Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 13 November 2013

Report compiled by Dave Pierce



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford

Hampshire SO24 0NG

England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051 F: +44 (0)1962 736426 E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader: Dave Pierce

Participants: David Erdman

Annie Erdman Angela Ferguson James Ferguson Bob Mitchell Christine Purchas

Diane Cahn
Edward Cahn
David Vicary
Vicky Vicary
Garry Winn
Gillian Clarance

#### Day 1

#### **Thursday 7th November**

Dave arrived at Glasgow Central Station shortly before 1.30pm where the first of the tour group boarded the minibus and, after a short drive to Glasgow Airport, we met a further five members of the party. Once loaded up we set off on the drive to Kennacraig. Initially, we travelled north along the west side of Loch Lomond, with the remnants of the autumn colours still showing against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks, before heading into Argyll. Here the weather deteriorated and heavy squalls ensued. A comfort stop was taken at Inveraray by which time we had seen our first Hooded Crows, plus Eiders on Loch Long and also our first Raven of the tour.

We pressed on & arrived at Kennacraig in failing light and stormier conditions around 5pm. The ferry was delayed by around 15 minutes and we were diverted to Pork Askaig, a more sheltered alternative than the scheduled Port Ellen; however, in all it was a relatively smooth and uneventful sail. Once ashore it was only a short drive to Bowmore. We received a warm welcome at the Harbour Inn, which was to be our home for the next three nights. We quickly settled in to our rooms and then enjoyed a late, but delicious, evening meal. Afterwards, Dave gave a brief on the plans for the next couple of days before we all retired for the night.

#### Day 2

## Friday 8th November

A few guests joined Dave at dawn at the harbour side, which was right outside the hotel. Hundreds of Starlings were breaking from their roost and swirling around the roof tops. On the water several Red-breasted Mergansers and 2 Long-tailed Ducks were not far out, and the improving light revealed 2 Rock Pipits and 4 splendid Turnstones on the shore just a few metres from where we stood.

After breakfast, in the dining room which overlooks the harbour, we set off to explore Islay. In no time at all, on the edge of Bowmore, we saw a couple of Slavonian Grebes, one of which was quite close to the shore. More Red-breasted Mergansers were here too, plus Shags. A little further along, as the road ran parallel to Loch Indaal, we had good views of a family of Whooper Swans: 2 youngsters and their parents which would have, in the last month, flown south from their breeding grounds in Iceland. Nearby was another pair of these swans, with other waterfowl including several Wigeon and a striking drake Pintail. By now, overhead skeins of Barnacle Geese had

been clouding the sky as they noisily searched for feeding pastures and it wasn't long before we drove between huge numbers grazing either side of the unfenced road. It was near here, towards the head of this large sea loch we scoped a large flock of Scaup on the choppy waters, with an even larger raft of Eiders beyond. Closer in on the same stretch of water we spotted a splendid Great Northern Diver.

Turning inland we soon encountered our first Greenland White-fronted Geese. Stopping to observe them we also saw various finches and buntings, and on the opposite side of the road a flock of over 20 Skylarks. Passing through the Gruinart Flats there were masses of geese on both sides of the road with some distant waders. Stopping at the RSPB's farm at Aoradh we watched some wintering thrushes in the form of Blackbirds, Fieldfares and Redwings searching for invertebrates in a damp pasture. We continued northwards to the end of the road at the Ardnave Loch. Amongst the waterfowl on this freshwater loch were both Whooper and Mute Swans. However, our main quest here was to be found on the adjacent cattle-grazed dunes. It wasn't long before our target was in the scope, Choughs. We enjoyed views of several of these as they probed the ground with their red bills and with their legs showing well too. It became apparent that we had found a sizeable flock of these, the rarest of Britain's crows, with an estimated 50 seen and heard with that most distinct and evocative call.

With thoughts of lunch we headed south back towards Loch Indaal, though by a different route. As we were driving, the group first spotted 4 Brown Hares in a roadside field, which we had good views of, and then, a few miles further on, we got equally good views of a pair of Roe Deer. On arriving back alongside the sea loch, a third mammal was seen, but this time it was a carnivore! To our excited delight an Otter was standing on the shore. Almost immediately it took to the water, where for almost 20 minutes we witnessed it diving for food. At first it kept surfacing, without success, but then after further attempts, it appeared with prey which it fed on while we observed through the scope. Eventually, it swam towards the shore further along the bay where we lost track of it amongst boulders. So we all sat down to our lunch in a small café at Bruichladdich feeling very satisfied! However, Dave soon had us back out on the nearby shore watching waders! Ringed Plovers, a Redshank and 3 Purple Sandpipers were feeding amongst the surf just a few metres from where we stood, giving excellent views.

