



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**BIRDING PLUS: Scotland: Famous Grouse in the Land of Whisky 2013**

Apr 19, 2013 to May 1, 2013

John Rowlett & Hugh Buck

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)*



*This superb 'Red Grouse' shows off its inflated eyebrow sacs in response to playback. (Photo by tour participant Jim Rome)*

This second Field Guides tour to Scotland enjoyed mostly good weather (if a bit variable, with its fair share of wind and cold), and this helped us score an enviable bird list and some thrilling sightings against a backdrop of unsurpassed scenic grandeur. The tour dates are situated critically between the departure of wintering waterfowl, especially the geese, and the arrival of summer residents, which makes the timing about perfect for the displaying grouse and the arrival of the Corn Crake. An interesting combination of departing winter species and early arriving summer ones added further spice as we traveled from the Solway to Highland Speyside, then west to absorb some of Scotland's most dramatic Hebridean 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.

Differing climatic conditions to the south and cold to the north of us made the bird list stronger on late winter birds than early arriving summer ones. The spectacle of thousands of Barnacles and Pink-footeds was the exciting produce of a late winter, and the corresponding late migration produced hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits and Golden Plover—all in high alternate dress—as well as an adult Iceland Gull and even a few Redwings. But, ah, those summer birds which had arrived were memorable—how about those Ring Ouzels!—yet none more so than that angry Corn Crake on Coll! Among resident species, the grouse, the Tawny Owls, the Chough, the nesting Dipper, a pair of Scottish Crossbills, and a pair of Bullfinches were hands down favorites. Despite some enervating health issues, our convivial group kept admirably to the lively pace, both birding and wee-dramming. The various neat whiskies, the intoxicating birds, and some of Scotland's finest dining made for an extraordinary tour. Hugh and I thank you all for making ours exactly that.

I have appended a splendid, detailed account of our journey that Hugh miraculously provided before he left for China! I trust he will forgive me for having done a little light dusting with respect to Field Guides's house style.

--John

#### 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*) – These Pink-footeds gave us a fine show this year with several amongst the Barnacles in the south and several hundred beauties at Vane Farm; we also had 5 near Findhorn on the 25th. These are likely Iceland breeders. [b]

**GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (GREENLAND)** (*Anser albifrons flavirostris*) – They had left their wintering grounds at Ken Dee and Islay, but a single, sick-looking individual was skulking in a marsh at Loch Gruinart, Islay, on the 29th. Our bird showed a yellow eye-ring, briefly

