

HEATHERLEA TRIP REPORT



HIGHLAND BIRDING IN LATE SUMMER

SATURDAY 3 AUGUST – SATURDAY 10 AUGUST 2024



Heatherlea Guides:

Aidan Branch & Ian Ford.

Saturday 3rd August

Everyone arrived safely with trains on time (in fact early).

Sunday 4th August

A good forecast with a strengthening breeze made us choose a local day. We went through part of the Abernethy Forest to the Loch Garten trail in search of Crested Tits and Crossbills. Aidan heard a Crested Tit as soon as we got out of the vans, and we located it high in the pines with a foraging flock but very few guests saw this bird as it flitted in and out of view. They did have the first of several good views of Treecreeper though and Coal, Blue and Great Tits. We walked down the scenic trail, enjoying flowers like Cow-wheat and Creeping Ladies' Tresses Orchid as well as views over the loch and surrounding hills until we heard the calls of another active group of small birds. Another Crested Tit was with this group but did nothing to cooperate with our group. However, a few more people saw this and its companions which included Willow Warblers and Goldcrests. It was hard going so we returned to the vans, hearing a brief snatch of Crossbill song on the way.

We drove to a different habitat next for a cup of tea at Old Spey Bridge. A Grey Heron posed in a dead tree and we heard a Grey Wagtail, annoyingly at the same time as a Sparrowhawk flew across the river. Goldfinches twittered near us but there was little else. We moved on to another patch of coniferous woodland and could hear Crossbills immediately but not overhead. We continued to hear Crossbills in flight as we walked along the track, quickly finding a lively family of Spotted Flycatchers. A Tree Pipit posed nearby and before long a Crested Tit trilled. It did the same as the earlier ones, feeding high in the pines and not showing very well.

Many Crossbills were calling now near the car park and we located several in the Spruce trees which were laden with cones. For once, this group stayed in the same trees for as long as we wanted (half an hour) and we could watch and photograph different red males, green females and grey juveniles as they pulled off cones and hung at different angles. The bright camouflage colours and the grey undertail coverts added to our superb encounter. Another Sparrowhawk was high over the forest.

It was lunchtime already – we ate at Poorhouse Wood. A Red Squirrel didn't like our company but others, especially Siskin, Greenfinch and a fleeting Great Spotted Woodpecker added colour to our picnic. Guess what, a Crested Tit appeared above us in the carpark but led us a merry dance among the pines. At one point two were calling but views were very limited.

After a comfort stop we drove towards Strathdearn with our first stop at Garbole. The wind had certainly risen and it was chilly here. Sand and House Martins as well as Swallows were feeding above the grassy areas but we wanted raptors. A Buzzard flew off as we arrived and several more were seen as were several Red Kites, at last becoming frequent here after previous presumed persecution. Seven juvenile Common Gulls were flying around but didn't settle for clear views. At last a larger raptor appeared, flying away fast – it was a subadult Golden Eagle but views were very poor. Ken then spotted another large raptor over a distant hill but it kept dropping out of sight. It did show enough of its huge broad wings and lack of tail to confirm it as a White-tailed Eagle but it was a poor showing. We stopped twice more up the scenic strath with its winding river, seeing how Buzzards hunted by hovering into the wind and we saw a group of Red Deer hinds on the lee side and a single antlered stag on the skyline. A little stroll up a hill let us enjoy the

beauty of Grass of Parnassus flowers before it was time to head for home. The return journey down was cheered greatly by getting good views of a pair of Bullfinches feeding on insects on the roadside barrier then an obliging roadside Brown Hare.

Today's highlights were the Crossbills and other birds in the forest.

Monday 5 August

The moth trap was full of local moths as well as beetles and caddisflies with beautiful species like Burnished Brass, Lesser Swallow Prominent and Welsh Wave. We were accompanied by screaming Swifts zooming past the nestboxes and three Crossbills flew over calling.

We were going to the Moray Firth coast today with our first stop at Bogmoor – over our cuppa we saw an Osprey and some of the group walked to see Tree Sparrows at their nesting colony. Further down the road we stopped to watch and listen to Corn Buntings, seeing adults with fledged young very well. Another Osprey was seen from there. At Spey Bay we had more Osprey views, a Red Kite overhead, Sandwich and Common Terns as well as both Black-backed Gulls. A pod of Bottlenose Dolphins cruised along offshore, moving slowly and passing flocks of moulting Goosanders. Kittiwakes, Common Gulls and Gannets were offshore while one dark Arctic Skua flew by close and three more were further out. Stuart saw a Common Scoter land briefly on the sea and Ken saw it as it flew off. A few Turnstones, Ringed Plovers and Curlews flew past.

