



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SPEYSIDE 2ND – 8TH APRIL 2017

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SUNDAY 2ND APRIL – *Sunny spells and moderate SW winds, 14C*

A long day today saw most of the group set off together from Great Ryburgh in Norfolk at 0600, making the drive North to Dunfermline where we met with the rest of our party just after 1400. The journey produced a few birds along the way, such as **Red Grouse**, European Golden Plover, and **Red Kite**. It was a lovely day, and we were keen to get out birding as soon as possible after check in! Vane Farm RSPB reserve, on the shores of Loch Leven, was only a fifteen minute drive away and was our destination for what remained of the afternoon. The light was excellent and from the hides, we enjoyed a really nice selection of waterbirds. Gadwall, Common Teal, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Wigeon and some beautiful drake Northern Pintails were seen, and a female **Goosander** was sleeping on one of the islands. Waders included dapper Northern Lapwings, Eurasian Curlew, and singles of both **Ruff** and **Black-tailed Godwit**, while a Little Egret was a useful addition to the trip list. About half a dozen **Whooper Swans** were seen on the western most scrape, looking very smart in the evening sunshine. The loch itself held dozens of **Common Goldeneye** and Great Crested Grebe, and the grazing fields hosted several hundred **Pink-footed Geese** on their last staging post before the final leg of their migration back to Iceland. Among them, on the distant St Serf's Island, we could also pick out several **Barnacle Geese** too. Further along, two **Goosander** flying up from the loch shore included a nice drake, and there were one or two Common Pochard among the many Tufted Ducks. Back by the Visitor Centre, we spent some time watching the feeders where we had good views of three **Tree Sparrows**, a **Lesser Redpoll** and several nice singing male Eurasian Siskins. A young female Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and several Common Buzzards, were circling the ridge behind and the fields were full of the songs of Meadow Pipit and Skylark. A nice afternoon, and we were certainly ready for a beer and dinner by the time we got back to the hotel – it had been a long day!

MONDAY 3RD APRIL – *Sunny spells and calm, with freshening SW winds and showers later, 14C*

We headed along the Fife coast to Largo Bay this morning, one of Scotland's premier locations for viewing winter seaducks, grebes and divers. We were lucky with the weather, as the light winds and sunshine first thing made for perfect viewing conditions, looking west from Ruddon's Point with the sun behind us across a very calm sea. A Common Chiffchaff was flitting in the coastal bushes as we headed across the point, and there were several Common Linnets and Reed Buntings about too, as well as a single Yellowhammer. It really was a beautiful morning, and the sea was littered with wildfowl – Common Eiders could be seen and heard all over the place, and soon we were enjoying exquisite views of rafts of **Velvet Scoters** and stunning **Long-tailed Ducks** coming into breeding plumage. A lot of the birds were quite distant, but the excellent light meant we were able to pick out at least seven **Red-necked Grebes**, including two sporting full summer plumage, several **Slavonian Grebes**, Red-throated Divers and the odd Common Guillemot. A Northern Gannet flew close by the point with another diving offshore, and on the rocks just below us an early **Whimbrel** was a nice addition and two Grey Plovers were in amongst the Common Redshanks. A few European Shags were also around, including several nice adults sporting crests, drying their wings on the rocks nearby. The views of the seaducks kept us scanning, constantly picking out new birds or better views of the key species. Common Scoters were actually well outnumbered by Velvets, but try as we might we could not find any Surf Scoters on this occasion. Walking back around the point, several newly arrived **Sand Martins** were buzzing around – great to see them back!

