

Autumn in the Cairngorms

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th September – 6th October 2023



Badger



Pine Marten



Dipper



Otter

Tour report and images by Dave Pierce



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Summary

The Cairngorms surrounding areas were the wonderful setting for this autumn break, further enhanced by visits to the nearby coast at the Moray Firth. The whole area is home to some very special wildlife, including some iconic species. We saw mammals ranging from tiny Wood Mice to majestic Red Deer stags. Close encounters included Red Squirrels (seen on four days) and a bull Grey Seal just metres away. Carnivores were very much a feature of this tour: we enjoyed lengthy views of a Pine Marten and seven Badgers one evening feeding under floodlights, right outside our hide. Otters, too, were seen on three different days, including on a couple of pre-breakfast strolls from the hotel. Of course, bird life wasn't ignored (far from it!), with great views of delightful Crested Tits, plus Crossbills, Dippers and Tree Sparrows. Both Red and Black Grouse were found around the moorland, whilst the coast produced an array of species including Slavonian Grebes, Scaup, Eiders, scoters, Razorbills, with Purple Sandpipers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Knot and Turnstones among the waders. Seven species of birds of prey were seen, including Golden Eagle and Red Kites on most days, although the raptor highlight (if not the tour highlight) had to be witnessing 11 Hen Harriers arriving to roost one evening, including two adult grey males.

Day 1

Saturday 30th September

It was a fine, dry day when Dave picked up the first three guests from Inverness railway station at the start of the tour. Leaving the Highland capital, the group drove south down the A9, before turning off at Tomatin to continue the journey on a quieter road. We stopped to view Coal Tits, Great Tits and Chaffinches attracted to feeders in a roadside garden. Blackbirds were present too, though they were feeding more naturally on berries at the same property. Further on, a Swallow was spotted as we drove to the hotel to collect two more guests, before making our rendezvous with our final guest at the Insh Marshes National Nature Reserve.

From the main observation point at the extensive reserve, there were four Roe Deer grazing the meadows, where wildfowl included Greylag Geese, Mallard and Teal, plus Grey Heron and Buzzard. On the edge of some nearby woodland Great, Coal and Blue Tits were seen, along with Chaffinches and Greenfinches, with Wendy finding a Goldcrest for us. Then from another viewpoint over the marshes, two Ruff were spotted with a flock of 30 Lapwings. Three Roe Deer were in view as well as a single Red Deer stag. We watched the latter trot across the meadow to easily hurdle a stock fence across its path. Around 12 Buzzards were in the air, together with a Red Kite and, more distantly, a Goshawk. Shortly after departing the marshes, we checked in to our hotel, where we enjoyed an excellent evening meal during which we discussed plans for the week ahead.

Day 2

Sunday 1st October

An early pre-breakfast drive brought us to a Black Grouse lek. There were no displaying birds present when we arrived at 0700: however, a male was eventually noticed nonchalantly feeding in the dim conditions. As the light improved, the Blackcock's purple sheen became evident, along with his red eyelids and white tail. Also present were three Red Deer, and a skein of Greylags flew overhead.

Following breakfast we headed north to Strathdearn (sometimes incorrectly called the Findhorn Valley), where we hoped to see eagles. Once we had turned on to the single-track road which negotiates the strath, we encountered

our first Red Kite of the day, followed shortly by a Kestrel, while Buzzards proved quite numerous. At an old stone bridge where a burn joins the main river a Dipper gave good views, with Grey Heron, Mallard and two Sparrowhawks noted. At a later stop, a herd of 40+ Red Deer with a stag was grazing. More Buzzards and Kestrels were seen, plus our first Raven. Then we stretched our legs with a walk in the strong wind, and though no new species were added it felt too good to embrace the elements for an hour, and to generate an appetite for our packed lunches. The next Red Deer comprised a bachelor group of seven stags, which must have been envious of our earlier single male with his large harem.

With the wind proving challenging, we returned slowly down the strath, with occasional stops and diversions to explore more. Ravens, Kestrels and Buzzards were quite evident, but eagles remained elusive, though the tally of Red Kites was now at least half a dozen. It was on the last part of the route that a scan by Dave spotted a probable eagle on the south side of the strath. This was quickly confirmed to be a Golden Eagle, an immature bird which was flying fast and low above and in front of the opposite hillside. It reversed direction and, still flying at speed, it soon dropped low out of sight. We waited, but unfortunately we did not see it reappear. Much closer, a Kestrel was perched on overhead wires, where we also observed Meadow Pipits, Starlings and Mistle Thrush before continuing to the hotel for the evening.

