

Sutherland

Saturday 14 - Saturday 21 June 2008

Leaders:

Robin Noble

Trip Report

Saturday 14 June

Pick-ups seemed quick and easy. We needed lunch soon, and so stopped at Foulis Ferry, where a fine red kite made a quick appearance. Then we travelled through the rich agricultural landscape to the Dornoch Firth where we entered Sutherland, and to Loch Fleet where we had good views of basking common seals, eider duck and cormorants. Further up the loch were shelduck families, with very careless parents (small wonder they lose their young!), and lots more at The Mound, where there were also mallard and curlew. Next we went to Balblair Wood, where we found the twinflower, looking not too bad considering someone had been driving a tracked vehicle through it! Then the more ordinary pyrola, and, last of all, the one-flowered wintergreen, St. Olaf's candlestick, in newly emerging bloom. With all the rarities seen, we headed up the road to Helmsdale, and Navidale House Hotel, reached through a maze of cones on the new bit of road, where we eventually settled in to our home for the next two nights.

Sunday 15 June

It was grey, cold and windy all day, with showers all around us, but never actually getting us, which meant that we had a reasonable day; we drove back south very briefly, and then turned up into the very different world of the narrow Glen Loth; we looked across the burn to the imposing ruins of the broch, an Iron Age tower, one of many which we were to see during the week. There was a quick, excellent view of a common sandpiper at the bridge by the standing stones, and, later, excellent views of the striking hills on the Caithness border. The flowers included butterwort in good bloom, and water avens, and we saw a single hind before we stopped at the Craggie bridge, where there were a few emerging (very late!) fragrant orchids. We then joined the "main" road up the famous Strath of Kildonan, and saw a few wheatear and curlew. We had lunch with a good view over part of the Flow Country, distant, complex, patterned bogs which form one of the wildest landscapes in Britain. Further up, at Forsinard, we did a walk around the Dubh Lochan trail; the pools were the driest I have known, and there were no birds! After a stop at the RSPB centre, we travelled on up the road towards Forsinain; again there were few birds but there were stags in velvet close to the road. On the way back to an excellent meal, we stopped by the river, where there were lots of swallows, house- and sand-martins, and we did see a cuckoo.

Monday 16 June

Things got better, at first brighter, and then warmer. Today we did the long trek west and north, across the huge expanse of the emptiest County in Britain. There were fishers now on the Helmsdale River, some sandpipers, and we heard a greenshank. We turned into new country at Kinbrace and stopped to photograph the great sweeps of land, and listen to the music of the

curlews; there was a distant red-throated diver. There were odd stags about, and, further on, three yearlings, and a yeld hind, at the road. We drove slowly up the River Naver, looking for dippers, which we did not see, but by the loch, there were more cuckoos, and redpolls all around. We had lunch, with views of the remote settlement of Altnaharra, and a "hut-circle", or Bronze-Age round house. A stop above duckponds, showed us mallard and teal, and produced some tiny flowers, including moonwort. Further on, across the rather bleak moor, Loch Meadie gave us three splendid black-throated divers in full summer plumage (never mind wondering what sort of ménage it is, just look at that patterning on the back!). It was getting misty as we descended towards another broch, the imposing Dun Dornagil. We did a short walk to Cashel Dhu, and the lovely, deep, calm, dark river: here we had greenshank, teal, a few new flowers, and tea! We were glad to reach the hospitable rooms of the Tongue Hotel, and had a splendid supper.

Tuesday 17 June

A funny day: breezy, grey, sometimes muggy, then cool and damp, very Highland! We drove over the huge bog of A'Mhoine, and round Loch Eriboll, to reach Durness, and walk out along the beaches and machair of Faraid Head; the monkeyflower below the old house, was lovely but there were few birds along the great stretch of sand. The tide was dropping, and there were divers, (including a great northern in winter plumage) but very far out. Despite the relative lack of wildlife, it was a good walk, with distant views over the sea, and complex inland landscape. We stopped at the Craft Village, and I was, very kindly, treated to a good coffee in the excellent bookshop/tearoom. On the way back, we stopped to look at an alpine, limestone specialist, the lovely mountain avens, here growing close to the road.

Wednesday 18 June

A more local day; we crossed the Causeway across the Kyle of Tongue, where there were drake eider, ringed plover, and lots of shags. We followed the old road around the inlet, to Kinloch; there were more plovers, greylag with young, and sandpipers with young, too. At the head of the Kyle, we climbed up to the well-preserved, Iron Age fort of Dun na Maigh, which also gave us wonderful views of the peaks of Ben Loyal. We returned to Tongue, and went up over the moor towards Loch Loyal, seeing little apart from what must have been a young greenshank on its own in a reedy loch. The loch looked dull in the poor light, so we turned back and went towards the coast. At Melness and Talmine there were lots of orchids: northern marsh, lesser butterfly, fragrant, as well as kidney vetch. We went as far as the astonishing rocks of Port Vasco, where there was some late spring squill, sky-blue against the grey rock and sea.

