

Speyside in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th May 2021



Slavonian Grebe



Red Squirrel



Cairngorms National Park



Ring Ouzel

Report and images compiled by Keith Buchanan



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Day 1

Saturday 22nd May

The group met in the hotel in Grantown-on-Spey at lunchtime. After a quick bite of lunch we headed out almost immediately down to Loch Insh, situated along the beautiful River Spey. A brief burst of rain cleared just as we arrived at the Loch, adjoining the village of Kincraig. As the sun came out we saw our first Goldeneye of the trip, as it dived in the still waters of the loch. A short walk brought us to a viewpoint overlooking a wooded island where we had great views of the massive Osprey nest, with both adults in residence.

Further on, at Insh marshes, we enjoyed views of a variety of waders, although the Greylag geese, with goslings in tow, were an appealing site. Snipe called out on the marshes, and the occasional Redshank, with Konik ponies as a distant backdrop.

Our final call of the day was to a little loch on the way back. Here the sun shone on us again, making a stunning sight of the Slavonian (Horned) Grebes which were breeding here. Obliging Sand Martins perched on the wires above us and Siskins were visiting the feeders on neighbouring houses.

Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed dinner and waved farewell to the first group as they set off on their Pine Marten watch. There was a successful trip with Pine Marten and a number of other species seen.

Day 2

Sunday 23rd May

Most of the group elected for an early morning walk to Anagach woods, just across the road from the hotel. An early delight were two Red Squirrels chasing each other up and down a tree. Two Roe Deer were spotted soon after, and a variety of birds were seen, both in the forest and on or above the small lake within it.

As the weather forecast was favourable, we decided to head to Cairngorm. Disembarking at 500m we were met by a stiff wind, but also by the tantalising sight of a small group of Snow Bunting, which immediately disappeared behind the buildings. We followed behind, but were unable to relocate them. Starting our walk up the mountain we were immediately distracted by the wonderful sight of a pair of Ring Ousels at really close range, actively feeding right in front of us, with a Northern Wheatear nearby. As we walked up the path toward the snowline we scanned constantly for Ptarmigan and Mountain Hare but, just as we were reaching a promising altitude, the weather closed in, it began to sleet, and we decided to descend again. A welcome coffee at the ski centre reinvigorated us and we headed down the mountain again.

We next stopped for a walk just to the east of Loch Morlich, and explored the wonderful Caledonian Pine forest which bordered the river. As the sun shone we were serenaded by many Willow Warblers, Chaffinches etc. A Crossbill was seen briefly, and they were also heard flying overhead. The striking fungus 'Bog Beacon' was spotted along with Great Butterwort.

Our final stop for the day was to the Craigellachie nature reserve near Aviemore. Here we were greeted almost immediately by the accelerating trill of a Wood Warbler. This bird proved rather elusive as leafburst had occurred but the next one heard was successfully tracked down and all obtained good views. The small lochan held a pair of Wigeon and a Grey Heron stalked the bank. Calling Treecreepers alerted us to a pair of these mouse-like birds, which were busy calling to each other. By the time we got back to the vehicles it was time to return to the hotel and relax before dinner.

Day 3

Monday 24th May

Today started with an early morning walk through Anagach woods down to the River Spey. It was raining, which meant things were quiet on the bird front, but Sand Martins and Swallows were obligingly sitting on wires, ready to be photographed. Down on the main river, several Common Sandpiper were flitting back and forth, and occasionally sharing a mid-stream boulder with a female Goldeneye.

After breakfast we drove the short distance to Loch Garten. We briefly visited the visitor centre, and learned how a pair of Ospreys had taken up residence on the famous nest overlooked by the centre, but had subsequently decided to move elsewhere. We then drove round to the car park which serviced the walk from Loch Garten to Loch Mallachie. The walk was unrelentingly wet but this did not diminish the wonderfully atmospheric Caledonian Pine forest. A small group of Crossbills erupted from a pine close to Loch Garten and more Crossbills were heard from time to time along with Siskin and numerous Chaffinches. A queen White-tailed Bumblebee was active in the Bilberry despite the cold and wet conditions. As the weather was still wet we decided to call in at Nethy Bridge, where some had coffee and some investigated a short nature trail where Treecreeper was the most notable species.

After a stop at the hotel to dry out and have some lunch we drove west through an impressive landscape of heather and blanket bog. Arriving at Loch Indorb, we began to see Redshank and Common Sandpiper along the shore. On the inland side, a male Red Grouse showed itself briefly. A Spotted Flycatcher was on a lochside Birch, and, inland, a Common Buzzard was mobbed by a Curlew. At that point we headed back to the hotel, stopping only to watch a colony of Common Gulls which were breeding in the heather.

