Dragonflies of the Highlands

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th June - 3rd July 2022



Azure Hawker by Martin Roberts



Northern Damselfly by Martin Roberts



Brilliant Emerald by Martin Roberts



Northern Emerald by Matt Eade

Tour report by Matt Eade



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants – Matt Eade (tour leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This was the inaugural tour to the Highlands where Odonata was the key focus. Of course, this area has much to offer to the wildlife enthusiast, as along the way we encountered not only a fantastic diversity of Odonata, we also saw several rare orchids (Small White and Coralroot Orchid especially), a few good butterflies and just shy of 100 species of bird. Mammals also shone with a few Otter and cetacean sightings on the west coast.

However, it was the Odonata which stole the show. The rarest and most anticipated species of the trip, the Azure Hawker, showed superbly and over the course of two afternoons when the weather was fine, at least six different hawkers were found. Add to this the ease of finding White-faced Darters, Northern Emeralds, Brilliant Emeralds and Northern Damselflies, this was nothing short of a very successful trip!

Day 1

Tuesday 28th June

With Matt's flight having been cancelled from down south, the proposed group walk on the first afternoon sadly didn't materialise. However, the well positioned hotel in Aviemore meant that most members of the group were able to head out to the nearby Craigallachie Reserve, only a five minute's walk from the hotel. Some good sightings were had, especially a few Northern Damselflies which is one of the top targets in the Cairngorms!

In the early evening, Matt arrived and the group enjoyed a pre-dinner drink discussing the plan for the days ahead and the various targets that everyone had in mind. We then headed through to the restaurant for one of many monstrous dinners we had on the trip.

Day 2

Wednesday 29th June

Craigallachie, Loch Garten, Uath Lochan

A pre-breakfast walk to the nearby deciduous woodland reserve of Craigallachie proved a worthy start to the day. Only three of the group joined Matt, but during the two hours a number of birds were heard with the most noteworthy being two calling Wood Warblers, while thankfully seen were two Ospreys and an adult female Pied Flycatcher feeding a recently fledged juvenile. A number of botanical highlights were noted with many Heath Spotted and fewer Northern Marsh Orchids, as well as Round-leaved and Chickweed Wintergreen. Hundreds of toadlets were also on the paths which ran parallel to a lake.

After a hefty breakfast, we left the hotel and drove northwards towards Loch Garten, stopping at 'Flowerfields' for an orchid bonanza. Four species were present, with the rarest of the lot being many Small White Orchids; Lesser Butterfly Orchids were particularly numerous here, while Heath Fragrant and Northern Marsh Orchids were in lower numbers.

The sun was starting to emerge, therefore, we rushed north to a site for White-faced Darter, very near to Loch Garten. We arrived just as the sun crept behind a large cloud, but with patience, we were soon enjoying the classic Caledonian warmth and sure enough, we found no fewer than three White-faced Darters, all eventually

showing nicely for us. Many Large Red Damselflies were present and included a pair in tandem with the male snagged in a Sundew. A Northern Emerald dragonfly tracked past us on two occasions and a Tree Pipit and a few Common Crossbills also flew over. What a brilliant start to our Odonata holiday!

Next up was a lochan which is the favoured haunt for the Northern Damselfly – another regional speciality. Despite being cloudy and cooler, we again quickly found our quarry, and an hour here saw us finding at least a dozen individuals with all allowing superb photographic opportunities. Two Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterflies were also rather docile in the cooler conditions. Also present here was a smart Emerald Damselfly (Common Spreadwing), a couple of Blue-tailed and many Large Red Damselflies.

On our way to lunch, an emergency stop brought us nice views of a Golden-ringed Dragonfly which was patrolling the main road and we enjoyed several flypasts before it flew off out of view. Lunch was then had at the very nice café in Coylumbridge where a Hobby sped past being mobbed by Swallows, and a Siskin was also displaying overhead.

