

# Birds and Mammals of the Cairngorms (Photography Tour)

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 7 April 2018

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Red Grouse



Red Squirrel



Rock Ptarmigan



Mountain Hare

Report and images by Robert Harvey



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

## Summary

Naturetrek's second Cairngorms tour was highly successful, with good photographic opportunities of Red Squirrel, Badger, Pine Marten, Mountain Hare, Red Grouse, Black Grouse, Ptarmigan, Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Siskin. A variety of habitats was 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

Monday 2nd April

### Inverness – Aviemore – Loch Garten

The group met at Inverness airport, Holiday Inn Inverness and 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. We had excellent views of European Treecreeper and Crested Tit on Scot's Pine, together with several other species which the group was able to photograph.

We then walked through the beautiful Caledonian Forest to Loch Malachie, where a small island topped by pine trees provided an excellent photographic focal point, before returning to the hotel for a delicious dinner.

## Day 2

Tuesday 3rd April

### Kincaig – Aviemore

After breakfast the group divided into two 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. Snow fell throughout the morning, providing spectacular settings for our photographs. Amongst the species photographed by the bird group were delightful bright yellow Siskins.

Returning to the hotel for lunch, an increase in temperature caused snow to turn to rain, which made for less than ideal photographic opportunities. We therefore spent the afternoon reviewing and processing the group's images from the first two sessions, to familiarise tour participants with Lightroom and the way to bring out the best in their pictures.

## Day 3

Wednesday 4th April

### Kincaig – Findhorn Valley - Carrbridge

Snowfall was heavier this morning, which again made for interesting conditions in which to photograph Red Squirrels and woodland birds. Red Squirrels showed well and highlight for the woodland bird group today was three visits by highly photogenic Great Spotted Woodpeckers.

After lunch the falling snow was easing off, leaving a brilliant white landscape. We travelled to Findhorn Valley, viewing flocks of Oystercatcher, Curlew and Lapwing along the way. Our objective was to find mountain hares and were quickly rewarded with a very obliging hare that we were able to photograph resting, grooming and alert. The hare had partly moulted into its darker summer pelage, making it easy to see against the snow, a combination that provided a superb photographic opportunity. Further up the slope, a group of hares were seen chasing each other and boxing, together with a herd of around 50 red deer. On our way back to the vehicle we encountered and photographed some feral goats. We paused to photograph a ruined farmhouse, which provided a focal point in the beautiful glaciated valley of the Findhorn River.

Our final stop of the day was at Carrbridge for a cup of tea and photographing the ruined packhorse bridge, which was backlit in the afternoon, creating tricky but also rewarding lighting conditions and the opportunity to try out high dynamic range imaging.

## Day 4

Thursday 5th April

### Kincraig – Cairngorm

This morning, half the group rose at 4am to spend four hours in hides watching a Black Grouse lek. One of Britain's most extraordinary wildlife spectacles, this began before dawn on remote moorland where a group of male grouse gather to strut, display and occasionally fight. At first, the lek could be heard but not seen, adding to the sense of drama. As dawn broke, the group was able to view and photograph this iconic behaviour, until the grouse were scared off by a passing bird of prey. The rest of the group made an early morning excursion to Loch Morlich to photograph the snow-clad mountains and their reflections in dawn light.

After a late breakfast, we drove to the highest car park on Cairngorm mountain where we had lunch and watched a flock of Snow Buntings. From the car park, we hiked up to one of the glacial corries on the flank of the mountain. In bright sunshine, the landscape was exceptionally beautiful, though the trail was buried under snow which made progress slightly tricky. On reaching a high corrie at over 900m elevation, we searched for Ptarmigan, initially without success. Then as we started to descend, we found two ptarmigan where some boulders were protruding from snow. Just starting to moult from winter to summer plumage, these arctic-alpine birds presented excellent photographic opportunities against a white background.

Descending the mountain, we returned to Rowan Tree Hotel for another excellent evening meal.

## Day 5

Friday 6th April

### Kincraig – Green Lochan – Loch Morlich

Today it was the turn of the rest of the group to view the Black Grouse lek, which performed even better and for longer than the previous day. The remainder of the morning was spent at leisure, with participants taking advantage of the hotel's proximity to an attractive loch for a local walk.

In the afternoon we went to the area around Loch Morlich and walked about one mile to reach Green Lochan. Though the light was a little disappointing, this beautiful lochan set amongst Caledonian pine forest well showed its turquoise water. A pair of Goldeneye were on the lake. We finished the afternoon making creative images of

ancient Scots Pines. One huge tree 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.

After dinner we adjourned to a comfortable heated hide deep in the Rothiemurchus estate to watch nocturnal wildlife. Three Badgers made long visits around the hide, enabling them to be photographed by floodlights using tripods and high ISO settings. Soon after 10pm, a Pine Marten arrived and stayed for around 15 minutes, feeding right in front of the hide, enabling us to photograph it. We returned to the hotel just before midnight.

## Day 6

**Saturday 7th April**

### Braemar – Glenshee

After breakfast we drive to Braemar on the east side of Cairngorms National Park, over a high moorland pass at 775m, and then on to Glenshee at 670m. Our main target species was Red Grouse and many were seen along the higher parts of our route, with photography done from the vehicle. At Glenshee we found and photographed two mountain hare, still in their white winter pelage. Following afternoon tea at Braemar, the tour concluded and participants returned to Inverness.

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## Species Lists

### Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	April						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>					✓		
2	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>					✓		
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓		✓		
4	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>			✓			✓	
5	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	✓		✓	
6	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>					✓		
7	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓		✓		
8	Feral Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>			✓				

### Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
2	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					✓	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓		✓
4	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓			✓	✓	
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓	✓
6	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				✓	✓	
7	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			✓			✓
8	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>				✓		
9	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓			
10	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
12	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓		✓
13	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓			✓
14	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓			✓
15	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓			✓
16	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					✓	✓
17	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		✓			✓
18	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓		✓			
19	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓					
20	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓			
21	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓			✓	
22	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓			✓
23	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓			
24	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	✓					
25	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓			
26	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓			
27	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓					
28	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>						✓
29	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						✓
30	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓	✓	✓	
31	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		✓	✓	
32	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓			
33	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓				✓
34	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			✓	✓		
35	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	✓	
36	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
37	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓			
38	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				✓		