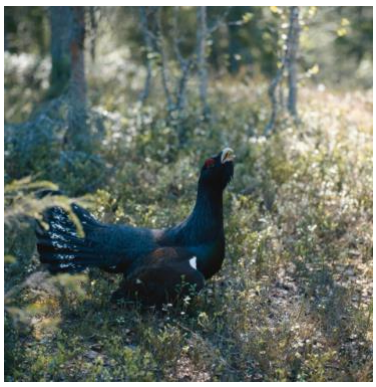
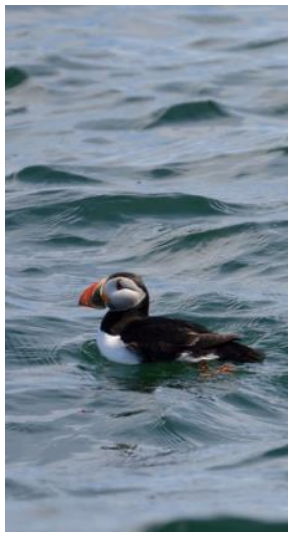
Bilingual Birding: Connecting to History, Culture and Conservation in Scotland

By Stephen Grace

Scottish Highlands & Islands
August 11 – 23, 2023

With guide Stephen Grace and participants Carol, Jeff and Martha





While birding in Scotland, the quip that Great Britain and America are two nations separated by a common language comes to mind. Shorebirds are referred to as waders. The Common Loon is called the Great Northern Diver; the Common Merganser is the Goosander. The Shag is a species of cormorant.

Many of the birds encountered in Scotland, even if they aren't native to North America, seem familiar. For example, the Goldcrest, a species closely related to our kinglets, produces a similar high-pitched vocalization in the treetops, causing a crick in your neck as you squint into the canopy to glimpse the smallest bird in Great Britain, a little scamp who wears a crown of royal gold. The Long-tailed Tit, a species similar to our Bushtit, always seems in a hurry. Flocks of these busy birds bounce from branch to branch and rarely remain still, just like our Bushtits back home.

Similar to how birds in Scotland tend to resemble North American species, Scottish culture feels familiar to people in nations that have been shaped by this vibrant part of Great Britain. In the 18th century, Scotland produced intellectual giants like Adam Smith, with his revolutionary economic theories; David Hume, with his

groundbreaking philosophy; Robert Burns, whose poetry illuminated human nature; and James Hutton, whose keen observations of the natural world birthed the science of modern geology. This period of creative ferment, known as the Scottish Enlightenment, not only shaped Scottish thought. It helped weave the cultural and intellectual fabric of the world, producing a pattern as recognizable as a tartan kilt.

The Scottish diaspora of the 19th and 20th centuries, driven by financial hardships that sent Scots searching for better opportunities overseas, influenced the economic, political, and cultural development of countries across the globe. When our Naturalist Journeys group listened to the ethereal wail of bagpipes at the Abernethy Highland Games while mist swathed the hamlet of Nethy Bridge, I felt connected to a cultural well that runs deeper than the differences between nations.

We were also brought together with our new Scottish friends by a mutual fascination with feathered wonders. In North America, we may call a buteo a “hawk,” while the British refer to the bird as a “buzzard.” (No vultures in Great Britain.) But when it comes to love of birds—watching them, studying them, conserving them—we speak a common language. Even if that language is riddled with Gaelic.

In the ancient Caledonian Forest, a remnant of a once vast pinewood in the Scottish Highlands that began growing when the glaciers retreated at the close of the last ice age, our local guide was as excited as her American guests to see a Capercaillie. The name of this bird, the largest member of the grouse family, means in Gaelic “horse of the woods.” When the wingbeats of the Capercaillie thrummed in a silent woodland, the sound seemed like an echo of horse hooves pounding the earth in a story told in Gaelic long ago.

Outlandishly plumed Capercaillie males look like a cross between a Wild Turkey and a bird-of-paradise. They parade on their leks, heads thrown back to make loud clicking and popping sounds. We hadn’t gone looking for this legendary bird, known to locals as the Caper. Scotland’s Capercaillie population is struggling, and the Caledonian Forest is the only region in Great Britain where the Caper can be found. Birding guides who adhere to sound ethical principles will not add stress to Scotland’s imperiled Caper population by guiding guests to see this species.

Sometimes, however, a giant grouse appears on a woodland walk. An encounter with a Capercaillie in the Great Forest of Caledon, its floor blanketed with purple blooms of heather beneath towering pines, can seem like a

scene from a Celtic myth–a story conjured from the misty woodland of our imagination, a place where fables are born. The wingbeats of the Caper we came across matched the beating of my own heart, still thumping from an encounter just a few minutes earlier. Our guide, Holly, had used her superb birding-by-ear skills to lead us to crossbills calling from the treetops. The ground beneath our boots was festooned with ferns, and red mushroom caps with white warts were perched atop pedestals in the moss: a fairytale forest. When we peered through a scope at the scissored beaks of crossbills prying apart cones of Scotch Pine, we wondered if these were Red Crossbills, the same species that occurs in North America. Or were they Parrot Crossbills? Could they be the Scottish Crossbill, Great Britain's only endemic bird?

Holly explained that separating the three crossbill species by field marks is not reliable. Crossbills in Scotland can be identified only with a sonogram of their calls–difficult to record and analyze. Regardless, our crossbill and Caper encounters that afternoon in an enchanted woodland, swirling with fog and spiced with pine resin and the honeyed scent of heather, completed a quest to see Scotland's three iconic forest species.

