

Sutherland

Saturday 16 - 23 June 2007

Trip Report

Leader

Robin Noble

Saturday 16 June

Today was grey and cold, and in the morning I was dogged by delays, but eventually I had picked everyone up, and packed their luggage into the minibus. Leaving Inverness, we headed northwards and had lunch at Foulis Ferry on the shore of the Cromarty Firth; there were common seals hauled out close by. We stopped next under the ruins of Skelbo Castle on the shores of Loch Fleet, and then again on the Mound, at its head: here there were lots of shelduck, as well as mergansers, but virtually no young at all, which was rather strange. Reaching Golspie we diverted for a walk in the Balblair Wood, where we looked at some rather special flowers: Common wintergreen, one-flowered wintergreen and twinflower. All were blooming nicely. It was a pleasant run from here along the shore of the North Sea to Helmsdale and our hotel for the first two nights of the trip. The building is rather splendid, (if slightly cool), the rooms comfy and the food good, so we felt we were off to a good start.

Sunday 17 June

Well, it was somewhat misty and damp, but it did not prevent us from doing what we intended; back-tracking slightly, we left the main road for the lovely side road up into Glen Loth, now empty of habitation but with a number of archaeological sites which make it obvious that it was well populated in prehistoric times. We drove slowly up the wee road, stopping at times to look around; the corner by the bridge over Craggie Water gave us lots of fragrant orchid, and there were red deer in evidence all over the place—we had some very good views. Joining the “main” road up the River Helmsdale, we wended our way further north, into the “Flow Country” proper, stopping for lunch with distant views over Loch Lucy. At Forsinard we walked the Dubh Lochan Trail, exploring the intricacies of the pool systems but seeing virtually no birds, so we carried on slowly up the road towards Forsinain, where golden plover and dunlin were very well seen. We also saw a splendid male Hen Harrier at Auchentoul Farm, and a distant red-throated diver. There was a snipe in the river as we returned to base.

Monday 18 June

This day involved quite a lot of driving, initially returning upriver to Kinbrace; being the beginning of a new sporting week, there was a new (and very separate) species much in evidence along the way—the sporting tenants, getting ready to fish the river, parking their Range Rovers and occasionally getting in our way! It was a very nice day indeed, and we had splendid views as we slowly drove over the great expanse of central Sutherland via Loch Naver, Altnaharra, and Loch Hope. We had lunch overlooking Loch Naver, during which an osprey appeared, and there was another one at Mudale, much closer to us. We stopped for an easy walk under the ramparts of Ben Hope, (after visiting the remains of the nearby broch), and we had brilliant views of noisy redpolls on a decrepit holly bush. The walk took us down to the slow-running river, dark under lovely trees, a very beautiful and peaceful place, which just happened to be totally devoid of birds! Near the foot of Loch Hope, we rejoined the faster road and swept over the bare moors of A'Mhoine to the green oasis of Tongue and our new base, the Tongue Hotel. Here, another good meal rounded off a rather fine day.

Report

Tuesday 19 June

Today we again crossed the Kyle of Tongue and A'Mhoine before driving round the wild Loch Eriboll to Durness and Balnakiel where we walked the splendid long beaches and short green turf of Faraid Head. It was warm out of the wind, but pretty cool in it, and we had good views of the cliffs, where there were several puffins to be seen. There were few flowers in evidence, the result again of the late spring, but it was pleasant walking and the views were good. We had hoped for the whimbrel that often hang out here, but neither they nor any divers were to be seen. After a short look around the Craft Village, we returned through the remarkable and contrasting geology around Loch Eriboll.

Wednesday 20 June

We went off up to the moors behind Tongue, and then Loch Loyal, but they were pretty quiet, and the highlights were botanical: orchids, globeflower, chickweed wintergreen all growing close to the most amazing old birch tree, a double pollard of remarkable size and appearance. Then we returned to Tongue and took the quiet little road around the head of the Kyle. It was pretty grey, but still dry, and we climbed up to the substantial ruins of Dun na Maigh, an Iron-Age fort on a strong site. We had lunch after this, and then went slowly along the shore; we saw shelduck and ring plover. Then we set off to look around Melness and Talmine, crofting communities where orchids, (lesser butterfly, fragrant and northern marsh), were quite spectacular and in places the rock scenery was remarkable. The rain began soon, the wind got up, and in the end we gave up and returned early to base at the hotel!

