



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SPEYSIDE 12TH – 18TH APRIL 2018

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THURSDAY 12TH APRIL – Moderate NE winds and overcast, 7C

We arrived in Dunfermline at 1400 after the seven hour drive up from Norfolk, meeting the rest of our group there for check in and a quick turnaround before heading out for our first birding session. The RSPB reserve at Loch Leven was only a ten minute drive away, and by 1500 we were enjoying our first common birds around the feeding station here – splashes of colour added by bright male **Eurasian Siskins** and Goldfinches, and a brief visit from a smart **Tree Sparrow**. The Siskins were all around us, chattering away in song flight and chasing each other through the trees with spread tails – clearly ready for the breeding season, even if the weather was not! Heading through the underpass to the hides, we found our first rafts of common wildfowl on the loch – Tufted Duck and **Common Goldeneye**, interspersed with the odd Great Crested Grebe and some stunning close up **Goosanders**. A female **Long-tailed Duck** whizzed by low over the water, and in the fields at the back we found a few lingering **Pink-footed Geese** feeding. From the farthest hide, Gadwall, Common Teal, Shoveler and Little Grebe were noted, along with a big feeding flock of Curlew and two **Black-tailed Godwits** including a lovely male in breeding plumage. Common Buzzard, Common Redshank and displaying Lapwings were also seen – the latter being carefully monitored by the RSPB staff who attempt to find and record each nesting attempt on the reserve. A Common Snipe popped out into view to preen as we watched a Little Grebe catching tiddlers in the shallows, and a hardy Skylark sang overhead as we exited the hide. Heading back towards the visitor centre, we called at the next hide not expecting much, as the volunteers were out on the marsh surveying. However, luck was on our side as they flushed a **Jack Snipe** which flew past the hide before dropping into an adjacent drainage ditch. The bird froze, partly in the open, and remained that way for fifteen minutes or more, allowing us all for careful study through the scope – superb! Eventually the bird gave us a little bit of its characteristic bobbing, but otherwise it preferred to remain completely stationary.

Heading east along the path to overlook the main loch and St Serf's Island, we found lots of small birds in the bushes including some more excellent views of **Tree Sparrows**. A migrant **Willow Warbler** was feeding quietly, not giving us its call to aid the identification. We had to rely instead on its long primaries, pinkish legs and lemon washed throat. A Common Treecreeper popped into view for us as we walked along, showing its silky underparts as it shinned up a branch, but the best birds along this trail were the **Bullfinches** – point blank views of a party of five, feeding on the newly emerging leaf buds of the pathside willows. Over the loch, we could see a couple of hundred **Sand Martins**, hawking low over the water in the cold wind, and more rafts of duck on the water included many smart male **Common Goldeneye**. Among the breeding throng of Lesser Black-backed Gulls on the island, we could see more **Pink-footed Geese**, **Goosanders** and a few **Barnacle Geese** too. Back at the Visitor Centre feeders, there were even more finches now that most of the visitors had left – the Siskins looked stunning as they carpeted the ground among the very smartly plumaged Chaffinches and brown-capped **Tree Sparrows**. We scanned hard for a Brambling, but couldn't find one. It had been a pretty solid start to the trip though nonetheless.

FRIDAY 13TH APRIL – Overcast with rain during the morning, light winds, 6C

We set out from Dunfermline this morning and drove east along the Fife coast to our main birding spot for the morning, the excellent Largo Bay. It was raining heavily, and the visibility was really poor, so we were thinking that we might not be able to see the sea, never mind any seaducks! We parked down at Ruddon's Point, and made our way out to the shore – on the rising tide, we could already see large flocks of **Common Eider** on the water, and actually the visibility was manageable. Among them were a few **Common Scoter**, and we began to pick out other species such as **Common Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, **Long-tailed Duck**, a nice raft of **European Shags** and a close pair of **Red-breasted Mergansers**. Walking around to the point, the sea was really calm due to the light winds, and immediately we picked up a superb breeding plumage **Slavonian Grebe** just beyond the rocks. The bird showed a few times in between dives, before taking flight and heading directly out to sea. A tightly packed flock of Common Scoter were checked carefully for the wintering drake Surf Scoter, but it was not with them – a little further out, seven **Velvet Scoters** showed really nicely though, and the light was improving all the time. This is not generally a good area for divers, but we saw two or

