



TOUR REPORT
SPEYSIDE
26TH MARCH – 1ST APRIL 2023

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Sunday March 26th: a travelling day but some good birds!

Everyone arrived at Great Ryburgh on time for the 6.00am start. We loaded up the van in the heavy rain and were on the road at 6.15. Despite heavy showers, the first leg from Norfolk to Newark produced Barn and Tawny Owls, Red Kites, Kestrels and Buzzards. After a coffee break, we continued northwards to Earsdon near Whitley Bay. My SatNav took us through unpromising-looking territory for a goose fest, but sure enough at the end of the road of a housing estate was a field full of honkers! We picked out the (Richardson's) Cackling Goose straight away, noting the small size. Two Greater Canadas joined the throng and dwarfed their cousin! The White-fronted Goose was trickier to pick out among the thousand or so Pinkfeet.



Cackling Goose with Pinkfeet at Earsdon, Northumberland

We ate a picnic lunch in an unromantic seating - in a Sainsbury's car park - making use of the facilities and noting a Sparrowhawk and Feral Pigeons above us. Onwards!

Just over an hour's drive north brought us to the spectacular Northumberland coast with Bamburgh Castle in the background. We parked in its shadow to scan the rough sea. A few Eider and Scoter flocks were picked out but not the sought-after visitor. We moved into a bit more shelter and were soon watching the drake Black Scoter with a handful of Common Scoter and merganser. The sun made the large bright yellow 'conk' stand out like a beacon! This bird had been present for many months (years!) but could go missing for months at a time, so we felt very lucky to connect with this American visitor.

Another hour's drive saw us in a tidy cemetery in Dunbar scanning the grey sky for a large swift. We eventually had to admit defeat and made our way to our comfortable hotel, crossing the Forth Bridge in the process. The darned Alpine Swift will have to wait for another time.

We had dinner in the adjacent restaurant at 7.00pm accompanied by pleasant chatter and then to bed! I could tell this was going to be a highly enjoyable week due to the banter flying about right from the first minute of the long drive!

Monday March 27th: seaducks galore.

We left the hotel at 7.30am and drove east for about 40 minutes in glorious sunshine. We arrived at Ruddon's Point and dressed warmly for the biting wind.

Our first scan of the bay revealed thousands of birds, though most were distant. Further along the dune path, we found many Velvet and Common Scoter and Common Eiders much closer in. It was nice to see Velvet Scoters close up for once.

Several scans from various points found us watching more scoters and Eiders, a handful of distant Long-tailed Ducks and many Shags. Waders included Ringed Plover, Curlew and Bar-tailed Godwits. We failed to locate any divers or grebes.

We returned to the hotel to check out and collect our luggage. After about an hour, we stopped for fish and chips on the A9: scrumptious, though the person serving us was amusingly surly! Afterwards, we had a very pleasant stroll in the warm sun, keeping an eye on the fast flowing river. The Dippers failed to show for us.

We arrived in the Aviemore area mid afternoon. We headed straight for a Loch just outside the town and were soon watching a stunning male Ring-necked Duck cavorting with a small group of Tufted Ducks in the glorious sunlight. Also here were Wigeon, Goldeneye and about a dozen displaying Little Grebes.



Waxwing

A Waxwing was being seen less than ten minutes away, so we decided it would be churlish not to pay it a visit. Initially, the bird couldn't be found in its favourite hedge but Marilyn soon located it in a berry tree behind the tennis courts. It showed superbly well for us.

We checked into our homely guesthouse at 5.15pm and were greeted warmly by our host, Christine, who diverted us to the lounge where a cup of coffee was waiting for us beside the roaring fire. We ate dinner at 6.45pm and then compiled two days' bird lists in the lounge.

Superb weather accompanied us all way today but tomorrow's forecast is very poor. We'll see!

Tuesday, March 28th: moors the merrier.

After breakfast in the guesthouse at 8.00am, Neil finally came up with a plan taking into account the rain was nowhere near as bad as forecast. We set off at 9.15am. And stopped again at 9.17am! Neil's plan was to stop for diesel at the filling station and let the group scan the rocky river for Dippers. Success (plus a Grey Wagtail)!

We made our way onto a moorland road and were soon watching four male Black Grouse lekking. We remained in the vehicle to avoid disturbing the birds at this critical time. Further on, several Red Grouse were seen as well.

