

Ardnamurchan – The Red Deer Rut

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 7th October 2023



Tour report by Steve Gater, Images by Robert Tilt



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Summary

The Atlantic or Temperate Rainforest that remains in Ardnamurchan is evidence of a wet climate, and we witnessed such during our short stay. However, the pleasures of exploring this amazingly diverse peninsula, enjoyment of its wildlife, landscape, history and culture far outweighed the wet weather. The Red Deer were superb and abundant, the views were close to distant, mostly for good lengths of time. Eurasian Otter were equally wonderful, as were the Pine Marten visiting nightly. Common Seal, Red Squirrel, different bat species added to the mammals list. Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Northern Raven and many more birds were seen. A good range of plants was found, perhaps Grass of Parnassus, Devils-bit Scabious, Harebell and Bell Heather being most enjoyed. Lichens such as Tree Lungwort, mosses, liverworts and ferns added variety and interest. As did Niall's talk on our final evening. This was a week to enjoy, a week to remember for some time.



Pine Marten

Day 1

Tuesday 3rd October

We were away from Glasgow on two buses and just beyond Tarbet, enjoying the very scenic Loch Lomond views when one bus was delayed. Consequently we missed a rendezvous at the Green Welly Stop but caught up at the Ariundle Centre in Strontian for dinner. There we met a couple who had driven directly and enjoyed our first delicious meal cooked by Kate and team. Common Kestrel, Mallard, Great Cormorant, Grey Heron and several gulls were seen enroute. The night drive back supplied excellent views of 12 Red Deer caught in the bus lights. After quickly finding our rooms, it was time for a well-deserved sleep. Well, assuming we could ignore the loud bellowing of a local Red Deer stag.

Day 2

Wednesday 4th October

Heavy rain dominated the morning but did not stop most taking an early morning walk to search for Otters on Loch Sunart. However, the local Red Deer stag did stop us. He appeared by the loch and displayed his huge antlers and stern demeanour – not at all friendly. So much so that we took a cautious detour, accepting and appreciating his potential threat of engagement. After all, it's what we came to see! Cooked and continental breakfast followed, then a briefing for the day ahead and off we went, Otter hunting. The rain kept us in and out of the buses, but this fitted the itinerary of short hops along the loch to scour for these mustelids. No joy on this occasion, but flowering Red Campion was a nice find. A short drive took us to the raptor viewing point at Ben Hiant. Common Buzzard obliged and a good number of Red Deer was spotted at distance on the hillside and along the road.

Kilchoan Community café, toilets and Wednesday market, were a few minutes away and busy. Tomatoes from the community nursery near Ardnamurchan Lighthouse were on sale in the market and needed for future breakfasts. We drove by the nursery as we travelled to the Lighthouse, arriving in foul weather that persisted for an hour. A stone wall gave enough protection from the elements for some serious sea watching to begin, producing many Northern Gannet, European Shag, Red-throated Diver, Eurasian Curlew, and several Eurasian Oystercatcher. A single Common Seal was in the sea, then two White-tailed Eagle appeared to everyone's delight, giving distant but excellent views. Leaves of Roseroot and Sea Plantain were picked out. Packed lunch was taken, then tea at the Lighthouse café before we left in sunshine.



White-tailed Eagle

The road back through Kilchoan led to a house with many Red Deer hinds and a single stag in its garden. The owner was putting out sheep bits to feed them so we had fantastic views. More Red Deer were also further away on the hillside. Northern Raven flew over, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk did likewise, 30 plus

Common Starling were on wires, Hooded Crow passed by. A single white flower sticking out of the grassy roadside verge was the lovely Grass of Parnassus, a plant often found alongside Devil's-bit Scabious. And sure enough, the purple/blue flowers of the latter species were nearby.

We were keen to see more deer and pleased to find them further along near Breahouse. One heavy stag was feeding with his harem, and loudly bellowing. Eyes turned to see why – a similar sized but darker stag, slowly making its way towards him. This was the time to be wary, cautious and prepare to protect or to challenge. The contest was coming, but sadly not before it started raining again and we had to leave for our evening meal.

