting to arrive from Greenland and Iceland, with skeins flying in over our heads and landing on the mudflats on the far side of the estuary. We drive along the Beaully Firth back towards Inverness which is quiet and then head back to The Steading, picking up two Red Kites over the A9 on the way home.

Day 4

The weather has improved again today and we decide to stay local to Strathspey. After a good breakfast our first port of call is Loch Insh, where we take up a position overlooking the south end of the loch. Craig picks up a male Gadwall as we arrive and a good find for Strathspey. On the loch there are some Canada Geese and Tufted Ducks. A Sparrowhawk is circling over some trees where the loch joins Insh Marshes and we have some large skeins of Pink-footed Geese over our heads and towards the Cairngorms having just arrived on migration. What a wonderful and evocative sight. The Cairngorms have a dense bank of cloud over the high tops and as the skeins approach the cloud, each and every one of them turn west to fly around the Cairngorms rather than through the cloud itself.

We then make our way to the RSPB's Insh marshes reserve and the excellent hide which overlooks the south west end of the reserve. We stand on top of the hide on the viewing platform which gives us great views of the marsh and the Monadhliath hills directly opposite. Our target bird is to be Hen Harrier and we haven't been in position long before Lydia picks up a female Hen Harrier quartering low over the marsh. This bird is then joined by a second bird, which is a juvenile as it has a more russet coloured breast and is more heavily streaked. This bird is hunting low over the marsh and eventually catches a vole, which it then promptly drops into a small pool, perhaps just lack of experience. The Harrier then flies low right over our heads giving superb views of this majestic bird.

There are also quite a number of Roe Deer grazing on the marsh and a steady stream of Buzzards flying around. Craig picks up two White-tailed

Eagles which appear briefly over the distant Monadhliaths, but the birds are elusive and only show for a few seconds before disappearing over a ridge.

From Insh Marshes we drive towards the Cairngorms and stop for a walk up a quiet track at Glenmore to try and pick up some forest species. There is a lot of evidence of Capercaillie in the area, with droppings along the path and the odd feather caught on the heather. A pair of Crested Tits show very well in front of us in some young Scots Pines right alongside the path and we are able to hear them calling as they busy themselves around us. It is a lovely walk through some very old Caledonian pinewoods, but the 'horse of the woods' the Capercaillie eludes us.

We stop at Loch Morlich for lunch and watch more skeins of geese fly over towards the Cairngorms, only to turn away again and head west due to the low cloud. From here we make our way to Dalnahaitnach behind Carrbridge to try and increase our tally of raptors. We are not to be disappointed and are treated to a 20 minute raptor festival over a distant hill. There are numerous buzzards circling and then Simon picks up a Goshawk which flies into the circling Buzzards and begins to spar with them, the birds twisting and turning as they chase each other. This is great to watch, especially as Goshawks by their nature can be so elusive. However, it was to get better and Simon picks up a juvenile Golden Eagle which comes out of the forest and soars up towards the Goshawk, which promptly starts mobbing it, giving us an excellent scale of the size of both birds. What a treat this is and a great way to end what has been another cracking day.

Day 5

Today dawns overcast and dry and we decide to head towards the Moray Coast to do some sea-watching. First stop, however, is Milton Loch just outside Boat of Garten where a Kingfisher has recently been seen and a bird that is very scarce in Strathspey. There are Moorhens and Mallards on the loch but no Kingfisher, unfortunately. Our spirits are good though as Tel is keeping us entertained with some of his adventures over the years.

Our first stop on the coast is at Findhorn Dunes. A grey Seal is just offshore and putting in regular appearances right in front of us and there is a flock of male and female Gooseanders fishing out on the sea. There are a large number of Gannets fishing far out and we have more Pink-footed Geese coming in off the sea on migration. A flock of very distant black ducks are Common Scoters and we have small flocks of Dunlin and Ringed Plover flying past us skimming low over the waves. Simon picks up a dark phase Arctic Skua and a Great Skua (Bonxie) harassing some Gannets a long way out, but in the windy conditions it is difficult to pick them up even with the scopes.