After a quick look off Leven promenade where more views of **Long-tailed Duck** were enjoyed and a big raft of Common Scoter were checked through, we headed back to the hotel to collect our luggage and check out. Then we began the final leg of our journey north, making a couple of stops en route. The first was at Pitlochry, and the tiny Loch Cuilc, which had been recently hosting a drake **Ring-necked Duck**. We were surprised by the size of the lochan, and how few birds were on it – if the Ring-necked Duck was here we were going to get very good views! And so we did, as it swam out from under the overhanging willows and afforded us absolutely superb close range views. A really smart bird and we were very glad that we had made the detour! Lunch was next on the agenda, and then on north to Speyside itself. Insh Marshes provided a nice interlude with a few common species of waterbirds on offer. A small party of **Whooper Swans** were noted, and a large flock of Pink-footed

Geese were feeding in the fields. Our final birds of the afternoon were a pair of newly arrived **Ospreys** at a nearby site, tending their nest ready for the season ahead. The female was very vocal, calling away to the male who seemed to be getting told off for perhaps bringing in the wrong kind of stick! Two pairs of **Goosander** were also on the loch, but the now strong cold wind meant that we did not hang around very long! It was on to Carrbridge then, our base for the next five nights, ready for the first enormous meal and a good nights sleep.



Ring-necked Duck, Pitlochry 3rd April

TUESDAY 4TH APRIL – *Fresh NW winds and showers, 9C*

An early start this morning saw us pulling into the Loch Garten RSPB car park at 0550 ready to join the throng in the Osprey Centre for 'Caper Watch'. It was a rather frustrating hour and a half, with no sign at all of any Capercaillie. The female **Osprey** was perhaps the highlight, seen dive bombing a persistent Carrion Crow that kept showing too much interest in her nest! A dapper male Brambling was at the feeders, and a Great-spotted Woodpecker was drumming. Heading back towards base, we called at a spot where **Black Grouse** can sometimes be seen. We quickly found two females under the pine trees close to the road, and had fantastic views from the van. Further down the valley, a male **Black Grouse** was sitting out in a meadow by the river, looking as if it was frozen to the spot in the cold winds! We nipped out of the van to scope him, and soon realised why he looked so despondent – it was freezing! We were certainly glad to get back into the warm for a hearty breakfast!

Our plan for the morning then was to head up to Cairngorm, and despite the strong winds the tops were free of heavy low cloud and there were some sunny spells bustling through. The journey up in the funicular was excellent – we had three **Ring Ouzels** feeding close to the railway and two or three **Mountain Hares** in their white winter coats. A **Common Raven** was also seen, and two Red Grouse were sheltering among the heather in the gully. Once at the top, we made straight for the viewing

terrace – the windchill was estimated to be -11C and it was extremely windy, tough conditions to search for our target bird, the **Rock Ptarmigan**. Thankfully, however, the visibility was actually very good and a **Ptarmigan** soon flew past us and landed behind one of the snow fences. It was a male, and he began displaying to a watching female. We had some reasonable views of them through the slats in the fence, but they were reluctant to move out into the open. A third bird, a female in virtually all-white winter dress, was located much closer and gave better views – thankfully we could see her from the warmth of the restaurant with a welcome cup of coffee in hand! Once back down at the base station, we took a short walk back up the gulley to have a better look at the **Ring Ouzels**. There were in fact two pairs feeding along the path here, and we got some pretty decent views. One of the **Mountain Hares** from earlier was running around in the heather a bit higher up the slope, and a **Raven** made another pass by.



Black Grouse and Crested Tit, 4th April

Heading back down the mountain, we saw two male Red Grouse from Coire na Ciste, before dropping down into the sheltered woodland of Glenmore Forest. Here we had lunch in the relative warmth compared to the mountain top! Only a short way down one of the trails, we located a pair of **Crested Tits**, and spent several minutes watching them foraging among small conifers right beside the path. Occasionally they would completely disappear in amongst the needles, before popping out right on the edge of the tree and showing their fantastic silhouette with crest erect. Really superb birds and of course, one of our main targets for the trip. The rest of the walk was quiet, apart from a few Eurasian Siskins and Coal Tits, but we did have a pair of **Crossbills** flying low over the car park as we returned. Sadly, the views did not enable us to assign them to species.