For our final excursion of the day, we headed south this time to Uath Lochan to enjoy the various trails, boardwalks, and acidic pools of this magical part of the Cairngorms. Odonata kicked off from the start with a brief view of a presumed Northern Emerald patrolling a sunlit path. Four-spotted Chasers then dominated the open areas, briefly being joined by some close-flying Northern Emeralds and two Golden-ringed Dragonflies. Common Blue Damselflies were also numerous here, settling mostly on the warm boardwalks, while a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Red Admirals also flew through the area. Matt had a brief female Goshawk fly past, but on the return, the distinctive call of a Crested Tit was heard and after much neck-ache, two birds were seen well. Two 'Scottish-accent' Crossbills flew over too. To make the most of the excellent habitat, we walked back on ourselves but this was worth it for the Crested Tits, but also the surprise find of a colony of Creeping Lady's Tresses which hadn't yet reached their flowering stage. It had cooled considerable, and with light rain starting to fall (how had we avoided it all day?), we decided to call it a day and head back to the hotel. Another large meal and several drinks later, we bid goodnight ready for a long day ahead tomorrow.

Day 3 Thursday 30th June

Aviemore to Carr Bridge; Loch Bran; Loch Maree; Gairloch

A damp, but productive pre-breakfast walk for a few of us along the River Spey was highlighted by a Red Squirrel which was acrobatically moving between branches affording good views. A Sand Martin colony, a redhead Goosander, an Osprey and several Treecreepers were also very much worth the 6am start.

We left the hotel in Aviemore, quickly stocked up at Tesco on food and drink and made our way towards the outskirts of Grantown on Spey to a Red Squirrel feeding station. Two were present upon arrival and a third also came down to feed. With the temperature slowing rising making Odonata a possibility for the day, we made our way over to Loch Bran (relatively close to Loch Ness) via Carr Bridge for Coralroot Orchids and Slochd Summit where three Red Grouse were present.

It was about an hour's drive to Loch Bran, but it was worth the effort despite being slightly off course. Upon arrival, despite the lack of sun, we soon found a teneral male Black Darter, three Common 'Highland' Darters

and several Common Blue Damselflies. Then, out of nowhere, along the shore edge a female Brilliant Emerald (our main target here) was ovipositing! The dragonfly continued on ovipositing in a very small area for several minutes allowing exceptional views of this tricky species, but it was a real pain to photograph, as like all emeralds, they rarely keep still.

A quick lunch stop back at the car heralded the clouds to disperse, warming the area up. We soon walked back out to the shore edge (only 50 metres) where several Brilliant Emeralds and a single Northern Emerald were present, albeit only showing themselves in flight. Four-spotted Chasers were also abundant and another Black Darter and an Emerald Damselfly were located. Several Ringlet butterflies were also on the wing.

After this brilliant success, we departed and headed for Loch Maree. It was a lengthy drive, which comprised driving alongside Loch Ness, through Inverness and eventually to the remoter main road bound for Gairloch.

When we arrived at Loch Maree, the area was warm having recently basked in glorious sunshine, so there was confidence (at least on Matt's part) that we would find our main quarry, but a quick scout on one of three main locations along the loch for Azure Hawkers failed to find any. Matt went into full roaming mode and dashed about the area, which proved exceptionally tricky to cross as the terrain is very unstable here. However, sure enough, a male Azure Hawker was located, and by the time the group had arrived, two males were present and both showed very well for all. This really was a fist-pumping moment – one of the hardest and most range-restricted species of Odonata in the UK had been seen! A Common Hawker also flew through, something that was unexpected on the trip due to its usually later emergence.

With beaming smiling faces all around and no injuries from the harsh terrain, we ambled back to the vehicles and admired the stunning scenery in this part of Scotland. It was now only a short drive to our beachfront hotel in Gairloch – the Myrtle Bank Hotel.

It had been an exceptional day with myriad highlights from the off and then ended with us having a drink on the hotel decking enjoying the spectacular calm conditions looking out towards Skye! A quick post-dinner walk along the beach produced a Greenshank, but what a day it had been and there was now a sense of relaxation as our main quarry had been seen, and seen well!

