

# Speyside in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 27th May 2022



Redstart by Keith Buchanan



Gannets by Keith Buchanan



Guillemots by Deborah Howard



Badger by Keith Buchanan

Tour report by Keith Buchanan



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Tour participants: Keith Buchanan with 8 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

## Saturday 21st May

Two participants were collected at Inverness train station. One was to be collected at Aviemore station but was delayed and caught a bus to Grantown. The rest of the group gathered at the hotel about lunchtime.

After lunch we headed to Loch Insh and parked near a bridge. We made our way past a little church and through the graveyard to where we had a good view of the loch. At the top of a tree was a typically massive Osprey nest, with one bird sitting. As we watched, it switched position, suggesting it was sitting on eggs. Its mate flew by occasionally, eventually settling lower down on the same tree. On the loch, a pair of Mute Swans had built a nest on a tiny islet. A female Goldeneye with five ducklings were actively feeding near the far shore. In the adjacent trees, a Spotted Flycatcher was hawking for insects. As we made our way back to the vehicles, a Kingfisher showed briefly flying across the loch.

Further on at Insh marshes, small numbers of Greylag Geese were calling vocally while, behind them, a Roe Deer grazed unconcernedly in the reeds. A crow was being harried by both Lapwings and Curlew, as it was clearly regarded as a threat to eggs or chicks.

Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed dinner and set off on our Pine Marten watch. Initially visitors to the baited area were birds, and a wide variety of species came in to enjoy the food on offer. Then a Badger arrived – the dominant boar of the clan which regularly visits. Big and broad headed, he snuffled about collecting peanuts and peanut butter. Eventually he was joined by four others and, we reckoned that six or seven different individuals eventually visited, a large proportion of the clan.

## Day 2

## Sunday 22nd May

The weather forecast was reasonable so we decided to head to Cairngorm. We parked up at the ski Centre (at about 500m altitude) then set off to climb higher in the hope of encountering Ptarmigan. It was a stiff climb and the weather deteriorated somewhat as we ascended. Two Red Grouse flew across our path and the occasional Meadow pipit was heard or seen. Eventually a small number of the party got high enough to be able to scan the scree, and were rewarded by brief views of at least two Ptarmigan. Descending again, we all enjoyed refreshments at the cafe before dropping back down the hill.

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 we set off, we admired a pair of Mistle Thrushes which were feeding just beside the vehicles. As the sun shone, we were serenaded by many Willow Warblers, Chaffinches etc. A Spotted Flycatcher sat obligingly on an overhanging branch and we all got a good look. A Grey Wagtail flew over the river and a pair of mating Humming-bird Hawkmoths was an unexpected sight. Retracing our steps, we were serenaded back at the vehicles by singing Siskins.

Our next stop was to the Craigellachie nature reserve near Aviemore. A pleasant walk through this broadleaved wood followed, with the highlight being a Peregrine Falcon soaring above the cliff. At that time of day the wood was relatively quiet, apart from Willow Warblers and Chaffinches, but Wood Anemones and other woodland plants were still in flower and Butterwort – an insectivorous plant – was just beginning to flower.

Our final stop of the day took us to a little Lochan. Here the first thing to greet us were the alarm calls of an Oystercatcher which turned out to have two chicks on the shore. A number of Goldeneye at the far side of the loch caught our attention but the main attraction was a lovely Slavonian or Horned Grebe in full breeding plumage. We admired this for some time before reluctantly withdrawing and heading back to the hotel.

## Day 3

## Monday 23rd May

After an early breakfast we set out towards the coast for our boat trip. Arriving at Macduff, we parked near the harbour and strolled down to meet our captain and crew. After we were safely aboard, we set off eastwards along the coast on a lovely day with the sea flat calm. Cormorants and Shags were lined up on the rocks as we proceeded towards the cliffs. We began to pick up auks in small numbers – Guillemots and Razorbills and, every now and then, a Black Guillemot. Overhead, Fulmars started to appear.