- suggesting Lesser White-fronted; however, some Greaters may "even have a narrow yellow orbital ring," according to Svensson. [b]
- GRAYLAG GOOSE** (*Anser anser*) – Regularly encountered and the common breeding goose of Scotland.
- SNOW GOOSE** (*Chen caerulescens*) – On Coll we saw 11 of the some 40 feral Snows said to summer on Mull; they have been breeding in the wild for some years now. [I]
- BRANT (ATLANTIC)** (*Branta bernicla hrota*) – Four on the shore of Loch Indaal, Islay on April 29 and 30. This light-bellied form, hrota, nests in Greenland and Spitzbergen. [b]
- BARNACLE GOOSE** (*Branta leucopsis*) – One of the spectacular sights of Scottish birding! We had fabulous views of thousands around Caerlaverock and Southernness. The whole of the Svalbard population winters in this area with a peak of at least 30,000 birds. Thousands of the Greenland wintering flocks were still present at Loch Gruinart, Islay, on the afternoon of April 29! These birds were restless and most seemed to have departed by the following morn. What an exciting event, this avian migration! [b]
- CANADA GOOSE** (*Branta canadensis*) – Introduced in the early 1900s, Canada Geese are considered a nuisance in Scotland, as they are in many parts of North America. [I]
- MUTE SWAN** (*Cygnus olor*) – After several hundred years this bird's status is still ill-defined, but most consider it naturalized; regularly encountered and several seen nesting. [N]
- WHOOPEE SWAN** (*Cygnus cygnus*) – A single bird at Lochmaben on the 20th, thanks to Dave's good spotting. We also had 4 at Vane Farm on the 22nd. Breeds mostly in Iceland, but occasionally in Scotland. [b]
- COMMON SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna tadorna*) – The big, handsome duck was frequent along all the coasts we visited.
- GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*) – A pair at Ken Dee and a drake at Avielochan.
- EURASIAN WIGEON** (*Anas penelope*) – Regularly encountered.
- MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The commonest duck in Scotland. [N]
- NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*) – A couple at Loch Ken, 1 at Vane Farm, and 2 at Loch Gruinart.
- NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*) – About 40 at Drumburg and 2 at Aberlady. These were likely boreal migrants. [b]
- GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN)** (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Regularly encountered. Authorities are divided on how to treat *Anas crecca*. Cornell Clements treats the birds we saw as the nominate taxon of Green-winged Teal, not splitting it at the species level from the North American taxon, *carolinensis*.
- TUFTED DUCK** (*Aythya fuligula*) – Several encounters of this diving duck here and there.
- GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – A flock of 200+ birds off Carsethorne on April 21. Largely a winter visitor to Scotland. [b]
- COMMON EIDER** (*Somateria mollissima*) – Common off all coasts except the inner Solway.
- WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (VELVET)** (*Melanitta fusca fusca*) – A few in difficult windy conditions off Longniddry and on Findhorn. The nominate taxon. [b]
- COMMON SCOTER** (*Melanitta nigra*) – Only a difficult trio on Findhorn Bay. Now split from the American taxon, Black Scoter. [b]
- LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Quite a few off Longniddry and on Findhorn Bay, most in summer plumage. Long-tails breed in the Outer Hebrides, but most of these were probably destined for Iceland. [b]
- COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – Singletons on the River Ken and Vane Farm, but common in the Spey Valley.
- COMMON MERGANSER (EURASIAN)** (*Mergus merganser merganser*) – Seen nicely on Lochmaben, the River Tay, at Dunkeld, and on Loch Morlich.
- RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – Although an inland tree-nester, Red-breasteds winter almost exclusively on coastal waters.
- Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)
- RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE** (*Alectoris rufa*) – Introduced for "sporting" purposes, this bird is now widespread and probably at least partially responsible for the severe decline of the native Gray Partridge, which we did not see. [I]
- RING-NECKED PHEASANT** (*Phasianus colchicus*) – Flourishing in Britain since at least Roman times, pheasants were introduced for "sport" and are now entirely naturalized; abundant in Scotland.
- EURASIAN CAPERCAILLIE** (*Tetrao urogallus*) – After being exterminated 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 the 24th, throwing his head back, fanning his tail, and occasionally launching himself forward. Although he was a bit distant and sometimes hidden by trees, all got good scope views of the famed Scottish "horse of the forest."
- BLACK GROUSE** (*Tetrao tetrix*) – Great views of a quintet of cocks feeding below the roadside near Tomintoul and 7 more at Creag Meagaidh. Bitter weather at the latter site prevented us from enjoying their display.
- WILLOW PTARMIGAN (RED GROUSE)** (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*) – The "Famous Grouse" of our tour and surely distinct from Willow Ptarmigan! We enjoyed several encounters, but that responsive male in calling display flight in the Elvan Valley will most live in the memory of our group. We also had an excellent study of the female near Leadhills. [E]
- ROCK PTARMIGAN** (*Lagopus muta*) – Our trip up to "Arctic" Cairngorm eventually paid dividends when the mist cleared and we all got different views from the upper station, including birds in flight and a female in the scope. A single frozen corpse still in winter dress allowed a close inspection.
- Gaviidae (Loons)
- RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*) – A lovely pair on Loch Morlich, a couple at Findhorn, a couple in the Sound of Mull, and a single West Loch Tarbert.
- ARCTIC LOON** (*Gavia arctica*) – A beautiful pair of summer-plumaged birds on Loch Morlich and a winter bird on the Sound of Mull. One of Jan's favorites.
- COMMON LOON** (*Gavia immer*) – Several in various plumages from the Coll ferry, in the Sound of Jura, and West Loch Tarbert. The birds we saw were almost surely destined for Iceland, as the species is only an occasional breeder in Scotland. [b]
- Podicipedidae (Grebes)

**LITTLE GREBE** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Several scattered about. Seen well.

**HORNED GREBE** (*Podiceps auritus*) – A pair of summer-plumaged birds at Avielochan; a rare breeder in Scotland.

**GREAT CRESTED GREBE** (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Six in fine summer garb at Lochmaben. [N]

*Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)*

**NORTHERN FULMAR** (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – Many around the Bass Rock and off Tantallon Castle, a singleton at Findhorn Bay, and another single from the Islay ferry.

**MANX SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus puffinus*) – A trio near Coll, around 40 from the return ferry and a couple from the Islay ferry. Nests in large numbers on Rhum and other islands to the north.

*Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)*

**NORTHERN GANNET** (*Morus bassanus*) – In spades on and around Bass Rock, perhaps as many as 20,000+; a few off Findhorn, and many from the Coll and Islay ferries. Scotland is the world's major nesting site for this species. [N]

*Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)*

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

**EUROPEAN SHAG** (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – Common off both coasts.

*Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)*

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

*Pandionidae (Osprey)*

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*) – A hunting bird over the River Tay at Dunkeld, a bird at Loch Garten, one at Spey Bay, one over the Sound of Mull, and a single at Loch Gruinart, Islay. Extirpated in Britain by hunting in the late 1800s, these birds self re-introduced in the 1960s and, under protection, are now increasing well, mainly in Scotland but also in England and Wales. [N]

*Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)*

**NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN)** (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – These harriers are still persecuted and declining throughout Britain, especially where Red Grouse are "managed." Still fairly numerous on the outer isles, we had views of several males on Coll. This, the nominate race, is subtly different from the Northern Harrier of the Americas.

**EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK** (*Accipiter nisus*) – Brief looks at a singleton at Bellymack Farm and at Findhorn; by some only.

**RED KITE** (*Milvus milvus*) – Apparently not uncommon (and mentioned by Shakespeare) in medieval times, Red Kites again were hunted to near extinction, only hanging on during the twentieth century in a remote valley in mid-Wales. The subject of re-introduction programs in the last 20 years, the species is now again thriving in a few colonies in Britain. We had several in the Ken Valley and the spectacle of some 40 birds at the feeders at Bellymack Farm.

**WHITE-TAILED EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Another tale of extermination and reintroduction, this species is now doing well in west Scotland. Mull is its stronghold and a single adult flapped along the shoreline, briefly mobbed by a Herring Gull, and landed to be lost to view. It then reappeared as it left the rock on which it had landed, but a fast-moving ferry denied most a second chance.

**COMMON BUZZARD** (*Buteo buteo*) – Not uncommon and regularly encountered in a variety of morphs and plumages.

*Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)*

**CORN CRAKE** (*Crex crex*) – Unforgettable. Our long boat trip out to Coll paid off as the first birds had just arrived. A calling bird at the Totranald RSPB reserve was furtive but at least glimpsed by all on 27/4. But we struck gold in the evening: A close calling bird responded vigorously to the ipod to rasp his challenge in full view for several minutes and provide unequalled views and photographic opportunities. A brief call only the following morning. This bird declined massively all over western Europe in the 20th century due to changing farming practices and only, with significant assistance, clung on in Ireland and the western isles of Scotland. Under protection it is now increasing again. One of the major targets of the tour and surely one of the highlights.

**WATER RAIL** (*Rallus aquaticus*) – A single bird at Lochmaben was responsive but furtive and seen only by Jan, Vicki, and Dave.

**EURASIAN MOORHEN** (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Now split from Common Gallinule of the Americas; a few encounters.

**EURASIAN COOT** (*Fulica atra*) – Common on Lochmaben and Loch Ken; only a few elsewhere.

*Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)*

**NORTHERN LAPWING** (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Regularly encountered. [N]

**EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER** (*Pluvialis apricaria*) – A pair of perhaps territorial birds near the Black Grouse, Tomintoul (thanks to Marcia), and an astonishing 500 or so birds on the 28th, Coll. These made for some great photos!

**COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Several at Carsethorne and a few elsewhere.

*Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)*

**EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER** (*Haematopus ostralegus*) – Very common throughout.

*Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)*

**COMMON SANDPIPER** (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Newly arriving birds scattered here and there.

**COMMON REDSHANK** (*Tringa totanus*) – The common coastal breeding wader in Scotland; most surprisingly, there was an albino at the Nith estuary!

**WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN)** (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – Five at Carsethorne and a small flock on Islay; a rare breeder in Scotland.

**EURASIAN CURLEW** (*Numenius arquata*) – The bubbling calls of territorial birds was a common feature throughout; encountered most days.

**BLACK-TAILED GODWIT** (*Limosa limosa*) – Quite exceptional numbers this year. We were pleased with a small flock of 8 birds at Ken Dee, but these were totally eclipsed by a flock of 500 or so breeding-plumaged birds at Loch Gruinart, Islay on the 29th and 30th! A rare breeding bird in Scotland, most of these would be destined for Iceland. [b]



**BAR-TAILED GODWIT** (*Limosa lapponica*) – A flock at Loch Gruinart. [b]

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres*) – Several encounters.

**RED KNOT** (*Calidris canutus*) – Rather distant views at Carsethorne and probably at Loch Gruinart.

**PURPLE SANDPIPER** (*Calidris maritima*) – Those not taking the Bass Rock "cruise" located a small flock of 10 or so on the rocks at North Berwick, and at least one stuck around in a flock of turnstones for all to see on their return. This winter visitor is often difficult to pin down. [b]

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*) – Distant views of birds at Carsethorne and Loch Gruinart. A single breeding-plumaged bird in the Golden Plover flock on Coll. [b]

**EURASIAN WOODCOCK** (*Scolopax rusticola*) – A couple of nice, dusk views of a roding bird at Dulnain Bridge; they are common in the Spey Valley in summer.

