



SPRING IN SPEYSIDE
7TH – 13TH APRIL 2025

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Monday, April 7th: the long journey north

Nine of the group met in Great Ryburgh on schedule to head off at 6.00am. Introductions were made, although several people had travelled with each other on Oriole Birding tours before. Two minibuses headed for Scotland on time!

It was a glorious morning in Norfolk. Some frost remained on the fields, while others were blanketed in a wonderful, evocative low mist. Pheasants and Rooks stood out against the perfect light as we drove along. Several Red Kites drifted over the road.

After one or two leg-stretch stops, we picked up John (the last of the group) just off the A1 near Doncaster. We put more miles on the clock before stopping to pick up supplies. After hitting very heavy traffic outside of Edinburgh, we didn't reach our hotel in Dunfermline until 3.00pm. Despite the long drive, everyone was up for a bit of birding before dinner! A quick turnaround saw us all heading for Loch Leven RSPB reserve. Before we even reached the hides, we saw Pink-footed Geese feeding in the fields, Tree Sparrows on the feeders and very distant (wild?) Barnacle Geese.

Closer views were had of the Pink-feet from the hides but the Shelduck and Curlew were much further away. A walk along the Heritage Trail brought us to a viewpoint overlooking a different part of the Loch. Nick found a very distant merganser and Neil found a flock of 35 Whooper Swans even further away! Goldeneye and Tufted Duck were much closer.

It was time to head back to the hotel for a freshen up before dinner. We ate at a local Italian restaurant before returning to the hotel to flop into bed. It had been a long day!



Pink-footed Geese, Loch Leven, by Robert Todd

Tuesday, April 8th: the Eagle has not landed

After breakfast in the restaurant next to the hotel at 7.15am, we were loaded and on the road at 8.20am. Excitement grew as we headed north with the heather clad hills increasing in height as we neared Aviemore. The sun shown in a cloudless sky.

Our first stop in Speyside was by a church overlooking a Loch, where we set up 'scopes to see if the pair of Ospreys were at home. Not only were they at home, they were sat next to each other on a branch in a tall tree performing a bit of a head bobbing display! It was a wonderful scene on a perfect day. We watched the loving couple for quite a while before moving on. It was a great start to our time in Speyside.

Our next stop was by a bridge near Nethybridge, where we first saw a colony of Sand Martins in the riverbank. Goosander flew up and down the river at regular intervals but best of all was a pair of Dippers on the rocks in the river itself.

We next checked some feeders in Nethy woods but the Red Squirrels and Crested Tits refused to play. It was now the midday lull, so we drove to the end of a forest track with views over the moors and mountains. Time for a picnic lunch.

While munching, we scanned the skies. It wasn't long before a pair of Golden Eagles soared into the sky but they were distant. One immature bird drifted closer giving much better views. An even more distant White-tailed Eagle was a frustrating addition to the day's sightings.

For a change of scenery, we spent the rest of the day in a stunning Scots Pine wood at Loch Garten. As we walked along the track, the sun was peeking through the trees causing dappled patches on the heather and blaeberry understory.

All ears were on high alert for the diagnostic call of Crested Tit but we only heard Coal Tits, Wrens and Chaffinches. After about half a mile, we were suddenly brought to a halt by a 'chuttering' call high in a pine: Crestie! We were soon watching two birds busying themselves in the trees above us. After about 15 minutes, they melted back into the forest and the group breathed once more.

We completed the circuit of the trail, taking in stunning Loch Mallachie on the way. It was a happy group that checked in at The Boat Hotel at 5.00pm with plenty of time to chill out, have a shower or in some cases take a local stroll to Milton Loch. We reconvened in the lounge to compile the bird log before dinner at 7.45pm.

Wednesday, April 9th: heading for the heights

After a full breakfast in the hotel, we drove up Cairngorm, stopping to check the mill pool-still Loch Morlich for divers. No luck. A stop at the lower car park up the mountain was also unsuccessful, this time with Ring Ouzel.

From the lower car park, we could see that the cloud was covering Cairngorm. However, after checking what visibility was like at the top on the Rangers' webcam and seeing we would be *above* the cloud, it was all systems go to climb aboard the funicular to the top!

Ten minutes later, we were stepping out of the funicular to find a snowless vista bathed in glorious sunshine. Visitors arriving on the funicular were not allowed to leave the confines of the Ptarmigan Restaurant, so we all made our way onto the viewing terrace to scan the surrounding mountain tops; not an ideal situation but we would try and make the most of it..