Day 4

Tuesday 25th May

It was a very early start this morning as we headed out to a Black Grouse lek on a grassy knoll surrounded by heather moorland. Rain made visibility difficult, and perhaps it deterred the Black Grouse too as none were seen! What was seen however were a number of Mountain Hares scattered over the grassland, interspersed with sheep, Greylag Geese and various waders. Moving on from this site, we returned to Loch Indorb. At the southern end we stopped, our attention caught by two Red Grouse which flew away from the road towards the loch. Then, along the far shore, a Black-throated Diver was spotted. This was quickly followed by another and then both got out onto the shore. One subsequently re-entered the water leaving one bird sitting on the bank - a wonderful sighting. Then it was time to return to the hotel for breakfast.

After breakfast we split into two groups. Two-thirds of the group headed straight to Macduff, on the coast, to undertake our boat trip, the main activity of the day, while the others explored the local wildlife, and managed to find a pod of dolphins in the Moray Firth. Later in the day the groups were reversed, with the second group going out for their boat trip.

At Macduff, we boarded the boat then headed out into a choppy sea. As we headed east we began to see lines of gannets, some almost overflying the boat. They were followed by increasing numbers of Guillemots and Razorbills. Some were in rafts on the water, many others flying in long lines to and from the breeding ledges. Troup head was a cacophony of breeding seabirds – Kittiwakes jostled for position with auks, Gannets occupied the flatter positions, Shags sat about on the lower rocks and, in the bay, a Great Skua patrolled the waters. Towards the far end of the colony, where shallower slopes allowed soil to accumulate, a small colony of Puffins had established themselves. Closer to the cliffs, the smell added a further dimension to this sensory experience. On the return trip, a small number of dainty Black Guillemot were also seen. All in all, a great morning.

In the afternoon, the first boat group worked their way back west along the coast as far as Spey Bay. Stops before this location produced, for example, Goosanders and Grey seals. At Spey Bay we were greeted by the curious sight of Common Terns hunting over the water accompanied by feeding Sand Martins, all presumably feeding on insects on the waters of the Spey as it emptied into the ocean. Along the beach, a lone Iceland Gull sat with Herring Gulls, standing out through its startlingly bright white plumage. Little Terns, Ringed and Grey Plover were also found in this lovely and interesting location, while Yellowhammers serenaded us from the adjoining Gorse bushes. Then, after a very long day, we headed back to the hotel.

Day 5

Wednesday 26th May

We set off west this morning, aiming for the lovely Findhorn Valley or Strathdearn. On our way along the valley, we stopped at two bridges. The first produced a brief sighting of a dipper on the river. The characteristic churrs of Red-legged Partridge betrayed the presence of two birds close to the road. High above, a small group of Golden Plover flew by but then swung round and landed in a field opposite, allowing us to view them through a scope. Lapwing displayed over the fields and the bubbling calls of Curlew came from the rushy fields opposite. A Red Kite suddenly appeared, being chased by a Curlew. A slightly longer walk at the second bridge produced Spotted Flycatcher and a Cuckoo in flight. Near the road, a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew onto a stone and began hurling its moss covering in all directions, looking for insects. It was soon joined by another and they both set about clearing moss off the stones.

About midday we parked near a bridge and had some lunch before heading up the hill. From time to time Buzzards breached the ridge-line. Northern Wheatear were spotted from the path and Red Deer were scattered up the slope opposite. A small herd of Wild Goats sat on the hillside opposite, regarding us with mild curiosity. At the top, on the ridge, two Golden Eagles were briefly spotted.

After descending, we progressed further to the head of the valley and parked before commencing to walk along the track. Lines of Red Deer on the ridge lines looked down on us. One group climbed up a side valley and were rewarded with a view of a Golden Eagle soaring in the distance. Both groups then returned to the vans and began the journey back to the hotel.

In the evening, the group that went to the Pine Marten hide were entertained by a succession of Badgers, mice and voles although no Pine Martens appeared.

Day 6

Thursday 27th May

An early morning walk by some through the lovely Anagach Woods brought delightful close views of a young Red Squirrel feeding in a tree. Buff and White-tailed bumblebees were busy in the Bilberry flowers and Treecreepers were busy examining the bark of the fine old Scots Pine trees in the wood.

