

HEATHERLEA TRIP REPORT

SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS, NATURALIST JOURNEYS

SATURDAY 15 – TUESDAY 25 JUNE 2019



Heatherlea Participants: Mary Kay Arthur, Cindy D'Ambrosio & John Inacone, Eddie DeMoll & Carol Pickett, Anne Sands and Kit Struthers.

Heatherlea Guide: Mike Coleman

Saturday 15 June

Having all arrived from different places over the past week, the group was collected by Mike from their Inverness hotel after breakfast, and after settling into the minibus, were whisked away to start their Highland adventure. The weather had generally been pretty awful over the previous few weeks, but we set off in dry and warm (for The Highlands) conditions...

Our first stop was on the beach of the Moray Firth leading to Alturlie Point, on the outskirts of Inverness. We took a slow drive, and started our lists – firstly differentiating the various members of the crow family (Jackdaw, Hooded and Carrion Crows and Rook), differentiating various gulls (Common (Mew), Great Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed), getting Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher and Dunlin, Red-breasted Merganser, and a flock of Starling (all of which were vaguely reminiscent of North American species), before moving on to some history.

Clava Cairns are 4000 year old burial chambers set in wooded farmland, and as well as the impressive stone structures, we saw several passerines in the adjacent trees, even if most were flitting about feeding, and even if the wind had picked up and was sending a bit of an unseasonal chill through the valley! Everybody got their first views of Willow Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Pied Wagtail, Woodpigeon, Blue Tit and Treecreeper, and heard other species like Goldfinch, Wren and Blackbird – a good introduction to the everyday birds of northern Scotland!

After the cairns, we headed to Culloden Battlefield to immerse ourselves in a bit more history. This was scene of the last pitched battle on British soil in 1746, and after a wander through the exhibition learning the whys and wherefores of how the battle came about, and after Anne had joined in with the Jacobite re-enactment of how they did battle, we headed onto the killing fields to breathe in the history.

What we actually did was go birding amongst the meadows, bushes and moorland habitats of the modern-day area and see a few memorial stones. The temperature didn't get any warmer as we enjoyed views of Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Linnet, Lesser Redpoll, Whitethroat, Stonechat, Wheatear, Reed Bunting, and a few flowering plants, including our first marsh orchids.

By the time our loop was drawing to a close, there were spots of rain in the air, and we hurried along to the exhibition centre for shelter before grabbing a quick view of a Kestrel hunting by the car park (sorry, parking lot!), and hopped in to head for lunch.

Lunch was taken beside Loch Flemington, which provided us with nesting Mute Swan, sleeping Tufted Duck, diving Little Grebe, and secretive Moorhen, and the gardens opposite entertained House Sparrow, a noisy but invisible Greenfinch, and some other garden birds. Before the territorial Mute Swan came to attack us, we moved on again, taking the scenic route back to Nethybridge, our home for the next week.

We drove through a mixed plantation and natural birch wood, through some upland farms and out onto Dava Moor – a large heather moorland, managed solely for the shooting of Red Grouse.

On the drive, we opened our account on the mammal list with two motionless Brown Hare and a few Rabbit, and after one brief stop in the woods by an old bridge with a fast-flowing burn running beneath it, we had brief glimpses of Bullfinch flying away, Grey Wagtail flying away, Willow Warbler hiding in the trees, and a Chiffchaff singing in the distance, so it was a relief to get into the open and see some birds well!

The first field in the open produced a gaggle of Greylag and two Lapwing, the second field produced a smaller gaggle of Greylag and 17 Curlew, and if there had been a third field, who knows what would have been present... instead we ventured into the heather and saw quite a few Red Grouse (male, female and youngsters), and took a swing around Lochindorb with its ancient castle to have an afternoon cup of tea.

After a brief Redshank for some, we had our first Red-legged Partridge, our first confiding Common Sandpiper, and our first decent views of Buzzard, Sand Martin and House Martin - none of which was as important as our first shortbread and slice of cake – and we followed the road round the loch, past a large Common Gull colony, and back onto a main road to head home.

Apart from driving through Grantown on Spey and seeing Oystercatcher on the roundabout (and nearly everywhere else), and getting two more Red-legged Partridge just outside the village, we failed to add to our tally, and arrived at The Mountview Hotel in good time to settle in ahead of dinner and a free welcome drink.

After dinner, a brief exploration of the village added Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Robin, Blackcap, and a few other garden birds to the list, and everybody finally drifted off to sleep in their new home.

Sunday 16 June

After breakfast, we headed into nearby Abernethy Forest – the largest surviving tract of native Caledonian pine forest in Scotland. There was a brief stop for a Roe Deer and a Red Squirrel, but we were soon immersed in the middle of Scot's Pine trees of mixed ages in this vast forest, managed for wildlife.

Within yards of the entrance gate and the first of our large black slugs, we had good views of a tiny Goldcrest, Coal Tit young being fed, a family party of Common Crossbill, and a very vocal and handsome male Redstart.

We walked along the track admiring the trees and the bushy understorey consisting of heather, juniper, blueberry and cowberry, and although there were occasional sightings of birds flitting around or flying over, the main highlights of the walk were a tatty Green Hairstreak butterfly, copious amounts of the carnivorous Butterwort, and some of the views across the River Nethy to the farther reaches of the forest.

Once we had climbed up to a croft with open fields, we had the best views yet of a displaying Tree Pipit, Carol found the first Great Spotted Woodpecker (GSW) with an absolutely great spot, and there were other species calling and singing and flying over, but not showing themselves (Cuckoo, Blackcap, Lesser Redpoll and Siskin spring to mind).

The walk down the hill back to the bus included another GSW, a lot of teeming wood ant nests, the necessity to get out the way of several mountain bikes, and the necessity to speed up at the end to get to the minibus as the rain started to fall.

