

Bird trip report

Cairngorms/Speyside and Isle of Skye

23rd April- 3rd May 2009

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I have wanted to visit Scotland and seek out its specialities for quite some time. The chance of crested tit, capercaillie, golden eagle, ptarmigan etc, and the beauty of the Scottish highlands, made this a highly anticipated holiday. However, the trip wouldn't be all out birding as my wife Lassie, despite enjoying the outdoors, has little interest in birds.

The plan was to drive up to Grantown-on-Spey, stopping overnight at Upper Teesdale for the Langdon Common black grouse lek. We would then stay at the Grant Arms 'birdwatchers' hotel for 4 nights, then drive west to Skye for the remainder of the trip. The Grant Arms hotel in Grantown is the centre for the Bird watching and Wildlife Club (BWWC), with its own lounge, library and lecture room. This provides a good forum in which to exchange sightings, book wildlife tours or chat to the staff about specific requests.

Before our return to Oxfordshire, over 100 species were observed including 11 UK lifers, and nearly all the species on my target list. Finding these specialities in Speyside and the Cairngorms can be tricky, but perseverance will eventually yield results.

Black grouse	Ptarmigan	White tailed eagle
Capercaillie	Golden eagle	Twite
Crested tit	Hooded crow	Black guillemot
Scottish crossbill	Black throated diver	Rock dove

List of target species (firsts for UK)

Day 1 : Langdon Common and drive to Speyside

Stayed in Brunswick House at Middleton from where I had planned to get up at 6.00 am, observe the black grouse lek and return in time for breakfast. Unfortunately slept through the alarm and so had to hope that they would still be around later on. Stopped at high force to see the highest waterfall in England which, after seeing Niagara Falls a few months ago, seemed a bit tame. The car park was full of **mistle thrush**, and the path down held **goldcrest**, **long tailed tit** and **chiffchaff**. **Grey wagtail** and 2 **dippers** were found at the base of the falls.

Drove on to Langdon with large numbers of **curlews**, **lapwings** and **oystercatchers** in the surrounding fields. Stopped at the bridge and scanned the area but could not find any grouse. Decided to drive back up the hill for a better vantage point, and after 5 minutes located 2 **black grouse** next to the stream about 400 meters away. Watched them for a while then embarked on the long drive up to the highlands, arriving at the hotel late afternoon. **Common gulls** were common throughout Speyside and a single **wigeon** was seen in a flooded field just outside Grantown.

Day 2 : Loch an Eilein, Cairngorm and Loch Mallachie

Arrived at the car park at Loch an Eilein so excited about the thought of crested tit that I forgot to bring money. Luckily the attendant agreed to accept some euros Lassie found in her handbag. Some feeders were hanging next to his shed which gave great views of **siskin**. Told me that crested tit were there daily until a couple of weeks ago. The 2-3 hour walk around the loch was very nice but quiet on the bird front apart from a few **coal tit**. Did see a few **goldeneye** and a single **goosander** on the lake, and a surprisingly tame field vole collected nesting material.



Siskin at car park of Loch an Eilein

On the drive up to the Cairngorm car park a **red grouse** was feeding at the side of the road. Did not feel energetic enough to walk up to the summit so took the funicular, hoping to see ptarmigan from the visitor centre. Their policy is protect the area by prohibiting people who arrive on the train from leaving the building. From the train, had great views of a pair of **ring ouzel** hanging about the track. Upon reaching the centre, made my way directly to the terrace to search for ptarmigan but, despite intensive scanning, only managed to find a couple of stones shaped like grouse. The best way to see ptarmigan, dotterel and snow bunting is to walk up past the centre and explore further afield.



Red grouse are very common in Speyside moorland

Next stop was a circular walk to Loch Mallachie (skirting Loch Garten) hoping to see crested tit and Scottish crossbill. Had spoken to a few groups of birders by this time, all of which had been unable to locate any cresties. The RSPB warden suggested that the birds were sitting on eggs and were quiet at the moment.

