



SCOTLAND: FAMOUS GROUSE IN THE LAND OF WHISKY

Apr 20, 2012 to May 1, 2012

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Three years in the gestation, this was the inaugural Field Guides tour to Scotland, organized in conjunction with Buckbird Journeys. The dates were carefully selected to try to combine the thrilling sights of Scotland's about-to-depart wintering wildfowl, especially geese, along with spring grouse in their optimal display season. An interesting combination of departing winter species and early arriving summer ones added further spice as we traveled from south to north, then west to take in some of Scotland's most dramatic highland and island scenery, some of her rich cultural heritage, and of course an in-depth look at her "usage beathe", the legendary water of life, better known as some of her finest malt whiskies.

Any tour of Scotland can be made or broken by her notoriously fickle weather and we had a fair selection, as expected, on this tour. But for our southern leg and up into the highlands it was largely fine, as we skirted various rain showers, and in the west it was downright superb. Only our two days in Speyside were spoiled by a nasty series of rain fronts blowing in from the northeast, making life difficult for us and the birds, and totally ruining any chance of climbing up to the Cairngorm Plateau to look for ptarmigan (which would have been there) and dotterel (which would have not). Our one venture to the bottom of the ski lift was like a trip to the Arctic with snow, ice, and wind contrasting with bright sunshine not too far to the southwest.

In any event, our tally of 145 bird species was a good score, although different climatic conditions to the south of us made the list stronger on late winter birds than early arriving summer birds. In the end, however, some wonderful sightings, some as unexpected as that sensational Red-breasted Goose, made up for some unexpected misses, like those silent Corn Crakes. Our cheerful group from the "New World" kept to the pace- both birding and other- admirably, and they showed their true mettle in persevering through cold rain and wind to finally nail those crossbills in Caledonian Speyside. The various whiskies and some of Scotland's finest dining all seemed much appreciated and set the blueprint for hopefully many more tours in the future. Thank you to all for making this one so memorable.

--John and Hugh

For more information about this tour, including future departures, visit our website at www.fieldguides.com. And to see this same triplist online, go to <http://www.fieldguides.com/triplists/sco12LIST.pdf> and you will find the list in its entirety.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – They appeared to have left the Solway, but we caught up with 6 at Loch Leven on 23/4, a nice flock of around 300 near Forres on 25/4, and a single on Islay on 28 and 29/4. [b]

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (GREENLAND) (*Anser albifrons flavirostris*) – Again they appeared to have left their wintering ground at Ken Dee and Islay, but we had distant scope views of 6+ at Loch Gruinart on 29/4 and a single limping bird gave close views amongst several Graylags the same evening. [b]

GRAYLAG GOOSE (*Anser anser*) – Regularly encountered and the common breeding goose of Scotland.

BRANT (ATLANTIC) (*Branta bernicla hrota*) – Singles at Burghead on 25/4 and at West Loch Tarbert on 28/4. Both were of the light-bellied form hrota mainly wintering in Northern Ireland and nesting in Greenland and Spitzbergen. [b]

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – One of the great sights of Scottish birding! We had views of large numbers around Caerlaverock on 22/4 and sensational views of an estimated 7000+ at Southerness the same afternoon. The whole of the Svalbard (Spitzbergen) population winters in this area with a peak of 40,000 birds. A single amongst the Pinkfeet

- at Florres on 25/4 was off course. [b]
- CANADA GOOSE** (*Branta canadensis*) – Although vagrants are occasionally encountered, all ours were of the big races introduced into Britain in the early 1900s. Now a significant pest. [I]
- RED-BREASTED GOOSE** (*Branta ruficollis*) – The undoubted coup of the trip. A single had been with the main Barnacle flock at Southerness for some weeks but was elusive and had been last reported on 11 April. But Lois did the impossible by picking it out close to the flock edge on 22/4, and Sharon did the miraculous by finding it again after the flock flew to resettle several fields on. A lifer for all the group, severely endangered and only a vagrant to Britain; to have sunlit scope views of this full adult amongst the Barnacles with the Solway beyond and Criffel to the west will probably remain a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most! [b]
- MUTE SWAN** (*Cygnus olor*) – Even after several hundred years its status is ill defined, but a long time import and breeder. In winter the population is probably augmented by wild birds from north Scandinavia. Regularly encountered.
- WHOOPER SWAN** (*Cygnus cygnus*) – A single bird at Caerlaverock on 22/4 did not look that healthy. Several hundred winter here and are hand-fed. Five at the Insh Marshes on 26/4 were a better sighting, and another 5 were at Loch Gruinart on Islay 29/4.
- COMMON SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna tadorna*) – This handsome bird was a frequent sight on all coasts we visited.
- GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*) – A pair at Caerlaverock on 22/4.
- EURASIAN WIGEON** (*Anas penelope*) – Regularly encountered.
- MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The commonest waterfowl.
- NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*) – Several at Caerlaverock 22/4 and a singleton at Loch Gruinart 29/4.
- GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN)** (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Regularly encountered; perhaps should be split from American Green-winged Teal, but Cornell Clements continues to lump them.
- TUFTED DUCK** (*Aythya fuligula*) – Again, several encounters.
- GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – A large flock of 300+ birds off Carsethorne on 22/4. Largely a winter visitor to Scotland. [b]
- COMMON EIDER** (*Somateria mollissima*) – Common off all coasts except the inner Solway. The nominate taxon.
- WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (VELVET)** (*Melanitta fusca fusca*) – There were a few amongst the Commons at Burghead on 25/4, but the conditions were against us and I'm not sure everyone got onto them. Probably best considered distinct from the Asian and western North American form. [b]
- COMMON SCOTER** (*Melanitta nigra*) – Several hundred off Burghead 25/4. Now split from the Black Scoter of east Asia and western North America. [b]
- LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Numbers in full summer garb off Burghead 25/4. It breeds in the Outer Hebrides, but most of these were probably destined for Iceland. [b]
- COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – Lochmaben 22/4, Speyside 26/4, and Islay 28/4. Up to 6 birds at a time.
- COMMON MERGANSER (EURASIAN)** (*Mergus merganser merganser*) – A couple at Whitesands, Dumfries 22/4 and a single on the River Spey on 24/4.
- RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – Regularly encountered. Although it is an inland tree nester, it winters almost exclusively on coastal waters.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

- RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE** (*Alectoris rufa*) – Around 10 near Kirriemuir on 24/4 and a single near Aviemore on 26/4. A bird introduced for "sporting" purposes, now widespread and probably at least partly responsible for the severe decline of the native Gray Partridge. [I]
- REEVES'S PHEASANT** (*Syrnaticus reevesii*) – An exotic surprise was the sight of 7 of these beauties (all males) by the roadside near Glenlivet on 24/4. This population has been there for more than 20 years but does not seem to have spread. Not the first time introduction has been tried. A native of south China, this is just one of the reasons to join Hugh next year! [I]
- RING-NECKED PHEASANT** (*Phasianus colchicus*) – It's been around in Britain since at least Roman times and is widely bred for "sporting" purposes. A variety of forms seen, ranging from Ring-necked through "Old English" to very dark individuals. Abundant.
- EURASIAN CAPERCAILLIE** (*Tetrao urogallus*) – After being extirpated in Britain in Victorian times, it was reintroduced successfully in the late 1800s and spread widely in Scotland. It is now declining again for reasons not yet fully understood. For this reason the few remaining leks are jealously guarded and the RSPB hide at Loch Garten is the

best option to see this bird without disturbance. A single male showed off there early morning on 25/4 but, although he pointed his head skyward and fanned his tail, later climbing into a pine tree, he was lethargic and distant and could only really be seen through the scope. But there he was, the famed Scottish "horse of the forest." Inclement weather probably robbed us of the chance of further sightings.

BLACK GROUSE (*Tetrao tetrix*) – Our first full male, in unlikely habitat by the roadside at Glenshee, was much appreciated, both on the ground and in flight. Our third visit to the Tulloch Moor blind on 27/4 finally struck gold with two cooing males strutting and fluttering up and down and two female "Grayhens" watching with interest from nearby trees. A bit distant but memorable through the scope.

WILLOW PTARMIGAN (RED GROUSE) (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*) – Your guides steadfastly refuse to accept that this is the same species as the widespread Willow Ptarmigan of Eurasia and North America. Several encounters, but that responsive male in calling display flight near Leadhills on 22/4 will most live in the memory. "The Famous Grouse" of this trip.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – A single off Burghead on 25/4 and a distant one at West Loch Tarbert on Sunday 29/4.

ARCTIC LOON (*Gavia arctica*) – The wind and rain could not prevent us getting excellent views of a couple of summer-plumaged birds on Loch Indorb on 25/4; beautiful divers!

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – Several in different plumages from the Islay ferry 28/4 and 30/4. Only an occasional breeding species in Scotland, most of those we saw will be destined for Iceland.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Four at the new pond at Maxwellton on 21/4 and 1 at Lochmaben 22/4.

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*) – One summer-plumaged bird near Aviemore 26/4. A rare breeding bird in Scotland.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Six in fine summer garb at Lochmaben 22/4. Now once again common in Britain after nearly being exterminated for the feather trade in the late 1800s.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – Although we encountered a few at Ailsa Craig, off Findhorn, and from the Islay ferry, numbers were small.

MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*) – Only a couple on the Ailsa Craig outward journey on 23/4. Heading north to their major breeding grounds on the Inner Hebrides.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*) – Thousands of Gannets were nesting on Ailsa Craig, and most of our other coastal visits were inflected with the beauty of their feeding dives, especially on the Islay ferry crossings.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (NORTH ATLANTIC) (*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*) – Regularly encountered.

EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – Common off the west coast.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Regularly encountered.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Our first sighting was of "Odin", the male of perhaps the most watched pair of Ospreys in the world at the Loch Garten hide 25/4. He was eating his breakfast, later with the cock Capercaillie perched behind him in a pine tree in the same field of view! Singles near Oban 27/4 and at West Loch Tarbert 28/4 were heading north. Extirpated from Britain by hunting in the late 1800s they self-introduced in the 1960s and, under protection, are now increasingly well mainly in Scotland but also in England and Wales.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Another sad story with a happy ending. Apparently common (and mentioned by Shakespeare) in medieval times, they again were hunted to near extinction only hanging on during the twentieth century in a remote valley in mid-Wales. The subject of reintroduction programmes in the last 20 years, they are now again thriving in a few colonies in Britain. One is around Loch Ken in south west Scotland where we visited on 22/4 to see over 50 of these attractive raptors at their feeding station in the early afternoon.

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Slightly closer, shortly after our seeing a couple of Goldens, this one looked bigger and very square winged, some of the hallmarks of this species. Another tale of extermination and reintroduction, the species is now doing well in west Scotland. Not yet nesting on Jura or Islay but now regularly reported and it would seem to be only a matter of time.

NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN) (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – Again sad and no happy ending in sight, they are still persecuted and declining throughout Britain especially where Red Grouse are "managed". Still fairly numerous on the outer isles we had views of a male at Loch Gruinart, Islay on 29/4 and a female on 30/4. A female in the wind at Loch Indorb, Speyside on 25/4 was seen by only a few. This is the nominate race, subtly different from the taxon of the Americas.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Brief looks at a single en route to Tarbert 27/4 and another nearly colliding with the bus at Bridgend, Islay on 29/4. Only seen by a few.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Once again a common sight in Scotland and regularly encountered.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – The emblem bird of the Scottish Highlands (with a few pairs in England) but often difficult to pin down. A couple of distant birds being mobbed by crows, seen from the boat over Jura on 28/4, looked on profile to be this species.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – The common Falco in Britain and regularly encountered.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Recovered well after the mid-century pesticide saga. A single bird, being harassed by Gulls, seen by some from our lunch stop at Moat Brae on 22/4.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Lochmaben 22/4 and near Bowmore 29/4. Now at last split from American forms.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Only encountered in the south, 21 and 22/4.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Although it has declined markedly following changing farming practices over much of Britain, it is still common in suitable areas in Scotland. Regularly enjoyed.

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Only a singleton, at Caerlaverock on 22/4. [b]

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria*) – A flock of about 100 distantly at Southerness 22/4, then wonderful views of at least 150 (many in full plumage) at Ardnave on Islay (and a single elsewhere), 29/4. Probably a mixture of breeding birds and others destined for Iceland.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – A single at Carsethorne 22/4, then several on Islay 28 and 29/4. [b]

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus ostralegus*) – Common throughout.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Newly arriving birds on the west coast and on Islay.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – The common coastal breeding wader in Scotland. Regularly encountered.

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – Singles at Carsethorne 22/4 and Islay 28/4, and a newly arriving flock of 13 at Loch Indaal, Islay 29/4. A rare breeder in Scotland, again mainly breeding in Iceland. [b]

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – The bubbling calls of territorial birds was a lovely feature throughout. Encountered daily.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa limosa*) – A singleton in immaculate garb at Ardnave Loch, Islay on 29/4. Only a few breed in Scotland. [b]

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*) – A couple of red birds at Caerlaverock on 22/4. A Scandinavian breeder. [b]

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – Only a single, at Burghead on 25/4. [b]

EURASIAN WOODCOCK (*Scolopax rusticola*) – A male was heard and glimpsed at dusk outside the Badger hide, Loch-an-Eilan 25/4. A poor show.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Encountered in numbers daily.

MEW GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus canus canus*) – Encountered in numbers daily.

HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) – Encountered daily. [N]

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII) (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – Many wonderful views of this handsome gull.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – This eagle-sized predator was regularly encountered on all coasts visited.

COMMON TERN (COMMON) (*Sterna hirundo hirundo*) – A single transient-plumaged bird over West Loch Tarbert 28/4. [b]

SANDWICH TERN (EURASIAN) (*Thalasseus sandvicensis sandvicensis*) – Seen at Girvan (2), Findhorn (6) and West Loch Tarbert (2).

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – A single by the Ailsa Craig 24/4 was a good sighting. Breeds in numbers in northwest Scotland.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – More than a thousand birds on Ailsa Craig 24/4, and a few from the Islay ferry 28 and 30/4. The brown-plumaged, nominate taxon.

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*) – A hundred plus at Ailsa Craig 24/4, a single off Findhorn 26/4, and a single from the Islay ferry on 30/4.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus grylle*) – Around 100 at Girvan and Ailsa Craig 24/4, and 20+ West Loch Tarbert and Sound of Islay 28/4.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – Around a dozen, rather flighty individuals at Ailsa Craig on 24/4. Numbers seem to be recovering after a recent decline.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – The real deal (unpolluted by domestic variants) was common on Islay.

STOCK DOVE (*Columba oenas*) – The Scaurbank regular birds are flighty and only gave brief looks to a few on 21/4, but we scoped a couple near Lochmaben on 22/4.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Common and encountered daily. In winter numbers are augmented by Scandinavian breeding birds, many of which we saw in huge, migrating flocks.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Since it colonized from the east in the 1960s, this bird has become a common sight in built-up areas and farmlands throughout Britain.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

COMMON CUCKOO (*Cuculus canorus*) – Sadly, only heard near Oban and on Islay and would not respond to playback. This famous bird has declined badly in Britain in recent years, but is still relatively common in the west of Scotland and the islands.