After a brief stop in a busy Nethybridge, we had lunch under Broomhill Bridge with a backdrop of the Strathspey Steam Railway running behind us at Broomhill Station (or Glenbogle as it was known on the old TV show 'Monarch of the Glen'), cows getting a little panicky around us until the young calves nipped into a neighbouring field, and a Dipper, Common Sandpiper, obliging Great Tit, and ubiquitous Willow Warbler for company.

To vary the native forest theme, after lunch we drove 15 minutes south to the local hub of Aviemore to visit the Craigellachie National Nature Reserve – a traditional upland birch forest – to get a different selection of species. Within seconds of arriving into the wood out of the underpass, we had a female Pied Flycatcher, and by the time we had wandered around the lower level of the hillside reserve, we had all had good views of the male as well, a group of Long-tailed Tit, a Mistle Thrush, a few Chaffinch, and after a while chasing it around the trees to get some colour, a loud and very flighty Wood Warbler. The Peregrine that has nested on the crag above the wood for many years appeared to have vacated its ledge this year.

Our final stop was in the area of Grantown Woods known as Tomvaich, which we reached just as the heavens opened, and stood huddled under the back door of the minibus to avoid the heavy rain as we had a hot drink and some homemade flapjack. The first short walk once the rain had abated produced nothing of note (and especially not the hoped-for Crested Tit), and so we tried at place number two after seeing a couple of Red-legged Partridge. Unfortunately, the whole of Tomvaich appeared to be lacking in new birds for us, and so we returned to base to get the checklist done, have dinner, and get some good rest ahead of a day on the sea.

Monday 17 June

After an early breakfast, we set off through the distilleries and rolling barley fields of Speyside in decent weather, accumulating a few birds as we went, and arrived at the harbour in the industrial village of Macduff on the Moray Firth in good time for our boat. In fact, we had plenty of time to drive around the village looking for a parking place before ending up parking in our original spot on the harbour!

Harold and Sophia were the crew on board the very yellow, double-hulled 'Seacat', and once the safety talk had been given and a Rock Pipit virtually flew into the boat, we were on the open waves, with only three anchored tankers and a lot of birds for company.

Our trip took us east from Macduff, past the quaint and secluded fishing villages of Gardenstown, Crovie and Pennan (where the movie 'Local Hero' was filmed), and within this stretch of picturesque coastline with wacky geological formations and hidden beaches, were several rocky headlands and cliff faces upon which seabirds had taken up residence.

The main headland – Troup Head – is Britain's only mainland gannetry, and thousands of Gannet were present on the wider ledges of the cliff face or wheeling around in the sky off the cliff face. Beneath the Gannet zone, there were longer, narrower ledges for Guillemot (Common Murre) and Razorbill, and small shelves in alcoves upon which (Black-legged) Kittiwake were found. Elsewhere in the melée, there was room for Fulmar, Black Guillemot, Shag, (Great) Cormorant, Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls, and on some of the peripheral grassy slopes, an increasing number of Puffin pairs were beginning to dig their burrows.

The route out also included a hunting Osprey, a relaxing Great Skua, one drake Eider, and several Grey (or Atlantic) Seal, and the route back, in slightly windier conditions with some added seaspray, included one Red-throated Diver (Loon) and some more obliging Black Guillemot.

Just as we entered the harbour upon our return, there were a few spots of rain, but by the time we had bade the crew and the boat farewell, regained our land legs, and bought the traditional seaside fodder of fish and chips (or a random smoked sausage, coleslaw and chips for the gluten-intolerant John), the weather was fine again.

We ate our lunch on the seawall in Banff in front of another hunting Osprey, some patient Herring Gulls all wishing to indulge in some fast food stealing, and a distant Sandwich Tern, and when all replete, we drove west along the Moray coast to explore a couple of places on the way home.

The first place we stopped at was Spey Bay at the mouth of the River Spey – from next to the grassy-roofed ice house and amongst the loafing gulls, we found a couple of Arctic Tern, some Goosander, a Eurasian Wigeon, a couple of Shelduck, a Lesser Black-backed Gull, another hunting Osprey, and we finally got to see Goldfinch perched!

On the way out of the Spey Bay area, we all saw Yellowhammer in the farmland, Tree Sparrow on a nestbox, and Collared Dove on a tree, and by the time we reached our final destination – Loch Spynie – we had all given up looking for the promised Grey Partridge and Corn Bunting in the fields as the barley and wheat and canola (!) was all too well advanced.

The freshwater, reed-fringed Spynie is set amidst a pig farm, and the car park and access track were busy, and so it came as no surprise that the small hide overlooking the water was also busy. It didn't stop us seeing another GSW on the feeders outside the hide, or Coot, Moorhen, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe, another Eurasian Wigeon, some young Grey Heron, or some Common Tern standing around wondering why their nesting platform had been taken over by Black-headed Gulls, but we left the previous occupants to it and we retreated to the pig farm to have a drink, some cake and a lot of Yellowhammer action.

We returned to the hotel through another slight shower and managed to fit in the checklist before dinner again, with the promise of another fun-packed day ahead.

Tuesday 18 June

We had a full house again, as Mary Kay and Anne had recovered sufficiently to join the party bus as we went in search of more Scottish 'specialities' – those species that cannot be seen elsewhere in the UK, and the ones most visitors really want to see.

Top of that list is the 'horse of the forest' – Capercaillie – virtually impossible to see during the summer months when females are sitting on eggs and males have disappeared somewhere to moult. Our best chance was in the Heatherlea Private Estate. We successfully negotiated the track and its puddles and bumps for as much time as we dared, and took in the vista and scanned the sky for raptors from the mobile phone mast at the top of the hill (briefly, in the biting wind!), and even mastered the art of looking at trees, but, alas, we could only find a few passerines, and no Turkey-sized grouse at all.

We went to the village of Carrbridge to take a pitstop, look at the curling rink and amazing stone bridge, and make a brief detour for an unusually obliging Jay, before heading into the wilds.

