

Scottish Grouse & Raptor Trip

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10/4-15/4 2002

In 2000 Ian Reid and I had booked flights and car hire for a long weekend searching for the rare lekking grouse in the Highlands when my baby twins were born prematurely. The trip was canceled in a turmoil of sadness after Rebecca had joined Max. We were about to try again in 2001 when Penny's pregnancy with Emily suddenly appeared to be going the same way. With a happy outcome there and a new season approaching we hoped it would be third time lucky in April 2002.

For me the priorities were simple; lekking Black Grouse and Capercaillie. I had searched for and seen several Blackcocks over the years, despite the increasing scarcity of this tremendous British bird. I had a stunning print of Chris Rose's "Dual at Dawn" over my fireplace but to my chagrin and increasing obsession, I'd never seen the spectacle of a lek.

Concerted attempts to glimpse a male Capercaillie had failed in 1999 and reports of several displaying in front of the familiar hide at Loch Garten had raised this target to virtually match the other in value. On top of that, a British tick was suddenly in the offing in the form of the Snowy Egret.

A fleeting visit to Scotland for Ian in 2001 had produced only the rather sad, solitary Blackcock at Loch Ruthven that Penny and I had seen in '99. He was after virtually all the Highland/Speyside specialities.

Callander, Stirling

April 11th

Duncan Orr-Ewing, of Oxford twitch team notoriety, now lived deliciously close to breeding Black Grouse, making his place our first port of call. Simple instructions to visit the site in the hills above Callander and look for displaying Blackcocks seemed almost too easy. Ian and I were up at a recommended leisurely 06.00 and arrived at the road to Braeleny and Drumardoch Farms at 06.45, well after dawn. We parked at the gate to the private road and walked.



By 08.40 we had noted the following in the small valley below heather moorland:

Common Buzzard 2-3 were in the Dartmoor-like scrub on the way up to the farms

Black Grouse Scanning the valley sides from the road produced no birds on the fresh green, juncus strewn field opposite Braeleny where Penny had found a dead Blackcock (see 6/6/99) and I was immediately concerned that the lek site wasn't in use. After just ten minutes however Ian picked one up on the skyline to the west and I focused my bin's with relief on the rotund black form of a displaying Blackcock. We set up the scopes and were immediately rewarded with our first ever performance. The cracking grouse was fluffed up with blazing red combs contrasting with jet black plumage. The neck appeared to be bulging and the tail was erect and spread with a dazzling ruff of vertical white undertail feathers truncating the rear of the bird. We were surprised that the grouse was alone but it trundled back and forth on the ridge 200m from us, turning to reveal its lowered head combs, then drooping lyres and frilly white 'pants'. I was soon trying to capture the first target of the trip on CCD. Classic stances of horizontal with fluffed neck outstretched and then round and upright with curved neck held aloft were noted on this remarkable strutting cockerel-sized bird which seemed too exotic to be a bird of Britain's harsh uplands.



Soon a second male appeared on a slightly higher peak 30-40m north of the first bird and started to display also. The fact that the birds were displaying on the highest ground, in long rough grass rather than on the usual short fresh grass with scattered juncus that I'd always expected of leks, seemed odd. We were also somewhat disappointed that the birds weren't engaging each other in the classic "dual at dawn" confrontation. A third male was soon apparent, feeding below the peak with tail retracted in the way I'd only ever seen them until now. After a short while the first bird flew quickly with powerfully beat pied wings towards the second and we thought we'd see some proper lekking. However, before anything started both birds suddenly flew off fast NW, over the ridge and disappeared. I got the strong impression they were making for a preferred spot for the fight, a new lek site hidden from the road! The non-displaying male continued to feed but probably became aware of a fourth bird, a female, down the slope towards us before I'd picked her up. She was feeding very unobtrusively in long rough grass c.150m from us. The male quickly became aroused and started to make his way methodically towards her, walking slowly but surely down the slope, plumage suddenly pumped up for action.



As he approached we could suddenly hear the intense but soft bubbling of the male's display call. The continuous, low, throaty warble wafted over the early morning hillside towards us as the Blackcock displayed to the Greyhen. Apparently unconcerned by us at our tripods on the road, the Blackcock walked ponderously through the grass bubbling as he did so. At a range of 150m we could hear the occasional harsh "coww" call amongst the low bubbling that I'd only heard on TV and radio before. Occasionally the grouse "flutter jumped" to complete the display, flapping extravagantly to take off with body held stiffly upright only to stop at a height of 1m and bounce back into the grass. Superb views of the stunning bird revealed the white headlamp shoulder patches and wing bars, dark legs and wonderfully spread lyre tail, as broad, swooping and elegant as in Rose's painting.

After the Blackcock had come all the way down to the female we realised she'd slipped away. The unsurprised but patiently resigned male started to walk south but we were distracted by loud bubbling from across the river. Scanning the eastern valley side produced no more grouse and a juncus-strewn area behind a knoll was checked

from below the road and found to be empty. By the time we looked back, all the grouse had disappeared. A fourth male was picked up far off, feeding in the grassy heather at the top of the plantation on the eastern side but no more males were found until we rounded the corner towards the gate. Then a Blackcock was surprised just 30m away and flew off quickly over the hill, I was sure this was the previous male which had walked here. At the car I suddenly noted a Greyhen feeding in long grass 30-40m away. Crippling views of the grey-brown plumage with sharply demarcated pale throat and small blackish bill and eye were enjoyed at leisure as she preened before creeping away.

I was struck at how similar the habitat was to the long grass of Stonesdale Moor in Yorkshire (see 23-24/7/00)

Oystercatcher	2-3 on the classic stony upland river were calling excitedly
Lapwing	a curious flock of c.10 were displaying <i>together</i> over heather high on the eastern side of the valley
Curlew	several pairs were breeding in the undulating grassy valley sides and hills, their warbling display calls, finishing off the atmosphere perfectly
Woodpigeon	several in the plantation
Skylark	only 1-2 singing latterly
Meadow Pipit	many displaying, singing and dashing about, as expected
Twite	1 called its name as it flew straight over us, flying quickly south. Ian didn't get on to this lifer and, amazingly, it was the only one of the trip
Lesser Redpoll	3-4 were flying in and out of the plantation, calling

We left not long after the last male had stopped displaying, delighted to have seen and heard the first trip target so well. Yet Ian and I were both slightly disappointed not to have seen a proper lek of confronting males. We had not quite experienced the real thing and I was sure more had been going on elsewhere, at an unknown site to which the first two had flown off, and possibly before our arrival. We'd have to return, fortunately the itinerary was designed to give us five dawns, two or three at Black Grouse and three or two at Capercaillie, as needed.

Loch Iubhair, Stirling

After a celebratory fry-up in Callander, where three Siskin were added to the (Lesser) Redpoll and Twite brigade, we hit the road west at c.09.30 in the hope of connecting with the long-staying Snowy Egret and a drake King Eider, both seen near Oban a day or two earlier.

A quick stop at this loch by the A85 to check birds on the water produced a couple:

Whooper Swan Ian put in the effort by walking along the shore while I manned the car, and was rewarded with a single Whooper tucked up in the north end

Lesser Black-backed Gull an immaculate pair was noted standing on the far shore

Common Gull another immaculate pair was standing near the first

Hooded Crow from this point west most crows were well marked Hoodies with a few black Carrions and the odd, speckled hybrid. Duncan later insisted all Hooded here were actually hybrids

Dunstaffnage Bay, Oban, Argyll & Bute

We pulled off the A85 just east of Dunbeg at 11.45 to scan the bay and the one east of it for the King Eider. In the next 15 minutes the following were noted.

Common Eider 40+ birds, mainly dapper drakes, were swimming just offshore in the eastern bay containing fish cages. They were scanned for their rare cousin to no avail unfortunately since they were only 100-150m away. The birds were making their amusing Kenneth Williams “mmm” call occasionally as the males commented on each others dress sense. 40-50 more were spread around Dunstaffnage Bay to the west



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|------------------------|--|
| Goldeneye | 2 pairs were swimming on the far side of the bay |
| Red-breasted Merganser | 1 pair was noted |
| Common Guillemot | we moved on to Dunstaffnage Bay containing the yacht club and I noted one some way out |
| Black Guillemot | Ian found another of his targets just as I commented that we should be seeing the species in the bay. The smart ad. br. bird was diving frequently but showed well, a typical and expected encounter on the west coast |

Balvicar, Seil Island, Argyll & Bute

We arrived at the small west coast village at c.12.45 in dull, grey conditions. The quiet spot had become famous in the twitching community for Britain's first Snowy Egret turning up here. Even I had trekked over to see it, since I was in the area. Now, however, no-one was at the scene of the winter's largest twitch and there was no sign of it on the small rocky golf course from the road. After looking for vantage points we parked near the general stores and went onto the golf course.

We crossed the wooden bridge over a tidal creek and only then saw two other people. Initial hopes that they were birders seemed dashed when I saw one apparently staring at the sea wall in front of him and the other videoing the first. We moved round to check and Ian suddenly exploded with the explanation. Standing a few metres in front of the men was a small white egret!