Strigidae (Owls)

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – The Scaurbank pair responded to playback for all to see, albeit a bit briefly, on 21/4.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – A hunting bird at Elvanfoot on 21/4 came back to playback and got the tour off to a good start.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – Scaurbank (2), Lochmaben (1), Dunkeld (1), and Loch Garten (1).

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – A pair at Scaurbank 21/4 eluded most, but a pair at Dunkeld 24/4 was more obliging.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Regularly encountered. Now split from Black-billed Magpie, *Pica hudsonia*, of North America.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – At least a dozen around Kilchoman and Ardnave on Islay on 29/4. This is their sole Scottish breeding area.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Ubiquitous. [N]

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Ditto. [N]

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Common in south and east Scotland.

HOODED CROW (*Corvus cornix*) – A line of hybridization transects central Scotland from south to north and the first birds we saw on the Moray Firth were hybrids. Further west they become paler and purer as we saw on the west coast and on Islay. Finally, and still a controversial one, split from *C. corone*.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Individuals encountered throughout. Increasing again in Scotland following protection.

Alaudidae (Larks)

SKY LARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – A few in the south west but commoner on Islay; upon hearing it sing one can only repeat, "bird thou never wert."

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Fifty or so at Loch Insh on 26/4 looked like new arrivals and would scarcely be enjoying what they found!

BARN SWALLOW (WHITE-BELLIED) (*Hirundo rustica rustica*) – Also newly arriving in numbers and looking out of place in the snow!

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – A couple of pairs at Caerlaverock on 22/4 the another 4 at Bridgend, Islay 29/4.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

WILLOW TIT (*Poecile montanus*) – A single, then a responsive pair at Lochmaben 22/4. Rare further north than here.

COAL TIT (*Periparus ater*) – Seen regularly.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus scoticus*) – Singles at Loch Garten and Methven Lochs, Speyside on 26/4. Confined in Britain to this area. The endemic resident *scoticus*. [E]

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – Common. [N]

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Common and cheerful.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – A single at Methven Lochs 26/4 and a couple south of Oban 27/4.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – A pair at Drumlanrig 21/4 were nest building; another at Loch Ken 22/4. A recent colonist in Scotland. [N]

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – A responsive pair at Dunkeld 24/4 and a single at Methven Lochs 26/4.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – A single at Dunkeld 24/4 and another on Islay 29/4. Heard in several other places. Now split from North American forms and possible further multiple splits to follow, not least in Scotland. Ours belong to the taxon *indigenus*.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – A singleton at Drumlanrig and a pair at Penpont on 21/4, and a couple from the bus near Glenlivet on 24/4. A much appreciated species. The taxon *hibernicus* is endemic to Ireland, the Outer Hebrides, and western Scotland, whereas the very similar taxon *gularis* is endemic to the rest of the British Isles. I believe all of our birds belonged to *gularis*.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – One at Keir 21/4, a couple at Dunkeld 24/4, and a singleton at Methven Lochs 26/4.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf-Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Its lilting song was with us from south to north to west and was the only warbler we regularly encountered. I can still hear it.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Only a singleton, at Loch Ken on 22/4.

Locustellidae (Grassbirds and Allies)

COMMON GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella naevia*) – One had been heard at Caerlaverock on 22/4, so we went to the spot and played its song. A couple of us glimpsed a small brown "mouse", which is often all that you see of this creature.

Sylviidae (Old World Warblers)

BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Singletons at Keir 21/4 and Loch Ken 22/4, and a pair at Stonefield Castle, Tarbert 30/4.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*) – One responded at Stonefield Castle on 30/4 but only offered flybys for most.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Regularly encountered, always pleasantly.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – A male at one of its sites at Penpont 21/4 appeared to have just arrived. It had not been there two days previously.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – A singleton by a few from the bus near Dunkeld on 24/4 and a male atop a rather distant pine tree at Loch Garten on 25/4.

STONECHAT (*Saxicola torquatus*) – Singles on Islay 28 and 29/4.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Always one of the first summer birds to arrive, they were well "in" and regularly encountered throughout.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

RING OUZEL (*Turdus torquatus*) – Declining and often elusive, that responsive male near Tomantin on 27/4 was a delight.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Common throughout.

FIELDFARE (*Turdus pilaris*) – A large (50+) migrating flock near Loch Ae on 22/4 was a bonus. Sadly we could not pick out any Redwings amongst them.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – Regularly encountered. Those comparative views alongside *T. viscivorus* at Dunkeld on 24/4 were the best.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – Commoner in north and west Scotland than anywhere else in Britain.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Although allegedly declining, it was abundant throughout our route. [1]

Prunellidae (Accentors)

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – A few encounters with this unassuming wee bird with the very musical song.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Two birds on the River Nith at Drumlanrig and one on the Scaur at Penpont 21/4.

