

Scottish Highlands

Saturday 10 - Saturday 17 October 2009

Trip Report

Leader: Robin Noble, Sutherland

Saturday 10 October

Arrival at the Aigas Field Centre.

Sunday 11 October

Alicia Leow-Dyke

Objective: To explore the grounds of Aigas Field Centre and to learn about and witness the Aigas Beaver Project.

Party: 8 Travelling Naturalist guests, Robin Noble & myself

Weather: Sunny with a slight breeze.

The day began with a presentation by Sir John Lister-Kaye, where he talked about the Magnus House; our superb new education building. This was then followed by a talk entitled the Balmorality Epoch, where Sir John discussed the Highlands from the period after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 through to the Victorian era and up until the present day. After such an exhilarating talk, it was time for a coffee break before Robin continued with his lecture on the Highlands. Robin's lecture covered all aspects of the Highland landscape, breaking many myths and surprising a lot of people about Scotland. The majority of people were unaware that the Highlands were almost totally wooded and that the action of man and grazers has reduced it to the landscape we know today. Robin also mourned the decline of the crofts in the hills, witnessing good working land; great for Corn Bunting and Corncrake, turn into a jungle of Bracken; good for very little. Covering geography, geomorphology, geology, anthropology, history, biology and ecology this lecture gave everyone about the most thorough grounding in Scotland that anyone had ever received.

After the wealth of information we had received we returned to the main house for a buffet lunch, where we relaxed over a lovely bowl of soup and salad. After lunch it was time to stretch our legs and so we decided to take a full tour of the estate. Starting at the main house we followed the path to the nature trail and continuing along the trail we walked up into the plantation. From here we headed up to the loch and the Beaver enclosure, where Alicia and Robin talked about the Beaver's biology and ecology as well as the reasons for its extinction in Scotland, its re-introduction along with the pros and cons this would bring. We also interpreted the actions of the Beavers to discuss the Beaver demonstration project we have here at Aigas.

Continuing around the loch we had a quick look in the Beaver hide that was constructed by the Aigas Rangers and Johnny Kingdom. We then headed up to the moorland, spying birds and identifying plants along the way. Once we were on the moorland we arrived at an area called Flat Rock, where Robin talked us through the archaeology of the area, with evidence from the Bronze and Iron ages.

Heading back down, we talked about woodland management and then we climbed up to the Tree Top Hide where we had an impressive view overlooking the moorland. It was here that we caught sight of two Jays flying across the moor.

After such a lovely day of exploring the estate and wildlife watching, it was time to return the main house for afternoon tea.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Chaffinch
Jay
Siskin

Cross-Leaved Heath
Douglas Fir
Ling Heather
Oak
Ragwort

PLANTS

Bell Heather
Birch
Blaeberry
Bog Myrtle
Chickweed Wintergreen

Rowan
Scots Pine
Sitka Spruce
Sorrel
Willow

Black Isle

Monday 12 October

Elsbeth Ingleby

Objective: To explore the diverse habitats of productive farmland and rich coastline found on the Black Isle.

Party: The Travelling Naturalist group, Robin Noble and Elsbeth Ingleby

Weather: Fine and bright, but a cold wind.

The day began with a briefing in the library by Robin, describing a little of the geology of the Black Isle and showing our intended route for the day on our huge wall map. Setting out we stopped briefly at Ffordes (the camera shop) where Leith was bluntly informed that her camera had died while the rest of us watched the rookery across the road. Moving on we passed through the lovely country village of Beauly before turning onto the Black Isle – a misnomer as it is neither an island, nor black. In fact it is a peninsular well known for its incredibly rich brown earth due to its underlying bed rock of old red sandstone, which produces excellent farmland.

