



## **BIRDWATCHING TRIP REPORT** **Scottish Highlands 23rd – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

### **Tour leader Chris Mills**

**Participants:- Mike and Jane James, Jane Hibbert, Jan Thompson, Sue Walton and Jane Wright**

### **TOUR OVERVIEW**

This Highland tour was again based at the lovely spacious accommodation of Feith Mhor lodge, near Carrbride. This big old refurbished shooting lodge house, set in it's own grounds with a large kitchen, dining room, lounge, drying room and 6 en-suite bedrooms proved perfect for our stay! The tour offered a great overview of the specialist Highland species. This year we had fantastic views of all the iconic Scottish Highland species – **Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Ptarmigan, Crested Tit, Osprey, Slavonian Grebe**, plus breeding plumage **Red-throated** and **Black Throated Diver**. Stunning views of breeding plumaged **Snow Bunting** and an interesting array of **Crossbills** including larger billed **Scottish Crossbill** types.

Mammal highlights were significant with **3 Pine Marten** and **5 Badgers** putting in prolonged close up appearances! Also a great supporting cast of **Bottle-nosed Dolphin**, numerous **Red Squirrel** and **Red Deer**. **Over the 7 days we recorded 125 species of birds.**

### **TOUR REPORT**

#### **Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> April. Day 1 – Nottingham to Aviemore, Highland**

I collected the group from Long Eaton railway station and junction 24 of the M1 around 7.30am, we loaded all of the cases into the minibus and were heading north by 8am.

The first birds of any note were **1-2 Red Kite** as we were passing near to the town of Doune, there were of course plenty of roadside **Buzzards** and **Kestrels** to keep everyone's attentions!

We arrived to the south of the Highlands mid afternoon and made our first proper birding stop to look for Black Grouse in an area where I have seen them before. We were in luck and as we passed in the minibus, we could see quite a good group, plus some closer birds in a smaller group further along. We parked and walked carefully back, to look at the small group. There was **5 Blackcock**, superbly strutting around, occasionally dropping their wings and cocking their tails. Their steely blue shining plumage and red wattles were revealed through the telescopes. Having enjoyed good views of these birds, we drove the minibus back to the more distant group, there was at least **15 male Black Grouse** more, this time a little more distant. Nearby in the fields, a few more additions to get the trip well and truly underway, with **Curlew, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Wigeon** and **6 Golden Plover** in stunning summer finery! All this to a backdrop of constant **Willow Warbler** song.

By late afternoon we arrived in Aviemore and stocked up on food provisions. We were soon at our lovely accommodation in Carrbridge, with a wonderful large garden, complete with **Red squirrels**. We had an early evening meal and headed to bed ready for an early morning pre-breakfast birding venture!

## **Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April. Day 2 – Abernethy Forest, Highland and surrounding areas**

Alarms were set for 4.30am & we left at around 5am for birding at a nearby forest location.

En-route we passed 4 very smart **Goosander**. We then set out walking through the forest, it was a fine dry, cold sunny morning – ideal! A **Tree Pipit** flew over calling, but everyone was focussed on looking and listening for the real “target” species! As we made our way on to a clearing, we stood very quietly. Suddenly, I realised I could hear a male **Capercaillie**! We stood perfectly still and it didn’t take too long to find a superb male **Capercaillie** lekking along a ridge in the forest about 25m away. We stood still and over the next fifteen minutes in complete silence, we carefully watched him walking through the trees displaying, 2 females were also seen briefly before they flew up into the trees. Having enjoyed this wonderful experience, we carefully withdrew ensuring the male continued to lek undisturbed. As we drove from the forest, I could hear a **Tawny owl** calling, we stopped and waited, he appeared briefly sitting in the trees on the edge of the forest, a nice daylight view!

We then drove to Loch an Eileen, with sunshine and light winds, but a little chilly, the weather was ideal for forest birding. The car park feeders provided ultra close views of at least **2 Red squirrels**. We then headed off into the nearby woodland. A few commoner birds were in evidence, **Chaffinch, Siskin, and Goldcrest**. I then heard the distinctive “rippling” call of a **Crested Tit**, eventually it showed reasonably well, albeit briefly in the tops of the trees, though well enough to see the cute raised crest! A little more searching and birds continued to show up – with **Redstart, Tree Pipit, Bullfinch, Grey Wagtail, Mistle Thrush** and a drumming **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. On the Loch we were treated to beautiful mirror images of the hillside plus reflected views of **Goldeneye** on the water and **Common Sandpiper** along the edges.