We rounded off the afternoon along Findhorn Valley, where we hoped to connect with Golden Eagle. From our viewing spot towards the end of the glen, we managed to find just enough shelter beside the van from the now howling wind, to use a telescope. Common Buzzards were loving the weather, riding high above the ridges, and we had superb views of a pair of **Peregrines** – the male, having mated with the female, flew to a height before stooping past us at immense speed and up to perch on the crags. Eventually, in the far distance, we picked up two **Golden Eagles**. The views were pretty poor, and they soon disappeared behind the hill – one to improve on in the coming days!

WEDNESDAY 5TH APRIL – *Fresh NW winds and cloudy, 10C*

We took a pre-breakfast walk around Carrbridge this morning, starting along the river by the old bridge where a pair of **Dippers** were on territory and gave some lovely views. A **Grey Wagtail** was bit further upstream, and in the riverside trees we found Goldcrest, and had good views of a pair of Treecreepers. A surprise here was a male **Ring Ouzel**, which was chacking in the bushes, and flew off across one of the paddocks to the back garden of one of the houses. We later saw it hopping along the pavement by the side of the road! A **Brambling** was singing as we walked back towards the village, and five **Redpolls** flew over calling. After breakfast, we headed north to spend the day birding along the Moray Coast. Our route took us up the A9 to Inverness, and then east along the coast stopping at a number of good birding spots along the way towards Lossiemouth. First up was Fort George, where a drake **King Eider** had been seen recently though not reported for several days. We decided we would give it a try anyway, and found the bird within about ten seconds of setting up our scopes! The **King Eider** was in with a small raft of about twenty Common Eiders, and what a spectacular bird! The light was excellent, and despite the distance we had some good views. The firth was full of raucous **Sandwich Terns**, diving into the water just offshore, and we saw lots of Northern Gannets and summer plumaged Razorbills.



Waxwing, Elgin 5th April

Next stop was Findhorn, though along the way we had some lovely roadside views of several hundred Pink-footed Geese. The wind really picked up while we were here, but over a cuppa we managed to see quite a few birds overlooking the estuary. Northern Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Goldeneye, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Shelduck and some big roosting flocks of Common Redshanks were noted. We couldn't see any Long-tailed Ducks here today though. Burghead was our next port of call, always such an excellent vantage point for scanning the sea and even today there was shelter to be found here and the light was superb. A **Great Northern Diver** was just off The Maltings in full breeding plumage, and there was a steady trickle of Kittiwakes moving by close

inshore. There were good numbers of Razorbills here too, and a scattering of Common Guillemots, while on the rocks below were a few Ruddy Turnstones and a Rock Pipit. Persistent scanning of the sea eventually paid off though, as we picked up a **White-billed Diver**, moulting into breeding plumage! Panic ensued as this was a much wanted species for everyone, but the bird was distant and there was a lot of swell in the heavy sea. Thankfully over the next twenty minutes or so the bird played ball and didn't wander too far from one area, allowing us to get five or six scopes on it and some pretty good views. The light was really picking out its ivory coloured bill each time it rose up and over the crest of a wave. A great bird! We drove along the coast a bit to Hopeman, hoping we might see it better from there, but we couldn't find it again. A Long-tailed Duck and a small raft of Common Eider were here, however.

Making our way a little bit further east, we wanted to have a quick check around the fringes of Elgin because a flock of **Waxwings** had been recently reported here. We didn't have a road name, so it was a bit of a needle in a haystack! However, driving along one of the streets in the west of the town, we spotted a bird on a wire – and it was a lone **Waxwing**! We pulled over and discovered there were in fact three birds, dropping down to feed on apples in the back garden of one of the houses. We met the owner, who invited us in and told us how many hundreds they had been feeding during the winter – such hospitality to both us and the birds! Bouyed by these magnificent views, we made our way to our final stop of the day at Loch Spynie. This tranquil spot provided us with great close ups of twenty eight **Whooper Swans**, and from the hide, really close Common Goldeneye. There was a female **Goosander** present, and a few **Sand Martins** moved through. A nice end to the day – it had certainly been an exciting one!

