

Speyside in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th May – 1st June 2022



Puffin



Gannet



Red-throated Diver

Tour report and images by Pete Stevens



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North Buckinghamshire RSPB Local Group

Tour participants – Pete Stevens & Paul Tucker (Leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This was a successful trip despite some 'highland weather'. We walked in some fabulous landscapes set off often by dramatic skies and we saw some excellent birds, some in poor light but others in the best of light and at close quarters. A major highlight of the trip was undoubtedly the boat ride off MacDuff with auks, Gannets, Fulmars and Kittiwakes all just off the side of the boat and on the breeding ledges. A bonus was the very close encounter with Bottle-nose Dolphins a short distance before we came back to port.

Other highlights included Quail calling that a few members of the group got up early the next day and managed to see! We had another early start but Black Grouse was not to be seen at the lek in poor weather. However, a Short-eared Owl paraded around us for several minutes making the morning a winner. This to be followed, on a wooded lane, by Woodcock, one of three seen on the trip and a first for some. Pied and Spotted flycatchers at Craigellachie Woodland Reserve in the afternoon were followed by stunning views of breeding plumage Slavonian Grebe. We managed to see Ring Ouzel on Cairngorm and then at Lock Morlich some of the best views possible of Black-throated Diver followed by similar views of Red-throated Diver.

In Strathearn, known as Findhorn Valley, we saw Red Kite, Dipper feeding young, Goosander, distant Golden Eagle and Peregrine among other birds. At Loch Insh on the 30th we found a female Goldeneye with six chicks and an Osprey on the nest only 100 feet away. At Loch an Eilean we found a pair of Redstart at the nest hole. Along with views of Crested Tit and Crossbill it all added up to a great trip.

Day 1

Saturday 25th May

The first arrivals were met by Pete and Paul at Inverness airport on a windy day with some showers early. We were quickly organised and on our way to the first stop of the trip at Fort George. Hoping for dolphin on the falling tide we may have been a little late but picked up Oystercatchers and a Ringed Plover. We stopped to get some lunch at a shop in a nearby village then moved on to the next stop on the Moray Firth. The tide was getting low but even in the strong wind we could make out Red-breasted Merganser. We headed south then towards our base for the week at Nethybridge stopping a little way off the main road to stretch our legs and get the feel of the moors. There was the sound of distant Curlew and on a small pond Mallard and Teal. The last stop of the day was at a large pool in fields near Boat of Garten where we could see Goldeneye, Wigeon, Lapwing, Redshank and Little Grebe, plus the first of the native Greylag Geese. We dropped off at the hotel, meeting Roger, and then Paul dashed off to pick up the rest of the group at Aviemore Railway Station.

Day 2

Sunday 26th May

Early away today, we headed back north and east to Macduff on the coast. Here we boarded the Seacat ready for our trip to Troup Head. As we neared Troup we saw the first of several Black Guillemots; Gannets, Guillemots and Razorbills became more frequent and the occasional Eider could be seen near the shore. When we reached the first of the colonies, auks surrounded the boat offering great photographic opportunities. We were now seeing Fulmar regularly and the first of several Puffins. Further around the headland and the first part of the

Gannet colony came into view., plus numbers of Kittiwake. We had now seen a dozen Puffins. A little further and we came to the Kittiwake colony with Fulmar nesting above and Razorbills below. Beyond, large numbers of Gannet in the air above us indicated the rest of their colony. It was difficult to know where to look next! Too soon it was time to return as the breeze picked up and the first squally showers hit us. The crowning moment of the trip came as the captain, Harold, shouted “Dolphin”. We were treated to a display as the feeding group surrounded the boat, often swimming right under our feet!

After thanking Harold and his very able assistant and trip guide Sophia we walked a little way along the harbour front to a fine little cafe for lunch.