Day 3

Monday 2nd October

With Loch Alvie so close to the hotel, a dawn stroll by the group to its shore seemed a natural option. A group of 13 Goldeneye proved to be the highlight, with Mistle Thrush, Blackbird and Robin amongst others recorded, plus three species of tits and Chaffinches on feeders at the hotel.

After breakfast we headed for Abernethy Forest and specifically the RSPB Visitor Centre by Loch Garten. From the car park we strolled through the old pines to the new building. Here we hoped to find one of the iconic species of the Caledonian Forest, Crested Tit. Lots of Chaffinches and Coal Tits were taking advantage of the collection of feeders suspended from trees around the building, plus Great Spotted Woodpecker, whilst a Goldcrest gave good views as it foraged naturally in low foliage. However, the much sought after tit was proving elusive, until the ever vigilant David sounded the alert. He had spotted one at a nut basket, and quickly everyone gathered to enjoy the sight of this “Pine Punk” feeding. Sometime later a second individual gave really close views at a different feeder; our patience had been well-rewarded. Mammals too were evident, with Janet observing a Wood Mouse gleaning up morsels spilled on to the ground below a feeder, and an obliging Red Squirrel showed well for all.

Next we explored another of Strathspey’s forests, at Rothiemurchus. We had lunch by the shores of the picturesque Loch an Eilein, before completing the two-mile circuit around the shore. Mallard and Cormorant shared the water, while in the surrounding woodland we found Long-tailed, Great and Coal Tits, together with Goldcrests. The ruined castle on the loch’s island, an historical Osprey nest site, was now inhabited by a crowd of Jackdaws.

After using the facilities at the car park we drove the five miles westwards to Loch Insh. A ten-minute stroll brought us to the shore halfway along its length, from where we observed a flock of 30 Canada Geese along with several Tufted Ducks, Goldeneye and four Wigeon. A little further on at the adjacent Insh Marshes reserve, a scan of a group of tall spruces uncovered three Crossbills feeding unobtrusively high in the conifers. Through the scope the two males and a female were observed at length breaking off cones with their specialised bills, before clasping

them with their feet and prising them open to feed on the seeds. An added bonus came in the form of 20 Siskins feeding in the same stand of trees.

Dinner was early today, to enable the group to meet at Inshriach Hide for 1900. Here we met Harris, our host for the evening. After an introduction to the anticipated proceedings, we took our seats, while Harris placed out food in the form of peanuts, peanut butter and sultanas. Within ten minutes of him rejoining us in the hide, a Badger appeared, then minutes later another, then another and still more. Eventually seven had gathered, hovering up the banquet provided for them immediately outside the hide and illuminated by the flood lights. Slowly, the numbers of Badgers dwindled, and in due course they had all slipped away. Shortly after, to much excitement, a Pine Marten materialised out of the darkness, moving gracefully along branches to the elevated feeding platform to gorge on sultanas. Harris recognised it as a regular female visitor. She fed contently just a couple of metres from the seated group until we noticed her demeanour change. She had stopped munching to stare intently in one direction, from where a few moments later a Badger shuffled in to view. She soon relaxed and resumed feeding, until the supply of food for both her and Badger was exhausted and both carnivores headed away in to the surrounding darkness. We too, took our leave, after just over two hours of magical viewing.

Day 4

Tuesday 3rd October

Three of the group went out at 0700 for a wander from the hotel down to the loch. Loch Alvie delivered this morning when Dave spotted an Otter. A great start to the day for him, Janet and Wendy as they watched it foraging through the scope. After breakfast the whole group headed for the Moray Firth. We passed the Black Grouse site we had visited at dawn on Sunday, though there were no birds present. However, a few miles further on we watched three males flying past on our right. This section of the route was through heather moorland where we found our first Red Grouse. Initially they were tricky to spot, concealed amongst the vegetation, but eventually we all enjoyed good close views, with around a dozen seen. The same area held a couple of juvenile Stonechats perching obligingly on fence posts.