We hurriedly scoped the egret at a range of 30m and I noted the bright yellow lores at the base of black dagger bill, familiar from the Birding World photos and diagnostic of non-breeding Snowy Egret. Incredibly, the egret was avidly hunting in the rock pools quite oblivious to the birders filming it at point blank range.

We approached as I whipped the Coolpix from the backpack. However, before I could use it the egret suddenly took off and flew up the creek towards us. It flapped close by us showing dazzling yellow feet and extensive yellow-green on the legs, flew over the bridge and dropped behind it. We moved back as the other birders approached. I crept up and was amazed to see the Snowy Egret stalking about in the dark creek just a few metres away. After noting pale flesh lower mandible (shown in Sibley) and very slightly shaggy nape, as well as the bright yellow lores and saddle *over* the bill, I started taking photos. First without the scope I crouched by the creek as the egret fed in front of me literally 2m away eating a writhing Sand Eel or similar. I put the camera on the scope but the bird was just too close!



One of the other birders then went round to be “in shot” with the egret so Ian joined him to demonstrate the tameness of this most obliging of megaticks. Tameness is apparently a characteristic of Snowy Egret.



We then pulled back and let the egret move out into the narrow creek where it stalked through the shallow water, prancing forward with wings flashing out for balance or to direct its prey and stabbing into the water. With the camera on the scope at a range of 20-25m I took some different close-ups.

At 13.20 we walked along the shore to see what else was about, hoping for Twite which had been reported by the other birders. The following were noted:

Shelduck

1-2 noted

Red-breasted Merganser	1 pair was fishing in the rocky bay
Oystercatcher	several along the shore
Redshank	1-2 along the shore
Common Gull	2-3 lovely smart birds were on the creek)
Pock Pipit	1-2 along the shore
Meadow Pipit	1 song flighting on the golf course, several others feeding
Hooded Crow	2-3 about

On our way back at 13.45 we stopped at the Snowy Egret again and this time I posed with it for a picture!



By 14.00 we were back on the road well satisfied with the performance by the egret and grateful that it had decided to return from Arran far to the south just in time for our trip and to give me an unexpected (British) tick after all

Dunstaffnage Bay, Oban

After lunch in Oban, where 18 moulting Turnstones were noted in the harbour with only Herring Gulls for company, we pulled in at the eastern bay with the fish cages at c.15.30. As drizzle turned to rain we noted that many more Eider had entered the bay and we started scanning.

Common Eider c.200 were spread about near and far

King Eider I worked along a mass of Eider on the far shore and within minutes stopped on one with a bright orange bill. At a range of 4-500m in the rain I blinked and took another look. Sure enough the abrupt triangular orange knob was set between the red bill and eggshell blue crown of an ad. % King Eider. I whistled to Ian who was

scanning from across the road and we zoomed in on the bird. For half an hour we watched the dapper but distant rare sea duck preening, squabbling with his slightly larger common cousins and finally settling to roost. I used the zoom eyepiece at 20x and 35x with camera at 4x to magnify the distant bird. I was very pleased to have seen only my second since the Ythan estuary bird (see 20/6/91) and add it to the trip list



At 16.00 we hit the road east for the two hour drive back to Doune.

Doune

After a quick cup of tea at Duncan's place, he drove Ian, myself and John Porter (who'd joined us for the weekend) out to his local Red Kite release area. From 19.00 to 20.00 we noted the following:

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| Red Kite | 3 were roosting in a tree in farmland not far north of the village. Further on 2 more were found perched lim and vertical in bare trees as the drizzle dampened their ardour. As we drove away from the site, a mass roost of some 15 birds was located in a copse close to the road. Some birds had been released here by Duncan but others had arrived from release sites elsewhere. Lovely raptors despite the drizzle and lethargy |
| Common Buzzard | 3 were about in the same area |
| Oystercatcher | as on almost all fields in Scotland, 1-2 pairs were breeding on a stubble field behind the village that was hosting a large finch flock - when they weren't roosting |
| Lapwing | 7-10 pairs were nesting on this one stubble field |

We then repaired to the pub to eat, drink and plan. An earnest inquisition into how to see "properly lekking" Black Grouse was intended to urge Duncan to show us the site where he'd recently bragged of having a dozen males. However, the site was "too far away", the males hadn't been lekking after all and he tried to convince us that the crouching,

strutting, turning and rearing of solitary Blackcocks was often all you did see. Duncan hadn't been to the Callander site in 2002! So we all had another whiskey and Ian and I planned to be at the Callander site before dawn to witness everything that was happening. We'd find the spectacle we wanted ourselves.

Callander

April 12th

Up at 04.45, Ian and I drove through the farm gate at 05.20 and parked on the verge at the foot of the hillside where the Blackcock had shown the previous dawn. By 07.30 we had seen what we'd wanted to.

Black Grouse After setting up the gear outside, we sat in the car with windows down through daybreak, listening and scanning both sides of the valley. By 06.00 things were looking even worse with no grouse on show at all. Either they were sluggabeds here or the action really was taking place at a new lek site. Out of the car in the cold light of a cloudy but dry dawn we scanned again and I then suggested walking down the road and scanning in the direction of the second farm, in case another valley was visible. By 06.20 we were walking up the track to Drumardoch Farm. The track went up and round a knoll that obstructed the view from the road and round this we scanned again. I aimed straight for a field of grazed green grass just below the croft c.800m up the undulating valley. A thick mat of juncus stretched across the top of the field before rough grass continued up to the distant hills, and there I found them. Two white bobs at the back of rotund black displaying birds stood out immediately in my bin's and I announced to Ian "there they are". The dual at dawn was going on in exactly the right setting. We cautiously walked along the road then climbed the steep side of the knoll and sat in the long grass with heads and optics protruding at 06.30. Still at a range of 4-500m we nevertheless took advantage of Leica and Swarovski magnification and enjoyed stunning views.





The two males were in full display, feathers puffed up with necks swelled out to three times the normal width. For the next half hour we sat and watched the two males lekking while I took photos. At magnifications of x80 to x140 in rather dull conditions I turned the sensitivity right up to ISO800 resulting in noisy pictures but at least I could use a shutter speed of 1/60s. The birds performed unaware of us. The lek comprised five to ten minute periods when both birds were fluffed up and walking about on the short grass bubbling away and rotating to display all aspects of their plumage to the other male and any female that might be watching. Occasional flutter jumps into the air increased their visibility further. Then one would approach the other with head lowered and there seemed to be an agreement to “joust”. The Blackcocks often then went to opposite ends of a short line of juncus, squared up then rushed at each other, disappearing into the juncus. We then couldn’t see what was happening but after a minute or so they’d emerge from one or both ends. Occasionally

they confronted each other outside the juncus and then it was a matter of mock lunging and avoidance without actual fighting although even very close approach was rare.

Several times during the half hour the birds calmed down and strolled about the grass pecking at it like chickens. The tail was sometimes lowered and the plumes allowed to relax but when one or other decided to start up again, both birds raised their standards in a second. After 28 years of birding, starting in the Yorkshire Dales in the 70's surrounded by Black Grouse without knowing it, I was finally in hills strewn with the birds, at dawn, in spring and watching a lek, albeit a small one. The myth had been confirmed at last. At 07.00 I felt I'd got enough shots to produce a memorable image (although on review I'd want to try again) and we crept away leaving the birds to carry on unperturbed. Although the croft of Drumardoch Farm was a rough little place I couldn't help envy the owner's position of tranquillity against the hills, waking up to the bubbling and squawking of lekking Black Grouse 200m away. As we walked back to the car another male was located on top of the previous day's original peak. Although not displaying he soon started walking down the hillside towards the road. As bright sunshine burst through a gap in the cloud, this bird shone out like a black jewel in the straw coloured grass, the blatant visibility to predators presumably adding to the daring of lekking males (see 14/4/02 to compare the camouflage of the male Red Grouse). I had just taken one distant shot at 07.10 when the grouse suddenly took off and whirred rapidly away from us and the nearby the lek

Curlew	several pairs were around us as we watched the lek with warbling displays completing the upland atmosphere perfectly
Skylark	only 1-2 singing
Meadow Pipit	plenty
Reed Bunting	1 male was seen by the road briefly
Raven	1 flew over

Doone

Before returning to Duncan's cottage Ian and I returned to the stubble field at the edge of the village to look for the finch flock. In fifteen minutes we noted the following in bright, warm sunshine.

Oystercatcher	as the previous day
Lapwing	ditto
Chaffinch	30+
Brambling	1 winter % was seen in a tree by the lane although "plenty" were reportedly present
Goldfinch	10-20
Linnet	100-150 were feeding on the stubble, frequently flushing in small groups

Siskin up into the trees and bushes before drifting back down to feed
a few % % and & & were often feeding on a peanut bag outside Duncan's kitchen window

Blackford, SW of Perth

After a light breakfast the four of us packed up for a weekend in the Highlands and were on the road north by 09.00, Duncan and John Porter in the latter's car leading the way. The original plan to go via Loch Tay and scan for eagles was changed to scanning for them from the A9 north of Pitlochry since the weather seemed good and Duncan felt confident. However, we soon stopped for another species right by the A9 and the Gleneagles Hotel.