We continued on our way and were pleasantly surprised to see a juvenile Marsh Harrier over a field. At Loch Spynie car park we saw Yellowhammer, Goldfinch, Siskin and 2 Great Spotted Woodpeckers. On the way to the hide there were at least 15 Long-tailed Tits, a Chiffchaff and Willow Warblers. Common Terns were still feeding young at the raft and among the moulting ducks were one female Shoveler, a couple of Gadwalls, Wigeons and Teals. Little Grebes and Coots had chicks and Greylags appeared to have bred well.

After a brief aromatic stop at a pig farm where one Lapwing was the highlight we continued to the estuary where we saw a Black-tailed Godwit, a lovely red Red Knot and a pretty good hybrid Hooded Crow.

More waders were at Burghead maltings with more of the species already but over a dozen Knot with a much closer stunning red one. On the sea Razorbills and Guillemots had chicks, Fulmars soared past, Kittiwakes and Gannets and whingeing Sandwich Terns passed further out. A Grey Seal bobbed about.

On the way home one bus saw two White-tailed Eagles fly over the bus (is that right Ken, I may have heard you mention it)!

The highlights today have been Red Knots, dolphins, Ospreys and the unexpected Marsh Harrier.

Tuesday 6th August

We drove towards Glenshee with a brief stop seeing Buzzard and Roe Deer. At the Well of Lecht with beautiful flowering Heather and a family of Stonechats, Willow Warblers, a Blackcap, Meadow Pipits, Mistle T and a lovely surprise, a male Ring Ouzel. Buzzards and Ravens were up in the blue sky.

We continued beyond Lecht with a panoramic view and Buzzards and Red Kites and a Red Grouse for some. A further stop for the loo brought super views of a Peregrine and a Buzzard interacting. After a cuppa stop on the moorland we reached Glenshee finally at nearly 1pm. Aidan's bus had a White-tailed Eagle overhead and away over the hills but seen by most. A scan of the mountain in front of us gave views of several active Mountain Hares, chocolate youngsters and blue-grey adults. After lunch we all went up the chairlift to search for Ptarmigan. It was windy but the scenery was stunning and it stayed dry all day. We found Ptarmigan feathers and poo and saw live Mountain Hares as well as seeing (and tasting) fruiting Crowberries and Cloudberry. Afterwards we went to the Devil's Elbow where, over a cuppa, we had views of a Golden Eagle going away from us, more Buzzards and a lovely herd of relaxed stags.

On the way home we had drive-by views of two Osprey chicks in the nest and a very brief Otter in the river. Seven Red Kites low beside the road were worth stopping for and we saw more on the way back. Mel was pleased to see a Pheasant, which she can't see at home!

Wednesday 7 August

There was a poor weather forecast for this morning but it turned out fine until later. We opened the moth trap which was full of moths, many repeats but Suspected which I hadn't suspected (a local moth in most of the country but frequent here).

We started at Poorhouse Wood where there were chatty Siskins, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a singing Crossbill in the carpark. The latter managed to hide very well from us. We had a short walk but the wood was very quiet though we heard more Crossbills. Rain was starting but we had a brief stop at a moorland layby, finding a calling Redpoll which was seen briefly.

It was time to head to the coast where we had a cup of tea in the sun at Sueno's Stone – an impressive Pictish sculpted monolith. It was a short drive to Netherton where Ospreys were immediately visible with two on posts and two in the air. Others were seen fishing, squabbling, carrying fish, three on a stick in water. They were constantly visible, often in good sunlight and ever popular. A lone Pink-footed Goose was out on the mud and Stuart noticed that the swan was a Whooper when it raised its head. Everyone had a chance to enjoy this unusual sight in August – like the goose probably an injured bird. Streams of Oystercatcher flew past to roost as the tide advanced while many Curlews, with their longer legs, probed the mud for longer. Four Shelduck fed offshore and Sandwich and Common Tern were present along with over a hundred Common Gulls. Behind us Aidan and Stuart found a few Skylarks in the fields. We stayed here a very long time enjoying all the birds' behaviour.

