

# Sutherland

**Monday 19 – Monday 26 June 2006**

## **Trip Report**

### **Leaders:**

Robin Noble

## **Introduction**

As an official tour for The Travelling Naturalist, the 2006 Sutherland trip was a new one, but I had, of course, done most of it several times, whether alone or accompanied, and the final few days were spent close to my home! As far as the weather is concerned, we had one of those "interesting" weeks, with what might be politely described as varying conditions. It began in a fairly foul fashion, but did slowly improve, and the last day-and-a-half was really rather nice. Thank goodness it went in that particular direction, and not the other way around!

## **Diary**

### **Monday 19 June**

With a bit of to-ing and fro-ing, I collected the group in Inverness around the middle of the day, and we headed up the A9 towards Loch Fleet, where we met Iain Macdonald from SNH in Golspie. He kindly showed us some of the very special flowers which lurk in Balblair Wood, the one-flowered wintergreen and twinflower being particularly rare and in beautiful bloom at the time. As we had already watched an osprey from the Mound, it made a really good start to the week.

### **Tuesday 20 June**

We spent that night (and the next) at Navidale House Hotel in Helmsdale, and the next morning saw us driving slowly up Glen Loth, looking for birds (of which there were initially very few) and for archaeology of which there is, thankfully, always quite a lot! There were also a lot of red deer, rather low down for the time of year perhaps, and some of them still looking very scruffy, unlike the immaculate roe buck which we spied outside one of the plantations. We spent most of the afternoon at Forsinard, on a guided walk given by Adrian Malone of the RSPB. His enormous enthusiasm for the bogs of the Flow Country was enough (just!) to keep us interested as we wandered through that complex landscape of pools, a landscape which was fast disappearing in wind and rain at the time! Something about his explanation of the formation of peat and bogs (a moderate rainfall, but allied to low summer temperatures, hence low evaporation rates), rang very true that afternoon. We did actually see a couple of birds, both looking somewhat fed-up I thought; a golden plover and a greenshank.

### **Wednesday 21 June**

It was nice to return to the warmth of the hotel that night and the next day we again set off up the Strath of Kildonan as far as Kinbrace, where we turned west, and headed into the empty lands beyond Badanloch. It was misty and damp, and the landscape looked endless, but eventually we came down into the welcoming fertility of Strathnaver, and the weather improved enough for us to have a pleasant walk around the cleared settlement of Rossal. We all admired the relatively new interpretation boards, which give a real feeling for the community of people who had lived there, even though it means that one of the most interesting, older features to be found, the probable souterrain, is not interpreted at all.

From here, we followed Loch Naver, counting brochs as we went, to Altnaharra, then took that wonderful little road which leads under the cliffs of Ben Hope. I had hoped to spend some time here, looking out for golden eagles, but the weather closed in and we could see little more than the impressive remains of the broch by the roadside. After all the moorland expanses, we did appreciate

the lovely birch woodland along the lochside. This soon gave way to dramatic views of a rather stormy-looking Loch Eriboll, but it was not long before the group was settling in to the comforts of our next base which was Port-na-Con House.

At this point I will break away from the narrative of the trip just to say that one of the most wonderful features of this tour was the comfortable accommodation in the three different places where we stayed (Navidale House, Port-na-Con and, later, Kylesku Hotel), and the excellent quality of the food in all three. This was of a high standard; the trip had not been described as a gourmet tour, but we could very well have done so. We were made very welcome at Port-na-Con that first evening and our stay there was heightened still further by the most remarkable sighting one evening- a big dog otter struggling for perhaps half-an-hour with a fish that was almost its own size. It doesn't get much better than that!

#### **Thursday 22 June**

We spent the Thursday at Balnakiel and Faraid Head in weather conditions which were not spectacular-slowly changing from cold and grey to mild and almost blue! What was spectacular was the bombardment which opened up, directly over our heads, it seemed, as we sat having a quiet lunch. From our vantage point it seemed as though all three services were involved; a gun was certainly shelling the targeted headland, a plane went over and dropped bombs, while more distant bangs made it clear that the Navy was also taking its turn. All in all, the noisiest picnic I have experienced for many years! (And the number of Range Rovers and the like which were apparently involved had to be seen to be believed!).

It has to be admitted that it did not really seem to worry the birds we saw around the place. These included the whimbrels which I had seen there at least a couple of weeks before, and all three divers, which was most satisfactory. More distant views included kittiwake, puffin, guillemot, razorbill, and gannet. There were, however, not many flowers in evidence, due to the continuing cold weather. This was midsummer according to the calendar, but still hardly felt like spring!