Pink-footed Goose To the SW of the village Duncan had seen a mass of grey geese in a ploughed field so we stopped to scan at c.09.20. Duncan estimated c.700 Pink-feet were scattered across the harrowed soil and I noted small pink bills with dark base and tip, dark heads and upper necks and pink legs

Barnacle Goose I hadn't even set my scope up by the time Duncan or John had located a couple of Barnacles in the far corner of the field. I quickly scoped the lovely smart black, white and grey geese, noting the broad white face and delightfully un-Brent or Canada-like whitish breast contrasting with black neck. The birds were feeding close to the Pink-feet and may have been wintering with them or had simply joined up on the general move north

Strathord, A9

Duncan later told us the name of the area in which we saw more Pinkfeet as we drove north of Perth.

Pink-footed Goose another 4-500 were seen at distance as rotund pale grey lumps in fields

Drumochter Pass, A9

We pulled into every layby from Dalnacardoch Lodge to the Dalwhinnie distillery, south and north of the pass, to scan the low surrounding hills for eagles. By the time we continued uninterrupted from Dalwhinnie at c.11.30, after an hour of driving and scanning, we'd seen the following in bright conditions cooled by a cutting wind:

Sparrowhawk 1 drifted over the road near Dalwhinnie
Common Buzzard c.10 were located and checked, soaring near and far over the hills
Golden Eagle At the northern end of the pass we stopped to scan some high rounded hills looming over the eastern side of the road. Within

minutes Duncan and/or John picked up a probable eagle low over a bleak hilltop. Ian and I followed directions with bin's soon latching onto a large raptor. As it glided away on long straight wings held in a very shallow 'V' I noted splayed primaries. We both then rushed to get scopes on it but it had slipped low over the rocky scree and disappeared from view. Although not a specifically identifiable view, the size and shape made it an eagle and it therefore had to be a Golden. I was glad to add it to the list for the Grouse & Raptor trip but Ian was less happy. This was his first in Britain and he felt unable to tick it on such a view. I convinced him that it was logical to agree that it was a Golden Eagle, place it on the trip list and still not tick it off on his British list which requires personally confirmed identification. Frustrated he earnestly hoped for another one over the weekend, even though this was my first ever in the Cairngorm range

Peregrine

I picked up 1 dashing in to mob a Raven high over a hill in the pass. Just before the eagle however, I noticed a large pale falcon perched on heather close to the west side of the road, coming out of the pass. Ian flashed to the others ahead and pulled into the next layby. By the time Duncan and John reached us I was perplexed by a falcon that initially resembled a Merlin but had the size of a Peregrine with almost white forehead, pale crown, dark but thin moustacial and pale breast running into fairly modest dark streaks, not bars, on the flanks and belly. I introduced it as an 'odd Peregrine' then fetched Ian's copy of CBG and the camera to record the bird. While I took some pictures at 150m range the others dismissed Saker due to the pale under's and dark eye patch but more to the point, Gyr also, due to the white neck patch of Peregrine, pale breast and streaked belly. Unfortunately the falcon was facing us concealing the wing extension.



The bird soon took off, winging about the road showing distinctly grey/brown upper's; the bird had very much the form of Peregrine. Later John referred me to the pale juvenile falcons illustrated on p. 71 of the MacMillan Birder's Guide. The moustache alone pointed to Peregrine

Oystercatcher	plenty about as usual
Curlew	several displaying and flying about
Lapwing	scattered all along the route
Stonechat	1 noted near the road at one stop
Raven	a pair over a hill in the pass, being mobbed by the first Peregrine

Aviemore, Highland

As soon as we left the A9 at the ski resort we knew we were in Speyside.

Osprey 4 birds drifted low overhead as we set off south towards Kincaig

Kincaig, Loch Insh

We pulled into the carpark at the north end of the loch at c.12.15. Duncan wanted to see an Osprey's nest here and a recent Lesser Scaup, which had gone. During our opening 20 minutes in Speyside we noted the following:

Osprey	1 was on the large round stick nest on top of a dead pine just beyond the small cemetery. Presumably the male was perched in a large Scots Pine nearby
Lesser Redpoll	a flock of "conifer finches" by the carpark contained 30+ redpolls. While John and Ian sought Mealies I noted some nice dark brown and buff Lessers

Siskin a few were trilling in the pines. Little did I know how prolific this species would be over the weekend

A possible target for the end of the trip was reported on the pager:

12.53 - *Perths. Ad. Red-breasted Goose near Kinross in field ½ mile W. of M90 Jn.7 with Pinkfeet at 12.40.*

Avielochan

After grabbing sandwiches in Aviemore we moved straight on towards Loch Garten but the sight of a gold and black grebe on a lochan by the road at c.13.15 caused another sudden stop, reverse, pull-over and photo-shoot.

Slavonian Grebe one gorgeous br. pl. bird was fishing just 40m from the road. Its golden ear tufts, blood red eye, and russet flanks shone in the sun



Loch Vaa

This classic Speyside site for Slavonian Grebe enticed the others for a walk but by now I was feeling the effects of two dawn starts plus Scottish beer and fine malts from the night before and dozed in the car like a dude.

Siskin several singing high in the conifers

Crossbill sp. I noted 2 crossbills calling as they flew over the carpark. When the others returned they boasted of superb scope views of 'definite Scottish Crossbills' in the Caledonian forest near the loch. I reported that a PhD student friend of Geoff Morgan was currently concluding that all Scottish Crossbills are Parrot Crossbills but this didn't deter them. I was content to let it lie but by the end of the day we would be forced to address the

question for ourselves in Abernethy Forest.

14.14 - Argyll. Snowy Egret 12 miles S. of Oban on Seil Island at Balvicar roosting on pond opposite general stores 2.10.

Boat of Garten

At c.14.45 we pulled over by the flashes on the approach to the village which always seemed to be teeming with birdlife in the spring and summer. During a five minute scan from the car I noted the following:

Little Grebe	1 on the open water
Wigeon	100+ were grazing on the far bank
Teal	1-2 pairs
Oystercatcher	several pairs
Lapwing	ditto
Redshank	1-2 pairs
Black-headed Gull	20-30 in br. pl.

14.56 - Argyll. Drake King Eider 3 miles NE of Oban E. of Dunbeg off A85 opposite Dunstaffnage fish farm on rocks with Eiders at 2.55pm

Loch Garten RSPB, Abernethy Forest

By 15.00 we were at the visitor centre to check on the routine for viewing the Capercaillie lek. We had given ourselves two dawns with a third if needed to see and hopefully photograph lekking Caper's, my second target of the trip. The expanse of deep, conifer strewn heather in the clearing between the centre and the Osprey nest tree at the edge of the forest was empty and I could scarcely imagine the spectacle we hoped for. Of the two "dead cert's" here one did perform during our visit.

Goldeneye	3-4 were on the usually birdless loch itself
Goosander	John picked out 2-3 with my scope and I looked at a &
Osprey	The & was sitting on the nest, apparently still awaiting the return of the regular % . The warden was strutting about like an expectant father with his knickers in a right twist. "What would he do if a male didn't appear?!". Duncan pointed out that a male had never failed to appear in the 50 years that this famous nest had been occupied. Still it got the punters going



Chaffinch lots were scrabbling for seeds at the feeders by the centre
 Siskin several were visiting the feeders and singing in the conifers

To our amazement, and contrary to my promise to Ian that he would have Crested Tit UTB by the time we reached the B&B, no Crested Tits were evident. Like Duncan, I had presumed they were guaranteed here. Surprised, we were nevertheless confident it would only be a matter of time and continued on into the forest to prove it.

Forest Lodge, Abernethy Forest

A walk through the extensive forest around the lodge, deep in Abernethy, again failed to produce Crested Tit although John claimed one briefly from his car in front as we drove in. From 16.00 to 17.30 we walked the trails SE of the lodge and noted the following:

Mistle Thrush 1 was seen in a grassy clearing near the lodge
 Common Crossbill It wasn't long before calling crossbills were heard above us in the open, mature Scots Pine forest. The familiar "chip chip" came and went but soon it was obvious birds were perched and feeding. Moving through the heather and bilberry (blaeberry up here) Duncan, John and I were soon onto a cluster of 2 % % and 3 & & crossbills at the top of a pine. The key features of bill size and shape and call were concentrated on and I was soon zeroed in on the decidedly slender, rather pointed and finch-like bill of "Common", shown nicely for the ad. & in CBG)
 Scottish Crossbill (as Ian joined us with his scope the birds moved off but more were calling around and beyond the path. During the next half hour we looked closely at 15-20 birds feeding in groups of 4-6 in the tops of pines. Ian did a good job of scoping several. With the slim bill of Common in mind I noted that several birds showed decidedly blunter, deeper bills which were nevertheless still basically conical and symmetrical without the "full beak" bulge of Parrotbill's lower mandible. These fitted Scottish but the discussion below is

probably correct in concluding that it is not possible to be more than 50% sure in the field. These birds were probably as close as it got and that would do for the trip list

Parrot Crossbill

On several occasions a very different, much deeper dull toned “parm” call was heard which seemed more like a distant vintage car horn honking than the usual clipped “chup”. Since only crossbills were about we felt this could be Parrotbill. Fairly frantic efforts to scope birds as they clambered amongst pine needles and cones resulted in very good views of %% and && , still of the two basic “bill modes”, until John suddenly found a large, block-headed & . Directions led my bin’s and Ian’s scope to the bird and I immediately saw a much more hefty bill with lower mandible bulge. The upper and lower edges of the bill were parallel before a blunt curve in to cross at the tips. Combined with the clearly greater size and large head (Duncan and John referred to lack of forehead but this wasn’t borne out by CBG) convinced everyone that this bird was a & Parrot Crossbill. Duncan also referred to a bull-necked % nearby earlier but I didn’t see that. Soon the bird flew to another tree and was lost. The question of Scottish was thus glossed over somewhat but the extremes of Common and Parrot seemed to be clear enough.