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba*) – The gray-backed Scandinavian breeder, nominate *alba*, was encountered several times on Islay. [b]

WHITE WAGTAIL (BRITISH) (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*) – The black-backed resident, often called "Pied Wagtail" or "British Wagtail," was commonly encountered throughout. Almost an endemic to Britain.

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis*) – Commonly encountered throughout.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – A single bird in parachute display flight near Oban on 27/4 was only seen by some from the bus.

ROCK PIPIT (*Anthus petrosus*) – At last split from Water Pipit (*A. spinoletta*), this is now a northwest Europe endemic. Singles at Kennacraig and at the Bowmore Distillery, Islay 28/4.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – Our Scaurbank feeders are the most reliable site I know for this species! Up to 6, including full males, there on 21/4.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – Single males at Lochmaben 22/4, Insh Marshes 26/4, and Islay 29/4.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – The most numerous bird in Britain, occupying almost every niche.

EUROPEAN GREENFINCH (*Chloris chloris*) – Less common but still regularly encountered. Both this species, Siskins, Goldfinches, and Tree Sparrows have increased following an upsurge of garden bird feeding in recent years.

PARROT CROSSBILL (*Loxia pytyopsittacus*) – The large-billed crossbills of the Caledonian Pine Forests of Speyside are

a "Crossbillgate" story in their own right. Not so long ago all the big-billed birds here were regarded as the endemic Scottish Crossbill, only recently elevated to species rank after many years of argument. More recently however, people have found birds apparently identical to the Parrot Crossbill of Scandinavia and either both species occur here together, or they are the same or another single endemic species altogether. Some, like our guide Malcolm, reckon they can be told apart, others say it is impossible even when they are singing. Anyway after several long, soggy searches we eventually located an actively feeding (and calling) flock near Grantown-on-Spey on 26/4, and through the scope the huge bills could easily be discerned. We ascribed most of the flock to this species.

SCOTTISH CROSSBILL (*Loxia scotica*) – In amongst them were two smaller-billed birds seen by most that we put down as Scottish. The debate continues! Anyway they were lifers for almost all.

LESSER REDPOLL (*Acanthis cabaret*) – A few flighty birds at Tulloch Moor and a nice flock at Creag Meagaidh on 27/4. Now split from Common Redpoll (*C. flammeus*), it is possible these British and continental European birds (as well as the Icelandic form) may be further split.

EURASIAN SISKIN (*Spinus spinus*) – Regularly encountered.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – This attractive species is now once again common in Britain.

TWITE (*Carduelis flavirostris*) – Around 8 on Islay on 29/4. Declining south of here and on the mainland but still holding strong on the islands. Ours are referred to the taxon *pipilans*, endemic to Britain and Ireland, and western birds are likely to be split from eastern forms sometime soon.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina autochthona*) – Occurring alongside Twites on Islay, and around 20 seen on 29/4. The endemic Scottish taxon *autochthona*. [E]

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Although said to be declining, it was still numerous enough in built up areas.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – This one has definitely declined in Britain but is daily at the Scaurbank feeders. Several seen on 21/4.

MAMMALS

COMMON PIPISTRELLE (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) – A couple in the twilight at Scaurbank 21/4.

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – Common throughout.

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – Commonly encountered, especially on Islay.

NORTHERN (BLUE) HARE (*Lepus timidus*) – Five of these highland relatives seen at Glenshee on 24/4. They turn white in winter but these were back in their summer coats.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – Sadly only a few pockets of these attractive and indigenous creatures survive in Britain following ousting and disease from the long-introduced Grays from USA. A couple at Balmoral on 24/4 and a single at Loch Garten on 25/4.

WOOD MOUSE (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) – One valiantly trying to steal peanuts at the hide at Loch-an-Eilan 25/4.

OLD WORLD BADGER (*Meles meles*) – A family sett of 5 gave heart-stopping views at the hide at Loch-an-Eilan 25/4.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – Several on Islay 28/4.

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*) – Several on Ailsa Craig 23/4, and several West Loch Tarbert and Islay 28, 29, and 30/4.

RED DEER (*Cervus elaphus*) – Regularly encountered in the Highlands and on Islay and Jura.

CARIBOU (*Rangifer caribou*) – The semi-domesticated herd on the slopes of the Cairngorms above Loch Morlich is the only one in Scotland and has been maintained for more than 50 years. Around 5 seen in the snow 27/4.

ROE DEER (*Capreolus capreolus*) – Regularly encountered.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The following is a day-by-day account from Hugh's Buckbird Journal that he has graciously permitted us to use. I think the freshness and level of specificity will be appreciated by all.

Saturday 21 April All have forgathered in Scotland in advance and we are soon off from Glasgow Airport south. Our cheerful and adaptable driver Robert, a native of Dumfriesshire, knows our route well and will be a tower of strength in days to come. Our Mercedes 16 seater bus is comfortable enough as we progress away from Scotland's rather dreary middle belt into the bare Lowther Hills where our first stop is for a fine Short-eared Owl which eventually comes back to John's

playback. Here also is our first, rather distant, Red Grouse and the first of many, soon to be familiar, Lapwings, Curlews, Oystercatchers, Meadow Pipits, Northern Wheatears, and, more unexpectedly, Willow Warblers. A little further on we induce a cock Red Grouse into a stunning aerial display as he lands on open ground not 20 feet from us. He is one of a dozen or so we will see today and more in days to come. On through Warnlockhead (rather surprisingly the highest village in Scotland) and into the emerging green valley of Upper Nithsdale where a pair of European Nuthatches are vocal and nest building. Here the River Nith produces our first White-throated Dipper and Gray Wagtail, Drumlanrig Castle (seat of the Duke of Buccleugh) is admired and we check into our comfortable small hotel in Thornhill.

