

Day 1: Late afternoon arrival at Inverness airport, 2-hour drive to accommodation on the west coast, north of Ullapool.

Day 2: A pre-breakfast walk served to stir our appetites and also got us good views of a number of woodland birds including the restless Redpoll (*ssp.cabaret*), Siskin, Treecreeper, Bullfinch, Yellowhammer and Goldcrest. Common Crossbills were heard but could not be seen.

Back at the hotel Hooded Crows were hanging around the car park and 5 or 6 Eider relaxed in the nearby sea loch. A post-breakfast weather check convinced us that the time was right to go for the island of Handa which, if all went to plan, was to be the *piece de resistance* of the whole trip. The island "ferry" having dropped us off on a beautiful sandy beach we were immediately met by the volunteer warden who, informing us in a friendly way of the "do's" and "don'ts" also gave us more background information on the island itself and some of its special birds.

In the nearest bay several graceful Arctic Terns floated over a large group of resting Common Gulls and received the accolades of all, but we were impatient to get to the cliffs and to survey the huge seabird colonies that we had heard so much about. The walk to the cliffs was a short one, only half an hour or so, but to get there first we had to pass through the moors and skua territory: good numbers of both Great and Arctic Skuas nest on the island and they are more than willing to demonstrate to any human intruder who they think is boss! Several elegant Arctic Skua sentinels eyed us suspiciously as we lumbered past, stopping now and then to gawk at them in appreciation. However, apart from a few disdainful glances and the occasional half-hearted flyby, we were apparently paying the skuas more attention than they were to us. In fact, we were almost disappointed, with the cliffs almost in sight, before the last Arctic Skua started dive-bombing us in the nick of time!

With the skua act behind us we reached the top of the hill and could already feel the warm maritime breeze, although we could never have prepared for the sheer spectacle that confronted us: 100 m high cliffs packed solid with Guillemots and Razorbills, whitewashed by tons of guano; 3 species of auks, Kittiwakes, Fulmars, Common Gulls, Great Skuas coming and going, soaring, diving, gliding, landing and taking off in every direction in a fashion beyond the worst of an air-traffic controller's nightmare! The sea literally dotted with seabirds, some of which took flight and drifted up to the grassy clifftops where we stood, coming almost within touching distance. Puffins, Razorbills and Fulmars on their nests at only a few metres away! We sat and stood around in that one spot for almost an hour just soaking up the whole experience and the pleasant warming sunshine.

Feeling it was time to move on, we drifted around the western part of the island along the clifftop path, marvelling at both the views and the birds. The odd Gannet flew by, presumably on its way to its breeding colony at Cape Wrath, while rabbits, wheatears and meadow pipits were the main land-based entertainment, although half a dozen jumpy Twite kept us occupied for some time. A short stop at a sandy inlet came as a welcome rest and also provided good views of a number of Grey Seals, some basking on a flat-topped island rock, others in the sea poking their heads above the waves to view us from a safe position. Increasingly aware that we had to drag ourselves away from this birder's paradise in order to catch the ferry back to the mainland before the last crossing at 5p.m. we hastened our pace, passing piping Oystercatchers and solemn skuas overflying a dazzling blue sea. Back at the landing beach we scanned the tranquil waters of the sound and found what we were looking for: 2 handsome summer-plumaged Black Guillemots, a farewell greeting from magnificent Handa.

But the summer days are long at these latitudes and the birding day was not over yet. After getting to grips with the identification of Rock Pipits on the stony shoreline we started to make our way back to the hotel, but we didn't get far before we had to stop for a beautiful summer-plumaged Red-throated Diver on a roadside loch. We contemplated the intricacies of its plumage at our leisure before taking the scenic route back to our cosy lodgings. What a day, it was going to be a hard act to follow!

Day 3: In the morning we set off to round the north-west corner of Scotland, impatient to see the area's stunning landscapes and a few more birds too. Amid mountains, moors and lochs the first roadside stop produced another Red-throated Diver, while a little further on a picturesque stone bridge over a fast-flowing river proved to be the ideal spot for a Dipper, as well as a Grey Wagtail.