After lunch we set off west hugging the coast where possible. At Cullen we stopped to see the Common and Grey Seals on a small offshore island. Then at Buckie we found three very close Eider in the harbour and cameras were clicking away! Further on we arrived at Spey Mouth. A group of a dozen Goosander were roosting on a river bank nearby and Sand Martins were hawking over the river. On the beach a group of five Ringed Diver flew but were then well camouflaged on the pebbles. Beyond them we scanned a roost of Herring Gulls and at one end there were Common Terns. After a while we spotted a long winged, long tailed tern that landed with them: Arctic Tern. A second was also then spotted. By the time we got back to the vehicles it was 5.00 p.m. so we set off back to Nethybridge.

Day 3

Monday 27th May

A very early start in hope of Black Grouse was dashed by poor weather. Wet and windy, it was a ‘no show’. Undeterred, the group looked for Black-throated Diver on the nearby Lochindorb. Again no luck - black was not our colour today!. Back along the road spirits were raised as a Short-eared Owl put on a show for us as we watched it quarter the moor for several minutes. Then there were two Common Sandpipers in a small stream. We decided as the hour was still early to do some exploring. First we found a male Kestrel and then along a small wooded road we stopped to watch a woodcock as it slowly padded into the undergrowth in front of us. A little further and two Red-legged Partridge showed up. When we turned around in the first van we lost contact with the other van; they had spotted a Red Squirrel but missed the Woodcock.

Back for a leisurely breakfast we were off again at 09:40 to Loch Garten this time. On the way we stopped at a fine piece of Caledonian Forest and were surprised by a Tree Pipit in display flight. After spotting a pair of Treecreepers we made for the RSPB Centre. Feeders here produced views of Coal Tit and a family of Siskin. In the Centre new live feed displays of not only Osprey, but White-tailed Eagle and Goshawk thrilled the group. We then drove on to the second car park to walk some of the Two Lochs Path. We strolled through the forest seeing Goldcrest, more Treecreepers including a family and yet another Tree Pipit. Then it was time for lunch before a trip to Aviemore.

After lunch we made our way the short distance to the Craigellachie Nature Reserve where we quickly found a nest hole in a tree occupied by Great Spotted Woodpeckers. The young inside were being fed regularly by both parents, just a few yards from where we were standing, oblivious to the group watching. Soon after we found both Spotted and Pied Flycatchers.

Off then for the final stop of the day just north of Aviemore, where we were able to get quite close views of Slavonian Grebe in full breeding plumage. We stayed quietly for some time marvelling at the Grebe's 'colourful dress'. Time then to get back to our hotel with just a brief stop on the way to view an Osprey fly over, calling as it went.

Day 4 May

Tuesday 28th

Today we took a very short drive to stop in a small layby opposite a field of Rape. After a little wait we heard a "wet-my-lips" call of a Quail. Never easy to see, we then headed for the Cairngorm Mountains.

On arrival we toggled up in several layers against the inclement weather for a hike in search of Ptarmigan. A short way up the path a Northern Wheatear lead us on for a while before flying off, then in the mist above us a lone Raven flew over. Meadow Pipits were the common bird along the walk, displaying right and left of us. It was not until we had pressed on to the boulder fields just before Coire an Lochan that we heard Ptarmigan calling. As hard as we tried we could not get a sight of the bird (s?). So we made the walk back to the Ski Centre Cafe for lunch.

After lunch we took a look around the immediate vicinity and our luck took a turn for the better with at least some of the group getting views of Ring Ouzel; a male and a female.

The weather was improving as we left the mountain and by the time we reached Loch Morlich the sun was shining. Viewing from the beach the group was able to see a male Goldeneye. Then Pete spotted a distant Red-throated Diver. So it was back into the vehicles for a quick trip along the side of the Loch to a nearer point to the bird. On arrival we were out with scopes ready. We scanned with no luck and were almost ready to give up when Roger shouted "Diver". We scanned the area he had been viewing noting Teal and three Common Sandpipers near the shore in the wait for the Diver's re-appearance. Then very close by a Black-throated Diver appeared! Not long after, the Red-throated Diver was found some distance off. As both birds dived and drifted away from us we moved on again a short distance eventually getting very close views of the Red-throated Diver to match the earlier views of the 'Black-throat'. A great end to a sometimes difficult day. Then back to the hotel with a brief stop for a Curlew close up beside the road.