Thursday 21 June

Midsummer Day, perhaps, but grey, misty and damp at first. We eventually managed to leave Tongue Hotel, after a very slow start, and crossed, once again, the Kyle and the bleak sweeps of A' Mhoine, before rounding Loch Eriboll. From Durness, we set off down the West Coast (our third coast of the holiday!), entering a most remarkable and rocky landscape. In something of a rush, we caught the little boat for Handa Island, and soon found ourselves walking the miles of boardwalk which extend across this very special island. We very soon had the best possible views of some snipe, and then were well and truly into the territory of the skuas-there were dozens, if not hundreds.

Perhaps not surprisingly, we saw no divers or grouse on this visit! It was damp at lunch, but the seabirds on the stack were good, and we soon had amazing views of one puffin. The perimeter walk was nice, there was thunder in the hills but not on us, and it was quite warm along the southern shore with its very tempting bays. (When waiting for the ferry back, I had a quick paddle and the water was freezing!) . After this, we made the quick run down to Kylesku in its dramatic setting, and soon found that the food here was even better than in our previous places.

Friday 22 June

On our last day, we slowly explored the complex coastline of my home territory, stopping at intervals to look about us. The hills were clear and the views good as we worked our way along.

The first section has deep, narrow, wooded glens, but it slowly opens out and we did a pleasant coastal walk to the very substantial ruins of the broch at Clachtoll. On the way, a small wetland gave us redshank and lapwing, the shore held the very rare oysterplant, there were wheatears around us, divers offshore, and while we were lunching, whimbrel on the rocks. We made another detour later, and sat in the sun above Loch Roe watching herons fishing and common seals cavorting. We wended our way slowly back to base, stopping at intervals, and there spent a very pleasant last evening, including what was, I think, the finest of many good meals during the trip. Another highlight was being referred to as "What'shisface" by one of the dear group with whom I had been all week!

SPECIES CHECKLIST

BIRDS (seen and heard)

Red-throated diver
Black-throated diver
Fulmar gannet cormorant
Shag
Grey heron
Mute swan
Greylag goose
Canada goose
Shelduck
Teal
Mallard
Eider
Red-breasted merganser
Osprey
Hen harrier
Buzzard
Kestrel
Merlin
Pheasant
Oystercatcher
Lapwing
Golden plover
Ringed plover
Whimbrel
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank (heard but not seen)
Common sandpiper
Common snipe
Dunlin
Great skua
Arctic skua
Common gull
Herring gull
Lesser black backed gull
Great black-backed gull
Black-headed gull
Kittiwake
Common tern
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black guillemot
Puffin
Rock dove
Wood pigeon
Collared dove
Cuckoo
Tawny owl
Skylark
Sand martin
Swallow
House martin
Pied wagtail
Grey wagtail
Meadow pipit
Rock pipit
Dipper
Wren

Duncock
Blackbird
Song thrush
Mistle thrush
Robin
Whinchat
Stonechat
Wheatear
Sedge warbler
Willow warbler
Goldcrest
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded crow
Raven
Starling
Reed bunting (heard only)
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Lesser redpoll
Bullfinch
House sparrow

MAMMALS

Common seal; grey seal; porpoise; red deer; rabbit; one pine marten, sadly dead on road!

REPTILES

Common lizard (only seen by driver).

BUTTERFLIES

Common blue; red admiral; painted lady; dark green fritillary; meadow brown.

DRAGONFLIES

Golden ringed.

FLOWERS (main ones seen)

Twinflower; common wintergreen; one-flowered wintergreen; tormentil; heath bedstraw; white campion; red campion; thrift; ragged robin; cow parsley; lousewort; milkwort; butterwort; bog bean; bog cotton; sundew; oblong and round-leaved; smooth tare; bitter vetch; fragrant orchid; northern marsh orchid; heath spotted orchid and hybrids; primrose; cuckoo flower; heath speedwell; waterlily; dog rose; hawkweeds, etc!; cow wheat; lesser spearwort; bog asphodel; scotch lovage; roseroot; silverweed; field pansy; sea campion, wild thyme; (moss campion, not in bloom and ditto primula scotica); monkeyflower; scurvy grass; sea mayweed; marsh marigold; pignut; bell heather; cross-leaved heath; lesser butterfly orchid; woodrush; chickweed wintergreen; globeflower; kidney vetch; bird's foot trefoil; slender St John's wort; orache; marsh thistle; various eyebrights!; oysterplant; mountain everlasting; alpine ladies mantle; English stonecrop, white and red clover; creeping willow.

Robin Noble.

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