Back at the bunkhouse the meal was quickly prepared and put out. Out onto the trestle table that is, to attract the local European Pine Marten. Our meal was well cooked and followed by making our first checklist of species seen. Compiling in several stages that is, very willingly interrupted by visits of a single Pine Marten that gave fantastic views. What a wonderful animal, what a wonderful experience for all. We were ready for the stag bellowing and well-earned rest. A great day!

Day 3

Thursday 5th October

A brighter start then rain in the afternoon that somewhat caught us out and forced a rethink of plans. But we got off to a good start before breakfast looking along the loch to the west. Little Grebe, Eurasian Curlew, Great Black-backed Gull, Great Cormorant, European Shag and Common Buzzard.

A delayed cooked breakfast meant that we set off to Salen Pier and soon it was time for coffee, along with shop, toilets and checking European Shag perched on a buoy. This was a short stop, our prime aim being the bird hide at Garbh an Eilan. Surprisingly, only a few Common Seal were in the water and none hauled out on the rocks. Good views of several Red-breasted Merganser were had. Black-headed Gull in winter plumage and European Herring Gull flew around, as well as Hooded Crow.



Common Seal

Next stop Castle Tioram, passing through Acharacle village where we would return after lunch. The clouds were heavy when we arrived, but the tops were clear enough for us to see the White-tailed Eagle's nest on a distant conifer. This is a most picturesque spot, the castle a brute and ominous statement to invaders by sea – go away – much the same as our local stag! The tide was in but the causeway was dry so we walked up to the castle and back, spotting leaves of Sea Thrift, wading through declining Bracken, admiring trees festooned with several species of lichen, mosses, fungi. Tree Lungwort particularly took the eye with its large lung-shaped thallus. Yellow flowers of Tormentil and Autumn Hawkbit were scattered about the Heather.

But the rain came, with menace, and we were quickly soaked. However we were determined to continue for a while, calling into Acharacle to successfully look for Red Squirrel near the doctors' surgery. A short drive then took us onto Kentra Moss, a large expanse of blanket bog with Round-leaved Sundew, Bog Asphodel, differently coloured species of Sphagnum moss. A huge Oak Eggar Moth caterpillar was busy crawling along the mossy hummocks. But no mammals or birds.

A stop for coffee in the village was unsuccessful, both cafes were closed. A rethink of plans determined that one bus would return to the bunkhouse for folk to dry and refresh, the other to follow the original target of viewing from the bird hide again. This proved to be most fortuitous with sightings of Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and plenty of Common Seal.

Dinner was taken again at the Ariundle Centre, and once again greatly enjoyed. We returned home well fed, ready to bed and noting several Red Deer on the road as we sped west. Back at the bunkhouse it was not long before a European Pine Marten visited the feeding station and the bellowing of the Red Deer stag rang out loudly through the night. It had been a long and very successful day, in spite of the mixed weather.

Day 4

Friday 6th October

Today was declared 'Otter day' in the hope that we could find one. We failed, we found five! The search began before breakfast, the culinary feast being delayed by an hour when the first Eurasian Otter was spotted as we parked the bus, only feet away. Unsurprisingly it took flight, well it swam away, and was quickly picked up near a convenient rock, head out of the water feeding, humping its back as it dived to catch more fish and swimming on. We were delighted and mesmerised, our hunger for Otter watching overcame our hunger for breakfast which we eventually enjoyed after 9am.

So a later start to our day saw us passing by our earlier excitement to the next inlet on the loch and Otter again, this time three! Yet more fantastic views with opportunity for the photographers to try out their skills. Later in the day we picked up our final Eurasian Otter off Kilchoan Jetty, some way out into the loch but still offering great views. Friday 6th October was officially recognised as 'Otter day'! Common Sandpiper was on the rocks, difficult to see but everyone managed in the end.