As we got closer to the nesting cliffs the noise level began to rise, and rafts of Guillemots and Razorbills peppered the sea, often diving as we approached on the boat. A female Grey Seal watched us nonchalantly from the rocks. Further on, long lines of Kittiwakes striped the cliffs, often nesting on impossibly narrow ledges and, up above where there was more space, a growing Gannet colony added to the cacophony. On a sloping grassy cleft in the cliffs a small colony of puffins was flanked by much larger numbers of the other species. As we returned to harbour Gannets flew over us constantly, on their way to the colony with seaweed in their bills to add to their nesting material.

After our delightful and productive boat trip we headed west along the coast in deteriorating weather. We stopped from time to time to scan the shore – the most striking find being a feeding frenzy of gulls and auks in which one or two Great Skuas were attempting to persuade other birds to disgorge their catch.

Our final stop was at a rather wet Spey Bay. A welcome coffee revived us and we braved the weather to explore the estuary. A singing Sedge Warbler reminded us that it was still spring. On the edge of the river an Osprey sat on a dead tree stump, clearly reluctant to fly in this weather. A sizeable party of Goosander were actively fishing. By then it was time to retreat from the rain and head back to our hotel.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 24th May

A very early start this morning as we headed out to a Black Grouse lek on a grassy knoll surrounded by heather moorland. The sun shone and it was a glorious morning. As soon as we got out of the vehicles we heard the wonderful liquid trilling of male Black Grouse, and seven males were soon spotted facing off against each other on the top of the hill. Further down the hill, Greylag geese with goslings were grazing, in amongst Curlew. But Hares caught our attention and soon we picked out a number of Mountain Hares grazing unobtrusively, both on the grass and in the rougher vegetation. Some still had white on them from their winter garb. Cuckoos called constantly from nearby vegetation, and a number were spotted in flight. A Merlin perched briefly on a post and the tick tock call of a Snipe could be picked out above the background chorus of Willow Warblers.

Moving on, we visited a nearby loch where Black-throated Divers breed. Although we did not locate any divers, numbers of Common Sandpipers and Red grouse kept our interest. As we drove past a small plantation a Red Squirrel sat obligingly on a low branch and we headed back to breakfast well satisfied.

After breakfast we made our way down to Loch Garten. Walking along a trail through the pines, we enjoyed the accompanying chorus of Chaffinch, Willow Warbler and Wren. A different call note alerted us and, as we looked up, a single Crossbill alighted on the top of a Scots Pine, allowing all a view. A little further on, a Crested Tit alighted on a Scots Pine near the base and a little further another was seen higher in a tree. Other highlights of the walk were a song fighting Tree Pipit and a singing Redstart.

After a picnic lunch at the visitor centre, we headed back to our locations of the morning, to try our luck again with the divers. The weather oscillated between rain and warm sun as we scanned the loch. Again, no luck with the divers but more Cuckoos were seen and a drumming Snipe was watched as it performed its big dipper flight pattern while drumming. Common Sandpiper and Oystercatcher protested constantly at our presence or squabbled with each other and we left them to it to return to the hotel after a long and productive day.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 25th May

On a day of mixed weather prospects we headed up to Loch Morlich. We walked by the river, having first enjoyed the sight of a Siskin trying frantically to feed about four young which were pestering it relentlessly. High above, House Martins were feeding and, in the open Scots Pine woodland, many small birds were evident. Approaching a low rise, a Mistle Thrush perched high on a post, giving satisfying photographic opportunities. Overhead, the low cronk of a Raven was, surprisingly, the first of the trip. A lovely, brick-red, male Crossbill perched on a low bank, giving excellent views. Further on, in a little valley, we watched a Spotted Flycatcher feeding a juvenile, and a Grey Wagtail carrying food, presumably to feed young.

We then drove up the hill to the ski centre where, after a welcome coffee, we had a brief look for Ring Ousel, but without success.

Our next stop, after lunch, was at Loch An Eilein. As we circumnavigated the loch we were frustrated by the song of a Redstart but could not find the singer. Shortly after, another Redstart flew low across the path and we got excellent views of an adult male and a juvenile. More fine views of Spotted Flycatcher were obtained and a Common Sandpiper sat very still for photographs at close range. Nice views of Goldcrest and a party of Long-tailed Tits were also obtained.