After breakfast we went back to Loch Garten and walked slowly through the trees, listening for the calls of Crested Tit. It was a beautiful morning and the loch was still save for the wakes of passing Greylag Geese. Siskins called from the canopy as we moved along but deeper calls drew our attention to a bright red male Crossbill, sitting low in a tree. Finally two Crested Tits were found moving in mid-canopy and all got reasonable views.

After this we again drove up the mountain to the ski centre on Cairngorm. Ring Ousels were spotted but there was no sign of Snow Bunting around the centre. At this point, some of the group again headed up Cairngorm.

After a walk of about two hours and several hundred metres of climbing they were rewarded with views of both Ptarmigan and Dotterel.

The rest of the party drove down the mountain and visited the beautiful Loch an Eilein. This loch has an island with a ruined castle, which had withstood an attack by Jacobite troops in 1690. It had also hosted some of the last Ospreys to nest in Scotland before the recent revival. In the bright sun the loch was stunning, framed by the snow capped Cairngorms behind.

In the evening, the final group went out to the mammal watching hide and, like the previous group, were entertained by Badgers, small mammals and birds, but again no Pine Marten.

Day 7

Friday 28th May

Our final day, and, after some again went on an early walk we had breakfast before heading west to take advantage of the glorious weather. A stop at Dulnain Bridge produced Grey Wagtail by the river. Further on, a scan of a grassy mound revealed a grazing Mountain Hare. At Loch Indorb we failed to find the Black-throated Divers again but as we watched, an Osprey flew over and two Red Grouse in the surrounding heather were a welcome distraction. Then it was time to go back to the hotel and for all to make their separate way home after a great week on Speyside.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; + = approximate count; h = heard only, LO = seen by leader only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2021						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓			✓			
3	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2						
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	2	2		4			
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	1				1	1	
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		1		1	2	2	
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				8+			
9	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				✓			
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	5		✓	✓		✓	
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	28			20 +	2	1	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	11						
13	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>						1	
14	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>				2			2
15	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			1				
16	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				2			
18	Slavonian grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1						2
19	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1	1					
20	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				✓			
21	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓			
22	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				✓			
23	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
24	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	3			1	2		1
25	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					4		
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>					1		
27	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>						1	
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	1	1				
30	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					5		
33	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				1			
34	Dottterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>						4	
35	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				12			
36	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				6			
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1						
38	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			6	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				6			
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	H	H
41	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	2		2		1		2
42	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1			

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2021						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
46	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				2			
47	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓			
48	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				1			
49	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓			
50	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>				4			
51	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sanvicensis</i>				8			
52	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				20			
53	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>				✓			
54	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>				✓			
55	Guillemot	<i>Uria algae</i>				✓			
56	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				✓			
57	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓			
58	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓
59	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	1	2	2	1	
61	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				4	2	2	H
62	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				1			
63	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	2						
64	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			1			1	
65	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	✓		✓
67	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓						✓
69	Barn Swallow	<i>hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			LO				
72	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		LO					
73	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				✓			
74	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
77	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					4	2	
78	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
79	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						2	
80	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
81	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
82	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H			✓	✓	✓
83	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1		2	1	1
84	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓
85	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓
86	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		2				2	

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2021						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
89	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
91	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	
93	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					1		
94	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
95	Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>				✓			
96	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Wood Warbler	<i>Philoscopus sibilatrix</i>		1				1	
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
100	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					1		2
101	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				1			
104	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		1				H	1
106	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	1	1			
107	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				2			
108	Scottish Crossbill	<i>Loxia scotica</i>			✓		✓		
109	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>							
110	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
112	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				6		1	
113	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				LO			
114	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		7					

Mammals

	Scientific name	Common name	May 2021						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	1						
2	European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	4				4	4	
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>						✓	2
6	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>						✓	
7	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
8	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>				6			1
9	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓		
10	Field Vole	<i>Microtus agrestis</i>	✓				✓	✓	
11	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	✓				✓	✓	
12	Pipistrelle Bat	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	✓				✓	✓	
13	Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	✓				✓	✓	
14	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				70+			
15	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				c10			

Invertebrates

	Scientific name	Common name	May 2021						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Dor Beetle	<i>Geotrupes stercorarius</i>					✓		
2	Small Tortoiseshell butterfly	<i>Aglais urticae</i>						✓	
3	Red Admiral butterfly	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>						✓	
4	Brimstone butterfly	<i>Gonopteryx rhamni</i>						✓	