A further two mammal species were soon to be seen as we drove back towards the Gruinart Flats. The first, whilst we were still on the coastal road, were 2 banana-shaped Harbour Seals perched on top of rocks a metre above the sea, in the most uncomfortable-looking position, though in reality they would have been quite relaxed. Once we were in a position overlooking the flats, we had distant views of a couple of Red Deer among vegetation. We had returned to the flats with the expectation of observing Hen Harriers. We didn't manage to see one, but thanks to Annie's eagle eye, we saw a much larger raptor, a Golden Eagle. It was perched on a stock fence post with Hooded Crows perched adjacently, which allowed us to appreciate its huge size. Although somewhat distant, when it flew to another post the white plumage in its tail and wings was revealed, enabling it to be aged as a young bird, probably a juvenile. With the light fading, seeing the eagle had been a great way to end the day.

#### Day 3

## Saturday 9th November

Driving north out of Bowmore after breakfast, we were greeted with formations of Barnacle Geese heading for their feeding areas. The wildfowl seen along the edge of Loch Indaal included Whooper Swans, Wigeon and Teal. Amongst the waders here were 8 stunning Ruddy Turnstones and about a dozen Bar-tailed Godwits with

their bills tucked in as they roosted just above the high tide. A few Twites were on the shore here too, but they only gave fleeting views.

Taking the 'B' road just before Bridgend we headed south. We soon saw a couple of Roe Deer and, a few miles further on, we began seeing Red Deer dotted around the hillside, including some impressive stags. We got out and watched them until they eventually became nervous and headed off up the heathery slopes. Moving on, we encountered good numbers of grazing Greenland White-fronted Geese followed by good numbers of Barnacle Geese. A little later, and with some good spotting and I.D. work by Gary as we were driving towards Port Ellen, allowed the whole group to enjoy some good views of a Peregrine. We were lucky enough to get prolonged views as it circled around, and at one point we watched it having a tussle with a Raven. Arriving in the Port Ellen area there were Ringed Plovers on the beaches, and offshore both Shags and Cormorants, whilst at nearby Lagavulin Bay through the scope we appreciated a Great Northern Diver plus several Harbour Seals on the rocks.

After some lunch we visited The Oa, the peninsula to the south-west of Port Ellen. The clouds were darker now and some showers had developed, but the conditions didn't deter us from going for a walk. Parking the minibus by the roadside we wandered up the track to Loch Kinnabus and, although we were caught by a shower, we had superb views of Redwings which were feeding in the adjoining fields. Also in the fields were hundreds of both Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese. On the loch we saw Mallard, Teal and Tufted Ducks; however, the biggest concentration of birds was around a crop that had gone to seed which was attracting large numbers of finches and buntings including about 400 Twite. The air was abuzz with the constant sound from these restless seedeaters, and these, in turn, attracted raptors. Twice, a hunting ring-tailed Hen Harrier was spotted across the loch and on both occasions it worked its way to the crop field and quartered around, allowing us some wonderful close views. Then David V. drew our attention to a small bird of prey on a fence post he had found. Looking through the telescope we were able to identify it as a Merlin. The group watched the tiny falcon through the scope then tracked it with their bins when it took off.

Finally, we returned northwards, driving as far as Port Askaig, enjoying the views we had missed on our night-time arrival to the island. It was an impressive scene looking across the sound to Jura and its distinct 'Paps'. En route we passed good numbers of Red Deer plus a couple of Roes. Bird-wise we saw a considerable flock of 90 Ravens and, for a fortunate few, a grey male Hen Harrier which crossed the road ahead of us.

#### Day 4

## Sunday 10th November

Over breakfast, 3 Long-tailed Ducks could be seen feeding in the harbour through the restaurant windows. Some of the group had seen them a little earlier whilst catching the early light outside. As usual there were also some Red-breasted Mergansers, plus 6 Harbour Seals hauled out on rocks. Garry also reported a Merlin flying by.