Day 5

Wednesday 29th May

Our destination today was Strathdearn, commonly called Findhorn Valley. Our first stop, un-planned, was just off the main A9. On a post near the road – and soon flying off, was a Red Kite, which was soon to be joined by the first Common Buzzard of the day.

At Findhorn Bridge we took our first planned stop and soon picked out an adult Dipper feeding a young bird on rocks below us. A Grey Wagtail flew over and it was seen to be with young too. In the trees next to the river Paul picked out Spotted Flycatcher which all the group got onto before our move up the Glen.

Next stop beside the narrow road produced a distant but clear view of a Golden Eagle. As we drove further on Red-legged Partridge were seen frequently and Mistle Thrushes were numerous in one field. On the river as we

passed were Common Merganser, or Goosander. At another stop there were several Lapwing with small young and a Redshank. Then at another a male Redstart. Then a final brief stop provided views of a large herd of Red Deer.

Stopping at the end of the driveable road we sat down for lunch before a walk up the Glen. We soon heard the call of a Peregrine and a Common Buzzard flew up high to be briefly 'stooped at' by the Peregrine, while atop the ridge to one side we could see another herd of Red Deer.

Over the high hills next came a young Golden Eagle that landed then took off again up and out of sight. Confusingly, shortly afterwards a Common Buzzard came over the ridge and landed on a rock. We walked on as, unfortunately, the weather worsened and eventually we turned back for the shelter of the vans.

Before we made our way back to the Hotel we took the Farr road over The Moor; a bleak but nonetheless strangely attractive drive. Off the Moor we headed back to the A9 for a quick drive back.

In the late evening some of the group joined Pete for a drive up to Grantown on Spey where we were lucky enough to see roding Woodcock.

Day 6

Thursday 30th May

The start of the day took us back to the woodland on the road to Colyumbrudge. The first birds seen were Coal Tit and Chaffinch, the most commonly seen birds of the trip.. Then at a clearing a Woodcock flew off. We walked on seeing Goldcrest and had a brief view of Roe Deer before turning back, when we got a good view of a Crested Tit. Just after there was a 'flyover' of two Crossbills.

Next on today's itinerary was Loch Insh. Taking the narrow path beside the Loch we soon saw a female Goldeneye with six small young – all already diving and because of their downy plumage popping up almost out of the water after. At the historic cemetery we could see an Osprey on the nest nearby. While watching her we also saw Goldfinch, Siskin and a Spotted Flycatcher in woodland surrounding the Cemetery.

We drove on to Insh Marshes. Many breeding Curlew, Lapwing and Redshank could be seen here as well as one Reed Bunting. After lunch we drove back towards Aviemore and to Loch an Eilean. Here we tried to find Wood Warbler for the second time in the trip without luck. We walked the woodland beside this pretty loch, with Long-tailed Tits 'following' us. We had views of Goldcrest and then a Redstart. We soon realised that the male Redstart was visiting a nest hole with food so moved back so as not to cause disturbance. Watching for some time we saw both parents back and forth frequently with food for the unseen chicks. Another good end to a day's birding.

Day 7

Friday 31st May

On our last day in the field it was decided to try another Forest, Invereshie and Inshriach National Nature Reserve, with chances of "The Big 3 Cs": Capercaillie, Crossbill and Crested Tit. After parking the vans we walked through a thinned plantation. Spotted Flycatcher and Goldcrest were seen before we first heard and then

saw two Common Crossbill flying over. They landed briefly then unfortunately flew on. A group of Siskin could be seen high up in the same tree.

We walked up the gradually rising path through the Caledonian Forest with stunning views gradually opening up to us. We obtained fine views of Willow Warbler, another Goldcrest and a second Spotted Flycatcher. On our return we saw Dunnock and a close up of Treecreeper.