The imponderable question of crossbills in the Highlands had been discussed without firm conclusion on Surfbirdsnews. In fact Scottish Crossbill is still considered a separate species (eg BWP and CBG) and will *probably* continue to be so.

John Cantelo recently commented on Surfbirdsnews: “British Birds' (Jan 2002 p4-11) deals with the status of Parrot Crossbill in the Abernethy Forest. In brief, the study found that of 64 crossbills trapped in the study period (1995 - 2001) only 5 were 'Scottish' Crossbill, 11 were Common Crossbill, 46 were Parrot Crossbill and two unidentified. The article concludes that in the Scottish Highlands, birdwatchers should be particularly careful with crossbill identification. Bill size and shape of Parrot Crossbill are so similar to those of Scottish Crossbill that visual identification is extremely difficult. Sonograms of tape recorded birds will assist in their reliable identification. What is ‘Scottish Crossbill’? There seem to be four possibilities:

- a) a separate species, Scottish Crossbill. As I understand it this status is, to a large degree, dependent upon it being an isolated form. That the majority of crossbills in a core part of 'Scottish' Crossbill habitat turned out to be Parrot Crossbill during the study period rather questions the idea that 'Scottish' Crossbill has been so isolated as hitherto thought. I can't see any reason to suppose that the situation as described should be unique. That Parrot Crossbill isn't represented in Scottish collections proves little given that this is a mere 'snapshot' in the life of a species.
- b) a subspecies of Parrot Crossbill. This was the status quo ante and, in my view, seems the most reasonable position. As studies of Galapagos finches show, bill size is quite plastic and can change surprisingly quickly under evolutionary pressure. In a

comparatively isolated population of Parrot Crossbill, periodically injected by an influx of birds from the continent, bill shape could alter over a few generations.

- c) The result of hybrid Common x Parrot Crossbill population. Who knows?
- d) A race of Common Crossbill - which would include Parrot Crossbill - after all this seems to be the approach adopted by the Americans to their own complex crossbill population.”

By 18.00 I was dead on my feet and gratefully fell into bed at 21.30 ready for a 4.45 start.

Loch Garten RSPB, Abernethy Forest

April 13th

Having been told that the Caper's show on clear frosty mornings, not on dull, drizzly ones, I'd noted with glee stars shining on an icy pre-dawn Speyside when I'd got up. Unsure of the likely turnout or rush for prime positions we arrived in the carpark at the invited time of 05.25. Ten cars were already parked however and we joined a queue of 10-12 birders in the dark. At 05.30 a young lady warden opened the gate and we filed into the centre. As the first rays of light were starting to illuminate the heather and conifers we were told of the plan to issue tickets for 4-5 at a time to view the main clearing, where the male Capercaillies generally displayed, from the tiny Osprey observation "forward hide". Our tickets made us the fourth group to go - not good.

After reading all those mouth-watering pager reports of male Caper's lekking in front of the RSPB visitor centre or hide (see 3, 24, 27/4/01 and 4/5/01) I was finally in that centre, at dawn, in April, ready and waiting.

We continued to scan and wait in hope until, at 06.00, Duncan picked up a male far out in the heather and scattered pines to the SE of the centre. Everyone scrambled to get onto it and I was soon looking at a thick blackish neck protruding from the heather with a blackish sail, or fin, or tail behind it - my first proper male Capercaillie, not a great view but a displaying male Capercaillie! Lining up through a viewing slot and between various intervening trees and bushes in order to scope the Caper' at a range of 250-300m was not easy and there was a distinctly twitch like scramble for a view. The wardens asked those watching it to give others a look but I'd waited too long, worked too hard, valued it too highly and knew too well the frustration that would follow less than maximized viewing opportunity; I kept quiet and kept soaking up the image. The Capercaillie was walking very sedately back and forth in the open, its neck was stretched nearly vertically upwards, projecting its heavy head, with shaggy throat, skywards. The tail emerged from the deep heather like a huge vertical black lily pad, broad and rounded but coming to a blunt point at the peak. At the base of the neck the white headlamp shoulder patches could be made out occasionally but the body of the bird was submerged in the sea of Caledonian ground cover. Although I could barely make out the ivory-like bill I presumed the bird was uttering its nutty clicking, grinding and famous cork popping "song".

While I watched the bird Ian was being a gentleman and allowing little old ladies to have a look only to find that the bird had then moved. After 15-20 minutes of intermittent viewing the Capercaillie was lost from view and I relaxed, very happy to have seen the

second target, as good as a high value lifer in its exciting novelty. Again, Ian was not happy and I strongly recommended he adopted my selfish approach. The little old ladies had already forgotten his sacrifice while he had virtually dipped out!

Photos of the Caper' were impossible at that range in that dim light, so I contented myself with the male Osprey that had appeared the previous afternoon (much to the warden's personal relief).

During this time the wardens had taken the first few groups to the forward hides even though the Caper' couldn't be seen and no others were showing. At c.06.40 it was our turn and we had a quick look at the Osprey on her nest through the swastika-bearing Nazi U-boat binoculars trained on her! After a quick scan of the empty clearing from a 3 man hide next door we returned.

We joined the scanning birders hoping the lone displaying male would reappear. Then, at c.06.45 he did - right in front of us! The Capercaillie had approached unseen and was suddenly making his way between us and the Osprey tree at a range of c.100m! To my annoyance a load of sluggabed dudes then arrived and were immediately taken to the forward hide, coinciding perfectly with the converging Capercaillie. For a few frustrating seconds I tried to find the bird in the Coolpix and then abandoned it to simply scope the thing. Now I could see the sharp, powerful white bill jutting upwards plus red eye comb and white flecks on the blackish tail which was sloping out of the heather at 45°. Within seconds the stonking bird disappeared behind pines, presumably smack in front of the forward hide.

My, probably rather urgent, request to go to the forward hide was denied and so we remained with the majority in the centre wondering what the bird was doing. For the next 25 minutes we scanned and waited as the crystal clear dawn gradually became enveloped in thick fog! As visibility worsened we were grateful for what we'd seen although I still had not a single picture of the target.

Then, at c.07.10 I was given another chance as someone announced that the male Caper's was in a tree between us and the Osprey nest. Although it was only viewable from a tight angle at the entrance end of the centre, everyone piled in. I set up at the back, looking between heads and focused on a great bulk cowering amongst Scots pine needles, presumably the same Caper' had stopped displaying and felt relaxed enough to feed right in front of us.

Ironically the fog now obscured what would have been a stunning view but the image of the huge grouse, scaled by virtue of the nest of pine needles in which he was sitting, through the intervening pines in the early morning mist, had a magic all of its own. I took my time with the camera as the great grouse looked about or greedily munched, presumably on pine needles, and by 07.30 I'd taken 34 photos. Despite the fog the rotund form of the bird was clear, with solid bill set in the shaggy great head, throat feathers still fluffed out, slim red comb immediately over the eye, white shoulder spot, short paler folded primaries and a hefty white crescent of blotches on the flanks of otherwise dark

underparts which hadn't been seen earlier, and long, broad tail with glossy sheen, were all discernible. Image enhancement later brightened up the pictures so that improved contrast and colour provided almost respectable shots of a male Capercaillie.



By 07.45 we were content with what we'd seen, I was relieved to have got some pictures of a male Caper's at least and we set off back to the B&B for a hearty full Scottish breakfast - perfect.

Moormore, Rothiemurchus Forest

Rested and refreshed we ventured back out into Speyside to take advantage of a cloudless, sunny day and look for Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting on the high tops. Ian had never seen either and I was keen to add a photo of this specialized grouse to the trip collection.

On the way, Ian and I pulled over at the start of the track to Moormore, the site of my very first birding in Speyside in 1984. We stood by the road amongst the Scots Pines for five minutes expecting to hear the trill of a Crested Tit but again none was forthcoming. I had never failed three times in a row before and couldn't understand it.

Cairngorm National Park

We parked at the lower car park to the NE of the main ski lift (now mountain railway!) centre at c.09.30 and headed after Duncan and John straight up the ridge on the east side of Coire na Ciste below the Munro of Cnap Coire na Spreidhe (1151m). When above the corrie we turned east straight up the rocky slope into winter snow, onto the plateau below the Munro and enjoyed the stunning view, over coffee, from a tor-like rock (itself at 1028m), high above Strath Nethy.



We then walked back down across the steep corrie of Coire Laogh Mor at c.12.15. I'd never been east of Cairngorm before and Duncan reckoned it would be quieter since the skiers were still using the main mountain. We were back at the car by c.13.10 having had a great upland walk.

