

Ardnamurchan - The Red Deer Rut

Naturetrek Tour Report

29 September - 3 October 2016



Report compiled by Marcus John
Red Deer Images courtesy of Simon Todd



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Tour participants: Marcus John (leader) and eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 29th September

We left Glasgow on schedule, crossed the Erskine Bridge and followed the western shores of Loch Lomond. After a brief stop in Tyndrum, we drove across Rannoch Moor and down through Glen Coe. The wet and windy weather added real atmosphere to the dramatic highland scenery. We caught the Corran Ferry over Loch Linnhe before continuing westwards onto the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. We arrived in Glenborrodale with plenty of time to settle into our comfortable rooms before a delicious dinner.

Niall Rowantree visited after dinner to give us a very informative and entertaining introduction to the breeding ecology of Red Deer in the Scottish Highlands. Niall is the head stalker of the Ardnamurchan Estate and his talk certainly whetted our appetite for the days ahead!

Day 2

Friday 30th September

We rose early and set off just after dawn on our first drive. We found a scattered group of Red Deer hinds above the dramatic bay of Camas nan Geall. More impressive was a big stag that stood sentinel over a large group of females behind Braeside. We continued westwards and, as we approached Kilchoan, we found a bachelor group of six young stags, two or three years old. They were indulging in jousting behaviour, lowering their heads and locking antlers in a test of strength; good preparation for future rutting!

Our return journey to Glenborrodale had been relatively uneventful but as we turned onto the steep track to our accommodation, two hinds suddenly appeared at the roadside, closely followed by a stag. He could only have been five metres from the vehicle; too close, in fact, for Simon's telephoto lens! It was a dramatic encounter that will live long in the memory.

After a hearty highland breakfast, we travelled out to Ardnamurchan Point, the westernmost place on the British mainland. We walked out past the lighthouse to scan the open sea from a covered viewpoint. We saw several Northern Gannets, two Harbour Porpoise swam past and a Grey Seal was also present. After lunch we headed back towards Glenborrodale but stopped when we saw a huge stag with an incredible 18 points on his antlers, who was sitting with a big herd of around 50 females and youngsters. As we watched, we heard roaring from the other side of the road as a large, very dark stag walked down the brae towards us. These dominant stags have little need to fight each other; it is the younger challengers who provoke conflict. During the afternoon we also saw a Golden Eagle, a lovely male Hen Harrier and a Merlin - not bad for a day that was mainly devoted to deer watching!

Day 3

Saturday 1st October

The day dawned clear and bright as we set off on our early morning drive at 7am. Although Red Deer were our main quarry, we were delighted to find a Harbour (Common) Seal close to the shore in Camas Fearna. It provided us with excellent views as it struggled to swallow a very large fish. We had just turned left down the Achateny road when we noticed a young stag running across the glen; we soon realised that a big male was in

hot pursuit! The dominant stag followed the younger one for several hundred metres before finally turning back to rejoin the females.

On the way back for breakfast, we stopped at Glenmore Bay when we saw a large ring of ripples on the still water. After some time, a dog Otter appeared and spent a few seconds at the surface, devouring a small fish. We enjoyed great views as he continued to feed in this manner for several minutes. He eventually drifted out of sight and we decided it was time for our breakfast. However, as we drove through Glenborrodale, a big stag crossed the road right in front of us and continued along the loch shore. We parked up and jumped out to get some close photographs in a superb lochside setting. As we drove up the track for our belated breakfast, we could hear him roaring behind us - it had been an amazing encounter!

Late morning saw us travelling east to Garbh Eilean, where we enjoyed a walk in the sunshine through maritime Sessile Oak woodland - a scarce and protected habitat. From the well-constructed hide, we counted 19 Harbour Seals hauled out at low tide. Next we visited picturesque Arivegaig, on the edge of Kentra Bay. After indulging in delicious coffee and cakes at Acharacle community cafe, we walked out to Loch Shiel and then continued on to Camas Torsa. Here we enjoyed our packed lunch whilst looking out over a sunlit Loch Sunart.

The late afternoon saw us driving back west along the Kilchoan road. We had stopped just beyond Camas nan Geall to photograph an impressive stag, when an enormous White-tailed Eagle glided past. Its flight seemed almost effortless, with only an occasional heavy flap as it headed out past the bulk of Ben Hiant. Soon after this, we found three stags roaring at each other on either side of the road at Caim - a spine-tingling sound. We finished the day watching the sunset over Loch Sunart, outlining the silhouette of mighty Ben Hiant.

