

The Travelling Naturalist



AIGAS FIELD CENTRE

Scottish Highlands

**Sat 29th September - Sat 6th October
2007**

Trip Report

Aigas House, Grounds and Forest

Sunday 30 September

Philip Knott

Objective: To explore the Aigas surroundings for a gentle start to the week

Party: 9 Travelling Naturalists, Robin Noble and Philip Knott

Weather: Overcast, but fairly calm and mild

The day started with a welcome and a talk by Sir John Lister-Kaye OBE, who founded Aigas Field Centre back in 1976. However, with the weather looking so good, it seemed a shame to be sat indoors and so the talk was curtailed. The field activities started with a walk around the Loch, Cuil na Caillich, our very own freshwater loch. The loch is stocked with Rainbow and Brown Trout, as well as FOUR European Beavers! These nocturnal creatures were all asleep though, but we did see plenty of evidence of their activities, and we discussed the pros and cons of their potential re-introduction.

On the walk we could see and hear a lot of birds flitting about the tree tops, including Goldcrest, Redpoll, Siskin, Bullfinch and a whole array of commoner tits and finches. We also looked around at the vegetation, discussing forestry, bracken, grazing and muir burn. It was amazing to think that 25 years ago the hill behind the loch was overgrazed heather moor. We also examined the value of deadwood, spying many woodpecker holes and standing dead trees. In the grounds we also caught sight of a Treecreeper, very elusive but very common in these rich lichen and moss covered forests.

After a buffet lunch down at the house we went up into the Aigas Forest, a very important refuge for wildlife. It is currently owned by the Forestry Commission but Aigas is having a big say in how it will be managed to the benefit of wildlife, including Pinewood specialists such as Pine Marten, Wildcat and Crested Tit. After driving up the track we unloaded at (nearly) the top of the hill. After a walk along a ride or two we heard several Crossbills, but couldn't quite see them! Phil also heard a Crested Tit way off. Once we had got to the top we were rewarded with fine views over towards the hills of Strathfarrar. We could see a couple of Stags through the telescope and heard several bellowing away. On the walk down we caught sight of a few Meadow Pipits and a very obliging party of Common Crossbills, posing for a view in the scope. A large raptor flew over as well, scaring things away. Was it a Buzzard, or a Goshawk? Not sure! Back for tea at 4.30pm.

Species List:

Treecreeper
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Robin
Redpoll
Siskin
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Large Raptor

The Black Isle

Monday 1 October 2007

Phil Knott

Objective: To explore as much of the Black Isle as possible, trying to see as much wildlife as we can.

Party: 9 Travelling Naturalists, Robin Noble and Phil Knott

Weather: Overcast and windy at first, sunny later. Mild.

After Robin has briefed us all for the day we headed out in the Aigas minibus. Our first destination was the north shore of the Beaully Firth, a site which is internationally protected for its marine life. 5 Bar-tailed Godwits welcomed us to Redcastle, along with Curlew and Oystercatcher. After a brief scan under the Kessock Bridge we headed north through the back roads of the Black Isle.

Heading down through Avoch and Fortrose, we soon came out at Chanonry Point. This headland juts out deep into the Inverness Firth, and allows closer views of seabirds flying past. We soon picked up Eider, Red-breasted Merganser and Turnstone once we sheltered from the wind! Other birds included Guillemot, Razorbill and Gannet. No dolphins but plenty of Common and Grey Seals.

We lunched at Cromarty, the historic town with its wonderful architecture. Robin also told us of Hugh Miller, the famous geologist. By now the sun had broken out and from the top ridge of the Black Isle we could see for miles in all directions. After a short stroll we all got back on board for a short trip down to the RSPB reserve at Udale Bay.

When we got out we could see why it is so heavily protected, as hundreds of birds were gathered close in front of the hide. We spent 40 minutes in the hide, gaining breathtaking views of Teal, Wigeon, Redshank, Knot, Godwits and Curlew. The light was truly superb and everyone was clearly delighted.

We headed back over the top of the Black Isle, disappointed that we hadn't seen a Red Kite, only several Buzzards! Lots and lots of back roads – the views would have to wait for later!

We headed back to Aigas happy, clearly buoyed by the spectacles of the afternoon.

Species List:

Shag
Cormorant
Grey Heron
Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Teal
Eider
Red-breasted Merganser
Lapwing
Bar-tailed Godwit
Knot
Dunlin
Black-tailed Godwit
Guillemot
Razorbill
Common Gull
Black-headed Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Gannet
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Pied Wagtail
Hooded Crow
Linnet
Chaffinch
Goldfinch
Yellowhammer
Oystercatcher
Wigeon
Lapwing
Herring Gull
Turnstone
Lapwing
Redshank
Curlew
Buzzard

Strathconon

Tuesday 2 October

Philip Knott

Objective: To explore one of the Highlands most ruggedly beautiful glens.