Our final stop of the day was at Boat of Garten, where we added Tufted Duck to our list of species as well as enjoying views of a pair of Little Grebe. As we attempted to drive away, a pair of Mallard with five chicks insisted on trying to reach the vehicle despite being shooed back to the water more than once. But an incident-free getaway was eventually achieved.

## Day 6

## Thursday 26th May

An early morning walk by some through the lovely Anagach Woods brought delightful close views of a young Red Squirrel. Near the entrance to the wood, it moved up and down the tree then dramatically jumped across the

path to a different tree. Another highlight was a female Roe Deer which watched us from close range but seemed unconcerned by our presence.

After breakfast we drove to the Strathdearn valley, and parked by a bridge. The wind was strong, but the sun shone and there was plenty of bird activity on the river. Sand and House Martins mixed with Swallows as they fed on insects over the water. Oystercatchers, Lapwings and Curlew dotted the fields adjoining the river.

At our second stop, also by the river, there was similar frenzied feeding activity. The alarm call of a Dipper alerted us to an individual which flew up river then dived straight under the surface. It emerged from time to time, to sit on rocks in mid-stream. On the far side of the valley, a herd of Red Deer were grazing placidly.

Our next stop, by a little bridge, allowed us to access the rough track that wound its way up the mountain. We ascended into the teeth of the wind until heavier showers persuaded us to turn back. But we were high enough to have stunning views of the valley, and a large herd of Red Deer which were grazing just below the ridge.

At our final stop, another walk produced a Common Lizard as well as singing Tree Pipit and a soaring Buzzard. As we descended the valley, a highlight was a Red Kite soaring in the bright evening sunshine.

## Day 7

Friday 27th May

Our final day started with fine drizzle but, undeterred, we set off early to explore the Kyntra woods. Lots of birds were singing despite the rain as we wandered down to the River Spey. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flew in its undulating way across the path. A high pitched trill alerted us to Treecreepers, where an adult was feeding a juvenile on the side of a Scots Pine. A buck and doe Roe Deer watched us as we emerged from the wood and crossed back to the hotel. Then it was time to pack up, after an excellent week in Speyside.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2022						
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓		✓			
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓		
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓		
7	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓	✓	✓				
8	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓				
9	Eider duck	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓				
10	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				✓			
11	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		2					
12	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>		2		✓			
13	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓		✓	
14	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
15	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓			✓		
16	Horned grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓					
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓		✓		✓
18	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓	✓	✓				
19	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>						✓	
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	
21	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓						
22	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓	✓	✓		
25	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓			
26	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓			✓		✓	
27	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓			
28	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓			✓	
29	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓				
32	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓				
33	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>						✓	
34	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			✓				
35	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓				
36	Guillemot	<i>Yria aalgae</i>			✓				
37	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			✓				
38	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓				
39	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓				
40	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓				
41	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓				
42	Shag	<i>Palacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓				

			May 2022						
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
43	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
44	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				✓	H		
45	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓			
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓		✓	✓		
49	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓			
50	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓			
51	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓					
52	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓				✓	
53	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓					
55	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
56	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					✓	✓	
57	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓			✓	✓	
59	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓				✓	
60	Long Tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			✓		
61	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
62	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				✓			
63	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
65	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓				
66	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H						
67	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H	H
68	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
69	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				✓	✓	H	H
70	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	H		H	✓	H	✓
71	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓			✓		✓
72	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	H	H		H	✓	✓	✓
75	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
76	Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓	✓		
77	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	
79	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>						✓	
80	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H	✓	H	✓	✓	
82	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
83	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
85	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				✓	H	H	
86	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓				
87	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓		✓			



		May 2022							
	Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
89	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				✓	H	✓	H
90	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓				
91	Scottish Crossbill	<i>Loxia scotica</i>	✓			✓	✓		
92	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	H				✓	✓	
93	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓				

## Others

		May 2022							
Scientific name	Common name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
<b>Mammals</b>									
European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	x							
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	x	x						x
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	x			x	x	x	x	x
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>								x
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>				x		x		
Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>				x				
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			x					
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			x			x		
<b>Reptiles</b>									
Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>						x		
<b>Butterflies</b>									
Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>								
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>								
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>								