

Scotland in Style

With Sandwich Bird Tours

by
Peter Roberts
May 27th-June 3rd 2006



Saturday 27th May: Kent to the Highlands.

The group arrived into Glasgow International only a few minutes late and we were quickly packed and on our way north, using my car as the luggage van, with Jim driving. He managed to keep up with me in my 17-seat minibus and we were up into the hills before long and turning into the grand drive of Geddes House by about 9pm. Yvonne awaited us with rooms already earmarked and a hot meal on the table.

Sunday 28th May: Black Isle and Strathconnon

After yesterday's late arrival we didn't aim to get up too early this morning. A 7.30am breakfast was followed by an 8.30am departure towards the Black Isle. Weather continued changeable, with rain showers interspersed with sun, but a cool wind throughout much of the day. The morning's goal was to find Red Kites, and we saw some very distant ones quite soon after turning towards Munloch. It wasn't until early afternoon as we left the Black Isle close to the Muir Of Ord that we gained some much better looks. During our stay on the Black Isle we popped into all the usual haunts - Munloch Bay, Udale Bay, Chanonry Point then Cromarty itself where we found a sheltered spot from the wind and ate our picnic. Best was Chanonry with its great views of Bottle-nosed Dolphins close in and cavorting. John spotted a first Arctic Skua here. At Udale was a single Whooper Swan mixed in with the Mutes, while at Cromarty we notched up some fine male Common Eiders and Razorbills, plus a Tree Sparrow – my first for this area. In the afternoon we went inland up the highly picturesque Strathconnon. The main goal here was Golden Eagle, which we saw reasonably well but in continuing "iffy" weather - rain then sun in the blink of an eye. The steep, glaciated valley with heather-clad slopes, rushing river and clumps of trees and meadows produced further interesting species such as both Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander, Common Sandpiper, Stonechats, Northern Wheatears and more. We dropped in on another bird guide to check some local info for future days and some of the group managed a reasonably long walk while others of us "watched and waited". We were back at Geddes for a superb evening meal lovingly prepared by Yvonne at 7.30pm.

Monday 29th May. Abernethy Forest, Cawdor & Loch Ruthven.

This was "horribly early" starts #1: a 4.30am breakfast and a 5am departure down to Strathspey in search of grouse! I'd got another local bird guide, Ray Nowicki to come and help out. Ray met us at 6am in Grantown after we'd seen beautiful summer-plumaged European Golden Plovers and Eurasian Wigeon en route. We followed Ray up Cairngorm Mt. to start the morning at a Black Grouse lek. As we arrived there were 3 birds present, but the weather was turning for the worse and they vanished in a swirl of damp cloud turning to slushy snow within minutes! Just over the road was a staked-out Ring Ousel pair showing up immediately we arrived. We hung on for it to return (which it did, giving good views, but in a snow-shower!). We decided that maybe lower down might produce better weather. We turned tail and headed for Abernethy Forest, halting at Tulloch Moor for another chance for Black Grouse. This worked well; we had some distant birds, but one much closer and in more workable weather conditions! Here too were Common Goldeneyes, Whinchats and more. Then for the main feature of the morning – a walk in the original Caledonian Pine Forest in hopes of Capercaillie. This didn't materialise, but we had grand walk (weather still going from dry and sunny to cold and rainy) and saw some great birds. Crossbills of unknown progeny called and passed over, but never dared show themselves for proper scrutiny. Common Redstarts were much more obliging. White-throated Dipper young posed nicely on the river we crossed before getting into the forest proper where Crested Tits put on a sterling performance. Once through the thicker forest we arrived at a fine viewpoint over open heather hillsides. Here were Common Cuckoo, Whinchats, Tree Pipits and a pair of splendid Golden Eagles. The latter were flying and seen perched up, wings half open in tops of trees; a great display. Turning back towards our much-wanted early lunch, we caught up with Eurasian Siskins, Goldcrests, a brief Eurasian Sparrowhawk and other bits and pieces before saying cheerio to Ray back at Forest Lodge. Our quick return to Geddes was interrupted only briefly by a quick halt for Red Grouse spotted by John as we nipped over the vast open areas of heather moorland.

Back at base Yvonne had a lovely lunch of soup and sandwiches awaiting us. It had already been a long day, so the afternoon was deliberately easier paced. Four ladies opted for a visit to nearby Cawdor Castle, borrowing my car for greater flexibility. The rest of us drove off to the local loch to seek out Slavonian Grebes. None here, so we decided to drive across to the better-known Loch Ruthven site where these gorgeous grebes performed well for us: a real treat to see them in full breeding plumage. Along the way we found some nesting Peregrines and finished the day with a drive past Loch Ness. A lively dinner chat revolved around the pros and cons of Tesco's - stimulating or what?

Tuesday 30th May; Wester Ross, Loch Maree & Applecross.

