

Ardnamurchan - The Red Deer Rut

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 7th October 2025



Red Deer



Red Deer



Eurasian Otter



Barnacle Geese

Tour report by Marcus Ward



Naturetrek

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Tour participants: Marcus Ward and Dave Jackson (leaders) with nine Naturetrek clients

Summary

The tour was dominated by the arrival of Storm Amy, which brought significant destruction to the beautiful Ardnamurchan Peninsula. Despite the challenging conditions, we persevered and were rewarded with memorable encounters, from the drama of the deer rut to wonderful views of feeding Otter and a wide range of birdlife, including a family of White-tailed Eagles, migrating swans and geese, and storm-driven seabirds. All of this unfolded against the backdrop of one of Scotland's most dramatically picturesque landscapes.

Day 1

Friday 3rd October

Pick-ups were arranged from Glasgow Airport and Paisley Station. The first group travelled north along Loch Lomond, enjoying the scenic views and stopping for refreshments at the Green Welly, before continuing smoothly to the Corran Ferry and on to the Ariundle Centre, arriving in good time. The second group, a couple of hours behind, were less fortunate; as the weather deteriorated, the ferry was cancelled, forcing a long diversion via Fort William.

Once everyone had gathered at the Ariundle Centre, conditions worsened further. News soon came through that a tree had fallen on our accommodation, rendering it unsafe. After a flurry of phone calls, we managed to secure alternative lodgings nearby at the Ben View Phoenix Hotel. By this stage, power and phone lines were down, so we settled in with our generous and welcoming hosts at Ben View, while the storm raged outside.

Day 2

Saturday 4th October

We met at 8.30am and headed to the Ariundle Centre for breakfast, while Marcus drove up to Glen Borrowdale to assess the condition of both the roads and the bunkhouse. Unfortunately, the news wasn't good; a mature conifer had come down across the bunkhouse roof, and although the roads were technically passable, there was widespread storm damage, with many fallen trees.

Reunited and refreshed, we decided to make the most of the improving weather and set off onto the peninsula in search of wildlife. Our first stop was at a hide overlooking Loch Sunart at Garbh Eilean, where a group of loafing Harbour Seals provided light-hearted entertainment as they yawned, stretched, and lazed in the mild but breezy conditions. This beautifully scenic location would become a regular stop during the week.

Continuing west, we paused at Salen, where the small local shop was (somewhat miraculously) open. The group took the opportunity to restock on supplies, before spending time watching Shags in the harbour. Overhead, a Pink-footed Goose was picked out, heading north over the hills.

We stopped briefly at the damaged bunkhouse to speak with the owners and to assess the situation. The surrounding feeders were busy with tits and finches, but it was soon clear that returning to stay there would not be an option.

As we made our way towards Kilchoan, small groups of Red Deer appeared along the hillsides; most were hinds accompanied by attentive stags, with the occasional bachelor group nearby. We paused at various viewpoints to enjoy the spectacle, and also managed good views of Hooded Crow.

In the late afternoon, we made our way back to the Ariundle Centre in Strontian for a hearty dinner before nightfall. Afterwards, we returned to the Ben View Hotel, where we enjoyed a relaxed evening of conversation and candlelight, before turning in for the night.

Day 3

Sunday 5th October

A hardy group of three ventured out early for a pre-breakfast walk down to the shore of Loch Sunart. The calm morning brought views of Hooded Crow and both Common and Herring Gulls, while the peaceful surroundings provided a gentle start to the day. After another hearty breakfast at the hotel, the full group set out to continue exploring the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. Our first stop was the hide overlooking the loch at Garbh Eilean, where the Harbour Seals were once again hauled out, this time on a different rock. Bird activity had picked up, the highlight being a group of twelve Whooper Swans flying up the loch; they were an evocative glimpse of migration in action.

Further viewpoints along the road towards Kilchoan produced Gannet, Buzzard, and more Red Deer. We paused for a longer stop at Caim, where a group of hinds were being expertly rounded up by a very vocal and impressive stag, showing off to two smaller onlookers. Here, a ringtail Hen Harrier provided prolonged views as it quartered the hillside.

Our next destination was Ardnamurchan Lighthouse, where we enjoyed our packed lunches, prepared by the Ariundle Centre. There was an almost constant stream of Gannets, along with distant Manx Shearwaters, Guillemots and Razorbills. The highlight for many was a group of around twelve European Storm Petrels feeding near a Great Black-backed Gull on the water. Their delicate “walking on water” behaviour was clearly visible as they fluttered around the gull: it was a magical sight. Unusual sightings included flocks of migrating Lapwing passing south out to sea among the Gannets, as well as several groups of Barnacle Geese, and a couple of Red-throated Divers.