Pink-footed Goose We admired the crystal clear panorama of high snow and rock with heather and forestry far below from the “tor” from 11.40 until 12.00. There was not a breath of wind up there and when we stopped talking the silence was profound, you could almost hear the sun striking the firm snow. Suddenly a musical sound drifted in as three skeins of geese came honking over the mountains from the east. 200 birds in total were crossing over the massif as easily as moving around the Norfolk coastal marshes and were presumably making for the Moray Firth visible in the distance. As they kept to their formations and uttering constant contact calls they beautifully

conjured up the determination, capability and wildness of birds

Golden Eagle

At 10.50 we were spread out looking for Ptarmigan as we worked our way up the steep rocky slope to the plateau when John called out a probable eagle floating in high overhead from the east. I followed the direction of observation with bins and soon picked up the dark, long winged bird of prey. As Duncan shouted back that it was an eagle I noted the sheer area of the wings, width as well as length, relative to the slim, square, closed tail and fine head, and agreed. As Ian wrestled with his scope some way off I did the same. Thankfully, and unusually, after the eagle had passed over once towards Cairngorm it turned and drifted very slowly right over us again, moving north. I used this time to try and get the scope onto it and after several failed attempts, succeeded. A very nice view revealed all dark under's, with paler greyer base to secondaries and tail feathers contrasting with dark underwing coverts and terminal band making the eagle an adult. It was in cruising mode with primaries angled back but the 'hands' still looked very broad with pronounced fingers giving a distinct heavy, powerful eagle jizz. This was my first eagle on the mountain after many years of visits and most gratifying. Ian was fortunate to have seen his second in two days in the Cairngorms, although he still hadn't managed to scope this one.

Ptarmigan

We carried on up the slope until, at 11.05, Ian called out "Ptarmigan" as he and John simultaneously disturbed one in front of them. Duncan and I converged and a quick scan with bin's revealed a round white ball next to a boulder 15m up the slope. The bird was still in almost completely white winter plumage and was facing me, taking cover from the others behind an ice-blasted rock. This was my first not in full summer plumage.





Noting the lack of eye combs on this lovely, demure & I took a load of security shots then moved forward and round towards the others for a side-on. Like the Stover Bittern, the Ptarmigan remained perfectly still in good light and I relished the photography.

While the others now relaxed and chatted, drinking coffee just behind me I moved forward filling the field of view and zooming out, taking the best shots of the trip, as my obliging subject sat perfectly still.

It is possible she had eggs nearby and was also reluctant to move since there were eagles about and I remained a mere 10-15m from her. After what I thought was a full set of photos at a luxurious 1/250s. shutter speed and low ISO sensitivity of 200 I wound the scope down. Of course the Ptarmigan then started to move (the photo-shoot was over). She turned her back and stepped into the sun stopping again to pose beautifully. In a flash I reactivate the gear and caught the mountain gamebird, even managing the sun's reflection in her blackcurrant eye!

The Ptarmigan soon continued to sidle off between the rocks, melting into the scene perfectly. It was clear that her stage of moult precisely matched the degree of snow cover and John presumed this would be controlled as simply as daylight length since temperature would be too variable - perfect evolution. To our surprise no more were encountered on the plateau and we were doubly grateful for this cracking speciality

Red Grouse

The expected and hoped for cousin finally completed the trip grouse list when a deep maroon % with vivid eye combs, followed by a browner & flew in front of us down the steep side to Coire Laogh Mor on the descent

Meadow Pipit

several on the lower slopes

Greenland Wheatear 1 % was flushed by John and Ian above Coire Laogh Mor as we spread out to find more Ptarmigan. I went after it and briefly noted large, stocky looking form with rich black face mask contrasting with striking white super', darker blue/grey upper's and richer apricot breast. The bird was clearly of the race *leucorhoa*, moving north over the mountains

We moved on to the main ski centre and after a fruitless look for Snow Buntings around the car park, repaired to the bar to enjoy the *après bird* with a well earned pint of chilled lager.

Loch Morlich

As we had driven in Duncan had clocked Red-throated Divers on this large, beautiful but busy loch below the mountains. We called in at c.14.30 for a quick scan.

Red-throated Diver 4 ad. br. pl. birds were located by scope at the eastern end. We drove back to get closer as they swam out towards the centre. Fine black and white hindneck stripes and rich red throat patch were fairly clear at a range of 2-300m on this enigmatic Highland species



Loch an Eilen

Ian and I collected more sandwiches on the way through Aviemore and continued on to this beautiful, forested spot for another crack at Crested Tit while Duncan and John looked for a Great Grey Shrike on Tulloch Moor. We ate a late lunch by the loch at c. 15.00. Duncan and John then arrived having seen nothing of the roaming shrike and we walked slowly round the loch. We actually walked right round the loch which was larger than expected. Ian and I lagged behind the others who'd set off back to the B&B by the time we trudged into the carpark at 17.30. Despite warm, sunny weather and plenty of other local passerines, the Highland tit gave us the slip yet again.



Goldeneye
Falcon sp.

a couple of pairs were scoped far across the water
a small falcon dashed over my head and out across the loch looking very like a Merlin. By the time I'd reached the shore, the falcon was moving away over the far pines, still looking short-winged and stocky. A frustrating near miss for the Grouse & Raptor trip list

Goldcrest

several singing in the mature pinewoods

Coal Tit ditto
Chaffinch many throughout the woods were almost as abundant as their small relative
Siskin trilling and zitting green finches were literally ubiquitous in the Scots Pines in the warm sunny conditions. I was actually getting fed up with them by the end, particularly as the speciality was nowhere to be seen

16.40 - Highland. Subad. White-tailed Eagle SW of Tomatin in Findhorn valley 3pm. Also Golden Eagle.

Grantown-on-Spey

Despite plenty of daylight left by early evening we had birded enough for the day. On the way back to the B&B we drove on to the original Capercaillie site and listened for Crested Tit again, to no avail, again! By 18.15 it was time for the pub to eat, drink and list the day's tremendous sightings. John had slipped away to Inverness for a drinking and letching session with Colin Croke et. al.

Loch Garten RSPB, Abernethy Forest

April 14th

Having seen a displaying male Caper' the previous morning, Duncan dude Orr-Ewing valued a lie-in more highly than trying for better Caper' views. Ian and I could only use the dawns we'd planned for ourselves and were up even earlier at 04.45. Worried by overcast, mild conditions we reached the carpark at 05.10 and were first in the queue with the plan in place. I'd grab the best viewing window while Ian secured tickets 1 and 2 for the forward hide.

The first news of the morning was negative. Because the newly arrived male Osprey had looked nervous the day before when he (presumably) saw comings and goings around the hides, there would be no visits to the forward hide while he was around the nest. Anyway, there was no sign of any Capercaillies so far, even on the camera at the lek centre. Coupled with mild, dull conditions I wondered if Duncan had made the right decision. Ian and I waited, scanning the open area and hoping.

The situation changed suddenly at c.06.30 when the young lady warden called Juliet excitedly announced that a male Capercaillie was displaying in the usual clearing to the left. A scramble for views from a glass side door was useless as the bird was beyond a dense wall of pines. The "chief" warden tried to decide if the male Osprey would mind while Juliet arranged to take the first four, including Ian and I, to the forward hide. While the "chief" warden pondered some more, Juliet led four of us to the tiny hide overlooking the wide clearing to the left which was largely invisible from the main hide.

Once at the narrow window I scanned left and picked up the male Capercaillie just 100m away as he stuck out of the heather like a giant reptile. A blistering scope view revealed just the tree-trunk-like black-green neck thrust upwards with the Caper's block-head tilted backwards forcing the shaggy beard to protrude beneath the sharply hooked ivory

mandibles. These were held open as if the Capercaillie wanted to savage something and, although I couldn't hear it, I realized the great grouse was probably.....“singing”.

While others enjoyed the view I manipulated the camera onto the scope but before I could aim, the Caper' took off. I gasped as I missed my best chance only to go into battle stations as the bird landed in a small Scots Pine just 50m in front of us! As it landed the Capercaillie spread its raised tail in a great fan of triumphant display, immediately lowering it again as it relaxed on its perch.

With the warden telling us our five minutes was up I struggled to locate the bird, focus the scope, adjust the camera zoom, confirm that I was on manual with spot metering selected, set a reasonable shutter speed in the very dull conditions and take a photograph. From 06.39 to 06.44 I took a number of pictures only to gasp at the under exposure, since I hadn't increased the CCD sensitivity. As the bird sat like a giant coucal or turkey on the pine branch, I aimed, focused and fired. Still the results were too dim and Ian suggested I switch to the fixed Kowa to ease the directional problem. I did this, turning the ISO to maximum at 800, and then we had to go. With my pulse racing from the challenge I walked back to the main hide - happy.

Once home, the software was able to adjust exposure and colour balance to turn sinister silhouettes into acceptable frame fillers of an adult male Capercaillie perched right in front of me! Amazingly the Leica shots at ISO200 turned out better colour balanced and sharper than the old Kowa ones at ISO800, despite massive under exposure.

