

Scotland's Winter Wildlife Photography Tour

Naturetrek Wildlife Photography Tour

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Meet Inverness; afternoon excursion
- Day 2/6** Photography excursions around the Moray Coast, Speyside & the Cairngorms
- Day 7** Return to Inverness after lunch

Departs

February

Focus

Wildlife photography, including birds, mammals and landscapes

Grading

B. Moderate day walks.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR53)

Highlights:

- Use of specialist photography hides.
- Mammals include Red Squirrel, Mountain Hare and Red Deer.
- Photograph Red Grouse, Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting, Crested Tit and other woodland birds.
- Stunning scenery of the Cairngorm Mountains, Speyside and Caledonian pine forests.
- Led by expert wildlife photographer Oliver Smart.



From top: Ptarmigan, Mountain Hare, Red Squirrel.
Images courtesy of Shutterstock



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Introduction

Scotland is home to a number of iconic and charismatic species that show extremely well against a winter backdrop. This week long photography tour aims to provide you with a range of opportunities to photograph these animals using a variety of techniques in a mixture of habitats.

Among the mammal species we will be focusing on are majestic Red Deer, timid Mountain Hare in their winter coats and the lovely, energetic Red Squirrel. In terms of birds, the coastal waters host overwintering ducks such as Long-tailed Duck, Common and Velvet Scoter as well as Goldeneye. The moorlands are home to the famous Red Grouse, while cheeky Crested Tit can be found flitting amongst the pine trees. Up on the hills are shy Ptarmigan in winter plumage as well as flocks of Snow Bunting.



Crested Tit (© Oliver Smart)

Specialist photography hides will be used for some species and your leader will provide you with the field skills required for capturing the best shots. During the week there will also be opportunities to review your images and learn tips for improving your photography. From coastal habitats to forests and mountains, we will be looking to showcase the best of Scotland's winter wildlife.

Photographer Leader

This tour will be led by expert wildlife photographer and tour leader, Oliver Smart. Following a childhood fascination with the natural world, Oliver went on to study ornithology at the University of Birmingham during his mid-twenties. With his late grandfather, Oliver explored much of the



Highlands of Scotland and has a lifelong passion for the wildlife and landscapes of this beautiful area. Alongside an emerging interest in photography, learning the art of bird ringing and volunteering for the Avon Wildlife Trust, BTO and RSPB, Oliver has put time to good use. His main passion is birds and through photography he has built a diverse collection of imagery, which is represented by both RSPB Images and Alamy. Combined with a desire to travel, Oliver has explored many parts of the world; his favourite destinations usually including a seabird colony or two, where the sight, sound, smell and opportunities for a photographer are second to

none. His claim to fame to date though is an image he took in the Seychelles which has been used on a bank note!

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

We will meet in Inverness at around lunchtime and journey east by minibus along the Moray Coast. We will spend the first night here before moving south to Speyside and the Cairngorms for the latter part of the tour.

During the winter months there are very often rafts of sea ducks, such as Eider, Wigeon, Long-tailed Duck, scoters, Goldeneye and occasionally Pintail, in the sheltered bays along this section of



Long-tailed Duck

coastline. There is also the potential to pick up some wintering waders too. Depending on the tides and prevailing weather we will stop at one or more locations. We will be aiming to use the expanse of water to best effect as we look at photographing these species within their environment.

Once we arrive at our hotel for the night, there will be opportunity to review the day's images and for your leader to give a more full introduction to the week. We plan to make time each evening for a review and a short tutorial for those who wish to improve their photography.

Day 2

Moray Coast & Speyside

This morning we will continue our exploration of the Moray Coast. Morning light and different state of tides may give us the chance to find a different range of water birds or to improve on our shots from yesterday.

After our morning session, we will turn south towards Lochindorb, gradually ascending to Dava Moor, where we can find habitat perfect for Red Grouse. A blanket of snow can create a contrast to the birds' reddish-brown feathers, but even if the weather is milder we will still be able to capture the bird within its environment as it blends in with the heather. There are a number of approaches that we may take, from using the vehicle as a hide to



Red Grouse (© Oliver Smart)

concealing ourselves within the dips of the moor. At this time of year the grouse will have started to pair up already and there may still be some cocks calling to advertise their territories.

Red Grouse (© Oliver Smart)



At the end of the afternoon we will continue on to our hotel near Aviemore where we will be based for the rest of the tour.