Strathdearn (or The Findhorn Valley as it is called in English-language literature) stretches deep into the heart of the Monadhliath mountains and is renowned as a raptor hotspot. With the wind blowing fiercely, it would take a nimble bit of aerial prowess to be out hunting, but we took the plunge, and via a Spotted Flycatcher, we worked our way upstream along the River Findhorn. Well, along the adjacent road.

Our first stop, at a place known locally as Garbole, produced some Lapwing with chicks in the field opposite, a Common Tern fighting the wind over the river, a brief Sparrowhawk seeing off a Mistle Thrush, a few Osprey sightings, and as another brief drizzly shower kicked in, we moved onwards again.

We stopped near a farm known as Daltomach further up the valley, Anne and then John saw our first mini herds of Red Deer, and there was a Buzzard, and then, a Golden Eagle drifted over the top of the hills over the river, was momentarily mobbed by a Merlin, and then disappeared from view. We moved on, and when we caught sight of a man with a telescope trained on the craggy hillside, it could only mean one thing, and we pulled over to find the sitting eagle. Most of us had a view of the bird sitting proudly on the hillside, pretending to be a rock, but it soon flew off, was mobbed again, and then there were two birds in the sky. We followed them both until lunch beckoned us further up the road.

Coignafearn Estate is at the end of the public road, and we ate lunch huddled in the leeward side of the bus, or in the bus, as the wind howled down the narrow valley, and the drizzly rain failed to completely clear. When the sun did come out, Mary Kay and Mike had a look at some of the flowers on the moorland before we retracked down the glen, past two very close Red-legged Partridge, a stricken 8-wheel drive moorland estate vehicle known as an 'argo', and a poorly timed Cuckoo on the other side of the bus.

We took one of the UK's highest roads over the hills to the village of Farr, and despite the presence of an 'under construction' power line connecting a wind farm to the national power grid, we took the narrow road straight through the middle of a grouse moor, and saw plenty of Red Grouse, and also plenty of Red Kite before dropping down the other side.

Our next stop at Loch Ruthven was supposed to produce a plethora of goodies, but the reserve was busy with people, there were fisherman in a boat, and the wind was whipping up the water and keeping birds off the tops of bushes, so we beat a retreat after unsuccessfully trying to catch a glimpse of a Slavonian (Horned) Grebe.

Our drive back to the hotel took in a few roads where we may have been able to see some new species, but we would have to settle for a few more Jays, a prolonged view of three Bullfinch, and a lot more trees as we took the scenic route around Inverness.

As we arrived back in Abernethy Forest on the outskirts of Nethybridge, we made a quick stop to listen for Crested Tit, but ended up seeing some large-billed (Scottish) Crossbill, and having a surreal conversation with a couple in a car who said they were looking for Capercaillie, before driving off confused when they were told that it would be highly unlikely. A couple of minutes later, they returned to tell us they had seen one fly across the road in front of them, and it was huge, and in a tree, and it was by the junction up the road.

As we were heading off that way, we had a quick look, but I think, independently, we all thought the couple were a little odd, and natural cynicism told us that the story didn't quite add up, so we returned to the hotel to celebrate not missing a Capercaillie, and to do the checklist before dinner!

Wednesday 19 June

In an attempt to nail the Crested Tit, we had a pleasant walk through the Duackside Woods in Nethybridge to start off with, and despite hearing the characteristic trill of our quarry, we failed to get a view in the breezy conditions, and had to settle for a range of other woodland species (Treecreeper, Coal, Blue and Great Tits, etc).

We had a look around the Explore Abernethy Visitors Centre in the village hall briefly and stopped to meet the Highland cattle called Hamish and Dougal outside Dulnain Bridge, before heading up the A9 – the major road which links everywhere from the populated Central Belt of Scotland with Inverness and the north, driving through Inverness to the Beaully Firth.

Another brief stop at Bunchrew House to see the site of Kit's granddaughter's wedding (and a small flock of moulting Canada Geese) later, and we went through a selection of Highland towns and villages en route to the picturesque waterbody of Loch Kinellan to see Slavonian Grebe. Yet again, we were foiled in our efforts, and had to make do with a cup of tea and biscuit along with some marshland flowers and a Sedge Warbler which finally showed itself having been singing its scratchy song for some time.

A new toilet stop in the Forestry Commission car park in Contin – and a good one by all accounts, including fresh flowers – followed, before we went onto the fertile soils of The Black Isle (which isn't black, and isn't an island) for the rest of the day.

We took lunch overlooking the Cromarty Firth with all its oil rigs awaiting decommissioning or refitting, with Eider swimming and Common Tern flying around, and when the rain rolled in, we rolled out past Yellowhammer and an invisible Reed Bunting to Udale Bay.

There was a decent selection of roosting birds present at high tide – more Canada Geese, gulls, Mallard, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Shelduck, some Redshank, a Greenshank which kept its head down, and a newish hide which to investigate.

When we had exhausted all possibilities, we drove eastwards along the firth to the quaint old settlement of Cromarty, where there were no birds, but a lot of historical and old buildings, mainly dedicated to the geologist and writer Hugh Miller, and a public convenience which was most welcome.

Our final stop was at Chanonry Point. Chanonry Point is one of the world's premier sites to see Bottle-nosed Dolphin from land, and at the right state of the tide, leaping animals can put on an amazing show. We had a couple of Grey Seal spotted by Cindy and a whizzing Red-throated Diver, but the rip tide wasn't really ripping, and although the sun was shining and all was well with the world, we had to make do with a Robert Louis Stevenson lighthouse, a refitted trawler passing by, and a couple of Linnet on the walk out.

On the way back to Nethybridge, we passed the Cloutie Well with various garments hanging from the trees in true pagan tradition, the Kessock Bridge with the Moray Firth on one side and the Beauly Firth on the other, Inverness Caledonian Thistle's football ground (site of the infamous Super Caley... tabloid headline), and arrived in good time to do the checklist and prepare for dinner.

After dinner, we enjoyed a whisky tasting session hosted by Rob – the owner and inventor of Angel's Nectar – who explained the whisky making process and his part in the whisky business.