The form and plumage of the male Capercaillie was wonderfully clear with bulbous head sporting hefty ivory hooked bill and relatively subtle red eye comb, thickly feathered grey/black neck passing through a green crescent on the breast before continuing onto the belly and tail. These were both marked with white, large crescent patches on the belly and flanks and spots and streaks on the neatly folded tail which belied its famous area when spread. A warm brown tone covered the broad but short wings and mantle with stubby brown primaries protruding; the white shoulder patch stood out prominently. I was surprised by the short, stocky pale grey legs with long thick toes and long claws.

Back in the centre I set up again while the wardens tried to get other groups through the forward hide for the close view. However, while group five was preparing to go I suddenly saw what had to be the same male Capercaillie fly fast and low between us and the Osprey tree, making for the area to the far right. Huge, long body, stretched out by the long, broad tail and outstretched neck and great square, relatively slim wings were noted before the bird landed in thick heather amongst young pines (where it or another male had displayed the previous morning).

From 07.00 until 07.25 the Caper' was visible far to the right amongst young pines. It initially moved about slowly with its head and neck held upright but soon remained still under a pine with only its white bill and shoulder patches gleaming out like stars in a night sky of heather and conifer. At a range of 250-300m I could do nothing but wait.

Meanwhile a female was seen from the large side window that had an obscured view of the large clearing to the left. I went over and minutes later saw the large speckled brown grouse flying rapidly on square wings, over the clearing towards the Osprey tree, disappearing behind the trees in front of us. Rufous tones, separating it from a Greyhen were noted before I returned to the front slots in case she continued in front of the centre. The bird must have gone into the forest as no more was seen of her. Ironically, my worst Caper' views on this trip were therefore of a female, the only Caper's I'd seen remotely well on all previous trips!

I returned to watch the distant male while Ian went outside to look for Crested Tits. While he was gone the male suddenly flew in to half the distance at 07.25. He started stalking through the heather more or less between the centre and the Osprey tree giving very nice views of his deep bottle green head and neck with white bill and shoulder patch and red eye comb.

While Ian was still missing I followed the Caper' in the scope for another 10-15 minutes, taking more photos and hoping he would start displaying. However, when the warden announced that another male was displaying at the far side of the main clearing and asked if anyone would like *another* trip to the forward hide I jumped at the chance, forsaking *possible* close views of the first displaying male. For a moment it looked as though the return of the male Osprey would scupper the plan but, fortunately he flew off again. Ian returned just as we were going. He dumped his scope and slipped in behind, unnoticed.

We were back in the forward "photography hide" a minute later and immediately got onto a another fine male stalking about with tail fanned c.200m away. With too many people here however, the warden Juliet took us to the forward Osprey observation hide next door. The first male was visible from here but had moved away, still not displaying. From 07.40 until 07.45 I tried to photograph him again but managed nothing of note. Meanwhile we put Juliet straight on a few things about the big cheese RSPB guy (Duncan) whose arrival had made her nervous the day before. When I accepted her request for some prints of my Capercaillie photos she said we could stay as long as we wanted. We also admitted that we weren't RSPB head honchos ourselves - eventually.

At 07.55 we returned to the photography hide and for the next 10-15 minutes I concentrated on a third male that had started displaying near the second. Both were at the far edge of the traditional clearing either side of a large, flat-topped boulder. The third bird "sailed" slowly out from behind intervening trees and I took a good many shots trying to capture the classic, had up, tail spread pose. All the while the bird was "singing" with his turtle-like nipping bill chattering open and closed. We'd heard the fourth male present, via video link, and so had the popping, clicking and grinding sound in mind. Like the Black Grouse, both these males occasionally "flutter-jumped", lifting their huge bodies out of the heather on extravagantly flapped wings before plumping back down a second later. The video link had revealed the loud fluttering sound as the fourth bird jumped. I ignored reports of a second female being seen far to the right and followed the Caper' as he marauded back and forth through the heather. I couldn't explain the similarity, but here was something shark-like about the sinister blackish beast drifting

about half submerged. A dinosaur comparison made more sense with powerful, thick neck, sharp beak and the fanned tail like a Dimetrodon's dorsal fin. I eventually gave up my position in the corner of the hide at last happy that I'd managed one or two shots of a fully displaying male Capercaillie. Although too distant, dull and grainy to compare with the myriad great ones published, the pictures nonetheless recorded my first encounter with displaying males.



During the excitement of the Capercaillie watching I had paid only scant attention to the “main attraction”. The Ospreys had mated at least once while we'd been there, forming a fine picture on the nest, facing us, both with their wings out-stretched. I'd actually taken the scope off the Capercaillie for this but been too slow and missed the fleeting event.

We headed back to the B&B very well suited with the second dawn's results. We'd have been mad not to have made the effort and sick as parrots when we'd heard three males and two females had been showing, with a sixth in the woods. With 31 males lekking in Abernethy in 2001 according to the RSPB, I wondered how close we'd been to other, undisclosed leks.

Moormore

After another fine full Scottish breakfast we packed the car and set off for our last day in the Highlands. On our way up to the ski lift centre to try again for Snow Buntings, Duncan (now in our car) suggested a look at the Ospreys at this scenic open site.

Osprey

The ♂ was immediately seen sitting on the nest in the wide heather covered clearing, ringed with the Caledonian pines of Rothiemurchus beneath the hills and mountains. We scanned and soon picked up the ♀, perched in a low dead pine 200m away. Surprisingly a third Osprey was then noticed by Ian, perched almost in the heather. Duncan couldn't understand how the territorial ♀ was tolerating the other and soon the first ♀ (with little breast band compared to the female) took off and swung low over the second. This bird didn't move however, and the flying bird soared off, either humiliated or unconcerned

Black Grouse

As we scanned I suddenly noticed a gracefully curved black neck on a round black body protruding from the top of a tall Scots Pine between us and the Osprey nest. Suddenly reminded of the oddly arboreal nature of these grouse I pointed it out to the others. Ian was about to focus his scope on the Blackcock when it flew out of the tree top and whirred right across the clearing. Rapidly flapped square wings with striking white undersides were clear with outstretched neck and tail streaming out in front and behind. The bird landed in the top of another pine, right by the road, still 200m from us. Again it looked about in elegant form.

Moments later a second Blackcock appeared in flight. This one flew in front of the first, going on into the extensive forest across the road. The first then followed. As if this wasn't enough, Duncan then picked up a third Blackcock perched in a smaller, dead pine, beyond the Osprey nest. This one was relaxed with lyre tail extended gracefully below it. A lek had clearly just ended in the clearing, probably in a patch of fresh green grass not far beyond the Osprey nest.

I loved the scenario and was delighted with this bonus. I wondered how many more were in the area, Abernethy Forest, the national stronghold of Black Grouse was just over the hills to the north and the habitat in the whole region was perfect

Curlew at least one pair was displaying nearby, finishing the dramatic atmosphere perfectly

Cairngorm

We parked at the “mountain railway terminal” and walked out across the heather covered hillside opposite for half an hour in cold rain, checking the snow patches for Snow Bunting. A check of the carparks and scree slopes around the buildings followed.

Red Grouse 1 % and 2 && were flushed from near the path and flew low and fast back past us. Crowing birds were then heard and 2 more separate %% were picked up in the heather. One on a mound showed brilliant scarlet combs and luxurious rusty/mauve plumage but I hadn't bought my scope or camera. A photo of the fourth grouse species was still needed

Our birding in Speyside thus finished a success with all four species of grouse including 5-6 Capercaillies, lots of Crossbills and Ospreys and a Golden Eagle. The first pager report on the Loch Garten Caper' viewing since “the season” started had been the one I'd actually attended!

10.39 - Highland. 6 Capercaillie (4 males) Loch Garten RSPB visitor centre 5.30-8am. Tomorrow meet in carpark 5.30am.

The three of us then set off for the Findhorn and the heather moors along Glen Kyllachy to the west where there was a good chance of Golden Eagle (Ian still hoped for a scope view), Hen Harrier and Merlin. The Slavonians on the beautiful Loch Ruthven beyond were worth a visit.

Slochd Pass, A9

At midday we stopped at the rocky road cutting between Aviemore and Inverness in case a Ring Ouzel was singing.

Northern Wheatear 1 % was smart but not as striking as the Greenland on the mountains

Findhorn Valley

At c.12.15 we turned off the A9 at Tomatin and set off along the minor road running up Strathdearn along the River Findhorn. I had never seen an eagle in this well known “eagle glen” and all eyes were peeled as we drove along. By 13.45 we'd reached the top of the

glen to find a little cluster of dwellings. These were either impressive or disgraceful. A traditional, very low single storey square-U-shaped building comprised probably six cottages enclosing a courtyard and set firm against the weather that would howl down the glen. It had been beautifully modernized. A large, modern, but sympathetic stone-coloured house was being built nearby but two white modern “ice cream block” bungalows spoiled the place terribly. They were empty and I hoped (no doubt forlornly) that they would be demolished. I noticed that the awesome wild Highland scenery was frequently spoiled by such rubbish. In the narrow, wonderfully remote flat valley floor surrounded by low yet steep hills we ate sandwiches in dull, cool drizzle before returning to the road through Glen Kyllachy to Loch Ruthven.