We make our way further east and stop at Roseisle for coffee and some more sea-watching. The coffee part is very good as we are in the Scots Pine

woods and sheltered, however, once we leave the sanctuary of the woods we are sand-blasted as the wind comes at us from offshore, so discretion is the better part of valour and it is back to the vans and onwards to Burghead and the Maltings on the eastern side of Burghead which may offer some shelter.

At The Maltings we see a skein of Pink-footed Geese coming in off the sea and flying very low over the heavy waves. There are at least 50 birds in the skein and they are clearly struggling to make landfall as the wind is directly head on for them. They are working hard and getting nowhere fast, so much so that they abandon this attempt, turn around and drift back out to sea. However they clearly have a plan as they then turn again back into the wind, gain some height above the waves and then a group of about 10 birds push through the middle of the skein from the back and take up the fight against the wind at the front. These birds are obviously fresher than the others, having been using less energy at the back and they are able to literally drag the rest of the skein over the water and over our heads towards Findhorn Bay. What a spectacle and an intelligent piece of teamwork which just goes to show the levels of communication and co-operation between these birds.

There is also a pair of Slavonian Grebes on the sea and a late Wheatear is flitting about the rocks, fattening itself up before its migration south through Europe and into Africa. On the rocks there are Redshanks, Turnstones and Oystercatchers and a flock of Long-tailed Ducks skim past us just offshore heading west, as well as some Eider and Common Scoters.

We always try to take our guests to the very best scenic locations that the Highlands have to offer, so with this in mind we make our way just outside Lossiemouth to Balormie Pig Farm. The pigs are obviously a big attraction for us, but there are rumours on the birding grapevine that some Little Stints and a Curlew Sandpiper are to be found probing in the mud. As we arrive it isn't long before Lydia spots some small waders scurrying around the outside of a muddy pool. Sure enough these are Little Stints and we are able to stand on a bank by the side of the road and enjoy close views of these long distance migrants that breed in the high Arctic and then head to our shores in small numbers to refuel before continuing down through Europe and into Africa and in some cases even as far as Australia. What a bird!

That just left the Curlew Sandpiper and it isn't long before John says "I think I may have found it." Sure enough a juvenile bird is on its own in the next pool along, probing its long curved bill in the mud. This is another wader which breeds in the Arctic and passes through the UK in small numbers on migration heading for Africa and a very good find.

Eventually we pull ourselves away from the romance of the pig farm and head to the estuary at Lossiemouth. There is a huge gull roost, with Great Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed gulls all present, along with scores of Wigeon, Teal, Red-breasted Mergansers and Grey Herons to name some of the species present. It is quite a spectacle and a good way to end our day.

Day 6

This is to be our day heading west to the west coast of the Highlands and the area around Gruinard Bay. We have some showers and windy weather on the way over. We stop at the viewpoint looking down onto Loch Broom but the weather is against us and we manage to see some Buzzards and Hooded Crows but not much else. We had planned to visit the Corrieshalloch Gorge but unfortunately the path was being maintained and access to the gorge was closed.

We continue to Gruinard Bay where we stop for lunch over looking Gruinard Island. There is a small flock of six Black-throated Divers in the bay below us giving good views and Gannets circling and fishing further out, but otherwise the bay is quiet.

We make our way along the coastline through some dramatic Highland scenery to the village of Second Coast where we stop briefly and pick up a Red-throated Diver which is fishing on the sea below us. Further on at Laide we stop to look over the bay and find a female Common Scoter on her own as well as some Black Guillemots, Curlews on the rocks and a very large skein of Pink-footed Geese coming in off the sea.

At Mellon Udrigle we park by the beach and walk down to the shoreline. There are Dunlin and Oystercatchers and Ringed Plovers on the rocks, but otherwise the area is quiet from a birding perspective. However we walk up onto a headland and have dramatic views over the bay and along the coast. As we retrace our route back towards Gruinard Bay we find a Common Buzzard which is hovering right alongside us in a field and only about two metres off the ground. We stop to enjoy the spectacle and appreciate the moment - it's certainly not just about finding the rarer species, some of our commoner birds can be just as spectacular, as this Buzzard proves.

