

SCOTLAND IN STYLE

MAY 21-29, 2011

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TOUR REPORT
SCOTLAND IN STYLE
May 21–29, 2011

By Andrew Whittaker

This tour had something for everyone: dramatic Scottish highland scenery, great birding, stupendous historical sites (castles, stately homes, and battlefields), and a visit to one of the world's finest Scotch whisky distilleries, where we sampled a wee dram! Combine this with being based in a wonderful historic Scottish hotel where we were treated to superb meals (we all certainly gained a few kilos) and marvelous family hospitality, and you have to think that life can't get much better!

Despite some very adverse weather hitting Scotland during our stay, birding highlights were many. I know for sure that none of us will ever forget the stunning Red Kites soaring right over our heads, or the Gray Heron swallowing whole that unfortunate mallard duckling! Other interesting behavioral observations included Red Grouse and curlews leading chicks off the roadside, and a Common Merganser and a brooding Lapwing attacking that Cock Pheasant.

Bubbly, clear mountain streams produced stunning Gray Wagtails and magical White-throated Dippers, while mirror-flat lochs, surrounded by breathtaking mountains and old pristine Caledonian pine forest rewarded us with Black Grouse, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Scottish Crossbill, Common Redstart, Eurasian Bullfinch, Goldcrest, and flocks of endearing tits that included Crested, Blue, Coal, and Great. Throughout, we were treated to spectacular moorlands scenery that was not without its birds either, including a feeding male Capercaillie, Willow Ptarmigan (Red Grouse), and a hunting Short-eared Owl. Stunning coastal sea cliffs provided us with countless thousands of breeding seabirds including Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Common Murre, Black-legged Kittiwake, Northern Fulmar, and magnificent gannets and stunning Common Eiders offshore.

Fond childhood birding memories flooded back to me as I heard the pleasant rambling song of the Yellowhammer—"a little bit of bread and no cheese"—emanating from the hedgerows, while European Goldfinch, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Siskin, and Eurasian Linnet all competed for our attention.

We also dove into a wealth of Scottish history, visiting the historical sites of Cawdor Castle (linked with Macbeth and Shakespeare); the medieval fortress of Urquhart Castle, situated on the banks of the famous Loch Ness; Balmoral Castle; and Culloden Battlefield, where many English and Scottish lives were lost in bloody battles.

And let us not forget the mammal highlights, among them close studies of the poorly-known nocturnal pine marten and badger, which were a highlight for your leader too.

All in all a fantastic group enjoyed a superb Scottish experience. I'm already looking forward to my return next year.

Itinerary:

May 21: Depart United States.

May 22: Those of us coming straight from the Vent Scottish Cruise arrived at Aberdeen; others started from Inverness. Transfer in a comfortable van (with some birding on the way) to the charming ancient market town of Grantown-On-Spey, our lovely base for the week, situated at the doorsteps to Cairngorms National Park. Afternoon birding walk in the adjacent Abernethy forest reserve and its spectacular ancient Scottish Caledonian Pine forest.

May 23: Excursion to Black Isle where we visited the RSPB Udale Bay hide and Chanonry Point to seek the Dolphins.

May 24: Further exploration of Abernethy forest and along the River Spey. In the afternoon we visited the spectacular Cawdor Castle and its gardens and birded the wonderful wooded grounds.

May 25: Morning birding around Loch Garten in the ancient forest and Caingorms National Park. In the afternoon a guided tour to the home of one of the world's most famous Scotch Whiskies, Glenfiddich distillery.

May 26: Drove across the scenic route to the east coast, stopping off in route to visit the Queen's residence of Balmoral Castle. Early afternoon at the most spectacular seabird cliffs along the Scottish east coast and birded the RSPB Fowlsheugh reserve, teeming with countless thousands of breeding seabirds.

May 27: Early start for the Black Grouse lek at Tullock Moor. After a good breakfast we braved the cold up on Dava Moor and decided to go up the famous Caingorms funicular where it was clear, but bitterly cold for this time of year. Afternoon birding around Loch Garten, with a visit to the famous RSPB Osprey hide and visitor center.

May 28: Black Isle and Strathconan and its magnificent valley and stunning Loch Dougan. Further west on a loon quest with afternoon sheltering from the worst storm to hit Scotland in over 50 years! Nocturnal mammal excursion to Caingorms National Park, where we visited a heated private hide for the chance to see the rare and poorly known Pine Marten and Badger.

May 29: Visit to the famous historic battlefield at Cullodan, followed by a visit to Urquhart Castle on the bonnie shores of the famous Loch Ness where we searched for Nessie! All transferred to Inverness for ongoing train trips south and homebound flights from Inverness airport.

Top five birds as chosen by the group

- 1- Red Kite**
- 2- Eurasian Curlew (with chick)**
- 3- Capercaillie**
- 4- Wood Warbler**
- 5- Short-eared Owl**

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Razorbill, Commo Murre, Black-legged Kittiwake, Northern Fulmar and magnificent Gannets and stunning Common Eiders offshore.