THURSDAY 6TH APRIL – *Strong NW winds and showers, 10C*

Our West Coast day today saw a more leisurely breakfast, though some people did venture out beforehand and enjoy more views of the **Dippers** and Grey Wagtail along the Dulnain River. Our journey took us north up the A9 and then across to East Croachy and up to the RSPB reserve at Loch Ruthven. This is a lovely spot, and of course our main target here would be the **Slavonian Grebes** – soon we were watching three birds together from the hide. A pair drifted quite close in, giving some super views through the scope, in full breeding plumage too of course. A displaying drake Red-breasted Merganser and a pair of Reed Buntings were also noted, while nearby we had some very nice views of a roadside **Red Squirrel** from the vehicle.



Slavonian Grebes, Loch Ruthven 6th April

We did not have too much time to linger here though, as another hour and a half of driving was in order to make our way up to the West coast and Little Loch Broom. A **Red Kite** was the only noteworthy sighting along the way, and soon we were enjoying our morning brew trying to shelter from the at times gale force wind coming down the loch. The light was good though and soon a distant **Golden Eagle** drifted into view. It was heading into the wind with wings half folded, and we never really got a proper view before it disappeared behind the mountain. We concentrated on the loch shore, and soon found three **Common Greenshanks**, huddled against the wind. Several **Common Ringed Plovers** were present too, and both **Red-breasted Merganser** and **Common Eider** were on the loch. Interestingly, a steady overhead passage of pipits and finches appeared to be taking place, along the valley and into the wind. Presumably birds completing the final leg of their northward journey – they must have been wishing they hadn't bothered! Over the same ridge, another eagle loomed into view – this time a young **White-tailed Eagle** – but it too quickly disappeared out of view behind the hill. Soon a second appeared, an adult this time, and gave better views before it too followed the path of the others. The strong winds seemed to be making the birds reluctant to circle around at all. Presumably the same **Golden Eagle** from earlier then appeared, mobbed by a **Common Raven**, and gave some better views, but we were still left wanting – perhaps one for tomorrow!



Great Northern Diver, Gruinard Bay 6th April

Gruinard Bay was our next stop, and despite the light drizzle and strong wind we saw some good birds here. As we arrived, a **Great Northern Diver** was on the sea really close in below us, the first of about eight or ten birds noted and one or two were in full breeding plumage. A **Slavonian Grebe**, also in summer finery, was bobbing just below us, and we also picked up a **Red-throated Diver** slightly further out. Behind, a small raptor dashed along the heather – it was a male **Merlin**. The bird perched briefly on a small bush allowing a few of us to get scope views, before it hurried on its way. It really was a smart bird with blue-grey upperparts and russet streaked underbody. It was now already 2pm, and we had not had lunch – it was time to head around to Mellon Udrigle! This idyllic spot did not disappoint, with a fine male **Northern Wheatear** greeting us by the car park and a party of migrant

Redwings feeding in the small paddock. We realised that they were in fact most likely **Icelandic Redwings**, with very dark plumage and boldly marked underparts – very distinctive looking birds indeed. The location of course would also tie in with these being birds that were planning to head north-west from here. During lunch, four **Twite** dropped into the car park and gave point blank views – this was our main target for this site so we were very pleased to see them so well. Another brace of **Great Northern Divers** were off the beach, along with a raft of European Shags numbering about twenty birds. Heading back towards Laide, a party of **Rock Doves** were seen – very smart birds indeed with their white rumps and double black wing bars. Several more were seen flying along the coast as we scanned the sea from a vantage point a bit further on – a few **Black Guillemots** could be picked out now and a pair of **Red-throated Divers** were on the water both in breeding plumage. Another half dozen **Great Northern Divers** were also seen, and some lovely close fly by **Common Ravens**. The cloud base was now lifting as the drizzle had cleared, and the views were opening up a bit back towards the Summer Isles – quite spectacular. From here we began our journey back towards base, making another short stop at Dundonnell to scan again for eagles but having no joy. The ride back was in much better weather than the morning trip up, and the scenery really was superb. We arrived back in Carrbridge just after 1830 – another full day!