As we drove past another part of Findhorn Bay, Aidan saw a Marsh Harrier land in long grass. We didn't have to wait long for it to take off and could see it was a second year male, alongside

another Osprey, and giving good views. We went to Roseisle for lunch in the sun and scanned the now very windy sea full of white horses. Blowing sand made birdwatching impossible but we'd seen very little on the sea. At Burghead at full tide we saw Sandwich Terns and Kittiwakes fly past while the only other bird of note was a summer plumage Red-throated Diver.

It was getting late by now so we returned via Lochindorb with good views of Red Grouse hunkered down in deep heather. A Kestrel was of note before we headed back to the hotel via Broomhill Bridge where Norman saw a Stoat running along the shore.

Another enjoyable day out with highlights of Ospreys galore.

Thursday 8th August

We reached Ullapool after a two hour drive and got our tickets to board the ferry to Stornoway. The weather was a bit drizzly at times with a brisk breeze as we set off, soon seeing Shags, Cormorants, Gannets and one Black Guillemot as well as a fly-over White-tailed Eagle in Loch Broom. As we approached the Summer Isles with their rocky hills, we had bigger birds over the land. The first was a Raven which landed on a cairn, a Great Skua sat atop another hill but a massive White-tailed Eagle flew up high towards the ferry. It was being mobbed by gulls and was moulting primary feathers but looked wonderfully rugged like the landscape. We saw our first of several dark morph Arctic Skuas too and the first Harbour Porpoises.

Organised Whale watchers were on the ferry looking out and informing passengers and, in the open sea, blows from a large whale were observed a long way out. Nearly all of us saw these big blows and at one point there were two blows and the briefest of views of a body but these cetaceans remained unidentified. However, a Humpback behaved much better and surfaced and dived much closer to the ferry, giving views of its long back, small fin and large tail flukes as it dived deep. Common Dolphins started appearing but headed to the bow and away without good views from the stern. A few seals were seen and there were both Common and Grey. Seabird activity increased with numerous Kittiwakes, small numbers of Manx Shearwaters and little groups of auks. Mainly composed of Guillemots including chicks, there were some Razorbills and increasing numbers of Puffins without any chicks. Fulmars and Arctic Terns were seen with a surprise Little Tern, more Great and Arctic Skuas and a close Sooty Shearwater. Storm Petrels were reported but very few guests managed to see these tiny waifs.

Approaching Stornoway there was a larger group of shearwaters resting on the sea, all Manx, and a huge cruise ship dominated the seascape. More Shags were on the rocks and Stuart spotted a flying diver with a fish, an excellent view of a summer plumage Black-throated Diver.

We had to disembark then wait to re-embark for the return but island-baggers were happy to add Lewis to their island lists!

The return had better visibility and a calmer sea which allowed much better and more frequent Common Dolphin sightings, many alongside the ferry. Many pods were seen and they were often jumping out of the water or splashing. Annoyingly distant, many blows were seen from Humpback Whales but with limited views of back or tail but the blows were impressive. Five Minke Whales decided it was their turn to appear and came past the ferry within two hundred yards - what a super show they put on with three in view in binoculars at one time. We had

further views of all the same seabirds and Cathy managed to see a Storm Petrel. We reached the Summer Isles then into Loch Broom with more and more small pods of Common Dolphins splashing along, several Harbour Porpoises, a distant flying White-tailed Eagle and a very distant Black Guillemot.

We arrived back in Ullapool feeling very tired from standing and holding binocs but elated with everything we'd seen. So many highlights.

We enjoyed our dinner after the drive back to the Mountview Hotel. Alan had been unwell and decided to go home today and Jo leaves us tomorrow morning to meet family.

Friday 9 August

There was a mixed morning forecast but we went to Strathdearn with my minibus slowing down for a Red Kite eating roadkill. It was windy but dry at Garbole with hirundines and Swifts flying low. A distant Red Kite and two Buzzards were the only raptors here. We moved up the strath and found a herd of Red Deer stags and seven Feral Goats while two Buzzards displayed in the windy conditions.