This is Hugh's home territory and soon produces our only Little Grebes of the trip, a male Pied Flycatcher literally just arrived from Africa and, at the feeders at Hugh and Caroline's house by the River Scaur and at the lovely gardens of neighbour Robin, our first Goldfinches, Siskins, Yellowhammers, and Tree Sparrows, the last two we will not find again as we go north. A busy opening day finishes with a semi-responsive Tawny Owl and a first wee whisky session at Scaurbank in the evening.

Sunday 22 April We are off again at 0800 for a long day of skirting rain showers and exploring Scotland's southern shores. First, en route to Lochmaben, we encounter a large migrating flock of Fieldfares (sadly no Redwings seem to be amongst them) and find a nice pair of Stock Doves (regular at the Scaurbank feeders but shy, skittish, and only glimpsed by a few folk yesterday). Lochmaben produces a few nice summer garbed Great Crested Grebes and a responsive pair of Willow Tits, another species not found much further north. Near Caerlaverock we find our first Barnacle Geese and the Wildlife and Wetlands Trust observation tower and grounds continue to build our wildfowl lists including a single, but perhaps not too healthy, lingering Whooper Swan.

A light lunch (soon to learn this is not to be the norm!) is taken in Dumfries (final resting place of the great poet Rabbie Burns) at Moat Brae House where James Barrie had the inspiration for the story of Peter Pan and a couple of local dignitaries tell us of the work of the Moat Brae Trust in trying to preserve this old house and the gardens for future generations. On west to the Valley of the River Dee, we are right on time for the daily feeding of dozens of Red Kites, now once again thriving in various parts of Britain after being driven to near extirpation.

At the Ken Dee Marshes are our first Graylag and feral Canada Geese, then at Southerness, thanks to Robert's deft handling of the bus, the extraordinary spectacle, with Criffel as a backdrop, of several thousand Barnacle Geese assembled for the northward journey to Spitzbergen. The sight is glorious enough but is made unforgettable by the finding, close amongst the mob, of the single adult Red-breasted Goose which has been amongst the flock for several weeks. We find it not once, but incredibly, after the flock takes wing to resettle, twice, and this rare and declining little goose, only a vagrant to Britain, gives wonderful and prolonged views through scopes and binoculars. A lifer for all but Hugh, it saves at least one person a bitterly cold trip to Bulgaria or Romania in the future!

How to beat this? Well impossible really, but the clear weather over the Solway at Carsethorpe with the mountains of the English Lake District clear across the water, a large flock of Greater Scaup offshore and a migrant Whimbrel inshore do their best.

Monday 24 April 0800 again and now northwest to the Ayrshire coast at Girvan. In the distance are the mountains of the island of Arran and closer the stack of Ailsa Craig. This is our morning destination and it is an hour plus out in our rather basic boat in mercifully relatively calm waters. A few birds on the journey out do include our first Common Eiders and a couple of Manx Shearwaters winging their way north, but it is not until we get to the far side of the rock that the true spectacle becomes apparent. Here are literally thousands of nesting Gannets and Common Guillemots (Murre), hundreds of Razorbills and Black Guillemots, and a few, at least, of the much desired Atlantic Puffin, as well as Gray Seals. Sadly it is all too soon over as we round the rock and head back, in choppy waters, with only a fine Great Skua providing much excitement.

The afternoon is taken up driving further north, by passing Glasgow, distant views of Stirling Castle and the monument to William Wallace and a brief visit to the RSPB reserve at Vane Farm on the shores of Loch Leven. Here our target is Pink-footed Goose, missing near the Solway, and, although the big flocks are once again gone, a lingering half dozen or so do grant us at least scope views. North again and the wooded grounds of the comfortable Dunkeld Hilton situated alongside the River Tay where we overnight.

Tuesday 25 April It is a bit dull and overcast as we do a 0600 "dawn chorus" walk around the hotel grounds. It is quiet but we do enjoy a noisy pair of Jays, good comparative views of Song and Mistle Thrushes on the lawns and add such as Goldcrest, Eurasian Wren and Eurasian Treecreeper (the wren now split from its New World cousins) to our growing lists.

On north again in variable weather, a beautiful cock Black Grouse is close to the road in open grassland as we ascend the pass of Glenshee. We enjoy views of him both on the ground and in flight where he alights in open heather amongst several of the more expected Red Grouse. A surprise in this habitat this one (they usually prefer the moorland tree margins) and possibly a rogue male ejected from his flock.