#### *Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*

**BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Several hundred around the Bass Rock, and also seen from the Coll and Islay ferries; much reduced in numbers in Britain over recent years. Al called my attention to a kittiwake-type gull that I think was an adult, winter-plumaged Sabine's based on its distinctive black, gray, and white wing pattern and its notched, all white tail. However, because of its rarity, the short amount of time I had it under observation, and my total lack of documenting evidence (no photos, etc.), I am including it here as hypothetical rather than giving it full standing on the list. [N]

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

**MEW GULL (EUROPEAN)** (*Larus canus canus*) – Encountered in numbers daily. In Oban harbor, a gull seemingly paired with a Mew was clearly larger with greenish yellow legs and a noticeable green ring around the bill. However, the iris was dark, not pale, and the ring should have been black. The head shape suggested Mew. This was possibly a hybrid Mew x Ring-billed.

**HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN)** (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) – Nominate taxon; an on/off split from American forms. Common. [N]

**ICELAND GULL** (*Larus glaucoides*) – An immaculate adult of the nominate form was on the pier at the Bunnahabhain Distillery, Islay, on the 30th— an exquisite final bird for the trip! This individual has apparently been a regular visitor to this site for the last five years. Perhaps like some of our group, this was his favorite distillery! [b]

**LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII)** (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – Lovely birds this, the west European taxon.

**GLAUCOUS GULL** (*Larus hyperboreus*) – A single adult-looking bird in the Sound of Mull on the 28th. A rare visitor. [b]

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

**COMMON TERN** (*Sterna hirundo*) – Three at Lochmaben on the 20th.

**SANDWICH TERN (EURASIAN)** (*Thalasseus sandvicensis sandvicensis*) – A couple at Longniddry and several at Findhorn Bay.

#### *Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)*

**COMMON MURRE** (*Uria aalge*) – At least 1000 around the Bass Rock and several from the Coll and Islay ferries. [N]

**RAZORBILL** (*Alca torda*) – Several at Bass Rock, Findhorn Bay, and around Coll and Islay. [N]

**BLACK GUILLEMOT** (*Cepphus grylle*) – A singleton in Oban Harbor, several in the Sound of Mull and the Sound of Jura.

**ATLANTIC PUFFIN** (*Fratercula arctica*) – About 50 around the Craighleith Islands and a few from the coll and Islay ferries. [N]

#### *Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

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

**STOCK DOVE** (*Columba oenas*) – Somewhat distant views of birds at Hugh and Caroline's Scaurbank.

**COMMON WOOD-PIGEON** (*Columba palumbus*) – Common and encountered daily. In winter its numbers are augmented by Scandinavian breeding birds that migrate in large groups.

**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*) – Marcia and Jim had great looks at an arrival near Boat of Garten on the 25th; then the rest of us had nice views of 3 birds on Coll and a singleton on Islay. This famous bird has also declined markedly in Britain, but is still common in the west of Scotland, where it heavily parasitizes Meadow Pipits, among other oscines.

#### *Tytonidae (Barn-Owls)*

**BARN OWL** (*Tyto alba*) – An individual seen briefly from the bus by a few near Kingussie.

#### *Strigidae (Owls)*

**TAWNY OWL** (*Strix aluco*) – The Scaurbank pair responded nicely at Hugh's urging.

#### *Apodidae (Swifts)*

**COMMON SWIFT** (*Apus apus*) – One at Thornhill (by Al only) was an early arrival.

#### *Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER** (*Dendrocopos major*) – A few seen about; perhaps best at Dunkeld.

**GREEN WOODPECKER** (*Picus viridis*) – A noisy pair near Penpont was a most welcome surprise, and we eventually got scope views of the male atop a pine tree. Rare in Scotland.

#### *Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)*

**EURASIAN KESTREL** (*Falco tinnunculus*) – The common falcon in Britain but only occasionally encountered.

**MERLIN** (*Falco columbarius*) – Some described a good candidate on Coll; and this was more likely than a Kestrel in this open habitat.

#### *Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)*

**EURASIAN JAY** (*Garrulus glandarius*) – A flyover near Penpont and 4 at Dunkeld.

**EURASIAN MAGPIE** (*Pica pica*) – Regularly encountered. Now split from the American form.

**RED-BILLED CHOUGH** (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – A pair at Ardnave and a couple at Kilchoman; Islay is their sole Scottish breeding area. Nice!

**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 Coll and Islay.

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*) – Individuals encountered here and there.

#### *Alaudidae (Larks)*

**SKY LARK** (*Alauda arvensis*) – Comparatively few, but one good, close one on Islay. A legendary song!

#### *Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**BANK SWALLOW** (*Riparia riparia*) – An early summer arrival; plentiful.

**BARN SWALLOW (WHITE-BELLIED)** (*Hirundo rustica rustica*) – Also newly arriving in numbers.

**COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN** (*Delichon urbicum*) – A few near Melfort and near Bridgend, Islay.