Thursday 20 June

A pre-breakfast excursion to the nearby village of Tomintoul saw us make our way over the moorland road that is always the first in the UK to be closed due to snow, and despite the early hour (or maybe because of it), we had views of common birds and mammals as we went.

The purpose of the drive was to try and see Black Grouse at their lek site, with fingers crossed that they would still be present as the end of their displaying season is nigh, and the overnight weather was a little damp... as it happened, we needn't have worried – six males were present in the low heather, and although not officially dancing and jousting with each other, one bird did strike a few poses and dance to himself on a few occasions, revealing his thrust back wings and white bottom to us. All the birds revealed their red combs. Our first

perched Lesser Redpoll and a Mistle Thrush also posed briefly in some nearby trees, and Roe Deer were scattered across the moorland as the sun began to warm the morning air.

We stopped for a showy Common Snipe on a fencepost, and then drove past the peat diggings from which many distilleries in Speyside still obtain the small quantity of peat they use during their distilling process, past another showy Common Snipe on a rock, and past a small herd of Red Deer, before stopping in a forestry access to scan the plantation tree tops for any raptor activity.

Within a few minutes, every Woodpigeon in the entire wood exploded from the trees like a confetti cannon, and in the midst of this chaos, a Goshawk chased a pigeon down, relented for a bit, chased another down, and gave a distant display before setting after another pigeon in a deep stoop, from which it never returned to view. We left him to enjoy his breakfast, and we headed back for ours.

After breakfast, we ventured back into Abernethy Forest to find the elusive Crested Tit. We wandered alongside the picturesque Loch Garten, and despite hearing a Crestie soon after arrival, we had no other hint of their existence. So, although we saw Goldeneye on the loch, a few groups of tits in the trees, and several groups of birders, we decided a comfort stop in the Boat of Garten hotel was the best course of action.

The drive to the Moray Coast seemed to take a long time as we fought the traffic, but we finally arrived in the Air Force-dominated town of Lossiemouth for a hot drink and some shortbread. A fishing Osprey emptied the estuary of nearly all birdlife, although John had seen a small group of Little Tern fly past, Carol spotted two Ringed Plover, and there were two obliging Linnet on the shore in front of us, so we moved on to the beach on the other side of town for lunch.

Other than some distant feeding flock of seabirds miles out to sea, Cindy's rock which resembled a Canada Goose, and a few Eider passing up and down the coastline, food (and the golf club flags) were the main interest, and as soon as the last sandwich or salad had been swallowed, we went in search of wildlife again.

The air force base is surrounded by pig farms, and we made a few stops to scan for new species. One field where a Quail had been reported singing a few days previously made for a decent stop, but the wind was relentless, and the Skylark were struggling to stay aloft. A Stock Dove made a fast fly-by, but time was pressing, and we had lots to see, especially the wide variety of seabirds, waders and duck at the Pictish capital of Burghead.

We stopped at the ancient-looking cemetery in Burghead briefly, and then spent approximately two minutes in total looking out to sea from the lookout at the end of the point and driving round the pretty harbour crammed full of colourful fishing boats – the wind had become ferocious, and we amassed the whopping list of a Grey Seal, a Cormorant and a Great Black-backed Gull before running away to calmer climes!

The road west continued through thigh-high barley fields and past the lurid green, fake stained copper maltings, and although we harboured dreams of seeing Grey Partridge – a cereal crop specialist in these parts – we had a date with a distillery to keep, so we had one

opportunity on one road to catch up with this declining and localised farmland bird, described in John's book as being dumpy and sad! Well, one opportunity is all we needed, as a yard into a barley field beyond the chicken wire fence, we had a proudly standing orange face and neck of a Grey Partridge, not appearing too dumpy or sad, but appearing well, until an oncoming car forced us to leave it behind.

Benromach Distillery is the smallest Speyside malt whisky distillery. It was reincarnated twenty years ago by the local whisky distributors Gordon & MacPhail as another string to their large whisky-bow, and uses the traditional style of distilling throughout the process, with no computer in sight. We enjoyed a tour of the distillery and saw what happens in reality compared to the theory we learned the previous night.

After a healthy dram of their 10 and 15 year old flagship tipples, we made one final birding stop – at Findhorn Bay. The sun was shining, the tide was high, and Kit found a Little Egret amongst the gulls and Mute Swans and Sandwich Terns and Shelduck. Although there had been a Eurasian Spoonbill present in the area for a while, it remained out of sight for us, and with plenty of ground to cover, and no new birds in the offing, we made tracks.

The drive home through forest and over moorland produced no birds of note, but Grantown on Spey produced a cash machine, and Nethybridge produced photographic opportunities of a kirk, a castle and a coo before the hotel, where we filled in the checklist and relaxed after a full day of activity!

Friday 21 June

The UK Heatherlea group and our group combined for one day to provide better support for the 'Mountain Day' – the day when we scale the mighty 4084ft summit of Cairn Gorm, and attempt to find the specialities which breed in the granite wilderness around and above the Cairngorm Ski Centre.

Between Nethybridge and Cairn Gorm, we stopped at Loch Morlich to see the most stationary Red-throated Divers of the trip relaxing before the watersports activity on the water got too much for them.

In no time at all, we had driven up the ski car park, and with foreboding clouds and a brisk breeze, the majority of the group set off up the main track with lunches packed and extra layers donned.

Usually there is a funicular railway up to just below the summit of Cairn Gorm, but due to a slight defect in the engineering, it has been closed for 12 months, and we followed the redundant concrete line of the railway up the hill.

A male Ring Ouzel was feeding on the ground after several hundred yards of the track, which was a pleasant break from the climb (even at that stage!), and another stop for a small flock of Raven and some mountain flora gave further respite.

From this point, showers became more frequent as the dark clouds came rolling across the impressive landscape, but we kept stopping for interesting flora, including clubmoss, Trailing Azalea, cudweed, bittercress and Starry Saxifrage amongst others, and we finally made it, wet and tired, to the Top Station – the top of the funicular railway, where we ate lunch in the shelter of the building.