We vacated the hotel after breakfast on this beautifully sunny day and drove to Port Ellen, sadly passing a dead Otter on the road just outside Bowmore. On arriving at the ferry port there was little delay before we were directed onto the vessel; however, before too long we were all on the aft deck, observing the bay prior to departure. We saw quite a few Harbour Seals and, amongst the birds, were Eiders and Great Northern Divers. Just as we set sail several Black Guillemots and a Black-throated Diver were seen. There was a constant trickle of

Guillemots and a couple of Kittiwakes as we cruised through the calm sea towards the mainland. The weather conditions were stunning and the scenery superb. As we left the snow-capped peaks of Jura were behind us and we faced the snow-capped peaks of Arran which rise above the Kintyre Peninsula. Several Red-throated Divers showed well as we approached the pier at Kennacraig.

Once we had disembarked, instead of turning north to Oban, our next port of the day, we turned south on a wild goose chase, that in fact turned out to be anything but! Dave had learned of the presence of a couple of rare geese several miles down the coast, so after about 15 minutes we stopped to scan the first flock of geese we encountered. These all turned out to be Greylags. Minutes later, a second larger flock, this time of Greenland White-fronts, received some scrutiny and, to our delight we found the 2 Snow Geese of our quest. What's more, we were fortunate that we had one white-phase and an intermediate blue-phase. It was a lovely scene as we scoped the Snow Geese and their Greenland White-front companions in bright sunshine with a backdrop of the Paps of Jura.

Back on course, we took a lunch break at the attractive former fishing port of Tarbert, where the light over the tranquil bay was most impressive. Then we experienced a wonderful drive along the Argyll coastal route with every bend revealing a new set of late autumn colours and light. Every sea loch had a new set of reflections, of trees, of houses and of colours. We arrived at the ferry terminal in good time, which enabled us to have excellent views of a Black Guillemot in Oban Bay. Once underway on the ferry, from the top deck we had a stunning 360 degree panoramic view, with the light lingering long under the clear, crisp skies. Most imposing of all was the arc from Oban northwards, of a continuous chain of snow-covered peaks from Ben Cruachan through to Ben Nevis. Approaching Mull, Duart Castle on its rocky promontory looked very atmospheric in the fading light. Once ashore, it was a dusky, though Woodcock-less drive to our accommodation. Once at Tiroran House the afternoon tea and cakes didn't appear to have dented our appetite for the later evening meal!

#### Day 5

## **Monday 11th November**

It was raining heavily at dawn but by the time we had finished breakfast it had dried up. We set off on our first day's exploration of Mull driving slowly along the shore of Loch Scridain and we hadn't gone far when David V. spotted an Otter. We stopped immediately and, though it was briefly seen again by a several folk, it proved to be too elusive so we eventually moved on. A Greenshank was briefly seen in the general area where we also saw Great Northern Divers and Common Seal.

Travelling eastwards we stopped in the car park near the summit of the Glen More road, where we picked up a flying Golden Eagle and soon after a second, though relatively distant. Driving a few miles further we again found another pair of Golden Eagles and, like the previous ones, these were adults too. They were flying around a peak some way off but they then crossed over the glen and began some masterly flying around a closer peak made all the more impressive due to the strong winds that prevailed.

Continuing onwards we passed the head of Loch Don where about 20 Wigeon and several Teal were feeding. A little later we stopped at Duart Bay where we took the opportunity to photograph the imposing castle, which is the ancestral seat of the MacLean clan. On the shores of the sea loch small flocks of waders were roosting including Oystercatchers, Curlews & 5 Bar-tailed Godwits. Lunch was taken at Craignure, the ferry port, where Hooded Crows were attempting to steal picnic food from Herring Gulls.

Afterwards we drove north passing flocks of both Greylag and Canada Geese before turning westwards at Salen and, due to the narrow isthmus of the island here, we were soon on the Atlantic side. Here on the north shore of Loch na Keal we scanned around and eventually Dave located an adult White-tailed Eagle perched in a spruce tree on the edge of a wood just across the road from where we stood. We were able to have good views of this huge raptor and from its wing-tag Dave knew it was the female of the local pair. She was a 13-year-old bird that had fledged from an eyrie on mainland Scotland in Wester Ross. Having shown herself off perched, she took off allowing us to appreciate the power in her deep slow wing beats has she flew along the near hillside.