three Red-throated Divers including a bird very close in, and we also picked up a couple more **Long-tailed Ducks**. The Common Eiders really stole the show though, the drakes looking immaculate in the low light and swimming by very close in to the rocks. Further out, a single Northern Fulmar passed by, and we picked up several Kittiwakes and Northern Gannets passing through the bay too. Following the peninsula round, there were a few Curlew and Redshank in the mouth of the stream, and looking back towards Lower Largo, we could see at least one hundred more **Velvet Scoters**, and a vast flock of Common Scoter that was probably into four figures. Returning to the van, we opted to drive around towards Leven, which took about twenty minutes, and try scoping back from the other side. This short stop was productive – perhaps the same **Slavonian Grebe** was close in with a group of Common Scoters, and two fine **Long-tailed Ducks** were just in the surf. Best of all though, a **Red-necked Grebe** appeared in the same view, and showed a few times in between dives. A really nice bird to pick up. A few Sanderling were on the beach here, but we didn't have too long to hang around as we needed to return to the hotel to collect our bags by noon.

The next leg of the journey saw us make the two hour drive up to Speyside, though this was punctuated by a lunch break at a restaurant on the way. We then continued up through the snow-clad pass of Drummochter, and past Dalwhinnie to Newtonmore. From here, it was only a few minutes to our next birding stop at Insh Marshes. The vista out over the marsh here produced a few Common Teal and Eurasian Wigeon, displaying Curlew and Redshank, and a single Sand Martin. A couple of Siskins were at the feeders, and a **Lesser Redpoll** came in trilling and landed on the top of a bird behind us. Not far away, at a second stop, we enjoyed our first **Osprey** of the trip, perched up by its nest, and superb views of a fishing pair of **Goosanders** really close up. A pair of **Grey Wagtails** were particularly lovely, as they flew in and landed in a small tree at the water's edge right in front of us in great light. Common Goldeneye, Mistle Thrush and Common Buzzard were other additions, before we made the final leg of the trip on to Carrbridge. Half an hour was spent, to end the day, speculatively driving some spots for the forest grouse species, but we didn't connect with anything – maybe our luck would be better on another day! Our welcoming hosts Christine and Michael were once again ready to receive us at our guest house, and soon we were enjoying a cuppa in front of a roaring fire – it had been a chilly day!

SATURDAY 14TH APRIL – *Fine day in light winds, 13C*

A stunning day of weather today meant we could really get to grips with some of the Speyside specialities! We started with a pre-breakfast amble along the river in Carrbridge, and our first bird was a cracking **Dipper**, under the old packhorse bridge in the early morning sunshine. It was singing away, but we couldn't hear it over the rush of water coming over the rapids. The rest of the walk was quiet apart from common woodland birds, and a **Grey Wagtail**. After breakfast, we were in two minds – go up the mountain and risk the large numbers of people on the last busy skiing weekend of the season, or head into the forest? Reaching the Aviemore junction, we could see the tops of the Cairngorms free from cloud and mist, and so we decided to go for it. Actually, when we arrived at Coire Cas, the car park was only half full and we took the second train of the day up the mountain in beautiful sunshine. Our main target bird at the top of course was **Ptarmigan**, and thankfully our luck was in – another friendly birder already had one in his scope for us as we arrived at the viewing area! The bird was peeking out from behind a rock, and still largely in winter plumage. It didn't move at all during the duration of our visit, so with the ski area open we decided to head out and down the hiking trail a short way to get a closer view. We ended up about twenty metres from the bird, and it still didn't move – lovely to see one up close like this. A **Northern Wheatear** was also seen briefly, but there wasn't anything else to be seen, so we headed back down. Coire na Ciste would be our coffee stop, and we hoped to see **Ring Ouzel** here. A large walking party were disturbing the ravine normally favoured by the birds, but they soon moved off and with that we heard the distinctive machine gun rattle of a **Ring Ouzel**. Three birds were present, and we watched a territorial dispute between two males – the dominant one chasing the other off high and away over the hill, before doubling back and returning to his prize spot. Nice views, and we enjoyed our coffee with warm sun on our backs too!

Down into the forest next and a first chance to catch up with some of its elusive residents. In the car park of our first stop, we could hear **Crested Tit** calling and over the next twenty minutes we had fantastic views of one heading back and forth to an old stump which it was clearly prospecting for nesting. Occasionally in between bouts of foraging, it would fly up to the tops of the pines to sing – really great views with the sun behind us. Despite this success we opted to complete our planned walk here anyway, though we didn't find any further cresties, nor any hoped-for crossbills. Lunch was had back in the car park in warm sunshine, with the same **Crested Tit** still buzzing around and a pair of Goldcrests for company.

