

# Ardnamurchan – The Red Deer Rut

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 7th October 2022



Otter



Red Deer



Red Deer stags



Dipper

Tour report and images by David Jackson



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Tour participants: David Jackson (leaders) with seven Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

**Monday 3rd October**

20°C - 14°C

Early pick-ups from Glasgow Central Station and the airport meant we were on our way, over the Erskine Bridge and passing Loch Lomond for our scheduled stop at The Green Welly, Tyndrum some 50 minutes ahead of time. Rain became heavier as we crossed Rannoch Moor and clouds shrouded the peaks of Aonach Dubh, Beinn Fhada and Gairr Aonach, collectively known as the Three Sisters of Glencoe, as we stopped to take in the view before continuing on our way.

After a short ferry crossing over Loch Linnhe, we were soon on our way to Strontian where we would be meeting the rest of the group who'd travelled independently at our meeting point, the Ariundle Café. We were all keen to get settled in at our accommodation - the Glenborrodale Bunkhouse. After our three-course dinner and one species high on the group's wish-list was Pine Marten so jam and peanuts were offered in the hope they would show on our first night. It wasn't long before the female marten and one of her kits enthralled us all with their visit, followed by a Badger right outside the lounge window - what a great start!

## Day 2

**Tuesday 4th October**

Rain am, sun pm, 12°C - 14°C

We awoke to heavy rain and any thoughts of an early walk down to the loch were quickly forgotten in favour of a leisurely breakfast while we watched the Coal Tits, Chaffinches and other common birds feeding outside the window. One early riser braved the walk and was rewarded with a Tawny Owl heading for its daytime roost site

Three Common Redshank calling and flying around the loch were the only birds of note as we made our way to Braehouse where two Red Deer stags locked antlers in a half-hearted battle while another stag looked on. They may have been getting in practice for the main event as it all ended amicably as they went their separate ways.

More deer were distant from Allt na Mi-Chomhdhial so we continued to Kilchoan Community Centre for a coffee stop before checking out Mingary Pier for seabirds. European Shags fed in the harbour as we scanned the water in the hope for Otter. No sign, so we continued on to the Point of Ardnamurchan, just over 1 km north of Corrachadh Mòr, the most westerly point of the British mainland, where Coll & Tiree and the Treshnish Isles could be seen from the lighthouse. Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls drifted by and Ravens croaked over the rocky crags but the sea was quiet so we took a slow drive down the narrow roads back to the Bunkhouse stopping at Loch Sunart on the way. An incredible sight of three Dippers, a difficult bird to find on the peninsula, showed very well while other birds seen included Common Scoter and Curlew before we returned to base for lunch.

The sky was blue as we headed out for the afternoon, stopping at Camas Torsa where two Harbour Porpoise broke the surface as they headed east along the loch.

Red-breasted Merganser and Harbour Seals were seen from the Garbh Eilean Wildlife Hide overlooking Loch Sunart where the rare Lungwort Lichen adorned several Oak Trees - a sign of good air quality in this remnant of Atlantic Rain Forest.

The regular Otters were nowhere to be seen so we retraced our steps back to Camas Torsa for another try, again without success, but those who missed the Harbour Porpoises earlier were given another chance as presumably the same pair were making their way back along the loch.

Back at base our delightful Pine Martens returned for their evening feast while the Red Deer stag, known as One Eye, bellowed to the unimpressed hinds. After dinner, the two kits came close to the open door with one growling and charging at his or her sibling showing its dominance over the plentiful food supplies.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 5th October

Overcast, wind and sun breaking through, 12°C - 10°C

We set off after breakfast to Camas nan Geall in the hope of seeing eagles and no sooner had we arrived an immature White-tailed Eagle almost slipped un-noticed over the bay and out of sight around the headland. Another bird appeared soon after and flew straight over our heads and across the mountains with up to three more birds in the air all within a few minutes of our arrival. Ravens and Hooded Crows couldn't compete for our attention with all the eagle activity. What a treat!

We then checked out the deer on the Braehouse road and noticed the dominant stag was alone with his herd while four more stags had been banished to the other side of the road, just a little too far off for photos. We carried on to the end of the road to Ockle where Mistle Thrush, Starling and Meadow Pipits perched on the wires. A pair of Merlins put the pipits up as they scythed over dry-stone walls and a Common Buzzard showed well on a fencepost ahead of the vehicle but wouldn't allow close approach. Muck, Eigg and Rum, collectively known as The Small Isles, and the distant Cullins of Skye could be made out as we drove back along the north of the peninsula.

