

# Birds & Mammals of the Cairngorms

## Naturetrek Wildlife Photography Tour

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Meet Inverness; transfer Aviemore
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- Day 2/5** Photography excursions around the Cairngorms
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- Day 6** Return to Inverness after lunch
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### Departs

March/April

### Focus

Wildlife photography, including birds, mammals and landscape

### Grading

B. Moderate day walks.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR53)

### Highlights:

- Use of specialist photography hides
- Mammals include Red Squirrel, Pine Marten, Mountain Hare and Badger
- Photograph Red and Black Grouse, Ptarmigan, Crested Tit and other woodland birds.
- Stunning scenery of the Cairngorm Mountains and Caledonian pine forests.
- Based in a comfortable hotel near Aviemore
- Led by expert wildlife and landscape photographer Robert Harvey



From top: Scots Pine, Cairngorms, Red Squirrel, Ptarmigan.  
All images © Robert Harvey



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## Introduction

Some of the finest opportunities for mammal photography in Britain are to be found in the Cairngorms, where the mountains also support good populations of moorland and alpine birds that are difficult to photograph elsewhere. During this short break, we will photograph several charismatic species that are rare or absent south of the Scottish border, such as Pine Marten, Red Squirrel, Mountain Hare and Ptarmigan, using a combination of hides and tracking on foot in mountainous terrain. From our comfortable hotel near Aviemore, we will be surrounded by superb scenery, with easy access to the Cairngorms and numerous wildlife viewing spots.



Cairn Lochan (Robert Harvey)

This holiday offers exceptional opportunities to photograph several of Scotland's iconic birds and mammals, which are rarely seen elsewhere. We will also benefit from specially constructed photographic hides, specialist guiding and advice from our professional photographer-leader throughout the tour.

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### Arrive Inverness, transfer Aviemore

We will meet in Inverness at around lunchtime and transfer by minibus to Aviemore and our hotel for the next 5 nights. We begin this afternoon with an introductory presentation on the Cairngorms, the species we are hoping to find and the best techniques for photographing them. We will then travel to the RSPB's famous wildlife reserve at Loch Garten for our first experience of the Caledonian pine forest and to photograph woodland birds coming to bait. Our expert photographer-leader will help with detailed guidance on camera set up and settings, to enable everyone to capture the best images possible. Then, as sunset approaches, we will use the light to bring to life the ancient trees of what is one of Britain's very few true wildwoods.

## Day 2

## Photography Hides & Braemar

This morning we will divide into two groups of three for photography from specialist hides. The Red Squirrel hide is set in a clearing in the beautiful Caledonian pine forest, and is designed to enable images of these pretty and agile squirrels jumping, feeding and reflected in water. The Woodland Bird hide, meanwhile, is set in very open woodland with a stunning natural background and perches providing opportunities for a wide range of images. As well as portraits, this hide offers opportunity for flight and interaction images, with possible species including Crested Tit, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Bullfinch, Siskin, Redpoll, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Treecreeper, Jay and Great Spotted Woodpecker.



Red Grouse (Robert Harvey)

In the afternoon, we travel by minibus to Braemar and Glenshee, on the east side of the Cairngorms. A key target will be to photograph Red Grouse with their wonderful coloured plumage, which can, with careful exposure, look especially good photographed against a background of snow. Red Grouse photography is best done along the roadside using the vehicle as a hide, and with luck we may also encounter herds of Red Deer. There will also be opportunities to photograph mountain landscapes along the route.

## Day 3

## Findhorn Valley



Mountain Hare (Robert Harvey)

Today, we will journey to the Findhorn Valley to photograph another Scottish specialty, the Mountain Hare. Mountain Hares will just be starting to moult from their white winter to their darker summer coats, making them easier to find on the hillsides and especially good photographic subjects. A careful approach is needed but with luck and patience, we hope to be able to obtain some excellent images. Time permitting, we may choose to return to our hotel via Carrbridge, where we can

photograph the ancient packhorse bridge that gives the village its name. After an early dinner, we aim to travel to Loch Morlich to photograph Cairngorm itself, across (and hopefully reflected in) the loch.