On the way back we find some Wild Goats feeding right by the roadside and we stop for an evening meal at Inchbae Lodge.

Day 7

Today dawns bright and clear, which is very welcome. We had seen Golden Eagles during the week, but not quite the sort of views that Simon and Craig had been hoping for, so with that in mind we decide to head back to the upper reaches of the Findhorn River and Strathdearn. Let's face it, you can never see too many eagles and it proves to be a good decision for us.

Some of the lower hills at the start of the glen can be very productive for raptors and they tend to get overlooked by birders heading for the higher hills at the end on the road. Sure enough we pick up a Golden Eagle which is in amongst some soaring Buzzards at our first stop, but this bird disappears quickly and we can't relocate it. It is clear though that raptors are on the wing as the skies are full of Buzzards and no doubt some other gems amongst them. Craig picks up a Goshawk soaring over a plantation on the opposite side of the glen and then a Hen Harrier appears in the same area. There are numerous Kestrels flying around and it is just a matter of remaining patient and diligent. We stop further along the glen to watch a Red Deer stag attending to his harem. He has about 15 hinds in attendance and some other mature stags watching his every move from further up the hill.

This stag is bellowing out his superiority and warning any potential challengers to stay away. The sound is drifting across the glen towards us and as we watch him throw his head back to roar, it is two or three seconds before the sound actually reached us. Whilst this is going on Simon picks up an adult Golden Eagle behind us which is soaring low over the glen in good light, giving fantastic views. This eagle is joined by a second adult bird and we have exceptional views as the stag roars in the background, which is the perfect sighting accompanied by an evocative soundtrack at the end of our week.

Strathdearn had certainly delivered for us, so we make our way back to Rothiemurchus where we stop at the visitor centre for some lunch and a bit of retail therapy. From here we then go up Cairngorm and take the funicular railway up the side of the mountain to the top station and the Ptarmigan Restaurant. We venture out onto the viewing area to have a scan of the hillsides. Simon picks up a flock of Snow Buntings which frustratingly quickly disappears over a rise. We decide to venture out onto the hill and walk slowly up towards the summit along the Windy Ridge path. Progress is deliberately slow and we stop and scan the alpine habitat for Ptarmigan, which are supremely camouflaged. Libby picks up some movement and spots a fabulous Mountain Hare, which is really close and very confiding (up to a point!) and we all get great views. After about half an hour Simon finds a Ptarmigan wedged against a rock, looking very much like a rock itself. This appears to be a female bird and sits perfectly still for the whole time we watch it. A remarkable bird in a remarkable habitat.

We agree to have a crack at the Snow Buntings which Simon has seen from the viewing terrace, so we head back down the hill and down onto the slopes below the top station. However, the Snow Buntings elude us, so it is back into the Ptarmigan restaurant for some coffee before we head off the mountain via the funicular railway.

We get back to The Steading in plenty of time to relax, do some packing and then enjoy our last evening meal together cooked by Sharon, our wonderful chef for the week. After dinner we sit down in the lounge with coffee and a few drams and go over our sightings and memories of what has been an excellent week in such a special part of the world.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Pink-footed Goose
Greylag Goose
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Pintail
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Common Scoter
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Gooseander
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
White-tailed Eagle
Golden Eagle
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red Grouse
Ptarmigan
Red-legged Partridge
Pheasant
Moorhen
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Dunlin
Ruff

Little Stint
Curlew Sandpiper
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Turnstone
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Black Guillemot
Razorbill
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Wheatear
Swallow
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Trecreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow

Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite

Total Birds: 98

MAMMALS

Short-tailed Vole
Wood Mouse
Red Squirrel
Rabbit
Mountain Hare
Badger
Wild Goat
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Common Seal
Grey Seal

Total Speices: 109