



When my better half asked what present I wanted to mark a significant birthday it didn't take me long to suggest a birding trip. Having been coached in photography as well as birding by Marcus of e-birder a few times previously I booked three days with him in the Inverness and Cairngorm area. I was keen to see some of the Scottish specialities, some of which would be lifers: on the list were Ptarmigan, Golden Eagle, Snow Buntings, Crested Tit.

The **11th** saw an early start from Marcus's with Greylag and Pink-feet in his garden before we set off for the Cairngorm. Early in the day we looked for some Scottish forest specialities in a location I will not disclose:- partly because I agreed to keep my eyes averted whilst we drove there and partly for the sake of a certain birds welfare. Quietly walking through some forest we found ourselves being followed by a magnificent male Capercaillie which had literally crept up behind us and had then started bubbling and cracking away. The two of us carefully walked some distance, turned round for some shots and then continued to move off in turn, mindful of the birds welfare I followed the advice not to allow it to approach too closely [I've seen the David Attenborough video where he falls over and the bird gets agitated and didn't want to repeat that!] After less than ten minutes we tore ourselves away. The Caper watched us off his patch and once we were out of sight we sat down to marvel at what we'd experienced. It was a great privilege to see such a stunning bird and it is something I'll never forget. Whilst the visit was brief neither of us wanted to disturb the bird any more than a couple of walkers or herd of deer might.



After taking ten minutes to reflect we set off with the intention of checking on some snow buntings on the mountains – which was also an advanced mooch to check out the Ptarmigan for the next day. We saw plenty of Grouse, a flock of around 20 snow buntings as well as Red Squirrel, Roe Deer aplenty. We then headed off to a woodland site for Crested Tits.



The Cresties showed very well within minutes of our arrival and seemed to be on a feeding circuit with a number of Treecreepers; reappearing every fifteen minutes or so to join the large numbers of Coal Tits. Also seen here were a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Raven. The Cresties were very obliging – foraging so close to where we had sat that I couldn't actually focus on them at times. They also seemed particularly fond of the sound of crisp bags and approached even closer when they thought there were scraps to be had! Sitting quietly in the middle of a flock of Coal Tits that were flying around so close that the wings sounded like buzzing bees whilst watching Cresties four feet away was a magical experience.



Having spent an hour in the woodland we set off for another general look around and I suggested we could go and look for a Great Grey Shrike that had been reported at Drumguish or try the Harrier roost at Insh Marshes. We decided to try for the shrike: the light was fading fast but I was keen to study a shrike up close and wasn't bothered about photographs. I even left my proper camera in the car and just slung my spare with a lightweight lens round my neck, just in case. Sure enough we found the right area and the shrike [noting some Goldeneye nest boxes in the roadside trees] and again saw Roe Deer. Then as we surveyed the valley in front of us I pointed out a flock of twenty or so Fieldfare, which were flying fast and with some evasive movement across the valley, Marcus being the wiser one of the two of us, looked to see what had spooked them. Next thing he called "Gyr..." and I was stunned to see a large pale falcon behind the Fieldfare which then swung around in front of us to fly over the river in the valley. There was much cursing as I tried to remove the lens cap, remember what settings I had the camera on, deal with a miss-set focus point and then try and get onto the fast flying bird... consequently I missed a shot behind a pylon, the next was out of focus and the first barely reasonable shot was as the bird was some 200m away up the valley. All the time I was trying to get the camera into play Marcus called out the salient features and we were both a bit shocked as the bird disappeared round a hill. We quickly walked up the road and I climbed the banking and after another good call by Marcus we watched the Gyr circle up over a moor and then cross the valley at some distance, before we lost it heading for the summit of the ridge opposite, about a kilometre and a half away from where we stood [my fault we lost it as I was supposed to be watching it but was distracted by half a fence post I'd impaled in my hand in the excitement!]

I know that any Gyr sighting will be debated and without either a full suite of better shots or the bird in hand, there will always be doubters but I can vouch for Marcus's description, which he'll be submitting to the relevant recorder. If you're ever going to get a wild Gyr then a large pale bird in the middle of the Cairngorms in winter, quickly covering an area of over four kilometres up a remote valley by following a river, then climbing high over a moor, before disappearing into the distance seems to tick most of the boxes.

After all that excitement we headed back to our B&B and thence to the pub!

The **12th** was due to be the day for Ptarmigan as the weather forecast was the best of the three days but as the morning dawned it was still rather cloudy, so we easily persuaded ourselves to go for another look at the shrike in the Gyr valley. I missed a shot of the shrike on the roadside wires and made do with a very distant record shot of it in its main hunting area. We kind of hung around for a bit, proper cameras and lenses on tripods, just in case any pale falcons showed up but after a while we decided we'd better go and try for Ptarmigan.



Looking like the odd ones out in our muted green gear amongst hordes of skiers and boarders in high viz colours we boarded the bus from the bottom car park at Cairngorm and within an hour had climbed to the right height to hear and then see distant Ptarmigan. Conditions on the mountain were at first very grey and off the path there were extensive ice fields – luckily we'd both got proper mountain gear, including crampons and ice axe. A few snow boarders stopped to ask us what the *"white birds were, flying all over the mountain side..."* which spurred us on. Then we got a break in the weather and spent a very enjoyable few hours with the Ptarmigan who were far more concerned with pairing up and displaying than with a couple of birders lying in the boulder fields. The interesting thing was that there was an overlap just between the Red Grouse and the Ptarmigan of around fifty metres [vertical] I'd expected to see them in completely different zones on the mountain.



The conditions brightened up considerably and were brilliant for skiers and ice climbers: we could see climbers roped up and in full arctic conditions on the ridges above and they actually cast shadows in the remnant cloud beneath the ridges.



Eventually we dragged ourselves away from the Ptarmigan and were then rewarded with a pair of Red Grouse, which moved towards us as we sat next to the path and showed to around eight feet away in the afternoon sunshine.



We finished the day by having a quick look for Scottish Crossbill on the way down to the valley and trying a quick bit of landscape photography. No crossbills but a fine end to an exhilarating day.

The **13th** was set for cloud and rain so starting from Inverness we debated whether to go east or west. To the east there had been reports of a King Eider but at that stage it hadn't been seen for a week and I was quite keen to try and see some decent flocks of sea duck so we went west. It was such a poor day weather wise that the camera rarely came out of the bag but we saw plenty of wildlife with some 14 point stags in a valley we first tried for eagles [no joy].



Then we headed for lunch at Embo pier – which is actually the remnant of a concrete jetty strangely situated in a caravan park! Through the driving rain was the largest flock of sea duck I'd even heard of let alone seen close up, there were at least five hundred Long Tailed Duck, a few hundred Common Scoter [too wet to tell if there was anything more amongst them], a few tens of Eider and a pair of Goldeneye. We watched from the car for over an hour – willing the rain to clear but it didn't and the Long Tailed flock flew past the end of the pier ten or twenty at a time and re-formed out in the middle of the bay.



As the rain persisted we drove round a few likely spots and found plenty of Hooded Crows and their hybrids plus a grey seal colony before calling it a day.

All in all a fantastic three days and I believe since we saw it the Gyr has been reported on at least two further occasions – it would be good if someone could get better shots!

Peter Welch, February 2011

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