It was cuppa time as a shower passed through. Bullfinches and a Willow Warbler called from the bushes but no raptors appeared in the drizzle. We thought it best to drive back down the strath and had a wonderfully close encounter with an Osprey flying just over the vans, followed by Aidan's bus having to stop for a Red Kite eating a dead Rabbit in the road. Very strange this happening to both vans in one morning! A little group of Lapwings in amongst the sheep seem to be the last reminders of summer up here.

We headed to the Black Isle and drove along the Beauly Firth shore as the tide advanced. A 'good' Hooded Crow was with several clear hybrids and seven Black-tailed Godwits waded in the rising water. Other more frequent waders were roosting here too.

We moved on to Udale Bay with the tide well in now. Greylag and Canada Geese were in high numbers but Peter found a popular Barnacle Goose with them. Ducks included several Wigeon and there were two distant Bar-tailed Godwits along with Ringed Plover, Redshanks and Curlews. A Sandwich and a Common Tern sat amongst these waders. A couple of miles further on we made our last stop of the week and quickly found a flock of Red-breasted Mergansers, all bobbing away in the white horses. There was also a group of Scaup offshore and two drakes flew past. A flock of scruffy Eider in eclipse were very close in and Linnets sang above us in the carpark.

GUEST HIGHLIGHTS

Everyone has thoroughly enjoyed this week as summer moves towards autumn. Here are everyone's highlights –

- Alan:** Passed on his thanks to the guides 'who have been superb and the knowledge of both amazes me as well as sending jokey comments to a few of the group.
- Jo:** Had a wonderful holiday with 'a bunch of lunatics' and two special guides. She particularly enjoyed the dolphins in the Moray Firth and the Red Grouse hiding in the heather.
- Shaun:** Seeing the Whooper Swan and the Pink-footed Goose though he was concerned about what may have happened to them.
- Ken:** Loved the Ospreys, the scenery, the good weather and the boat trip. The group was amazing!
- Stuart:** Also the Ospreys which were very special but also the special part of the forest with great views of Tree Pipit, Spotted Flycatchers and Crossbills.
- Ali:** Had few objectives and enjoyed learning more but her highlight was the amazing group, including the guides.
- Nick:** Had lots of highlights but the best were the Great Skua fighting with the Greater Boack-backed Gull and seeing the male Ring Ouzel.
- Cathy:** Manx Shearwaters and the magical forest birds, Tree Pipit, Spotted Flycatchers and Crossbills. She added the singalong in the van on the way back from Ullapool.
- David:** The whole week was brilliant with stand-out highlights being the amazing White-tailed Eagle, his first Humpback and the Great Skua/Great Black-back squabble.
- Peter:** Was delighted with the seven Ospreys at Findhorn Bay.
- Mel:** Especially enjoyed the whole day on the ferry with so many seabirds, dolphins and whales.
- Norman:** Also really enjoyed the ferry day but added that he had come to learn. He has learnt a lot with the Red Knot being a favourite and thanked everyone who helped him during the week.
- Aidan:** The ferry crossing exceeded his expectations, especially the Black-throated Diver, seeing the red, green and grey colours of the feeding Crossbills, the excellent Bottlenose Dolphins and working with Ian,
- Ian:** Had used the same phrase as Aidan about the ferry but added the enthusiasm and fun of the group as an extra to all the many wonderful sights we've had all week.

	SPECIES	3/8	4/8	5/8	6/8	7/8	8/8	9/8	COMMENTS/NOTES
1	Mute Swan			X				X	
2	Whooper Swan					X			
3	Pink-footed Goose					X			
4	Greylag Goose			X	X	X	X	X	
5	Canada Goose					X		X	
6	Barnacle Goose							X	
7	Shelduck					X		X	
8	Mallard		X	X	X	X	X	X	
9	Gadwall			X					
10	Shoveler			X					
11	Wigeon			X				X	
12	Teal			X					
13	Scaup							X	
14	Tufted Duck			X					
15	Eider					X		X	
16	Common Scoter			X					
17	Goosander			X					
18	Red-breasted Merganser							X	
19	Red-legged Partridge				X				
20	Red Grouse				X	X			
21	Pheasant		X		X	X	X	X	
22	Red-throated Diver					X	X		
23	Black-throated Diver						X		
24	Fulmar			X		X	X		
25	Manx Shearwater						X		
26	Sooty Shearwater						X		
27	Storm Petrel						X		
28	Gannet			X		X	X		
29	Cormorant			X		X	X	X	
30	Shag						X	X	
31	Grey Heron		X	X	X	X	X	X	
32	Little Grebe			X					