Pair of **common sandpipers** were seen on Loch Garten, and **treecreeper** in the woodland. Finally, on the portion of the walk that skirts Lake Mallachie, I heard the song I had been listening out for for hours. Found the **crested tit** quickly and was rewarded with superb views and photo opportunities.



Crested tit at Loch Mallachie

Day 3 : Loch Lochindorb, Anagach Forest

A pair of black throated divers had been reported on loch lochindorb which is only 20 minutes drive from Grantown. The loch is surrounded by a large area of rolling moorland with an island castle set in the middle. The approach road contained many red grouse, **wheatear**, **meadow pipit**, and curlew. Setting up the scope beside the loch at the castle end I soon located 2 **black throated divers** at the far side of the loch. An improvement in the light revealed the distinctive black throat. Other species of note were **red breasted mergansers**, **redshank**, **goldeneye**, **reed bunting**, **red-legged partridge**, a **cuckoo** and a brown hare. As we were about to leave a large raptor appeared : first **osprey** of the trip.

Within 5 minutes walk of the hotel is the Anagach Forest, where Scottish crossbill, crested tit and even capercaillie reside. A flock of 30 **scottish crossbills** had been observed on an organised walk that morning so I hoped to find them myself. Eventually found them, albeit briefly, flying overhead before flying off into the distance. Pair of **teal** flew off from a flooded area in the forest and a singing **wood warbler** was also of interest.

Day 4 : Caper-watch (Loch Garten), Findhorn Valley, Dolphin watch (Fortrose point) and Loch Ruthven.

The RSPB hide at Loch Garten opens at 5.30 am for observation of lekking capercaillies. Arrived slightly later to find a large crowd of people jockeying for position. Managed to get my eye to one of the RSPB scopes in order to 'tick' capercaillie, then fell back to the rear to wait for the crowd to dissipate. Planned to then set up my scope for more relaxed caper-watching. Whilst waiting was entertained by red squirrel, siskin and great spotted woodpecker on the feeders. Annoyingly, when space became available the capercaillies had disappeared from view, and my wife seemed eager to return to the hotel for breakfast. Parked up where the road runs alongside Loch Garten to check for divers. Instead, spent the next 20 minutes watching an otter fishing not far off-shore. For once, I had to fight for use of the binoculars as Lassie was fascinated by seeing an otter in the wild.

After breakfast, drove up the picturesque Findhorn valley, a good site for golden eagles. Half way along, a bridge over the river is a good place to watch dippers. Also present were common sandpipers, sand martins, house martins, swallows and a tree pipit. Parked at the end of the road and walked up the track for a couple of kms. Ring ouzels were singing from the mountainside, ravens were flying about and many red deer frolicked up on the high ground. Three mountain hares were ahead on the path before bounding up the mountainside out of view. I was not successful with the golden eagle, probable due to the lack of sunshine and the fact that we did not walk far down the track. Was not too concerned as I was sure I would see some on the Isle of Skye.

A narrow road leads from the Findhorn Valley road to the B851 near Loch Ruthven, crossing moors that hold a large number of red grouse. Had planned to visit Loch Ruthven next, but an almost empty tank of petrol led us towards Inverness to seek a service station. From here, we decided to drive up to Fortrose Point on the Moray Firth to watch the bottle nosed dolphins that offer super views from the spit of land either side of high tide when they feed off the salmon. Hung about for an hour or so with no sign of cetacean although linnets, turnstones and a dunlin provided some interest. My first hooded crow of the holiday provided some consolation to the disappointment of dipping on the dolphins.

I had been keen to visit Loch Ruthven since watching an article on the breeding Slavonian grebes on Springwatch. The only other slavs I have seen were from a distance at Whitford burrows, Gower, where they winter. Thus, I was eager to see them in full breeding plumage. Walked to the loch from the car park listening to cuckoo, and immediately spotted a pair close to the shore. Set up the scope and was rewarded with stunning views of 3 pairs of slavonian grebes. More excitement was added by a pair of red throated divers that drifted slowly towards us, again offering great views. I turned to my wife and asked how people can have little interest in birds. Her blank stare answered my question although even she was impressed with these birds.



