

Aigas Short Break

Monday 30 March – Friday 3 April 2009

Trip Report

Leaders:

Robin Noble, Neil Arnold, Rebecca Nason & Phil Harris

Introduction

The Travelling Naturalist would like to thank you all for joining us on what was quite an exceptional 'short wildlife break' at Aigas. Not only were we blessed with mild and often sunny Spring weather for the whole 3 days, but we were lucky enough to encounter a range of wonderful Scottish specialities from mammals to birds. The success rate of wildlife sightings on this trip was very high and this of course is something which one cannot predict in advance, for nature will not 'come to heal' and this is the way of course, that it should remain. Unpredictability is part of the fun and keeps us vigilant and hungry for nature's wonders. However we were in 'luck' on this trip as incredible sightings from Pine Martins to Capercaillie to Otters all showing themselves well, allowing good views for all. From late nights in the hides to our exceptionally early rise for the Capercaillie watch, the extra efforts paid off handsomely and have no doubt left wonderful memories etched in our minds forever.

A large part of the enjoyment of this 'reunion' trip, with many of you returning to us again after previous Travelling Naturalist wildlife holidays, was the extremely pleasant and enjoyable experience which is 'Aigas'. From the hearty Scottish meals and warm, friendly hospitality at the attractive Aigas 'home', to the organisation and 'fieldcraft' skills shown by the various Aigas & Travelling Naturalist staff members, all these factors helped play a key role in making this trip such a successful one.

Corrimony and Aigas

Tuesday 31 March 2009

Donald Shields

Objective: To view a local black grouse lek before heading back to Aigas to learn something of the history of the highland landscape.

Who: The Travelling Naturalist group, the TN leaders, Phil Knott and myself

Weather: Somewhat worrying to begin with, but brightening up to a lovely day.

The day started early, or should I say reasonably early. While this could be seen as a mere warm up before the gargantuan task that awaited in just two days of raising ones head for 4am, to me it still felt early. We travelled up Strathglass, (flushing a few woodcock off the road as we went,) towards Corrimony; an RSPB reserve that has been very successful in helping the local population of black grouse.

We met Dan Tomes, the reserve manager, at the road end and in our buses headed up the private road, through the pinewoods and out onto the moor edge where one of the black grouse leks are situated. The buses make a brilliant hide and they showed little indication that they were aware of our presence as they pranced about. Here we saw about eight males (black cocks,) and one female (grey hen,) the presence of the rather harried looking hen meant that we got superb views of all the males displaying and scrapping for all they were worth. As they were all spread out across the lek, everyone got good views by the time we moved on to the second lek. Here we were able to get out the buses and look all around us, from the

males at the next lek to the little lochan on the moor. We also saw some curlew and lapwing on the ground by the lek as well. Dan told us about the work the RSPB had been doing here over the past twelve years and what the future plans are.

Returning to Aigas, everyone filled up on a hearty breakfast before heading up to our new education facility; The Magnus House. Here the rest of the morning was spent learning about the state of the highland landscape and how both natural and un-natural forces have shaped it. This was started by Sir John Lister-Kaye, with special emphasis on natural capital and the Balmorality epoch and concluded by Travelling Naturalist leader Robin Noble. The list showing numbers of animals who were considered vermin that had been killed in one glen over a three year period was staggering and it is amazing to think that this land could support so much.

After a superb buffet lunch provided by Lady Lucy, the group split in two. Phil led one group and I led the other around the Aigas loch and grounds. Special emphasis was put on the beavers that we have here and the effects of their presence. We discussed the re-introduction in Knapdale and some of the contentious issues and conflicts arising from it. It certainly is a very interesting time just now. We also took in part of our archaeology trail and tree-top hide before heading back down to the common room for a spot of afternoon tea.

Species List

Woodcock	Siskin
Blackbird	Blue tit
Black grouse	Great tit
Meadow pipit	Coal tit
Skylark	Duncock
Grey Heron	Hooded crow
Mallard	Carrion crow
Curlew	Rook
Lapwing	Buzzard

Black Isle Day

Wednesday 1 April

Gareth Davies

Objective: To find an otter! To see a dolphin! To explore the Black Isle, discovering as much wildlife on the way as possible!

Party: 31 Travelling Naturalist guests, Robin Noble, Ian, Donald, Phil and myself.

Weather: Sunny, still and fantastic!