Twite & Northern Wheatear, Mellon Udrigle 6th April

FRIDAY 7TH APRIL – *Fine and dry with light winds, 12C*

Our last full day saw us making another 0530 start in order to maximise our chances of the remaining outstanding species. We headed up a valley to look for lekking **Black Grouse**, and arrived to find eight birds displaying in meadows in the valley bottom, with good views to be had through the scope despite the birds relative distance. Their bubbling and whooshing calls could be heard on the morning breeze, and we marvelled as they flutter-jumped at one another in display – such fantastic birds! Having had our fill we returned to the RSPB Loch Garten Osprey Centre to see if anything was happening at ‘Caper Watch’. The Ospreys were of course in residence, and a few **Brambling** were about, but there was no sign of any Capercaillie once again and so we soon decided to move on to another spot before breakfast time. We knew a location where **Capercaillie** had been seen recently and so we took a casual drive to check if any birds were visible from the roadside. Amazingly, we found a female perched right out in full view beside the road, about ten feet up on an open branch in

all her glory. With the road quiet so early in the morning, we were able to stop alongside her only a few metres away and enjoy remarkable close views of her beautiful plumage. The birds are known to avoid tracks and roads, so to see one right beside a pretty busy major route was quite remarkable – none of us could quite believe it!



Common [left] and 'Scottish' Crossbill, Abernethy 7th April

After breakfast we headed into the Caledonian Forest with a view to finding some crossbills, as these were now the only major gap in our list for the week. Completing a circular two hour walk through some beautiful woodland, we looked and listened carefully as we went and soon found three **Crested Tits** feeding together, close to the path. We began to pick up crossbill calls too, mainly birds flying overhead but soon our first singing male was found perched typically high atop a pine. It looked like a pretty standard **Common Crossbill**, with nothing to suggest one of the more interesting possibilities! Redpolls were everywhere, and in one large birch we briefly had a very pale and frosty **Mealy Redpoll** among numerous Lesser Redpolls, and Eurasian Siskins were singing all around. Next a pair of **Common Crossbills** popped up at ground level feeding on a dead tree, and gave some superb views – again no large-looking bills to be seen though! Another pair of **Crested Tits** gave good views – we really were having a good trip for this easy-to-miss species – and a pair of **Golden Eagles** were scoped as they soared over the foothills of the Cairngorms. Back in the car park, we had a cuppa and noticed a small party of crossbills were feeding quietly nearby, with the occasional giveaway cone dropping to the ground and seed scales floating on the breeze. Two looked like standard **Common Crossbills** but a third had a much chunkier bill and heavier head, with truncated upper mandible and bulging lower mandible to the bill. It appeared to show the necessary characteristics for **Scottish Crossbill**, but of course without a DNA test kit to hand, we would struggle to be sure!

For lunch we headed north to a loch where we hoped to find **Black-throated Diver**, and were soon eating our sandwiches with a stunning Black-throat in the scope in excellent light. Several Red Grouse were seen nearby and a **Red Kite** also circled over the loch. The **Black-throated Diver** was a real show-stopper though – labelled aptly by one of the group as the Aston Martin of Divers! Back down into the Spey Valley, and a **Dipper** was seen from Broomhill Bridge where our first **Swallow** of the year flew by and a smart drake Common Goldeneye was on the river. Abernethy Forest was our destination then for the last part of the afternoon, and a walk produced our 11th **Crested Tit** of the

