

Scotland 19th to 26th June 2021

Introduction

Beata and I visited the Strathspey / Speyside area of Scotland between the above dates, as we needed a holiday and couldn't travel outside the UK due to Covid. Obviously, we did a fair bit of birding coupled with some general tourism and walking. I was keen to see some of the Speyside specialities, but aware of how elusive these can be from past visits, as they proved to be.

Accommodation

As usual, booked via Booking.com. we stayed one night on the way up in Elsrickle near Biggar, and 6 nights in a caravan at Shenval near the Glenlivet estate. Whilst both were excellent, for the main part of the holiday, we should have stayed closer to Aviemore.

Land use and conservation against sites visited.

I take a keen interest in land use and the impact on birdlife and looked forward to seeing the landscape and birdlife, and compare to what I had read about, in books and on social media, from both the pro and anti-shooting communities. This is a summary of what we saw.

Moorland near Glenrinnnes

Dry moorland, devoid of any bird life except meadow pipits, swallow, house martin, with chaffinches and willow warblers in the scrub. A nasty looking trap was noted here, not visible from the road and only just visible through bins. I wonder why that is? No grouse.

Farmland near Glenrinnnes

A well signposted, damp, organic cattle farm north of, teeming with curlews, swallows, with willow warblers and chaffinches in scrub and woodland. Curlew was common here as the grazing was not intense and the ground was left damp. Saw golden eagle and several buzzards here too.

Moorland north of A939, West of Bridge of Brown

Blasted by burning for grouse and overgrazed. Heather was down to the gravel in many places and obviously massively degraded. Very few birds other than a pair of wheatears were noted here. More like Morocco than Moray. No grouse.

Moorland south of A939, West of Bridge of Brown

Over side of the road was a complete contrast. There were burned areas but quite old, grazing but very few sheep, and lush pasture and damp moorland. Breeding waders of all sorts, including curlew, lapwing and snipe, with short eared owls co existing. This was the only place I heard red grouse.

Moorland North of Grantown on Spey toward Lochindorb.

This was not extensively burned but quite dry and grazed by sheep. Few waders were present except around Lochindorb, the only other birds being meadow pipits and a huge colony of common gulls. No grouse.

Loch Garten and Abernethy Forest

Well known RSPB site. The forest is undergoing natural regeneration after deer removal. Ospreys no longer in residence but a pair is in the area and looking like they will settle next year. Crested tits around but difficult to see, and Capercaillie was seen around the visitor centre. Trails nearby

produced spot fly and redstart, plus commoner species. Lovely spot with friendly staff and a nice, uncluttered shop and visitor centre.

Corrimony

The gem of the trip. Difficult to find and a long walk from the carpark to the reserve paths but worth it. Full of songbirds in well managed, former shooting estate. Sheep and deer have been removed, and some forest replanted along with natural regeneration. Alive with songbirds, wildflowers and insects. You can sit and be deafened by the buzzing of bumblebees. Beautiful and a great example of what can be achieved fairly easily with a sensible management plan. This is what Scotland should be like.

Loch Ruthven

Nice little reserve with a short walk from the car park to the hide to see Slavonian grebe. Fishing still allowed on the Loch, but this doesn't seem to both the grebes, and the two have co-existed for years.

Area North of Lecht Ski tow, SE of Tomintoul on A939

Obviously, a different estate than below. Damp moorland, with little grazing, moss and heather all over, plenty of birds including thrushes, siskin, willow warbler and buzzard. We also had a walk in the woods West of Tomintoul, which was pleasant, if unspectacular.

Moorland South of Lecht Ski tow, SE of Tomintoul on A939

Ecological apocalypse of burnt areas for grouse shooting. Devastating to see and the only species present were meadow pipits. This area resembles Kuwait in 1991 minus the knocked out tanks and it's supposed to be a national park! No Red grouse in view. We drove past the ski tow and scanned the area. Every claim by shooters that management of moors benefits the environment and wildlife can be disproved by taking them to this site.

Forestry

There were some plantations of mixed broadleaves noted. Several areas of the introduced Sitka spruce were seen to have been harvested, and whilst looking bad, I understand they recover quickly. There did not seem to be any recent new plantations of Sitka spruce in the areas we visited. Some of the old plantations were impressive, impressively dark underneath, and devoid of life except at the edge. On the positive side, RSPB Abernethy Forest and RSPB Corrimony are both in excellent condition. My observations here were of recovering habitat with a high biodiversity. Corrimony was teeming with songbirds, the like of which I haven't seen in the UK for years. This doesn't square with the information I have seen on shooting websites that suggested that managed grouse moors are biologically richer than RSPB reserves. Even the most casual observations by someone who knows what they are looking at showed the reverse was true.