Day 4 Friday 1st July

Loch Maree

A pre-breakfast drive to Gairloch harbour was very much worth the early alarm clock as two Otters were seen here, and two Common Scoters, several Red-throated Divers and a few Harbour Porpoise were also seen.

With the day dawning cooler and cloudier than hoped, it was a slow start and there was little rush to leave the hotel. So, after a hefty breakfast, we departed and made our way back to Loch Maree to another location. Unfortunately, the conditions neither improved or got worse, therefore, Odonata were in short supply, but we did still encounter several Lesser Butterfly and Heath Spotted Orchids. A dragonfly nymph was a terrific find and was later thought to have been a Brilliant Emerald, but its true identity may need more time. A couple of Large Heath butterflies were also on the wing and three very distant Red Deer were spotted. We finally managed some damselflies in the cooler conditions with a couple of Large Red Damselflies making an appearance, and an

exuvia found by one of the group members was most likely an Azure Hawker. A thorough search at an existing site for Lesser Twayblade unfortunately drew a blank, but a 'baby' Palmate Newt was a lucky find.

We drove to a small café called 'Midge Bite' and then worked our way back to Loch Maree and to the Beinn Eighe area. This is the favoured site for Northern Emerald and the odd break in the cloud increased the temperature enough for two individuals to be seen, the first in flight only, but the second was an excellent spot, perched by the side of the path for perhaps a minute before heading off into the treetops allowing all to get a photograph. Northern Emeralds are the most likely emerald species to see settled, but even then it's a major task, so we were all very pleased with this find and it goes to show how important it is that everyone gets involved in the spotting, which worked wonders here.

With the weather still fine, it made sense to have one last go for the Azure Hawkers at the western end of the loch. From the car park, we enjoyed watching three summer-plumaged Black-throated Divers through the scope; we presumed two males and a female were involved. As we made our way to the cleared area, once again, our main quarry was there waiting for us. At least five Azure Hawkers were showing off their basking behaviour by laying their entire abdomen down against the bare cut trunks and allowed excellent photographic opportunities. What was even more amazing was a male Azure Hawker landed on a group member – a memory to cherish for sure – and signifying the importance of wearing light-coloured clothing when going in search of Azure Hawkers. It was certainly a pleasure to watch these range-restricted dragonflies within arm's reach and even better with no one else around. A Northern Emerald also showed impeccably, clinging on to a bush as the wind blew it around, but as it was just above head height, Matt bent the branch to bring it lower where it showed off its calliper-shaped anal appendages. A Common Hawker patrolling the treeline was the last surprise for the afternoon, or at least, Odonata wise, as returning to the car park we were amazed that one of the Black-throated Divers was just offshore – such stunning birds.

It was again smiles all around and we arrived back at our beautiful hotel with plenty of time yet again to enjoy a drink overlooking the wonderful bay. Another top day on this quite incredible tour.

Day 5

Saturday 2nd July

Gairloch area

Unfortunately, the forecast today was not good at all, at least, for the morning anyway. After a soggy prebreakfast drive to search the harbour, and then, driving around to a couple of viewpoints, there wasn't a great deal on offer, although a distant pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins showed for a short duration and were even seen leaping out of the water.

Over breakfast, an Otter caused a stir as one was fishing just offshore – it's always satisfying when the wildlife comes to you, especially when we were in the warm and dry. After breakfast, we drove to the northern tip of the peninsular for a cultural excursion at the Arctic Convoy Memorial at Rubha nan Sasan. It was a bleak place, but was littered in a variety of orchids, namely Lesser Butterfly, Heath Spotted and Northern Marsh Orchid. Offshore, Common Terns and Guillemots were viewed and we got some incredible views of Great Skuas as they passed close overhead.

With conditions seemingly not improving, it was best we reverted to the town of Poolewe for a spot of coffee. The chosen location was the unique Poolewe House Hotel, where paying guests have included Brad Pitt in the past. The coffee was just as welcome though as we immersed ourselves in the bizarre toilets, lounge and everything in-between.

