



TOUR REPORT
SPEYSIDE
28TH MARCH – 3RD APRIL 2022

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Monday, March 28th: the long journey north

Two of the Speyside Tour group made their way to Great Ryburgh just as the dawn chorus erupted in the garden of The Manor House. We were soon on our way west in patchy fog and quite heavy traffic. Our first pick up was by the A1 at North Muskham, where Deryck joined Diana, Neil and Chris in the minibus. The next stop was a rainy Doncaster, where Jim and Adam came aboard.

About an hour later, we stopped at Scotch Corner for a lunch break in the very heavy rain. We drove across to the M6, where the rain stopped at Carlisle and the weather became progressively drier and sunnier as we headed into Scotland! A good omen?

We picked up Ted and Celia at Dunfermline station at 2.30pm, quickly followed by checking into our hotel. After a 15 min break, it was finally time to head out birding! We drove to the famous reserve at Loch Leven where we were afforded a very friendly welcome by RSPB staff and volunteers.

Over the course of the next 90 minutes, we strolled to the three hides to leisurely scan the marsh and huge lake. Plenty of Pink-footed Geese were present – some quite close to the hides - and we also managed to pick out a few distant Barnacle Geese trying to hide from us on a grassy promontory.

Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and Lapwings were in display flights and the pools were populated by Tufted Ducks, Teal, Shoveler and Goldeneyes. Noisy Black-headed Gulls were settling down to breed.

The highlight came when a Short-eared Owl was seen quartering the long grass at the rear of the marsh. Although distant, the grace of this piercing-eyed vole killer was clear for all to see. It was a really good end to a long travelling day.

We got back to the hotel at 6.00pm in time to freshen up for dinner across the way at 7.00pm. It was nice to be able to chat with people over a meal rather than in a noisy minibus.

Tuesday, March 29th: seaducks in the mist

A trip to the east coast was planned for today before we continued our journey to the Scottish Highlands. The fire alarm went off in the hotel at 5.45am; it turned out that the group thought I had arranged it to make sure everyone was down for breakfast in time! Would I be that cruel?

After a full English buffet-style breakfast, we headed out to Ruddon's Point. It was a misty, murky morning so we hoped we would be able to see the sea never mind some birds on it!

On arrival, we could thankfully see some birds, though they loomed in and out of the fog at various times. Many Common Eiders were in small flocks spread out across Largo Bay but we soon located a few Velvet and Common Scoters. No Surf Scoters could be found but other birds included Red-breasted Mergansers, Goosanders, Bar-tailed Godwits, Sanderlings, Curlews and one or two winter-plumaged Red-throated Divers.

Just as we were starting to pack away, a Short-eared Owl drifted across the rough grass of the dunes we were stood in. It eventually flew right passed our eyes: the owl was giving us a once over! It perched on some dark rocks in front of us and everyone had superb 'scope views as it took a rest from hunting. It was a fitting end to an enjoyable, productive morning's birdwatching.

We picked up our luggage from the hotel and were on our way north again by 12.30pm. Travelling up the A9 gave us a real sense that we were starting to reach the Highlands. Excitement was building!

75 minutes later, we were tucking into an excellent lunch at House of Bruar (the lemon meringue tarts were to die for!). We took a little stroll along part of the path to the waterfall in search of a Dipper. The star bird wasn't home but two of our group glimpsed the first Red Squirrel of the trip.

We continued up the A9. The scenery became more and more 'Cairngormsy' as we snaked our way north. We called in at a famous 'secret' Osprey nest but neither bird was at home. There

was just time to take a walk in a local wood to see if we could see and hear Crested Tits or Crossbills but we weren't lucky. Siskins were much in evidence, though.

We checked into our welcoming guesthouse at about 5.30pm. Michael and Christine provided us with a warming drink as we ordered our evening meals. Michael and Christine have been hosts on many an Oriole tour to Speyside and we are always Royally looked after.

After an extremely filling meal, we retired to the lounge (complete with real fire) to compile the day's bird list. We also made a few plans to try and see as much of the area's special birds as possible over the course of the next four days here.

Wednesday, March 30th: a ringing in our ears in the snow.

Everyone was keen for a pre-breakfast drive this morning, so off we went at 6.15am. Rather magically, it was snowing! We headed out onto the local moors and scanned for birds as we went. We reached Loch Lochindorb as the sun rose over the hills. With the fine dusting of snow, it made for a wonderfully scenic start to the day.