At a rather cold Glenshee we scan briefly for Ptarmigan but have to be content with Red Deer and several Mountain Hares before our descent into Royal Deeside and a visit to the Queen's summer palace at Balmoral. Only the gardens (a bit difficult in the patchy drizzle) and the opulent ballroom are open but we do get a flavor of how the other half lives. The silver and diamond-lined whisky decanter for her Diamond Jubilee at £100,000 does not attract any offers, it is after all only a Johnny Walker blend! For us the afternoon "Spirit of the Malt" tour at the nearby famous Glenlivet distillery is more to our taste; it includes a tasting (not much of it rejected!) of seven different "expressions" of their famous highland malts ranging from 6 months to 25 years old and climaxes in a generous dram of a newly broached cask of the 1979 vintage which sells in the Visitor Centre for over £1000 for a 750ml bottle. After all this the unexpected nearby sighting of no less than 7 male Reeve's Pheasants by the roadside has to be taken into context but they were real enough even if an exotic import. The Boat Hotel at Boat of Garten is comfortable and the food good even if the lack of a laundry service is irritating.

Wednesday 25 April Malcolm O'Reilly, our locally based guide for the next two days, is on hand at 0500 as, in uncertain weather, we drive the short distance to Loch Garten and the large and well-patronised Osprey nest viewing hide. Our goal is the rare and sadly declining Eurasian Capercaillie and this protected area is the site of a known lekking ground, viewable from the hide and managed by the RSPB to prevent disturbance at other sites. After some anxiety we do get "managed" scope views of a single rather distant male both on the ground and later up in a bare pine tree (with a perched iconic Osprey in the same field of view). In the cold and damp, although he does hold his head aloft and fan his turkey-like tail, he is rather lethargic, but he is much-wanted and appreciated nevertheless. In the next two days we could reasonably expect further sightings but the weather will prove to be right against us.

We are unlucky, after a period of fine weather, to coincide with a series of seven different rain and wind fronts blowing in from the north east which will slow us considerably. First victim is a nearby well-patronised Black Grouse lek but silence greets us and, even if birds are present they are keeping a low profile. Searching for Crossbills and other pine woods birds is a miserable prospect and we instead head north for an unscheduled visit to the Moray coast at Findhorn and Burghead. Conditions remain trying but we do swell our lists with several seabirds, including an in plumage Red-throated Diver (Loon), a single light-bellied Brent Goose, many summer-plumaged Long-tailed Ducks, and hundreds of Common Scoters amongst which a few Velvet can, with patience, be discerned. An unscheduled rarity chase produces the desired views of a large flock of Pink-footed Geese with a single Barnacle amongst them, but the reported Ross's Goose appears to be white morph Pinkfoot!

We backtrack via Loch Indorb where, in the wind and rain, we do score excellent views of two Black-throated Divers (Arctic Loons) in full breeding garb and a few also glimpse a female Hen Harrier as it sweeps by in the rain. Finding Crossbills in the pine woods near Grantown-on-Spey is a hopeless task in this weather. Instead we dine early, then take an evening visit to a hide near Loch-an-Eilan where Pine Martens and Old World Badgers are fed nightly. In the event we have wonderful views of a set of 5 Badgers coming in for their peanuts at point blank range but the Pine Martens have been coming in late (between 1130 and 0400!) and we cannot wait them out. As dusk descends we do listen and look for a roding Eurasian Woodcock but, although his soft croak can be heard, at best a small flying shape is all that can be discerned. To boost the mammal list a furtive Wood Mouse tries to share the nuts with the Badgers!

Thursday 26 April The morning weather is, if anything, even worse, and after an early responsive Crested Tit at Loch Garten we again postpone the pine woods and instead visit the extensive Insh Marshes where, from a well equipped hide, a small herd of Whooper Swans are a better sighting than our bird at Caerlaverock. Alongside Loch Insh a flock of migrating Barn Swallows and Sand Martins (Bank Swallows) give hints of better things to come. At the pinewoods around the Methven "kettle" lochs, the weather relents enough to allow a walk in the woods for more Crested Tits, a Long-tailed Tit, and another Goldcrest. Then near Aviemore a small fishing loch produces, in a biting wind, a summer-plumaged Slavonian (Horned) Grebe and it is back to Grantown-on-Spey for a last gasp walk in the Caledonian pines for Crossbills. It is frustrating at first with a few birds calling and flying but almost at the last minute we at last find a settled flock which allows scope views. Both the endemic Scottish and the very similar Parrot Crossbill are now known to inhabit these woods and, under Malcolm's expert tuition, we all get good scope views of huge-billed birds which have all the characteristics of Parrot. But amongst them are a few smaller billed ones and it appears we have a mixed flock of both species, not an uncommon phenomenon here. We have earned these birds right enough and have, if not beaten Speyside, at least put up a good fight.

Friday 27 April Happily the weather is at last clearing, although the sight of a couple of Swallows on the wires with snow flakes falling around them is unusual to say the least. At the Tulloch Moor blind we are greeted with a welcome bubbling cooing and at last have slightly distant but scope views of a couple of jousting male Black Grouse (Blackcocks) fluttering up in the air with couple of female Grayhens looking down on them from the surrounding trees. Up at the base of the Cairngorm Ski Railway it is positively arctic, the path up to the plateau is snow and ice covered and, although Ptarmigan will doubtless be toughing it out, no self respecting Dotterel will be within miles of here. As is sadly common at this time of year, a walk up to the plateau for these species is impossible.