Party: 9 Travelling Naturalists, Robin Noble and Phil Knott

Weather: Mostly cloudy, not cold.

The weather has to be dry for Strathconon to work out, and today it was, so we headed out with much optimism. Driving out through Muir of Ord and past Glen Ord Malt Whisky distillery we were soon in Strathconon, a former glacial valley. We followed the River Conon up for a long way, past some of the best Salmon fishing grounds in all of Scotland. On the way up we passed 3 Hydro-electric dams and lots of intensive forestry, and we talked about all the conflicts in land-use found in these parts.

Our first stop was at Loch Meig, surrounded by thick forest. Here we picked out Mallard, Meadow Pipit and Buzzard, along with 4 Grey Herons standing together. We moved on up past Scatwell and Strathconon House, owned by the creator of Lego, just as the Glen really started to open up. We spied a few deer on the hillside, but it wasn't until we stopped that we realised just how many there were around us. Stags were bellowing from every hill top, either with a group of hinds, or without. The silhouettes on the skyline were enigmatic, just as the next thing we spotted was! A young Golden Eagle was perched on top of a nearby hill, perhaps at 2/3 of a mile distance. Recognisable by size and profile, it soon took off and flew around above us, spiralling higher and higher on the updraft of the south-westerly wind. Soon it was gone, and we drove up to the top loch to eat our lunch amid spectacular scenery. A Buzzard flew around and Mallards were on the Loch. On the way down we stopped at a freshwater stream, and very quickly had stunning scope views of a singing Dipper, and a pair of Stonechats.

To complete our day we took a walk up Glen Meanie, in an area of restructured forestry. Here we seen many more stags, stonechats and brief views of two Golden Eagles at the end of the Glen. A Kestrel and a flight of Golden Plover also put in an appearance. Classic Scotland at a wonderful time of year. Back home via a scenic route over the Meig Dam for afternoon tea at 4.30pm.

Species List:

Golden Plover
Golden Eagle
Kestrel
Buzzard
Stonechat
Dipper
Meadow Pipit
Mistle Thrush
Red Deer
Grey Heron

Speyside

Tuesday 3 October

Philip Knott

Objective: To explore some of Scotland's most famous habitats in search of wildlife

Party: 9 Travelling Naturalists, Robin Noble and Phil Knott

Weather: Mostly overcast but a high cloud base

We started the day with a long drive – all the way to Insh Marshes RSPB at the far side of Speyside. After a brief stop in Kingussie we met up with Pete Moore and 2 RSPB residential volunteers for a tour of the hides, and talks about management of the marsh, its importance and of course, Aspen trees! The marsh itself was quiet, a few Buzzards, Mallard, Heron were the slim pickings. A Roe Deer was a nice bonus. Distantly, Phil picked out 3 Red Kites, a rare bird at the reserve, and ironic since we spent an entire day exploring the Black Isle – their home! We lunched at the site as well, picking up several Long-tailed Tit and Bullfinch before heading east into the Pinewoods.

After lunch we drove along past Insh and Aviemore and into the Glen More forest park. Here we stopped at the Reindeer centre and took a walk up the hill, for a circular walk into the pass of Ryvoan. This is one of the best remnants of true Pinewood we have left in Britain. Once we were past the Forestry we found Granny Pines, ancient Birches and Willows and rare plants like Juniper (and for Scotland) Holly. Little birds flitted everywhere, including numerous Crested Tit, Goldcrest and Siskin. Several troupes of Crossbill flew about, many probably Scottish Crossbills, our only endemic species. Other birds included numerous Coal Tit and Redpoll, with evidence of mammals too, Squirrel cones, Pine Marten scats, oh and Wasps!! No one was hurt thankfully. It was a lovely walk, more reminiscent of Scandinavia than Scotland, especially with the peaks of the Cairngorms showing so well.

We headed back to Aigas happy at our day, and grateful of the weather.

Species List:

Roe Deer
Crested Tit
Crossbill
Redpoll
Siskin
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Coal Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Robin
Wren
Blackbird
Redwing
Hoodie
Grey Heron
Mallard
Buzzard
Bullfinch
Meadow Pipit
Mallard
Red Kite
Goldcrest
Trecreeper
Wasps!
Scots Pine
Goat Willow
Silver Birch
Juniper
Holly
Blaeberry
Heather
Cowberry

West Coast

October 4 2007

Mitch Werndly

Objective: To see as many wild goodies as possible and to take in some of the brilliant scenery too.

Party: 8 Travelling Naturalists members, Robin Noble and me, Mike Werndly.

Weather: Changeable

We started the day after a interesting briefing from Robin in the library and then we were on our way westward towards the west coast. Our first stop was of a loo variety at the river Backwater lavatories, a lovely little stop which is surprisingly good for wildilfe. We did have a quick look around the river for dipper

and grey wagtail, but drew a blank unfortunately. After all were relieved, we headed west again on the main road to Ullapool.

