

Speyside in Spring

Naturetrek Wildlife Tour

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Travel to Speyside
Day 2/6	Daily excursions around Speyside
Day 7	Depart

Departs

April/May/June

Focus

Birds, mammals and other wildlife

Grading

B. Easy to moderate day walks. Several miles will be covered on foot each day.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR68)

Highlights:

- Enjoy some of the UK's most dramatic & wildlife-rich landscapes
- Woodland birds such as Crested Tit, Redstart, Wood Warbler & Spotted Flycatcher
- Raptors including fishing Osprey and magnificent Golden Eagle
- Upland species including Ring Ouzel, Golden Eagle, Ptarmigan & Snow Bunting.
- Vast seabird colonies on the Moray Firth.
- Iconic mammals such as Red Squirrel, Mountain Hare and Red Deer.
- Lekking Black Grouse in the early morning.
- Breeding Osprey, Red-throated Diver & Slavonian Grebe on lochs.



From top: Golden Eagle, Crested Tit & Red Squirrel (images courtesy of Shutterstock images)



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Introduction

The wild landscapes around the River Spey in the Scottish Highlands are amongst the most unspoilt in the UK. The area inland of Inverness and the Moray Firth embodies much of what people love about Scotland, encompassing the high peaks of the Cairngorms, peaceful forests and scenic river valleys, all within a relatively small area. These alpine uplands, windswept moorlands, remote lochs and ancient Caledonian pinewoods also support some of the country's rarest and most exciting creatures. Speyside is



technically just the area around the River Spey, although many use the term more generically to refer to the 'whiskey triangle'. Our tour will visit Speyside as well as Strathspey, Badenoch, the Cairngorms and Moray, taking in the ancient Caledonian Pine Forest, hidden lochans, beautiful coastline and high passes in search of the region's wildlife. We'll stay for six nights in Grantown-on-Spey, the perfect base from which to search for iconic birds and mammals such as Golden Eagle, Red and Black Grouse, Red Squirrel, Crested Tit and Crossbill. Spring is a particularly rewarding time to visit, when the forests resound with the calls of songbirds and summer visitors have arrived to breed, while the occasional passage migrant or lingering winter visitor can still be found.

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 Speyside

For those arriving in Inverness or Aviemore (see meeting information below) a transfer will be provided for the drive to our hotel in Speyside. After arriving and checking in, we will head out for our first foray to the woods and lochs found throughout this area.

Our destination this afternoon will be Loch Insh, which has been home to nesting Osprey for at least 20 years. On a small island towards the east end of the loch, amidst some tall pines, their large nest can be seen quite easily. By this time of year the established pair should have returned and we can watch the birds at the nest from an unobtrusive location. Goldeneye also nest here in some numbers and we will be watching out for these smartly plumaged birds during our visit.



Further upstream is the RSPB Insh Marshes reserve, a small area of river floodplain that supports numerous breeding waders including Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank and Snipe, with two hides from which to observe them. As we head back towards our hotel, time permitting, we may also stop at Invereshie and Inshriach to stretch our legs and follow a path for a little way which winds up through the different habitats in this area, from lowland forest to open hillside.

Day 2

Speyside

Most mornings there will be a pre-breakfast walk or excursion offered for those who wish. Some days it will be a walk from (or near to) the hotel into the local woodland for the dawn chorus. Other mornings will see us travel to a site for Black Grouse or local lochan for water birds, such as Slavonian Grebe. An early start will be required in the search for lekking Black Grouse. At this time of year the males will be displaying and their striking black, white and red plumage can be seen to full effect as they compete for mates.



Black Grouse

After breakfast today we will stay fairly locally, visiting Abernethy Forest and the area around Loch Garten. Situated within the Cairngorms National Park area, the forest is mixed native woodland made up of tree species including Caledonian Pine, Birch, Aspen, Alder and Rowan. Once part of



Parrot Crossbill

the ancient Caledonian Pine Forest, it is home to such specialists as Scottish, Common and Parrot Crossbill and Crested Tit. Charismatic Red Squirrel also live here and can be seen bounding across the forest floor or scurrying up a tree. The woods are crisscrossed with a variety of tracks which we will explore in a leisurely manner and the calls of the birds make the woods come alive, helping us to locate some of the shyer species amongst the foliage. If we are quiet we may also catch sight of Roe Deer amongst the trees.