Reaching the coast at Nairn, birdlife was plentiful and varied. Waders on the shore included eight Bar-tailed Godwits, whilst offshore we had Razorbills, Shags, Cormorants and several juvenile Gannets. Besides gulls, a late Common Tern was patrolling close to shore and on the landward side 10 lingering Swallows were feeding.

Driving eastwards, we passed flocks of grazing Pink-footed Geese. A second stop was brief due to the strong wind catching the exposed beach, though a couple of Sandwich Terns were seen. Our next location at Burghead was far more sheltered and productive. Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Curlew and Redshank were all present and close, as were some beautifully-plumaged Knot and Turnstones. It was a good place to take our lunch while enjoying the avian delights, which also included Rock Pipits and a Pale-bellied Brent Goose on the shore, with rafts of Eider and Common Scoter offshore. Among the latter David spotted a Velvet Scoter. Before departing Burghead, we took a look at the fishing village's harbour. Here, a bull Grey Seal was a wonderful sight, but so was a splendid Red-throated Diver still in breeding plumage! Moving on to Lossiemouth, six Purple Sandpipers sharing a river wall with a Rock Pipit were arguable our best waders of the day. We had further waders including here including Turnstone, plus another Common Tern and more Razorbills.

Our final venue for the day was Loch Spynie, a few miles from Lossiemouth. A wide variety of waterfowl was present. Among them we found a pair of Gadwall and two pairs of Pochard, plus Coots and Little Grebes. Janet's

sharp eyes spotted a Kingfisher very close to the hide, though Wendy was the only other member of the group to see it. At the loch's car park were several wildlife feeders, at which a Red Squirrel gave good views, as well as photo opportunities. Two Great Spotted Woodpeckers fed here too, along with Chaffinches, Goldfinches and a flock of 10 Tree Sparrows. A Kestrel and the tour's only Magpie was seen on the drive back, after what had been a fantastically varied and interesting day.

Day 5

Wednesday 4th October

The weather forecast proved right, with rain having set in before dawn. After checking a local crag for a potential roosting falcons, we drove north to Inverness where we crossed the Kessock Bridge high over the firth to the Black Isle. Once there, a short drive brought us to the shore of the firth, where Dave advised the group to be extra vigilant, as this was prime Otter habitat. Within a minute of that announcement, Janet spotted one! It could hardly be closer to the minibus, just a few metres away and enabling fabulous views, catching and feeding on a couple of crabs during the 20-minute close observation on and just off shore. Eventually it disappeared, though before we moved on Wendy pointed out a Common Seal she had seen. Following the shore further, we encountered Oystercatchers, Curlew and Redshank plus a single Bar-tailed Godwit, with a couple of Red Kites on the landward side.

The rain had ceased by the time we had a comfort stop at Avoch, and the sky had had brightened at our next stop at Udale Bay where we took our lunch. Here thousands of Pink-footed Geese were present, along with some Canadas and Greylags, plus a couple of Barnacle Geese among them. Other waterfowl included good numbers of Wigeon and Teal, while waders included about a hundred Lapwings. Passerines were represented by a flock of 50 Linnets. Nearby a group of Bar-tailed Godwits showed well, pushed close in by the incoming tide, with good views of scores of Scaup just offshore, plus several Slavonian Grebes. Heading back to the Kessock Bridge, more Red Kites were seen. We stopped on the coast just east of Inverness where two Goosanders on the firth were new for the day, and we also had good views of Tree Sparrows and Yellowhammers.

We returned earlier than normal to the hotel to allow a little free time before a special evening trip to the Insh Marshes to look for Hen Harriers arriving to roost. Once at our view point, it wasn't long before Wendy spotted the first one, a ringtail. Soon other members of the group were picking up incoming harriers. Some went straight to roost, while others quartered around: one flushed a Snipe. Some came in low, others from high, and the number of these sadly much-persecuted raptors steadily racked up. Thanks to a great team effort by the group, the count of Hen Harriers came to nine ringtails (females and juveniles) and two superb adult grey males! As we walked back to the bus, a Brown Hare was grazing in an adjacent field and a couple of Pipistrelle Bats flitted overhead.