Our first port of call was on the north shore of the Beauly Firth near a ruined castle known as Redcastle. Here we elbowed photographers out of the way to look at the Greylag and Pink-footed Geese that were present in their hundreds on the exposed mudflats, plus a nice collection of waders including Oystercatchers, Curlew and Bar-tailed Godwits. Further along the north shore road we stopped for nice views of Wigeon, Teal and Red-breasted Merganser. Taking the back roads along the Black Isle towards the fishing village of Avoch (the product of a misspelling, it is actually pronounced Och!) we were trying to identify a miscellaneous flock of finches when a Sparrowhawk flashed past almost within touching distance of the bus! Pausing on the waterfront at Avoch, we were puzzled by a very pale duck that just didn't look right; the eventual consensus was a cross between a mallard and a domestic white duck.

Our lunch stop was at Chanonry Ness. This spit sticks out into the Moray Firth (more correctly it separates the Moray and Inverness Firths). As it level with the promontory of Fort George on the south

shore, the firth is only a kilometre wide at this point, causing a tidal race around the end of the spit, which frequently brings shoals of fish close to the shore, and thus attracts Bottle-nosed Dolphins and Grey and Harbour Seals. We were lucky, and just as we pulled in to a parking spot two dolphins swum past the end of the jetty. However, they were moving quickly out to sea and were soon out of sight, but a Grey Seal and a few Harbour Seals were more obliging, bobbing around in the water. Walking out along the spit we came pretty close a Rock Pipit, with distinctive dark streaking on its breast, which was hopping around on the shingle and spotted a good collection of Guillemots in winter plumage scattered across the sea. Having lunch and hot drinks in the bus, we were in time to inform the arriving photographers of our success before heading across the backbone of the Black Isle to Cromarty, stopping briefly for a nice little group of Roe Deer in a field.

Cromarty used to be a bustling fishing village, but has declined of recent years as trade was taken to Invergordon, further down the Cromarty Firth. We stopped on the waterfront where we could see a raft of Eider Duck, and also the silhouette of a distant Shag colony while Robin told us about his grandfather's efforts to secure the firth, an important harbour during the First World War, against the German U-boats.

We crawled back along the shore road between Cromarty and Udale Bay, a huge tidal mudflat that brings in thousands of wading birds and wildfowl every winter. We spotted a large raft of Scaup (80 plus individuals) plus a close Red-breasted Merganser and a distant Slavonian Grebe in its winter plumage. At Udale Bay we went into the little RSPB hide where we saw thousands of Wigeon lining the water's edge, dotted with a few Teal and Shelduck. Dotting around were also Redshank, Golden Plover, Knot, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit and Lapwing, whilst the crowning glory was a beautiful Greenshank not twenty yards away. This elegant wader is becoming ever scarcer in the upland habitat as its breeding habitat is being gradually lost. It is also notoriously shy, so a close glimpse like this was very special indeed.

Time was pressing, so it was time for us to turn tail and head back along the north coast of the Black Isle back to Aigas for afternoon tea.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Bar-tailed Godwit
Buzzard
Chaffinch
Common Gull
Cormorant
Curlew
Eider Duck
Golden Plover
Greenshank
Grey Heron
Greylag Goose
Guillemot
Herring Gull
House Sparrow
Knot
Lapwing
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Mallard
Mallard/Domestic duck hybrid
Mute Swan

Oystercatcher
Pheasant
Pink-footed Geese
Red-breasted Merganser
Redshank
Robin
Rock Dove
Rock Pipit
Rook
Scaup
Shag
Shelduck
Siskin
Slavonian Grebe
Sparrowhawk
Starling
Teal
Wigeon

MAMMALS

Bottle-nosed Dolphin
Grey Seal

Harbour Seal

Roe Deer

Speyside

Tuesday 13 October 2009

Ian Sargent

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

Party: 8 Travelling Naturalists, Robin Noble, Richard Clarkson and Ian Sargent

Weather: Mostly overcast but with 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, right in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. After a brief stop in Kingussie we explored the reserve including a tour of the hides, and talks about management of the marsh, its importance and of course, Aspen trees! The marsh itself was quiet to begin with as we only spotted a well hidden Roe Deer, a Lapwing, a Grey Heron, and of course lots of Mallard. We decided to take a short, but steep walk to the next hide which sits at a lower level looking over the marshes. As we arrived we saw first three Roe Deer, then four and five... until we finally decided there were 9 in view! Some of these were quite close with a buck, doe and two calves grazing the nearest. The highlight however was spotted by Robin on the far side of the marshes – a Hen Harrier. It was flying low and occasionally pausing to hover as it hunted. At first we assumed it was a female as it was brown with the distinctive white “ring tail”, however at closer inspection we decided it was an immature. We lunched at the site as well catching a sight of a Red Admiral late in the season before heading east into the vast Pinewoods.