Our early morning sortie had lasted well into the mid morning and we headed back to the accommodation, buoyant and ready for breakfast, possibly brunch! Our timing was very good! Just as we pulled on to the driveway an **Osprey** flew over the accommodation!

After a relaxed brunch back at Carrbridge, with the weather still sunny and fine we headed for some more forest birding near Dulnain bridge. Once amongst the Scots pines we were soon hearing the distinctive calls of “**Crossbills**”. After a bit of searching in the tops of the trees the first birds were located, most of these appeared and sounded as **Common Crossbills**. But there was a good selection of birds and we encountered several groups, before finding a larger billed Crossbill. Whilst this bird didn’t quite reach Parrot Crossbill proportions, it was clearly bigger billed – maybe a **Scottish Crossbill**!? See the images over page to make up your own mind! We had lots of views and fun watching these amazing birds, whatever species you want to assign them to. I see 100’s of Crossbills each year and I am unconvinced by “*Scottish*” Crossbill. This is a view shared by many keen birders with similar experience. Some of our birds looked fairly large billed certainly not Parrot Crossbill size or shape! As Common Crossbill varies a lot in bill shape/size anyway, I prefer to leave each individual to make their own decision! The birds were calling but it would be hard to say anything definitive from the calls!

Whilst in the wood we also noted a singing **Tree Pipit**, numerous **Siskin, Coal Tit a Treecreeper** plus **Willow Warblers** and **Blackcap**. A **Sparrowhawk** was soaring high above us, as were several **Common Buzzard**.

We rounded off a very successful first day with a late afternoon visit to a small Lochan & were soon feasting our eyes on two superb breeding plumage **Slavonian Grebes**. The pool also held **Little Grebe, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Common sandpiper**. Plus plenty of **Sand Martin** and **Swallow** overhead.



© Black Grouse – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Capercaillie – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Goldeneye – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Red squirrel – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding

### **Monday 25<sup>th</sup> April. Day 3 – Loch Garten, Boat of Garten Nethy Bridge**

We again opted for an early start, though the usual local Black Grouse lek was very quiet and it as fortunate we had seen them very well on the way up. We then headed to Loch Garten, with heavy snow showers falling and windy conditions, birding was a lot trickier! A stroll around the forest produced a singing **Redstart**, **Treecreeper** and **Siskin**. Out on the loch there was **Goldeneye**, **Common Sandpiper** and **Goosander**. We heard **Crested Tit** twice but couldn't get very satisfactory views. Also several **Crossbills**, but fairly brief views. No visit to the Scottish Highlands is complete without visiting the famous RSPB Loch Garten! So with the snow falling heavily, we didn't need a second invitation. We enjoyed an hour of the **Ospreys** at their nest and some interesting dialogue from the wardens about the birds. There was also several very close **Red Squirrel** showing very nicely on the feeders.

We started to head back to the accommodation, stopping off first at Nethy Bridge where we had nice views of **2 Dipper**. Then another stop at the River Spey Bridge where there was several **Goldeneye**, **Common Sandpiper** and a smart male **Red-breasted merganser**. Then at the Spey Bridge at Boat of Garten and a short stop produced a pair of **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Goosander**, **Goldeneye** and **Common Sandpiper**.

In the afternoon we headed down in a river valley just to the east of the Cairngorms. The object was mainly to look for raptors, although the snow showers were still falling intermittently and hindering our chances. As we headed up the valley, the weather cleared and a little and group of **Common Crossbills** were watched very close to the minibus, just a few feet away! A group of **4-5 Red Grouse** were seen, several **Curlew** were calling and displaying, plus **2 Snipe** drumming overhead. A crisp marked male **Wheatear** showed up close by on the heather, and then as the weather improved **1-2 Buzzard** appeared and **2+ Kestrel**. We were really hoping for a Golden eagle or a Merlin, as these were the species I had encountered in the area before, but after an hours scanning we had no joy. I was about to set a time to leave by, when a big, big raptor appeared overhead. Incredibly, there was no mistaking an adult **White-tailed Eagle**, it drifted slowly away from us dropping into a conifer plantation on the distant ridge – fabulous and well worth the wait. We were joined a few minutes later by a couple of other birders, they had missed the original Eagle. But luckily a second **White-tailed Eagle** appeared, a little more distant this time, but still very clear to see. We all celebrated with one of Sue's famous peanut butter flapjacks!

An excellent day was rounded off with an excellent evening meal back at the accommodation.