The loch was like a millpond, which is quite unusual. Pink-footed Geese "pinked" overhead as they resumed their migration. The loch held Tufted Ducks and Goldeneyes but best of all was a stunning Black-throated Diver out near the castle. Telescope views were superb on this calm morning.

We retraced our route homewards but soon drew to a halt as a pair of Red Grouse postured by the side of the road. The other Black-throated Diver was also found on this part of the loch. As we watched, it began to 'sing' to its partner. What a magical sound in an awesome setting.

On the drive back to the guesthouse, we stopped to watch eleven Black Grouse lekking on a grass mound. We stayed in the van to avoid disturbance but we could see and hear them well enough from the minibus. Needless to say, because of the high entertainment on the moors we were a tiny bit late back for breakfast. Christine and Michael are used to birdwatchers, so didn't seem to mind one bit!

After filling up with fuel, because the conditions were better than forecast, we decided to head up to the ski-centre to suss out local weather up high. Low cloud covered most of the tops but we decided to search for another enigmatic bird around the centre. After about half an hour, a male Ring Ouzel was found near the alpine garden. Its mournful, piping song could be heard above the wind as it perched in full view on a telegraph line.

As the snow came down, a few Snow Buntings were located on the roof of the funicular station. These delightful birds had a few fly rounds before returning to the roof. The funicular to the top of Cairngorm was closed for repair and with fresh snow falling, coupled with low cloud cover, we thought it unwise to venture any further to try and find Ptarmigans. Apparently, repair work had scattered the birds over a large area anyway and the local birdy grapevine reported that no one was seeing them here anyway!

Our next stop was one of my favourite walks: the Loch Mallachie trail near Loch Garten. I informed the group that I had never failed with Crested Tit at this location. Would I live to regret it?!

The woods were very quiet. The calls of Siskins were a constant soundscape, interspersed with Chaffinch song. The weather went from hail storms to bright sunshine: we were seeing these Caledonian Pine Forests in their winter and sunny spring glory all within the space of a few minutes!

Further along the trail, Chris thought he spotted a Brambling. We walked back along the track to join him and then I heard the sound I had been listening for: the unmistakable call of a Crested Tit.

Everyone had views of the mobile bird; some better than others. As the bird perched on the edge of a pine branch and revealed its immaculate crest, one of the ladies in the group was heard to utter one of my favourite reactions to a bird, ever: "Oh. My. Goodness!" Diana whispered in appreciation. And then, like so often with Crested Tits, it melted into the forest without anyone seeing it go. The hail started to fall again, so we moved on.

Loch Mallachie held a couple of Goldeneyes and Greylags but the rest of the walk was quiet (apart from regular battering by hail!). We ate our picnic lunches back at the van, perched on fallen Scots Pine branches.

We next drove to Forest Lodge, taking it very slowly while listening for Cresties and Crossbills. We arrived to find the RSPB had closed off the access track to the car park! We walked slowly along the track but it was very quiet (except for an extraordinary number of vehicles using the 'closed' track!)

Once at the start of the forest walks, we again moved very slowly forward looking and listening as we went. A Crested Tit showed very well for us; everyone had excellent views this time round. A few Crossbills flew over but didn't linger. It was time to head back to the van and then on to the guesthouse.

We ate another filling meal at 6.30pm, followed by the day's bird list in the lounge with a cup of coffee and a 'waffer-thin-mint'.

Thursday, March 31st: visiting Elvis

The early morning drive was taken in a couple of centimeters of crunchy fresh snow! The guesthouse looked delightful as we pulled away to get to the moors. The Black Grouse looked superb on their snow-covered grassy knoll. We watched them quietly for about half an hour: better than any TV soap.

After a filling breakfast at the guesthouse, we drove north up the A9. Onwards passed Inverness, where the sun came out to guide us on our way. We reached Loch Fleet just as the sky turned black. We could see some heavy rain out to sea, so we waited in the minibus for a few minutes. The reason we were here was because the pesky drake King Eider – Elvis – had decided to move from its wintering home of Nairn to a site further north three days before we arrived in Scotland!

Several close flotillas of Common Eiders were in the bay; coming closer on the in-rushing tide. Of course, Elvis wasn't with them but they were beautiful to watch anyway. There was a large flock of Eiders about half a mile out to sea, so we set about scanning through them. They were extremely mobile, swirling about and diving in a close flock.