Please note that, although there are Capercaillie in these forests, their numbers are in severe decline and care must be taken to avoid disturbing these rare birds, particularly during the breeding season, so we will not be going to look for this species during the tour. We will also need to keep to the tracks and minimise our impact on the area to improve their chances of survival.

Later in the day we will visit the Spey in search of Dipper and Grey Wagtail. One of Scotland's longest rivers, the Spey is famous for the whiskey distilleries found along its banks; the fast flowing, crystal clear waters being a perfect ingredient for a drink whose Gaelic name, Uisge Beatha, means 'water of life'. The meandering river also has breeding Common Sandpiper, whose noisy calls can be heard above the rush of the water.



Dipper

Day 3

Moray Coast



Northern Gannet

This morning we will make our way north to the Moray Coast where the River Spey ends its 105 mile journey in Spey Bay. The river is constantly changing the shape of the shingle banks that shelter breeding terns. In spring, lingering divers and sea ducks such as Great Northern Diver, scoter, Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck float out on the water while Bottlenose Dolphins can often be seen further offshore. It is worth taking a few minutes to have a scan from the Whale and Dolphin

Conservation Centre on the east side of the estuary, and check on their latest sightings.

During the day we will head further east and take a boat trip out to Troup Head, where the cliffs are thronged with thousands of seabirds that have returned for the breeding season, including Gannet, Guillemot, Fulmar and Razorbill, all crowding onto the sea cliff ledges in a noisy, frenetic huddle. This trip will allow us to watch the birds feeding at sea as well as returning to their nest sites with their catch.

Along the same coast are Findhorn Bay, Culbin Forest and Burghead, all of which are excellent locations for a variety of wildlife. Our exact plan for the day will depend on the tides and the weather, but we be hoping to find Tree Sparrow and Corn Buntings in the fields along the roadsides, Red Kite and hunting Peregrines, Skylarks singing above the sand dunes and waders such as Dunlin and Ringed Plover on the tidal margins, as well as both Grey and Harbour Seal.

Day 4

Cairngorms

Our aim today is to traverse the slopes of Cairngorm in search of Ptarmigan. If there is still snow on the tops the birds will be found lower on the slopes, but will be making their way higher as the weather warms. These lovely, cryptic birds are usually by now in summer plumage, though some may still be partially in winter plumage, making them a strange mix of streaky white and mottled brown. We will also be looking for Ring Ouzel which can be found around the car parks and corries, as well as Snow Bunting in their smart breeding plumage and possibly Mountain Hare or Dotterel.



Throughout the day there will be the possibility of Golden Eagle, Merlin, Skylark and Meadow Pipit. This walk is likely to take us the best part of the day, at a slow pace, although we hope to have time to stop at Loch Morlich later in the afternoon for Goldeneye and Red-throated Diver.

Day 5

Streathdearn

More commonly referred to as the Findhorn Valley, Streathdearn is a typical upland valley consisting of heather moorland with a few blocks of trees and a fast flowing stream system. The clear, boulder strewn watercourses are perfect habitat for Dipper, while on the slopes of the hills above we will be watching for Mountain Hare and Red Grouse, and over the ridgelines soar Golden Eagle and Raven. Working our way slowly up the valley, we will stop at various locations to scan the surrounding landscape for movement. Towards the end of the road we should start to see Northern Wheatear and perhaps Ring Ouzel too.



Depending on sightings and progress today we may also choose to visit nearby Dava Moor, which is open countryside and perfect habitat for Red Grouse, Golden Plover, Snipe, Whinchat and the occasional Short-eared Owl.

Day 6

Speyside

Our final full day will be spent exploring some of the other paths that wend their way through the forests in further search of Crested Tit, Redstart, Willow Warbler, Crossbill and the ever endearing



Red Squirrel. Should there be any key species that we have yet to find, we will make every effort to locate them today. The choice of locations will depend on what has already been seen during the week, but the possibilities include Craigellachie, where Peregrine are known to nest in the crags while Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler have been found along the tree line, Carrbridge with the old pack horse bridge and pine woods walks or a return to the Abernethy Forest.

Day 7

Depart

There should be time for a final walk this morning before we must make our way back to Inverness or Aviemore to start the journey home.

The tour will finish at either Aviemore or Inverness and a drop off will be provided to both locations.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Grading & Focus

The main focus of this tour is birds and mammals, although time will be taken to look at other wildlife too.