Tufted Duck, Greylag Goose, terns and Eider inhabited the watery expanses near Durness, and then a short baywatch produced a large number of seabirds, including Gannet and Shag. Past Durness we continued on around Loch Eriboll and then on to Loch Hope. Here we came face to face with a pair of immaculate Black-throated Divers which well deserved our undivided attention and appreciation. We were seeing these birds as they should be seen, on their terms, on a calm loch amidst rolling green hills, backed by sombre mountains and swathed in an ethereal silence.

Satisfied. from here we turned back towards the Durness area for an evening appointment with a very special bird, however our progress was slowed somewhat at Loch Eriboll by a total of 11 Goosander and more Grey Seals. Near Durness a Snipe perched on a fence post was very obliging but it was the rare Corncrake we were after, so on we went. Luckily, my repeated impersonations of the Corncrake's call had trained the hearing of the other members in the group, and before long someone had heard the bird calling from a flowery field. What happened in the next hour or so will be familiar to anyone with experience in the business of spotting Corncrakes: a party of seven silent birders, binoculars poised trying to get even a brief glimpse of a Corncrake calling repeatedly from a distance of less than 15 metres away. Alas, despite our eagerness, application and a variety of triangulation attempts that bird stubbornly refused to show as much as a feather.

Nevertheless, it was good to know that the species appears to be making a comeback to the mainland, thanks to intensive conservation work and the co-operation and understanding of farmers and landowners.

We had time for one more roadside stop before returning to the hotel, so what better occasion than a fishing otter! As we watched, feeling fortunate indeed, it swam a little offshore, caught a flatfish and swam back to its favourite rock to consume it! Unforgettable!

Day 4: Heading south today we drove along very narrow, winding roads towards the Summer Isles. The rain had become more persistent now, but during the few dry or sunny spells we still managed to encounter some of the breeding waders we had hoped to see: calling Snipe, Golden Plover and Dunlin. As if to greet our arrival at the stretch of coastline overlooking the peaceful Summer Isles the sun came out and lit up a magical scene that must surely be worthy of making a fortune in postcard sales! In a short seawatch we noted a good variety of seabirds although the hoped-for Storm Petrel eluded us.

Next, the attractive tourist town and fishing port of Ullapool was an appropriate place for a little shopping, re-fuelling and gull-feeding before continuing the route towards Gairloch. Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Seals in the sea were nice enough, but I was counting on

seeing.....yes! There it was! An enormous adult White-tailed Sea Eagle flying towards us! Great views! What? Another one! Two?! We watched these birds as they flew across the bay, soared upwards over a ridge and glided past the mountain out of view, all the time being mobbed by Hooded Crows, gulls or Buzzards. Feeling that we had had enough excitement for one day we headed back to Ullapool, stopping briefly for a relaxing riverside walk in the luxuriant shade of some handsome stately trees.

After dinner we were on the road once more to our west coast accommodation, and of course we couldn't finish without that "last roadside stop" could we? This time it was for calling Greenshank (this area is their breeding stronghold in the British Isles) and a pair of Black-throated Divers, accompanied by their young downy chick!

Day 5: After watching 3 displaying Black-throated Divers (doing just what they are doing in the Mullarney and Svensson field guide) we said goodbye to the west coast and crossed over to the Loch Fleet area, with clouds in the sky and little sign of the sun.

A short forest walk enabled some of us to see the Common Crossbill, but the Loch itself initially had few birds of interest, except feeding Sandwich Terns and Shelduck. The sea looked promising with a tight group of no less than 5 Black-throated Divers (it was still an excellent bird!) and a distant but definite Great Northern Diver. However this promising pursuit was hastily called off as the rain started to come down in rather large quantities. An Osprey was seen briefly as it flew over the road and another viewpoint over the loch revealed Eider, Red-breasted Mergansers, an assortment of gulls and some comical-looking Common Seals.

Driving south now we passed the temptation of the Glenmorangie distillery at Tain and stopped briefly to watch a Red Kite flying over the road to the north of Inverness. The next feature on the itinerary was a Bottle-nosed Dolphin watch from apparently the best place in the whole of the British Isles for them: Chanonry Point. We waited for the rain to relent and it did for a while, although we and a good number of other visitors were all disappointed as there was no sign of the dolphins.