A slow drive failed to produce any Black-throated Divers on the Loch but we did find a busy colony of Common Gulls and a white 'plumaged' Mountain Hare.

Thirty odd minutes later, we pulled up at a rainy Burghead. A scan of the bay produced several smart-looking breeding-plumaged Long-tailed Ducks and some very distant divers (one Black-throated and one Great Northern). There was no sign of the White-billed Diver.

We ate our picnic lunch before heading back across the moors to Boat of Garten: we had decided to do some forest birdwatching by way of a change of scenery. A slow walk

through a wonderful Caledonian Pine forest produced very few birds in the rain but we did hear and glimpse a Crested Tit. Rain stopped play.

Back at the guesthouse, we settled into the lounge to compile the meagre bird list, though any day graced with a Black Grouse lek and Long-tailed Ducks should perhaps be classed as a successful one.

We had dinner in a local pub at 7.00pm - very nice food but a little slow serving it up. Back at the guesthouse, Christine made us a warm drink while we completed the day in tears of laughter!

Wednesday, March 29th: a frustrating day

After another filling breakfast and assessing the weather, the group set off to the famous Findhorn Valley. A couple of Red Kites and Buzzards were a good start on the way up the valley but as we neared the end, cloud cover was disappointingly low. However, it was only minutes before our first raptor: a young Peregrine was trying to take a Common Gull!

Ravens showed well, as did Buzzards but it was generally quiet. Neil decided it would be worth heading back down the valley where it had been clearer. Just as everyone was in the van, Neil heard a Raven cronking. He looked behind and saw a Golden Eagle soar over the ridge. Unfortunately, the Raven saw it off in record time and only one other person saw it!

We waited to see if the Eagle would return. Meanwhile, a male and female Peregrine flew over our heads clearly showing the size difference between the male and the female. A quick glance down the valley saw a Golden Eagle soaring into view from behind a ridge. Before more than one or two saw it, it was chased off by another Raven!!

It began to rain, so we made our way onto the Farr Road. The seven miles of moorland was very quiet: not even a Red Grouse was seen! We ate lunch in a lay by overlooking a loch but we only added Goosander to the day's list.

After a filling picnic lunch, we called in at Loch Ruthven RSPB. We had the place to ourselves, so could enjoy the Slavonian Grebes in solitude. Three grebes were distant but one beauty floated past the hide showing really well. After having our fill of this rare British breeder, we retraced our route back down the Farr road. We stopped and scanned at regular intervals but found nothing but Meadow Pipits.

With the rain setting in, we turned tail and headed south where the weather looked brighter. We called in at an Osprey nest but no one was at home. We returned to the guesthouse where three of us took a short walk by the river in the drizzly rain. The Dippers weren't at home but there were plenty of Siskins, Chaffinches and Greenfinches.

We ate a lovely dinner at the guesthouse at 7.00pm and made plans for the following day. Everyone said they had really enjoyed the day but we need the birds to start behaving and showing well!

Thursday, March 30th: the eagles have landed

Everyone was up and ready for a pre-breakfast drive, leaving at 6.00am. The dawn chorus was ringing out around the guesthouse, including a hooting Tawny Owl.

We made our way onto the nearby Moor. The Black Grouse could be heard in the usual place. Disconcertingly, three photographers could be seen walking towards the lek! We carried on slowly along the road, scanning for anything that moved.

We circled the Loch but couldn't find and divers. Several Red Grouse were close to the road, as we're four or five Mountain Hares. It was time to head back just as the sun rose above a ridge and bathed the Moor in golden light. This is the moment Louisa and Tony caught sight of a Short-eared Owl but it disappeared over a ridge before anyone else saw it.

Back at the Black Grouse, from the shelter of the van we could hear and see nine males doing battle on the grassy knoll. The three photographers were sat by the fence below the lek about 200 yards from the road. **(FOOTNOTE: the photographers were later reported to the police by several other birders).**

We were back at the guesthouse for breakfast at 8.00am and away again at 9.00am. We headed north to Inverness and then west towards the west coast. After about a 90 minute drive, we pulled up at Dundonnell and scanned the Marsh and loch. Three Greenshank were nice to see and several divers were 'scoped from our position. We drove to another layby, closer to the water and scanned the Loch again.

Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated were all seen well through telescopes. No raptors appeared over the mountains, so we moved on.

We next pulled up in a layby overlooking Gruinard Island, where several divers were again present and close enough to see well through telescopes. We also managed to see a charming flock of 70 Barnacles Geese in the surrounding fields. Surprisingly, there were no raptors!

We ate our picnic lunches in the stunning setting of Mellon Udrigle. Buzzards circled overhead and yet more divers were on the sea. Three gorgeous Wheatears were flitting around but the regular Twite failed to show for us.

Our return journey back to Carrbridge took us via Loch Maree and Beinn Eighe: the scenery was simply breathtaking. A stop for fuel at a loch side station provided us with yet another Black-throated Diver.

Further along, two interesting shapes on a hill saw us screeching to a halt. Sure enough, a pair of adult White-tailed Eagles were sat side by side seemingly making eyes at each other. A third adult White-tailed was soaring high above the love struck couple. We watched the canoodling pair for quite some time and even showed the birds to a nice lady cyclist, who was thrilled to see them. We stopped to scan the mountains a couple more times but failed to locate any Golden Eagles.

We were back at the guesthouse at 6.30pm for a quick change for a scrumptious dinner at 7.00pm. We compiled the bird log over a coffee and a mint in the lounge in front of a smoky fire before retiring to bed. A long but enjoyable day!

Friday, March 31st: a bird-filled day

After another filling breakfast, we drove up to the Cairngorm Mountain Funicular and were whisked up to the top station (along with some bemused skiers giving us some strange looks). Cloud cover was quite thick, so we stayed on the viewing terrace to scan the tops. Regular gaps in the cloud brought sunny spells, which lit up the mountains beautifully. As the cover receded, we took a short walk across the snow to scan the path up to the summit. It wasn't long before two Ptarmigans were found about half way up the hill!

Cloud kept covering the area, but in between times everyone had telescope views of these elusive birds. Many groups had tried to see Ptarmigans here recently and failed. The male hopped onto a clump of vegetation and looked our way. The red 'eyebrows' could clearly be seen. It wasn't the best views people had ever had but we were very lucky to see

any at all! Helen was so pleased, she undertook some Extreme Knitting: sitting on a rock in the snow to knit a few lines of her hat. She has the photos to prove it, as well!

We made our way back down to base camp, which was bathed in sunshine. A Snow Bunting dropped in and showed well but the recently-returned Ring Ouzels failed to show.

We next drove back towards Carrbridge and parked in a scenic spot with a view over hills and forests. Before we could even break out the picnic lunch, Simon spotted a raptor. It was a Goshawk! We stayed in this spot for about 90 minutes and notched up at least 6 Buzzards, two or three White-tailed Eagles, one Golden Eagle and a fly over Common Crossbill.

We eventually drove to a nearby Scots Pine forest and slowly walked the track listening and watching for birds as we went. There were plenty of Coal Tits and Siskins but no sight or sound of our target species.

We walked the whole track, waited a few minutes at the end, but the forest was deathly quiet. Only about 300 yards from our turnaround point, Marilyn, who was ahead of the rest of the group, stopped and looked up into the trees. There, before our very eyes, was a Crested Tit, which also began to call. And then there was another one. And another. And another! We also heard a couple of crossbills flying over, which sounded very much like the deep "tup, tup" of Parrot Crossbill. We shall never know being as they didn't land near us.

We got back to the guesthouse at 5.45pm, giving people plenty of time to pack and freshen up before dinner. Unfortunately, we are on the move back south tomorrow. After a lovely dinner, we retired to the lounge to compile our last Speyside log. We also presented Christine, our hostess, with a dish decorated with a Puffin as a thank you for looking after us so well. (Thank you to Lou for arranging the whole thing). And then it was to bed to prepare for the long journey home tomorrow.

Saturday, April 1st: no birds and it wasn't an April Fool's joke!

A few of the group went for an early morning walk. The Dipper and Goosander were seen on the river and two Great Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming round the guesthouse. A hooting Tawny Owl greeted the early risers.

After the usual filling breakfast in the guesthouse, we loaded up the van and said a fond farewell to Christine. She had done us proud over the last week and treated us like Kings and Queens.

