

## Scottish Highlands 2005

This wasn't an out and out birding holiday, just a fortnight away to do some sightseeing and just to explore a country to which I had never been to before.

We arrived on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June but I didn't get to see any birds until the 5<sup>th</sup>, with my first treat, a Female Osprey sitting on an enormous nest at the Loch Garten RSPB centre, sadly she had had a clutch of 3 eggs with one male but her usual mate turned up and kicked the eggs out of the nest and it looks unlikely they will raise any chicks this year, then a brief visit to Loch Morlich produced Pied Wagtail, Black Headed Gull, Siskin and Blackbird. A loch side stop on Loch Lochy on the 7<sup>th</sup> produced a pair of Red Breasted Mergansers also on the 7<sup>th</sup> a visit to Culloden Battlefield produced Stonechat, Reed Bunting, Willow Warbler, Meadow Pipit and Skylark.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> after an early start to go on a guided walk around Abernethy Forest I heard a Cuckoo calling from our backdoor. The guided walk was amongst the Caledonian Pine Forest so I was hoping for Capercaillie, sadly they failed to put in an appearance but we did see Common Sandpiper, Greenfinch, Coal Tit, Tree Pipit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Chaffinch, Mallard and Reed Bunting, Goldeneye, a Crested Tit was heard but not located and we also saw Red Squirrel. In the evening we witnessed an Osprey flying up the valley from our backdoor.

A beautiful drive up to Lochaline via the banks of Loch Linnhe, where we spotted a male Eider along with Shag, Cormorant, Common Gull, Herring Gull, a Buzzard and also a Seal and Red Deer doe. The drive to check where the Mull ferry sailed from turned out to be worth it when I witnessed a Merlin take a Common Tern off the surface of the water, it was immediately mobbed by just about every other bird there but still managed to make it's escape with it's prey.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> we decided to drive up to John O'Groats on the drive up just north of Inverness we witnessed 2 Red Kites gliding effortlessly above the road. At John O'Groats I was pleasantly surprised to see House Martins and Swallows I didn't realise they went so far north. After a short stop at John O'Groats we proceeded to Dunnet Head the actual most northerly point on mainland Britain. We stopped at one of the small lakes that are alongside the road to Dunnet Head and among the gulls I found a bird I had never encountered before, after some watching and consulting the Collins Guide I finally come to the conclusion it was a Parasitic Skua. There were lots of Curlews on the moorland along with Lapwing, Kestrel Skylark and Meadow Pipit. The cliffs were alive with seabirds, Puffin, Razorbill, Cormorant, Fulmar, Guillemot and Kittiwake but sadly no Black Guillemot. I then watched a pair of Wheatears feeding their young in a little walled garden near the lighthouse.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> we visited Rothiemurchus fish farm to view the Ospreys feeding of the trout. We arrived around 19:30 and walked to the hide, at least 2 different birds visited the pool during our two hour stay but neither would hunt, I think due to the presence of anglers.

The 12<sup>th</sup> was another early start, this time to drive to Mull to view the Sea Eagles as seen on Springwatch. A short ferry ride took us over and we drove to the meeting point to proceed to the hide. Around 10 cars convoyed their way through dusty Scottish forestry to a small wooden hide approximately 500 yards from the nest. When we arrived the wardens had just finished ringing the chicks, Itchy and Scratchy. The parents were both perched in the same tree and give great views through the scope. We also had some great views of them flying around the local area. Also on Mull I saw Great Tit, male Eider, Stonechat, Wheatear, Meadow Pipit, Chaffinch, Wren, Willow Warbler, Swallow and Whitethroat.

The 13<sup>th</sup> saw a change in the weather and it rained, heavily. A drive along Lochindorb cheered me up though, despite the rain I saw a Black Throated Diver in full breeding plumage along with an equally as stunning Red Throated Diver also in summer plumage.

I still hadn't seen Golden Eagle so we drove up the Findhorn Valley hoping to see one. A pheasant chick crossed the road in front of us and then 20 yards further on we spotted a pair of Curlew with 5 chicks, right by the side of the road. Further up the valley we encountered a few Common Sandpipers, Grey & Pied Wagtail, Hooded Crow a Kestrel and lots of Reindeer but sadly no Eagles.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> I decided to visit the Slavonian Grebe viewing platform near Boat of Garten. The birds there appear to be nesting and the platform offers excellent views with the scope. There are feeders set in the forest behind the platform and I was watching a group of Red Squirrels feeding of the peanuts when a female Capercaillie walked right through the break in the trees, giving me a brief but excellent view of her before she disappeared seconds later. Feeling good after that very lucky sighting I decided to take an evening stroll around Loch an Eilein, not far from the car park I spotted a pair of Redstarts, I also saw Willow Warbler and Siskin but it was not until I had nearly circled the loch did I get my first view of Crested Tits, there were 4 of them feeding in amongst a group of fledgling Coal Tits.

The weather finally cleared enough on the 16<sup>th</sup> for me to make my assault on Ben Macdui in search on Dotterel and Ptarmigan. I arrived at the Cairngorm car park armed with map and compass not to mention the layers of extra clothes. I started the climb and after only about 5 mins walking picked up a Ptarmigan flying up the valley below me, he landed and gave some decent views but not great, still a tick though. The plan was then to ascend the mountain until I came across a Dotterel and the turn around and come back down. Eventually after nearly 1300 metres there it was, right by the side of the path, literally within 6 feet of me. I quickly got the video camera out of the map pocket of my coat to film it but on switching the camera on it had built up condensation inside and failed to work. The bird surprisingly stayed around and didn't look bothered by my presence at all, so I sat and watched it go about it's business. On the return trip I came across a Mountain Hare which was also nice to see having only seen the non mountain kind.

A stop near Grantown on Spey on the 17<sup>th</sup> produced Spotted Flycatcher and a pair of Dippers feeding their young in their nest under the bridge that spans the Spey. I also

visited Insh Marshes on the 17<sup>th</sup> hoping for Harriers but I didn't see any. I did see another Curlew with chicks, Redshank, a pair of Greylag Geese with 3 goslings, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Reed Bunting, an adult Heron with a Juvenile, Swift, Swallow, Willow Warbler, Black Headed Gull, Jackdaw, I also heard a Tawny Owl hoot as we were leaving.

In the evening we had booked a session in a hide with Speyside Wildlife to hopefully see Pine Martin and Badgers. The evening started well with superb views of a Great Spotted Woodpecker coming to feed on the peanut butter put out for the visiting mammals. Then everything went very quiet for about 3 hours with only a mouse providing entertainment before the guide announced that we would "give it 20 mins". As if by magic a female Pine Martin appeared coming along the path. She came to the feeders and started tucking in to the free offerings. She stayed for around 20 mins before being scared away by 3 adult badgers which promptly gorged themselves on the peanuts. These stayed around for another half an hour giving all some excellent views and the chance to photograph them, they were totally unfazed by the flash photography or the floodlights around the hide.

On the return journey to South Wales we came across a Red Legged Partridge in the middle of a town quite brazenly standing on a dry stone wall.

Scotland is an amazing place with some absolutely stunning scenery but what amazed me most was how close you could get to the birds/wildlife particularly the waders.

So all in all I had a really great trip, my first time in Scotland but not my last I still have yet to see Golden Eagle and Scottish Crossbill and I would like to see a male Capercaillie but at least I don't have to scale Ben Macdui again. Highlight of the trip had to be the White Tailed Eagles, what an awesome bird and to see them close up was just amazing, other high points for me were seeing Divers in summer plumage, breeding Slav Grebes, and the Merlin taking a Tern was also amazing to see.