

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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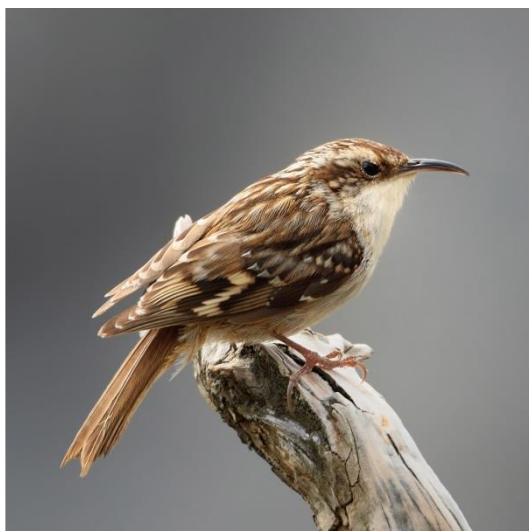


Tour Report

Scotland – Autumn in the Scottish Highlands

3 – 10 November 2018

Eurasian treecreeper



Goldcrest



Hawfinch



Red squirrel



Compiled by: Ashley Grove

Tour Leader: Ashley Grove with six participants

Day 1: Saturday 3 November 2018

Weather: mild & dry

With everyone now at the Grant Arms, which was to be our home for the week, we had a welcome meeting to run through the itinerary for the coming days, prior to our evening meal.

Day 2: Sunday 4 November 2018

Weather: dry with sunny intervals; high winds

Leaving the hotel at 8.30am after a hearty Scottish breakfast, we started our birding fairly locally at Avielochan. The site was fairly quiet, with little activity on the water bar a couple of common goldeneye and mallards, so we smartly made our way on to our next destination, Cairngorm Mountain.

Stopping on the way up at the grouse viewpoint proved a good decision, as a scan of the trees in the valley found a cracking goshawk enjoying the early morning sunshine. It didn't hang around long enough for everyone to get a look at it through the telescope, which was being buffeted by the gusty conditions.

The main car park at Cairngorm Ski Centre was even windier, so it was no wonder the snow buntings were not to be seen and with the funicular railway being out of action for some long-term maintenance, we resorted to some long distance scanning for ptarmigan, which prefer the higher ground. Clearly they were also lying low and with viewing made tricky by the wind, we had to settle for a couple of red grouse, a nice flock of ten Eurasian bullfinch from the lower car park and a small group of fieldfare, which were clearly hardier than us.

Heading back to lower altitude again, we pulled in to Loch Morlich for a scan of the water. Again common goldeneyes were present, along with tufted ducks, a lone female goosander and single whooper swan.

Loch an Eilein was a good choice for a lunch stop, and we were able to watch the red squirrels on the feeders there, prior to going for a wander. A few woodland birds were spotted, Eurasian treecreeper and a very obliging goldcrest being the highlights.

Our final stop for the day was the RSPB's Insh Marsh Reserve. The feeders in front of the hide allowed some nice close views of great spotted woodpecker, with the nearby trees holding a large flock of about 30 common redpoll.

But it was the marsh beyond the feeders that is the main attraction here and the hope of a rare raptor, perhaps. Common buzzards were seen on several occasions going about their business, but two views of a short-eared owl made the afternoon.

Also noted on the floods towards the back of the marsh were a group of whooper swans, Eurasian wigeon, Eurasian teal and tufted duck, as well as roe deer in double figures.

With darkness falling at around 4.30pm at this time of year, it was time to call it a day and head back to the hotel.

Day 3: Monday 5 November 2018

Weather: cloudy with light rain

We journeyed to the north coast today. Our first stop was Findhorn Bay and we arrived at high tide to find a good selection of wading birds at fairly close range. Eurasian curlew, bar-tailed godwit, common ringed plover,

dunlin, common greenshank, knot, ruddy turnstone, Eurasian oystercatcher and a single European golden plover were seen.