Day 3

Ptarmigan, Cairngorm

This morning we will get ready for a full day out, up the sides of Cairngorm mountain. It's here that



Rock Ptarmigan (© Oliver Smart)

we will find Ptarmigan, a member of the grouse family that changes its plumage colour over the winter to be better camouflaged within its surroundings. Cairngorm is one of Scotland's Munros (mountains over 1,000m/3,000ft), standing at approximately 1,245m (4,084ft), with a plateau that is the highest in the UK, displaying the greatest extent of mountain arctic landscape in the country. Ptarmigan can often be found around the snowline, so their exact location

will very depending on the weather at the time of our visit. If it is necessary to go as far as the plateau then our ascent will be up to 850m and we are likely to cover a distance of 4 miles or more.

Also found on the slopes of Cairngorm are overwintering Snow Buntings. These large buntings are known to breed in this area, but are joined in winter by continental birds as well. Males have a more off-white hue to their feathers at this time of year, but are nonetheless beautiful birds and we'll be hoping to come across a flock during our session.



Snow Bunting (© Oliver Smart)

Day 4

A little to the northwest of our location is Streathearn, more commonly referred to as the Findhorn Valley. This is where the source of the River Findhorn begins, and very well known for Mountain Hare. With their white, winter coats designed to blend into snowy landscape, these shy mammals are well adapted for living up in the hills. Stealth and patience will be the key to success.

Findhorn Valley

Mountain Hare (© Oliver Smart)



Days 5 & 6

Photography Hides and Red Deer

This morning we will divide into two groups for photography from specialist hides for an opportunity to capture the charismatic Red Squirrel and cheeky Crested Tit. The Red Squirrel hide



Red Squirrel (© Oliver Smart)

is set in the beautiful Caledonian pine forest, with ancient pine trees and silver birches above a heather carpet, which we are hoping will be covered in snow. During the winter months these lovely animals have thicker coats and display ear tufts to varying degrees. With windows on three sides, the hide is set up to give you excellent views of the forest, which you can enjoy from its comfortable armchairs.

While one group is at the squirrel hide, the other group will be nearby at a more open area where Crested Tit visit some feeders. There will be the possibility to move around and take images from different angles. The old growth pine trees offer the birds a choice of perches and the gnarled trees provide extra texture and interest to your shots.

In the afternoon, we visit one of the nearby estates where the gamekeeper will accompany us to where they feed the Red Deer during the winter months. The feeding area is set amidst the trees, where we should find a herd of Red Deer, including stags, and we will be hoping for some with magnificent antlers. The number of branches on set of antlers corresponds to the individual's age and fitness.



Red Deer (© Oliver Smart)

The following morning, we will return to the Red Squirrel photography hide and Crested Tit area, each group of three switching locations from the previous day. In the afternoon we will return with the gamekeepers to the Red Deer feeding station. There may be a different selection of deer here today, with different dynamics within the herd. Lighting is also likely to be different to yesterday, so we should be able to get a good range of images over the two afternoons.

During our final evening there will again be time to review your images, with your leader providing some additional hints and tips on editing and post processing.



Crested Tit (© Oliver Smart)

Day 7

Morning Excursion, return to Inverness

Our final morning has some flexibility in it to allow us to return to a site that we enjoyed or if we missed a particular species earlier in the week. Otherwise we can explore this fantastic area a little more. Around lunch time we must pack up our kit and turn northwards again, back towards Inverness. We will aim to be back in the city in the late afternoon.

Images courtesy of Oliver Smart and Shutterstock

Tour grading

Grade B – Moderate day walks. Photography of Mountain Hare and Ptarmigan in particular is on foot, and involves walking in mountains, including uphill sections and steep/rough terrain at times, along with carrying your photography gear. Snowy weather can make it more tiring too! The



Ptarmigan excursion is around 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 time exploring on foot, particularly during the last few days. 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 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 Inverness 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 1230 hours at Inverness 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 Inverness railway station should be after 1630 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

This is a list of suggested items that would help you get the most out of the tour:

- Digital single lens reflex camera capable of photographing at ISO 6400 for low-light or creative shots
- Telephoto lenses (400mm or 500mm focal length) for bird and mammal photography
- Standard and wide angle zoom lenses for mountain and forest landscapes and for Red Deer
- Tripod and/or monopod
- Cable release
- Bean bag e.g. <http://www.smartimages.co.uk/accessories.php>.
- Neutral density and polarising filters
- Flash
- Hiking boots
- Cold weather and wet weather clothing
- Warm hat and gloves
- Thermos flask and water bottle
- Walking poles

Focus

This is a specialist photography holiday, aimed at the keen amateur wildlife photographer, and focusing on the wildlife and landscapes of Speyside and 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 for the first night in lovely Ramnee Hotel in Forres then for the remaining nights at the Rowan Tree Hotel near Aviemore. All rooms have en-suite facilities. For more information on the hotels, please visit www.ramneehotel.com and 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 blizzards 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, 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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