After a hefty lunch back in Gairloch, the sun suddenly appeared and prospects of a damp afternoon were soon cast aside and we enjoyed a quite memorable afternoon skirting around to Red Point, to the south-west of Gairloch. We walked a glorious white sandy beach at Opinan, finding plenty of Moon Jellyfish and a couple of Dunlin. Our first Common Blues of the trip were here, and offshore, the slow meandering of a dorsal fin had us looking, albeit distantly, at a Basking Shark. Not uncommon in these waters, seeing a Basking Shark is in no means easy. Red-throated Divers and Red-breasted Mergansers were also just offshore. One of the top highlights here though were a family of Ringed Plover, with four unbelievably small chicks running along the beach after their parents. After this cuteness overload, we continued on to Red Point and scanned the mirror-like sea and found two small pods of Harbour Porpoise and admired the views down to the south end of Skye.

The day was still far from over so we headed to Flowerdale Waterfall close to Gairloch. The length of the walk only saw four of us arrive at the lower viewpoint, but the walk overall had us finding a delightful family of Spotted Flycatchers and of course the waterfall itself.

One group member stayed behind and inspected the rock pools from just off the hotel and found the following: Shore Crab, Butterfish, Shanny, Common Starfish, Risso's Crab, Hermit Crab and one Edible Crab.

It was back to the hotel in good time to enjoy, once again, a few beers on the terrace in glorious conditions.

Day 6

Sunday 3rd July

Gairloch: drive to Inverness

A brisk south-westerly wind today again meant that there was no immediate rush to go in search of any Odonata. A pre-breakfast drive to Rua Reidh Lighthouse was very much worth the half hour drive there and back. As well as the views, we also saw a Puffin, two Black Guillemots and a handful of Razorbills flying past. Several Rock Doves, Wheatears and Rock Pipits were also present. Two Red Deer showed well in one of the valleys along the drive.

Back for breakfast, we reluctantly departed this stunningly located hotel and commenced the drive back to Inverness. A toilet stop at Rogie Falls saw a Common Hawker fly over the car park and before ending the tour in Inverness, we walked Monadh Mor. Despite what felt like promising conditions and habitat, we only saw a Fourspotted Chaser for our troubles. An Osprey did show well however and was constantly calling too.

With onward journeys imminent, Matt dropped everyone back into Inverness (either at the train station or airport) and to end what was a very successful trip to the Scottish Highlands.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays

www.twitter.com/naturetrektours

Instagram www.instagram.com/naturetrek wildlife holidays

Species lists

Odonata

			2				
Common Name	Scientific Name	28	29	30	1	2	3
Azure Hawker	Aeshna caerulea			3	5		
Common Hawker	Aeshna juncea			1	2		
Emerald Damselfly	Lestes sponsa		1	2			
Northern Damselfly	Coenagrion hastulatum		12				
Common Blue Damselfly	Enallagma cyathigerum	Y	Υ	Υ			
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Ischnura elegans		2	Υ			
Large Red Damselfly	Pyrrhosoma nymphula		Υ	Υ	Υ		
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	Cordulegaster boltonii		3	3	Υ		
Northern Emerald	Somatochlora arctica		3	1	3		
Brilliant Emerald	Somatochlora metallica			5			
White-faced Darter	Leucorrhinia dubia		3				
Four-spotted Chaser	Libellula quadrimaculata		Υ	Υ			Υ
Black Darter	Sympetrum danae			2			
Common Darter	Sympetrum striolatum	1		3			

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name				June/July 2022								
		Scientific name	28	29	30	1	2	3					
1	Greylag Goose	Anser anser				✓	✓						
2	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			✓								
3	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓	✓						
4	Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra				2	2						
5	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima				✓							
6	Common Merganser	Mergus merganser			✓								
7	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator				✓	✓						
8	Red Grouse	Lagopus lagopus scoticus			3								

