

Dragonflies & Orchids of the Highlands

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 28th June 2025



White-faced Darter



Northern Emerald



Small White Orchid



Coralroot Orchid

Tour report by Matt Eade



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Summary

This six-day holiday in the Scottish Highlands once again delivered with a great variety of excellent wildlife (and cafés) throughout. Two fantastic hotels serving far too much delicious food were much enjoyed, as was the quality of wildlife encountered. We saw all of the expected orchids and all but one of the dragonflies and damselflies, with group highlights being Coralroot and Small White Orchids and the photogenic Northern Emerald, Common Hawker and Golden-ringed Dragonfly, but maybe best for all was the evening at a wildlife hide, where we enjoyed point blank views of Pine Marten and Badger. A short visit to Loch Bran, during which we found ten species of odonata, including ovipositing Brilliant Emeralds and freshly-emerged Black Darters, was another firm favourite for the group. Of course, the scenery and wilderness in this area of Scotland ensured we enjoyed the very best that this area had on offer.

Note: the familiar English names for the odonatan are used here; see the checklist for the “new” English names, where they have changed.

Day 1

Monday 23rd June

After two pick-ups in the Inverness area (at the train station and airport) from mid-morning, on our way down to meet the rest of the group at 2.00pm we had time to take a short look at a popular White-faced Darter location within the Abernethy Forest. Despite gusty winds, sunny spells allowed enough warmth for a minimum of two White-faced Darters to land among the group on the boardwalk. A Common Hawker also cruised past and posed beautifully on some heather: two excellent species of Odonata within the first hour!

The rest of the group were picked up at The Rowan Tree Hotel, and after the meet and greet, off we went again back to the same location; but by now the wind and cloud had increased to a level which hindered any dragonfly activity. Therefore, we ventured to another pool and had prolonged views of half a dozen Northern Damselflies, one of the rarest species of odonata in the UK; the cooler temperatures allowed us a close approach. Also present were Four-spotted Chasers, while among the horsetails were several Large Red Damselflies, Common Blue Damselflies and a female Emerald Damselfly.

A return visit to the darter location again turned up nothing, so we went back to the hotel, freshened up and rested before a brilliant dinner.

Day 2

Tuesday 24th June

The day's weather was thankfully better than forecast; however, it was still a bit poor for much odonata activity, so today was very much an orchid day. We started in the north of the region, before making our way down south. Two main sites were visited and we saw the following: Coralroot Orchid, Small White Orchid, Lesser Twayblade, Heath Fragrant Orchid, Northern Marsh Orchid and Lesser Butterfly Orchid. Before and after these sites, we walked a circular route at Anagagh Woods, near Grantown-on-Spey, and found a fine collection of wildlife, with Crested Tits being very vocal; a few showed as they fed in the treetops. A large flock of Common Crossbills was

also observed, plucking pinecones. Keen eyes picked out a few plants of Creeping Ladies Tresses (still just about in bud), Chickweed Wintergreen, Heath Bedstraw and a lone Lesser Twayblade.

Thankfully, during the only shower of the day, we had lunch at the fantastic Coylumbridge Café, which always gives us a good feed. We then headed south to Uath Lochan, our final site of the day, where another long walk in now promising conditions sadly didn't yield any dragonflies, although two damselflies (Large Red and Common Blue) were found and incredible numbers of toadlets were on the path. A Spotted Flycatcher was located in the treetops, while on the ground were more Creeping Ladies Tresses, some even more advanced with a couple of flowers just about poking through. With the temperature dropping and no sign of any further sunny spells, we called it a day and went back to the hotel.

New for this tour in 2025 was a three-hour session in a nearby wildlife hide, with Harris, our local guide. Initially we were teased by a few Wood Mice, but finally, after a patient two-hour wait, a Pine Marten arrived and spent a short time hoovering up a few peanuts. Then, not long before we were going to call it a night, two Badgers joined the show; they were first noticed by their loud eating habits, picked up by the outside microphone! It was an excellent evening, and we were all thankful for this opportunity.



Black Darter



Pine Marten



Northern Damselfly



Golden-ringed Dragonfly

Day 3

Wednesday 25th June

We departed our excellent hotel soon after breakfast and made our way back to the Loch Garten area (via Aviemore, where an Osprey flew over) to try again for White-faced Darter, but as per normal, the sun remained hidden and we missed out; but a Common Hawker cruised past on two occasions, and a delightful family of Crested Tits showed gloriously among the stunted Caledonian Pines.