The day started well and in fine fettle the convoy of explorers set off to see what such a beautiful, fine and warm day might offer. We first headed towards Redcastle and before we even got there we had sighted a Buzzard being mobbed by crows over a field and some Common seals basking in the distance on the Beauly firth along with some Shelduck in the water! At Redcastle we piled out of the buses and set up scopes for the first time, getting good early views of Redshank, Hooper swans and Oystercatchers and a few lucky ones caught a glimpse of a Grey wagtail in the foreground!

From here we headed up the road towards North Kessock (catching what was to be the first of many Red kite sightings above us) and stopped under the Kessock Bridge, here we caught sight of a number of birds, and after not too long got what we were after. 2 Otter, probably a bitch with an older pup, were posing on one of the bridge supports. We played hide and seek with them between the uprights for some time catching fine sunlit views of them as they played in the water. Well satisfied we moved on again, back

through Charleston and past Munloch bay and up through the farmland. It was on this winding country road that a short stop to gain a glimpse of a raptor overhead turned into a protracted and awe-inspiring sight of 5 Red kites, a Sparrowhawk, several Buzzards and gulls spiralling and circling and jostling for position in a stately tower of flight. As if this was not enough, in the gorse below 2 Linnet and 2 Yellowhammer; a male and female, posed in the sunlight for us giving everyone a clear sight of their beautiful markings.

We were well into the heart of the Black Isle by now. The Black Isle is not actually an island, but is a peninsula surrounded by three firths: the Beaulie Firth, Moray Firth and Cromarty Firth. There are several possible reasons as to where it got its name. The isle is low-lying and in winter when all the surrounding peaks are covered in snow, the black isle remains snow-less and looks much darker. There is a shrine to St Duthac in Tain, just north of the Black Isle, and pilgrims to his shrine used to cross over the isle to get to it. It therefore became known as *Eilean Dubhaich* (gaelic for St Duthac's Isle) which became confused with *Eilean Dubh* (black isle) over time. Another reason is that the Eathie ridge is a ridge of black peat running across the Black Isle.

The next stop, and our lunch stop, was at Chanonry point, where we were on the search for dolphins. The dolphins here are the largest bottlenose dolphins in the world, with the largest up to 4m long! Luckily we spotted a pair of dolphins out by a buoy. It was a 14 year old mother called Kesslet and her 14month old calf, Charlie, calming swimming around and, amazingly, before long they had come so close as to almost touch them! We were in for the treat of a lifetime as the displayed right next to shore, so close you could hear them as they shot salt water from their blowholes. The calf following it's mother so close as to touch, copying everything she did, lunches were abandoned as all rushed down to get a glimpse that one would imagine impossible from land. As if this was not enough Long-tailed ducks, Red-throated divers, Eider duck, Guillemot and Knot speckled our view of this unbelievably still water, dappled in the sunlight.

So after lunches were reclaimed and hot drinks drunk, we set off along the coast road spotting Mistle thrush, Skylark, Fieldfare and a Kestrel on the way. A brief stop in Cromarty gave us a Razorbill before we headed on to Udale bay, a large and locally famous RSPB reserve of mudflats. And given the success so far need I even say that we were fortunate again; countless Curlew lined the mud along with Bar-tailed godwit and Redshank, oh and a Weasel ran along side the road quickly. And just to top it off, a quick stop at Newhall point just up the road gave us a fine view of a Red-breasted merganser.

And so we set off back to Aigas with Skylarks climbing into the sky on either side of us and Lapwing in the fields. And just in case the 18 Red kites we saw this day had not sated the appetite for raptors, a quick stop on the way back gave us a stunning view of the local Peregrine falcon. That's quite enough for one day, so it was back for tea and cakes!

Species List:

Pheasant	Common gull	Starling
Rook	Herring gull	Linnet
Buzzard	Great Black-backed gull	Yellowhammer
Hooded Crow	Carrion Crow	Sparrowhawk
Wood pigeon	Red-breasted merganser	Turnstone
Shelduck	Heron	Duncock
Curlew	Cormorant	Song thrush
Oystercatcher	Siskin	Greenfinch
Whooper swan	Blackbird	Skylark
Pink-footed goose	Chaffinch	House sparrow
Grey Wagtail	Wigeon	Long-tailed duck
Redshank	Mute swan	Red-throated diver
Mallard	Goldeneye	Eider duck
Black-headed gull	Red kite	Guillemot

Knot
Mistle thrush
Fieldfare
Kestrel
Razorbill
Teal
Bar-tailed godwit
Lapwing
Peregrine falcon

Mammals

Otter
Bottle-nose dolphin
Weasel
Common seal

Flora

Gorse
Scurvy grass
Opposite Leaved Golden
Saxifrage
Lesser Celandine
Blackthorn
Primrose
Scots Pine
Sitka Spruce
Larch
Daffodil
Wood Anemone
Butterbur
Broom
Red Dead Nettle
Shepherds Purse
Coltsfoot
Pampas Grass

Speyside

Thursday 2 April

Elspeth Ingleby

Objective: To see a Capercaillie lek and to explore Speyside's woodland and wetland habitats and their associated fauna and flora.