Heading for the road around the south shore of the same sea loch, we paused a couple of times looking for the Fallow Deer that frequent the area. At the second attempt a group of 4 were seen grazing, including a dark form one, plus a 5th one which was a little more distant. We were just about to set off after admiring these attractive ungulates when cries rang out from all corners of the bus as an Otter had wandered into view a few metres away, parallel to the vehicle, through a belt of trees between the road and the deer field, presenting great views. It was a most unexpected but exciting bonus. If anyone did miss out, their frustration wouldn't have lasted too long for only minutes later, as we returned to the coast, a different Otter was spotted by Annie. Noticing it had a rather large item of prey in its mouth we anticipated it would come ashore to feed, which it did, and great views were had again has it munched its catch, on a kelp-spewed rock.

When the Otter moved further along the shore we manoeuvred the bus to continue our excited observations.

Following this very satisfying sighting we continued slowly along the coastal road admiring the impressive scenery which includes a section where the road passes beneath some towering cliffs at Gribun. Then it was over a hill road to Loch Scridain where David E. spotted the tour's first Kestrel. Dave had hoped we would see some other raptors in the general area and, sure enough, after a short wait a ring-tail Hen Harrier was seen quartering the ground and we eventually saw another 2, also brown ones. And then Annie found yet another Harrier, though this was a grey male. With the light failing this was our last stop of the day, so we drove the short distance to Tiroran House. Approaching the gateway a Pipistrelle was hawking around with a second near the house where we finally laid to rest Dave's quest for a Woodcock when one flew overhead.

### Day 6

## **Tuesday 12th November**

Around 7.30am Annie and Dave walked down the shore below Tiroran. Quite soon Dave spotted an Otter foraging by a small pier. With some careful watching in the improving light we observed the busy creature for about 10 minutes in the sea close to shore. Gary arrived just too late to see the Otter, though a Great-Spotted Woodpecker put in an appearance.

Leaving the hotel after breakfast it was good to have a Grey Wagtail feeding on the drive just before the gate posts. Then we followed the coast along Loch Scridain, initially on the north shore and then the south side, where quite early on we had good views of a Greenshank and a Redshank feeding in close proximity. Soon afterwards we saw a Great Northern Diver plus a dozen Grey Seals on rocky islets.

Entering the Brolass area of the island's south-west peninsular, Dave spotted an eagle flying low and quite close to the road a little way ahead. Accelerating the minibus, we stopped ahead of its line of flight. With everyone

disembarked we gathered at the roadside and had excellent views of what proved to be a majestic Golden Eagle; it was a young bird, hunting over a roadside field. We had prolonged and very clear views of it, including watching it for a time as it perched on the side of a small knoll with 2 cheeky Hooded Crows nearby for a size comparison. After about 20 minutes it went out of view so we carried on, but we hadn't gone very far when we spotted another Golden Eagle. This one was a little more distant but still showed well and, like the previous one, drew the attention of mobbing corvids and a Kestrel whilst we watched.

Afterwards, following a brief stop at Bunessan we turned south to Ardalanish. En route a superb male Hen Harrier was hunting low over the rough ground, scattering flocks of passerines in the process. We took lunch in the minibus overlooking Ardalanish Bay where a flock of unsettled Golden Plover was alternating between feeding in a nearby pasture and swirling around overhead. Here we had a flock of Goldfinches, plus 8 Ringed Plover on the lovely sandy beach. From here we drove to the end of Mull's south-west peninsula where we found larger numbers of Greylags, 24 Greenland White-fronted Geese and a single Pinkfoot plus some Lapwings. In the settlement of Fionnphort it was a novelty to see a garden full of Rock Doves! The drive back was uneventful bird-wise, but the scenery was very impressive, in particular a waterfall across the sea loch which was flowing upwards on account of the strong wind. On our last leg of the return journey, Annie's sharp eyes did exceptionally well to spot an Otter at Loch Beag and we watched it swimming and diving in the choppy water.

#### Day 7

## Wednesday 13th November

At dawn, just in front of Tiroran House, Angela, Annie, James and Dave thought they had done well when they spotted 2 Woodcocks flying back to their woodland roost; a few minutes later a further 2 were seen! Then they wandered down to the shore where Dave spotted an Otter on the little pier. Soon after it was in the water swimming slowly towards us, diving and catching what appeared to be Butterfish, then chomping on them at the surface.