Sanna is one of the most beautiful beaches on the Ardnamurchan peninsula with its sandy bay and sand dunes and as we drove past the extinct volcano a Golden Eagle gave brief views from the moving vehicle. The tide was fairly high and the sea a bit choppy making the search for seabirds difficult. A small flock of Sanderling and Ringed Plover were seen as we walked along the beach before we headed back to the car park through the machair grassland where Common Gulls fed.

Our next stop was a disused quarry leading up to the abandoned crofting township of Glendrian where the ancient volcanic crater can be seen from the track. The information board gives the history of the settlement and it was interesting to read that it was only abandoned in 1941 having escaped the highland clearances a century or two earlier with the last family outstaying their neighbours by 20 years.

There was a noticeable drop in temperature as we got out of the minibus at Mingary Pier where a very close Harbour Seal could be seen feeding off the pier. The dominant stag was adorning his antlers and scraping up the earth before rolling around in it in an attempt to look more appealing to the hinds at Braehouse as the wind became colder and stronger, so we made our way back to Glenborrodale to check the bay for Otter which appeared right on cue around the island catching fish. A little distant but a welcome sighting nonetheless.

The cold was setting in so we returned to base for a hot brew after a very rewarding day out in the autumnal weather with time to relax before the evening's Pine Marten entertainment. The Bunkhouse manager, Niall arrived after dinner to talk about the history of Ardnamurchan and the historical links to the monarchy, tartan and the civil wars. The discussion around climate change created a lively debate with the weather on the peninsula becoming wetter and less suitable to some of the wildlife. He finished by comparing the antlers of deer from the estate, some with European ancestry and how they arrived in the UK, a very enjoyable and illuminating talk.

## Day 4

**Thursday 6th October**

Rain showers, 11°C

One of our adventurous guests cooked hedgehog fungus for breakfast, bought from the indoor market in Kilchoan, as the usual birds gathered outside feeding on scattered seed.

Our last drive out west to Braehouse where the dominant stag was baying to his herd and with no other stags around to challenge for his kingdom we turned around and headed east along the B8007 past Glenborrodale where at least one of the Dippers was still around the bay. There was little activity on the loch from Camas Torsa so we headed to Acharacle for hot drinks in Tioram Café.

The tides were favourable for an excursion to Tioram Castle, which can only be reached on foot along a tidal causeway. Due to the risk of falling masonry, entrance to the interior is prohibited, though the interior can be viewed through a wrought iron gate to gauge the wall thickness. Black-headed Gulls, Oystercatchers, Rock Pipits and a flock of seven Wigeon were seen as we dodged the showers on the way back to the vehicle.

We decided to put off lunch until we reached the Garbh Eilean Wildlife Hide which proved to be a very good move. An Otter had just caught a flatfish and was on the rocks closest to the hide munching away when we arrived, much to everyone's delight. It stayed until it had consumed every part of the fish from head to tail before diving back into the loch and swimming away. Fortuitous timing indeed!

Rain persisted as we made a stop at a viewpoint by Glen Moidart so a unanimous decision was reached to make an early visit to the café where Kate, the owner, had just nipped down to the village so we made ourselves at home by lighting the wood-burner before she returned and made us a welcoming pre-dinner pot of tea.

A few Red Deer were seen through the driving rain as we returned to the bunkhouse where we completed the checklist and retired for our last night on the Ardnamurchan peninsula.

## Day 5

**Friday 7th October**

Rain showers, 12°C

Early risers were treated to more Pine Marten sightings as the last of the jam was consumed while the usual stag bellowed close by - he didn't get much sleep during the night that's for sure! A Robin sang in the twilight as we prepared breakfast before loading up our luggage for departure. We'd had an enjoyable time during our visit to the UK's most westerly mainland peninsula, with breath-taking scenery, good food, courtesy of Kate and her team,

and seen some wonderful wildlife. We said our goodbyes to those travelling independently and set off for the ferry and on to Glasgow where the tour concluded.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		October 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	3	4	5	6	7
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				7	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		3			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia 'domestica'</i>			15+		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				1	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		1			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			2		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		2	1	3	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			6		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		3			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓		✓		
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓			
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			1		
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1		
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			5	2	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	✓		
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1			
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			3		
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓		✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				1	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		3	1	1	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	2	
Mistle Thrush				✓		

## Mammals

I=Introduced		October 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	3	4	5	6	7
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		2			
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓		
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓	1	1	
European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	1	✓			
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			2		