Closer to us in nearby trees, common linnets and yellowhammer showed well and a skein of pink-footed geese passed noisily overhead, as did a few larger groups of European golden plover.

Onward to Burghead, where various gulls were lined up on the harbour wall for comparison, with greater black-backed gulls among them, dwarfing the few shag that stood beside them. Several ruddy turnstone and Eurasian rock pipit made up a good selection in the harbour.

Out at sea we picked out a raft of 20 or so common eider, guillemot, more European shag and some distant long-tailed ducks. The sight that pleased most though was a small pod of bottlenose dolphins which skirted the headland. Five were noted at least and a grey seal also made a brief appearance close to shore.

We headed onward from here to Roseile Headland, where we had been tipped off about good sea-duck numbers. We weren't disappointed. There were several hundred common scoter accompanied by 50+ velvet scoter and 30+ long-tailed duck, including some males in cracking plumage, on a flat calm sea. Very nice!

As if that wasn't enough, a further scan revealed red-throated, black-throated and great northern loon, as well as great-crested and horned grebes. Sea watching doesn't get much better!

After a brief and unproductive detour to Elgin, on the hunt for a reported flock of waxwings, we finished the day at RSPB Loch Spynie. Plenty of common birds to see on the bird feeders aside the hide, along with a couple of red squirrels, which were very entertaining, as ever, preferring to climb inside the squirrel feeders to eat the peanuts out of the wind.

On the loch itself, a couple of whooper swans were among the mutes, and mallard and tufted ducks were joined by common goldeneye. The highlight of this site was the 'late show' of a common starling murmuration, involving probably four or five thousand birds. They took a while to settle, being joined by small groups as the light faded, with one unlucky individual being plucked from the crowd by a well-drilled Eurasian sparrowhawk on its first attempt. Eventually they descended as one into the reedbed for the night, a totally mesmerising spectacle to witness, which we all thoroughly enjoyed.

Day 4: Tuesday 6 November 2018

Weather: cloudy & dull with sunny intervals

The first port of call today was Strathdearn, possibly better known as Findhorn Valley, where we'd have our best chance of eagles this week. Once in the valley, our first stop was to scan the surrounding hillsides, where we were very lucky to pick up an adult white-tailed eagle. It was a little way off, but close enough to clearly see the pure white tail as it banked against the grey sky.

Moving onward we happened upon a group of red deer stags close to the road, which were very well antlered and a lovely sight to see at close range.

Further into the valley our next viewpoint soon yielded white-throated dipper, red kite and common kestrel and a second white-tailed eagle, this time a juvenile bird. A couple of views of distant golden eagle left us a little disappointed; however, we did get better views of golden eagle – one came across the valley towards us as we made our way back out. Quickly exiting the minibus, we all managed to get on the bird as it drifted over and out of sight. One can visit this valley many times and not see an eagle at all, so actually seeing both white-tailed and golden eagles, was a privilege indeed.

Next we travelled on to Dulsie Bridge, a lovely spot to eat our packed lunch. The sun came out as we arrived and even produced a peacock butterfly. There was very little in the way of birdlife, unfortunately, but

everyone enjoyed the beauty of this place, especially with the autumn colours, which enhanced every journey we took during the week.

From here we spent the rest of the afternoon in the Lochindorb area in search of moorland species. Red grouse showed fleetingly in the blustery conditions, but there was one outstanding highlight to this stage of the day. Pulling off the main road we stopped to view a perched buzzard on a post around 50 yards from the road; it soon became apparent this was a rough-legged buzzard which is a rare wintering bird to the UK, so quite a find.