During lunch, we had a visit from an inquisitive female Snow Bunting and a Pied Wagtail, and once we had regained some energy, we started out on the final leg of the journey to the summit.

In between occasional bouts of sunshine, the weather turned, and although we saw a Mountain Hare through the rain, that was as good as it got for a while as the rain soon turned to sleet, and then hail, and when two happy, but very loud Welshmen explained how they had seen Ptarmigan and Dotterel, the mood of sheer desperation began to fall over the group. Possibly. This may just be artistic licence, as everybody still seemed remarkably chipper considering.

Once at the weather station at the summit of the mountain – Britain's sixth highest peak – Mike and Scott (the other Heatherlea guide) ran away into the mist, and after what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only five minutes, Mike found a Ptarmigan, managed to radio Scott and beckon the group, and everybody congregated just after the bird had exited from view down the hill to the south.

Mike did a little corralling of the bird, which just wanted to run like the clappers across the hillside, which at least gave everybody a good view, and as the weather was sunny again, we all decided to enjoy the walk down scanning for Dotterel. A Wheatear came flying through to almost complete the set of mountain birds, and when one of the UK group exclaimed "There's one!" at almost Welshman volume, everybody in Strathspey began to get excited!

The female Dotterel (the brighter, good looking one of the pair) was only 50 yards away, and proceeded to entertain us for some time in good light, and in close proximity, until the cloud rolled in and the drizzle started again, but it meant we had completed a clean sweep of the mountain birds, and we could return to the buses over 2000ft lower down the hill with a smile on our faces! There was still time to get a better view of the Mountain Hare on the way down, and pass a Japanese couple dressed in shirts and trousers who really wanted the summit to appear very soon, as they were probably freezing cold and very wet.

The walk down did become drier, and once down, folk enjoyed hot chocolate, cake and biscuits, and tried to forget how much their legs ached or had turned to jelly. There was even time for Kit (who had not participated in the marathon hike) to get good views of Ring Ouzel.

We took one last stop before the hotel, at a small waterbody near Aviemore called Avielochan. In lovely sunshine, we had decent views of Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Dunnock and Willow Warbler, but the main reason to go there was the pair of Slavonian Grebe with their chick in the short reeds on the water – stunning birds in the sunshine.

We had a checklist check and made good use of the remaining time before dinner by indulging in either some therapeutic showering, or therapeutic consumption of beer.

Everybody slept well.

Saturday 22 June

We bade farewell to The Mountview Hotel and made a brief stop in Abernethy Forest to seek out Crested Tit for a final time, and although we saw a lot of the regular woodland species, there seemed no hope of actually seeing our hat-wearing little chickadee at all in the silent forest. Until we did. One trilling bird made itself known, and in true Crestie style, flitted around the pines until we had all at least glimpsed the crest or seen the bird in silhouette. A good way to end our Cairngorms National Park episode, and we moved west in good spirits.

The route to the West Coast took in Ruthven Barracks (where Bonnie Prince Charlie undertook his final bit of subterfuge to the Hanoverians), the geographical centre of Scotland, and various tales and buildings of the Jacobite escape, John Adam's fireplaces, Queen Victoria, or the 1990s TV show 'Monarch of the Glen'. After a brief stop in Spean Bridge, we drove past the visible two-thirds of Ben Nevis – Britain's highest mountain, and through the town of Fort William until we reached the Corran Ferry.

The few minutes we were on board the ferry were over before we even realised we were moving, and so we watched the nesting Black Guillemot (or Tystie, as we say in Scotland) on the Corran jetty once we had docked, a couple of Cormorant over the still Loch Linnhe water, a Rock Pipit on the pebbly beach, and most bizarrely, an unseasonal, but seemingly very happy, female Long-tailed Duck in front of the salmon farm.

Our journey across the Morvern peninsula was sedate, and predominantly birdless, other than a brief stop at the head of Loch Sunart where there was a lounging female Goosander and a feeding Greenshank, and a small flock of Canada Geese farther along the shoreline. The weather was fine, the traffic heading back along the single-track road suggested the ferry was running to time, and so we kept going until we reached the queue, barely slowing down for the St. Kilda houses – where the entire evacuated population of St. Kilda was re-housed in the 1930s.

Lunch was eaten in the ferry queue, and the trip was exceedingly quick on the still water of the Sound of Mull. We saw Common Gull, Common Buzzard, and a Common Seal, but the common species were interrupted by a lot of Moon Jellyfish below us, and the sighting of the North American Skunk Cabbage upon arrival on the Isle of Mull – our home for the next three nights.

Mull is a big island with a varied landscape, and famous for its birds-of-prey, so we drove around one of the many circular routes on the island attempting to see as many raptors and moorland birds as we could.

We made a few stops in likely places and when we saw some close birds, but effectively took a route from Salen to Dervaig. As well as Sand Martin, Stonechat, Wheatear and Raven,

John struck gold, literally, and spotted a Golden Eagle way up in the clouds, and we all spotted Dervaig church and its white missile silo steeple.

At Loch Tor, John went for the hat-trick and spotted another Golden Eagle and a male Hen Harrier, which certainly trumped the Dunnock, Whitethroat and Willow Warbler that were in the bushes. The Golden Eagle sat on a rockface in the half distance, before being mobbed by a Kestrel, and once airborne, it was besieged by two Kestrels, before cruising off and leaving its incredibly small-looking pursuers behind.

We had a chance to explore the colourful island capital of Tobermory before going to the hotel. Some roamed the streets, and some had a look around the aquarium in this charming, but quite touristy, centre. The warmest temperatures we had encountered so far, meant the windows were opened for the short drive to our welcoming hotel in Glen Forsa. The hotel overlooks the busy shipping lane of the Sound of Mull, and it also doubles as the island's airstrip, so there is always something to see from the windows.