After about half an hour's close scrutiny, the King Eider showed itself on the left hand edge of the Eider flock. It stayed there quite a while allowing everyone to pick this impressive bird out through telescopes.

After that excitement, it was time for lunch on the picnic tables overlooking The Fleet's mouth, keeping one eye on the distant Eiders to see if they were coming any closer. They weren't!

We slowly drove along the access road looking for suitable scanning places. The first we came across looked down the valley across the estuary. An Osprey was spotted with a fish and then an adult White-tailed Eagle soared into view further down the valley.

On the water, we saw Goldeneyes, Pink-footed Geese, Red-breasted Mergansers and Wigeon. We could see a few waders in front of a hide across the way, so it was there we headed for next.

The hide was reached through a tract of woodland. This proved a very quiet walk (apart from Siskins and Chaffinches, of course). As we settled into the hide, watching a Red Kite swooping close over the edge of the water, Chris rushed in and said he had found some Crossbills in the trees outside.

Over the next 40 minutes, we studied bill size and shape and also the "tup, tup" calls as the Crossbills fed on pine cones above our heads. It was deduced that the male was a very good fit for Parrot Crossbill but photographs of the female will have to be studied further!

There were quite a few Curlews in front of the hide, as well as Redshanks, Wigeon, Crows and a Hooded Crow. A few dead geese were a worrying sign of Bird Flu taking a hold.

Our last stop was by the bridge at the start of the estuary known as The Mound. A leisurely scan of the water and marsh produced a few Teal and Shovelers, Redshanks and Wigeon, etc.

We reached the guesthouse at 6.00pm because of heavy traffic near Inverness and ate at 6.30pm. We were now into the routine of retiring to the lounge with a coffee and mint to compile the bird list.

Friday, April 1st: dancing grebes and soaring eagles

With the weather set fair, we planned to go up the Findhorn Valley today: famous for birds of prey. First up was a pre-breakfast drive onto the moors to check on the Black Grouse lek. True to form, the grouse kept us entertained as they lekged in the snow. A couple of Woodcocks were also disturbed from the roadside.

After breakfast at Christine and Michaels', we made the short drive to the valley. Again, the ever-rising hills were peppered with snow as we slowly drove to the end of the twelve mile, single track road. A few Buzzards drew the van to a halt at regular intervals to check them out!

We parked in the large stony area at the end of the track and began to scan. A few Red Deer showed themselves on the hillsides and then a Ring Ouzel was found perched atop a tree. A Kestrel perched on a crag was worth 'scoping.

As the breeze got up (a rather chilly one!), the scanning of distant ridges went up a gear. A gorgeous Peregrine drifted by and perched on a rock for all to admire in telescopes. And then the shout went up that everyone wanted to hear: "GOLDEN EAGLE!!"

A magnificent eagle drifted over a ridge, showing off its classic long-winged outline for all to see. White in the wings and tail showed the bird to be an immature one. Another bird joined it, checking out the deer on the hillside for any weak ones. All in all, one or two of these superb birds were on show for over half an hour, so everyone had their fill of this iconic species.

The snow looked to be setting in and settling at this point, so we decided to move a few miles down the valley in case we needed to make a hasty exit! Lunch was taken at another viewpoint by a stony river. Snow flurries made the scene very picture postcard-esque.

The weather wasn't too bad, so we headed across the Farr Road: seven miles of open moorland. We stopped to scan at several good viewpoints but we saw very little: not even Red Grouse.

Further on, we pulled up at the RSPB reserve at Loch Ruthven just as a large group of people left: perfect timing! We made the short walk through the lochside wood to a small hide overlooking the loch and a small bay.

Our target species here was spotted immediately, though rather distant: Slavonian Grebe. One bird was in full breeding plumage while the other had a remnant of winter white on its face and neck.

As we watched, these two birds swam closer to each other and then began calling. One repeatedly dived under the other one, then both birds fluffed out their ornate head plumage. And then came a very brief 'dance' across the water; side by side, turning their heads away and towards each other. The display was utterly spellbinding: a truly magical and charming experience for the enthralled onlookers.

After this excitement, we traced our steps and drove back along the Farr Road moorland. Once again, it was very quiet. Not even the regular Grey Wagtail and Dipper showed on the trickling rivulet near the Findhorn Valley Road. Neither were these two species obvious further down the valley at the major bridge crossing the river. A large flock of Curlews and Oystercatchers added a dash of colour to the fields by the side of the river, though. It was time to head home.