We drove the short distance to Inverness and tried again near Kessock Bridge but again had no luck with the dolphins or, for that matter, with the rain. 2 Mute Swans held our attention for a short while before we decided to retire to our lodgings in Speyside.

Day 6: The weather had turned quite cold, but despite the cloudy skies it wasn't raining. We paid a fleeting visit to the Loch Garten area, passing a Sand Martin colony on the way and watching a female Goldeneye and a female Wigeon, both with chicks, on the loch itself. The feeder outside the reception desk was a great success with Siskins, Coal Tits, Chaffinches and the like; with so much free food it's no wonder that birds here are so tame!

Next we stopped at a loch where I hoped to see Slavonian Grebe; the good bird didn't let me down. With the sun on our backs again we delighted in close views of 3 superbly coloured adult Slavonian Grebes with a stripy chick riding on the back of one of them.

The next stop was the Cairngorms, an imposing almost daunting massif with 4 of the 5 highest peaks in the British Isles. The clouds were holding back so I decided we should "give it a go", which meant quite a steep ascent of about 500 metres in the search of Ptarmigan, Dotterel, Ring Ousel, and Snow Bunting. Less than half way up however, we had to take to the shelter of the chairlift station as it began to rain and visibility was substantially reduced.

Despite that we managed to get reasonable views of Ptarmigan, Twite and Ring Ousel and we descended in the hope of better weather in the two remaining days.

Lower down in more hospitable surroundings we had a close encounter with a family of Mink, and watched a pair of Wood Warblers continuously coming and going with juicy caterpillars for their nestlings, before heading out to the moors in search of Black and Red Grouse. The former eluded us (as it did throughout the trip) but we soon had excellent views of a good number of Red Grouse. Scanning a nearby loch gave us (another!) pair of Black-throated Divers and a little further on we were thrilled by a Short-eared Owl scouring the marshy areas for an unsuspecting prey item. Happy to leave things on a high note we headed home.

Day 7: Today the skies didn't invite us to tackle the Cairngorms again so we chose a more relaxed option of looking for Scottish and/or Parrot Crossbills in Culbin forest, to the north of Grantown. We took an easy walk through the forest and came across a group of 7 or 8 birds, obviously either Parrot or Scottish Crossbills, but which species exactly very few people would be able to say. Crested Tits were common along with a good array of forest birds.

From here we drove to Fort George, opposite Chanonry Point, and sure enough the Dolphins were there - just off Chanonry Point! Arctic and Common Terns presented us with a good opportunity to practice field identification, and a Whimbrel and Red-breasted Merganser added further notes of ornithological interest. Skirting along the bay towards Inverness I spotted a "Mute" Swan on the sea, which upon stopping miraculously turned into a Whooper Swan! This is a regular wintering species in parts of Scotland, but it should have departed for its breeding grounds some 3 or 4 months ago!

Lunch and a brief shopping spree in Inverness were followed by a visit to Loch Ruthven (Slavonian Grebe, Red-throated Diver and Hen Harrier) and then a slow drive home over empty moorland roads.

Day 8: A brisk morning walk in a nearby forest afforded us brief views of a female Capercaillie, in addition to numerous Red Squirrels. With the thought of Snow Buntings and Dotterels in my head I wanted to give Cairngorm another try, even though the weather was less than promising. First of all though, we dutifully stopped off at the RSPB Loch Garten Osprey hide for excellent views of the nesting Ospreys and videos of Capercaillies!

A short search for Black Grouse proved unsuccessful (again) so we drove to the Cairngorm car park and started the ascent. I knew this part of the mountain, so we continued in spite of the rolling fog that closed in around us about half way up. Surprisingly the only birds we saw well were several Rock Pipits! We reached the summit of Cairngorm, and in the face of things decided it would be better to retreat to the Ptarmigan restaurant. Over a nice cup of hot tea I began to wonder, who would accompany me next year in my quest to "conquer" the Cairngorms and reveal its avian treasures?