

Autumn in the Cairngorms

Naturetrek Tour Report

24th – 30th October 2020



Pine Marten



Crested Tit



Red Deer



Mountain Hare



Badger



Red Squirrel

Tour report by Chris Rose
Images courtesy of Kevin Pearmain



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Tour participants: Chris Rose (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 24th October

The group met at the RSPB's Insh Marshes reserve on a sunny but breezy afternoon. Although the hide was locked due to Covid restrictions, the rooftop observation platform gave wonderful views across the marsh to the Monadhliath hills on the far side of the strath. Soon after arriving there were close views of a Brown Hare just below the viewing platform, giving us our first mammal of the trip. A pair of Buzzards lazily rode the wind in front of us and one came to perch on a slender birch tree close to the viewpoint, where it stayed for 20 minutes offering excellent views and photo opportunities. A juvenile Hen Harrier then provided a wonderful, lengthy display of aerial agility as it sparred with a Buzzard over the grassy mound ahead of us. Fieldfares and Redwings, newly arrived from Scandinavia, flew over our heads and flocks of Mallard and Wigeon dabbled in the marshy pools.

After arriving at our hotel, we discussed the week's plans over a cup of tea and then enjoyed a delicious dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Day 2

Sunday 25th October

Early rain cleared to bring a bright, sunny morning and, after a hearty breakfast, we drove towards the RSPB's Loch Garten reserve, stopping on the way to view a flock of Greylag Geese in a field next to the road.

In the Loch Garten car park Coal Tits flocked to food being held out for them on peoples' hands and, almost straight away, our first Crested Tit was seen. Peeling away from the busy car park we headed up towards the refurbished (but closed) visitor centre where we were treated to our own feeding flock of tits and Chaffinches. Coal Tits came to the hand for food and Crested Tits made frequent visits to the wooden bench in front of us, providing excellent views of these charismatic little birds of the Caledonian pine forest.

Moving on to the Anagach Woods on the edge of Grantown on Spey we were treated to the spectacle of two Red Squirrels chasing each other around a tree trunk, in competition for ownership of the squirrel nut-feeder! The wonderfully named "Velvet-footed Pax" toadstool was found and identified close by in the woods.

By late morning we were driving up Strathdearn (or Findhorn Valley). Our first stop gave us good views of a Dipper feeding in the fast flowing Findhorn. At our second stop a young Peregrine gave us a thrilling display as it hunted small flocks of Fieldfares and Redwings, dashing through them at high speed and stooping on them from a height. Flying a few feet off the ground 'Sparrowhawk fashion' over a field for several hundred metres it flushed a small flock of passerines and jinked up through them, without success; although driven by hunger, the inexperience of a young hunter was clear to see. Just before getting back in the minibus a female Sparrowhawk was spotted hunting along the same route as the Peregrine. We were doing well for raptors!

Further up the valley three, immature male Goosanders were found on the river and a little further on the unmistakable croak of a Raven drew our attention and two birds appeared. One settled in a tree where we were able to view it through the telescope. A young male Kestrel gave good views perched in a tree nearby.

At the top of the valley, rain carried on a brisk wind limited our activities to eating lunch in the minibus, but a clear spell allowed us great views of a male Peregrine engaging a Buzzard in an aerial challenge almost directly over our heads.

Returning down the valley we delighted in good views of our fifth raptor of the day; a Red Kite. This was joined in the air by a Raven and a Buzzard, all vying for the same airspace.

Stopping a few hundred metres up the Farr road a distant immature Golden Eagle was spotted but, sadly, didn't hang around long enough for most of us to see it. Higher up the road a Hen Harrier made a brief appearance bringing the day's raptor total to six. A lone Red Deer stag was seen briefly on the brow of a hill while on the return journey two Sika Deer females showed well at the edge of a pine plantation, bringing our mammal tally for the trip so far to five.