After another excellent three course dinner, some of us stayed up to watch for Pine Martens. Our patience was rewarded with extended views, right outside the living room window!

Day 4

Sunday 2nd October

Our early drive took us back to the best places for Red Deer, and the handsome stag was again with his harem behind Braeside. On this occasion he was close to the road and the light was superb; we had our best photographic opportunity of the tour. There was little activity elsewhere so we actually made it back for breakfast in good time!

Later that morning we were accompanied by the head stalker, Niall Rowantree. It was a real privilege to spend time in the field with the man who knows the ecology of Ardnamurchan better than anyone else. He explained much about the behaviour of Red Deer and the efforts made by the estate to manage their habitat in a sustainable manner. He has a wide knowledge of highland conservation and we also discussed the impact of sheep on the highlands and the impact of White-tailed Eagles on sheep. From the road to Achateny, we watched a big stag chase off a younger male, which had to leap over a fence to get away. While this was happening, another immature stag tried to get amongst the females from other side until he, too, was forced away. Now the dominant stag busied himself with herding his females into a tight group, before roaring to reinforce his dominance. To complete the scene, as we stood and listened to the stag, a pair of Golden Eagles flew across the mountainside opposite. We ate our sandwiches at the raptor watch point of Camas Nan Geall, where we also saw a distant White-tailed Eagle.

In the late afternoon we drove out to Sanna Bay, widely recognised as one of Britain's most beautiful beaches. We walked across the white sand in brilliant sunshine, enjoying close views of both Sanderling and Ringed Plover. On our return journey, we had another view of the same Otter feeding in exactly the same place. To complete a memorable day, we could hear two stags roaring throughout the evening, one of them only a few metres from our dining room window!

Day 5

Monday 3rd October

We needed to make an early start and so left immediately after breakfast to return to Glasgow. Just after disembarking from the Corran Ferry, we made a short stop at the Glen Righ Forest, a hot-spot for Red Squirrels. Sure enough, we had close views of several of these charming little animals as they came in to eat hazelnuts from the feeders. As we drove back down the A82, we were also able to enjoy the magnificence of Glen Coe, arguably the most famous site in the Scottish Highlands. We arrived back in Glasgow in good time for everyone's flights and trains.

It had been a remarkable few days, during which we had seen almost all of the iconic animals of Scotland. The sight and sound of big Red Deer stags roaring at each other across the wild glens was the undoubted highlight. To have seen and photographed them at close quarters was a real privilege. The supporting cast added enormously to our enjoyment: Otter, Pine Marten and Red Squirrel, as well as both Golden and White-tailed Eagles. Everyone appreciated the special scenery of this remote peninsula, and the Glenborrodale Bunkhouse was a welcoming and comfortable base with chef Alan providing hearty and delicious meals. Ardnamurchan is a remote yet beautiful place that retains a true sense of wilderness; time spent here will live long in the memory.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Scientific name	Common name	September / October				
			29	30	1	2	3
1	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		300	235	150	
2	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		2			
3	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>			2		
4	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			1	1	
5	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>					6
6	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		2			
7	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			19		
8	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1			

Birds

1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	1	1	
2	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassana</i>		3		2	
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	6	4	2	
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		1	1	2	
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		8	5	10	
7	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>				11	
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		3			
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			3		
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				3	
12	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				2	
13	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1			
14	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	3	4	4	
15	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1		
16	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1	2	2	
17	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				1	
18	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
19	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	2	6	3	9	
20	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				7	
21	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1			
22	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		3	2		
23	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		8	3		
24	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				3	
25	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		6		1	
26	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		✓			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
29	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				1	
30	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓		✓	
31	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			1		
32	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			H		
33	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		2			
34	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		3			

	Scientific name	Common name	September / October				
			29	30	1	2	3
35	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
36	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		1			
37	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1	
38	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		4	6	12	
39	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	1	1	
40	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		2			
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1			
42	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		4	5	4	
43	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				1	
44	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		6	5	3	
45	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>		8		1	
46	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H			
47	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			H		
51	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		50		10	
54	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		1	3		
55	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>				6	
57	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			1		