Party; 31 Travelling Naturalist guests, Robin Noble, Ian Sargent, Phil Knott, Elspeth Ingleby

Weather; A glorious clear day, although bitterly cold in the early morning

Leaving a sleepy Aigas at 4am, driving off into the chilly hours before dawn, we headed south down the A9, and arrived at Abernethy just as the sky was beginning to lighten. We queued quietly outside the Loch Garten osprey hide, our goal for this early morning rise being a glimpse of the spectacular and elusive Capercaillie in full lekking mode.

Fortunately, a lekking site has been established at the Loch Garten reserve, almost underneath the famous osprey nest, so we patiently waited for the so-called 'horse of the woods,' to make an appearance. As the sun came up we were treated to a stunning view of the resident female osprey, EJ, perching near the nest and silhouetted against the pink sky, plus two roe deer picking their way through the forest. Shortly after, a capercaillie appeared briefly and distantly, visible only from the smaller forward hide. However, as people were being taken forward in small groups to see it, two other males were spotted from the main hide. Telescopes were soon lined up so everyone got a glimpse of the contenders strutting in and out of view behind some distant trees. We took a quick stroll towards Loch Mallachie to warm up a little and some of the group saw a Scottish crossbill perched atop a tree while the rest were appreciating a view of goldeneye on the placid Loch Garten. From here we headed to Aviemore for a hearty cooked breakfast, which, given the cold and early start, was more than welcome.

By the time we emerged, warm and stuffed, the sun had got to work and the temperature was far more pleasant. Taking the back road to Abernethy we saw a red squirrel just by the road, as well as curlew, meadow pipits, redwing and a great spotted woodpecker. We got out of the vans at Forest Lodge to take a walk through the Caledonian pine forest surrounded by the calls of the ubiquitous chaffinch plus lots of tits – coal, great and long-tailed tits were all spotted – and a lovely view of a pair of siskin. A small group who split off from the main party managed to get a good view of crested tits, much to the envy of everyone else! Driving to Carrbridge for lunch, there were flocks of greylag geese in the fields along with many feeding waders.

After lunch and hot drinks we drove north to the River Findhorn and followed its course up Strathearn. We then proceeded over the grouse moors where we got not only our first sighting this year of the migratory wheatear, but also some stunning views of both male and female red grouse, resplendent in the sunlight. Arriving at the RSPB reserve at Loch Ruthven, we were tripping over common toads on the path down to the loch side. On the loch we were lucky enough to see a pair of horned grebes (also known as Slavonian grebes) in their striking summer plumage and a pair of red-throated divers, with their peculiar upward pointing bill. Both pairs of birds obligingly sat on the water for extended periods to allow the whole group to get a good look through the scopes.

Heading home we saw a brown hare unsuccessfully trying to hide in the short grass and then got stuck in a traffic jam behind some very pregnant highland cows! Heading back up through Inverness there were vast skeins of pink-footed geese overhead flying south from the Beaully Firth. We arrived back at Aigas tired and slightly sunburnt, but sated after a wonderful day of wildlife watching!

Species List:

Capercaillie
Osprey
Goldeneye
Scottish crossbill
Tree creeper (heard only)
Common buzzard
Rook
Jackdaw
Chaffinch
Robin
Blackbird
Black-headed gull
Common gull
Lapwing
Oystercatcher (on a roof top!)
Pheasant
Pied wagtail
Curlew
Meadow pipits
Redwing
Starling
Great spotted woodpecker

Mammals

Roe deer
Red squirrel
Rabbit
Brown hare

Amphibians

Common toad

Flora

Scots pine
Blaeberry
Cowberry

Raven
Coal tit
Great tit
Siskin
Wood pigeon
Long tailed tit
Crested tit (some of group)
Sparrowhawk
Hooded crow
Greylag geese
Mallard
Mistle thrush
Grey wagtail
Wheatear
Red grouse
Horned grebe (Slavonian grebe)
Red throated diver
Reed bunting (caravel group)
Tufted duck
Red kite
Pink-footed geese
Grey heron