It was a fine day just about throughout, with sunshine yet a cold wind. We set off at 8am to the west coast, making swift progress through some fine scenery to reach the sea inlet of Little Loch Broom by about 10.30am. From there it was a short hop to the overview for Gruinard Island where we'd pinned our hopes on seeing White-tailed Eagle. Almost as we arrived we scoped two huge distant lumps that had to be the birds - but they were not very great views and both eventually slipped away onto the "blind" side of the island. We picked up Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Black Guillemots and European Shags on the sea while watching and waiting for something better. A mid-morning cuppa revived our cold spirits and as we supped, a huge apparition flew in - a magnificent adult White-tailed Eagle with enormous wingspan, pale head and tail. A Hooded Crow came in to mob it, dwarfed by its immense size. It landed, we scoped it sat on a rock, showed passers-by, then it flew, giving further fine views before circling high into the clouds and disappearing. With this major goal accomplished early we continued round the wonderful indented, rocky coastline of Wester Ross towards Gairloch. Aultbea village provided loos and summer-plumaged Red-throated Divers. Gairloch itself produced Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, Northern Gannets and various other goodies. We reached the next goal of Loch Maree in time for a late lunch while scanning the gorgeous loch for Black-throated Divers. Bingo! A splendid pair came into view in the cold choppy waters of this picturesque loch in the Beinn Eighe National Park with its huge snow-sprinkled mountains and deep, glaciated valleys. With time to spare, we finally got to do what I've had in mind on several previous trips, but never had the time for: a detour to Applecross. The road winds steeply up in a single track, windswept peninsula. The sharp altitude gain gives virtually the only chance in Scotland for virtually "drive-by" Rock Ptarmigan. It was a dramatic drive up to a spectacular high pass amidst rocky plateaux where we got out, walked and looked hard. After a few hundred yards I tried something different; playback of the bird's odd guttural call. Instantly a bird flew from the far hillside right past us - absolutely brilliant. We had excellent scope views of the bird then left it to its bleak life and started for home (it was now approaching 5pm). A couple of productive stops on the road found us further lovely divers and Common Scoters. We arrived back very content with the day's birding at 7pm in time for another of Yvonne's tasty suppers.

Wednesday 31st May: Abernethy revisited, then twitching in Aberdeen.

A second attempt at Capercaillies today meant an early start after a 5am breakfast. Yvonne came along too and left her car at the bottom of the Dell Road ready to transport me back to the minibus from where we'd started our walk. Great plan and lovely walk, but another birder met us halfway along reporting no birds, so we backtracked and went off to walk the same trails beyond Forest Lodge as we did two days ago with Ray Nowicki. Another lovely walk, but again no Capers. Crested Tits, Common Redstarts, Tree Pipits and Goldcrests tried to cheer us up, but it was disappointing not to get "the Big One". However a substantial compensation came in the form of Crossbills spotted by Chris. I've done 4-5 tours in this area over the last 2-3 years and not seen any, but at last here they were - and perched, and bright males, and (best of all) with whopping great bills! There is still a lot of argument about the taxonomy of these birds in Scotland. Does Scottish Crossbill really exist? Is it not "just" Parrot Crossbill? Some say that both Parrot *and* Scottish occur. But for me, an adherent to the Clement's World Checklist (even if I don't always agree with all taxonomic decisions made) then what we saw today were indeed both Scottish and Red Crossbills. A Lifer and thus a very special day for me at least!

After all that excitement we nipped back to the Loch Garten Osprey viewing centre and viewed Ospreys. We also used loos, looked over nearby Loch Garten and ate a snack while deciding what to do with the remainder of the day. The allure of finding a drake King Eider amongst Common Eiders on the coast at Aberdeen was too great a temptation for most of the group. 4 opted out and went for a good relaxed afternoon with Yvonne. They popped down to our staked-out Wood Warbler site with great success, then returned to Geddes finding nesting Eurasian Treecreeper in old Sequoias in the grounds. The rest of us took a long, but interesting drive over to the Grampian and Deeside area of the Highlands with an hour or more on the coast north of Aberdeen to seek out the rarities. Sadly the King Eider was not found. 300 Common Eiders presented a fine spectacle in the bright afternoon sunshine. Offshore were Common Scoters, auks, Red-throated Divers and a couple of fine dark phase Arctic Skuas, but search as we may, no rarities. We returned the two hour journey back to Geddes arriving by 7pm. Another splendid supper and decisions to try for Handa Island tomorrow.

June 1st: Handa Island.