Day 3

Monday 26th October

Our first port of call after breakfast was a Black Grouse (Blackcock) lek on the way to the Moray coast. Arriving at the lek just after 9.30am we were treated to the wonderful sight of 12 displaying males: an activity that is normally only witnessed at or just after dawn. Pleased that we were now spared an early rise later in the week, we pressed on to Lochindorb for Red Grouse. It wasn't long before the distinctive "go-back, go-back" call was heard coming over the heather and soon grouse were popping up all around us. A party of six Tufted Ducks landed on the loch as we drove round it and small groups of Mallard dabbled at the loch's edge.

Driving up to the Moray coast our first stop was the harbour town of Burghead. A walk in the warm sunshine around this small, working harbour gave us a good look at the different plumages of immature and adult-winter Herring Gulls. Turnstones gave very close views as they probed the fishing nets hauled out on the quayside for mending, while a female Grey Seal swam by the boats hoping for cast-offs from the fishermen. At the mouth of the harbour Cormorants perched on the harbour entrance lights, drying their wings.

Walking over the headland from the harbour we were able to look out to sea from the car park. Red-throated Divers in winter plumage were seen just offshore along with Razorbills and a Guillemot. Small numbers of Long-tailed Duck were also present, the drakes looking very smart in their winter finery. Groups of Eiders flew past and a single Common Scoter was seen distantly. Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher, Turnstone and Rock Pipit were seen on the rocks below us as we ate our packed lunch in winter sunshine.

The afternoon found us at Findhorn Bay at low tide. Walking out over the mud brought us closer to the waders, ducks and geese, but also gave us a sense of space and of being closer to nature, with the evocative calls of Curlews, Redshanks and Oystercatchers ringing clearly across the flat expanse of the estuary. We were able to directly compare Knot, Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank as they fed alongside each other, while dapper-looking Pintail and Wigeon dabbled nearby. Pink-footed Geese were a constant presence and we watched as skeins came in from the adjacent fields, 'whiffling' down to the mud by flipping over sideways in mid-air to quickly lose height and aid their descent. Looking to our backs an approaching shower prompted a hasty retreat to the minibus and a welcome hot drink! Moving round to the other side of the bay we found a covey of Grey Partridge in a field close by, while on the estuary there were closer views of Pink-footed Geese and a small group of Whooper Swans flew in.

Day 4

Tuesday 27th October

A day trip to Gruinard Bay on the west coast meant an early start and a packed breakfast on the move. Driving through stunning mountain and moorland scenery we stopped for a break and to admire the view. Looking west across Loch Droma to Corrieshalloch Gorge and the mountains of Wester Ross, wisps of mist clung to the valley bottoms while the heather-clad hillsides shone deep orange in the early morning sun. Some Red Deer were spotted on the hillside before we climbed back in the minibus and pressed on to the coast.

After a brief stop at Dundonell for a hot drink and a look at Common Gulls and waders on the shoreline, we moved on to a viewpoint overlooking Gruinard Island. Sharing the sound with a plentiful number of Shags and auks were half-a-dozen Great Northern Divers, including one bird still resplendent in its summer plumage. A group of Grey Seals were hauled out on nearby rocks providing good views and behind us two Red Deer stags posed, regally, against the skyline, giving good photo-opportunities. A flock of a hundred or so Barnacle Geese grazed a field on the far side of the bay giving us our first view of this species for the trip. Driving further round the coast a juvenile White-tailed Eagle was spotted perched on a rock but unfortunately flew before the group could see it through the telescope.

Scanning the coastline for Otters all the while we drove round Gruinard Bay to the charmingly named hamlet of Mellon Udrigle. Sitting on the sandy beach to eat our packed lunch we watched Great Northern Divers fishing just offshore. A very late adult Swallow flew low over the dunes behind the beach, where Witch's Cap and, unusually, Wood Blewit mushrooms were both identified. On leaving Mellon Udrigle a small raptor was spotted perched on a rock and identified as a male Merlin. A great addition to the raptor list!

On our homeward journey we stopped again at the Gruinard Island lookout and, just as the rain arrived, an adult White-tailed Eagle was spotted circling over the hills, its white tail clearly visible against the hillside – a great end to the day.