We did our checklist outside, had dinner, and all collapsed at the end of another good day, with even better weather!

Sunday 23 June

A leisurely start to the day was had by all after our initial plans were changed at the last minute to fit in with the weather forecast. Off we drove in warm and cloudy conditions to patrol the southern shore of Loch na Keal – the large cut into the western coast of Mull.

The tide and calm waters looked good for an Otter sighting, but try as we might with regular stops, we just kept getting bumped along the single-track road by cars wanting to pass us, and we remained mammal-less.

We did enjoy better luck with birds, with multiple sightings of Wheatear, Common Sandpiper and Rock Pipit, and after an impromptu stop for some calling Twite, we also added Ringed Plover, Wren and finally, the Twite.

Working our way back along the shores, past the mighty Munro (mountains higher than 3000ft) of Ben More complete with Munro Baggers preparing to tackle the fearsome peak, we had an eagle in the sky, which turned out once more to be a Golden Eagle, this time being mobbed by a small group of Raven.

The Lachlan Macquarie Mausoleum is a National Trust of Australia property celebrating the life of the first governor of New South Wales (who according to the plaque at the mausoleum pictured on Google – 'helped turn Australia from a penal colony into a free settlement'), but we didn't stop (other than to let a car pass), and after we did stop to look at a line of Common Gull on a fenceline, we continued along the north shore of Loch na Keal.

The idea was to have a hot drink and see Otter, but instead we saw lots of cars parked where we had planned to stop, and no Otter, but we did see our first White-tailed Eagle,

which we jumped out of the bus for, and were royally entertained with a bit of circling and a double fly-by from this majestic bird we nickname 'the barn door' due to its wide wingspan.

From there, we found ourselves in the queue for the boat to Staffa and The Treshnish Isles, and proceeded to have a fabulous day of seabirds and sunshine...

Before alighting on Staffa, we took a swing around Fingal's Cave and its gigantic basalt columns, with Mendelssohn's 'The Hebrides' playing over the boat's tannoy system, and then climbed up the steps and the grassy track to the top to have lunch.

We were surrounded by Scottish islands from Jura to Skye, all rising up out of the sparkling Hebridean sea, which was peppered with leisure craft and lounging auks. The island itself provided us with a pair of Twite, some Meadow Pipit, an inquisitive Herring Gull, and a Great Skua which gave us a good look as it went in search of trouble. The lower reaches had nesting Shag and Black Guillemot.

Our hour on sunny Staffa went too quickly, and it was a shame to descend the hill and the steps and hop on board the boat again to move on. Fortunately, we didn't have far to move, as we headed to the neighbouring island of Lunga – the largest of The Treshnish Islands.

Once we had collected our landing pontoon and safely negotiated the low tide rocks, we were truly in the realm of the seabird. Two hours of relaxed seabird colony watching provided entertainment beyond compare, with hundreds of Puffin standing around feet away posing for photographs, nesting Shag, Fulmar, Razorbill and Guillemot on every available ledge, and the surface of the flat sea littered with birds.

According to the literature available on the boat, 'Puffin Therapy' is an actual thing, and this may explain why we were all in fine fettle when we dragged ourselves off Lunga and back to the boat, having been engrossed in watching Puffins standing around in vegetation, standing around not in vegetation, taking off, flying, wheeling about, crash landing, burrowing, having disputes, and listening to them calling.

The journey back to Mull took in some Grey Seal and Greylag Geese, and by the time we arrived back at the bus, the clouds were beginning to take the blue sky away from us.

The drive back to the hotel included a selection of birds (mainly in the same spot), including Curlew, Grey and Pied Wagtails, Reed Bunting, Starling, pipits, Hooded Crow, and Whitethroat, but some relaxation time was required before dinner, and so we drew a fantastic day to a close.

The checklist and plan for tomorrow was devised after dinner, becoming all the more complicated as a very rare Great Spotted Cuckoo (all the way from southern Europe) had just arrived on Iona as we were driving home – so as well as some culture, history, and maybe some rain... it may also include a twitch!

Monday 24 June

The change of plan to do the boat yesterday seemed inspired as we ate breakfast with steady drizzle coming down outside, and so we made our way to the isle of Iona with fingers crossed for an improvement in the weather and visibility, even though we were expecting it from the surprisingly accurate forecast.

We made one stop to admire a collection of Common Peafowl, a Red Deer and some Rabbit as the weather started to improve, and then the road wound its way between plantation forestry and vast glens, with towering, craggy mountains on both sides, and increasingly spectacular views as we descended westwards.

Then, at the junction to Iona, there was a Police sign claiming the road was closed. Never believing everything written down, we continued to the village shop at Pennygael to buy some milk and to make use of their facilities, as always being guarded by their 'tame' Grey Heron.

Scanning the shores of Loch Scridain, we found two second year White-tailed Eagle on the rocks in front of the shop (until they flew, forcing every other species present into harrying one of the eagles up the loch), had a long chat with Bryan – the shop's proprietor and another wildlife guide on the island – and found out from the Police that the road would open in two hours when the bus that had come off the road had been salvaged... so we resorted to Plan B, which was to drive around Loch Scridain and look for raptors and Otter.

The drive along the north shore produced the remaining young eagle on a distant spit, but nothing of note, and by the time we reached a viewpoint overlooking Iona, Staffa, Inch Kenneth (where the old kings of Scotland were buried when they couldn't reach Iona), and The Treshnish Isles, we stopped and had our 'elevenses'.

On the drive back, Cindy produced an adult White-tailed Eagle being mobbed by a Buzzard, and we met some good examples of the Great British public telling us their life stories and driving fairly badly before heading to Iona on the newly-opened road.

The flashing blue lights of the Police car had left the roadblock and were now assisting a French camper van which was stranded, but thankfully not entirely blocking the road, although several Grey Heron and Common Sandpiper later, the clean up operation from the stricken bus did mean a slight delay as a mini-excavator was repairing the road verge.