#### *Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)*

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

**CRESTED TIT** (*Lophophanes cristatus scoticus*) – Four at Rothiemurchus and a pair near Burghead; this taxon is endemic to Scotland. Once I found the cut of the Haubenmeise, we had no problem with it! Technically, of course, true Haubenmeise would be *L. c. mitratus*, and not *L. c. scoticus*, I suspect. [E]

**GREAT TIT** (*Parus major*) – Common and widespread.

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

#### *Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)*

**LONG-TAILED TIT** (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – A single at Lochmaben and a pair at Bridgend.

#### *Sittidae (Nuthatches)*

**EURASIAN NUTHATCH** (*Sitta europaea*) – Fairly numerous and noisy around Penpont and Keir; a recent colonist in Scotland. Nice looks!

#### *Certhiidae (Treecreepers)*

**EURASIAN TREECREEPER** (*Certhia familiaris*) – Singles at Lochmaben and Keir; 3 near Melfort.

#### *Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**EURASIAN WREN** (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – Common by voice; individuals seen here and there. Now split from North American forms and possible multiple splits to follow, not least in Scotland. The taxon we saw is indigenous.

#### *Cinclidae (Dippers)*

**WHITE-THROATED DIPPER** (*Cinclus cinclus*) – A pair from the bus in the Warnlockhead area eluded most, but all caught one back at Keir. A pair at Balmoral and a singleton at the Woolen Mill, Islay. A fine bird, best studied at Robin's garden where it was nesting under the bridge. [N]

#### *Regulidae (Kinglets)*

**GOLDCREST** (*Regulus regulus*) – A few encounters.

#### *Phylloscopidae (Leaf-Warblers)*

**WILLOW WARBLER** (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Its cheerful, lilting song just spells out Spring! It was with us from south to north to west and was the only warbler we regularly encountered. An early returnee.

**COMMON CHIFFCHAFF** (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Singles at Loch Ken and Dunkeld.

#### *Sylviidae (Sylvia, Parrotbills and Allies)*

**BLACKCAP** (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – A couple at Scaurbank (where they were eating suet), several near Melfort, and a singleton at Bridgemend.

#### *Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)*

**EUROPEAN ROBIN** (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Regularly encountered; another legendary bird that never disappoints.

**EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER** (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – A male at one of its sites at Penpont appeared to have just arrived; rare further north. Lovely!

**EUROPEAN STONECHAT** (*Saxicola rubicola hibernans*) – Seen around Crinana; several seen on Coll. Jan got us on our first one.

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

#### *Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**RING OUZEL** (*Turdus torquatus*) – Declining and often elusive, the responsive pair we had at the lower car park on Cairngorm was much appreciated. Excellent studies!

**EURASIAN BLACKBIRD** (*Turdus merula*) – Common throughout; seen daily.

**REDWING** (*Turdus iliacus*) – Four seen well alongside the road on Coll and two seen on Islay. Despite much looking, we failed to find any Fieldfares. [b]

**SONG THRUSH** (*Turdus philomelos*) – Regularly encountered; those comparative views alongside *T. viscivorus* at Dunkeld were the best.

**MISTLE THRUSH** (*Turdus viscivorus*) – Commoner in the north and west of Scotland than anywhere else in Britain; seen almost daily.

#### *Sturnidae (Starlings)*

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Abundant and seen daily.

*Prunellidae (Accentors)*

**DUNNOCK** (*Prunella modularis*) – A few encounters with this unassuming denizen of the hedges; what a lovely song!

*Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)*

**GRAY WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Occasional sightings of this long-tailed, river specialist.

**WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED)** (*Motacilla alba alba*) – The gray-backed migrant, alba, a Scandinavian breeder, was encountered at Ken Dee, Coll, and Islay. [b]

**WHITE WAGTAIL (BRITISH)** (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*) – The black-backed resident and endemic taxon, yarrellii, was commonly encountered throughout. [EN]

**MEADOW PIPIT** (*Anthus pratensis*) – Common encountered throughout; especially numerous on Coll.

**TREE PIPIT** (*Anthus trivialis*) – A vocalizing pair at Tulloch Moor made for a nice summer arrival.

**ROCK PIPIT** (*Anthus petrosus*) – A pair at Kennacraig.

*Bombycillidae (Waxwings)*

**BOHEMIAN WAXWING** (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – A single bird scoped from the Thornhill Inn by Paul and Barbara Johnson constituted an unusual late record. [b]

*Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)*

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – A fine, transient-plumaged bird foraged outside the Ptarmigan Restaurant on Cairngorm; a rare "alpine" breeder in Scotland.

*Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)*

**YELLOWHAMMER** (*Emberiza citrinella*) – The Bucks' Scaurbank feeders are the most reliable site for this species. We had fine views as we enjoyed Caroline's tea and scones. We also had a couple at Spey Bay.

**REED BUNTING** (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – A single male at Lochmaben and several on Coll and Islay.