We then headed to Loch Bran. This small body of water, sheltered by mixed woodland, is a superb site, and in only an hour we conjured up between us ten species of odonata. Our main quarry, the Brilliant Emerald, showed instantly, and we enjoyed at least four of these glistening dragonflies, two of which were ovipositing females. In addition, we saw two Black Darters, a few Common (Highland) Darters, Four-spotted Chasers, a Golden-ringed Dragonfly and a fresh Common Hawker, which showed almost too well! Four species of damselfly, including an Emerald Damselfly and our first Blue-tailed Damselflies, were also present along this forty-metre stretch of bank.

With the weather looking promising, we travelled north-west to Loch Maree, arriving mid-afternoon at Beinn Eighe NNR. Although it remained cloudy, the wind dropped, allowing the temperature to rise, which prompted a Northern Emerald to commence hawking near the treetops. It settled, which allowed the long lenses to come into action, but the views remained tricky, to say the least. A fine specimen of a Lesser Butterfly Orchid was by the track, as were a few Heath Spotted Orchids.

It was then a short journey onwards to Gairloch and the Myrtle Bank Hotel, nestled along the rocky shores. We had a fine dinner, with Gannets and Common Terns viewable from the table.

Day 4

Thursday 26th June

A pre-breakfast drive to Gairloch Harbour produced a handful of Red-throated Divers, an actively-feeding flock of Common Scoters and fishing Common Terns, but sadly, no sign of any Otters within the harbour.

After an absolute feast of a breakfast, we set off towards Loch Maree, overlooked by the quite stunning Slioch Mountain. We scoured three different sites during the day, these being the most reliable for finding the UK's most sought-after dragonfly: the Azure Hawker. It wasn't to be for today; however, we had a brilliant time in what can only be described as "mixed conditions". At our first location, a few Common (Highland) Darters were found on the path; two Common Sandpipers were also along the shoreline. We continued to the eastern end of the loch, where we walked the trails of Beinn Eighe; two clients were teased with a tantalising glimpse of a possible Azure Hawker! However, confirmed sightings only comprised Common Hawker and Northern Emerald, and a fly-through Golden-ringed Dragonfly, plus some very impressive sundews among the shallow pools. A Lesser Butterfly Orchid and several Heath Spotted Orchids were along the trails here, while higher up, we somehow found an Emperor Moth caterpillar.

After a much-needed lunch, we tried a different site, where we enjoyed a wonderful few hours in pristine habitat, with the odd squally shower added in for good measure. With the sun shining, insect activity increased; a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Northern Emerald made the most of this prolonged dry spell, but just as another heavy cloud rolled in, a female Golden-ringed Dragonfly was found perched and showed incredibly well: sometimes rain can be a good thing! The excitement didn't stop there: another sunny spell triggered Large Heaths to start flying about, with a total of five seen. We then moved over to an ancient Caledonian Pine belt, but despite another effort, only a Common Hawker, Four-spotted Chaser and another Large Heath were found.

It had been a day of hard work and persistence, so a deserved meal was very much enjoyed by all.

Day 5

Friday 27th June

The forecast for today was far from ideal for insects, so we went into full orchid mode, and rounded the day off with a tour of the spectacular coastal routes in this corner of Scotland.

We headed north and enjoyed a few hours exploring a peninsula close to Poolewe, with the highlight perhaps being three Pugsley's Marsh Orchids among a smattering of Northern Marsh Orchids and, oddly, several Greater Butterfly Orchids. A roosting Common Blue butterfly was also noteworthy, as were the many Heath Spotted and Heath Fragrant Orchids. We continued along the peninsula to the end, finding more of the same orchids, while offshore were Great Skuas and Shags.