We finish Speyside with a short drive north to Tomantin where a roadside male Ring Ouzel responds well to playback. Now south and west, between the Monadhliath and Grampian Mountains with a stop at the Creag Meagaidh Nature Reserve where a flock of Lesser Redpolls perform well for us and we learn of another Black Grouse lek nearby, but the morning performance just ended. Through Fort William in brilliant sunshine (which will largely be with us for the rest of the trip) with the bulk of Ben Nevis (at 1344m Britain's highest peak) clearly visible on our left, a picnic lunch on the seashore south of Oban (another Osprey flies by) and we are into the little fishing port of Tarbert by early evening. The modest Tarbert Hotel is friendly enough but the dinner menu fails to live up to the high standards we have come to expect!

Saturday 28 April And happily the morning dawns calm and sunny for our 2 hour ferry from Kennacraig to Port Askaig on the Inner Hebridean island of Islay. The pier at Kennacraig has a close Rock Pipit, West Loch Tarbert holds a scattering of Great Northern Divers (Common Loons) in a variety of plumages and we will see more as we approach Islay. Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers are numerous, there are several Black Guillemots and a lot of Shags and Great Cormorants as well as both Gray and an occasional Common (Harbor) Seal. Even another Osprey flies past and a few spot a distant Red-throated Diver. The sea crossing, past the island of Gigha, produces Gannets and a few other species but is more memorable for the views to the east of the long Mull of Kintyre and to the west of the mountains of Islay and the unique triple Paps of Jura.

As we enter the narrow Sound of Islay, a couple of distant raptors are spied over Jura (where Red Deer abound). They appear to be being mobbed by Hooded Crows and are clearly Eagles. One appears to have white in the tail but the overall impression is that they are Golden and not wandering White-tailed, now breeding on Mull not that far to the north. This feeling is strengthened with the appearance of another, slightly nearer, and the size and the huge broad wings on this one seem good for White-tailed. Sadly the views of both species are distant. We dock at Port Askaig and it is a short drive to our family-run Bowmore Hotel and a memorable lunch at the Happy Coo Bistro where we are entertained by the ebullient owner Mairi. Then it is more whisky lore at the nearby Bowmore Distillery where we learn of the malting of the barley over peat and get our first taste of the smoky island malts.

Our evening is spent with a drive along the bird-filled shores of Loch Indaal to Portnahaven where a single Pink-footed Goose seems lonely amongst the Graylags, we get nice views of Ringed Plover and single Whimbrel and add real wild Rock Pigeons and a female Stonechat to the list. Back at the Bowmore Hotel after dinner the place reverberates to the sounds of a ceiligh band, more island malts succumb and our own "Rose of Texas" proves a great hit amongst the locals!

Sunday 29 April A 0600 start sees us away to Loch Gruinart in our quest for newly arriving and much desired Corn Crakes. Sadly there is no sound of any to guide us and this will be a frustration throughout today and tomorrow. By all accounts they should be in but inclement weather to the south appears to have slowed down both them and several other summer migrants. Instead we spend our day exploring in depth the Rhinns, an area of moorland and lochs on the northwest corner of Islay. Twites, Linnets and the special Red-billed Chough (here in its only Scottish breeding ground) all oblige and our day is peppered with other good sightings. They include a majestic male Hen Harrier quartering the flats at Loch Gruinart, a lovely flock of over 150 European Golden Plover, many in full summer finery, a newly arriving flock of a dozen Whimbrel and an immaculately summer-plumaged Black-tailed Godwit, a rare breeding bird here. Graylag Geese abound, we relocate the "lost" Pink-footed and also a limping Greenland White-fronted Goose apparently left behind by the departing flocks (although we have distant scope views of another half dozen in the early morning) and Wheatears and Skylarks are now numerous and conspicuous. A Common Cuckoo calls but cannot be drawn into playback.

Our evening is quieter but it is glorious- a memory of a perfect west Scotland day with the islands of Colonsay and Mull clear and even the snowy dome of Ben Nevis visible in the distance. We close with a tutored whisky tasting session at the hotel bar where 4 expressions of Islay malts seem to be thoroughly enjoyed!

Monday 30 April In Scotland's unique way it has clouded over in the morning, no Corn Crakes are calling, the Cuckoo again refuses to be drawn in but a female Hen Harrier gives brief looks. It is blustier for our return ferry ride and nothing new is

reported. We stop briefly at the lovely gardens of the Stonefield Castle Hotel (the second largest display of rhododendrons in Britain) where a hyper active and non cooperative Garden Warbler is our last new bird and at least another summer arrival.

Our last lunch at the Inverary Smokehouse at the end of Loch Fyne is memorable and then it is over the Rest and Be Thankful Pass and down to the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond. All too soon we are back where we started at Glasgow Airport where we part company after a real look at Scotland, its wildlife, culture and usage breathe, often at its unpredictable best.

Totals for the tour: 145 bird taxa and 12 mammal taxa