In the afternoon, the weather was ideal for raptors and so we headed up Dorback Valley behind Nethybridge to have a scan around and see what we could find. Common Buzzards were loving the sunshine, and we had six together hanging along one ridge with a Common Kestrel. At one point, a **Red Kite** drifted over and two of the Buzzards proceeded to escort it off the premises. More distantly, we watched a **Golden Eagle** soaring, and occasionally displaying, over the far mountainside. What was likely the same bird kept appearing on and off for about half an hour, and we had some adequate scope views despite it being a very long way away. Two **Mountain Hares** were also a lovely addition here, including one still largely in its white winter coat.

We ended our productive first day with a visit to another tract of Caledonian forest, where some other birders had tipped us off about some good daytime sightings of Capercaillie. With the RSPB Caper Watch now defunct, it's now more difficult to connect with these birds than ever and we would avoid walking in the forest in the early morning which can lead to disturbance of sensitive lek sites. It was a stunning afternoon to walk among the ancient pines, but there were desperately few birds – though we did eventually hear one **Crested Tit**, and saw a **Dipper** on a forest stream. Needless to say we didn't find any Caper, but on the way back, we finally heard a crossbill calling. A lovely deep 'chup-chup' note indicative of one of the larger billed types. Frustratingly, we couldn't see the bird to start with, but patient scanning eventually revealed it perched in the shade by the trunk of a big pine and it remained there for several minutes. Its fairly short and stubby bill profile, with fairly deep bulging lower mandible but fairly prominent crossed mandible tips, looked a better fit for '**Scottish**' Crossbill rather than Parrot. We sadly didn't manage to sound record it, but compared to the Parrots we are used to seeing down south in winter, it was far less bull headed and the bill looked slighter – it had a definite 'forehead' too, often lacking in the flat crowned Parrots. Always interesting to see and hear these **Scottish/Parrot** type birds and try and work out what exactly they are! This was our final action of the day, as we returned to Carrbridge weary ready for another one of Michael's excellent slap up dinners!

SUNDAY 15TH APRIL – *A fine sunny day in light winds, 15C*

We awoke to a stunning morning in Carrbridge today, with blue skies, no wind and warm sunshine following a touch of frost overnight. Our plan was to tackle our longest day of travel, and head north-west onto the coast around Gruinard Bay. On the way north, we called in at RSPB Loch Ruthven to try for some better views of **Slavonian Grebes**, which breed on the loch here. We didn't have to go more than 100m from the car park, as a superb pair of 'Slavs' in full breeding dress were floating in the first bay. We watched the birds preening in the morning sunshine, and marvelled at their quite immaculate head dress. A quick stop, but well worth the detour! From here it took around 90 minutes to arrive at our next stop, at Dundonnell at the head of Little Loch Broom. Before we arrived though, we had an exciting impromptu stop by the roadside for a superb **Golden Eagle** which was soaring close to the road and being mobbed by two **Common Ravens** – a great view albeit a bit brief, and a big improvement on yesterday! Down at the loch, on the tidal flats we found four **Common Greenshank**, and again the light was great for comparing with Redshank and Curlew close by. Several Common Ringed Plovers were also present, and we saw our first **Hooded Crows** of the trip here too.

Next we reached the layby overlooking Gruinard Island, and set up the scopes for a scan of the sea here for divers. There were several **Great Northern Divers** on show here, though not the

concentration we normally find, and none in full summer plumage. Several Shags, Razorbill, Common Guillemot and a distant **Great Skua** flying towards the Summer Isles were also seen. The light was just superb and the visibility excellent – we could make out the outline of the Isle of Lewis way out across The Minch, as we descended down towards Gruinard. We continued on the road around the west side of the bay, reaching the hamlet of Mellon Udrigle in time for lunch. The narrow road down to the village here produced some nice **Rock Doves**, and a confiding male Common Stonechat for the list. At the parking area, a male **Northern Wheatear** greeted us and there were close views of Skylarks to be had among the many Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails. We opted to carry lunch down to the dunes at the edge of the beach, and we could scope Red-breasted Mergansers, Ringed Plovers and **Great Northern Diver** as we ate our sandwiches. Annoyingly though, we managed to just miss a fishing White-tailed Eagle by a matter of minutes, and try as we might we could not find another one all day! A **Merlin** dashed through the bay though, a frequent visitor here from the adjacent moorland where they no doubt breed. Of course, special mention has to go to the scenery on this stretch of coast too, especially on a wonderful day of weather like today.