**CORN BUNTING** (*Emberiza calandra*) – We mismanaged this one when the suspect atop a wire in its favored spot flushed as we exited the bus; it could not be induced back into view. Once common, this species, has declined markedly in Britain and is now difficult to find.

*Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)*

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

**EURASIAN BULLFINCH** (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – A pair of these lovely and often elusive finches was admired at Melfort; what fabulous birds!

**EUROPEAN GREENFINCH** (*Chloris chloris*) – Regularly encountered in small numbers.

**SCOTTISH CROSSBILL** (*Loxia scotica*) – 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, birds apparently identical to the Parrot Crossbill of Scandinavia have been found, and either both species occur here together, or they are the same or another single endemic species altogether. It had apparently been a very poor winter for crossbills and their pine cone larder was much diminished. Sightings had been few and far between, so we were happy for Suann and Jan to see 4 crossbills at Rothiemurchus on the 24th and for all who made the hike to have definitive scope views of a pair of Scottish at Inshcraig on the 25th. This latter pair was especially interested in some call notes Suann produced on her app! [E]

**EURASIAN SISKIN** (*Spinus spinus*) – Regularly encountered, often at feeders.

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

**TWITE** (*Carduelis flavirostris pipilans*) – Excellent views of several on Coll. Declining south of here and on the mainland, but still holding strong on the isles. Ours represented the taxon pipilans, endemic to Britain and Ireland.

**EURASIAN LINNET** (*Carduelis cannabina autochthona*) – Seen nicely on Islay; this taxon is endemic to Scotland. [E]

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) – Daily in small numbers.

**EURASIAN TREE SPARROW** (*Passer montanus*) – This species has declined in Britain but is a daily occurrence at the Scaurbank feeders.

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## MAMMALS

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

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

**EUROPEAN BROWN HARE** (*Lepus europaeus*) – Common encountered, especially on Coll and Islay.

**NORTHERN (BLUE) HARE** (*Lepus timidus*) – Several seen about, first near Leadhills, then Glenshee and Cairngorm; highland relatives of the Brown Hare, they turn white in winter, as were two of those seen at Glenshee.

**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 the States. One at Drumlanrig, one at Scaurbank, and one at Inshcraig.

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

**RED FOX** (*Vulpes vulpes*) – One seen our first day by some.

**OLD WORLD BADGER** (*Meles meles*) – A family sett of 3 gave heart-stopping views at the hide at Loch-an-Eilan.

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

**GRAY SEAL** (*Halichoerus grypus*) – Several hauled out on Crigleith and the Bass Rock; and several on Coll, West Loch Tarbert, and Islay.

**FALLOW DEER** (*Dama dama*) – A herd of these introduced deer at Dunkeld. [I]

**RED DEER** (*Cervus elaphus*) – Regularly encountered in the Highlands and on Islay and Jura; we had in-your-face views at the badger hide.

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

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

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

### Hugh's Detailed Day-by-Day Account

#### Saturday 20 April

All have foregathered 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 Lowthar Hills and the lovely valley of the Elvan River. Here are the first of many, soon to be familiar Lapwings, Curlews, Oystercatchers, Meadow Pipits, Northern Wheatears, and 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 late emerging green valley of Upper Nithsdale where our first of several European Nuthatches is vocal and responsive. Here the River Nith produces our first Grey Wagtail, Drumlanrig Castle (seat of the Duke of Buccleugh) is admired and photographed, and we check into our comfortable small hotel in Thornhill. Profiting from the afternoon sunshine, we travel on to Lochmaben where Great Crested Grebes are in full plumage, there is a single Whooper Swan, and the iPod induces an elusive Water Rail to call and show itself to at least an alert few. Nearer Caerlaverock a flock of a thousand or so Barnacle Geese also contain a few Pink-footed, there are more at Glencaple, and a busy opening day finishes with a noisy pair of Tawny Owls and an introduction to Scottish whiskies at the Buck's home at Scaurbank in the eve.

#### Sunday 21 April

The morning produces what will prove to be our only real rain of the trip so we take it easy at the feeders at Hugh and Caroline's house by the River Scaur and at the lovely gardens of neighbor Robin, for our first Blackcaps, Siskins, Yellowhammers, Tree Sparrows and a couple of wary Stock Doves. At Robin's we catch up with the much wanted White-throated Dipper and, although we fail to find his newly arrived Pied Flycatcher, we soon score Pied at another site near Penpont where an unexpected and vocal pair of Green Woodpeckers produce scope views of the male atop a pine tree. It starts to clear around midday as we travel west to the valley of the River Ken, our first Red Kites and Greylag Geese, and a nice little flock of summer-garbed Black-tailed Godwits which prove to be merely a prelude to days to come. The hills of the English Lake District are clearly visible from Southernness where we find further huge numbers of Barnacle Geese, and the Solway shore at Carsethorne produces rafts of Greater Scaup and a selection of shorebirds which include several Whimbrels. The viewpoint at Drumburn gives us a number of Pintail and our lists are flying at the end of day 2.