Day 5

Wednesday 28th October

Today we returned to Strathdearn on a fine day to catch up with Mountain Hare. Stopping halfway up to scan for raptors we were rewarded with four Red Kites, three in the air at the same time. A Sparrowhawk and a Kestrel both entered the stage and gave a good display as, in turn, they swooped on the kites to drive them out of their territory. Ravens and Buzzards were an almost constant presence and a flock of newly arrived Redwings and Fieldfares fed in the fields across the river. Just as we prepared to leave for the higher reaches of the strath, a juvenile White-tailed Eagle appeared low over the field directly in front of us, giving us fantastic close-up views of this huge raptor. A Red Kite joined just below but we watched the eagle climb in lazy circles above our heads until it eventually glided away out of view. A great start to the day!

Parking at the top of the valley we walked up the hill to look for Mountain Hare. One was found, still in its summer coat and well camouflaged amongst the heather and the rocks. Hunkered down out of the wind in a hollow we were able to approach cautiously from downhill until it was possible to get close enough for a few good photos.

As we made our descent off the hill a Golden Eagle made a brief appearance above the horizon, quickly gliding out of view behind the hillside.

The day was ended with a quick visit to the Cairngorm ski centre car park to admire the view and to check the hillsides for Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting. None were present but some of the local Reindeer herd was seen lying down in the heather below us.

Finally, a walk from the hotel produced Redwings feeding on the ground in a Birch wood, which also held some great examples of Hoof Fungus; a birch-tree speciality. A Dipper at the loch side ended the day's birding just as the light was fading.

After an early dinner we headed for the Pine Marten hide set in the Inshriach Forest, just a 15-minute drive away. We were led by torchlight to the hide where, after just half-an-hour's wait, two male Badgers appeared at the floodlit feeding station just below us. This was a great opportunity to enjoy a prolonged view of these animals at their ease and at really close quarters. After watching the Badgers hoovering up peanuts for nearly an hour, the star of the show arrived; a beautiful female Pine Marten seemingly sprang from nowhere and settled down to feed happily on an eye-level platform, only feet away from us. Temporarily spooked by one of the Badgers below her, she climbed on to the roof of the hide for a short while where we could hear her moving about just above our heads. Returning to finish the food she proceeded across the branch in front of us, demonstrating her excellent balance and agility, to a second feeding platform. After a spellbinding 20 minutes and with all of the food gone, she finally made an elegant exit through the trees and out into the night. What an end to a great day.

Day 6

Thursday 29th October

Our last full day was spent at the Black Isle, between the firths of Moray and Cromarty. En route at Munlochy a flock of over 1000 Pink-footed Geese had settled in a field next to the road giving us excellent views of these winter visitors. As their excited calls reached a crescendo the flock took flight and the sound of a thousand pairs of beating wings filled the air as they climbed away to new find grazing.

Arriving at Channonry Point at 9am on a beautiful, still, bright morning we enjoyed a packed breakfast and a hot drink at the picnic tables overlooking the sea. Three Grey Seals swam lazily in the narrow channel between us and Fort George on the southern shore of the firth, while Guillemots dived for fish brought in with the incoming tide. Two Meadow Pipits fed on insects in the stranded seaweed and Wrens seemed to be in abundance in the Gorse scrub. A Pied Wagtail – amazingly our first for this trip – made a welcome appearance! A male Red-breasted Merganser and a small party of Long-tailed Ducks flew past along with Eider duck. Sadly, there were no dolphins, so at high tide we headed a short distance north to Udale Bay to check out the high-tide roost.

At Udale the waders and ducks had been pushed by the tide high on to the marsh grass close to the road, so we had good views of Wigeon, Teal, herons, and many waders. Bar-tailed Godwits roosted alongside Curlew, Redshank, Dunlin, and Ringed Plovers while Oystercatchers and Lapwings shunned the company of other waders and roosted in their own species groups. Two Red-breasted Mergansers swam in a channel close to us and further out Shelduck could be seen on the water. Red-throated Divers were seen further out in the Cromarty Firth.