A few days earlier, when we had walked a woodland path and tilted our faces toward branches above us, we glimpsed a Crested Tit. Called the Crestie, this bird is a charming chickadee relative with a bridled face. The tuft atop its head makes a distinctive silhouette, even when seen in dim forest light. Though widely distributed in mainland Europe, this bird is found in Great Britain only in a small area of the Scottish Highlands, where a Crested Tit subspecies persists. The Crestie's rhythmic trill is a signature sound of the Caledonian Forest, an anthem carried down through the ages.

Crestie, Crossbill and Caper: our Scottish forest bird trifecta was complete.

* * *

When our group traveled by ferry to the Outer Hebrides, our education in bilingual birding continued. The Atlantic Puffins that bobbed on waves were the same species–with the same name–that breeds along the east coast of North America. But what we call the Common Murre, the British refer to as the Guillemot.

Our minds were busy with bird name translations as we scanned the water. The Arctic Skuas we spotted were, we learned, the Parasitic Jaegers familiar to North American birders. However, the Great Skua that flew past the ferry, giving us a close look at its bulky body and the white flashes on its wings, is a species not found in North America. The Great Skua also goes by Bonxie in Britain, a name that originated in the Shetland Islands.

"The Bonxie is a proper bully," a local guide explained. The British use the adjective "proper" to refer to things done correctly. A proper cup of tea is one served with exacting standards. But "proper" is also used in ways that may surprise a mind shaped by language in North America. When clouds spit a few raindrops on the British Isles, this is not a proper storm. During a deluge, we heard a Brit say, "It's absolutely throwing it down right now." A proper storm.

The birding guide elaborated on skua behavior: "An Arctic Skua will harass a gull and steal its fish. But a Great Skua will drown the bird and eat it." A proper bully. Aboard this ferry bound for the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, our group was provided not only with ornithology lessons, but also with language instruction–and with thrilling sea mammal viewing.

As Northern Gannets dropped from the sky to pierce the water like darts with their streamlined bodies, Short-beaked Common Dolphins cavorted alongside our vessel, leaping clear of the water. A Minke Whale rose to breathe among a raft of Razorbills, and a Humpback breached, creating a white explosion among the waves.

While still absorbing the sight of the Humpback, we saw Manx Shearwaters, a life bird for all members of our group. Seventy-five lifers: that was the official tally for one ardent lister from northern New York. But the Manx is more than a check (or a "tick" as the British say) on a list. This bird has tales to tell.

Like other shearwaters, this seabird shears the water with its wingtips as it soars low across the sea, skimming the waves with a display of power and elegance mesmerizing to watch. The Manx Shearwater's scientific name, *Puffinus puffinus,* comes from this bird's history of being lumped with puffins. Like puffins, the Manx Shearwater nests in burrows, perhaps accounting for the shared names of these seabirds only distantly related. What's known for certain is that "Manx" refers to the Isle of Man, located between Great Britain and Ireland, where an

ancient Gaelic dialect called Manx is still spoken. The old ways live on in Scotland's remote Highlands and islands, and birds that existed in this region from time immemorial are returning–with the help of humans.

Though modest in size, Scotland may once again leave a monumental mark on the world. Its enlightened commitment to bird conservation could serve as a beacon for other regions in this dark time of global biodiversity loss.

Though the Capercaillie is currently struggling in Scotland, a conservation project of enormous scope, both spatial and temporal, is underway. Known as Cairngorms Connect, this ambitious initiative aims to unite local landowners in restoring and linking habitat across a vast swath of the Capercaillie's historic range in Cairngorms National Park. Planned to span the next two centuries, this far-reaching effort offers hope for this imperiled bird, and for Britain's other embattled wildlife.

Scotland already has several avian conservation achievements to its credit. Species extirpated in the past from Britain, and then successfully reintroduced to Scotland, include the Osprey, familiar to birders on all continents except Antarctica. Another success story is the White-tailed Eagle, a formidable raptor of Eurasia reminiscent of the Bald Eagle, but heavier and with a wider wingspan. This magnificent bird of prey was driven to extinction in Britain in the early 20th century. A reintroduction program in 1975 at Scotland's Isle of Rum produced a White-tailed Eagle population that continues to grow and expand its range. Our group watched several of these birds soaring on board-flat wings above mountain ridgetops.

We also spotted Golden Eagles, another raptor brought back from extinction's brink in Britain. Seeing a Golden Eagle rise on thermals into a gap of blue sky between clouds reminded me of watching this species in the American West, and left me feeling buoyant on the van ride back to Nethy Bridge. As we drove past lochs and meandered through heaths and moors, Scotland felt familiar, yet there was so much more to explore.

This tour of birds, history and culture provided by Naturalist Journeys, along with their partner organization, Heatherlea–Scotland's premier birding guide service with a deep commitment to conservation–gave me an appreciation for the shared heritage of Scotland and America. Our journey probed the distant past of Highland castles and clans and explored ancient culture on remote islands. It also provided a glimpse of a hopeful path ahead.

When I returned to Common Loons and Common Murres and Common Mergansers on my side of the pond, I brought home fond memories of my new avian friends in Scotland–and my new human friends. The Scots spoke with accents that threw me and used words that sometimes baffled me. But I felt I had known them a very long time when, together, we raised glasses of whisky. As our journey concluded, I was left with a lingering sense of optimism about a better future for birds, and for people, on this planet. A proper future in which all species thrive.

Photos: Group Birding (Stephen Grace - SG), Capercaillie (NJ Stock), Long-tailed Tit (NJ Stock), Razorbill (SG), Eurasian Chaffinch (SG), Atlantic Puffin (NJ Stock), Roe Deer Fawns (SG), Tobermory (SG), Rook (SG), Mountview Hotel (SG), Red Grouse (SG), Sunrise on Isle of Mull (SG), Gruinard Bay Viewpoint (SG), Common Seal (SG), Birding Gruinard Bay (SG)