A quick toilet stop in Gairloch broke up the journey out towards Opinan Beach. This picturesque beach was not only enjoyed by us, but also several Dunlins and Ringed Plovers, and Great Skuas showed superbly as they powered into the now fierce southerly wind; seabirds way out at sea looked at their most sublime as they fought with the waves. Many Lesser Butterfly Orchids, some brutish (but pure) Northern Marsh Orchids and a possible Dune Waxcap were close by, and on our return a resting group of Grey Seals showed well, and a group of Eider and their ducklings were feeding below us. After lunch at the Gale (very apt) Centre, we then drove the narrow road out to Rua Reidh Lighthouse, a remote place in every sense. Here were more orchids, and offshore a Manx Shearwater and several Gannets and Common Terns flew through. Three Twites were spotted briefly on the return to the vehicle, which ended the day in fashion just as a prolonged band of rain which arrived on the west coast.



Lesser Twayblade



Pugsley's Marsh Orchid

Day 6

Saturday 28th June

This was probably the finest morning of the trip, with mostly sunny conditions and a strong wind, the latter ensuring odonata remain in the most sheltered spots, making them easier to locate.

A pre-breakfast walk from the hotel in near-gale-force winds made for an interesting time, especially looking out to sea, where in the bay were several Manx Shearwaters, three Arctic Skuas, a few Arctic Terns and lots of Gannets.

After breakfast, we wasted no time in heading for Beinn Eighe, at the eastern end of Loch Maree. We went to a favoured spot and stayed in situ until we had to depart for Inverness late morning. This worked wonders; dragonflies had clearly been downed by the wind, and we enjoyed amazing views of several Northern Emeralds, Common Hawkers and Golden-ringed Dragonflies. The former were especially very photogenic! Unfortunately, our quest to find an Azure Hawker was a failure, but we had given it our all, and we can mostly blame the weather for this species remaining unseen. However, we nevertheless ended the tour on a high with this spectacular display of odonata.

We departed for Inverness Airport to drop two clients off, and then it was straight to the Cairngorms for an hour of botanising before concluding the tour. Near Grantown-on-Spey, an area of woodland was well scrutinised, and here we found the delightful Twinflower and many Creeping Ladies Tresses, now mostly in flower.

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Species lists

Damselflies & dragonflies

Old common name	New common name	Scientific name	June 2025					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
Beautiful Demoiselle		<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>						
Emerald Damselfly	Common Spreadwing	<i>Lestes sponsa</i>	✓		✓			
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Common Bluetail	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>			✓			
Common Blue Damselfly	Common Bluet	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Northern Damselfly	Spearhead Bluet	<i>Coenagrion hastulatum</i>	✓					
Large Red Damselfly	Large Red Damsel	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Small Red Damselfly	Small Red Damsel	<i>Ceragrion tenellum</i>						
Common Hawker	Moorland Hawker	<i>Aeshna juncea</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
Emperor Dragonfly	Blue Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>						
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	Common Goldenring	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>			✓	✓		✓
Brilliant Emerald		<i>Somatochlora metallica</i>			✓			
Northern Emerald		<i>Somatochlora arctica</i>			✓	✓		✓
Four-spotted Chaser		<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>	✓		✓	✓		
Broad-bodied Chaser		<i>Libellula depressa</i>						
Black-tailed Skimmer		<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>						
Keeled Skimmer		<i>Orthetrum coerulescens</i>						
White-faced Darter	Small Whiteface	<i>Leucorrhinia dubia</i>	✓					
Black Darter		<i>Sympetrum danae</i>			✓			
Ruddy Darter		<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>						
Common Darter		<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>			✓	✓		

Orchids

Common name	Scientific name	June 2025					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Coralroot Orchid	<i>Corallorhiza trifida</i>	✓					
Creeping Lady's Tresses	<i>Goodyera repens</i>	✓					✓
Lesser Twayblade	<i>Neottia cordata</i>	✓					
Greater Butterfly Orchid	<i>Platanthera chlorantha</i>					✓	
Lesser Butterfly Orchid	<i>Platanthera bifolia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Small White Orchid	<i>Pseudorchis albida</i>	✓					
Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Northern Marsh Oorchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
Pugsley's Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza traunsteinerioides</i>					✓	
Heath Fragrant Orchid	<i>Gymnadenia borealis</i>	✓				✓	

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	June 2025					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>					✓	
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>				✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Large Heath	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>				✓		✓
Common Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>			✓			
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>			✓			

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	June 2025					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓			
Western Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓				✓	
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	✓	
European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>		✓				
European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		✓				

Birds

Common name	Scientific name
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>