After lunch we drove along past Insh and Rothiemurchus and into the Glen More forest park. Here we stopped at the Reindeer centre and took a walk up the hill, for a linear 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, Coal Tit, Goldcrest and Crested Tit although we found it hard to actually see any Crested Tit. We did however see a Red Squirrel working its way through the crowns of the Scots pine at close range. 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 (Robin had forgotten his waterproof coat!).

After dinner, we headed up to the Magnus House, where Robin gave a lecture on the Archaeology of the Highlands and Islands

SPECIES LIST:

BIRDS

Blue Tit
Buzzard
Chaffinch
Coal Tit
Crested Tit (heard)
Crossbill (heard)
Goldcrest
Great Tit
Grey Heron

Hen Harrier
Hooded Crow
Mallard
Robin
Treetreeper
Wren

MAMMALS

Roe Deer

INVERTEBRATES

Red Admiral

PLANTS

Blaeberry

Cowberry

Strathconon

Goat Willow

Heather

Holly

Juniper

Scots Pine

Silver Birch

Wednesday 14 October 2009

Jennifer Dunn

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

Party: 9 travelling naturalists, Robin Noble and Jennifer Dunn

Weather: Mostly cloudy, quite 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, having glimpsed a Buzzard en route. 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 hundreds of Mallard, Tufted Duck and Goldeneye. Some of these ducks were slightly more difficult to identify as they were moulting into their winter plumage. We moved on up past the village of Milton and Strathconon House, owned by the creator of Lego, just as the Glen really started to open up. We spied a few Red 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 hill tops, either with a group of hinds, or without. The silhouettes on the skyline were enigmatic. But no sign of the majestic Golden Eagle as yet. We drove up to the top loch to eat our lunch amid spectacular scenery. Many Buzzards flew around the hills and made their distinctive call. Deer were spotted again and one was particularly unusual. One of the stags showed a slight discolouration in comparison to the rest. He was white! On the way down Robin got out to check the river for Dipper one last time and we spotted a Kestrel flying rapidly in front of us – what a sight!

To complete our day we took a walk up Glen Meanie, in an area of restructured forestry. Here we walked and scanned the hill tops for any sign of activity and admired the colours of the trees at such a wonderful time of year. We also took notice of the diversity of smaller plants that covered the wetter areas to the side of the road – including Butterwort, Sundew and Violets. When we reached the top we took one last effort in searching the skies and hilltops for the golden eagle, and sure enough it was there at the very top of the mountain, perched, and watching us. All we could see through the scope was its dark silhouette standing out against the rock with broad shoulders and long neck. It turned its head to the side and gently glided off and into the distance. It was a brief glimpse but an encounter not to be forgotten. On our return drive we diverted via a scenic route over the Meig Dam spotting beautiful houses, ancient Oaks and a stag with his harem in a roadside field. A beautiful day.

SPECIES LIST:

Buzzard

Chaffinch

Fieldfare

Golden Eagle

Goldeneye

Hooded Crow

Kestrel

Mallard

Meadow Pipit

Red Deer

Redwing

Tufted Duck

Wren

West Coast

Thursday 15 October

Alicia Leow-Dyke

Objective: To take in the beautiful scenery of Britain's most rugged terrain and to hopefully spot a White-tailed Eagle or two.

Party: 8 Travelling Naturalist guests, Robin Noble & myself.

Weather: Misty with a slight breeze and a few showers.