### **Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> April. Day 4 – NW Speyside & North Coast**

The weather forecast for today was not good! Strong northerly winds with heavy snow showers. So we decided to head to the coast where at least birding would produce some birds along the coast. We arrived at Portsoy mid-morning where a White-billed Diver had been present recently, but a quick look at the sea told us unless it was very close inshore it was going to be very difficult to see in the raging white waves and surf! Still we contented ourselves with **2 Red-throated Diver**, a **Great Northern Diver**, **Razorbill** a few **Guillemots**, **Sandwich Tern**, **Common Scoter** and an almost constant stream of **Kittiwakes** and **Gannets** passed by. Star bird was a **Great Skua** that unexpectedly flew west, no doubt caught up in the stormy conditions. After a couple of ours in the cold northerly wind, we retreated to the café and had a nice hot soup and hot chocolate!

Further along the coast at Burghead we spent a further pleasant couple of hours scanning the sea off the mouth of the bay it was less rough here, but surprisingly less seaduck than past visits. We had a nice flock of **c45 Eider**, as well as **Sandwich & Common Terns**. Out on the rocks several **Cormorant** and **Shag**, plus on the sea **Red-breasted Merganser**. The shore line hosted **Hooded Crow**, **Turnstone**, **Curlew** and **Ringed Plover**, plus very good views of a friendly **Rock Pipit**!



© Crossbill sp? – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Common Crossbill – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Northern Wheatear - Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Dipper - Chris Mills Norfolk Birding

### **Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> April – Day 5 NW Speyside, Findhorn Valley, Chanonry Point**

Today there was an improvement in the weather, the wind had dropped and the snow showers eased! We took a short drive to a moorland loch to look first for one of my personal favourites – Black-throated Diver. The water was a little choppy and the first scans of the large loch didn't locate any divers. Then I noticed two distant divers, so we drove closer. A nice starter! Two superb breeding plumaged **Red-throated Diver**, these are delicate divers, with slender lines and up-tilted bill and heads. They surpassed any previous experience as they started to a courtship display, very reminiscent of Great-crested Grebe – wonderful!! A bit more searching and then we located the best of all the black and white patterned birds; an exquisite breeding plumage **Black-throated Diver**, fully appreciated with good views through the scope. We also noted several **Red grouse** showing very well, plus **Oystercatcher**, **Redshank** and **Meadow Pipits** up close. A couple of **Wigeon** were also new for the trip.

The weather was still good so we headed on to the Findhorn valley, arriving perfectly at 11am for raptor watching in improving weather conditions. As we headed down the valley we stopped for nice views of a male **Redstart**, **2 Grey Wagtail**, plus several **Song** and **Mistle Thrush**. We reached one of my favoured vantage points midway along the valley and had lunch here. Though we were pleased to be almost immediately distracted first by **30 Red Deer** on the hillside and then by a **Golden Eagle** as it came into view over the ridge opposite. This bird eventually soaring right overhead, it disappeared behind us only to reappear a few minutes later with a second **Golden Eagle**, the action then continued with both **Golden Eagle** in and out of view for the next forty minutes, including a **Buzzard** and a **Raven** mobbing one of them. Eventually they disappeared, but shortly after a **Peregrine** skimmed along the top of the ridge – a brilliant hour of raptor action! We then headed towards the Black Isle area. We stopped off at Munloch bay, where there was several Just before reaching the Black Isle we had **30 Teal**, **Hooded Crow**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Lapwing**, **Curlew**, **Ringed Plover** and **Oystercatcher**. Nearby we also noted **2 Tree Sparrow** and several **Yellowhammer**.

We then headed to Chanonry point where we were able to watch a mother and calf **Bottle-nosed Dolphins**. Also from here we located several **Eider** plus a scattering of **Guillemot** and **Kittiwake**.

Another superb evening meal thanks to the ladies cooking enjoyed whilst the group all from Leicester I must add, enjoyed watching Leicester City secure the Premiership title!







© Snow Bunting – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Crested Tit – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Badger – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding



© Pine Marten – Chris Mills Norfolk Birding

#### **Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> April – Day 6 Cairngorm, Insh marshes and Speyside evening hide**

We had a relative lie in with breakfast at 7am. I had been studying the weather conditions all week with the heavy snow showers we had witnessed. Today definitely looked the best chance for heading up to Cairngorm mountain for Ptarmigan. It was clear from the mountain car park camera images online that we would have to take the funicular to the top. The lower slopes and paths under several inches, indeed a foot of snow!

A stop off at the lower car park gave us good views of **Ring Ouzel**. We then headed up to the main car park, on arrival a few **Snow Bunting** flew overhead. Then a superb male breeding plumaged **Snow Bunting** landed on one of the walls in the car park. This monochrome beauty showed superbly well down to just a few feet, a wonderful start to the day!