week as we watched a pair prospecting a nest hole in a decaying pine. Crossbills were around, but the views were restricted to flyovers, and we saw Goldcrest, Treecreeper and plenty of Siskins. Early back to base tonight after a very long day, we couldn't resist swinging by the spot where we had seen the female Capercaillie in the morning. Despite being right alongside a now very busy section of road, the bird was amazingly in almost the exact same spot but just a bit higher up. Even more amazingly, we now realised we could in fact see two birds together! It was hard to stop for long with the traffic thundering past but we managed to all get some more good views – no sign of a male but two females was decent compensation! This wrapped up what had been a very successful trip this year, and none of us could believe how quickly the time had gone!

Systematic List

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Black-throated Diver
3. Great Northern Diver
4. White-billed Diver
5. Little Grebe
6. Great Crested Grebe
7. Slavonian Grebe
8. Red-necked Grebe
9. Great Cormorant
10. European Shag
11. Northern Gannet
12. Grey Heron
13. Mute Swan
14. Whooper Swan
15. Greylag Goose
16. Canada Goose
17. Pink-footed Goose
18. Barnacle Goose
19. Common Shelduck
20. Mallard
21. Common Teal
22. Eurasian Wigeon
23. Gadwall
24. Northern Shoveler
25. Northern Pintail
26. Common Scoter
27. Velvet Scoter
28. Common Eider
29. King Eider
30. Long-tailed Duck
31. Red-breasted Merganser
32. Goosander
33. Common Goldeneye
34. Tufted Duck
35. Common Pochard
36. Ring-necked Duck
37. Common Pheasant
38. Red-legged Partridge
39. Red Grouse
40. Black Grouse
41. Capercaillie
42. Rock Ptarmigan
43. Eurasian Sparrowhawk

44. Common Kestrel
45. Peregrine
46. Merlin
47. Common Buzzard
48. Red Kite
49. Osprey
50. Golden Eagle
51. White-tailed Eagle
52. Common Moorhen
53. Common Coot
54. European Oystercatcher
55. Common Ringed Plover
56. Grey Plover
57. Northern Lapwing
58. Common Redshank
59. Common Greenshank
60. Eurasian Curlew
61. Whimbrel
62. Ruff
63. Black-tailed Godwit
64. Bar-tailed Godwit
65. Black-headed Gull
66. Common Gull
67. Herring Gull
68. Lesser Black-backed Gull
69. Great Black-backed Gull
70. Black-legged Kittiwake
71. Sandwich Tern
72. Razorbill
73. Common Guillemot
74. Black Guillemot
75. Great-spotted Woodpecker
76. Woodpigeon
77. Collared Dove
78. Rock Dove
79. Waxwing
80. Skylark
81. Meadow Pipit
82. Rock Pipit
83. Pied Wagtail
84. Grey Wagtail
85. Barn Swallow
86. Sand Martin
87. Winter Wren
88. White-throated Dipper
89. European Robin
90. Dunnock
91. Northern Wheatear
92. Common Stonechat
93. Common Blackbird
94. Song Thrush
95. Mistle Thrush
96. Ring Ouzel
97. Redwing
98. Fieldfare

99. Common Chiffchaff
100. Goldcrest
101. Blue Tit
102. Great Tit
103. Coal Tit
104. Long-tailed Tit
105. Crested Tit
106. Common Treecreeper
107. Rook
108. Carrion Crow
109. Hooded Crow
110. Common Raven
111. Western Jackdaw
112. Magpie
113. Common Starling
114. House Sparrow
115. Tree Sparrow
116. Chaffinch
117. Brambling
118. Greenfinch
119. Goldfinch
120. Common Linnet
121. Twite
122. Lesser Redpoll
123. Mealy Redpoll
124. Eurasian Siskin
125. Scottish Crossbill
126. Common Crossbill
127. Reed Bunting
128. Yellowhammer

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