#### Monday 22 April

It is bright and breezy as we leave Thornhill and the contrast of winter and summer is illustrated by reports of a Bohemian Waxwing by the Johnsons and a Common Swift by Al before breakfast - very late winter departure and early summer arrival, indeed. Our destination is North Berwick where a very windy sail on a high-speed RIB acquaints us with the main selection of Scotland's seabirds which include Puffins and thousands of Gannets. Back ashore the landlubbers have located a small flock of wintering Purple Sandpipers and we all get to see at least one of these in a flock of Turnstones. Elsewhere on the Firth of Forth we score rather windy looks at Long-tailed Ducks and White-winged (Velvet) Scoters, enjoy some of the sights of historic Edinburgh and cross the Forth Road Bridge with views of the historic Railway Bridge on our right. The RSPB reserve at Vane Farm on Loch Leven is full of wildfowl which include another 4 Whooper Swans and several hundred Pink-footed Geese. From here it is but an hour to our Hilton Hotel situated right on the banks of the River Tay in Perthshire's Dunkeld.

#### Tuesday 23 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 an Osprey patrolling the River Tay, a drumming male Great Spotted Woodpecker, good comparative views of Song and Mistle Thrushes on the lawns and such as Goldcrest, Eurasian Wren (now split from its New World cousins), and Eurasian Treecreeper. At a rather cold Glenshee we scan briefly for Ptarmigan but have to be content with Red Deer and several Mountain Hares (at least two in their white winter garb) before our descent into Royal Deeside and a visit to the Queen's summer palace at Balmoral. Only the gardens and the opulent ballroom are open, but we do get a flavor of how the other one-tenth of one percent lives. By the road from Braemar to Tomintoul we have wonderful views of a quintet of calmly feeding cock Black Grouse and keen-eyed Marcia draws our attention to a pair of breeding plumage European Golden Plovers a little distance away. A tour of the Glenlivet Distillery enhances our knowledge of the production of these famous highland malts and from here the valley of the River Spey and the comfortable Boat Hotel at Boat of Garten are but an hour away. We bully the staff into serving our dinner in time for the dusk viewing of a roding Woodcock at nearby Dulnain Bridge.

#### Wednesday 24 April

At dawn in relatively calm weather we drive the short distance to Loch Garten and the large and well-patronized 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. We do not have to wait long before a fine cock arrives to do his thing. He is a bit distant and moves in and out of the trees but all get scope views as he raises his head, fans his tail and does an occasional fluttering leap forward. This mega desired bird makes a hearty breakfast all the more enjoyable. The weather remains with us, our local guide John Picton joins us, a fine pair of Arctic Loons (Black-throated Divers) in full summer garb are on Loch Morlich, and a pair of Ring Ouzels are induced into action at the lower Cairngorm car park. Although the tops of the mountains are cloud covered we take a chance and board the Cairngorm Mountain Railway to the upper restaurant and viewing area at a coolish 3000+ feet. A stiff wind and cloud hamper our early attempts, but it does suddenly clear to open up an astonishing vista both below and around us. And eventually we all get views of Rock Ptarmigan including a pair in flight, a female in the scope for those that brave the snow and wind, and a dead, winter-plumaged bird which could be examined in the hand. A single almost summer-plumaged Snow Bunting is feeding outside the restaurant -

confined as a breeding bird in Scotland to these barren heights. Back down in warmer Rothiemurchus the divers have turned into a pair of Red-throated and a longish walk eventually produces a few Crested Tits, and Suann and Jan see a quartet of Crossbills, most likely the endemic Scottish, considering the Caledonian Pine habitat.

#### Thursday 25 April

John takes us first to Avielochan where a pair of summer-plumaged Horned (Slavonian) Grebes are the pick of a small range of waterfowl. Then on to the Caledonian forests at Inshcraig where we eventually get excellent and confirmatory scope views of a pair of Scottish Crossbills. The pine crop has been very poor this winter and sightings of these elusive birds (and even more so the closely related Parrot Crossbills) have been few and far between. We feel privileged to have nailed this single Scottish endemic in the time available. On north to the shores of the Moray Firth at Findhorn and Spey Bays where we get more manageable views of Long-tailed Ducks and a few Common and White-winged (Velvet) Scoters, an excitable pair of Crested Tits and where we flush an almost certain Corn Bunting on a roadside wire at its known hotspot but which disappears as we leave the bus never to return. Inexplicably rare now in Scotland (indeed all of Britain) and is a "miss" we will not be able to rectify. Our evening at the well known hide at Loch an Eilan produces the expected Badgers coming for their peanuts, the well known Wood Mouse making occasional darts under their noses but again, sadly, no Pine Martens.

