

# Birds & Mammals of the Cairngorms

Naturetrek Tour Report

30 March - 3 April 2017

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Mountain Hare



Red Squirrel



Caledonian pine forest



Red Grouse

Report and images by Robert Harvey

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Tour participants: Robert Harvey (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Naturetrek's first Cairngorms tour was highly successful, with good photographic opportunities of Red Squirrel, Badger, Pine Marten, Mountain Hare, Red Grouse, Ptarmigan and many woodland birds including Treecreeper and Siskin. A variety of habitats were explored, ranging from Caledonian pine forest through moorland to high mountain, enabling an excellent overview of Britain's largest and wildest National Park. Rowan Tree Hotel was ideally located with superb food and helpful staff.

## Day 1

Thursday 30th March

### Inverness – Aviemore – Loch Garten - Rothiemurchus

Half the group met at Inverness airport and the other half at Rowan Tree Hotel, well located between Aviemore and Kincaig. The afternoon started with an introductory presentation on the habitats and species we expected to see on the tour and the techniques for photographing them. Then we made a short journey to Loch Garten to try out our long lenses on a variety of woodland birds. Probably due to mild weather, Crested Tits did not appear, but we had excellent views of Treecreeper on Scot's Pine, together with several other species which the group was able to photograph.

After a delicious dinner, we adjourned to a comfortable heated hide deep in the Rothiemurchus estate to watch nocturnal wildlife. Two badgers made long visits around the hide, enabling them to be photographed by floodlights, using tripods and high ISO settings. A Tawny Owl swooped in close to the hide and took a Wood Mouse, though this happened too quickly for photography. Soon after 11pm a Pine Marten arrived and seized an egg. Half an hour later it returned and stayed for 15 minutes, feeding right in front of the hide, enabling us to photograph it. A wonderful start to the tour!

## Day 2

Friday 31st March

### Kincaig – Cairngorm - Loch Morlich

After breakfast we divided into two groups for hide photography, half to do Red Squirrels and the other half woodland birds. Both hides are close to Kincaig and offered excellent views of the target species. Up to three or four squirrels were in view much of the time, feeding on logs, a rotten tree stump and at the base of a pine tree. The woodland bird group watched and photographed 14 species including Great Spotted Woodpecker, Jay and delightful, bright yellow Siskins. Red Deer was seen at a distance.

We returned to the hotel for lunch and then drove to the highest car park on Cairngorm Mountain, from where we hiked up to one of the glacial corries on the flank of the mountain. Unfortunately by this time it was very windy and also raining, which made less than ideal walking conditions. Our perseverance was, however, well rewarded at an altitude of about 850 metres when the rain stopped and we found both male and female Ptarmigan. Already in their summer plumage, these arctic-alpine birds were superbly camouflaged amongst high altitude heather moorland. They were relatively unafraid of our approach and presented superb photographic opportunities.

Descending the mountain, we finished the afternoon at Loch Morlich, photographing Cairngorm Mountain across the lake and making creative images of ancient Scots Pines. The rain had cleared leaving a largely clear sky and some excellent evening light. One huge tree of the Caledonian Pine forest had shed a large branch which formed an excellent foreground and leading lines into the image, giving a sense of the character and age of one of Britain's very few remaining areas of true wildwood.

## Day 3

Saturday 1st April

### Kincraig – Braemar - Glenshee

After breakfast we again divided into two groups for hide photography, half to do Red Squirrels and the other half woodland birds. Photographic opportunities were again very good and some very good images were obtained of feeding squirrels and birds, including flight shots. Redpoll was added to the list of birds photographed.

After lunch we drove to Braemar on the eastern side of Cairngorms National Park, over a high moorland pass at 775 metres, and then on to Glenshee at 670 metres. Our main target species was Red Grouse and many were seen along the higher parts of our route, with photography done from the vehicle. On our return journey we were also fortunate to see five male Black Grouse at a lek, accompanied by two females, though these were slightly too far for good photographs. Mammals seen on the drive were Roe Deer, Rabbit and Brown Hare.

## Day 4

Sunday 2nd April

### Findhorn Valley – Carrbridge - Cairngorm

After breakfast we set off to the Findhorn Valley in search of one of the more challenging species to photograph – Mountain Hares. Parking near the top of this beautiful glaciated valley, we crossed a footbridge and hiked up a steep hill. Mountain Hares were much in evidence, especially as they had only just started to change their white winter pelage to brown summer colouration, making them easy to spot on the snow-free hillside. Careful fieldcraft enabled us to closely approach four different individual hares, which obligingly posed for photography before taking off at speed. The weather was also highly favourable to us, with broken cloud giving way to blue skies and plenty of light to photograph the nimble hares. On our way back to the vehicle we encountered and photographed some feral Goats, our tenth species of mammal of the tour.

Today we had a picnic lunch in the field, during which we watched a Dipper bobbing along the Findhorn River. We spent the afternoon on landscape photography. A ruined crofter's cottage and barn in the Findhorn Valley presented many interesting compositions. We also photographed the ruined packhorse bridge at Carrbridge, which was backlit in the afternoon, creating tricky but also rewarding lighting conditions and the opportunity to try out high dynamic range imaging.

After dinner we drove to the lower car park on Cairngorm to photograph sunset over a panoramic landscape with a foreground of pine trees, granite boulders and heather moorland.

## Day 5

Monday 3rd April

### Loch Garten – Loch Malachie - Inverness

A 5am start saw us at the Loch Garten Osprey hide well before sunrise, courtesy of the RSPB. A beautiful dawn sky unfolded before us. The Ospreys had returned from Africa just a few days earlier and were busy collecting nest materials, interspersed with frequent mating. Unfortunately our other target species, Capercaillie, did not put in an appearance, though we were able to watch a Brambling and other birds at close quarters from the RSPB hide.

After breakfast we concluded the tour with a walk through the beautiful Caledonian forest to Loch Malachie, where a small island topped by pine trees provided an excellent photographic focal point. A variety of woodland birds provided further interest.

Lunch was taken back at the hotel and the group then departed to Aviemore railway station and Inverness airport.

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## Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April				
			30	31	1	2	3
1	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓				
2	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	✓				
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓		✓
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓			
5	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>				✓	
6	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			✓	✓	
7	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
8	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	✓				✓
9	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓		
10	Feral Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>				✓	
<b>Birds</b>							
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓	✓	
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓		
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
4	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				✓	✓
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓	✓
7	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>			✓		
8	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			✓		
9	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		✓			
10	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	✓	
11	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	✓	✓
12	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
13	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>					✓
14	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
15	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓				
16	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓	✓	
17	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	✓	
18	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓	✓	
19	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓	✓	
20	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		
21	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓		
22	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓		
24	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓			
25	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓	
26	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓		
27	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓	
28	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓		✓		✓
29	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		✓
30	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓		
31	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
32	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓				
33	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓				✓
34	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓		
35	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April				
			30	31	1	2	3
36	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓	
37	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		
38	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓			
39	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓	
40	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓	✓
41	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓		
42	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	
44	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓		
46	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓		
47	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					✓
48	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓		✓

### Other fauna

Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*

Common Frog, *Rana temporaria*