After a hearty breakfast we set off very promptly for the West Coast, as we had a lot of ground to cover. Our journey took us north from Aigas through Beauly and past Craigdarroch, an important SSSI oak woodland. We then passed Loch Garve and through the town of Garve. Garve has an important place in history because this is where ministers including Winston Churchill met to discuss the D-Day landings in 1944. They travelled here by train from London. It was so top-secret that all other trains had to run as usual so it took the train a long time to reach its destination. Our first stop of the day was at Blackwater River to admire the scenery and make use of the facilities.

From here we continued west on the main road to Ullapool before turning off on to the destitution road toward Dundonnell. Many destitution roads were constructed in the 1840s during the time of famine in Scotland. The lairds of the time implemented these constructions as a means of employment for many people within the area.

As we drove further west, we noticed the gradual change in the landscape as the trees became few and far between and the scenery much more rugged. Stopping at a steep sided valley to look for eagles; Robin interpreted the changes in the landscape and explained that this was due to changes in the rock formation. As this stop yielded little in terms of eagles we pressed on to our next major stop; Dundonnell. Here we searched for waders on the salt-beds and along the shoreline of Little Loch Broom - we were granted sightings of Grey Heron, Ringed Plover and Red-Breasted Mergansers.

Our next destination was Gruinard Bay which looks onto Gruinard Island, the site of anthrax tests during the Second World War, now a site where the largest bird of prey in Britain can be found: The White-tailed Eagle. This was our main stop of the day and so we tucked into our lunch and waited patiently. Scanning the bay we did see Grey and Common Seals, along with Shags and a Black-throated Diver. Unfortunately, we could not see any eagles and regrettably we had to move on as time was passing us by. We continued along the main road and decided to stop in a lay-by that overlooked Gruinard Island from a different angle. We stopped here mainly to get a closer look at the seals that were hauled out on rocks below us in the sea. However, as we scanned the island Robin noticed a large bird soaring over it. Could this be an eagle? Once we focused our binoculars and telescope on to the bird, our suspicions were confirmed - it was a White-tailed Eagle! We watched as it soared along and over Gruinard Island and eventually out of sight. We left in high spirits and headed to the village of Aultbea.

At Aultbea we had a comfort stop and scanned along the coast, here we saw a Grey Wagtail, House Sparrows and Turnstones. Continuing along the coast we passed through Poolewe and Gairloch and to a place called Shieldaig. Shieldaig means herring harbour in Old Norse and it would have once been a thriving little port. This area is great place to look for birds after westerly gales, as many birds get blown into this small sheltered cove. However, the weather had been relatively calm over the past few days and so there was not much on offer apart from two Little Grebes (Dabchicks).

When we were back in the bus we returned to Gairloch for afternoon tea at the Mountain Cafe. This is a quaint little cafe complete with a small bookshop in the heart of Gairloch. We all relaxed over a hot drink and cake in the conservatory before having a browse in the bookshop.

Once we had refuelled, it was time to make our way back to Aigas, admiring the scenery and spotting the occasional group of Red Deer as we drove.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Black-throated Diver
Chaffinch
Collared Dove
Common Gull
Curlew
Great Black-backed Gull
Grey Heron
Grey Wagtail
Guillemot
House Sparrow
Little Grebe
Mallard
Meadow Pipit
Oystercatcher
Red-breasted Merganser
Ringed Plover
Robin
Shag
Turnstone
White-tailed Eagle

MAMMALS

Common Seal
Grey Seal
Red Deer

Strathfarrar

Friday 16 October

Elspeth Ingleby

Objective: To explore the wildlife and scenery of Glen Strathfarrar, one of the most beautiful and remote glens in Scotland (if not the world!)

Party: The Travelling naturalist group, Robin Noble, Richard Clarkson and myself.

Weather: Early morning mist lifted to give beautiful sunshine although it clouded over a little during the day.