Today we headed north at about 8am with fingers crossed for good weather for a proposed visit to Handa Island off the west coast of Sutherland. It was a lovely drive up through picturesque Ullapool and on to Scourie, winding up the west coast through bleak moorland and mountain landscapes. On arrival at Tarbet at about 10.30am we were encouraged to find the weather still just about in our favour; grey and overcast, but dry. That was the way it remained all day. The little open boat across to the island was running back and forth in 10 minutes flat. We got across in two goes, had a cuppa and snacks, plus introductory talk from the staff before setting off for a circular walk around the island. It was a lovely 3 hours or so from midday until 3pm. Star attractions were the vast seabird colonies. Huge numbers of Common Guillemots and Razorbills huddled on the ledges of the sheer sandstone cliffs. Smaller numbers of Atlantic Puffins were a bigger draw with lots of "oohs" and "aahs" all round as we scoped these bright auks. On land of course the wonderful show of Great and Arctic Skuas was a major delight - so good to see these close-to rather than distant dots on a seawatch! Some of the group rustled up 2 of the only 4 Red Grouse on the island. It was a good experience and an invigorating walk, returning to the mainland by 3.45pm. We motored back through the pleasantly empty twisting roads to arrive back at Geddes by 6.45pm





Arctic Skuas on Handa by John van der Dol

Friday 2nd June: Last try for Capers, Strathspey mop-up and the Cairngorm tops.

The madly keen (or was it desperate?) got up at 4.30am to have a third and final attempt at Capercaillies. We went to a new location recommended by local contacts and wandered for an hour or more through fine habitat of mature Scots Pine with good Bilberry understorey, seeing very little at all. Back for breakfast by a leisurely 8am and thereafter the group split into two. Some opted for the hike up into the Cairngorm plateau that Yvonne had scouted out last week. They took the "spare" car and did their own thing all day. The rest of us wandered off for the day with no fixed agenda. First we passed by the open grouse moors of Loch Indorb. It was a fine sunny day, though a wind made the water too choppy to find the Black-throated Divers. We were delighted to watch an Osprey come in and make several dives before successfully catching a small fish - quite a spectacle. Further round the loch we found a fine Whooper Swan, breeding-plumaged Eurasian Golden Plover and then, on the classically managed heather moorland a pair of Red Grouse. These birds were close to the road and had a group of tiny chicks with them, so gave us long and fine views. From here we went south towards everybody's favourite town - Grantown-on-Spey. We walked in further forests known for their Capercaillie, but again drew a blank except for Crested Tits. By now it was nearing lunchtime and we drove south seeking out a suitable picnic spot. At Nethybridge we pulled up in glorious sunshine to a couple of riverside picnic tables in town. This turned up trumps, as Chris got his much-wanted Grey Wagtail (and bonus Dipper) on the river as we ate our sandwiches. It was a superbly clear sunny day by now. The tops of the Cairngorms were showing crystal clear above us and we envied the trekkers the views that they must be experiencing right now (let alone the birds). We decided to get some of that for ourselves by going to the Cairngorm tops the "wimps way" on the Funicular Railway - just to admire the view if nothing else. But first it was catch-up time for those who'd not seen Wood Warbler. On the way to the Cairngorm Railway was the site near Loch-an-Eilean where the species showed so well before. It did so again today, singing in low Beech tree branches at eye-level and dropping to its nest below before our very eyes - brilliant stuff! Now for the mountains. As we arrived at the base where we caught the railway, the trekkers were gathered having completed their walk to the tops and back. They were "high" with their successes; both Eurasian Dotterels and Ptarmigans at point-blank range - just feet away and on nests, and all in the most perfect sunny weather you could wish for on a mountain top notorious for changeable foul weather. After 8 minutes of steep ascent in the cable railway we were out at the Visitor Centre and Ptarmigan Restaurant close to the top of Cairngorm at over 3000 feet - we'd all virtually bagged our one and only Munro! The place is a bit of a "tourist-trap" and there is no access out onto the tops from the here. Although very frustrating for us, it is just as well that the "rabble" aren't allowed to wander from here, otherwise the area would be severely disturbed. We had to make do with long distance scope views of adjacent bare rocky mountainsides and just be happy that we'd got up here and were enjoying fine views. We looked long and hard, found nothing and popped into the cafe for a cuppa before descending. I took one last look around the other side and was amazed and delighted to spot a gorgeous Eurasian Dotterel on the slopes. I rushed back in to the others and got them quickly onto the open viewing terrace. We relocated the bird (now turned into a pair) and had

mid-distance, but good looks at this highly-prized species before having to drag ourselves away and make the journey back to Geddes House for our final night.

A splendid supper of Haggis, Roast Lamb and Sherry Trifle was washed down with a bottle of Ptarmigan Whisky kindly provided by Sandy and Alan. Thanks were made all round for what had turned out to be a successful and fun week.

Saturday 3rd June: Return to Home.

We were packed and away by 7.30am for the long drive down to Glasgow, arriving in good time at just before 11am. Our trusty minibus was dropped off, group checked in and heading home, while I turned about and drove my car back up to the highlands.



Kent Birders on Handa waiting for the boat back to the mainland

John van der Dol

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