Itinerary

Saturday 19th Drove from Surrey to Elsrickle, birded the evening around the village

Sunday 20th Drove to Aviemore, visited Avielochan, then on to the caravan at Shenval

Monday 21st Dufftown, birded the moors and farms between there and Shenval and then an afternoon trip to Lochindorb

Tuesday 22nd Black grouse spot near Carrbridge, Loch Garten and Cairngorm. Didn't climb up, despite perfect weather, and vowed to come back another day.

Wednesday 23rd Inverness (drive through without stopping), Loch Ness (monster does not exist), Drumadrochit, Urquhart Castle (tourist trap) Corrimony and Loch Ruthven

Thursday 24th Chilled out and went South around Tomintoul as far as the ski tow at Lecht

Friday 25th Attempted to walk up Cairngorm but it was too misty. Slopes were bird less, tried Rothiemurchus, and back to Loch Garten

Saturday 26th Looked for Black grouse again without success, then Loch Garten and drove home 13 hours with 4 stops.

Bird List and Notes

88 species recorded, 1 UK tick! (Golden eagle)

Black throated diver – a single bird at Loch Morlich, my first ever close view of this species in summer plumage- jaw dropping. The traditional site of Lochindorb was apparently abandoned
Slavonian Grebe- 1 bird at Avielochan and 4 at Loch Ruthven

Little grebe - noted in several places, including the loch at Corrimony, and at the pool in Boat of Garten

Cormorant – noted from the car on the drive up

Grey heron – 2 noted on the drive up and another pair near Aviemore.

Greylag goose – Common and prolific breeder on the moors and wetlands

Teal – a few at Loch Ruthven noted

Mallard – noted at all wetland areas

Tufted duck – noted at the Boat of Garten wetland with small young

Goldeneye - several females noted at Avielochan and also at another Loch near Coylumbridge

Goosander a female on the bank North of Loch Insh was the only sighting.

Red kite – 9 birds noted on the drive up and 3 in total in the North Cairngorms area. Expected to be commoner, but probably illegally persecuted

Goshawk -a female bird seen at East of Nethybridge, being mobbed by a Merlin

Sparrowhawk - seen on route and one bird near Boat of Garten

Buzzard- 13 on the drive up and present in Strathspey but not common, probably illegally persecuted. Comments from Alex Hogg, head of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association about this species help to get you into the mindset of the shooters, he claims it is “a threat to biodiversity of Scotland” as they (a native species that predominantly feeds on rodents) take pheasants (an introduced species released for shooting). This proves he has heard the word biodiversity and can just about pronounce it but doesn’t know what it means.

Golden eagle – a distant bird seen briefly North of Glenrinnies

Kestrel - a few noted en route and on Speyside.

Merlin - a male was seen mobbing the goshawk noted above. Imagine an F16 doing barrel rolls around a 747 for a size comparison.

Red Grouse – expected to be common, particularly as the moorland is “managed” so they can be shot . Is this a seasonal thing or have they finally been completely shot out? I heard one from the road at A939 but did not see and that was it.

Capercaillie -some exciting sightings. We were sitting outside the Osprey centre at Loch Garten when Beata clocked a large, mottled gamebird flying away through the trees. It flew back a few minutes later. Some of the staff were a little incredulous that it could have been a female Caper, but the warden confirmed to me when we left that it was one and they had seen it too. The last morning, I went for a walk near the centre early morning, and saw a very large black bird fly away through the trees. Far too big for a corvid.

Red legged partridge – several noted on the Glenlivet Estate, where probably released for shooting

Pheasant - as RLP above but much commoner

Moorhen - noted at the loch in Boat of Garten.

Oystercatcher – perhaps the bird of the trip. Very common in all areas, even in urban ones, seen on sheep fields, moors, roadsides, roundabouts and obviously breeding on flat roofs in Perth.

Lapwing - few noted, not common

Snipe – few pairs noted in damp moorland areas, not on managed grouse moors.

Curlew - fairly common, but not on grouse moors or overgrazed areas

Redshank – few pairs with young at Lochindorb, well photographed

Common Sandpiper -present in all loch and watercourses, obviously very common. Even seen perched on overhanging branches by rivers

Black headed gull – common all over

Common gull – commonly noted all over Scotland, with a large number breeding near Lochindorb, where well grown chicks seen.

Herring gull - noted commonly on the drive North

Lesser black backed gull - noted commonly on the drive North

Stock dove - noted at the roadside on the drive North, and in a few in Scotland

Woodpigeon -very common throughout, in flocks near the holiday accommodation, which is always an impressive site.