AIGAS – WILDLIFE CHECKLIST

KEY

Aigas	AIG
Black Isle and firths	BLK
Speyside	SPY

BIRDS

(Western) Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	Two cock birds Loch Garten
Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>	Two leks : one holding seven cock birds and a greyhen and another seventeen cock birds – Corrimony RSPB Reserve
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>	At least eight cock birds and one hen – Farr Road
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	One Loch Ruthven area
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	Widespread
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	Large flocks BLK
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	Very large flocks BLK
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Scattered groups BLK
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	Twenty Beaulay Firth
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Widespread BLK
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	Widespread BLK and SPY
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	A flock of c. fifty BLK
Eurasian (Common) Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Small flocks BLK
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Three Loch Ruthven area
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Some forty BLK
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Sixteen BLK
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Ten BLK and twelve SPY
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	A pair AIG
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Flocks BLK
Red-throated Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	Two Chanonry Point and two Loch Ruthven
Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	Two Loch Ruthven
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Common BLK and SPY
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Scattered records BLK
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Only at Chanonry Point
Common (Eurasian) Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	One BLK
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	One BLK and one Aigas Gorge
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	One BLK, one Loch Garten and one Aigas Gorge
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	Two AIG, seventeen BLK and one Loch Ruthven area.
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	One AIG and one BLK
Common (Eurasian) Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Common and widespread incl AIG
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Small flocks BLK
(Northern) Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Scattered records SPY and Loch Ruthven Area
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	One BLK
(Eurasian) Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	One heard Loch Garten – very early morning!
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	Seven Udale Bay BLK
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	Six Udale Bay BLK
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	Common in open country and mudflats
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	Small flocks BLK
(Ruddy) Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	A small flock BLK
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	Three Chanonry Point
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Common incl AIG
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Seven records of this migrant gull AIG,BLK,SPY

Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	A handful of records BLK
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Common Guillemot (Murre)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	One Chanonry Point
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	Six BLK
Rock Dove (Feral/Common Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	Several flocks, some of which resembled true Rock Doves
(Common) Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Scattered records in towns
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	One seen AIG
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	One seen AIG, heard every night
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Eurasian (Western) Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Northern (Common) Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	A handful of records AIG, BLK and Loch Ruthven
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Widespread incl AIG
(European) Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	Five birds Loch Garten
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Long-tailed (Bush) Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Noted AIG and SP
(Eurasian) Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Widespread
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Common in conifer forests incl AIG
(Winter) Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Common incl AIG
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	At AIG and SPY
Common (European) Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Common incl AIG
Common (Eurasian) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Common incl AIG
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	Widespread incl AIG. Flock of c. sixty Corrimony
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	Widespread incl AIG. Flock of c. twenty five Corrimony
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Widespread incl AIG
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Widespread incl AIG
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	Two near Loch Garten
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Two males on Farr Road
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Only BLK
Hedge Accentor (Dunnock)	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Scattered records incl AIG
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Three BLK and two near Loch Ruthven
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Very widespread incl AIG
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Very widespread incl AIG
(Eurasian) Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	Common in coniferous areas incl AIG
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Only AIG
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Several BLK
Scottish Crossbill	<i>Loxia scotica</i>	One Loch Garten
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Several AIG and a pair BLK
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>	Common BLK
(Common) Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	One near Loch Ruthven

MAMMALS

Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	Seen on each evening AIG
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	One AIG
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	One from vehicle BLK
Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	One BLK
Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	One seen on two evenings AIG and one on road near AIG in the early morning
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	Two Beaulieu Firth
Common (Harbour) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Groups Beaulieu Firth and one Chanonry Point
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	A female and a yearling Chanonry Point
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Three AIG and a herd near Inverness
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Several sightings AIG
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Widespread incl AIG
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	One AIG and one near Loch Ruthven
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Widespread
European Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	(Captive at Aigas, Highlands) Two, possibly three at AIG both early morning and at dusk

OTHER TAXA

Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	Very common Loch Ruthven
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	One Loch Ruthven
Striped Ladybird	<i>Myzia oblongoguttata</i>	One SPY

Thank you for joining us and we hope to see you again in the not too distant future.

Rebecca Nason & Neil Arnold

(on behalf of Phil Harris & Robin Noble of The Travelling Naturalist).

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Picture and Furtle Finch crest from Martin Phipps



Morning by the lake at Lochgarten



Hobnailus Booticus