Day 6

Thursday 5th October

The optional pre-breakfast wander produced an Otter again on the loch, while birds included 12 Goldeneye and a Grey Heron. After the meal, with rain forecast to spread in from the south-west, we headed north-east! Our first stop was to be at Dorback where a Roe Deer doe crossed the road just ahead of us with her twins, barking an alarm as she did so. We saw both Buzzards and Kestrels, all perched due to the calm conditions. Several Blackbirds were foraging by the roadside and a Mistle Thrush was on overhead wires, where it was joined by a Redwing, a first for the trip and a first locally for the autumn. Two distant Red Deer were spotted plus further Roe Deer, Buzzards and Kestrel, plus a Stonechat.

Driving on to the high road pass of the Lecht, Dave heard a Red Grouse, which, following a short stroll, Janet and Mike soon located and the whole group saw. Dropping down to Corgarf, where the infant River Don rises, we had lunch at the picnic site. At least one Red Kite floated around and a flock of at least 50 Redwings was foraging. We followed this with a break for coffee and a browse in a local gallery just as the rain set in. Before the return journey, a Dipper was observed from a road bridge. Then as we climbed back up to the Lecht we spotted a couple of Red Grouse, whilst beyond the pass a Red Squirrel was on the roadside verge. During a stop for a scan before dropping back down in to Strathspey, six male Black Grouse flew past giving decent views of this scarce species. The final stop of the day was at Milton Loch, Boat of Garten, where close views were had of Mallard, Wigeon and Tufted Duck.

Day 7

Friday 6th October

On the concluding day of the tour, the group started with a return to the Insh Marshes. On the approach two Red Squirrels were on the roadside verge, where they had probably been foraging for hazel nuts. At the reserve a couple of Roe Deer were close to our view point and birds included Mallard, Grey Heron and Red Kite. We stopped to observe a third Red Squirrel while travelling to Glen Shirra, where a further Red Kite was seen. Other raptors seen were several Buzzards and a Kestrel, while over 20 Ravens had gathered. Wendy found an obliging Dipper for the group to observe, and a Goosander flew closely by.

All too soon, we had to return to the hotel where the group said their fond farewells before going their separate ways, and Dave returned the remaining guests to the station.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	September – October 2023						
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6
Brent Goose (Pale-bellied)	<i>Branta bernicla</i>				1			
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	30		30		✓		
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					2		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	70+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	c50			✓	1000+		
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			7	10+	✓	2	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				2			
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			4	30+	400+		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30+				✓		
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				2			
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			c20	20+		2	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					80		
Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				100+			
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>				1			
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				100+			
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			20+	4		12	
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					2		1
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					✓		
Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>		1		3		6	
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>				10+		3	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓				✓	100s
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				c20			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				4			
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auratus</i>					5		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓	✓		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	30				c100	3	
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	✓		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				60+	✓		
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				15	c10		
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				30+			
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				30+			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	2						
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓			
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				6			
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					1		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				30+	100+		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓		
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	September – October 2023						
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1			✓	✓		
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓	✓		
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				2			
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				3			
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓			
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				1			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓			
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓		
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>				✓	✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	6+		2	✓	1	1
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1					
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2		3	1		
Eurasian Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		1					
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					11		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	6			5	1	3
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	c20	c20	✓		✓	c10	c10
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			h				
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				1			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			2	2+		✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		c5		1	1	c8	✓
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	1	3	2			
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				1			
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>					1		
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6					c20
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			2+				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1			15		1	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10+	✓			✓	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	100 +	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓				✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		✓	✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓						
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	20			✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						1	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>						50+	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2+	✓	✓	✓	2	30+	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				4		1	

Common name	Scientific name	September – October 2023						
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1				1	1
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				8+	6+		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓			✓		✓	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		✓		✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		6+		c20	✓		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	3						3
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				3			
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			15	c50			
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			3				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	30	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			c20				
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>					5		

Others

Scientific name	Common name	September – October 2023						
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6
River Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1	1	1	
Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>			1				
European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>			7				
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	20	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	7	2		2	2	4	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	1	50			c20	2	✓
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1	2		1	3
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					1		
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				1			
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>					1		
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>			1				
Pipistrelle Bat species	<i>Pipistrellus sp.</i>					2+		