#### **Friday 23 June**

This was rather similar weatherwise, but equally enjoyable and certainly quieter. We went round Loch Eriboll, across the bare sweep of A'Mhoine, and took the old road around the head of the Kyle of Tongue. The sheltered, wooded country here has always been one of my favourite places, and Ben Loyal slowly cleared during the morning to provide a wonderful backdrop to a prolonged and close view of an osprey which was patently anxious to eat the flatfish it had just caught! We climbed up to the extensive remains of an impressive Iron-age fort near Kinloch called Dun na Maigh. It has an excellent view over the Kyle and of the mountain, and there is plenty to look at in its own structure, with clear details of the entrance passage and the gallery within the walls. Although marked as a broch on the map, it is not a "typical broch" (if there actually is such a thing!) in that it is certainly not circular, but rather somewhat "D" shaped. Like many others in Sutherland, its drystone masonry is very unstable, and we exercised the greatest care in walking around it. In the afternoon, we paused in Tongue before going up to Loch Loyal. Here we duly admired one of my favourite trees, a splendid, ancient pollarded birch, and the flowers around it, which included several globeflowers, and the diminutive chickweed wintergreen. The ornithological highlight here was a black-throated diver on the loch.

#### **Saturday 24 June**

We headed south, through some very heavy showers, and, not without some misgiving on my part, took the boat to Handa. However, all was well; very slowly, it cleared to a glorious afternoon, and the island looked beautiful. There were plenty of puffins about, (and great skuas in plenty to prey on them), gannets offshore again, red grouse on land, and the slowly-clearing panorama of sea, rock and mountain all around. The relatively short drive from Tarbet took us to Kylesku and the good food of the hotel. As we sat in the diningroom that evening, and the evening sun lit up the wild, rocky landscape of Glendhu, I began to relax, feeling that Sutherland was at last showing itself at its best. Our last full day was beautiful, and we spent it here in Assynt, walking up my own glen in the morning, enjoying the butterflies which were emerging on this, the first warm day for what seemed like several months! The drive around the Assynt coast road filled at least some of my passengers

with amazement, and we made many stops for photographs. That afternoon was spent where a narrow glen twists down to the sea, a little place where green turf, grey crags, an enamelled sea and small sand beaches provide a vision of peace and colour. We had gone there just because it is a beautiful place, but we did also see a pair of those brilliantly coloured birds, the "grey" wagtails. Another wonderful meal and sunlit evening concluded our week in Sutherland, although the photostops on the way back to Inverness the next day also added to the memories of the trip.

## **SPECIES CHECKLIST**

### **Bird List: (seen and heard)**

Red-throated diver, black-throated diver, great northern diver, fulmar, gannet, cormorant, shag, mute swan, greylag goose, shelduck, mallard, shoveler, eider, common scoter, red-breasted merganser, osprey, hen harrier, buzzard, pheasant, lapwing, golden plover, ringed plover, whimbrel, curlew, redshank, greenshank, common sandpiper, snipe, dunlin, great skua, arctic skua, common gull, herring gull, lesser black-backed gull, great black-backed gull, black-headed gull, kittiwake, common tern, arctic tern, guillemot, razorbill, black guillemot, puffin, rock dove/ feral pigeon, wood pigeon, collared dove, cuckoo, sky lark, sand martin, swallow, house martin, pied wagtail, grey wagtail, (probable!) tree pipit, meadow pipit, rock pipit, dipper, wren, dunnock, blackbird, song thrush, robin, redstart (heard by Liz), whinchat, stonechat, wheatear, willow warbler, chiffchaff, blackcap, goldcrest, spotted flycatcher, coal tit, great tit, jackdaw, rook, hooded crow, carrion crow, raven, starling, reed bunting, chaffinch, greenfinch, siskin, goldfinch, redpoll, (possible! crossbill), bullfinch, house sparrow.

### **Mammals:**

Long-eared bat, otter (and how!), common seal, grey seal, red deer, roe deer, rabbit (must we?!).

### **Amphibian:**

Frog

### **Fish, etc:**

Brown trout, flounder, (thanks to osprey), sandeels, freshwater pearl mussels,.

### **Butterflies:**

Small white, green-veined white, red admiral, small tortoiseshell, small pearl-bordered fritillary.

### **Moths:**

Six spot burnet, northern eggar (caterpillar), magpie, garden tiger (caterpillars), dark arches (Liz).

### **Dragonfly:**

Golden ringed, small red damselfly.

### **(Special) flowers:**

Twinflower, one-flowered wintergreen, common wintergreen, creeping ladies' tresses, lesser twayblade, butterwort, sundews, heath spotted orchid, northern marsh orchid, fragrant orchid, slender St. John's wort, monkeyflower, moss campion (somewhat withered!), scotch lovage, frog orchid, Scottish primrose and Grass of Parnassus (not in bloom, sadly), lesser butterfly orchid, globeflower, chickweed wintergreen (not in bloom), yellow pimpernel, royal fern.

## **Robin Noble, December 2006**