A little while later whilst packing the bus Dave alerted the group to 2 White-tailed Eagles that flew slowly past the hotel. Then, just following our departure from Tiroran, a Sparrowhawk flew past us. And a brief stop and scan at Loch Spelve revealed a White-tailed Eagle standing on the rocky shore. Once on the ferry most of the group went out on deck and as we sailed out of Craignure, Dave pointed out an adult White-tailed Eagle perched in a tree and Gary spotted its mate close by. It was a nice finale to our stay on Mull. A few Kittiwakes were the bird highlights of the remainder of the sail, plus a Small Tortoisehell found by James about a mile out from Oban!

After we had disembarked, we drove for an hour to arrive at Tyndrum, where the Green Wellie Store provided a welcome break. Afterwards we were soon driving along the bonnie, bonnie banks, where the crows were already a different colour. Then we were at Glasgow Airport saying our farewells with further goodbyes at Glasgow Central, but all with fond memories of two wonderful islands, and their special creatures of the land, sea and air, not to mention some rather fine malts!

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## **Species List**

Birds ( $\checkmark$  = recorded but not counted; h = heard only; d = dead)

				November					
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus						1	
2	Greylag Goose	Anser anser		20	100	30	50	100+	
3	Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons		100+	500	200		24	
4	Canada Goose	Branta canadensis					60		
5	Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis		1000s	1000s	100+			
6	Snow Geese	Chen caerulescens				2			
7	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	<b>✓</b>	20	✓	✓			
8	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus		20	20	10		7	
9	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		10					
10	Eurasian Wigeon	Anas penelope		100+	50		30		
11	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Northern Pintail	Anas acuta		1					
13	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		4	30		40		
14	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			5				
15	Greater Scaup	Aythya marila		100					
16	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	20	100	30	30		3	
17	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis		2	1	3			
18	Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula					1		
19	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator		60	25	50	20	20	6
20	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata		3		1			
21	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica				2			
22	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer		2	2	10	2	2	1
23	Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus		1	1				
24	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis				1	1		
25	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		1	2	6	50	40	10
26	European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis		40	30	50	20	30	20
27	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		20	2	6	2	2	3
28	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla					1		5
29	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus			2	1	4	1	
30	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus							1
31	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	2	12	10	20	15	20	6
32	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos		1			4	2	
33	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus					1	1	
34	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus			1				
35	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	✓	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		50		50	✓	3	
37	European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria						15	
38	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		20	10			8	
39	Eurasian Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola					1		4
40	Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica		12				5	
41	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata		50	30	20	30	30	
42	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia					1	1	
43	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		2	1		5	2	
44	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres		14	12	2			
45	Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima		3					
46	Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla				2			6
47	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

			November							
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
48	Common Gull	Larus canus	✓	100+	✓	100s	✓	100s		
49	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Common Guillemot	Uria aalge				40				
52	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle				10				
53	Rock Dove	Columba livia		60	50	10	2	50	4	
54	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		10	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	Great-spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major						1		
56	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓				
57	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax		50						
58	Rook	Corvus frugilegus		✓	✓	✓		✓		
59	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	100+		
60	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone							2	
61	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1	h	100+	2	✓	✓		
62	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		<b>√</b>					✓	
63	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		30						
64	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus					1			
65	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		h	1		1	1		
66	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		100s	✓	✓	✓	<b>✓</b>	✓	
67	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris		2	10	2				
69	Redwing	Turdus iliacus		2	100s	100s	✓	100+		
70	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		2	6	✓		100+		
71	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus			1		2	2	5	
72	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		2			3	6		
74	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓		<b>✓</b>		
75	Dunnock	Prunella modularis					1	2		
76	Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		3	5		3	2		
77	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea						1		
78	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓		✓	6		
79	Eurasian Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		10	6		4	6		
80	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris			2					
82	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	15			10		
83	Twite	Carduelis flavirostris			400					
84	Common Linnet	Carduelis cannabina		✓						
85	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra						h		
86	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		3	2					

## Mammals

1	European Hare	Lepus europaeus	4	2				
2	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	<b>✓</b>	✓				
3	Western European Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus	1 d					
4	Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus					12	
5	Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	2	4	20	6	6	
6	European Otter	Lutra lutra	1		1 d	3	2	1
7	European Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	4	4	1			
8	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	4	50		30	5	
9	Fallow Deer	Dama dama				5		
10	Pipistrelle bat	Pipistrellus pipistrellus				2		

				November					
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Other Taxa									
1	Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly	Aglais urticae L							1

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