It wasn't long before Nick shouted that he had a Ptarmigan on a ridge! The bird scuttled away before any of the group could see it! It was only a couple of tense minutes later that Giles refound the bird plus it's friend. While everyone was trying to see the target birds, through the heat haze, Giles found another Ptarmigan! This was a much closer bird and much more detail could be seen. Fantastic!

Meanwhile, Gordon found two Ring Ouzels, and a pair of Snow Bunting joined us on the viewing terrace. What a lucky morning! After about 90 minutes, the funicular took us back



Snow Bunting, Cairngorm, by Robert Todd

down the mountain to the vans. We drove to a sheltered picnic spot in Garten woods, with nothing much to note.

With the day still cloudless, we decided to try for closer views of birds of prey, so settled into a car park at the end of a nearby valley. A couple of displaying Golden Eagles were already in the air but very distant. An adult White-tailed Eagle that appeared out of nowhere was much closer and eventually drifted right over our heads!

Our final destination of the birding day was a moorland with a famous loch in the middle. We soon found our final target of the day: a pair of superb Black-throated Divers. For once at this site, there was hardly a ripple on the water and decent views of these graceful birds were had. We moved further on without finding any Red Grouse: a new British endemic species.

We reached the hotel at 5.30pm and compiled the day's bird log before dinner - not forgetting to add the ghostly male Hen Harrier at an undisclosed site seen earlier in the day! The meal was a drawn-out affair due to another group of 20 people in addition to our 12. However, the company was excellent, so it didn't seem to matter.

Thursday, April 10th: ducking and diving

We were on the road again by 8.30am, this time heading towards the sea. We arrived at Portsoy at about 10.00am and immediately saw a delightful flock of Eider in the harbour ("ooohhh"). An initial scan of the sea produced passing Gannets, Sandwich Terns and Kittiwakes. A delightful flock of Long-tailed Ducks was fairly close to shore, joined by a couple of Razorbills. It was then that Nick shouted that he had located the White-billed Diver!

The star bird was reasonably close-in showing all of its features in the morning light. It wasn't in full breeding plumage but, still, what a bird! While everyone was getting on the 'bananabill', a scan of the bay produced a Red-throated Diver, several more Long-tailed Ducks and some close Razorbills.

After more than an hour admiring *the* diver, we decided to try our luck elsewhere. After half an hour, we were scanning the sea again, this time at Spey Bay. The sea was fairly quiet, with more Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Divers and a fast moving flock of distant Common Scoters. The rivermouth itself held a pair of Wigeon, Goosander and an array of gulls.

While waiting for the regular dolphins to appear, we decided Spey Bay was a great place to have our picnic lunches, so we commandeered a picnic table and tucked in. The only species added was Ringed Plover, a couple of which whistled past our heads and settled on the shingle island. We moved on, dolphinless.

Lossiemouth was the next port of call. There were lots of people enjoying the hot, sunny day on the beach, which caused quite a lot of recreational disturbance of the birds. However, we saw Bar-tailed Godwits in various stages of moult, including one with a stunning brick red belly. Dunlin and Ringed Plovers fed among the Wigeon, Teal and gulls.

As the disturbance intensified, we were packing away when a shout went up of "Osprey!" The raptor flew in - strangely unmobbed by any of the other birds present - flew up the channel towards us, then plunged into the water and came out clutching a fish. Simple as that!!



Osprey AA1, Lossiemouth, by Robert Todd

We certainly wouldn't top that action, so drove along the coast to Burghead for a final seawatch. It was fairly quiet and only added Turnstone to the day's list. We drove back to Boat of Garten via Loch Lochindorb. Our target here was the new endemic British bird: Red Grouse.

We managed to find two ‘famous Grouse’ but they were far from co-operative on the moor. As we were watching the second Grouse, another Osprey drifted into view over the car carrying a fish!

We got back to the hotel at just after 5.30pm and reconvened in the bar to compile the day's bird log before dinner at 7.15pm

Footnote: Robert managed to photograph the Osprey at Lossiemouth. Incredibly, the photo (when blown up) revealed that the bird had a ring on its leg. Neil contacted Tim Appleton of Global Birdfair fame, and instigator of the Rutland Water Osprey Project to see if he could provide any more details. The reply came in quickly: “White AA is a locally fledged Osprey ringed in 2007. It is a regular at Lossiemouth and Spey Bay”. Amazing stuff!

Friday, April 11th: Scaup in the ‘scopes

All but one of the group were eagerly standing by the vans in the car park at 5.45am this morning: destination moorland. Half an hour later we were watching six Black Grouse on a grassy mound, listening to their evocative calls in the chilly, but still air. After everyone had had their fill, we drove along the moorland road hoping for a Short-eared Owl. We drew a blank but did get much better views of Red Grouse.