Due to the success of the earlier part of the week, the itinerary was changed to include this, the hidden gem of the highlands. After a short briefing by Robin we headed out for the entrance to the strath at Struy, just 5 miles down the road from Aigas. Glen Strathfarrar was formally a National Nature Reserve, but as it is gated and only 24 vehicles are allowed in at a time, this designation was removed, although it was still heavily protected as it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area and a National Scenic Area.

We stopped for a quick look at the Red Deer in the Culligran deer farm. Strictly speaking this is cheating, but it is still wonderful to see these magnificent animals close to, especially during the rut. We stopped by the river to enjoy the view and scan the skies. Autumn is well under way, and the colours, especially on a crisp sunny day like this, were simply stunning. As we passed through the deciduous woodland of Birch,

Oak, Aspen and Alder we came across a lovely stag posing in a clearing. We also enjoyed watching one of the younger photographers trying to stalk him in order to get better photos!

Our first lengthy stop a few miles into the glen was in a bend of the river which we call 'the Dipper spot'. Here we watched several flocks of Redwing swooping around the trees until the call of a Dipper attracted our attention to the river in time to see the little bird motoring downstream on rapidly beating wings. We were also constantly scanning the skies for a possible glimpse of eagles, and thus spotted a nice herd of Red Deer on the skyline.

Continuing up the road, we stopped at the point where the valley begins to open out, from the previous river formed V-shaped glen, to a glaciated U-shaped strath. Here we stopped on the edge of Loch Beannacharan, where there was a lovely view of a Grey Heron. Our sky searching here proved successful as a juvenile Golden Eagle flew overhead towards the hillside in front! It didn't seem to comfortable, perching on a rock, only to take off and move to another, back and forth across the hillside flapping all the while. This is very unusual behaviour for an eagle which is such an efficient flyer that they rarely need to flap their wings at all. It seemed likely that this bird was not long fledged, and this was one of its first solo flights away from its parents, so it still had much to learn about thermals and aerodynamics! We appreciated getting such a prolonged view of this magnificent bird, and it was close enough that the view through the telescope was truly superb!

A few hundred metres up the road, we stopped again to look at an odd couple on the water; a Mute Swan and a Whooper Swan have paired up, producing 4 White cygnets. We watched as they scrambled up the bank and then, a superb lesson in always looking behind you, two eagles were spotted soaring over the ridge behind the bus. These were mature Golden Eagles, most likely the parents of the juvenile we had just seen; and they were flying just as eagles should, soaring in circles with ne'er a wing beat.

We had further brief stops for a lovely wee Stonechat, and a pair of Whooper swans and their one year old cygnets (one of only 4 resident breeding pairs in Britain!). We continued the rest of the way up the strath, past both Loch Monar dams to a nice spot in the sunshine looking up to Sgurr na Lapaig and down the strath below where we stopped for lunch. It was surprisingly warm in the sun as we supped our drinks before preparing to move once more.

Our last stop was by the river in the woodland, close to a ravine where Bonnie Prince Charlie was said to have hidden from the redcoat army! Here we got out for a little wander, down to the river or along the road a short way. Sadly the water was rushing a bit too much for dippers, but it was a lovely spot just to stretch the legs and appreciate the fresh air!

Time was pressing, so we headed back to Aigas with just enough time to stop at the Erchless Motte on the way. This mound was once the site of the original Chisholm clan house, and is now a graveyard with the main building Erchless Castle sited on the plain below. Sadly, the last Chisholm owners of the castle, two sisters, died without children and it was sold; the only land still belonging to the Chisholm clan is the motte where they were buried.

SPECIES LIST

BIRDS

Blue Tit
Coal Tit
Dipper

Golden Eagle
Grey Heron
Meadow Pipit
Mistle Thrush
Mute Swan
Redwing

Siskin
Stonechat
Whooper Swan
Mute Swan
Wood Pigeon
Wren

MAMMALS

Feral Goat

Saturday 17 October

After breakfast departure.

Red Stag

INVERTEBRATES

Hairy black and yellow striped caterpillar!

PLANTS

Alder