Common Buzzard 5-10 were seen and checked

Golden Eagle

At c.13.15 Duncan called a raptor low over a hilltop in a very narrow part of the glen at the uppermost plantations. I pulled into a handy layby and we piled out. The classic *Aquila* form was obvious and the long, broad wings sported the prominent white underwing windows and tail of an immature bird. Extension of the white underwings over the inner primaries and the time of year aged the bird as first summer. The eagle quickly slipped out of view over the hilltop but we waited. Within minutes it reappeared over the valley between two hills and Ian and I quickly scoped it. To our amazement the eagle cruised in low over the second hillside, probably c.1000m from us, braked in a flourish of huge slowly flapped wings, and landed on the rock strewn grass. There the Golden Eagle cowered, hunched over and leaning forward on its shaggy legs with a mass of remiges folded behind. As I let Duncan have a look I told Ian he was being absurdly lucky with eagles on the trip.

I rapidly prepared the camera and adaptor but just as I was ready to take the scope, the eagle took off. It continued to perform however, wheeling out over the valley and my increasing “locating speed” allowed me to grab a shot. Some judicious contrast and brightness adjustment later reduced motion blur although the spot metering had already prevented a wipeout silhouette.



Kestrel
Oystercatcher
[Common Snipe
Woodcock

The eagle soared above us for a minute or two longer then roamed away east of the Findhorn. We'd been very lucky again. Several pairs of eyes makes a big difference to the "hit rate".

2 were noted

several were breeding on the rocky meanders of the Findhorn

1 was drumming over bog near the road in the lower valley]

As I drove up past woods and boggy pasture in the lower valley my eyes swept over a stocky brown bird standing motionless 6m from the right side of the lane in juncus-strewn boggy ground. As I drove past I subconsciously noted long bill, cryptic brown plumage and dark bands over domed head. When I realized, ½ s. later that this added up to one incredible thing, I slammed the brakes on gasping and swearing in amazement. The others looked about in panicked anticipation as I threw the car into reverse, clammering that I had *never seen this* before. I stood on the brakes again and focused my bins on the stunning Woodcock which was still standing still in the grass. As Ian and Duncan understood and joined me in watching my first ever Woodcock at rest I admired the soft rounded form of the barrel-like body with peaked head and long, pale bill sweeping out below it. The black eyes, set below the domed crown, were large and clearly watching us (and *everything* else) as the bird foraged in its wonderfully subtle way. One of its short legs was eased forward into the grass and when it was quite ready, shimmered in the vegetation in the manner of an egret. Slowly it eased forward and shimmered with its other leg but found nothing to pick at. The rounded, leaf brown mantle and chestnut brown rump swept over into the neat, dark tipped tail with the immaculate wings held low. Most noticeable were the black-brown bands with pale buff stripes between running across the nape. A long dark loreal stripe covered the long gap between bill and eye.

After a couple of minutes enjoying the view I started to curse my lack of preparation for the Findhorn. The camera was in the boot; I hadn't expected the birding to start this soon. Ian offered to slip out to the boot and get the camera, concealed by the car. I continued to watch but could wait no longer and got out myself. Still the Woodcock remained. Ian was attempting to examine the wader's nostrils with his scope. I had just opened the camera case when the Woodcock finally decided it had done enough for an elusive wader and suddenly flew off quietly into the nearby woods. Delighted with the views but very frustrated to have missed the only photo opportunity in 28 years birding, I made a quick drawing in my notebook, before even this was delaying the tick and run merchants with me too much for them to tolerate

Common Gull	up to 50 were scattered along the Findhorn, clearly nesting on the narrow flood plain
Sand Martin	1-2 were picked up over the river
Dipper	1 was on the river at the top of the valley
Northern Wheatear	1-2 were on the scree slope at the top of the valley
Ring Ouzel	As with the eagle, Duncan did a good job of picking up and tying down a singing % high on a rock outcrop at the top of the valley. He'd gone after claimed Twite but soon heard the thin, aimless notes of the ouzel. On our approach he located it first, 150m away, its white chest crescent standing out smartly yet helping to camouflage the thrush against the rock surprisingly effectively
Raven	1-2 were over the steep, rocky hills at the top of the valley

Glen Kyllachy

At every layby we stopped to scan the magnificent rolling heather moors between the Findhorn and this glen which was managed grouse moor right down to Strathnairn. Duncan echoed Colin Crooke's cursing of the game keepers in this superb upland region who illegally but continually slaughter any grouse predators here, preventing Hen Harriers from establishing what should be a healthy population.

Peregrine	Ian called a falcon perched on a rock far across the top end of the glen, a fine steel grey ad.
Red Grouse	The one species that had to be guaranteed was indeed seen well when a pair was encountered 6-7m from the left side of the road. An incredibly dapper % stood up boldly in the heather with vivid scarlet combs above black eyes with bold white eyerings, the focal point. As I asked Ian to do his "camera at binocular eyepiece" trick I noted considerable white speckling on the belly which merged into deep chestnut-red flanks and breast in heavy barring. The upper's were lightly flecked with white but the belly was actually 75% white. The blackish primaries and short square tail were noted

along with “fang-like” white malar stripes remaining from winter plumage. The greater amount of white on the belly than usual for winter plumage made the bird appear more like the race *variegatus* which occurs on the islands of Smøla and Frøya off the coast of Norway. Recent discussion on Surfbirdsnews about the specific status of Red Grouse had revealed the possibility that this darkish winged race *variegatus* arose from hybridization between native Willow Grouse *lagopus* and introduced Red Grouse *scoticus*. In other words there was no natural intermediate race, suggesting that *scoticus* and *lagopus* are distinct species. This male however, suggested that there was more common ground between Red and Willow since it showed too much *lagopus* white belly for a classic *scoticus*.



Later I posted the above picture on Surfbirdsnews and Andrew Harrop responded as follows “The Natural History Museum at Tring has a very extensive collection of Red Grouse specimens. Although Steve's bird has more white on the belly than normal, I believe that it falls within the range of variation of *scoticus* rather than being a partial albino. The collection does include some partial albinos, including one collected at Kirriemuir, Angus in September 1900 which resembles Willow Grouse, and another collected at Dunkeld in September 1911 which is mainly white. In Finland last spring, I observed Willow Grouse which appeared to be partly nocturnal (confirmed by Jari Peltomaki). Given the recorded differences in behavioural ecology, morphology and moult strategy, the idea that Red and Willow Grouse should be treated as species has some foundation and deserves a thorough review.” The & crouching motionless nearby lacked red combs and had white only in her thin eyerings. She looked like a mound of rich chestnut-brown heather.

[Golden Plover

1 was heard calling near the top of the glen on the return journey. I

scanned from a nearby mound in wind and rain but could not see the plover]

Loch Ruthven

From 15.30 until 16.15 we walked to and from the hide near the tiny carpark in cold, dull conditions.

Slavonian Grebe 4 pairs plus a single intruder were noted. The pairs were distributed about the wide loch, one pair displaying out in the middle created a lovely sight. The pair occupying the rushes in front of the hide spent much of our time there, teaming up against an intruding bird. Much shrill calling and racing through the water ensued giving fine photo opportunities. Subtle details such as the white tip to the blackish bill and orange lores containing scarlet eye were easily noted. Duncan (and John in Speyside) raved about these birds as one of the best in Britain.



Goldeneye	12 on the loch
Swallow	2-3 freshly arrived birds were feeding in the blustery conditions
Reed Bunting	1 % on the way to the hide

An enduring memory of Ruthven from our visit in June '99 had been the myriad Willow Warblers that were singing everywhere. The place seemed less alive without them despite the dazzling grebes. We also scanned the broad, rough hillside across the loch for the lone Blackcock that we'd seen in '99 and Ian had located for himself in 2001. Alas, there was no sign of it. Success with this tremendous bird on the trip belied its continuing plight nationally.

A slow return journey up Glen Kyllachy and down the Findhorn valley, scanning for raptors produced nothing new and we joined the A9 for the drive south at c.18.30.



Doune

Once in Duncan's local pub, toasting the trip with Glen Turret, an interesting report crept onto the pager, but caused little consternation. We'd seen so much over the four days, the fourth and final British crossbill could have added little.

22.36 - LN Fri: Highland. Male Two-barred Crossbill reported Abernethy Forest RSPB.

Callander

April 15th

Ian and I still had a fifth dawn at our disposal and during a lethargic discussion at 06.30 Ian convinced me we should visit the Black Grouse a third time. We arrived at a very leisurely time of 07.30, confident that lekking grouse would be in the middle of their activity. We parked on the road verge into the valley and scanned as on the 12th.

Black Grouse Again no birds were visible anywhere from the road so we drove on to the track to Drumardoch Farm. Walking up the track and cautious rounding of the brow brought us into view of the lek site and at c.07.50 we were focusing on a pair of lekking grouse once again. We crept back round the knoll above the road and, with only scopes and heads peeping over the brow, settled to watch the birds in rather brighter conditions than previously. I was still of the opinion that I'd taken the best pictures I was going to get but felt the irresistible urge to fit the camera to the scope as I saw one of the Blackcocks flutter jump in the early morning light on the upland hillside. By 08.15 I was photographing the dueling Blackcock with the camera at 4x as usual but scope zoom increased to c.35x. Although the CCD sensitivity was on maximum as before, the resulting images of the grouse were an immediate improvement.

