

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AND SURROUNDS

2nd to 4th May 2018

Craig Higson and Rob McHale

Day 1.

We had been planning this trip ever since I made a solo venture to the area last May, so it was with some enthusiasm we set off at 03:30 on Wednesday morning, despite the very early start! We made good time and, aside for a quick stop for a Sausage and Egg McMuffin at Lockerbie had no stops at all, so we arrived at the Cairngorm Mountain Railway at 10:00 am, ready to try to see some Ptarmigan. Sadly, the mountain was largely covered in cloud, and it was snowing, so we decided to postpone this bit of the trip and headed off to Abernethy.

At Loch Garten RSPB we heard Redstart and Tree Pipit from the path to the Osprey watchpoint, along with the ubiquitous Siskins and Coal Tits. Willow Warblers were also present in good numbers. We saw the female Osprey on the nest (well, her head) but, aside from the Chaffinches, Siskins and odd Goldcrest visiting the feeders it was very quiet so we headed off to walk some of the paths adjacent to Loch Garten. Spring was clearly later arriving than on my last visit at the same time last year, and there was only one further Redstart heard and only one or two Tree Pipits. Whilst trying to see a singing Tree Pipit we did latch onto a Crested Tit which performed for a few seconds before disappearing. A pair of Goldeneye were on Loch Garten itself along with a pair of Common Sandpipers and Swallows and Sand Martins feeding over the water.

As it was now nearly 1pm we decided to go and deposit our bags at Aviemore Youth Hostel where we had booked in for two nights (recommended!). As we came out it was clear that the weather had undergone a rapid improvement and we could now see Cairngorm Mountain, and even the café on top so we decided to head up and look for Ptarmigan.

Although the weather had cleared up, it was still bitterly cold on top with a significant snow covering making spotting any Ptarmigan potentially very difficult! A nice distraction was a smart, and very confiding, Snow Bunting that happily hopped around within a few metres. After half an hour we had to go into the café for a warm drink as it was absolutely freezing. Just as we finished our brews another birder came over and told us he had just seen a Ptarmigan fly in and proceeded to give us precise directions to the bird. Quickly making our way onto the viewing terrace and within a couple of minutes we had great views of a cracking Ptarmigan, probably 50/50 white and grey, with the red above the eye glowing against the snow. We left the summit and headed back to the car, stopping to watch a 'flock' of four Snow Buntings on the car park. We also had Wheatear, Raven and Red Grouse from the Car Park.

Day 2

We were on site in one of the woodlands around the area at 05:30. It was very quiet with only Siskins, Blackbirds and the odd Robin making up the dawn chorus. We had been wandering the footpaths for an hour or so looking for Capercaillie when Rob suddenly tapped my shoulder and whispered 'Craig'. I immediately knew what he meant and looked straight in front as a stunning male Capercaillie walked across the footpath 75 meters or so from where we stood! As it disappeared into the vegetation we moved quickly along the path to get closer and had more views of it as it sat in the bilberry before flying off. Satisfied we had seen our main target we birded the rest of the area, ticking off more Crested Tits, Tree Pipit, Willow Warbler, (Scottish?) Crossbills, Siskin, Coal, Great and Blue Tits, and other expected species.

After a quick breakfast in Aviemore we had a passing look on Avielochan, which produced Goldeneye, Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher, Teal and Greylag Goose before we headed to Lochindorb where the Black-throated Divers had been performing.

The drive to Lochindorb produced little in terms of birdlife until we made the turn of the main road. The Common Gull colony was in full swing and we had to slow several times to allow them to get off the road. As we topped the small rise leading to the loch, it was immediately apparent that the birding wasn't going to be easy as a very stiff wind was cutting across the exposed water, whipping up more than a few white horses. There were quite a number of birders in the area, no doubt due to the excellent pictures doing the rounds of the stunning Black-throated Divers. When we eventually managed to find a spot to park up, one of the birders informed us that the birds had shown briefly and then disappeared into a bay, out of sight. We decided to stay and see if they came out again. Whilst we waited we were entertained by an Osprey that came close overhead and then appeared / disappeared for the next few hours, with a different bird putting in cameo appearances. A Red Kite that suddenly appeared with a flock of gulls, flying into the wind over the water across the Loch was a completely unexpected bonus. We also had one very distant Golden Eagle. Red Grouse and a few Chaffinches, Meadow Pipits and corvids added to the day list, but sadly no divers!

At around 15:00 we gave up and headed back to Aviemore. One of the birders had mentioned seeing Wood Warbler at the back of the Youth Hostel where we were staying in the Craigellachie Nature Reserve. This is a cracking little woodland area at the base of the cliffs where the Peregrines sometimes nest (you can see the CCTV monitoring camera on the cliff face). Sadly we didn't see a peregrine but we had excellent views of singing Wood Warbler and displaying Tree Pipits.

Day 3

Our last day and we only had a couple of hours before we needed to head back, so we spent it in another woodland seeing if we could add to our previous days success. Unfortunately, we couldn't. We did see more Crossbills, plus all the other usual suspects but we didn't add any new species to the trip list. We left Aviemore at 08:00 and were back home by 14:00.

Total species count for the two and a bit days was only 53 species, but this included some quality species and we spent considerable amounts of time at just three of the sites.

We stayed in the Aviemore Youth Hostel. Although I believe there is the usual dormitory style accommodation, we booked a private twin room which was very comfortable, with bed linen and a towel provided. I believe en-suite rooms are available. The rest of the set-up is typical hostel style with a communal kitchen, common room and dining area. There were a few shower rooms and toilets dotted through the building, and it was possible to shower in a private shower room. The hostel was very clean and comfortable overall and suited our needs perfectly. There was also plenty car parking and you are only a few hundred metres from the centre of Aviemore. You do not need to be a member and I booked through an online booking site for £20 per person per night.

Craig Higson, May 2018

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