We took the funicular to the top. From here there was a small balcony viewing area, though it was knee deep in snow but we were able to start scanning the nearby slopes. It was exceptionally cold, well below zero and after thirty minutes everyone had retreated for coffees and teas. I continued scanning, a distant **Golden eagle** was a nice distraction, as was a **Peregrine**, but I couldn't locate the desired Ptarmigan. I warmed up inside the café with the rest of the group and then started searching again, starting to be concerned as the number of skiers was also increasing!

Then suddenly a bit of movement in the scope and I realised I had a pair of **Ptarmigan!** I shouted everyone over and several other birders joined me. The birds weren't close and it took a while to get everyone on to them, but fortunately they both eventually started feeding and the movement allowed everyone to get reasonable views. We celebrated with a second coffee and chocolate cake, before heading down on the funicular. One third of the way down from the carriage one of the group spotted another **Ptarmigan** just below us, how typical!!

From the car park we also had good views of **Red Grouse**, **Meadow Pipit** and **Wheatear** and a couple of **Raven** also passed over. We then headed to Insh marshes, we were soon stopping the minibus again off as **2 Ospreys** flew overhead.

We then arrived at Insh where we had wonderful views of **3 Ospreys**, including two at a nest site. The loch also hosted **3 Goosander**, **Goldeneye** and **Common Sandpiper**.

We arrived at RSPB Insh marshes late afternoon and from the viewing platform we added quite a few additional species for the trip – **Eurasian White-fronted Goose** and **Whooper Swan** were surprises, presumably late sick or injured birds? Also **Snipe**, **Wigeon**, **Redshank**, **Lapwing**, but the real highlight was a beautiful hunting male **Hen Harrier**.

We had a fish supper then headed for an evening session in the Speyside wildlife hide. Tonight was by far the best evening I have had at this site, possibly aided by the very cold weather. Around 9.30pm the first of **5 Badgers** arrived. These northern Badgers are really small compared to our beefy English counterparts. Soon after the excitement was ramped up a notch as a **Pine Marten** arrived. Though there was no need to panic, because eventually **3 Pine Martens** were all visible together, feeding just a few feet away from the glass windows of the hide! This rounded off a very successful day!

#### **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> April – Day 7. Boat of Garten & Carrbridge**

We headed out this morning to the car park at RSPB Loch Garten where we had heard a Crested Tit was coming in for food. We had seen Crested Tit, but had struggled to get clear protracted views. So I took some seed and peanut butter. On arrival another birder confirmed the Crestie was coming in now and again. We had lovely views of many **Siskin** taking seed from the ground, plus plenty of **Coal Tits**. Eventually the **Crested Tit** appeared, he was in and out very quickly on the first visits. But in the end we had great views of the **Crested Tit** as it fought to extract seeds from the peanut butter I had planted!

Also around the area was **Tree Pipit**, **Redstart**, **Goldcrest**, **Siskin**, **Redpoll** and **Crossbill**. A very obliging **Treecreeper** also showed very well allowing some pictures to be taken

After lunch back at the accommodation with all the target species seen on the tour we decided on a circular walk around the woodland and nearby river valley. The highlight was plenty of **Buzzards, Curlew** and **20 Golden Plover** in the breeding plumage.

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May. Day 8 – Return to England dropping the group off at Junction 24 of the M1 mid afternoon**

#### **Birds recorded**

Over the week **125 species** were recorded by the group, but most memorable will be the great views of the **Golden and White-tailed eagle, Capercaillie, Ptarmigan, Black Grouse, Crested Tit, Crossbills** wonderful views of **Ospreys**. Stunning breeding plumage **Black-throated Diver** and **Slavonian Grebe**. Plus the **3 Pine Marten & Badgers**.

#### **Mammals recorded**

Grey Seal – Findhorn bay  
Common Seal – seen Findhorn bay and other coastal locations  
Roe Deer – numerous seen daily  
Red Deer – numerous in the hills and Speyside wildlife hide  
Red Squirrel – seen daily in the accommodation garden  
Brown Hare – seen regularly in Findhorn Valley  
Rabbit - numerous  
Mountain Goat – seen in Findhorn valley  
Wood Mouse – seen from Speyside wildlife hide

#### **Cetaceans recorded**

Bottle Nosed Dolphin – seen from Portsoy, Findhorn bay and Chanonry point  
Common/Harbour Porpoise – seen from Portsoy

If you are interested in joining a future Highlands tour please contact us for details.

**Next Highland Tour May 2017**

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