Slavonian grebe in breeding plumage on Loch Ruthven

Day 5 : Drive to skye via Loch Ness.

The drive was through some wonderful scenery via the east shore of loch Ness. Four hours later we reached Kyle of Lochalsh, a small town next to the bridge to the Isle of skye. Just before the town is lay-by from which you can look down on small islands where black guillemots and arctic terns have bred. Whether I was too early or they don't breed there any more, neither species was present.

For the next 5 days we stayed at the Romesdal croft bed and breakfast on the Trotternish peninsular. This is a working croft with highland cattle and sheep. Joe runs the farm, and bed and breakfast with much enthusiasm and is full of local information. He enjoys showing the guests around the croft and encourages interaction with Morag, Dolly and the other highland cattle. It was especially interesting searching the land for newborn lambs. The accommodation is comfortable with the benefit of having the attic sitting room to yourself. The breakfasts are made with locally produced food, the black pudding and haggis being particularly tasty.

In the evening, we went down to Portree Harbour for fish and chips. Whilst eating and keeping an eye on the rapidly approaching herring gulls, noticed a bird bobbing about amongst the boats approximately 100 meters from us. Looked through the binoculars and yes, it was a **black guillemot** in summer plumage. Numbers of **great black backed gulls** were also present.

I had promised Lassie that our stay on Skye would involve more walking and visiting touristy places than birding, although I would be on the lookout for both species of eagle, twite and other interesting species. Hooded crow, red breasted merganser and wheatear were especially common, although I failed to locate any golden plover on the higher ground.

Portree sea eagle boat trip

Booked on the MV stardust 10.00 am boat trip which, despite some doubts, proved to be enjoyable and very productive. First birds of interest were **shags** and **rock doves** (said to be pure-bred) that nest in the caves. Worryingly, the white tailed eagles were nowhere to be seen although the captain said they had occupied the nest viewable from the boat. Moving along the coast brought good views of black guillemot (including one still in the white winter plumage), **puffin**, **guillemot**, **gannet** and **raven**. Back to the eerie and timing could not have been better. The **white tailed eagles** were just about to swap position on the nest, a magic moment. The captain waved a fish injected with air to entice the bird closer but it remained on its perch. Personally, I was happy it did not come down ; would have been too much like feeding time at the zoo.

Walk to Rubha Hunish

To reach the point, park at the car park by the phone box and follow the posts with the white marks. Two routes ; either along the top of the ridge or along the valley to the west. Added **Stonechat** to the list but no signs of twite. Walked to the lookout but decided not to negotiate the steep stairs down to the peninsular. The trek back was nice with the valley full of wild flowers including carpets of wild primrose. While taking a photo of the flowers, I heard a familiar sound and quickly looked up to splendid views of a pair of **twite**, a species I have wanted to see for a long time.



Wild Primroses at Rubha Hunish, Isle of Skye



One of a pair of twite at Rubha Hunish

Walk to coral beach, Dunvegan

The beach is very unusual in that it is made up of bits of coral of varying sizes and shapes. Lassie happily collected interesting pieces of coral while I did a spot of birding. Found 4 **whimbrel** and a **rock pipit** where the path reached the sea, a colony of grey seal on the nearby islands, and numerous **eider** and a **great northern diver**. Noticed a bird of prey soaring over distant mountains that proved to be my first **golden eagle**. Had a better view of one a few days later near Portree and spent a gleeful 15 minutes watching it slowly drifting past.