	SPECIES	3/8	4/8	5/8	6/8	7/8	8/8	9/8	COMMENTS/NOTES
33	Red Kite		X	X	X	X	X	X	
34	Osprey			X	X	X		X	
35	White-tailed Eagle		X	X	X		X		
36	Marsh Harrier			X		X			
37	Sparrowhawk		X	X					
38	Buzzard		X	X	X	X	X	X	
39	Golden Eagle		X		X				
40	Moorhen			X					
41	Coot			X					
42	Oystercatcher		X	X		X	X	X	
43	Golden Plover			X					
44	Ringed Plover			X				X	
45	Lapwing			X		X	X	X	
46	Curlew			X		X	X	X	
47	Whimbrel			X					
48	Black-tailed Godwit			X				X	
49	Bar-tailed Godwit							X	
50	Turnstone			X					
51	Knot			X					
52	Redshank			X				X	
53	Arctic Skua			X			X		
54	Great Skua						X		
55	Puffin						X		
56	Black Guillemot						X		
57	Guillemot			X			X		
58	Razorbill			X			X		
59	Sandwich Tern			X		X		X	
60	Common Tern			X		X		X	
61	Arctic Tern						X		
62	Little Tern						X		
63	Black-headed Gull			X		X		X	
64	Common Gull		X	X	X	X	X	X	
65	Herring Gull		X	X	X	X	X	X	
66	Lesser Black-backed Gull			X					

	SPECIES	3/8	4/8	5/8	6/8	7/8	8/8	9/9	COMMENTS/NOTES
67	Great Black-backed Gull			X		X	X	X	
68	Kittiwake			X		X	X		
69	(Feral Pigeon)		X	X	X	X	X	X	
70	Woodpigeon		X	X	X	X	X	X	
71	Collared Dove		X	X	X	X	X	X	
72	Swift		X	X	X	X	X	X	
73	Great Spotted Woodpecker		X	X		X			
74	Kestrel					X			
75	Peregrine				X				
76	Magpie			X					
77	Jay					X			
78	Jackdaw		X	X	X	X	X	X	
79	Rook		X	X	X	X	X	X	
80	Carrion Crow		X	X	X	X	X	X	
81	Hooded Crow						X	X	
82	Raven				X	X	X		
83	Goldcrest		X			H			
84	Great Tit		X	X	X	X			
85	Blue Tit		X	X	X	X			
86	Crested Tit		X			H			
87	Coal Tit		X	X		X		X	
88	Skylark					X			
89	Sand Martin		X	X		X		X	
90	Swallow		X	X	X	X	X	X	
91	House Martin		X	X	X	X	X	X	
92	Long-tailed Tit		H	X		H			
93	Chiffchaff			X				H	
94	Willow Warbler		X	X	X	H		H	
95	Blackcap				X				
96	Treecreeper		X	H		H			
97	Wren		X	X	X	X			
98	Starling		X	X	X		X	X	
99	Dipper		X					X	
100	Song Thrush			X				X	

[illegible]

	SPECIES	3/8	4/8	5/8	6/8	7/8	8/8	9/8	COMMENTS/NOTES
1	Hedgehog		D	D	D		D		
2	Red Squirrel		X						
3	Rabbit		X	X	X	X	X	X	
4	Brown Hare		X		X	X	X		
5	Mountain (Blue) Hare				X				
6	Stoat					X			
7	Mink		X						
8	Otter				X				
9	Mink		X						
10	Common Seal						X		
11	Grey Seal			X			X	X	
12	Minke Whale						X		
13	Humpback Whale						X		
14	Common Dolphin						X		
15	Bottle-nosed Dolphin			X					
16	Harbour Porpoise						X		
17	Red Deer		X		X			X	
18	Roe Deer		X	X	X	X		X	
19	Wild Goat							X	

If you enjoyed Ian's trip, [click here](#) to find out the next holidays that Ian will be leading.

For future trips with Aidan, [click here](#) to find out the next holidays that Aidan will be leading.

To contact Heatherlea to discuss this, or any other Heatherlea holiday call us on 01479 821248 or email info@heatherlea.co.uk

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Thank you to Nick Goldman , Alan Jones and Mel Wertnik who provided photos too.