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And let us not forget the trip mammal highlights, among them the close studies of the poorly-known nocturnal Pine Marten and Badger, which were a highlight for your too.

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BIRDLIST.

Key;

H = Heard only.

Ducks, Geese & Swans (*Anatidae*)

Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*)

Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*)

Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) – Great scope studies of a lovely male.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) – With seven 3–day-old chicks!

Pheasants, Grouse etc. (*Tetraonidae*)

Eurasian Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) – Wonderful scope looks at a distant male.

Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) – Nice looks at this endemic subspecies (a.k.a. the “Red Grouse”).

Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*)

Gray Partridge (*Perdix perdi*) – H

Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*)

Grebes (*Podicipedidae*)

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – H

Shearwater & Petrels (*Procellariidae*)

Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Gannets & Boobies

Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

Comorants (*Phalacrocoracidae*)

European Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns (*Ardeidae*)

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Osprey (*Pandionidae*)

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Hawks, Eagles & Kites (*Accipitridae*)

Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*) – Incredible studies right over our heads! No wonder this magnificent raptor was voted top bird of the tour.

Eurasian Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – The adult was not visible on the nest.

Falcon & Caracaras (*Falconidae*)

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Plovers & Lapwings (*Charadriidae*)

Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

Oystercatchers (*Haematopodidae*)

Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

Sandpipers & Allies (*Scolopacidae*)

Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Leader only.

Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)

Common Sandpiper (*Actilis hypoleucos*)

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)

Gulls, Terns & Skimmers (*Laridae*)

Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)
Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)
European Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)
Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)
Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)
Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)
Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

Skuas & Jaegers (*Stercorariidae*)

Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

Auks, Murres & Puffins (*Alcidae*)

Common Murre (*Uria aalge*)
Razorbill (*Alca torda*)
Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) – Great looking bird.

Pigeons & Doves (*Columbidae*)

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)
Common Wood-Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*)
Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

Cuckoos (*Cuculidae*)

Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) – Multiple good studies.

Typical (*Strigidae*)

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) – Great looks.

Swifts (*Apodidae*)

Common Swift (*Apus apus*)

Woodpeckers & Allies (*Picidae*)

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*)

Crow, Jays & Magpies (*Corvidae*)

Eurasian Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*)
Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*)
Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*)
Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*)
Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)

Larks (*Alaudidae*)

Sky Lark (*Alauda arvensis*)

Swallows (*Hirundinidae*)

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*)
Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)
House Martin (*Delichon urbica*)

Chickadees & Tits (*Paridae*)

Coal Tit (*Parus ater*)
Crested Tit (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – A little stunner with that crest.
Great Tit (*Parus major*)
European Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

Creepers (*Certhiidae*)

Eurasian Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*) – H

Wrens (*Troglodytidae*)

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

Dippers (*Cinclidae*)

White-throated Dipper (*Cinclus*) – This gem is always a real crowd pleaser.

Kinglets (*Regulidae*)

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*)

Leaf warblers (*Phylloscopidae*)

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)
Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) - H
Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) – Stunning studies!

Reed-Warblers & Allies

Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*)

Old World Warblers (*Sylviidae*)

Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*) – A good find! This great songster is not common this far north.
Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)
Greater Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*)

Old World Flycatchers (*Muscicapidae*)

Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*)
European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)
Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*)
Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)

Thrushes & Allies (*Turdidae*)

Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)
Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*)

Starlings (*Sturnidae*)

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Accentors (*Prunellidae*)

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)

Wagtails & Pipits (*Motacillidae*)

Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)

Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*)

Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*)

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*)

Buntings & Sparrows (*Emberizidae*)

Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) – ‘A little bit of bread and no cheese’ Great to see them doing well here. For me, this was a bird that brings back childhood memories of birding British farmland.

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*)

Siskins, Crossbills etc. (*Fringillidae*)

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)

European Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*)

Lesser Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*)- H

Eurasian Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) – Common; with many young this year

European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Eurasian Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*)

Eurasian Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Males are simply stunning birds.

Old World Sparrows (*Passeridae*)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

Mammals and other interesting records

Stoats & Weasels (*Mustelidae*)

Pine Marten – Stunning to see this mythical creature so well!

European Badger – Lovely looks at this one too!

River Otter – Good looks as it crossed Loch Garten early in the a.m. A rarely seen UK Mammal.

Rabbits & Hares (*Leporidae*)

European Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

Squirrels (*Sciuridae*)

Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*)

Seals (*Phocidae*)

Common / Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

Gray / Atlantic Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)

Deer (Cervidae)

Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)

Roe Deer (*Capreolus*)

Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*)

Voies & Lemmings (Arvicolinae)

Short-tailed Field Vole

Vespertilionid Bats (Vespertilionidae)

Pipistrel Sp.? Bat

Butterflies:

Peacock

Small Tortoise Shell

Small White

Red Admiral