9	Common name	0-1	28	-00				
		nmon name Scientific name	20	29	30	1	2	3
10	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus			✓		✓	√
	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata				✓	✓	✓
11	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica				3		
12	Gannet	Morus bassanus			✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		1				
14	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	1	✓	✓	✓	
15	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo				✓	✓	✓
16	Shag	Gulosus aristotelis				✓	✓	✓
17	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		1	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus		✓	✓			✓
19	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus			✓			
21	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata			1	√	√	
22	Greenshank	Tringa nebularia			✓	✓		
23	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula			√	√	√	
24	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			√	√		
25	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	√	√	√	√	√	_
26	Common Gull	Larus canus		√	√	√	√	
27	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus			√	√		/
28	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	√	√	√	√	√	_
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus graellsii					√	
30	Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla						_
31	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle						_
32	Puffin	Fratercula arctica						_
33	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge					√	_
34	Razorbill	Alca torda						
35	Rock Dove	Columba livia					√	
36	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	√	√	√	√	√	\ \ \
37	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		√	√	√	√	\ \ \
38	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		V		Н		
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		√	√	11		
40	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		√	V			
41	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo		√				
	Common Swift		,	√	√			/
42 43	Western Jackdaw	Apus apus	✓ ✓	√	√			
		Coloeus monedula	√	✓ ✓				
44	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	V	✓ ✓	√		,	✓ ✓
45	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		V	√	,	√	
46	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix			√	√	√	√
47	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	,	,	√	√	✓	✓
48	Coal Tit	Periparus ater	✓	√	√	✓		-
49	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		√	√			-
50	Crested Tit	Lophophanus cristatus		3	,			
51	Great Tit	Parus major		√	✓			ļ .
52	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis					✓	√
53	Sand Martin Barn Swallow	Riparia riparia Hirundo rustica		√	√ √	√	√	√

		mon name Scientific name		J	lune/Ju	ıly 202	2	
	Common name		28	29	30	1	2	3
55	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		✓	✓	✓		✓
56	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus				✓		
57	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus			√	✓	✓	
58	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		✓				
59	Common Whitethroat	Curruca communis					✓	
60	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓	✓			
61	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		✓		✓	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		✓	✓			
63	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		✓	✓			
67	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata		✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca		✓				
69	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			✓		✓	✓
71	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe					✓	✓
72	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	√
73	Dunnock	Prunella modularis					✓	✓
74	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii			✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis				✓	✓	√
76	Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus						√
77	Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis		3				
78	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula			✓			
80	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		√	√	√		✓
81	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina						✓
82	Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis flammea				√	✓	
83	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra		✓		√		
84	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis			√	√	√	√
85	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Others

	Scientific Name		,	June/Ju	ıly 202	2	
Common Name		28	29	30	1	2	3
Mammals							
River Otter	Lutra lutra				2	1	
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	√	√	√			
Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus			√			
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus				2	√	√
Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris			√			
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus			1	✓	√	
Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena				3	5	
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis					15	
Weasel	Mustela nivalis					1	

		June/July 2022								
Common Name	Scientific Name	28	29	30	1	2	3			
Butterflies										
Large Heath	Coenonympha tullia				√					
Large White	Pieris brassicae						/			
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	Boloria selene		3	1						
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina				√					
Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus					√	√			
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		2	√	√					
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria		√		√	√	√			
Ringlet	Aphantopus hyperantus			10	✓	√	√			
Other Marine Species										
Basking Shark	Cetorhinus maximus					1				
Moon Jellyfish	Aurelia aurita			√						
Orchids										
Heath Fragrant Orchid	Gymnadenia borealis		√							
Heath Spotted Orchid	Dactylorhiza maculata		√	√	√	√	/			
Lesser Butterfly Orchid	Platanthera bifolia		√	√	√	√				
Small White Orchid	Pseudorchis albida		√							
Coralroot Orchid	Corallorhiza trifida			√						
Northern Marsh Orchid	Dactylorhiza purpurella	√	√	√		√	/			
Creeping Lady's Tresses	Goodyera repens		√							
Northern Marsh x Heath Spotted			√			√				