Harrapool, Broadford bay

Managed to negotiate a 10 minute stop on the way to Kinloch Hotel for afternoon tea. Scanning the beach yielded 2 **greenshank** and 4 **bar tailed godwit**, with a great northern diver further out in the bay. Afternoon tea was expensive but worth it to have sandwiches and a variety of cakes served in luxurious surroundings of this impressive home of Lady McDonald. Family members personally welcome you, stoke up the fire and stop for a chat. They even offered us a complimentary carrot and white truffle soup which was delicious.

Uig

Previous reports said that the reedy area behind Uig port holds corncrake and grasshopper warbler. Stopped for a while hoping to here the rasping call of the crake while Lassie had tea and cake in the teashop. No sign of the corncrake although did find a **sedge warbler**, and a **blackcap** up the road in a patch of deciduous woodland near the Ferry Inn.

Elgol

Hoped to take the boat trip up the spectacular Coruisk loch in the Cuillin Mountains but windy weather led to all trips that day being cancelled. Looked out to sea for a while and was rewarded with decent views of a **great skua** that came close to the shore before flying back out to sea.

3rd May : drive home to Oxfordshire

Drive home was through some beautiful scenery including the magnificent Glen Coe valley (single black guillemot seen on the loch) and the scenic loch Loman where I watched a tame red breasted merganser for a while. Had learned the words to 'the bonnie banks of Loch Loman' and took delight in singing it along the length of the loch until Lassie asked me politely to zip it.

Rest of the drive was long and boring but passed the time reliving some great birding moments.

List of birds observed (UK lifers are highlighted)

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|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Great northern diver | 35. Dunlin | 69. Robin |
| 2. Red throated diver | 36. Bar tailed godwit | 70. Stonechat |
| 3. Black throated diver | 37. Whimbrel | 71. Wheatear |
| 4. Slavonian grebe | 38. Curlew | 72. Ring ouzel |
| 5. Little grebe | 39. Redshank | 73. Blackbird |
| 6. Fulmar | 40. Greenshank | 74. Song thrush |
| 7. Gannet | 41. Common sandpiper | 75. Mistle thrush |
| 8. Cormorant | 42. Turnstone | 76. Sedge warbler |
| 9. Shag | 43. Great skua | 77. Blackcap |
| 10. Grey heron | 44. Black headed gull | 78. Chiffchaff |
| 11. Mute swan | 45. Common gull | 79. Willow warbler |
| 12. Greylag goose | 46. Lesser black backed gull | 80. Goldcrest |
| 13. Wigeon | 47. Herring gull | 81. Long tailed tit |
| 14. Teal | 48. Great blacked backed gull | 82. Crested tit |
| 15. Mallard | 49. Guillemot | 83. Coal tit |
| 16. Tufted duck | 50. Black guillemot | 84. Great tit |
| 17. Eider | 51. Puffin | 85. Blue tit |
| 18. Goldeneye | 52. Rock dove | 86. Treecreeper |
| 19. Red breasted merganser | 53. Wood pigeon | 87. Magpie |
| 20. Goosander | 54. Collared dove | 88. Jackdaw |
| 21. Buzzard | 55. Cuckoo | 89. Rook |
| 22. Golden eagle | 56. Great spotted woodpecker | 90. Carrion crow |
| 23. White tailed eagle | 57. Skylark | 91. Hooded crow |
| 24. Osprey | 58. Sand martin | 92. Raven |
| 25. Kestrel | 59. Swallow | 93. Starling |
| 26. Red grouse | 60. House Martin | 94. Chaffinch |
| 27. Black grouse | 61. Tree pipit | 95. Greenfinch |
| 28. Capercaillie | 62. Meadow pipit | 96. Goldfinch |
| 29. Red legged partridge | 63. Rock pipit | 97. Siskin |
| 30. Pheasant | 64. Grey wagtail | 98. Linnet |
| 31. Moorhen | 65. Pied wagtail | 99. Twite |
| 32. Coot | 66. Dipper | 100. Scottish crossbill |
| 33. Oystercatcher | 67. Wren | 101. Reed bunting |
| 34. Lapwing | 68. Dunnock | 102. Wood warbler |