Day 5: Wednesday 7 November 2018

Weather: sunny intervals

With a day planned on the Black Isle, it was worth the few miles extra northward to check out reports of an American wigeon, which had been seen recently at Loch Eye. It was good to see large numbers of ducks on arrival at the loch, so now we just had the simple task of finding one in particular on such a large area of water ... it didn't take too long, however, to pick him up, feeding with 100 or so Eurasian wigeon. Another highlight was a large raft of greater scaup on the water, a very unusual sight away from the sea. Other waterfowl included northern shoveler, common pochard, tufted duck, red-breasted merganser and Eurasian coot, all in good numbers, and a couple of pink-footed geese.

RSPB Udale Bay Reserve was the next port of call, but we were slightly distracted en route by a flock of around 20 Bohemian waxwings on telegraph wires at the roadside. After driving by, we were fortunate that one remained for all to see once we found a suitable turning place and somewhere to pull over.

With the water still a little high at Udale, we had an early lunch as the tide receded and the birds began to return to feed on the slowly exposing mud. This really is wader heaven, with Eurasian curlew, Eurasian oystercatcher, bar-tailed godwit, black-tailed godwit, common ringed plover, dunlin and numerous common redshank in particular. Lots of Eurasian teal and Eurasian wigeon were feeding close to the hide and, further out, we spotted a nice raft of greater scaup – for the second time today. A large skein of pink-foots thought about landing, but sadly moved on.

Again on the hunt for something out of the ordinary, we headed via (a very quiet and dolphinless) Chanory Point, to Munloch Bay, where we had heard reports of a snow goose, mixing with the pink-footed geese. Although some 100 or so pinkies were present, the apparently much larger flock had been moved on by a farmer protecting his crops. We did, however, get reasonable views of a red kite that drifted through which was a nice bird to end a cracking day's birding.

Day 6: Thursday 8 November 2018

Weather: sunny intervals & cold

A frosty clear day started with a short drive to RSPB Loch Garten and the surrounding Abernethy Forest. With capercaillie slowly becoming a bird of myth and legend in the highlands, it wasn't surprising that we couldn't track one down, but European crested tits were a different story. Armed with a supply of sunflower hearts, we loaded our upturned palms with temptation for the hordes of coal tits that call these forests home for the winter months. With so many coal tits feeding from our hands and forming queues in the surrounding trees, it wasn't long before we heard the calls of, and then saw, at least two European crested tits. Not as brave as the coal tits, they preferred to take seed from the floor. A walk into the forest found more 'cresties' and a startled roe buck, which barked before bounding off into the trees.

Once parked at Loch Garten Reserve, we walked to the main centre, which being western osprey focused is closed during the winter months. However, they do keep the feeders topped up and good views of coal, great,

Eurasian blue and European crested tits were had, along with great-spotted woodpeckers and a single brambling, which sadly didn't linger after calling from the top of an adjacent Scots pine.

From there we decided to give Cairngorm another try; as ever, the weather was very different up there. High winds and squalls put a stop to any prolonged study of the hillsides for ptarmigan, but a brief view of a small flock of distant snow buntings was seen by a couple of the group.

We headed back to Grantown and had a walk through Anagach Woods, to Old Spey Bridge and back. The feeders in the wood had a couple of red squirrels partaking of the peanuts; we had another European crested tit visit and good views of Eurasian treecreeper.

Down by the bridge we had reasonable views of a white-throated dipper, bobbing as they do on a boulder in the river. They're great little birds, and it's always a sight that brings a smile to your face.

Day 7: Friday 9 November 2018

Weather: breezy, but dry

Off to the coast again today and to Lossiemouth, which offers a little sea watching, along with a sandy beach, rocky shoreline and dunes. The dunes held little, but one of the group immediately picked up a purple sandpiper feeding on the rocks in front of the car park which was a great bird to see, especially so close. Later a flock of around a dozen of these beauties flew by at sea, landing further down the bay. Also at sea were a red-throated diver, several long-tailed ducks, guillemots and northern gannets.

After such a good visit a few days before, we decided Rosiele was worth a revisit and, although numbers were down on before, a small group of common scoter were very close in and gave really good views, as did a marauding gang of ten red-breasted mergansers, who busily fished before us. Northern gannets were offshore here too, diving for fish in a variety of plumages, from first years to full adults (for comparison).