The birds continually squared up to each other or broke off to feed, the

rich bubbling calls wafting gently over to us 400+m away. Soon Ian noticed a third male lurking in the juncus just beyond the lek site. This bird steadily made his way round the long vegetation and, at c.08.30, entered the leksite. As the dueling two continued bowing, rearing, twirling and bubbling, the third male watched closely although kept out of the fray remaining 4-5m back. Presumably he could tell which one was the dominant male, I certainly couldn't. Suddenly a Greyhen flew over the valley between us and the lek and disappeared in the direction of the ridge above the road. She hadn't been at the lek and I wondered how widely scattered the birds here were. After another 15 minutes the third male wandered down the green field. I reduced the CCD sensitivity to 400 to reduce noise and the pictures were correspondingly "smoother"

The displaying birds continued, running at each other behind the juncus as on the previous morning, occasionally one flutter jumped and the two periodically broke off to peck at the short grass like hens. At 08.50 I photographed one of males feeding as he maintained his plumes in readiness. The blue hue to the black plumage stood out beautifully as did the white "headlamp" shoulder patches and the scarlet combs.

Loud bubbling suddenly started up behind us but scanning failed to locate any more birds. We quietly walked back towards the car but no more grouse could be seen and I soon returned to the lek. Ian went on however and I was alone "with" the displaying birds for the last half hour.

By 09.10 the light had become quite good and the pair posed beautifully for what was probably my favourite photograph, coming closer than any other to the birds in Chris Rose's inspiring painting over my cottage fireplace. The birds then pulled back and broke off adding two more shots to the sequence.

I was surprised at how nonchalant I had already become at having these glorious displaying Black Grouse in my scope view, after so many years bereft of the experience. That is one of the strange things about birding, until you see a species or a behaviour pattern such as this for yourself, you can't *know* it exists and, more to the point, its existence seems somehow impossible. Then you witness it in your own binoculars and it passes from myth to fact in an instant. Perhaps it is the satisfaction of confirming it for yourself that drives a birder to see new species and amazing aspects of birdlife. At 09.20 the two birds suddenly finished the morning's displaying and dueling and flew off, one after the other, in the direction of the ridge above the road. Perhaps they were going to continue up there. So ended my Blackcock lek watching, I walked back down to the road and met Ian at the car. He'd found one more Blackcock high on the hilltop across the river and we couldn't believe this was the displaying bird we'd heard. Still at least four males had been present on a wonderfully relaxed and

successful morning. To my surprise I had improved considerably on my previous pictures and I was very thankful Ian had convinced me we should use all the time we could.

Curlew several pairs as usual
Skylark 1 singing

After a final fry-up in Callander, we bought whiskey for Duncan and I bought presents for my ladies. We then returned via Doune to secrete the whiskey in Duncan's garden and then moved on east. The plan was to see the Red-breasted Goose north of the Firth of Forth before catching the flight south at c.17.00.

Loch Leven RSPB, Perth & Kinross

Duncan had told us the Red-breasted Goose was recently in fields west of Kinross town but, after a much slower than expected drive east, attempts at finding it failed. We eventually reached the well known reserve at c.12.45. While I checked 2-300 Pinkfeet from the carpark, Ian hunted down the warden to get the latest gen. The Pinkfeet were thought to be the birds from north Norfolk on their way back to Iceland or Spitzbergen. The rarity was therefore presumed to be one of the winter's Norfolk birds moving north with them. It was in a large mobile flock near Kinross and Ian had a map of the areas to scan.

We drove back through Kinross, heading for the likeliest fields within a triangle of roads to the NW and from 13.15 until 13.50, noted the following:

Pink-footed Goose What looked like a root crop in one sloping grassy field at 800m turned out to be c.1000 Pinkfeet when seen with bin's. Clearly *the* flock, I set up my scope to start scanning immediately, while Ian drove on to get closer

Red-breasted Goose I worked my way through the scattered mass of rotund grey geese expecting to latch onto the red, black and white one easily. I had forgotten how well hidden a Red-breasted could be and it took me ten minutes of careful sweeping before I stopped the scope on a largely black goose with prominent white flanks. A closer look confirmed that this bird actually had a black head intricately patterned with white and deep red markings. The foreneck was actually deep red also and the white flanks continued onto white belly and undertail. Pleased to see my third ever individual (the first for 15 years) of this beautiful and globally threatened goose, I attached the camera as Ian returned. He'd picked it up also. Immediately however, the goose sat down on the pasture to rest and preen and posed in a less than classic manner with wing drooped to the ground revealing large white undertail and uppertail covert patch. At the range of 800+m I needed to increase the scope

zoom to 35-40x but also leave the camera on self timer to reduce camera shake since conditions were dull and I had no remote release. To do this we used Ian's scope to prop up the camera and prevent the zoom eyepiece swiveling. I took a few shots of the sprawling goose.

Fortunately the goose stood up after five minutes and started to feed again. I struggled to fix the scope on the bird long enough for the 3s. self timer and got rather disappointing shots which nevertheless revealed the white double wing bar, flanks bars and lovely head and neck pattern.

To my frustration the goose then sat down again. I waited, with the convoluted set up trained on the bird, hoping for a better shot but Ian was now ready to go for a Red-necked Grebe off Rudden's Point in Largo Bay, 20 miles to the east. He took his scope back (not unreasonably), watched the goose for another couple of minutes then packed up. Normal roles were then reversed as I opted out of a mad dash, preferring to attempt a better shot of the goose, then call it a day with plenty of time before our Edinburgh airport check-in at 16.00. By now it was 13.45. I stood firm, annoying Ian further but at 13.50 the Red-breasted stood up. One shot later I packed up, hopeful. We got into the car, ran through the plan again calmly and abandoned it as it became clear we'd never make it. The final photo was blurred anyway.

We returned to the reserve at 14.15 and spent a leisurely final 45 minutes birding from the nearest hide.

Pink-footed Goose 1000+ were strewn about the marsh feeding and chattering quietly

Greylag Goose	20-30 were apparently as wild as any in Britain
Wigeon	20-30
Teal	a few were dabbling in front of the hide
Lapwing	many pairs were breeding out on the marshy pastures
Curlew	a flock of c.70 was on the marsh
Redshank	several pairs were in front of the hide

With an hour to go we packed up the gear for the last time after five intensive days birding Scotland, all objectives achieved admirably with only Crested Tit missed. I felt very accomplished and relaxed.

Summary

Red-throated Diver	Rothiemurchus (Highland)
Little Grebe	
Slavonian Grebe	Avielochan, Loch Ruthven (Highland)
Great Cormorant	
Shag	
Snowy Egret	Seil Island, Oban (Argyll & Bute)
Grey Heron	
Mute Swan	
Whooper Swan	Insh Marshes (Highland)
Pink-footed Goose	Loch Leven (Perth & Kinross), Cairngorm N.P. (Highland)
Greylag Goose	
Canada Goose	
Barnacle Goose	(Perth & Kinross)
Red-breasted Goose	Loch Leven (Perth & Kinross)
Shelduck	
Eurasian Wigeon	
Gadwall	
Eurasian Teal	
Mallard	
Tufted Duck	
Common Eider	
King Eider	Oban (Argyll & Bute)
Goldeneye	
Red-breasted Merganser	
Goosander	
Sparrowhawk	
Common Buzzard	
Golden Eagle	Cairngorm N.P., Findhorn (Highland)
Osprey	Speyside (Highland)

Common Kestrel	
Peregrine	
Red Grouse	Cairngorm N.P., Findhorn (Highland)
Ptarmigan	Cairngorm N.P. (Highland)
Black Grouse	Callander (Stirling), Rothiemurchus (Highland)
Capercaillie	Abernethy (Highland)
Red-legged Partridge	
Common Pheasant	
Moorhen	
Coot	
Oystercatcher	
Ringed Plover	
[Golden Plover]	
Northern Lapwing	
Common Snipe	
Woodcock	Findhorn Valley (Highland)
Eurasian Curlew	
Common Redshank	
Turnstone	
Black-headed Gull	
Common Gull	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	
Herring Gull	
Great Black-backed Gull	
Common Guillemot	
Black Guillemot	Oban (Argyll & Bute)
Woodpigeon	
Collared Dove	
Skylark	
Barn Swallow	
Meadow Pipit	
Rock Pipit	
Grey Wagtail	
Pied Wagtail	
Dipper	Findhorn Valley (Highland)
Wren	
Dunnock	
Robin	
Stonechat	
Northern Wheatear/Greenland Wheatear (Highland)	Cairngorm N.P., Findhorn Valley
Ring Ouzel	Findhorn Valley (Highland)
Blackbird	
Song Thrush	
Mistle Thrush	
Goldcrest	
Coal Tit	
Blue Tit	
Great Tit	
Eurasian Nuthatch	

Eurasian Treecreeper
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow/Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Twite
Lesser Redpoll
Common Crossbill
Scottish Crossbill
Parrot Crossbill
Bullfinch

Doune (Stirling)

Callander (Stirling)

Abernethy (Highland)

Abernethy (Highland)

Abernethy (Highland)

No. species : 98
[including 1 heard only]

No. British ticks: 1