Thursday 19 June

We said goodbye to the Tongue Hotel, and went round to Balnakiel, where we walked over the golf course; there had been lots of primula scotica in bloom, but it was all over. There were, however, lovely yellow field pansies, and yellow saxifrage almost out. The mountain avens had been in good bloom here, too, and we eventually found a couple of late flowers; it is a lovely heathland, with lots of flowers and gulls, and amazing larksong, as well as good views over the mouth of the Kyle and Faraid Head. We had lunch overlooking the Kyle, and then headed up the River Dionard, into impressively wild country; we then diverted, in mist and rain, down to Sheigra and Oldshoremore, but we did see one lovely golden plover by the road. We later stopped at Laxford and Scourie,

where there were three dunlin, ringed plovers and eider. We drove in rain from here to the welcoming Kylesku Hotel.

Friday 20 June

Colder still, with sleet showers! We actually managed to dodge the worst of them, and did the circuit of the mad little coast road, stopping at intervals to take pictures and look about. At Oldany, we went for an easy wander down to the shore, where the thrift was beautiful, and there actually were butterflies and dragonflies, as well as basking seals on the rocks. Clashnessie Bay was looking lovely, and Audrey saw a porpoise. At Clachtoll, again overlooking sandy beaches, we walked along the coast, visited the oysterplant in its protective cage, and then went past the small wetland where some waders lurked. We walked to the imposing ruins of the great broch, and admired its extensive ramparts, before being caught in a shower on the way back. Achmelvich was quiet, and the machair very short of flowers, but this was more than made up for by the wonderful black-throated divers on Loch Assynt. We had tea a little further on, but gave up on another short walk as a big shower headed for us-so we headed for the hotel, and another nice evening with an splendid meal. Late sun gave us wonderful lights and views over the sealochs and mountains, and rounded off our week spent in the great, empty County of Sutherland.

Species seen

Birds

Pheasant
Greylag goose
Mute swan
Shelduck and ducklings
Wigeon
Mallard and ducklings
Teal
Eider and ducklings
Red-throated diver
Black-throated diver
Great northern diver
Fulmar
Heron
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Kestrel
Merlin
Red kite
Sparrowhawk
Buzzard
Oystercatcher
Lapwing and chicks
Golden plover
Ringed plover and young
Common snipe
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank including juvenile
Common sandpiper and chicks
Dunlin

Common gull
Herring gull
Lesser black-backed gull
Great black-backed gull
Black-headed gull
Kittiwake
Sandwich tern
Common tern
Arctic tern
Great skua
Arctic skua
Guillemot
Razorbill
Black guillemot
Puffin
Rock dove
Wood pigeon
Collared dove
Cuckoo
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion crow
Hooded crow
Raven
Great tit
Blue tit
Sand martin
Swallow
House martin
Skylark
Willow warbler
Chiffchaff
Blackcap
Goldcrest
Wren
Starling
Blackbird
Song thrush
Mistle thrush
Robin
Stonechat
Wheatear
House sparrow
Grey wagtail
Pied wagtail
Meadow pipit
Rock pipit
Chaffinch
Siskin
Lesser redpoll
Twite

Mammals

Common seal
Harbour porpoise
Red deer
Roe deer

Rabbit

Fish

Brown Trout

Butterflies

Green-veined white, common blue

Moths

Northern eggar (caterpillar)

Dragonflies

Common goldenring

Other insects

Green tiger beetle
devil's coach horse

Other taxa

Beadlet anemone

Flowers (mostly in bloom): (the usual haphazard list!).

Lousewort, milkwort, butterwort, greater and lesser stitchwort, heath bedstraw, tormentil, heath speedwell, germander speedwell, broom, gorse, hawthorn, twinflower, one flowered wintergreen, common wintergreen, bell heather, cotton grass, water avens, woodrush, rowan, ladies' smock, herb Robert, fragrant orchid, heath spotted orchid, bogbean, sundew, cow parsley, pignut, thrift, red campion, white clover, ox-eye daisy, bird's foot trefoil, foxglove, marsh thistle, bluebell, primrose, yellow pimpernel, cow wheat, wild thyme, spearwort, water forgetmenot, hawkweeds(!), biting stonecrop, dove's foot cranesbill, bog asphodel, water lily, marsh marigold, cross-leaved heath, roseroot, sea campion, scotch lovage, sea mayweed, silverweed, moss campion, monkeyflower, yellow iris, daisy, buttercup, mountain avens, ladies' bedstraw, eyebrights(!), kidney vetch, spring squill, wild carrot, moonwort, common mouse-ear, yellow sow thistle, blood-drop emlets, northern marsh orchid, lesser butterfly orchid, common ladies' mantle, Scottish primrose, field pansy, mountain everlasting, common violet, purging flax, yellow rattle, yellow mountain saxifrage, tufted and bush vetch, English stonecrop, oysterplant, ragged robin, pennywort.

Robin Noble, December 2008

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