We had dinner in the guesthouse at 6.30pm and then settled down in front of the fire with coffee and mints to compile the day's bird log. After a nice chat, it was time for bed!

Saturday, April 2nd: go west young man

The snow had cleared slightly for our pre-breakfast drive on the moors. We took it very slowly, scanning for raptors on the extensive moorland. No luck and the Black-throated Divers were also

taking a break from the loch. However, we saw a few Red Grouse and two Mountain Hares still with a frosting of white in their fur. The Black Grouse were still doing their thing on their grassy knoll.

The weather was perfect for our trip out today: blue skies! The plan was to head to the west coast to try and see eagles and divers. We made good time to our first stop: Dundonnell at the head of Little Loch Broom.

It was quickly obvious that the millpond calm loch was home to several divers and other birds. First, however, we paused to watch a few Greenshanks and Redshanks on the mud.

Out on the water, a few Great Northern Divers and one or two Black-throated Divers showed well, as well as a distant Red-throated Diver. Guillemots dived in the shimmering water and three Slavonian Grebes were found too.

Further on, we stopped to scan the recently burned out Gruinard island. Unsurprisingly, no White-tailed Eagles could be found perched on the crispy heather but there were more divers on the loch. A winter plumaged Black Guillemot was the first some of the group had seen in this plumage.

Lunch was taken at the unbelievably beautiful beach at Mellon Udrigle. A stunning male Wheatear also joined us on the short grass around the crofts. Despite a good walk round the village and despite hearing one when we first arrived, we couldn't relocate any Twite.

Meadow and Rock Pipits showed well, as did a Pied Wagtail or two but no little finches. Out on the sea, a pair of summer-plumaged Red-throated Divers drifted by. Regular scans of the distant, crystal clear mountains failed to turn up any eagles of any flavour, which was rather unusual and disappointing.

We continued back towards our Carrbridge base via the southern loop. We stopped at various viewpoints along the way. Again, the scenery was absolutely stunning in the glorious sun. The most productive stop was near Gairloch. The flat calm, clear blue bay held five Black-throated Divers close together in varying stages of moult. Everyone in the group firmly fixed the different plumages in their minds for future reference.

More stops along the scenic route provided more scanning opportunities (mountain and loch) but failed to produce anything else of note. We were back in Carrbridge for 6.30pm and down for another filling dinner at 7.15pm.

Sunday, April 3rd: a perfect farewell present from Cairngorm

Despite this being a day of long travelling in the minibus, everyone was keen to take one last pre-breakfast drive onto the moors. The air was fresh and chilling as we scanned the vast area for anything that moved.

Very few birds were seen – the usual suspects of Meadow Pipit, Common Gull, Red Grouse and the reliable gang of lekking Black Grouse. Perhaps the highlight was the almost pure white Mountain Hare on the hillside (the way it stuck out like a sore thumb, it may as well have had a sign saying 'eat me' on it!).

We just had time to have a look for the reported Glaucous Gull close to our Guesthouse. There were plenty of Black-headed and Herring Gulls but no sign of the Arctic visitor. It was time for breakfast.

After our last breakfast at Christine and Michael's, we loaded up the van and set off for the long journey home. We had another look for the Glaucous Gull in the fields near Carrbridge but there was still no sign.

Our last stop in Cairngorm was another visit to the 'secret' Osprey nest. This time, a bird was sat on a protruding stick right by the nest with a snowy, shimmering Cairngorm as a backdrop. The Osprey had obviously just returned to the nest after its flight from West Africa. We observed through telescopes from afar, drinking in the scene. It was a perfect end to our stay in Speyside.

The rest of the day was spent driving ever southwards, dropping people off at various points along the way. It's always sad saying goodbye to new and old friends but it's hopefully only *au revoir*. The last people disembarked in Norfolk at 8.00pm and that was the end of another highly enjoyable birding adventure!



Snowy scenes around Carrbridge from the tour!

BIRDS SEEN (114 species in order of IOC)

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>
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>
King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</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>
Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>

Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus cornax</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sternus vulgaris</i>
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus ilicus</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rebecula</i>
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>

Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>
Parrot Crossbill	<i>Loxia pytyopsittacus</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>

Blue = Heard only

MAMMALS

Atlantic Grey Seal
Common Seal
Red Squirrel
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Red Deer
Roe Deer
Rabbit
Feral Goat