Collared dove -a few noted in villages

Cuckoo - singing noted at Insh Marshes, near the accommodation, at Abernethy and seen at Corrimony

Short eared owl - two birds, one, possibly a young bird being fed by an adult at our frequent stop on the A939

Swift - a few noted mainly in urban areas. A lot coming down to feed at the pool near Boat of Garten.

Skylark – scarce with just a few noted in open areas

Swallow – very common throughout, presumably due to livestock producing plenty of insect prey.

House Martin – not common but commoner than down south, and widespread

Sand martin -noted at practically all waterbodies

Tree pipit – small numbers at Corrimony, also noted at Loch Garten

Meadow pipit – fairly common, on some grouse moors it was the only bird present

Grey wagtail – noted on most rivers

Pied wagtail – very common throughout.

Dipper – one in the river on the Glenlivet estate

Wren – more often heard than seen, but seemed to be common, even high up on the mountains

Duncock - several noted

Robin – common in suitable habitat

Redstart – 1 or 2 in Abernethy Forest

Stonechat – noted at Corrimony and on the odd grouse moor but a bit elusive. Apparently heavily depleted by harsh winters from what I have read.

Wheatear -a pair noted on a grouse moor near A939 were the only sighting

Ring ouzel – a fairly tame male around the ski centre at Cairngorm. More regeneration of woodland on the uplands would help this species, thought this does seem to be happening with the removal of the deer in many areas

Blackbird - abundant

Fieldfare – 1 possible noted from the car near Carrbridge. Rare breeder in the UK

Song thrush – great to see this was very common throughout Scotland, and breeding like mad as birds were carrying food in all directions.

Mistle thrush- as above and very common, with fledged young all over. Again, great to see.

Blackcap – several males still in song, seemed quite common.

Willow warbler – what a blast from the past to hear this singing all over. Obviously at a high density as occupying sub optimal habitats, even high on the mountains. It set me thinking as to

why this has declined so much in the South and East. Decline in insect prey and climatic changes may be the reason.

Goldcrest – noted singing in a few places, mostly in Abernethy

Spotted flycatcher – several noted near Lochindorb, and in Abernethy

Long tailed tit -a few noted near accommodation

Great tit - widespread

Crested tit – seen badly in Abernethy forest where fairly common but elusive

Coal tit – common in pine woods, e.g., at Abernethy and at Corrimony

Blue tit - widespread

Treecreeper – noted at Abernethy and Corrimony

Jay - odd birds noted en route, but not in Speyside

Magpie – noted on the drive up but absent from Speyside and Moray probably due to gamekeeping.

Jackdaw - very common all over, one of the few species noted on intensively sheep grazed areas.

Rook – as jackdaw

Carrion crow as magpie

Hooded crow - a few noted, rare presumably due to gamekeeping. One near Dufftown and a pair plus 1 near Corrimony were the only sightings. Seemed to be elusive and shy of humans, probably due to persecution.

Raven - a pair frequented the wood near the accommodation and were seen and heard daily

Starling – fairly common but not abundant

House sparrow – occurred and seen in most urban areas and villages.

Tree sparrow – one seen on the first evening at Elsrickle

Chaffinch – very common throughout, great to see as rare in Southern England now

Greenfinch – common

Goldfinch – widespread, not in great numbers

Siskin -very common in all areas, even in areas with few or no pine trees, and only scrub. As with willow warbler, at a high density as occupying sub optimal habitats, even high on the mountains.

Linnet - a few noted

Scottish Crossbill – a pair at Corrimony, not seen well but identified from their call.

Bullfinch – noted near the accommodation and heard in several places

Yellowhammer - a single bird noted on the roadside on the Glenlivet estate.

Misses

Ptarmigan and Dotterel– these occur on the snowline, and the high tops in summer, and there we didn't see them as we didn't go that high.

Black Grouse – always tricky to find unless you find a lek. Checked at the location near Carrbridge but we either twice arrived too late (7.00 AM) or the lek has been abandoned.

Several dog walkers noted the area, which is bad news. One idiot was walking his dogs right through the riverside fields where redshank, curlew and snipe were breeding, and where we saw the lekking black grouse in April 2017.

Hen harrier – if you believe the shooters, this species flourishes on grouse moors. Not sure where and what their ID skills are as I didn't see any despite intensive searching

Red throated diver – not noted at the site North of Lochindorb, where seen in April 2017

Mammals

Red deer – very few in number, away from the deer farm behind the accommodation, only 2 groups of two seen. In fact, 3 at the service station on the M6 relief road were the biggest group we saw.

Roe Deer – commonly seen

Rabbit – very common

Hare -common, great to see

Stoat – one seen crossing the road near Aviemore

Red squirrel – a few noted. Several live ones seen in the area, plus signs asking people not to run them over, and a few killed on roads

Hedgehog -sadly roadkill only

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8th September 2021