

The Great British Bird Race – Highland

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th – 30th January 2026



Dipper



Hawfinch



Crested Tit



Red Squirrel

Tour report by Matt Eade
Photos by Steve Wilson



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Tour participants: Matt Eade (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Summary

This action-packed forty-eight hours made the most out of the avian delights this county had on offer. A two-week freezing spell at the start of the month had clearly dispersed many passerines, as these proved hard to come by, but thankfully, several scarcities had replaced them, ensuring that a respectable tally of ninety-four species was seen. The highlights comprised both Black and Red Grouse, both Golden and White-tailed Eagle, and Crested Tit, while the scarcer species seen comprised Surf Scoter, Snow Goose, Smew and Great Crested Grebe (the latter two both rare in Highland, with only one of each present this winter in the entirety of the county) and Green-winged Teal. With excellent café options, a very comfortable hotel serving sumptuous food, and wonderful Highland panoramic views, it was a memorable venture.

Day 1

Wednesday 28th January

We convened at the hotel at 12.30pm and soon made our way down to Loch Insh, ready for the kick-off at 2.00pm. In the interim, we set about locating a long-staying Smew, a rare bird in Highland. We eventually found the bird and watched it constantly until the sound of the 2.00pm claxon. The race was on and the Smew, along with Goldeneye, Goosander, Little Grebe and Tufted Duck were secured within seconds; we made a swift exit, but still had time to admire a perched Mistle Thrush.

During the short drive down to the Insh Marshes RSPB lookout, we saw Whooper Swan and Wigeon, and from the lookout it was with mighty relief that the long-staying Snow Goose had done the decent thing and illuminated itself among a throng of Greylag Geese off in the distance. Here, we were also treated to a superb fly-by from a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle, and a small flock of Fieldfare, but it stayed relatively quiet and we ended the day on a meagre thirty-one species. It was time to go back to the hotel, first to defrost, and then to freshen up before a lovely dinner.

Day total = 31

Day 2

Thursday 29th January

Today was to be a big day, as we were to seek out a big tally, while incorporating a variety of habitats. Without wanting to rush breakfast, some of us were at our table positions a good twenty minutes before serving time, just in case we could sneak a little valuable extra time.

We left the hotel in the Cairngorm gloom and made our way north on the A9, hoping a Rook might arise from the many fields and that a Blackbird might cross our path, and although neither did, we of course did catch up with these species in good time. The Moray Firth was our first destination, and off Milton of Culloden we collected some excellent species for our now growing list. Scaup, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Diver and a few waders were fine additions, as were a few finches. Next up was Allangrange, home to the Black Isle brewery; a standard Naturetrek tour would, of course, have meant visiting such a fine establishment, but race mode ensured only the birds remained a priority, and here we added Siskin, Blackbird (at last!) and our only Sparrowhawk.

A brief coffee stop at The Storehouse café along the A9 added House Sparrow and Red-breasted Merganser, but soon after on our drive north we found no fewer than eight Black Grouse. Although this was at a known lek site, today the birds were only feeding. But this didn't matter: this was a Highland speciality under the belt.

We headed on to Dornoch, one of the sites most favoured by birders this winter, as it has hosted a solid stream of rare ducks; today the wind did scupper things a little, but still we managed to locate two Surf Scoters and a single Velvet Scoter among the Common Scoters, plus both Sanderling and Purple Sandpiper along the beach.

After a welcome lunch stop, we ventured to Tain, where thankfully both Pintail and Shoveler (the latter another scarce Highland bird) were found, along with a group of Dunlins and Knots, but the real bonus here was a drake Green-winged Teal on the river channel (despite having been 'lumped' with the European Teal recently, it was still countable during this race). We had yet to see a Coot; therefore, we visited Loch Eye and quickly found a flotilla.

We next headed back to the Black Isle, where a receding tide at Udale Bay gave us a Black-tailed Godwit, then went around the corner and at Cromarty had a lucky sighting of a Razorbill in the channel. But this was completely overshadowed by an adult White-tailed Eagle going at a Herring Gull, before venturing inland.

As the light faded, a detour to the southern end of the Isle sadly added no more species, but today had been exceptional, and we arrived back at the hotel in a strong position, if a little tired from the time spent on the roads. We had seen a wonderful array of species.

Day total of new species = 46

Running total = 77 species

Day 3

Friday 30th January

We had only six hours to conjure up as many species as was possible. Things didn't get off to the best of starts, as the mountain road to Cairngorm was closed, and then our next few stops proved fruitless. But Nethy Bridge came up trumps with its ever-cooperative Dipper, and a nearby feeding station added a lovely Crested Tit, and a bonus Jay. We moved on to Lochindorb, where a Red Grouse was soon located, but our journey north to the coast couldn't have gone much better.

It all started off with a pair of obliging Hawfinches in a churchyard, where a bonus Bullfinch and Long-tailed Tits also proved valuable. Loch Flemington gave us Magpie and Moorhen, a flock of Lapwings flew over, and we then scored Turnstone and Pied Wagtail at Alturlie; although not usually worthy of a mention, these last few species allowed us to creep past ninety species seen, something that hadn't seemed possible at the start of the day.

With time now slipping rapidly from our grasp, we wanted to end on a high, and therefore made our way to a high valley not too far from the famous River Findhorn. Minutes later, there they were: a pair of displaying Golden Eagles! This our final addition, and with only ten minutes to spare.

Wind beaten, we now calmly made our way back to the hotel, where we awaited the all-important results. Despite a brave attempt, Highland finished outside the podium positions, although the quality of birds (and surely unfair lack of daylight!) surely warranted such a position. Maybe next year!

Day total of new species = 17

Final total = 94 species

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Snow Goose	<i>Anser caerulescens</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus scotica</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</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>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>
Rock	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</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>
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>