Red Grouse by Robert Todd

One van also got very close views of the Black-throated Divers on the still Loch. After breakfast, we set off again, this time for the Black Isle. A lengthy scan of Udale Bay produced 100 Greater Scaup, 7 Slavonian Grebes, a few divers and a roosting flock of Pink-footed Geese. We moved on, inevitably diverted by pesky roadworks and found our way to Chanonry Point. This is a famous place at which to see Bottlenose Dolphins at close range. A couple of fins broke the surface but they were far out in the channel. One dolphin gradually

swam closer and we all thought the spectacle was about to begin. WRONG! The dolphins vanished and the awaiting crowd dissipated in disappointed fashion. We decided to eat our picnic lunches to give the animals more time to show. In the meantime, we saw Sandwich Terns, Long-tailed Ducks, a flock of Turnstones and a Grey Seal. We then admitted defeat.

Just a few minutes later, we were watching a pair of Common Crossbills in a pine wood that a kind birder had told us about earlier. There were lots of Redpolls. Siskins and Chaffinches. With few other birds, we chanced a dash across to Loch Ruthven to see the Slavonian Grebes. Sure enough, forty minutes later, we were all installed in the hide at the Loch watching a close pair of stunning Slavs indulging in a spot of pair bonding, involving head shaking, water weed offerings and synchronised diving.



Slavonian Grebe, Loch Ruthven, by Robert Todd

Another pair were further out on the loch. A perfect finale! We reached the hotel at 5.30pm and then met again at 6.45pm to compile the day's bird and wildlife log. A tasty dinner followed, complete with some lively chat!

Saturday, April 12th: "chip, chip" or "chup chup"?

After breakfast, we set off for the Rothiemurchus Estate, where a contact of Neil's had seen Crossbills the day before. It was another gloriously sunny day.

Two Crossbill calls were heard almost immediately but the birds were just passing through. However, Tree Pipit and Willow Warbler had obviously arrived overnight and were very welcome additions to our sightings in Scotland.

A low "chup chup chup" call drew our attention to a chunky passerine flying towards us. Thankfully, it landed on top of a medium sized pine right in front of us. Over the course of ten minutes, this brute of a Crossbill sat in perfect light, preening and calling. It was as perfect an example of a Parrot Crossbill as one could wish for without being able to sound record it! On the return walk back, we noted two distant Black-throated Divers on Loch Morlich, along with a few Goldeneyes.



Parrot (?) Crossbill by Robert Todd

We decided to try one more tract of Caledonian Pine Forest, so took the short drive to Loch an Eilean. It was fairly busy with families but we took a walk through the towering pine anyways. Bird action was fairly quiet and we left an hour later without seeing either Crossbills, Cresties or Red Squirrels.

We nipped back to the hotel to collect the sandwiches (Neil, you had ONE job!! DOH!) and then drove to the Findhorn Valley to find a scenic picnic spot, catching a glimpse of a male Redstart along the way. An area by the river was just the job for a picnic. We flushed a hiding Common Sandpiper while unloading the food. Minutes later, Nick spotted a distant Golden Eagle. Quite a few Buzzards were on show, as were a couple of Grey Wagtails.

After lunch, we completed the drive to the end of the valley, where someone kindly showed us an Emperor Moth sitting on a stone. A Raven passed overhead but it was otherwise quiet. We retraced our route back down the valley and turned off up the Farr road. The seven miles of moorland were devoid of birds apart from a few Buzzards and a pair of Ravens.

Nick suggested we return to the paddock where the Redstart had been glimpsed, which proved to be a great call. The summer migrant was back but very mobile. Most people had a decent view before it vanished again. Just as we were about to leave, Jonathan found a Mountain Hare in a field across the way. It was a lovely greyish/white colour and was conspicuous in the grass; not a good look in 'Eagle Valley'!

On the drive back to the main road, a Dipper flying along the rocky river made for a nice finish to the day's birding. That night, our final dinner of the holiday, proved to be a very pleasant evening indeed.

Sunday, April 13th: the return to Norfolk

A brief breath of fresh air in the hotel car park before breakfast, Marilyn found a feeding male Blackcap in a mixed flock of House Sparrows and Blue Tits in a bare tree by the van. A filling breakfast was followed by a protracted check out from the hotel thanks to their absurd and frustrating system of paying separate bar bills!