The road along the Ross of Mull to Iona is long, winding and narrow, and cars were heading in both directions, but we finally arrived at the car park in Fionnphort, ate lunch, saw a swimming Shelduck in the bay, and walked onto the ferry for a brief ten minute sailing across the calm Sound of Iona.

Iona is most famous for its Middle-aged abbey, built near the site of Saint Columba's monastery which dates back to 563, and is a site of importance for Christian learning and its Celtic and Viking history, but is also a tranquil retreat and a place where the low intensity farming and gardening is favourable to nature – ensuring that fields are managed for Corncrake, and crops are produced organically.

We walked, in rising temperatures, past the abbey, shops, heritage centres, gardens, Twite, Wheatear and Skylark to the northern end of the island where we had heard that Scotland's second ever Great Spotted Cuckoo had been re-found during the morning. With no other information to go on, we arrived at the north, and with a potentially fruitless and tough cross-country walk on our hands, we split into two groups, with Mary Kay and Anne heading to the abbey, and the rest of the group proceeding to try and see the bird.

Once we had found a decent footpath along a field edge, we met Bryan again, and an accomplice who had just seen the bird fly into some willows, and while Bryan sat on a stile, we stood around and waited. The wait was relatively short, as out came the bird in all its spotted cuckoo-esque glory and landed on a grassy field in full view. It flew off after a while, along the coast and round the corner, and as we all walked away, comparing photos and considering how lucky we were, back it came, past us, and landed on the fencepost above the stile Bryan had just vacated!

As the previous Great Spotted Cuckoo record in Scotland was in the 1950s, it is highly likely that the finder yesterday, someone who reported it in the morning, Bryan and his mate, and our group, were the only people ever to have seen the species in Scotland, which makes five out of ten viewers from The States, and not one of the ten actually from Scotland!

The walk back into Baile Mor – the main village on the island – involved splitting up again, with folk heading into shops, into bars, or in search of Corncrakes, before reconvening at the ferry in order to return to Mull. It would appear that cultural appreciation, shopping and drinking were more successful than birding on this occasion, and we left the island without a single Corncrake 'crex' being heard by anybody.

The drive back along the Ross of Mull produced a string of Buzzards on sticks and pylons, a string of Grey Herons on the shorelines of the lochs, and string of cars with no reverse gear as we encountered them away from the allotted passing places.

We got back to the hotel, relaxed, ate, checklisted, and braced ourselves for our final day.

Tuesday 25 June

A glorious day of sunshine welcomed our final day together, and we soon found ourselves along the sun-drenched water side of Loch na Keal again on an Otter hunt. Amongst the seaweed, black rocks and boulders of the foreshore, we saw the ubiquitous Grey Heron, Rock Pipit and Common Sandpiper, but no Otter.

And then, whilst watching a Common Seal bobbing up and down next to a skerry in the middle of the loch, an Otter appeared feeding! We watched it for some time as it continued to dive, catch food, eat it, and repeat the process, even when we were slightly distracted by a very yellow Siskin or more Common Seal, we kept our eyes on its whereabouts until it came ashore, had a feed next to a recently arrived Grey Heron, moved onto another rock, and then disappeared – a marvellous start to the day!

Still with a chance of more Otters on the mainland, we drove to the ferry terminal to start our journey to Inverness, and soon had a selection of wildlife whilst waiting in the queue and from the boat. A selection of Moon Jellyfish remained in the area, a fast-flying female Eider zipped past looking dark and cormoranty, and two Common Tern flew north to be replaced by two Arctic Tern flying south seconds later, and as the Sound of Mull was like a millpond, it took no time at all to arrive on Morvern.

Our drive over the big hills and big glens of Morvern was also over quickly, and we spent time overlooking the Otter hotspot of Loch Sunart, with views of the village of Strontian over the water – famous for the discovery of the element Strontium 90, and for the past few years, the home of an American Black Duck.

We stopped to try and see a singing Garden Warbler, but managed only Lesser Redpoll and several Chimney Sweep moths, and then had a brief look for our trans-Atlantic ducky friend at the rivermouth in Strontian, but with no joy. A spot of retail therapy in Strontian was undertaken, and the briefest of forays upstream along the river in the village to see if the Black Duck (or any duck really!) was anywhere, but they weren't, so continued through the area known as Ardnamurchan. This area is the last great natural wilderness in the UK, and home to a vast selection of protected species, mainly due to the remoteness of much of the land, and the lack of any discernible public access!

Scanning the mountainsides, rough pasture, woodlands, lochs and meadows as we went along the tumbling road, we did see a few common birds, but the wind was picking up, and by the time we reached Drynie Hill for lunch, we were lacking any raptors or stand out species. After lunch, we passed through some quaint and attractive villages, had some good views of the Small Isles (Eigg, Rhum and Muck), saw more common species and fish farms, and we arrived at the main T-junction on the Fort William to Mallaig road, and back into semi-civilisation.

Our next stop was going to be at Glenfinnan. This small village has a monument on the banks of Loch Shiel which marks the spot where Bonnie Prince Charlie landed to start the Jacobite uprising in 1745, raised his standard, gave an uplifting speech, and started to amass more followers and support as he proceeded to march on London. The column pales into insignificance compared to the gigantic Glenfinnan viaduct situated just north of this, and although only completed in about 1900, is possibly more famous than the Jacobite memorial as it appears in the Harry Potter movies!

We found ourselves in a slow-moving stream of traffic on the approach to the village, and as we passed through the village, the only car park was full, and car park wardens were directing cars further up the road to a car park entrance which was closed, and so the first available parking was a long trek back along the road. A tough executive decision was made to keep driving, to enjoy the geographical tour and the fine views up to Britain's highest mountain – Ben Nevis.

Ben Nevis is generally only visible for one day in twelve according to some vague Scottish statistic – and yet again, this wasn't one of them, although once again we did see the water

pipes leading to the distillery and the bottom third, and some of the ski infrastructure on Aonach Mor next door.