## Day 4

## Leks and Ptarmigan

This morning we will divide into two groups of three once again. Led by a local, experienced photographer, the first group will drive for around half an hour south-west towards Kingussie, to specially situated Black Grouse hides. Here, under the guidance of our local photographer, we aim to capture the stunning spectacle of an early morning Black Grouse lek. A very early start will be required to get into position before dawn, and we expect to be leaving our hotel at around 4am! Getting so close to these lekking birds is a rare privilege, and so our early start should be well rewarded.



Black Grouse (Robert Harvey)

Those members of the group not visiting the lek will instead enjoy an early morning excursion with Robert for some landscape photography, most likely either along Loch Morlich or into the pine forest. After all returning to the hotel for a late breakfast, there will then be the opportunity to rest at the hotel. This time can be used for reviewing images, for talking a walk near the hotel or catching up on sleep after the early start.



Ptarmigan (Robert Harvey)

After lunch, we will set out on foot in search of Ptarmigan. Found high on the flanks of the Cairngorms around the spring snow line, a hike of about a mile with modest ascent is required to reach them. At this time of year the Ptarmigan are about to change from their white winter plumage to their mottled summer plumage. With patience, there is a good chance of photographing these iconic birds. Weather permitting, there will also be the opportunity to take great landscape shots of the high mountains.

## Day 5

## Leks and Pine Marten

This morning the groups will swap over so that the second group will visit the Black Grouse hides and the first can enjoy a well-deserved "lie-in", before joining Robert for some morning landscape photography. On arriving back at the hotel, the rest of the day will be more relaxed. No activities have been scheduled for the rest of the morning in order to once again catch up on sleep, and spend some dedicated time reviewing our images prior to the next hide visits.



Pine Marten (Robert Harvey)

This evening, we will have the use of a comfortable heated hide after dinner where we expect to watch and photograph Pine Martens, one of Britain's most beautiful and elusive carnivores, along with Badgers. Flash is not allowed in this hide so photography will be using floodlights, requiring a tripod, cable release and high ISO setting.

## Day 6

## Photography Hides, return to Inverness

This morning we will return to the Red Squirrel and Woodland Bird photography hides, each group of three switching hides from the earlier in the week.

Returning to our hotel for lunch, we will review and share our images with the group, before making the return journey to Inverness. We will aim to be back in the city in the late afternoon.

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## Tour grading

Grade B – Moderate day walks. Photography of Mountain Hares and Ptarmigan in particular is on foot, and involves walking in mountains, including uphill sections and steep/rough terrain at times. The Ptarmigan excursion is a four mile round trip on foot with almost 1000 feet of elevation gain (the trail is good but at this time of year can sometimes be buried under snow!). Ptarmigan especially is a demanding species to find, so some effort will be required, though the results are extremely rewarding.

We travel by minibus most days, but will spend plenty of the time exploring on foot, particularly on Days 2 and 3. Enjoyment of this tour, therefore, demands a reasonable level of fitness and an enjoyment of walking (or, the unfit should be prepared to feel tired at times!). All walks will be taken at a leisurely pace, and a built-in flexibility will take into account of the overall abilities of the group.

## Arrival / departure details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will arrive into Inverness airport and so this will be our first meeting point. We will then pick any other group members up from Aviemore railway station before arriving at the Rowan Tree Hotel. Exact timings will be confirmed nearer the time, but in past years timings have been as follows: 1200 hours at Inverness airport and 1400 hours at Aviemore railway station. At the end of the tour we expect to return to Inverness airport by 1600 hours. Those departing by air from Inverness should arrange flights to depart after this time. Departure time from Aviemore railway station should be after 1415 hours. As flight and train timings do vary from year

to year, we would ask you to contact the Naturetrek office before booking travel arrangements that are unlikely to fit in with the timings mentioned above.