The next move was to watch over Camas nan Geall beneath Ben Hiant. A Common Kestrel was using the wind to stay aloft while Northern Raven glided across. Eight Oystercatcher were on the rocks and two Hooded Crow landed in a tree. Red Deer were in the distance, stags and hinds. Fancying a coffee,

we moved off to Kilchoan café for lunch then the nearby jetty where we spied our last Eurasian Otter, plus Turnstone, Rock Pipit and Northern Raven

Driving north took us through the world-famous volcanic rings to the isolated beach at Sanna Bay. What a wonderful spot that we shared with no more than six folk with dogs. We didn't find cetaceans on the sea but did find different plants on land, including Devil's-bit Scabious, Harebell, Grass of Parnassus, Wild Thyme, Lady's Bedstraw, Yarrow and Mouse-ear Hawkweed – all in flower. A pair of Yellowhammer was spotted on the road, European Stonechat and two Golden Eagle soaring up high and watched for fifteen minutes.

The return to the bunkhouse, via toilets, took us past good numbers of Red Deer. A little exploration of some groups led us to watch a couple of young stags that stood up to each other and took to confrontation - antlers locking as they were filmed. Brilliant, amazing!

Kate and team arrived with our final delicious meal and were thanked for their superb service. Pine Marten arrived to entertain us once more and Niall Rowantree delivered a fantastic talk about all things Ardnamurchan and more. He was still in conversation two hours later such was the interest in his wide knowledge and wisdom. But eventually sleep was needed for an early rise and departure in the morning. What a fantastic day it had been, what a privilege in so many ways.

Day 5

Saturday 7th October

What a day, certainly one to remember! A quick, simple breakfast, goodbye to two clients staying on for a few days and farewell to the Ardnamurchan Bunkhouse and peninsula, giving five hours to reach Glasgow on time for onward travel. Well that was the plan, but an amber weather warning changed everything and we were lucky to reach our destination – eventually. Passage through Glen Coe was an even greater spectacle than normal with rain lashing down, thick silver ribbons of wild water streaming off the hillside and a huge curtain of cascading water at the narrowest gap in the valley. Our timing was good, the road was soon closed behind us due to flooding.

The rain continued to hammer down as we snaked along the side of Loch Lomond to find that the A82 to Glasgow had just been closed due to flooding, and A83 closed because of landslides. One route left to us, return to the top of Loch Lomond and head towards Stirling. Although we just managed to straddle two deeply flooded sections of road, the third flood proved a step too far when a tractor in front became stranded. And with all four escape routes now firmly closed, we were stranded too. So back to Tyndrum for a rethink at the Green Welly Stop. After three hours the A82 was re-opened, leaving us to complete our journey. It had taken more than 9 hours but we were all safe and ready to enact plan B for getting home from Glasgow.

Interestingly, along the way, a Red Squirrel scampered across the road to give us a final tick. We had seen much during our wet week in the aptly named Atlantic Rainforest of Ardnamurchan. And we had enjoyed a fascinating experience.



Mingary Castle

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, E = Evidence)

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023				
		3	4	5	6	7
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			✓		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			6		
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		20	✓	✓	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓				
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia 'domestica'</i>	✓				
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓				
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		20	✓	✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓	2		
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓	✓		
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	4	✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	2	4	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		6	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		4	4	6	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				20	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓			
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓			
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓			✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓			
Razorbill	<i>Alca aalge</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			2		
Western Jackdaw	<i>Colceus moneduta</i>	✓				✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓				✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓				✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		10	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023				
		3	4	5	6	7
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓			
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			E		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓	H
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			✓		
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	6	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	2	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓		
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓			
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			✓		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓	4	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓	
European Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		2			
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				2	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				2	

Others

		October 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	3	4	5	6	7
MAMMALS						
Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>		✓		✓	
Noctule	<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>				✓	
River Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				✓	
Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		✓	✓	✓	E
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓		
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>		✓			
INVERTEBRATES						
Butterflies						
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓			
Speckled Wood	<i>Parage aegeria</i>		✓			
Moths						
Oak Eggar Moth (caterpillar)	<i>Lasiocampa quercus</i>			✓		