We drove on a little way until the Forest opened out and we stopped there for our picnic at Achleum. Afterwards we walked the path through this part of the Glenfeshie Estate where Tree Pipits were commonly seen atop the small scattered trees in heathland dominated by mature heathers. A little further on a single Crossbill flew over appearing to land in an isolated tree but was not found again. We walked on seeing one of very few invertebrates on the trip: a Four-spotted Chaser dragonfly (*Libellula quadrimaculata*) and a Green-veined White butterfly (*Artogeia napi*). On the walk back we found a smart male Stonechat before returning for our last night at Nethybridge Hotel.

Day 8 June

Saturday 1st

Today we said our goodbyes and the group were dropped off at the train station and airport to make their way home after a wonderful holiday enjoying the wildlife and scenery of this attractive part of Scotland.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2022						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓					
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>					✓		
4	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓					
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓		✓				
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓						
9	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓					
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓			✓		
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓						
13	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>				✓			
14	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>				S			
15	Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				H	✓		
16	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		✓	✓	
17	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				✓			
19	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓			
20	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				✓			
21	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓				✓		
22	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓					
23	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓					
24	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓					
25	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓					
26	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
27	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			✓				
28	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓		
29	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>					✓		
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		✓				
32	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>			✓		✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2022						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31
34	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓					
36	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
38	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓			✓	✓	
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
41	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓			✓		
42	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓					
43	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓					
44	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓					
45	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓					
46	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓					
47	Guillemot	<i>Uria algae</i>		✓					
48	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓					
49	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓					
50	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			H		✓	H	H
54	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		✓	✓	
56	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓				
57	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓		
58	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Barn Swallow	<i>hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓					
62	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
64	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓	✓		✓
66	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓		
67	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					✓		
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
69	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
70	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2022						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31
71	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						✓	
72	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
73	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓	H		✓	H
74	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓				✓
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
76	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>				✓	✓		
78	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
79	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		✓	✓	
80	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			✓				
81	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				✓	✓		
83	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		✓		✓
84	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					✓	✓	H
85	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					✓		
86	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>						H	
87	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H		H	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓			✓	✓	
89	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓
91	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓	✓	
92	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>			✓			✓	✓
95	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓				
97	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓					
98	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>							3
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
101	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>						✓	

Mammals

Scientific name	Common name	May 2022						
		25	26	27	28	29	30	31
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>					✓		
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓			✓	
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		12+					
Pipistrelle Bat	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>					✓		
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓					
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓					
Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>				✓			
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	✓						

Invertebrates

Scientific name	Common name
Dor Beetle	<i>Geotrupes stercorarius</i>
Small Tortoiseshell butterfly	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Red Admiral butterfly	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Brimstone butterfly	<i>Gonopteryx rhamni</i>
Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>
Green –veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>

Plants

Common name	Scientific name
Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>
Leopard's bane	<i>Doronicum pardalianches</i>
Chickweed wintergreen	<i>Trientalis europaea</i>
Cloudberry	<i>Rubus chamaemorus</i>
Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>
Trailing Azalea	<i>Loiseleuria procumbens</i>
Ling	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Cross-leaved Heath	<i>Erica tetralix</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Bell heather	<i>Erica cinerea</i>
Bearberry	<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>
Heath milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
Alpine Lady's mantle	<i>Alchemilla alpina</i>
Wood Sorrel (leaves only)	<i>Oxalis acetosella</i>
Wood Anemone	<i>Anemone nemorosa</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Wild pansy (Heartsease)	<i>Viola tricolor</i>
Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>
Sea Campion	<i>Silene maritima</i>
Large-flowered Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula grandiflora</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Common Dog Violet	<i>Viola riviniana</i>
Fir Clubmoss	<i>Huperzia selago</i>
Stagshorn Clubmoss	<i>Lycopodium clavatum</i>
Water horsetail	<i>Equisetum fluviatile</i>
Common Rockrose	<i>Helianthemum chamaecistus</i>