A well-earned coffee stop followed at the friendly community café in Kilchoan, which provided welcome refreshments. From there, we explored the nearby Mingary Pier, taking in views across to Mingary Castle. Although no Otters were seen, we enjoyed sightings of Gannets and a passing Great Northern Diver.

On our return journey, we stopped again at Caim, where the same dominant stag was still bellowing and keeping his harem in check. It was a truly captivating scene, and we became so absorbed in the drama that time slipped away. Just as we began the journey back, a Sparrowhawk dashed overhead, followed shortly by a beautiful male Hen Harrier gliding low along the hillside, making a perfect finale to the day.

Back at the centre, we enjoyed another excellent evening meal, during which a Common Pipistrelle was detected flying outside on the bat detector. Later, we returned to the hotel for a relaxed drink with our hosts, before turning in for a night's rest.

Day 4

Monday 6th October

Another early start saw most of the group gather pre-dawn for a short walk down to the shore of Loch Sunart, hoping to catch sight of the local Otter. Although the Otter didn't appear, watching the sunrise over the loch, with Red Deer bellowing on the distant hillsides, was reward enough. A Dipper gave a brief appearance, and a couple of Grey Wagtails added movement to the tranquil scene.

After another good breakfast and a quick refuelling stop in Strontian, we set off for a short walk along the Ariundle Valley. Here, fungi stole the show, with around fifteen species recorded. Highlights included a perfect Common Earthball, which provided a slow-motion demonstration of spore dispersal, and an impressive Fleecy Milkcap. A brief stop at the village shop for supplies preceded our return to the hide overlooking Loch Sunart. In addition to the regular Common Seals, excitement grew when an adult White-tailed Eagle appeared, followed soon after by another adult and a juvenile. The trio went on to perch together in a Scots Pine, allowing wonderful scope views. Three Barnacle Geese also passed overhead, while a Common Guillemot in winter plumage was spotted close to the hide.

Continuing west, a sharp-eyed client called out "Otter!", prompting a quick turnaround and some superb, prolonged views of the animal feeding on mussels just offshore: it was a true highlight of the trip. We enjoyed our packed lunches overlooking the scene, as the Otter slowly drifted out of view.

By now, the rain had set in, so we pressed on towards Acharacle, scanning Loch Shiel where we noted Tufted Duck and Little Grebe. After a brief stop, we continued to Castle Tioram, a quintessentially Scottish viewpoint, and a favourite spot for both scenery and wildlife. The walk across the sandbar to the castle produced a rather lost-looking Barn Swallow, a good mix of shorebirds, and several Goosanders and Wigeon, along with small flocks of Barnacle Geese. A couple of Common Seals were also fishing in the shallows nearby. The area proved excellent for fungi, with fine examples of Shaggy Inkcap, colourful waxcaps, brittlegills, and a striking Dyer's Mazegill.

By late afternoon, the group (now slightly damp and bedraggled) returned to the Ariundle Centre for drinks and another hot dinner. En route, we stopped briefly at the hotel to collect chargers, to make use of the newly restored power supply. Back at Ben View, it was a relief to find the electricity finally back on, allowing everyone to shower, repack, and prepare for the journey home the following morning.

Day 5

Tuesday 7th October

Our final morning began with another hearty breakfast, before we said our goodbyes to Leanne and Billy, our fantastic hosts, whose warmth and generosity had rescued the trip for us. After heartfelt thanks and farewells, we began the journey south towards Glasgow, crossing the Corran Ferry and stopping briefly at the Green Welly for refreshments, before arriving in good time for onward connections.

Despite the challenges brought by Storm Amy, this proved to be an immensely rewarding trip, full of memorable wildlife encounters, dramatic landscapes, and good humour throughout. The combination of resilience, camaraderie, and the wild beauty of the Ardnamurchan Peninsula made for a truly unforgettable week, and one that will be remembered fondly for many years to come.

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025				
		3	4	5	6	7
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓	✓			
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				✓	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025				
		3	4	5	6	7
I=Introduced						
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			✓	✓	
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓			
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓				
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			12		
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				✓	
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				✓	
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia 'domestica'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓				✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓			✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓			
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</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>			✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓		
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓		
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓		✓	✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			✓		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓		
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>			✓		
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			✓		
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓		
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		

I=Introduced		October 2025				
Common name	Scientific name	3	4	5	6	7
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</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>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓		
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓	
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</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>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		