Our planned departure time was delayed by about half an hour because of this nonsense. However, the weather was fine as we joined the traffic heading south along the A9 (where a House Martin was noted). We made very good time and were back in Norfolk to collect the cars from the Old Manor at about 6.45pm, with a couple of stops along the way for people to stretch their legs and to buy some provisions.

We said our farewells: the group had gelled nicely, almost from day one. The birds, the weather and the good company had made this jaunt to Speyside extremely enjoyable indeed!

BIRDS SEEN (species in order of IOC)

Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus scotica</i>
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>
Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>

Little Grebe
Slavonian (Horned) Grebe
Oystercatcher
Northern Lapwing
Common Ringed Plover
Eurasian Curlew
Bar-tailed Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Red Knot
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Black-legged Kittiwake
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
White-billed Diver
Northern Fulmar
Northern Gannet
Great Cormorant
European Shag
Grey Heron
Little Egret
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Hen Harrier
Red Kite
White-tailed Eagle
Common Buzzard
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Kestrel
Eurasian Jay
Eurasian Magpie
Western Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Northern Raven
Coal Tit
Crested Tit

Tachybaptus ruficollis
Podiceps auritus
Haematopus ostralegus
Vanellus vanellus
Charadrius hiaticula
Numenius arquata
Limosa lapponica
Arenaria interpres
Calidris canutus
Calidris alpina
Actitis hypoleucos
Tringa totanus
Rissa tridactyla
Chroicocephalus ridibundus
Larus canus
Larus marinus
Larus argentatus
Larus fuscus
Sterna sandvicensis
Uria aalge
Alca torda
Cephus grylle
Gavia stellata
Gavia arctica
Gavia adamsii
Fulmarus glacialis
Morus bassanus
Phalacrocorax carbo
Phalacrocorax aristotelis
Ardea cinerea
Egretta garzetta
Pandion haliaetus
Aquila chrysaetos
Accipiter nisus
Circus cyaneus
Milvus milvus
Haliaeetus albicilla
Buteo buteo
Dendrocopos major
Falco tinnunculus
Garrulus glandarius
Pica pica
Corvus monedula
Corvus frugilegus
Corvus corone
Corvus cornix
Corvus cornax
Periparus ater
Lophophanes cristatus scoticus

Blue Tit
 Great Tit
 Eurasian Skylark
 Sand Martin
 Barn Swallow
 Common House Martin
 Long-tailed Tit
 Willow Warbler
 Common Chiffchaff
 Eurasian Blackcap
 Goldcrest
 Eurasian Wren
 Eurasian Treecreeper
 Common Starling
 Song Thrush
 Mistle Thrush
 Eurasian Blackbird
 Ring Ouzel
 European Robin
 Common Redstart
 European Stonechat
 Northern Wheatear
 White-throated Dipper
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow
 House Sparrow
 Dunnock
 Grey Wagtail
 Pied Wagtail
 Meadow Pipit
 Tree Pipit
 Rock Pipit
 Common Chaffinch
 European Greenfinch
 Common Linnet
 Redpoll
 Scottish/Parrot Crossbill
 Common Crossbill
 Goldfinch
 Eurasian Siskin
 Snow Bunting
 Yellowhammer
 Common Reed Bunting

Cyanistes caeruleus
Parus major
Alauda arvensis
Riparia riparia
Hirundo rustica
Delichon urbicum
Aegithalos caudatus
Phylloscopus trochilus
Phylloscopus collybita
Sylvia atricapilla
Regulus regulus
Troglodytes troglodytes
Certhia familiaris
Sternus vulgaris
Turdus philomelos
Turdus viscivorus
Turdus merula
Turdus torquatus
Erithacus rebecula
Phoenicurus phoenicurus
Saxicola rubicola
Oenanthe oenanthe
Cinclus cinclus
Passer montanus montanus
Passer domesticus
Prunella modularis
Motacilla cinerea
Motacilla alba yarrellii
Anthus pratensis
Anthus trivialis
Anthus petrosus
Fringilla coelebs
Chloris chloris
Carduelis cannabina
Carduelis flammea
Loxia sp
Loxia curvirostra
Carduelis carduelis
Carduelis spinus
Plectrophenax nivalis insulae
Emberiza citrinella
Emberiza schoeniclus

Red = Endemic

Blue = Heard only

Purple = Leader only

MAMMALS

Atlantic Grey Seal
 Brown Hare

Mountain Hare
European Rabbit
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Bottlenose Dolphin

MISCELLANEOUS

Green-veined White
Peacock
Emperor Moth
Buff-tailed Bumblebee

European Flounder

Platichthys flesus

Caledonian Pine
Larch
Silver Birch
Danish Scuvygrass
Tree Lupin
Common Gorse