We now began retracing our route, back along the west side of Gruinard Bay. Our next stop produced several nice **Black Guillemots** in a variety of plumages, and several more **Great Northern Divers**. A party of Common Seals were hauled out on the rocks here, and another **Golden Eagle** circled distantly over the moorland behind. The highlight here though, was a breeding plumaged pair of **Red-throated Divers** – with the sun behind us and the birds close to the shore, these were the best views many of the group had ever had of this stunning bird. Continuing on, we drove back past Dundonnell and stopped at the final bend looking back up the glen towards Ullapool. Here we enjoyed a brew while scanning the snow capped mountains either side, to try one last time for a White-tailed Eagle. Ironically, we saw yet another **Golden Eagle**, displaying over the ridge, but not our main target. From here, it was an hour and a bit back to Carrbridge, where we arrived after 6pm [via a quick check again for Capercaillie by the roadside on the way!].

MONDAY 16TH APRIL – *Sunny spells and moderate southerly winds, 15C*

We packed a lot into today, starting with a pre-breakfast excursion to see lekking **Black Grouse**. This is always one of the highlights of a spring trip to Scotland, and while our local lek is only small [three males this morning] we have the added bonus of having it completely to ourselves! It was a lovely morning too, with the sun just starting to hit the bottom of the valley as we left the **Black Grouse** bubbling, coo-ing and flutter-jumping in the grass to head back for a welcome breakfast. We just had time to call at the bridge on the way back, and enjoy the **Dipper** gathering nest material. After breakfast, we headed back into the Caledonian pine forest for another walk hoping to bump into a Caper, but despite putting a three hour shift in and looking through a lot of trees, we were not lucky with a sighting. A singing **Tree Pipit**, newly arrived from Africa and our first of the year, was a welcome bonus, and on the walk back there was a lot of **Crested Tit** activity again. We had some more super views of this iconic Speyside special, and they were really vocal today too with lots of singing and calling. While watching these delightful birds, we heard a couple of deep ‘chup-chup’ notes and realised a **Crossbill** was feeding just above us. Over the next half hour, we pieced together some decent views of at least three **Scottish Crossbill** types, again being large billed birds somehow lacking the structure of typical Parrot. One of the males was certainly edging towards that ball-park though, with a big bulge to the lower mandible and a pretty broad upper mandible blending into a flatter crown. The views weren’t as clear as the previous visit though, so we were left not entirely confident with a definitive identification! It was nice to see and hear some more large-billed **Crossbills** though, and hopefully we would get the chance to see some ‘proper’ Parrots before the end of the week.

After coffee, we headed north to Lochindorb hoping to find Black-throated Diver. It was predictably cooler and more breezy here, and we saw a **Red Kite** floating across the moorland at the south end and plenty of **Red Grouse** standing sentinel like among the heather. The Common Gull colony here is always good value too, and we stopped to admire them as we crossed the moor at the north end of the loch. We couldn’t find any Black-throats today, and so we continued on to the Moray Coast and

Burghead. The light here was just stunning today – a flat, gently swelling blue sea backed by snow-capped mountains, and plenty of birds! We set the scopes up and began scanning as we ate our lunch, and almost the first bird we saw looking east from the maltings was a large, dark diver clearly in summer plumage. Even before it turned around to face us, there was a definite inkling what this was going to be – a dazzling **White-billed Diver**! This was a lifer for many in the group, and with the high tide drifting the bird inshore, the best views we have ever had of one off here. We watched it on and off over the next hour, eventually getting some really great views with the crisp light behind us – that bill just shone out like a beacon! Also offshore were four close **Red-throated Divers**, Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Common Eider, Shag, Gannet, Kittiwake and the first **Sandwich Terns** of the spring – all in all not a bad collection at all.

The day had just run away with us, and it was already approaching 4pm as we reached the next town along to the east, Lossiemouth. Here the river mouth is a great place to observe loafing gulls, and we arrived to be greeted by several hundred birds bathing in the channel and resting on the river bank on the far side. First bird up – a second calendar year **Glaucous Gull**, sticking out like a sore thumb as it sat preening among Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. This was not a bad return, for the ten minutes we had to spare here! Our final destination for today was the secluded Loch Spynie, and here we enjoyed a nice selection of common wildfowl, such as Wigeon, Teal, Great Crested and Little Grebes, Common Goldeneye and our first **Whooper Swan** on the trip. A small skein of Pink-footed Geese circled over, and Sand Martins were hurrying through in the spring sunshine Reed Bunting, Yellowhammer, and a party of Fieldfare, were our last additions of a very busy day.