Our first stop was to see if the local Osprey was home. She wasn't. We made our way south for a couple of hours and stopped at Cockenzie near Musselburgh. We immediately located some close Eider, so expectation was high that we would soon be watching a regal King Eider, which had been frequenting with the locals. An hour later, we were still scanning and expecting! Neither did we see the regular Iceland Gull, though a handful of Purple Sandpipers and a Velvet Scoter were some recompense. During this stop, we ate our picnic lunches in the dreich weather.

The rest of the day was spent travelling back to Norfolk in the grey drizzle. We stopped a few times for a leg stretch and coffee and arrived back in Great Ryburgh at 8.30pm. We transferred our luggage into various cars and said a sad farewell as we went our separate ways.

I would like to say a huge thank you to the group, who were very patient when searching for elusive birds and were great company to be with. See you at the Alpine Swift, everyone

(don't mention the Alpine Swift!!). I would also like to say a massive thank you to Christine Stitt at Carrmoor Guesthouse for feeding us and looking after us so wonderfully during our stay.

BIRDS SEEN (111 species in order of IOC)

Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Cackling (Richardson's) Goose	<i>Branta hutchinsii</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose (Russian)	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Anas collaris</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</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>
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</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>
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>

White-tailed Eagle
Common Buzzard
Oystercatcher
Northern Lapwing
Common Ringed Plover
Eurasian Curlew
Bar-tailed Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Purple Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Common Greenshank
Black-legged Kittiwake
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Eurasian Collared Dove
Western Barn Owl
Tawny Owl
Short-eared Owl
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Common Kestrel
Peregrine
Eurasian Jay
Eurasian Magpie
Western Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Northern Raven
Bohemian Waxwing
Coal Tit
Crested Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Eurasian Skylark
Long-tailed Tit
Common Chiffchaff
Goldcrest

Haliaeetus albicilla
Buteo buteo
Haematopus ostralegus
Vanellus vanellus
Charadrius hiaticula
Numenius arquata
Limosa lapponica
Arenaria interpres
Calidris alba
Calidris maitima
Tringa totanus
Tringa nebularia
Rissa tridactyla
Chroicocephalus ridibundus
Larus canus
Larus marinus
Larus argentatus
Larus fuscus
Sterna sandvicensis
Uria aalge
Alca torda
Cepphus grylle
Columba livia
Columba palumbus
Streptopelia decaocto
Tyto alba
Stix aluco
Asio flammeus
Dendrocopos major
Falco tinnunculus
Falco peregrinus
Garrulus glandarius
Pica pica
Corvus monedula
Corvus frugilegus
Corvus corone
Corvus cornix
Corvus cornax
Bombycilla garrulus
Periparus ater
Lophophanes cristatus
Cyanistes caeruleus
Parus major
Alauda arvensis
Aegithalos caudatus
Phylloscopus collybita
Regulus regulus

Eurasian Wren
 Eurasian Treecreeper
 Common Starling
 Eurasian Blackbird
 Redwing
 Song Thrush
 Mistle Thrush
 European Robin
 European Stonechat
 Northern Wheatear
 White-throated Dipper
 House Sparrow
 Dunnock
 Grey Wagtail
 Pied Wagtail
 Meadow Pipit
 Rock Pipit
 Common Chaffinch
 Eurasian Bullfinch
 European Greenfinch
 Common Linnet
 Lesser Redpoll
 Common Crossbill
 Goldfinch
 Eurasian Siskin
 Common Reed Bunting
 Snow Bunting

Troglodytes troglodytes
Certhia familiaris
Sternus vulgaris
Turdus merula
Turdus ilicus
Turdus philomelos
Turdus viscivorus
Erithacus rebecula
Saxicola rubicola
Oenanthe oenanthe
Cinclus cinclus
Passer domesticus
Prunella modularis
Motacilla cinerea
Motacilla alba
Anthus pratensis
Anthus petrosus
Fringilla coelebs
Pyrrhula pyrrhula
Chloris chloris
Carduelis cannabina
Carduelis cabaret
Loxia curvirostra
Carduelis carduelis
Carduelis spinus
Emberiza schoeniclus
Plectrophenax nivalis

Blue = Heard only

MAMMALS

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

MISCELLANEOUS

Caledonian Pine
 Larch

Silver Birch
Siberian Squill
Glittering Wood Moss
Fox Moth caterpillar
Buff-tailed Bumblebee