With Loch Spynie just down the road, it was worth calling in for a look at a different time of day from before. A flock of 100+ mallards was impressive, with a single drake Eurasian teal and three Eurasian wigeon for company. A variety of gulls was present as well: seemingly, birds dropping in for a wash and brush up in the fresh water. Black-headed, common, herring, lesser-black backed and greater black-backed gulls were seen, but sadly no sign of the glaucous gull which had been sighted a few days before. We did all have very good views of a water rail and little grebe, which came close to the hide.

Heading south again we made time enough for a circuit of Lochindorb, with the hope of catching up with our rough-legged buzzard again, but the only birds of note were a covey of red-legged partridge.

Day 8: Saturday 10 November 2018

Weather: sunny & cool

There was just time this morning for a post-breakfast walk and a return to Anargach Woods and the river Spey. Our arrival at the woods was announced by a brambling calling from the top of a pine, and various red squirrels were sighted throughout the walk.

The highlight, however, was the discovery of three hawfinches, which gave their presence away with their squeaky calls. Unable to pick them up perched, we did at least see them fly over us.

These beauties took our tally of bird species on the trip to 103, a pretty healthy number for the time of year, for sure.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
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	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Enroute
	BIRDS	AVES							
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>							✓
2	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓		✓			
3	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
4	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
5	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				✓			
6	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓		✓			
7	American wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>				✓			
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓			
9	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓		✓			
10	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓			
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			✓			

12	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>				✓			
13	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓				✓	
14	Velvet scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>		✓					
15	Common scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓					
16	Long-tailed duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓				✓	
17	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓	✓					
18	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		✓		✓		
19	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓					
20	Black grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>			✓				
21	Willow ptarmigan (Red grouse)	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	✓		✓				
22	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓				
23	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓				
24	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓				✓	
25	Black-throated diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		✓					
26	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓					
27	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓		✓			

28	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓					
29	Horned grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓					
30	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
31	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓				✓	
32	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓				✓	
33	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				✓	
34	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓				
35	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓		✓				
36	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	✓						
37	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓						
38	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓				
39	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>				✓			
40	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
41	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		✓					
42	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓					
43	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓			

44	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		✓		✓	
45	European golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓					
46	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓			
47	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓
48	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓		✓			
49	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓			
50	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		✓		✓	
51	Red knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓					
52	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		✓			
53	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>						✓	
54	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓			
55	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓					
56	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
57	Mew gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		✓			✓
58	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓		✓	
59	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓		✓	

60	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓					
61	Common murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓				✓	
62	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓	
63	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓					✓
64	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓			✓		✓
65	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>							✓
66	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	✓						☐
67	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓			✓		
68	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓						✓
69	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓			✓		
70	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>							✓
71	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>							✓
72	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>							✓
73	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>				✓			✓
74	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓						
75	Bohemian waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>							✓

76	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓			✓		
77	European crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					✓		
78	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓			✓		
79	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓			✓		
80	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓		
81	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					✓		
82	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					✓		
83	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>					✓		
84	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓					✓
85	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓				✓		
86	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓					✓
87	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓					✓
88	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓					
89	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓			✓		
90	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>							✓
91	White-throated dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	✓				✓		

92	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓					
93	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓					
94	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓					
95	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓					
96	Eurasian rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓				✓	
97	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
98	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					✓		
99	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓				✓		
100	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓				✓		
101	Common redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	✓	✓					
102	Red crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓			✓		
103	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓				✓		✓
104	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓			✓		
105	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓					
106	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓					
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA							

1	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓			✓		✓
2	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphas</i>	✓						
3	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓				✓		✓
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>							✓
5	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓					
6	Atlantic grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓				✓	
7	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	✓						
	BUTTERFLIES	LEPIDOTERA							
1	Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>			✓				