TUESDAY 17TH APRIL – *Sunny spells and showers in strong to gale force southerly winds, 15C*

A very difficult day today where the weather was kinder than forecast but the birds just didn't want to play ball and we ended up seeing very little. We started in Abernethy Forest, where after dropping one of the group at the Loch Garten Osprey Centre, we embarked on our longest walk of the trip through the Caledonian Forest. After a forecast which originally showed heavy rain, it had now downgraded to light showers and out of the wind among the trees it was actually pretty pleasant. Our main target here would be Parrot Crossbills, but in truth we completed a three mile circular walk without very much to show for it. We saw one crossbill, probably a Parrot, which perched up distantly and briefly, but flew before we could get the scope onto it. What we did enjoy great views of though were **Crested Tits**, and of the three or four recorded on the walk, two showed extremely well, singing and foraging by the path with a couple of Coal Tits. As usual on the tour, we had enjoyed some really good views of Cresties this year, and if you are familiar with their distinctive calls they are not difficult to find. Back at the car park, we had a coffee, before collecting Joan from Loch Garten where she had enjoyed a couple of hours watching the **Ospreys**, without the three mile walk! Goosander and Common Goldeneye were seen on the river crossings as we headed out towards Grantown, and a single Sand Martin was seen at Broomhill.

Next we headed back up to Lochindorb, to try again for the Black-throated Divers. It was very windy here though, with the loch not only having waves whipping across and breaking on the shore, but at the south end there was actually a one metre swell!! Needless to say, the divers remained tucked up somewhere out of view, or out to sea, which was probably calmer! We saw several Red Grouse in the vicinity, but that was about it. The final part of the afternoon was spent in Strathdearn, or the Findhorn Valley as it is known to birders. This beautiful valley certainly didn't disappoint with its physical grandeur, the snow capped peaks at the far end now delivering a steady snow melt into the raging River Findhorn which was in flood. We hoped to see raptors over the heather-clad ridge tops, but we saw one Buzzard, and two Hooded Crows! A female Eurasian Sparrowhawk showed brilliant as it flew alongside the van, and two Common Teal were on a small pool in the valley bottom. It had been a forgettable day, and a shame to end our week on a low with no new trip species added to the list. It had been very windy, but that didn't seem totally responsible – it was just one of those days!

WEDNESDAY 18TH APRIL – *Fine and sunny, up to 27C*

A travelling day today as we headed south to Edinburgh and then on to Norfolk where we arrived mid evening.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

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

49. Common Ringed Plover
50. Northern Lapwing
51. Common Redshank
52. Common Greenshank
53. Eurasian Curlew
54. Black-tailed Godwit
55. Ruddy Turnstone
56. Sanderling
57. Common Snipe
58. Jack Snipe
59. Black-headed Gull
60. Common Gull
61. Herring Gull
62. Lesser Black-backed Gull
63. Great Black-backed Gull
64. Glaucous Gull
65. Great Skua
66. Black-legged Kittiwake
67. Common Guillemot
68. Razorbill
69. Black Guillemot
70. Sandwich Tern
71. Woodpigeon
72. Stock Dove
73. Collared Dove
74. Rock Dove
75. Great-spotted Woodpecker
76. Skylark
77. Meadow Pipit
78. Rock Pipit
79. Tree Pipit
80. Sand Martin
81. Pied Wagtail
82. Grey Wagtail
83. Dipper
84. Winter Wren
85. Northern Wheatear
86. European Robin
87. Common Stonechat
88. Dunnock
89. Common Blackbird
90. Ring Ouzel
91. Song Thrush
92. Mistle Thrush
93. Fieldfare
94. Common Chiffchaff
95. Willow Warbler
96. Goldcrest
97. Blue Tit
98. Great Tit
99. Coal Tit
100. Crested Tit
101. Long-tailed Tit
102. Common Treecreeper
103. Rook

- 104. Carrion Crow
- 105. Western Jackdaw
- 106. Black-billed Magpie
- 107. Common Raven
- 108. Common Starling
- 109. House Sparrow
- 110. Tree Sparrow
- 111. Chaffinch
- 112. Greenfinch
- 113. Goldfinch
- 114. Bullfinch
- 115. Common Linnet
- 116. Eurasian Siskin
- 117. Lesser Redpoll
- 118. Scottish Crossbill
- 119. Yellowhammer
- 120. Reed Bunting