## Equipment to bring

- Digital single lens reflex camera capable of photographing at ISO 16,000 for nocturnal wildlife and ISO 6400 for low-light shots at dawn and dusk
- Telephoto lenses (400mm or 500mm focal length) for bird and mammal photography
- Standard and wide angle zoom lenses for mountain and forest landscapes
- Tripod
- Monopod
- Cable release
- Bean bag
- Neutral density and polarising filters
- Flash (not allowed in Pine Marten/Badger hide)
- Hiking boots
- Cold weather and wet weather clothing
- Warm hat and gloves
- Walking poles

## Focus

This is a specialist photography holiday, aimed at the keen amateur wildlife photographer, and focusing on the birds, mammals and landscapes of the Cairngorms. We will spend several hours in hides, as well as travelling in vehicles and on foot searching for target species, in order to provide excellent photographic opportunities.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

We stay at the Rowan Tree Hotel in Aviemore, where all rooms have en-suite facilities. For more information on the hotel, please visit [www.rowantreehotel.com](http://www.rowantreehotel.com). All food is included in the price of the tour, except for lunch on the first day.

## Weather

At this time of year, the weather can range from snow blizzard to moderately warm sunshine. We may get both on the same day! You should therefore bring a mixture of clothing including warm fleeces, jackets, hats and gloves. Walking boots will be needed for the Ptarmigan and Mountain Hare excursions.

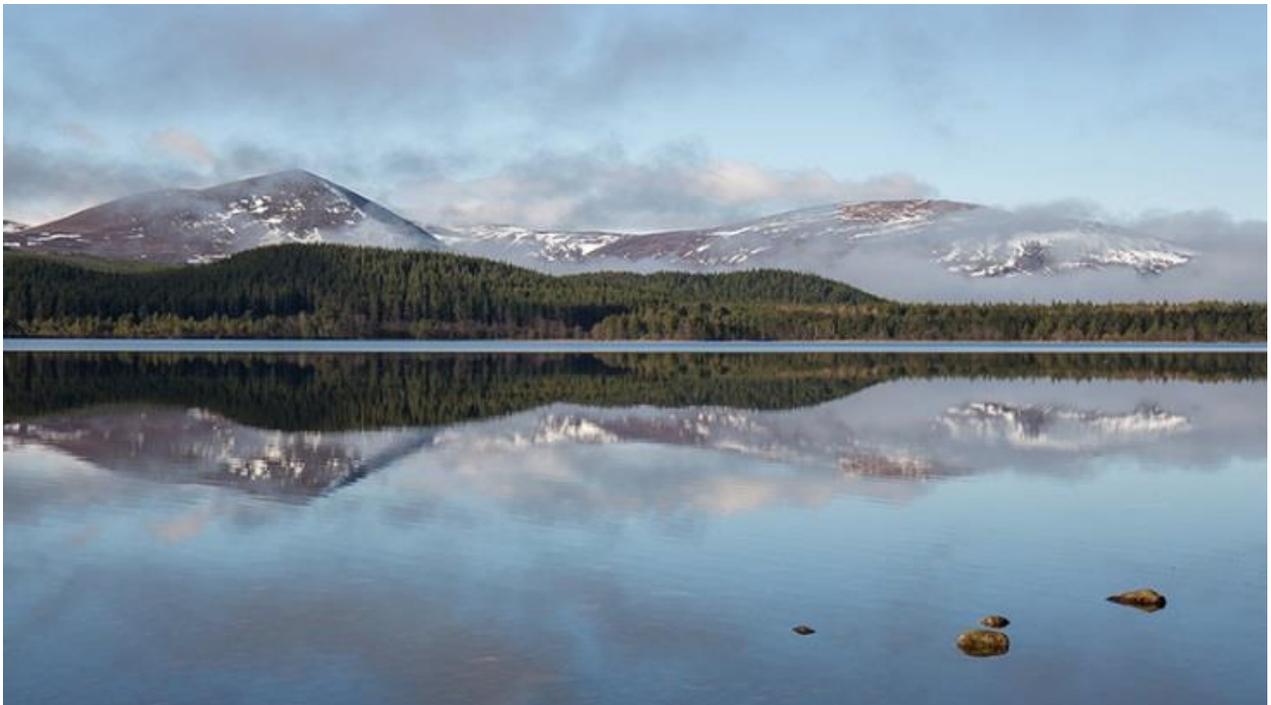
## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call

us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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Red Squirrel, Mountain Hare and Loch Morlich (Robert Harvey)