A mile further along the coast a convenient layby gave us good views of a flock of about 200 Greater Scaup at a popular wintering spot for this species. After a brief visit to Cromarty to look out towards the North Sea, we returned to Udale to watch the birds disperse on to the mud as the tide receded. A flock of Long-tailed Tits passed directly over our heads and gave us great views as they busied themselves in a nearby tree.

Steady rain and a receding tide meant a tactical retreat and a return to Strathspey. In the last hour of the day a look in at Avielochan produced a lone female Goldeneye before we headed back to the hotel for a welcome cup of tea and a hot shower.

Day 7

Friday 30th October

Our final morning dawned bright and sunny and we enjoyed a relaxing walk around picturesque Loch an Eilein to soak up the atmosphere of a mixed Caledonian forest with its diversity of flora. We encountered tit flocks and enjoyed good views of Goldcrest and Treecreeper amongst them, while Jays could be heard calling from deeper inside the forest. On our return to the car park a female Sparrowhawk flew overhead and disappeared into the trees – a final raptor fly-past to signal the end of our Highland holiday.

After returning to the hotel, we made our farewells after a wonderful week in the Cairngorms; good company and great wildlife in some of the UK's most stunning landscapes.

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Checklists

H = Heard LO = Leader Only			October							
	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Our tour checklist follows the names and taxonomy (including species order) of the International Ornithological Congress list of the birds of the world (version 10.2, July 2020) which seems destined to become the global standard in future. The species included are based on those thought most likely to be recorded together with what has been seen on previous tours.										
1	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				✓				
2	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>				✓				
3	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>				✓				
4	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
7	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		✓		✓	✓			
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>				✓	✓			
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓		✓			✓	
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				✓				
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓		✓	
13	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓		✓				
14	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>							✓	
15	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				✓			✓	
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				LO				
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				✓			✓	
18	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓					✓	
19	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓					
20	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>							✓	
21	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>					✓			
22	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>							✓	
25	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>							✓	
26	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓	✓		✓	
27	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					✓		✓	
28	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓				
29	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				✓				
30	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓			✓	
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓						
32	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
33	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				LO				
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
35	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					✓		✓	
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
37	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>				✓			✓	
38	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓				
39	Red-throated Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓			✓	
40	Common Loon (Great Northern D.)	<i>Gavia immer</i>					✓			

H = Heard LO = Leader Only			October							
	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
41	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓			✓	
42	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>					✓			
43	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
44	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			LO			✓		
45	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		✓	✓		
46	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓	✓					
47	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓			✓		
48	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					✓	✓		
49	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓				✓	✓
51	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
52	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					✓			
53	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓					
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				✓				H
55	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
57	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>					✓		✓	
59	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓		LO	✓		
60	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
61	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓					
62	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					✓			
65	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>							✓	
66	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		LO					✓	✓
67	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		H	✓		✓	
68	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓					✓
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				✓	✓			✓
70	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
72	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
73	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
74	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>					✓			
76	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓			✓		
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				✓			✓	
79	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>							✓	
80	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>							✓	
81	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	✓			
82	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓				
84	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>					H			
	Total number spp seen or heard: 84									

H = Heard LO = Leader Only			October							
	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Mammals										
1	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>						✓		
2	European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>						✓		
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓			✓		
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elephus</i>			✓		✓			
6	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>			✓					
7	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓			✓		
8	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europeaus</i>		✓						
9	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>						✓		
10	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
Total number spp seen: 10										
Fungi										
1	Velvet-footed Pax	<i>Tapinella atrotomentosa</i>			✓					
2	Fly Agaric	<i>Amanita muscaria</i>		✓						
3	Woodland Blewit	<i>Lepista nuda</i>					✓			
4	Witch's Hat	<i>Hygrocybe conica</i>					✓			
5	False Chanterelle	<i>Hygrophoropsis aurantiaca</i>							✓	
6	Hoof Fungus	<i>Fomes fomentarius</i>					✓			