The tour is graded B as there will be some moderately strenuous walks, covering several miles, and a reasonable degree of fitness will be required. Some days the walks will take much of the day and you must be able to carry with you everything that you would need.

Food & Accommodation

All breakfasts and evening meals are included from dinner on day one to breakfast on day seven. Lunch is not included throughout the tour, but arrangements will be made each day to pick up either a packed lunch or visit a cafe. Except during particularly inclement weather, packed lunches are recommended each day to maximise time in the field as the daylight hours shorten. We would recommend allowing around £10 per day to cover the cost of lunches throughout this trip.

The hotel in Speyside provides double and twin bedded rooms, all with private bathroom facilities. Rooms for single person occupancy are subject to availability and a supplementary cost.

Clothing

The average temperature in north east Scotland in May is around 10-12°C, although it may feel colder higher up or near the coast due to the wind chill factor. We recommend taking warm, windproof and waterproof clothing with you for your holiday, which can be removed or added in layers as required. A good waterproof jacket and waterproof trousers are essential. It would be useful to have hat, scarf and gloves too. It is recommended to check the weather forecast for the region the week prior to your holiday. Sturdy waterproof footwear such as walking boots or shoes with warm socks are recommended. Gaiters can also be useful.

Comfortable, casual clothing and shoes are suggested for the evenings at the hotel.

Equipment

The following is our recommendation of general equipment that you should bring with you.

- Binoculars
- Telescope (optional)
- Thermos Flask
- Personal first aid kit (including tweezers in case of ticks)
- Small rucksack/ day pack
- Wash kit and medication
- Camera & accessories (optional)
- Sun protection (if the forecast is for sunny weather)
- Chapstick/ Lip balm
- Insect repellent
- Field guide and reading material
- Refillable water bottle

Meeting Information

By Train

We meet you at Inverness Station at 1215 hours at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). Do not worry if our bus is a few minutes late, parking is difficult in the station and it is easier for us if we are sure everyone is together. At the end of the trip, we normally have you back at the station by 1500 hours.

It is also possible to take a train to Aviemore and we will meet you here at around 1400 hours. The bus may be a few minutes later than this if traffic from Inverness has been particularly heavy. At the end of the tour we would aim to have you back to the station in Aviemore by around 1315 hours

By Bus

If you arrive, you can either take the bus to Inverness or Aviemore. For those arriving by bus into Inverness please make your way to the train station entrance for 1215 hours. It's approximately 450 metres from the bus station to the train station.

National buses will also stop in Aviemore. If you alight here then please get off at the stop by the train station (the bus stop is just outside the station entrance) and wait for the tour bus to arrive around 1400 hours.

By Air

We can meet you at Inverness Airport at 1240 hours; please make your way to the blue bus stop by the taxi at the front of the airport terminal. The tour vehicle will arrive into the short stay carpark just across the road. There is only 10 minutes waiting time, so please do not worry if the tour vehicle is a few minutes later in arriving. It's easier to make sure that everyone is together and ready before it arrives. At the end of the trip, we normally have you back at the airport by 1430 hours.

By Car

If you come by car, you may drive directly to the hotel near Aviemore. Full address details will be provided in the final joining instructions for the tour. The meeting time will be approximately 1430 hours.

Tour Transport

For this tour we will be using small 9-seater mini-buses for the day to day travel. Please assist our tour leaders in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

Accommodation in Inverness

If you arrive the night before the trip, or want to stay the night at the end of your trip, then we suggest the following hotels:

Convenient for Inverness Station (5 min walk away):

Royal Highland Hotel

Station Square, Academy St, Inverness, IV1 1LG

01463 231 926

www.royalhighlandhotel.co.uk

Mercure Inverness Hotel

Church Street, Inverness, IV1 1QY

01463 548 111

www.accorhotels.com

PentaHotel Inverness

63 Academy Street, Inverness, IV1 1LU

01463 228 850

www.pentahotels.com/hotels-destinations/united-kingdom/inverness?

MacDougall Clansman Hotel

103 Church St, Inverness, IV1 1ES

01463 713 702

www.invernesscentrehotel.co.uk

Waverly Inn Guesthouse

25 Union St, Inverness, IV1 1QA

01463 716 008

www.waverleyinnngroup.com

Alternatively take a look at options on www.tripadvisor.co.uk

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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