We headed off toward Little Loch Broom and to our first major stop, Dundonald. The only thing of note there were a few red-breasted mergansers, a female eider and some shags. Soon we headed off to Gruinard Island, where a pair of white tailed sea-eagles have nested for the last couple of years. This species became extinct in the UK in 1918 due to persecution by man (the last albino female being shot on Shetland),but the species was re-introduced in 1975. Today we have about thirty pairs in the Highlands and 2005 proved to be their most successful breeding year ever in the UK,with twenty four young raised. We saw a lone brown plumaged juvenile sitting on the rocks and a white headed adult actually catch a fish on the sea. We also spotted a couple of gannets, two black guillemots, eiders and a party of eleven black throated divers in winter plumages. We had some lunch and a cuppa here as its always a good spot for some wildlife watching.

Our next stop was to Loch Ewe, a sea loch some ren miles away. This great little loch always seems to turn something up, but nothing of note was on show that afternoon, so we headed straight to Shildaig. Shildaig means herring harbour in old Norse and must have been quite a thriving little port in the dim and distant past, but today there were just a few grey wagtails, little grebes (or dabchicks), grey heron, eider and oystercatchers. After westerly gails, there's a good chance that something will be blown into this small sheltered cove, but as it had been relatively calm over the past view days, not too much was on offer.

The twelve mile long Loch Maree, one of the most beautiful lochs in the Highlands was next on the itinery.It's home to about 6% of the UK population of black throated divers. We stopped briefly for some pictures and a scan for eagles and then heading towards Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve, Scotland's first, which was set up 1951 and comprises 48 square kilometers of remnant Caledonian pine forest and mountainous habitats.

Species list:

Red-breasted merganser
Eider
Sea Eagle
Black throated diver
Gannet
Balck Guillemot
Grey wagtail
Little Grebe

Strathfarrar

Friday 5 October

Michael Werndly

Objective: To observe the wonderful wildlife of Strathfarrar

Party : 8 Travelling Naturalist party members, plus myself.

Weather: **Changeable**

We started the day with a brief briefing from myself in the library and then we were straight out into the wilds of the Scottish Highlands! Today we headed not so far away,(well, just ten minutes up the road really), to Strathfarrar. Strathfarrar used to be a National Nature Reserve up until 2001, but due to some problems with access to the public, this status was taken away. We went in through the gates and were soon driving along a belt of silver birch woodland which stretches along the river Farrar. This woodland is usually good for roe deer, but today our luck was sadly lacking. We did see some chaffinches and some Mistle thrushes however.

Finally we came out into an area of Caledonian pine forrst.This habitat type is very rare in Scotland, and was really the climax vegetation after the last ice age, which ended some ten thousand years ago. This woodland type isn't comprised of Scots pine alone , but an array of many species including hazel, birch, oak, alder, aspen and elm. The Caledonian pine forest covered about 20% of Scotland's land area, but now due to deforestation by man, only covers 1% of its former range. The largest of these areas are in Abernethy in Spey side and Glen Affric.

We headed up the Strath past this area, as we had our minds set on bagging some golden eagles, that most iconic bird of the Scottish Highlands. We stopped at several places and scanned and stopping by the river we spotted three cygnet whooper swans and a couple of adults. This bird is an occasional breeding species in Scotland and this year they must have liked the look of Scotland more than Iceland. At least these young birds wouldn't have to go through the rigors of migration this autumn! We also saw a couple a stonechats perching on some heather along the road.

We still needed to see our star bird, the golden eagle, so we stopped at an area where we have seen them on occasion. As soon as we got out of the bus we could hear the roaring of the red deer stags, which are rutting their stuff at this time of the year. Luck was on our side with regard to the eagles, and a superb adult golden eagle took flight and flew towards the bus. It soared majestically over us and gave many the opportunity to observe this elusive bird at close quarters and its 2.2 metre wingspan. The golden eagle does particularly well in the UK, which has 20% of the European population (c 420 breeding pairs), the western part of the Highlands has a particularly high density because of sheep, which usually die en masse during the winter and thus provide ample carrion to sustain the population over the winter.

We headed back to the Caledonian pine forest area in the hope of a Highland specialty or two. We had lunch by the road near the Aigas big green one (our van), and kept an eye on the trees. When we finished our sumptuous dining, we strolled down the road. Suddenly a crested tit started to call furiously from a Scots pine near the road. Many of us managed to see the bird as it fed busily around the tree. This species is insectivorous and as the Highlands are starting to get milder winters it appears that the forested tits range and population is set to expand significantly.

With some of the best the Highlands has to offer we headed out for afternoon tea.

Species list:

Chaffinch

Coal tit

Robin

Stonechat

Mistle Thrush

Golden Eagle

Red Deer

Whooper Swan

Crested Tit