#### Friday 26 April

Although we encounter some real Scottish weather, including snow in the early morning, it continues to clear as we travel southwest and will be almost universally brilliant for the rest of trip. In the cold early morning several male Black Grouse at Creag Meagaidh are lethargic and reluctant to display, so we continue west to lunch at our hotel at Kimelford south of Oban (where our first Black Guillemots are in the harbour and a possible Ring-billed Gull x Mew Gull hybrid is closely watched and much discussed). We spend the afternoon scouring the coastal woodlands where a brilliant pair of Bullfinches are the highlight and also visit the famous and fanciful "Wade" Bridge over the Atlantic at Clachan.

#### Saturday 27 April

Our ferry to Coll leaves Oban at 0715 and offers fine views of the Isle of Mull, the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, and north to the islands of Rhum, Eigg, and Muck. A variety of sea and other birds include a small group of Manx Shearwaters but only a few get onto them. The low lying inner Hebridean island of Coll is at its best in the spring sunshine and we check into our lovely hotel before moving on to the RSPB reserve at Totranald where, to our great relief, a single Corn Crake calls in the warden's garden and we all get at least something of a view of a rather furtive individual of this much wanted species. An excellent sea and other food lunch and we are off again to score Northern (Hen) Harrier, a trio of Cuckoos, a few lingering Redwings and definitive views of Twites before returning to Totranald in the early evening. Here we strike gold as another Corn Crake calls close by and judicious use of the tape raises his hormones to such an extent that he several times comes right into the open and rasps back his challenge. Superb scope and other views and some excellent photos are our reward and he is celebrated keenly at an excellent dinner at the Coll Hotel later.

#### Sunday 28 April

A reduced party makes it for the early morning trip back to Totranald where a single Corn Crake rasp is our only encounter but where we enjoy the sight of a major fallout (several hundred birds) of migratory Golden Plovers coming into the surrounding pastures. Nearby a party of 11 full-winged Snow Geese is something of surprise although this feral flock has been established here for a number of years. A hearty breakfast over we kill time around the hotel and ferry port before the afternoon ferry back to Oban. This time all get on to Manx Shearwaters close to Coll but sadly only a few onto the adult White-tailed Eagle on the shores of Mull as he flaps briefly along the shore, is mobbed by a Herring Gull, alights briefly and is lost to view. Tarbert and our hotel is reached in sunshine in the late evening.

#### Monday 29 April

And happily the morning dawns relatively calm and sunny for our two-hour ferry from Kennacraig to Port Ellen on the Inner Hebridean island of Islay. The pier at Kennacraig has a close pair of Rock Pipits, West Loch Tarbert holds a scattering of Common Loons (Great Northern Divers) in a variety of plumages and we will see more as we approach Islay. Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers are numerous and there are lots Shags and Great Cormorants. 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. Once at Port Ellen we admire the celebrated distilleries of Ardbeg, Lagavulin, and Laphroig as well as a nearby colony of Common Seals. Then it is more whisky lore at the Bowmore Distillery where we learn of the malting of the barley over peat and get our first taste of the smoky island malts. Lunch over we scour the shores of Loch Indaal, the pastures and marshes of Loch Gruinart, and the machair of Ardnave. There are surprises including several thousand "itchy" Barnacle Geese, a wonderful flock of several hundred summer-plumaged Black-tailed Godwits, a single rather ill-looking Greenland White-fronted Goose, and, by the shores of Loch Indaal, a party of four Brant (Brent Geese). But for most it is a couple of displaying Red-billed Choughs at Ardnave that steal the show. Some join in for a memorable after dinner tutored Islay Malts session at the Bowmore Hotel.

#### Tuesday 30 April

Pre-breakfast we are back at Loch Gruinart where we at last catch a flock of the (usually much commoner) Bar-tailed Godwit, add Linnet to the list, and find a couple of more Choughs at Kilchoman for those that missed them the previous evening. The Godwits are still there but the numbers of Barnacles seem much reduced - doubtless the calm weather has induced them into making further inroads into their long flight to Greenland. We wind down around the woods at Bridgend but no additional warblers or other summer visitors appear to have arrived, take in the Islay Woollen Mill, historic Finlaggan, and the now much recognised distillery of Bunnahabhain on the scenic shore of the Sound of Jura. Here an immaculately plumaged adult Iceland Gull is a final (fine) new bird and precedes the scenic return ferry back to Kennacraig, on along the shores of Loch Fyne, over the Rest and Be Thankful Pass, along the shores of "bonny" Loch Lomond, and into the unwelcome sprawl of Glasgow.

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**Totals for the tour: 151 bird taxa and 14 mammal taxa**