We continued to head north along The Great Glen. The Great Glen incorporates a run of different lochs along a major geological fault line, and they culminate in Loch Ness, but the traffic was arduous (in Highland of Scotland terms), and although we had views of the lochs, the mountain tops were all shrouded, birds were hard to come by, and stopping was not easy. Even Nessie wasn't behaving today, although by the time we did find the space to pull over and enjoy the view down Loch Ness with Urquhart Castle looming high over the water, a cracking Osprey with a fish in talons flew right next to us for the perfect photograph. Except none of us had a camera at hand!

A brief tour of Inverness got us to the hotel, where rooms were allocated, taxis were booked to the airport for the morning flights, and we all said fond farewells.

The usual end to a Heatherlea group includes all guests voting for their favourite bird of the trip, and their 'champagne moment', which can be anything at all that is considered the overall highlight, birdy or non-birdy. This didn't take place, mainly because it would have been impossible to vote fairly on any individual bird or single occasion over the course of the whole trip. However, the stand-out moments that may be embellished into stories told to future groups, I believe, in no particular order, might be:

- The ascent and hail-battering on Cairngorm (and the hare and birds on the mountain);
- Staffa and Lunga (and the weather and birds on the islands);
- The first White-tailed Eagle of the trip before the Treshnish boat;
- The final straw Crested Tit in Abernethy Forest;
- The final straw Otter on Mull;
- Benromach Distillery;
- The final straw Grey Partridge before the distillery;
- Iona (and the Great Spotted Cuckoo);
- The first boat trip along the Moray Firth and the seabird cliffs from below;
- The early start for Black Grouse and Goshawk, and seeing them both;
- The first day from pick-up in Inverness, with so many species in a short space of time;
- The Osprey fly-by at Loch Ness;
- The woods in Aviemore with Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warbler;
- Loch Tor on Mull with its Golden Eagles and Hen Harrier; and
- Fish and Chips on a seawall!

We amassed 132 species (130 seen and 2 only heard), which is a fabulous effort in mid-summer. So, a huge thanks to all who participated for your spotting ability, enthusiasm, patience, humour and company, and I trust you enjoyed it all as much as I did – it really was most pleasurable!

Hopefully we shall all meet again at some point in Scotland or further afield. Happy Birding!

Mike, Nethybridge & Mull, June 2019

If you enjoyed Mike's trip, [click here](#) to find out the next holidays that Mike 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

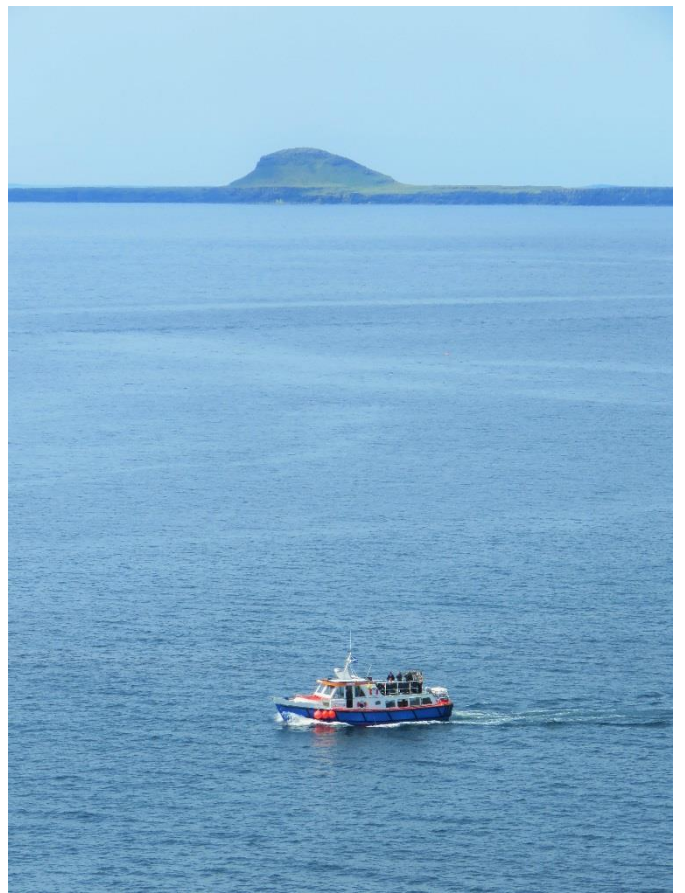




























Scottish Highlands & Islands with Naturalist Journeys and Heatherlea Checklist

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Saturday 15th June	Inverness – Alturlie Point – Clava Cairns – Culloden Battlefield – Loch Flemington – Dulsie Bridge – Lochindorb - Nethybridge
Sunday 16th June	Abernethy Forest – Broomhill Bridge – Aviemore (Craigellachie National Nature Reserve) - Tomvaich
Monday 17th June	Macduff / Troup Head / Pennan – Spey Bay – Loch Spynie
Tuesday 18th June	Inverlaidnan – Strathtearn (Garbole – Daltomach – Coignafearn) – Farr Road – Loch Ruthven – Abernethy Forest
Wednesday 19th June	Nethybridge (Duackside) – Bunchrew House - Loch Kinellan – Black Isle (Udale Bay – Cromarty – Chanonry Point)
Thursday 20th June	Tomintoul – Loch Garten – Lossiemouth – Burghead – Benromach Distillery – Findhorn Bay
Friday 21st June	Loch Morlich – Cairngorm - Avielochan
Saturday 22nd June	Abernethy Forest – Corran Ferry – Lochaline-Fishnish Ferry – Mull (Dervaig – Loch Tor – Tobermory – Glenforsa)
Sunday 23rd June	Mull (Loch na Keal) – Staffa - Lunga
Monday 24th June	Mull (Loch Scridain) – Fionnphort-Iona Ferry - Iona
Tuesday 25th June	Mull (Loch na Keal – Fishnish-Lochaline Ferry) – Strontian – Kinlocheil – Glenfinnan – Loch Ness - Inverness

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